



Local History Factsheet:

A brief history of West Lakes



From left: West Lakes shopping center, Delfin Island, Military Road

From 1836 to 1840, migrants to South Australia landed at a site in what is now the northern section of West Lakes. A memorial to the original Port of Adelaide can be found in the park at the end of Settler's Drive (*note: this is not the correct location – merely a memorial*).

While West Lakes is very much a modern suburb, the idea which gave birth to it was first proposed in the 1880s by Fredrick Estcourt Bucknall. Bucknall proposed creation of an inland harbour on the upper reaches of the Port River, connected to the sea by a canal through the sand hills. In 1882 Bucknall built Estcourt House from which he anticipated he would be able to view the progress of this new harbour, with the proposed canal passing along the property boundary. However, by the mid 1880s the harbour scheme floundered.

The upper Port Reach area became commonly known as a part of the Reedbeds, the swampy, marshy stretch between the Port River proper and the Torrens. Records also show that the land between Grange and Alberton was called 'The Pinery' and described as a sandy, slightly raised ridge, a consolidated sand dune stretching several miles. Species of plants found here included Sheaoak, Silver Banksia, Black Tea Tree, Blue Gum, Pine, Quandong, Wattle, Kangaroo Thorn and Hop Bush. Residents living in the burgeoning suburbs bounding the area also spoke of its many snakes.

Due to its isolation and lack of development the area became a place for all kinds of activity, a playground for young explorers, lovers, hikers and dumpers. In the 1940s and 50s attention again turned to how this 'swampy wasteland' could be reclaimed and developed – this time by the South Australian Harbours Board. They proposed dredging the Port Reach basin and creating a man-made lake.

In 1959, the land was purchased and plans for housing were drawn. The plans included a channel linking the proposed lake to the sea, cutting through the sand dunes near Estcourt House. The lake would provide a haven for small pleasure craft and other aquatic sports. Maps dating from this time show that the area that is now Westfield West Lakes was given the name 'Olympic City' and featured substantial car parking areas, as well as light rail link to this site and looping the lake (connecting with Port Adelaide).

The proposed development was to be a joint undertaking of the harbours board and the South Australian Housing Trust. However, development of the plan was too costly for the state government. So an agreement was negotiated with Development Finance Corporation (later Delfin Ltd).

Swamp reclamation commenced in 1970. Ten million tonnes of earth was shifted to form the man made lake. A pipe was built to carry sea water from the gulf to the lake, and the lake was also designed to receive storm water run off from the surrounding areas. The lake was filled in 1974, and the once “wasteland of stunted mangroves, and reedbeds - a polluted rubbish dump which had thwarted earlier proposals” was transformed.

The first stage of the West Lakes Mall shopping complex was opened in November 1974, and the second a year later in Oct 1975. West Lakes library, originally located in the Mall, was established in 1978. The first stage of the Lakes Resort Hotel opened late in 1985.

The first football match for premiership points held at Football Park (AAMI Stadium) was played between North Adelaide and Central districts in May 1974. Central Districts won. In the Grand final that year Sturt defeated Glenelg. In 1976, a record Grand Final crowd of 66, 887 watched Sturt beat Port Adelaide – the record was possible because the seating had not been completed, so most of the crowd was forced to stand. In November 1983 the Council gave formal approval for the erection of four 50 metre towers at AAMI Stadium. Work started almost at once, official "light up" was made in March, 1984.

West Lakes Shore Primary School opened in 1978 with 254 students.

Delfin Island was opened in 1978. It was originally about three kilometres long with a freshwater lake, planned for ‘prestigious living for 5,000’. Island Point was opened in 1982. It created a record for the sale of subdivisions in South Australia with 70 per cent of the land being sold within the first fortnight.

In 1981 ‘Lakeside’ (Number 12) newsletter reported good responses to the establishment of a West Lakes Bowling and Citizens Club with 350 founding members, and the formation of a West Lakes Tennis Club with 80 founding member families.

In 1985, it was recommended that signs be posted warning residents of the dangers of swimming in polluted lake water. An Aquatic Centre was built in 1986 at the northern end of the lake through a Government unemployment scheme. A BMX track was also created to cater for the many young people in the area.

In 1970-71, blocks of land in West Lakes could be purchased for \$4000. Land released in West Lakes Shore in 1975 cost an average of \$12,500 a block, with lakefront blocks commanding nearly double that. Just over a decade later these same blocks were worth \$80,000. In 1984, it was reported that house prices had increased up to 30% since 1982, compared with 14% across Adelaide. The average price of a new home on Delfin Island in 1983 was \$122,235, up from \$81,230 in 1979. A home purchased for \$44,000 in 1978 in West Lakes Shore could be sold for about \$90,000.

Energetic promotion by the company attracted a variety of individuals and families of all age groups. Marketing slogans cried “take a year round holiday at home” and sold West Lakes as “a

place to live, work and play". In a 1985 Advertiser article, the manager of West Lakes Real Estate described the development as a very mixed, middle class area.

By 1985 the target population of 20,000 in 6,000 houses was reached. From that year, the Council and the Department of Marine and Harbors assumed management of the lake and surrounds from the Delfin Group.

In 1991 the West Lakes project was crowned the 'best Real Estate project in the world' by the French based International Real Estate Federation.

Sources

'A History of Woodville' by Susan Marsden, Corporation of the City of Woodville, 1977 & 'A History of Woodville – update' by Susan Marsden 1987 (not published).

'From Park Lands to Sea Coast' by Mary Geyer with Peter Donovan, published for the City of Hindmarsh and Woodville by Peacock Publications, 1996.

'The Greater Port Adelaide Plan: achievements 1949-59 and future programme' by the South Australian Harbors Board, 1959.