

# *Down the Drain - Lost Tributaries of the MPC* By David Widdowson

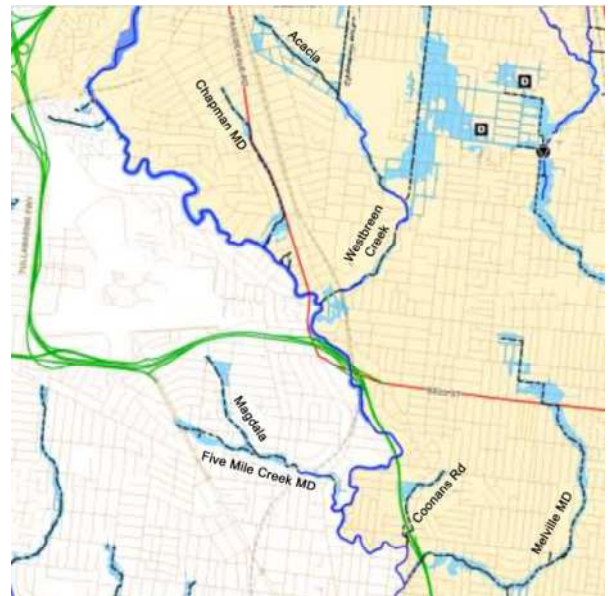
## Part 1 - Introduction

Despair as we might about the concrete-lined drain that is the current Moonee Ponds Creek, at least it is still above ground, which is more than can be said for many of the minor creeks that once flowed into it. These minor creeks have been reduced, in the most part, to underground storm water drains. In this series I will look at three of these major creeks; Melville Creek in Brunswick, Five Mile Creek in Strathmore and Westbreen Creek in Pascoe Vale. In the last part I will look at the minor creeks that are no longer with us.

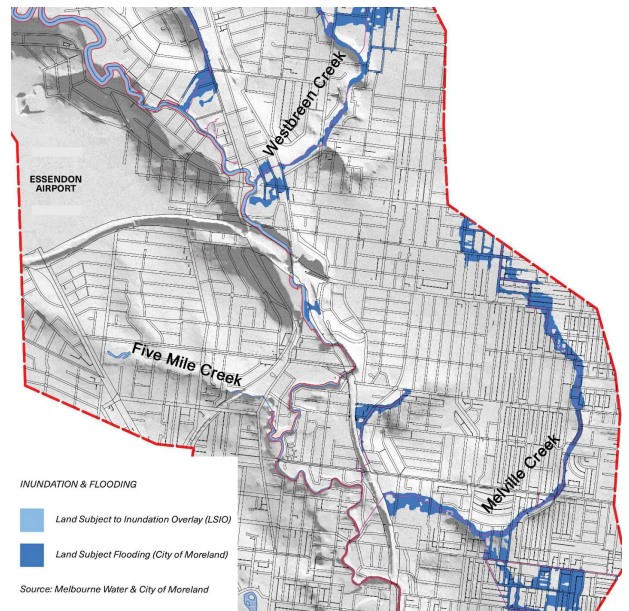
So, why were these minor creeks turned into underground drains? Partly it was to create land for housing (eg Five Mile east of Napier St, Melville creek near Moreland Rd). But then again many of the old creek beds were turned into reserves or green corridors (eg Salmon and the reserve above the Magdala main drain, Austin Crescent and Dunstan Reserve). Presumably this was because of subsidence risk, and also that such properties would lie at the bottom of valleys and hence be prone to flooding. Safety may have been a factor, there is a story about a drunk drowning in Five Mile Creek one night on the way home from the pub! But mainly I'd say it was the 19th and 20th century mentality about "tidying up" urban areas. After the suburbs were cleared, these creeks were left as dirt-lined drains, at risk of major erosion after heavy rain. There certainly wasn't the attraction we feel now towards green spaces and water; there was no attempt to beautify these creeks - better just to shove them underground!

## Drain Spotting

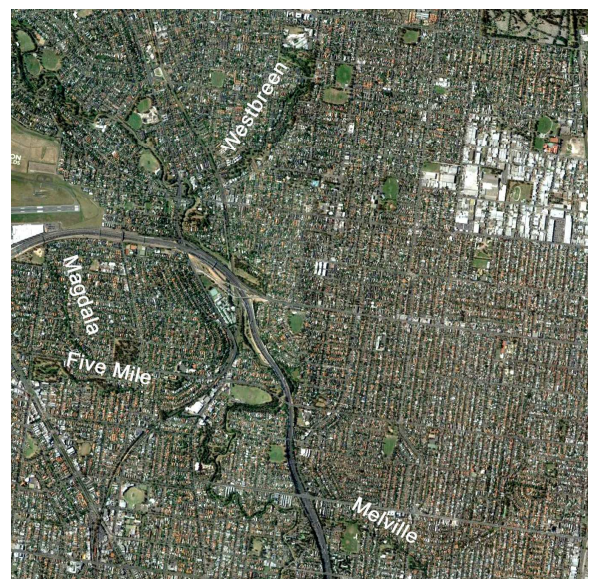
The following images show how we can get some idea of where these creeks once flowed:



From maps showing where the main drains (MD) currently run. (Source: SES/ Moreland Council).



From flood maps and topographical maps, the creeks lay in the lowest part of the landscape.



From vegetation on Google Maps; trees and bushes grow very well in old creek beds! (Courtesy Google Earth).

1) From aerial photos such as those found on the Melbourne 1945 website, here showing Westbreen Creek before it was put underground. (<https://1945.melbourne/>)



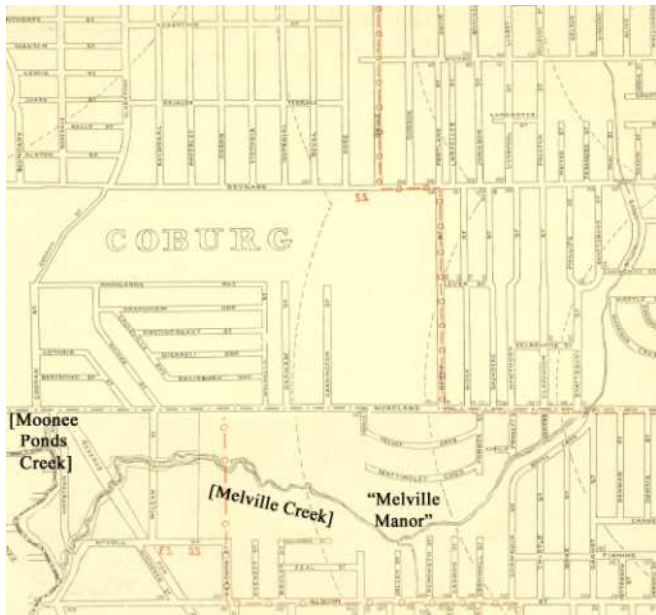
## Part 2: Melville Creek

Travelling along Melville Road south of Moreland Road, there is a valley you might expect to be carved out by a creek over a period of thousands of years, however there is no sign of such a waterway now. This is where *Melville Creek* - a former tributary of the Moonee Ponds Creek - once ran, until it was ingloriously transformed into Melville Main Drain No 4320 in the early to mid years of the Twentieth Century.

Melville Creek was named after Donald Melville (1829-1919), a Scottish migrant who became a Brunswick councillor and Mayor and finally a Victorian MP (he was one of Victoria's last Ministers of Defence, this being before Federation). Melville owned land in



West Brunswick near the dip in what is now Jolley St, and in 1870-71 built *Melville Manor* there. (A report in the *Coburg Leader* 22/2/1902 complained of stagnant water on Melville's property from a dam used for irrigation and that "the stench was simply abominable"! ). The creek which ran through his land became known as "Melville's Creek". (It should be noted that the name Melville Creek doesn't appear on any map I could find, the only primary references to the name are from newspaper articles in the 1930s. Residents of Coburg who remember the creek say that it did not have a name.)



The earliest comprehensive map of the creek I could find was this Melbourne Metropolitan Board of Works (MMBW) map from 1922. The map shows Melville Creek flowing freely as an open drain or naturally banked creek south of Vincent St in Coburg (I assume that the creek ran along roadways in its upper reaches). The short section east of Jolley St in Brunswick must have been a secondary branch. I have added the approximate location of Melville Manor. It is interesting to note the absence of Melville Rd as a major thoroughfare; it was extended after Donald Melville's estate was sold after his death in 1919, with the tram line added in the mid 1920s. Melville Road may well have been Melville's driveway originally!



Melville Main Drain (MMBW)

There are numerous reports in *The Age*, *Argus* and local newspapers in the 1930s, referring to the state of the Creek and plans to put it underground. Apparently the creek was very steep sided for much of its path, creating a hazard for people trying to cross. There was especially concern around the Brunswick

Northwest Primary school, with dangers for students mentioned repeatedly. There were also complaints about flooding, scouring of the land and mosquitos.



This image shows a bridge over Melville Creek, (possibly McLean St) showing the extent of erosion in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. PROV (VPRS 8609 P/0032 Unit 7).

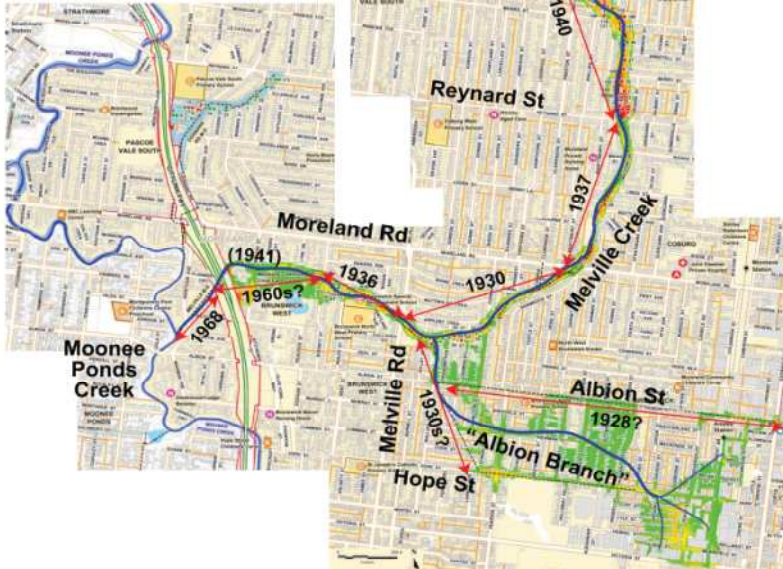


By 1945, the creek had been put underground as far as Everett St, but still flowed freely after this, as shown in this aerial view (<https://1945.melbourne>). Significant scouring can be seen along parts where the creek still flowed; the area around McLean Street had also been turned into a drain, and a narrow bridge can be seen on Hopetoun Avenue. The section marked as "Reserve for Railway" finished up being used for the Tullamarine Freeway!



## Melville Creek

- Possible original path
- Main Drains
- ↔ 1930  
Year Main Drain created
- Areas at risk of flooding

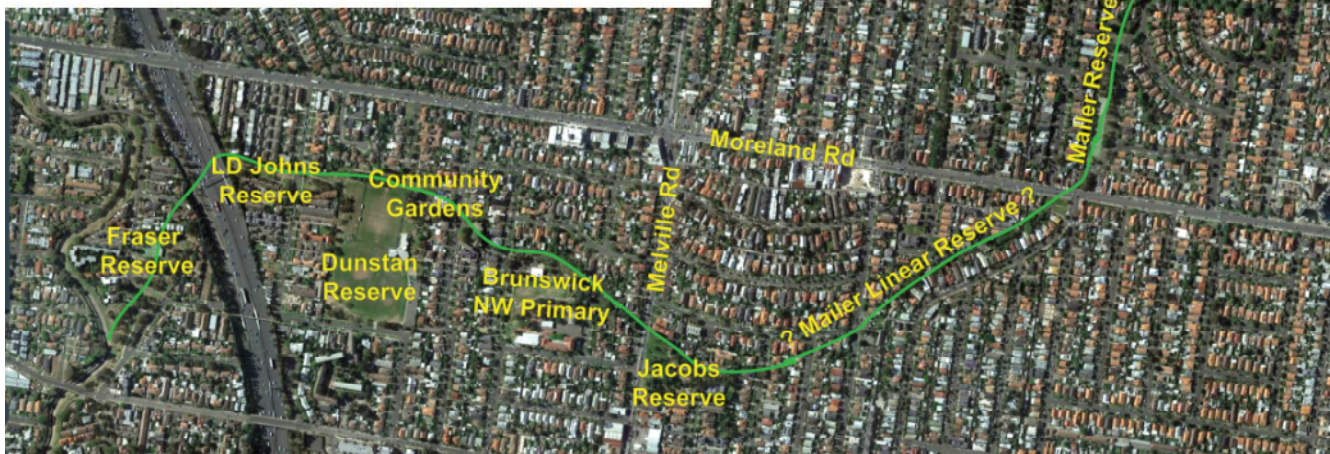


This map is a combination of three Flood Maps (courtesy of Moreland Council) showing the location of the Main Drains and my interpretation of where the lost Creek might have once run, based on the drains and areas now most likely to flood. The main branch emerged from the low areas north of Bell Street in Pascoe Vale and North Coburg. The secondary "Albion" Branch began near Hope Street and merged with the main branch near Jolley Street.

Creation of the Melville Main Drain occurred in many stages - I have marked on the map the dates when sections were placed underground. Generally work proceeded downstream, however upper section work would have been needed later as increasing development caused floods to occur more often.

## West Brunswick - Current View

— Melville Creek former path



The current aerial view of the area (courtesy Google Maps) shows that - while some of the creek's path has had houses built over it - numerous reserves and "green corridors" along its path give an indication of where it once flowed (I am not sure about the Maller Linear Reserve, it still appears on some maps). The West Brunswick Community Gardens also lie over the former creek bed, ensuring good growing conditions!

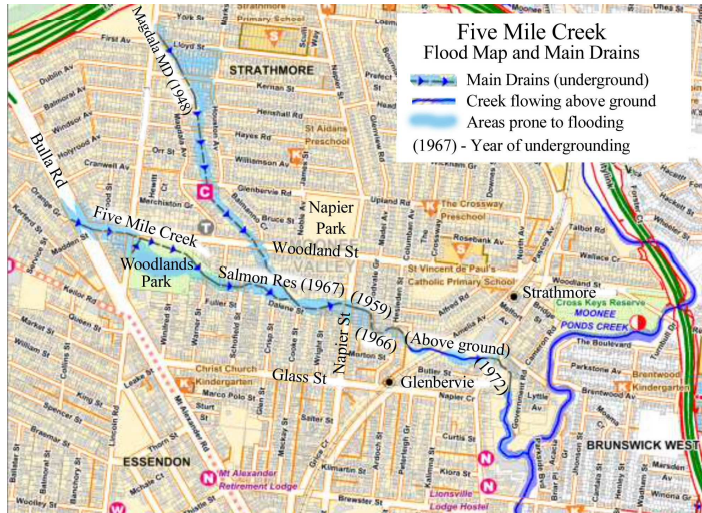
Moreland Council, local Friends and private groups have done a great job in creating Reserves and beautifying the areas the former creek ran. Reading the many articles complaining about Melville Creek in the 1930s made me realise how much our attitudes to waterways have changed in the last 80 years. I suppose areas that might be "daylighted" in the future are from Dunstan Reserve to LD Johns Reserve and, to the west of the freeway, Fraser Reserve. So, perhaps some time in the future, Melville's Creek will once again see the light of day!

Thanks to Tony Smith (FoMPC) and Marilyn Moore (Coburg Historical Society (CHC) for their assistance. References: Victorian Parliament website and CHC (for Donald Melville); Trove.nla.gov.au for Newspapers from 1930s, *Development of the Moonee Ponds Creek Drainage System* (MMBW 1981) for dates of the Main Drains.



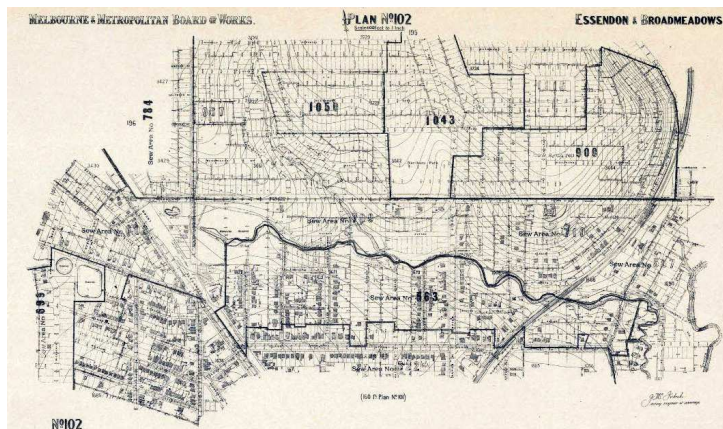
## Part 3: Five Mile Creek

Some questions for Essendon and Strathmore residents to ponder: where does the water come from for the ponds at Woodlands Park, and where does it go? Why is there a "green corridor" from these ponds to Napier Street, and another one parallel to Magdala Avenue? Why does an open drain suddenly appear just north of Glenbervie Station? And then reappear as a stream in a steep gorge east of Pascoe Vale Road? The answer to all these questions is, of course, **Five Mile Creek**, another lost tributary of the Moonee Ponds Creek, now reduced (for the most part) to Main Drain No 4330.



This modern map of the Main Drains and flood-prone areas gives us an idea of where the creek once flowed. There were at least two branches: the main branch began near Orange Grove in Essendon North (west of Bulla Road), then moved through Woodlands Park towards Napier Street. A secondary branch began in the flat plateau that is now Essendon Airport - eventually becoming the Magdala Main Drain - and joined the other branch in what is now Salmon Reserve. Judging by the topography, perhaps another branch came down from Keilor Road to Woodlands Park. (Original Map: SES)

Unlike Melville Creek, whose name was not well known at the time, the name "Five Mile Creek" was widely known and is old - records can be found featuring the name as far back as 1849. The name is believed to derive from the distance between its meeting point with the Moonee Ponds Creek (now Five Mile Creek Reserve) either to the Yarra, or to the GPO, both of which are about eight kilometres (five miles).



MMBW Plan, early 1900s, shows the path of the creek



View of Creek in Woodlands Park, 1920s



Downstream of Woodlands Park, 1920s



Downstream of Napier St, 1920s.



Map of the Creek through Salmon Reserve





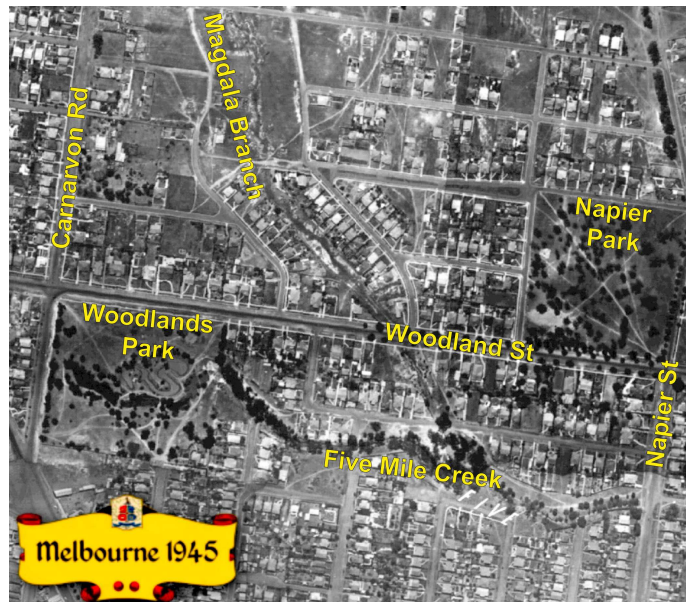
The original state of the creek has been described as a "sequence of vegetated water holes". This picture from before 1930 shows it as a minor stream, small but free flowing. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the land was mainly agricultural and subject to erosion, which increased greatly due to massive urbanisation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. PROV (VPRS 8609 P/0032 U7).

Many newspaper reports from the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries refer to the creek, generally in unkindly terms! In 1928 it was said to "have long been a source of annoyance" and that "the locality was menaced by flood waters". Stagnant water was thought to be the cause of "numerous cases of diphtheria" and other diseases.

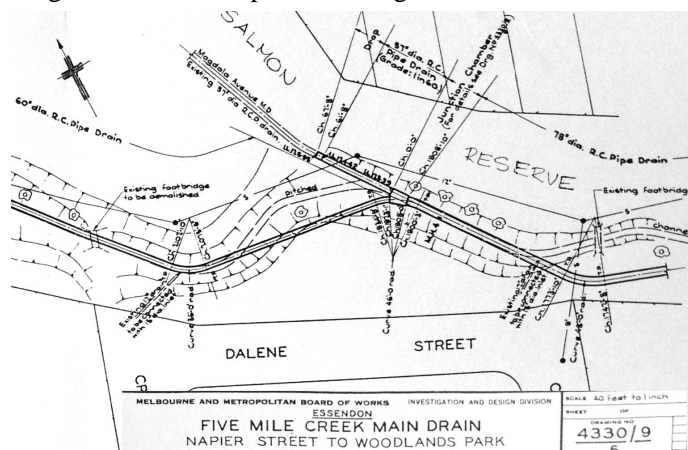
By 1929, the council decided to fix these problems by lining the entire length of the main branch with bluestones to create a free-flowing open drain, the work being completed by 1930. The image at right – taken from the railway line looking towards what is now Five Mile Creek Reserve – shows the result. PROV (VPRS 8609 P/0032 U7)



The section that still flows above ground today north of Glenbervie Station is a remnant of this era. This section is two bluestone pitches wide, with sloping sides two bluestone pitches high and retaining walls set back on each side. It has been deemed significant by the Heritage Council of Victoria for "showing how the natural environment was modified in the interwar period...to reduce the effects of flooding...due to increased run-off from urban development". (Heritage Vic).



The Melbourne 1945 aerial view shows the main branch of the creek - now a bluestone open drain - under the row of trees from Woodlands Park to Napier Street. The problem now was the Magdala branch; considerable scouring can be seen in this photo, and things were about to get much worse. In 1946 the grass runways at Essendon Airport were converted to concrete, leading to increased runoff into the creek and greater scouring. To fix this problem, the entire Magdala branch was placed underground in 1948.

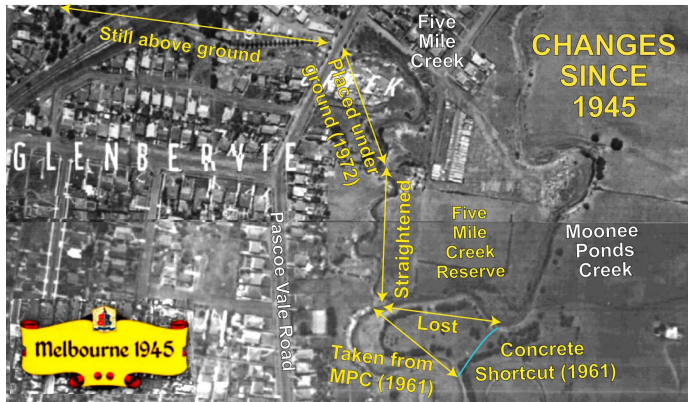


After 1948 the increased flow of water from the underground Magdala Main Drain emptied straight onto the bluestones in Salmon Reserve. The inevitable flooding that followed - especially in the "Napier Street dip" in 1963 - led to the entire length of the main branch between Woodlands Park and Glenbervie Station being put underground. This MMBW plan from 1966 clearly shows the existing pitched channel that was to be removed (along with foot bridges) and replaced with concrete pipes. Work was completed east of Napier Street in 1966 (the land then sold for housing!) and in Salmon Reserve in 1967.

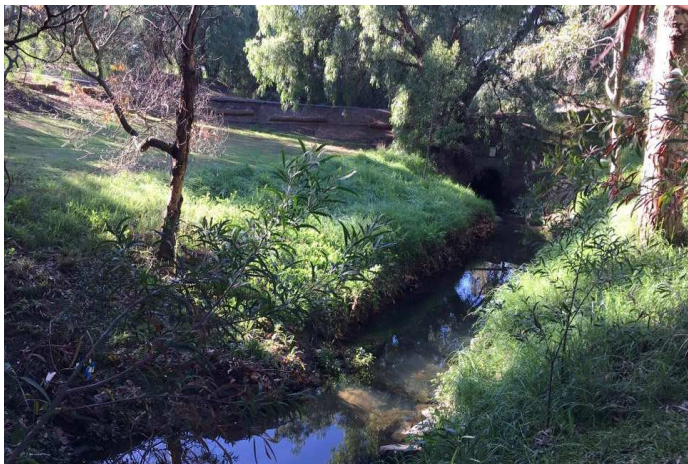




Evidence of the old creek's path can still be seen in Salmon Reserve, which was gifted to the community by the land's original owner, William F Salmon, in 1918. A local accountant, Mr Salmon had planted many of the magnificent trees still seen in the Reserve. This section could perhaps be "daylighted" in the future if there was the will to do it!



The lower reaches of the creek were also undergoing many changes - I have marked them on this Melbourne 1945 aerial view. The section just east of Pascoe Vale Road was placed underground in 1972 - by the MMBW, but at the expense of the landowner. The final section of the present day Five Mile Creek was originally part of the Moonee Ponds Creek, it was taken when the concrete shortcut was created in 1961!



Five Mile Creek Reserve today; this is part of the section that was once the Moonee Ponds Creek. Friends of Five Mile Creek, led by Ginny Moylan, have done sterling work, helping to create a beautiful section of creek.



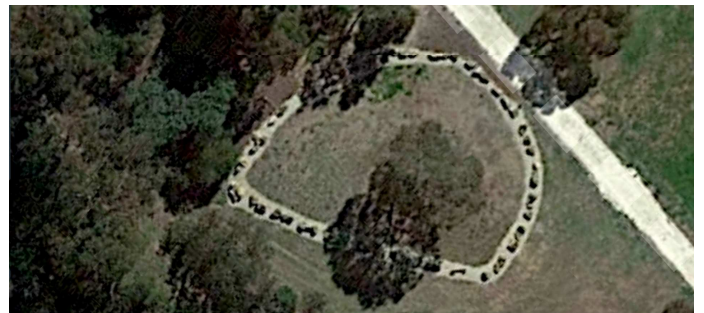
Five Mile Creek lower reaches.



The meeting of Five Mile Creek and the Moonee Ponds Creek (concrete section at right).

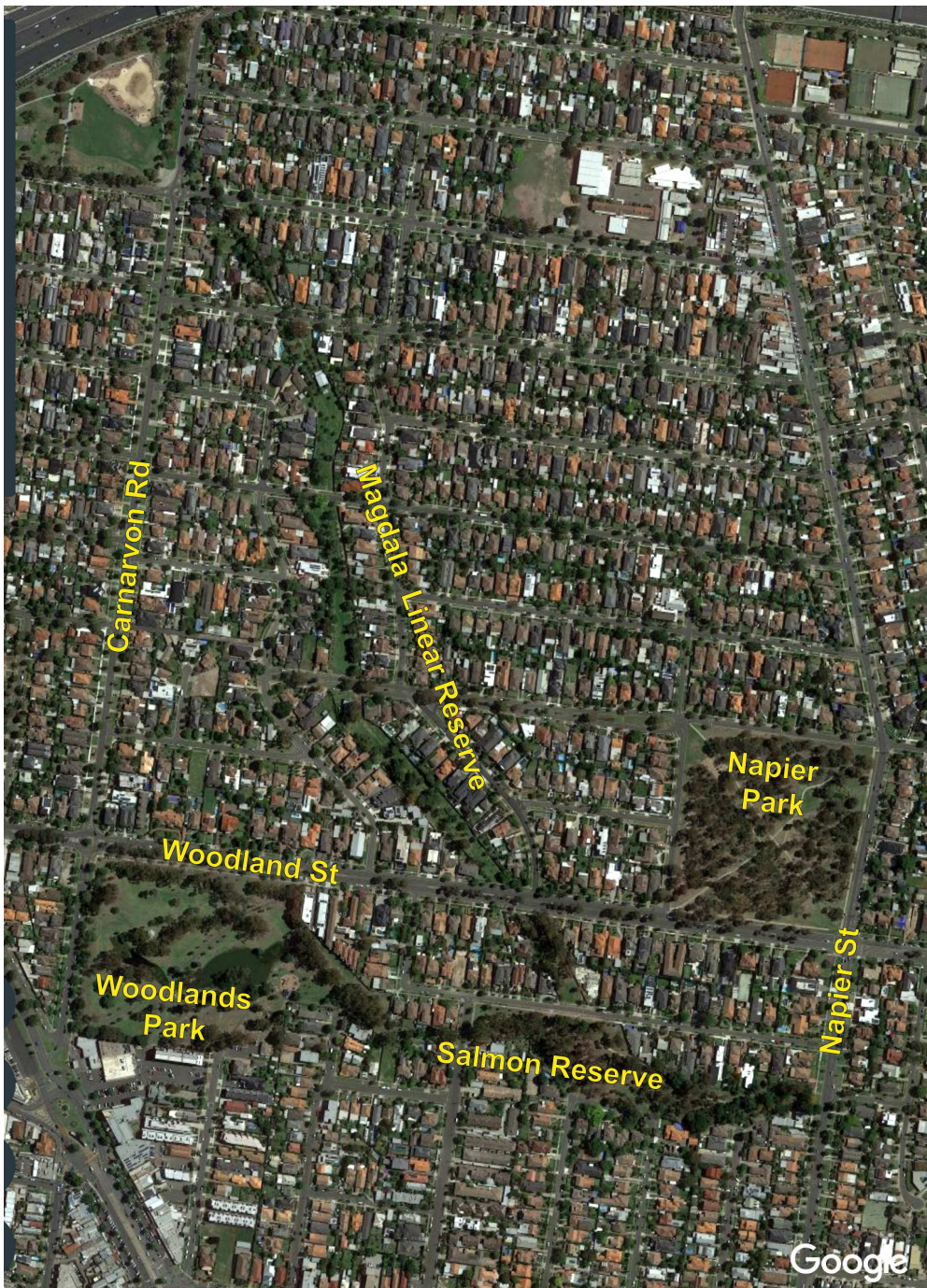


Five Mile Creek Reserve is now home to a ceremonial rock circle, Babepal Paen-mirring ('Mother's tear' in the Woiwurrung language). Launched in 2018, it recognizes a registered site of Aboriginal significance and serves as a space to educate the local community about the importance of the Reserve to the Wurundjeri people. Each grouping of rocks represents the three main Wurundjeri families. From the eye-shaped circle, the tears of Mother Earth flow down to Five Mile Creek.



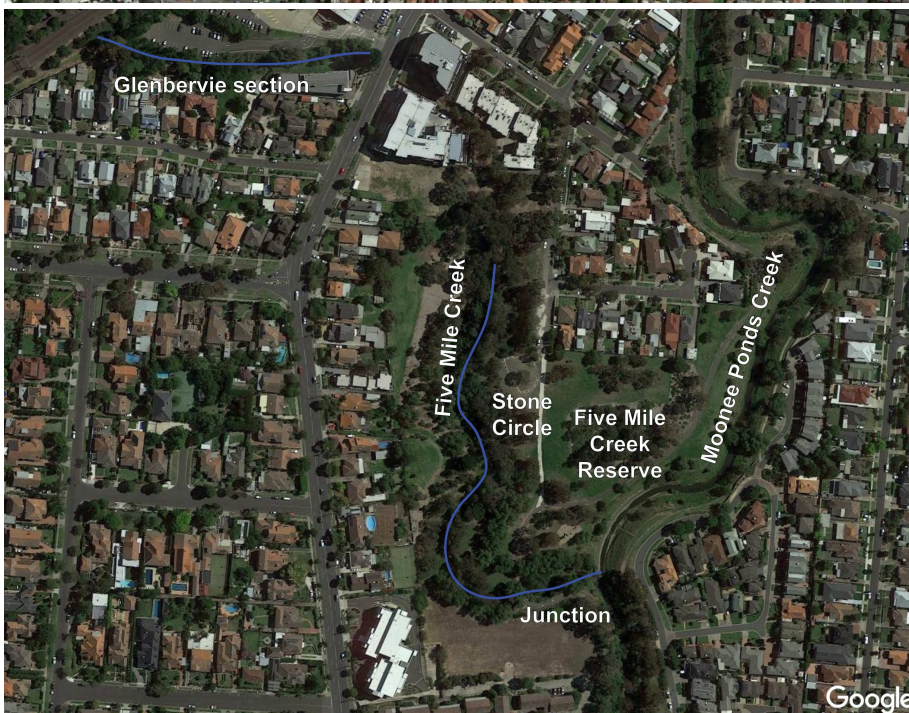
The stone circle in Five Mile Creek Reserve, showing the distinctive shape. (Google Earth)





Current view of the remains of Five Mile Creek, showing the Magdala Linear Reserve that runs from Lloyd St to Salmon Reserve.

Also shows the trees that dominate Salmon Reserve.



The Lower section showing the Glenbervie section in Blue stones, plus the Five Mile Creek Reserve.

Finally, it is nice to see that Woodlands Park is now being returned to native wetlands - as it once was - so at least one part of Five Mile Creek is being restored to its former glory!

Thanks to Anne Black for her assistance.



## Part 4: Westbreen Creek

There is good news as we continue to head north exploring the lost tributaries of the Moonee Ponds Creek – more of the creeks are above ground! So whereas Melville Creek was completely underground, Five Mile Creek did manage to preserve some of its middle and lower sections. Now as we get to Westbreen Creek (in Glenroy and Pascoe Vale), large swathes are still above ground, even if much of the rest of the creek was turned into Main Drain No 4340.



Back in the 1840s, the creek was a popular picnic spot for John Pascoe Fawcner – it ran close by his 800-acre property “Pascoeville”. He was known to show visitors the lyre birds that inhabited a natural fern valley which he called “Blue Bell Dell”. By the late 1800s, most of Pascoe Vale had been cleared

for dairy farming, with land around the creek being considered of poor quality, infested with weeds and feral goats.



The name “Westbreen” is believed to derive from the local school which opened in 1923. District Inspector Davies suggested Westbreen as the school's name, being a combination of the names of two bus proprietors, Weston and Miss Breen (one of her buses appears at left in Bell St). It is not known how widely used the name Westbreen Creek was, it

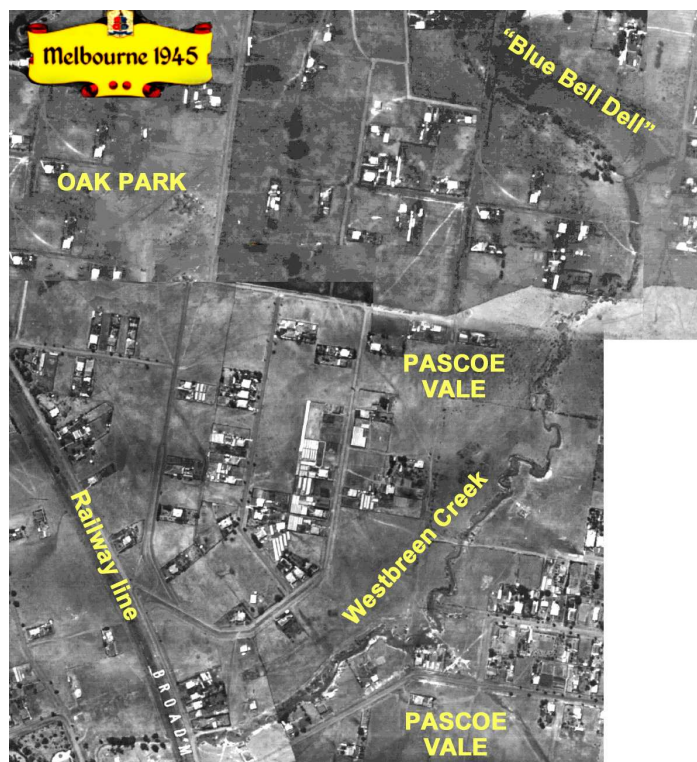
does not appear on any early maps and I could only find one mention of the name in a newspaper before 1954. The name only became official in 2016 thanks to the work of Alex English of Moreland Council.



Pascoe Vale Station in 1890, with the Westbreen creek valley in the background, shows how few houses had been built at the time.



The creek can be seen flowing through this photo from the 1930s, showing how few houses existed at the time. The railway line can be seen at right.



Aerial photos from Melbourne 1945 show how little suburban development had occurred by then; there were few houses as the area was still predominantly farmland. The area marked “Blue Bell Dell” was used as a military dump during World War 2. In the post-war years, from 1946 to 1960, the Westbreen sub-basin became urbanised, at least the part that wasn't being used as a council tip!

Increased housing development led to complaints from new residents about “mosquitoes, rats and stench”. Residents and “Progress” groups lobbied strongly for the creek to be undergrounded, citing disease and safety concerns, and that flooding was likely to occur, as it did in 1963 and 1978.

Interesting to see how “progress” groups once lobbied against nature and now do the opposite!

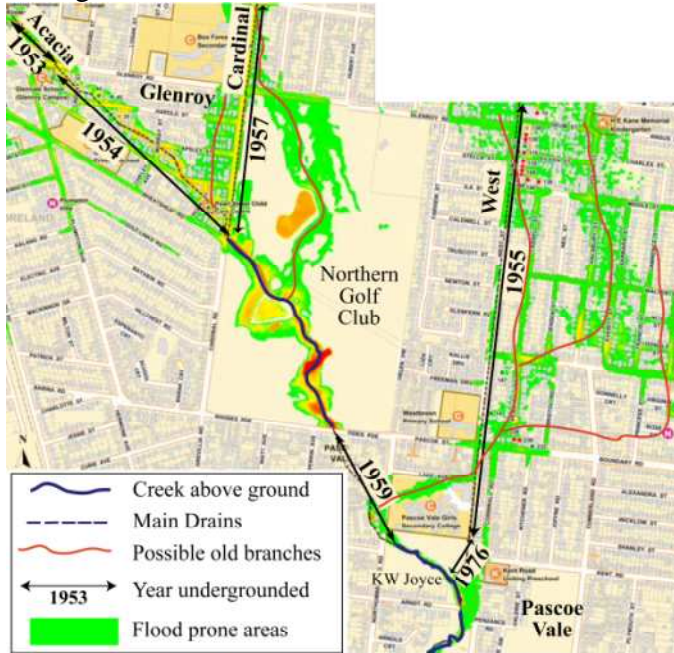




This MMBW map of the lower reaches shows how the creek joined the Moonee Ponds Creek before it was undergrounded at Park St. Again it is not named.



The First Melways Street Directory from 1966 shows "Blue Bell Dell Reserve" but the creek that flows through it is not named.



A modern map of the Main Drains and flood-prone areas (courtesy of the SES) shows the current state of the Westbreen Creek sub-basin. Remaining above-ground sections in the Northern Golf Club, K W Joyce Reserve and Gavin Park have been marked in blue. The sections that were turned into Main Drains are shown with dashed lines – it can be seen there were three main branches of the creek feeding water from the Glenroy/ Pascoe Vale plateau down to the Moonee Ponds Creek. I have labelled these as Acacia, Cardinal and West after the Drains they now supply. Other possible old minor branches are shown in red, based on the Melbourne 1945 aerial photos, flood prone areas, the various remnant valleys, and some speculation! "Lake Avenue", just north of the Pascoe Vale Girls' School, was apparently named after the lake on the nearby Mt Sabine Property.

The various other creek sections were undergrounded on the dates indicated, derived from the MMBW book "Development of the Moonee Ponds Creek Drainage System" from 1981. It can be seen that undergrounding first occurred in the upper parts of the basin where the watercourses were generally ill-defined, most of this work being done in the 1950s. However, creation of these drains then lead to more erosion in the remaining open streams, leading to progressively more of the creek being undergrounded in the 1960s and 1970s, until the final section was completed in Gavin Park in 1979.



The current aerial view, courtesy of Google Earth, shows the reserves that now make up the Westbreen Creek linear park.





By 2007, the creek in K W Joyce looked like this – with minimal landscaping and vegetation – until there was a major effort by the Friends of Westbreen Creek Group (led by Judy Allen, and in association with Moreland Council) to beautify the creek.



Twelve years later, the view is vastly different – a spectacular example of naturalisation in the above-ground sections of the Creek.



Westbreen Creek in Northern Golf Club



H M Dowd Reserve



In K W Joyce Reserve



Underground again, near Zenith St.



Gavin Park



Entering Moonee Ponds Creek

Moreland Council's Westbreen Development Plan (2018) talks of creating new wetland areas in the lower reaches, which would also help to restore more of Westbreen Creek to how it once was!



## 5. Chapman Main Drain

Driving along Pascoe Vale Road, just north of the Oak Park Swimming Pool, not many motorists would realise that they travelling in an old creek bed. The landscape does give some clue; it is a narrow valley all the way until Chapman Avenue, when Pascoe Vale Road suddenly climbs up to the Glenroy plateau. This was once a tributary of the Moonee Ponds Creek, until it was turned into the Chapman Avenue Main Drain in the 1950s and 1960s.



The earliest sign of the unnamed creek I could find was this 1860s map of the North Eastern Railway line (as the Carnegie line was once known). Slightly confusing, as it has south up, it shows the Chapman Avenue branch before that road was put in, and the creek continuing as a ditch on the west side of Pascoe Vale Road. The conversion of creek to roadside ditch must have occurred when Pascoe Vale Road was created in the middle years of the nineteenth century, when it was known as Sydney Road (later as Old Sydney Road).



The 1945 Melbourne aerial view shows that the lower reaches were the only scoured section. Hints of the open channel can just be made out on the western side of Pascoe Vale Road.

By the time of the rapid post-war urbanisation of Oak Park in the middle years of the twentieth century, residents were beginning to complain about the open drain that was "a menace to health, rat-infested, overflowed frequently in winter, and that the increased effluent load [makes] it even more unpleasant during the summer months". Eventually, the city of Broadmeadows agreed to underground the section between Prospect Street and Victoria Street in 1953, and then between Victoria Street and Winifred Street in 1958. Of course this led to increased scouring in the final section, which was put underground in 1964.



A map of the Main Drains and flood prone areas (courtesy of the SES) shows the location of the drain, beginning in Chapman Avenue, continuing down Pascoe Vale Road to Winifred Street, where it flows south west to the Moonee Ponds Creek.

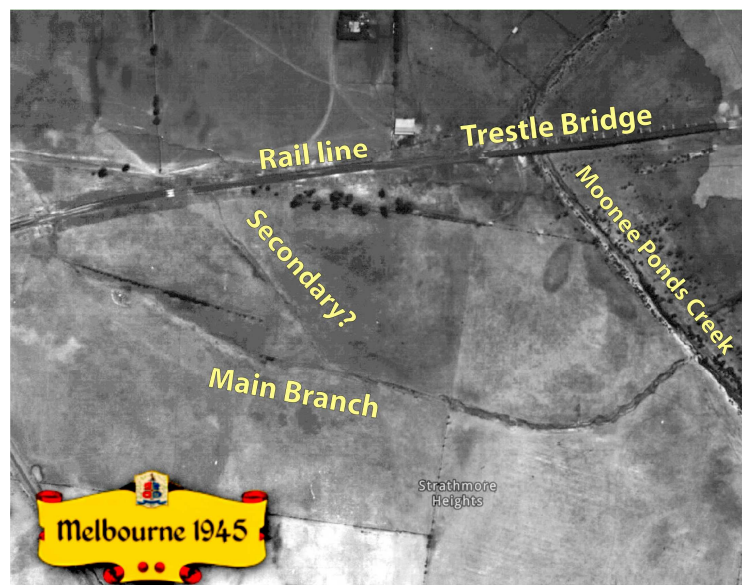


The only modern sign of the old creek bed is a depression next to the west cricket oval at Oak Park Sports Centre. The tributary emerges as a pipe just south of the Margaret Road foot bridge - a sad end for a creek that once carved a valley through Oak Park!



## 6. Mascoma St

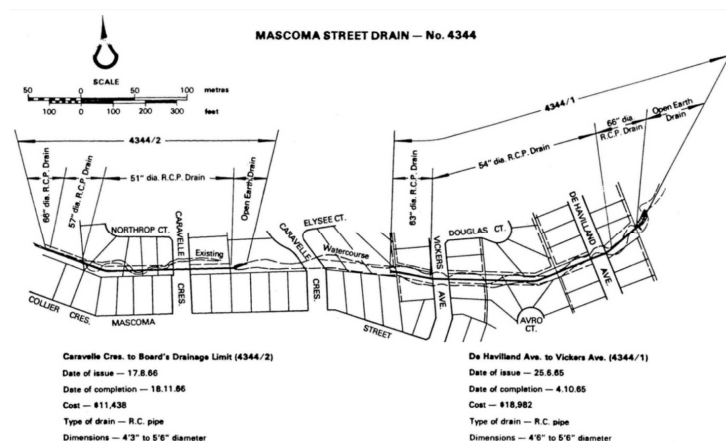
Just north of Mascoma Street/ Boeing Road in Strathmore Heights lies a small but quite steep-sided valley that hints at another lost tributary of the Moonee Ponds Creek, turned into an underground drain, mainly in the 1960s.



The Melbourne 1945 aerial view shows the minor creek, with a possible secondary branch, flowing from the railway line to the Moonee Ponds Creek. The trestle bridge, built in the 1930s through undeveloped farm land, can be seen at top right.

By the time the rapidly expanding suburbs reached Strathmore Heights in the early 1960s, the creek became an issue for the developers, so:

"Two sections of the Mascoma Street Drain were undergrounded...in 1965-66, at the time that residential subdivisions at Strathmore Heights were being developed. The City of Broadmeadows was emphatic that the drain should be undergrounded, feeling that an open drain would be a hazard to children, and would be aesthetically unacceptable. The underground drain was designed and constructed by the [Melbourne Metropolitan Board of Works, but was financed by the subdivider" (MMBW 1981). Such an arrangement between the MMBW and developers was common at the time.



The MMBW 1981 book continues: "In mid-1969, the intervening section of drain between Vickers Avenue and Caravelle Crescent was undergrounded for similar reasons at cost to the developer. In 1976, the Strathmore Progress Association requested the Board of Works underground the drain through the parkland between the rear of houses in De Havilland Avenue and Moonee Ponds Creek for aesthetic and safety reasons - the council was informed that they would be expected to contribute towards the cost of the undergrounding of the drain [as it was] council owned land." So the final section was completed through Boeing Reserve in the mid 1980s.



The current view (courtesy Google Earth) has had the path of the old creek superimposed, plus arrows indicating when each section was undergrounded.



This small park with playground between Caravelle Crescent and Glenscott Crescent is the only remaining sign of this minor tributary, now reduced to Main Drain number 4344.