4.4 Yerta Bulti Port River/Estuary

(Includes suburbs of West Lakes, Semaphore Park, Royal Park)

To the north of Witongga was Yerta Bulti, the Port River area and estuary. As outlined above this area was a continuous ecological system in terms of the fresh water flow from the hills, across the plains and to the sea pre-settlement. The Port River was, and remains, a complex environmental system. Unique to the region it is the largest estuarine mangrove forest river system in Gulf St. Vincent.

The Yerta Bulti region was an important food source for Kaurna meyunna. Estuarine environments (Figure 65, Figure 66) are highly productive and are important nursery zones for many marine species. The networks of creeks, mangrove forests and saltmarsh floodplains provide a refuge for juvenile fish, crabs and prawns. The high concentration of these animals draws in larger predatory species to hunt and patrol along the deep channels throughout estuarine systems.

Figure 65 Mangroves, Upper Port Reach, 2011

Figure 66 Mangrove lined shore, Lower Port River, Torrens Island, 2012

Tides have a major influence on mangrove forests; during high tides the mangrove roots and trunks create a complex matrix that provides a refuge for juvenile fish and crustaceans. It is during these periods that larger fish enter the mangroves through the creeks and deep channels to feed. At the peak of the tide the Kaurna hunters would place their fish traps and nets at the entrances of the creeks and channels to trap the larger fish as they were trying to leave with the receding water. As the tide lowered the fish were concentrated into small pools where drag nets and spears could be used to collect them. Today there are remnant Kaurna fish traps located along the metropolitan coastline. These lasting examples showcase the ingenuity and deep understanding the Kaurna people have of the marine and estuarine environment.

The mangrove area supported breeding seabirds that would gather and build nests amongst the mangroves, sand dunes and islands, some of which still occurs today. These sites provided a seasonal source of fresh

eggs and bird meat. Wirras (throwing clubs) were used to kill resting birds and nets tied between branches of trees fringing known nesting sites were used to catch birds as they fled the nest.

The mangroves are ideal places to find a range of shell fish, e.g. kakirra-small black river mussel, kulutunumi-periwinkle, kunggurla-river crawfish, kuti-cockles and large oysters. A recent trench excavation (near the Old Port) revealed a shell midden which held a number of the mentioned molluscs and camp fire hearth ashes (Figure 67). This site also had stones scattered on the surface.

Figure 67 Oyster Midden, Port River region, 2011

Accounts of the upper reaches of the Port River characterise it as an intertidal mud flat. Such a place would have provided a habitat for worms, crabs, mud clams and seagrass and an important foraging zone for fish. These areas could provide food at both high and low tides. During low tide the Kaurna could walk amongst the short leaved seagrasses and use their toes to feel for clams hidden in the mud. The shallow pools with longer seagrass are refuges for blue swimmer crabs; these are easily caught using nets or spears. During high tides hooks, such as the bone hook Pirri kuya, would be used to catch fish as they foraged through the seagrass and mudflats looking for worms and small crustaceans.

The Port River became the site of the colonising port (the Old Port, early 1837 until October 1840, now West Lakes; and the existing Port Adelaide) and early maps (Figure 68) show the waterways and vegetation. The founding of the port is discussed later, p. 53.

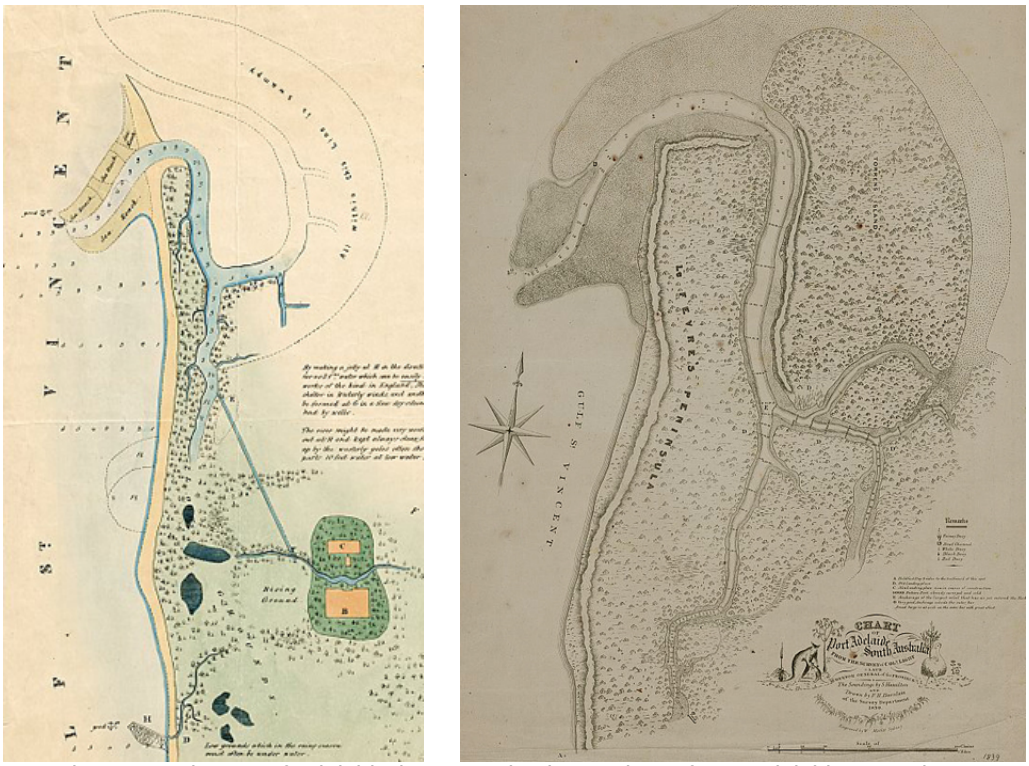

Figure 68 The Port and Town of Adelaide (NLA 1120). Plan & Chart of Port Adelaide, 1839 (NLA 1126)

Kraehenbuehl (1996:47, 48) outlined the observations of the naturalist James Backhouse who landed at the Old Port from the ship *Endora* in 1837. Kraehenbuehl provided the contemporary naming of the species mentioned by Backhouse and stated that 'the diary is remarkable for the additional information that is provided on coastal plants, which gives a much better understanding of early plant communities in samphire areas and in the red sand dunes'. Backhouse's diary entry of 30 November, 1837 described the locality as follows:

Vessels come to a large creek at Port Adelaide, and J. B. Hack is cutting a canal across a saltmarsh to the sounder shore to bring goods to the wharf. The marsh is bordered next to the creek, which forms a good harbour with Avicennia tomentosa one of the mangroves of Australia; and the marsh is covered with two or more species of Salicornia and Frankenia of erect fruticose growth with pink blossoms the size of a silver penny, a prostate inconspicuous species … and some of the Chenopodeae [sic] *of fruticose habit. There are several stores on the sandbank which skirts the marsh, two of them semi-cylindrical erections of corrugated iron belonging to the Governor and several temporary huts.*
On this sandbank are some of the trees of the genus Callitris, somewhat like the Moreton Bay species in habit, and of which the piles have been cut for the canal, a Banksia near to B. australis, if not that species, Casuarina quadrivalvis supporting …. Kraehenbuehl (1996:48).

Narno, the Native Pine, Forest – The Pinery
The Pinery was a forested area just to the south of the Old Port site and its extent is outlined in the 1882 Department of Lands map (Figure 9 above). Kraehenbuehl (1996:189) noted that when he first saw the Pinery in 1954 it extended 4 km north from the Grange Golf Links towards Queenstown and that the northern part was then about 200m wide and almost solely covered with a Narno *Native Pine* (*Callitris Preissii)* woodland association and that 'In between were shallow swales where occasional Aboriginal stone flakes could regularly be seen' reflecting the Kaurna utilisation of the area. In 1838 Colonial artist John Skipper depicted a small group of Kaurna meyunna in a pine forest (Figure 69). It is not known if the pine forest depicted is of the Pinery as there was another large area of Native Pine several kilometres to the north of the town of Adelaide at the time of settlement.

Figure 69 (Extract) Pine Forest, J. M. Skipper, 1838 (AGSA)

Kraehenbuehl (1996:189) relays what he considers to be the best account of the Pinery flora. It was by Fenner and Cleland (noted botanists), who described the area as follows:

THE PINERY ON THE EAST SIDE OF THE PORT RIVER BETWEEN ALBERTON AND THE GRANGE.
The Pinery consists of a sandy, slightly raised ridge, a consolidated sand dune, stretching several miles close to the eastern bank of the river. It has a very interesting flora and contains a few plants which are rare. It also shows affinities with the mallee scrub in having Grevillea ilicifolia var. ililifolia. At one time there was quite a forest of Native pines (Callitris propinqua [now preissii] with Peppermint gums (eucalyptus odorata [mis-identity for E. porosa] and some black tea-tree (Melaleuca pubescens [now M. lanceolata], Eucalyptus leucoxylon and Sheoaks (Casuarina stricta [Allocasuarina verticillata]. Much of the timber has been cut out, though a considerable number of pines still exist and young ones are coming up.

Imagery of the Narno *Native Pine* and the Pinery follows (Figure 70, Figure 71).

Figure 70 Narno *Native pine*, Gutti *Quandong* & Minno, *Golden Wattle*, The Pinery, 1958 (Photo D. N. Kraehenbuehl)

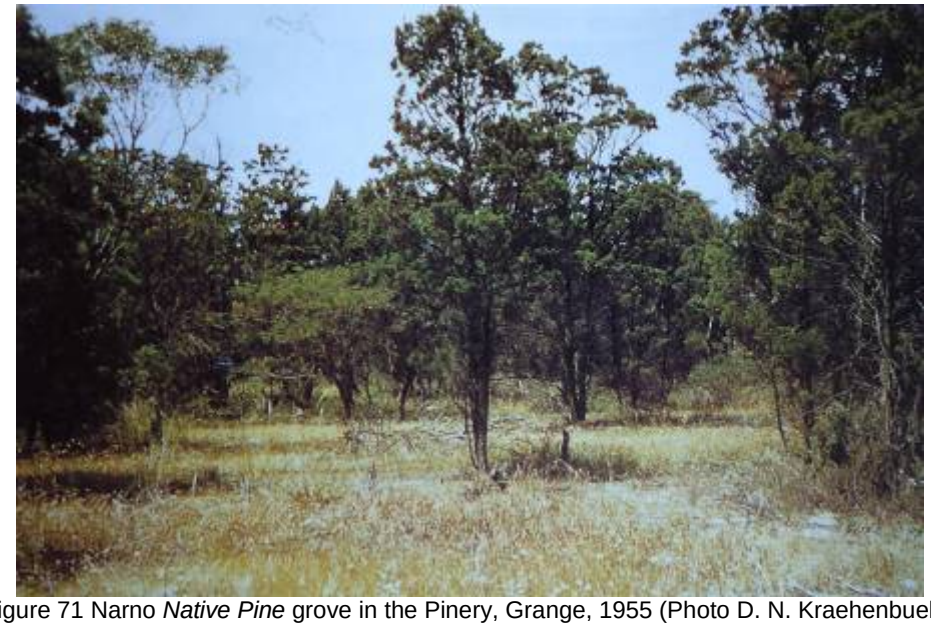

Figure 71 Narno *Native Pine* grove in the Pinery, Grange, 1955 (Photo D. N. Kraehenbuehl)

The Dunal Area

A large dune stretched inland from the coastal dunes, traversing the southern area of the Yerta Bulti region and was part of the area utilised by Kaurna meyunna. Now known as the Gillman Dunal system, its extent is outlined in the City of Port Adelaide Enfield (PAE) *Kaurna Cultural Heritage Survey* (2007) (Figure 72). The PAE Council boundary is marked by the dotted line. Of the dune, the Survey stated:

> *Now almost entirely levelled or developed,* [the dune] *offered elevated locations extending well into the low lying, flood prone environments surrounding the southern edge of the estuary. The strategic importance of this feature is illustrated in the number of sites found along its length including camps that were maintained well into historic times in and around Port Adelaide/Yertabulti* (PAE, 2007:11).

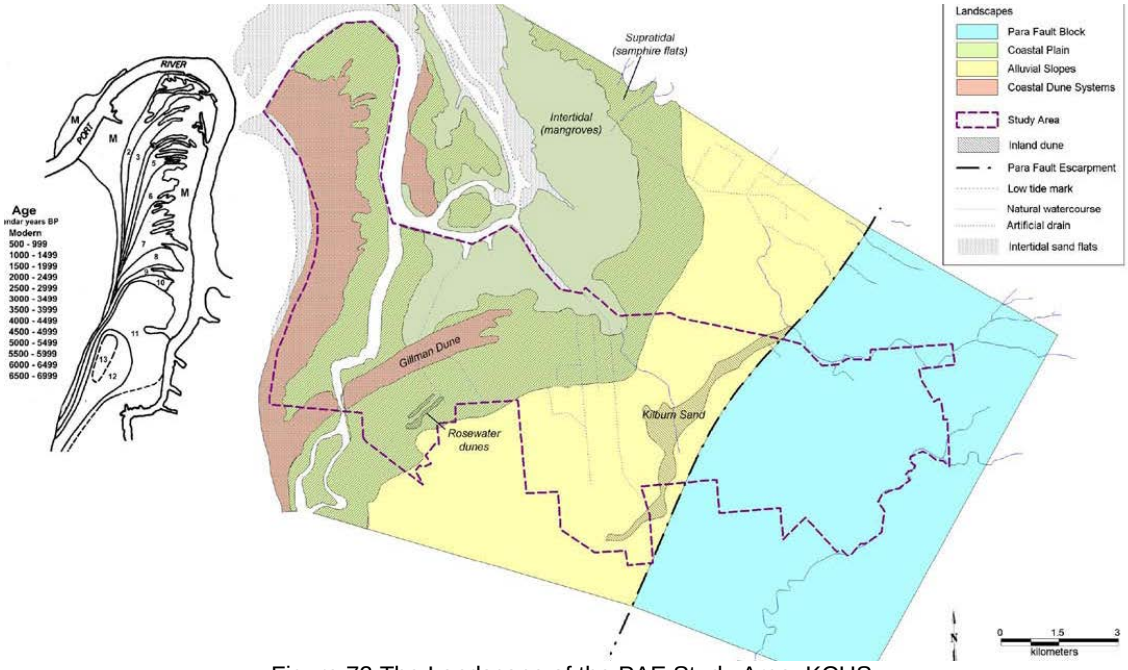

Figure 72 The Landscape of the PAE Study Area, KCHS

A reflection of what the area was like is provided by remnant dunes on Torrens Island, a few kilometres to the north along the lower reaches of the river (Figure 73).

Figure 73 Remnant Dunes, Torrens Island, Lower Port River, 2012

Yertabultingga: Dunal Burial Sites, Cemeteries or Sleeping Places

Three burials in the Queenstown dunes, near to the Old Port, are recorded in the *Kaurna Cultural Heritage Survey* (2007:8). One early find at Queenstown was reported in *The South Australian Advertiser*, 7 February 1860:

> *Skeleton Found. On Sunday last, whilst some children were playing at Queenstown, on the ridge of sand hills between the Port-road and the Old Port, they picked up a human skull in a place where the wind had drifted away the sand. On this being made known, the spot was examined by some persons living in the locality, when a complete skeleton was discovered, supposed to be that of a native woman. It must have been buried there some years, as the bones were completely bleached.*

Landscape Changes and the Loss of Kaurna Sites

Changes to this area commenced immediately upon settlement with the use of part of the estuary for Adelaide's first port. The landscape changes reflect and demonstrate the loss of the Kaurna meyunna traditional living sites and cultural landscape in the region.

The First Port

South Australia's first port, the landing site of the first settlers from early 1837 until October 1840, was located on the southern reach of the Port River - now part of the West Lakes urban development. Known as the Old Port, or Port Misery, as well as the Port Creek Settlement, the landing site comprised the mangrove lined banks of the river itself and later a canal cut through the mangroves to higher ground in the sand hills,

ending with a landing wharf on the corner of what is now Old Port Road and Webb Street/Frederick Street, Royal Park/Queenstown.

Founding Surveyor–General, Colonel William Light, having earlier examined the mouth and lower reaches of the estuary in September 1836, returned there in late November for a more detailed survey of the estuary and on the 22nd he wrote of 'The Harbour':

Yesterday we had beautiful weather, with a fine breeze. Mr Kingston [Light's deputy] *accompanied me in the surveying boat to examine that creek taking a southerly direction which I had not had time before to look at carefully, and which has since been running so strongly in my mind that I could not rest until I had seen it again. We were more than delighted to see it running into the plains at such a distance, and I am now more than ever persuaded that it is connected with the fresh water lakes* [of the Torrens], *if not, it extends to within a couple of miles of them, and one of the finest little harbours I ever saw is now fairly known. … The eastern coast of Gulf Saint Vincent is the most eligible [for settlement], if a harbour could be found – that harbour is now found – more extensive, safe, and beautiful, than we could ever have hoped for.*

The next day Kingston reported that the (lagoons of the) fresh water river (Karrawirraparri/Torrens) and the south arm of the river (harbour) were definitely inter-connected.

Figure 74 Hatchboat in the Port River, 1836, Col. W. Light (NLA F512)
(From *South Australia: A survey of the east coast of St Vincent Gulf, 1836*)

On the 22nd December 1836, Colonel Light, in the hatch boat, proudly it would seem, led two ships, his own, the *Rapid*, and the emigrant ship *Tam O'Shanter* through the sand bars and mangroves of the estuary to the higher reach of the river. He wrote that:

It was really beautiful to look back and see the two British ships for the first time sailing up between the mangroves, in fine smooth water, in a creek that had never before borne the construction of the marine architect, and at which some future period might be the channel of import and export of a great commercial empire (Dutton, 1960:193).

An early map (Figure 75) provides the shape of the waterways and Colonel Light's 1839 watercolour *Distant view of the Landing Place and Iron Stores at Port Adelaide with the South Australian Company's storeship 'Sir Charles McCarthy' at Anchor* (Figure 76) gives a more descriptive pictorial view of the river estuary and vegetation.

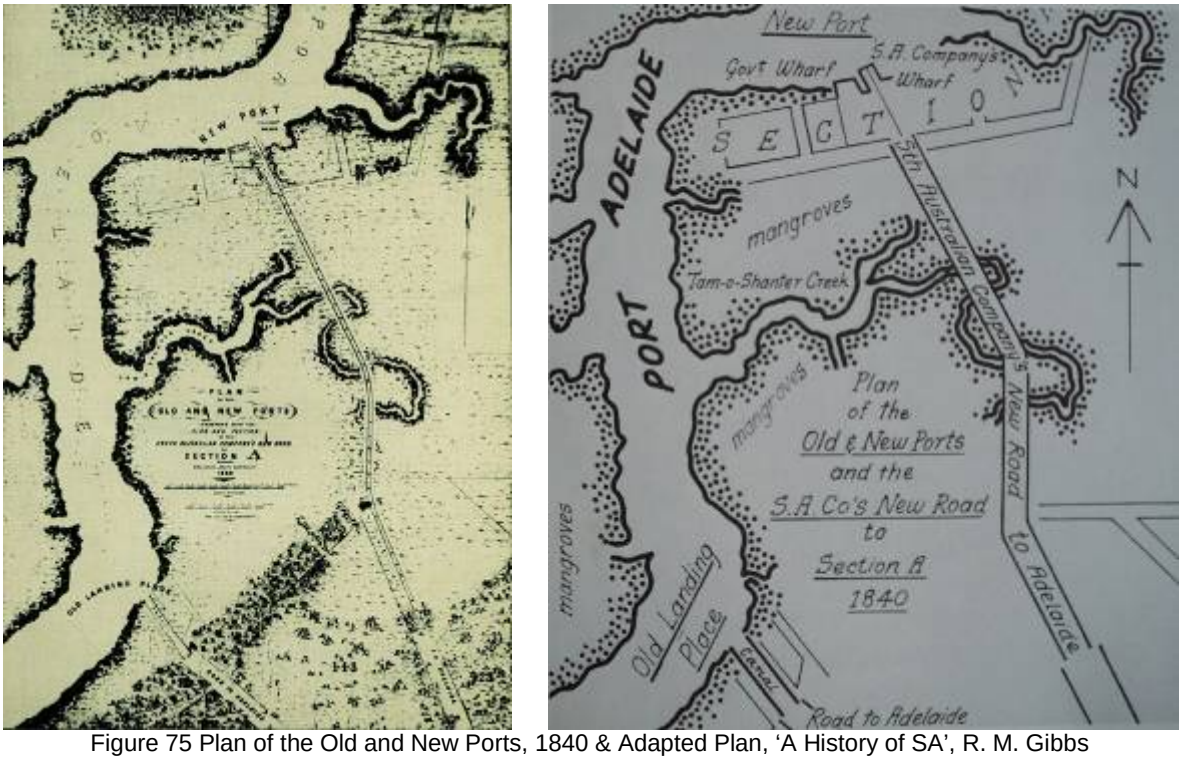

Figure 75 Plan of the Old and New Ports, 1840 & Adapted Plan, 'A History of SA', R. M. Gibbs

Figure 76 Distant view of the landing place…, 1839, Col. W. Light (AGSA)

Brian Samuels, Principal Heritage Officer, State Heritage Branch, has said of the first port (pers. comm., 2011):

> *Colonel Light selected this site as a temporary one. He preferred a site at the North Arm of the River, but acknowledged that the new colony could not afford to build a road to it. This site was chosen for its accessibility, being the nearest to firm ground, where the mangrove belt was thinnest. During the first year a canal was cut through the mangroves to the foot of the sandhills and a small staging constructed. Full size vessels anchored downstream near the site of the modern Jervois Bridge.*
>
> *At high tide passengers and cargo could be brought up the canal in small rowing boats. At low tide passengers had to wade or be piggy-backed ashore through the swamps. As a result the site earnt the name 'Port Misery'.*

In 1838, the canal cut through the mangroves was completed with 'a foreman and fifteen men at work' (Hack, 1837). It was 840 feet long and 20 feet wide at the top. The canal ended at the top of (now Old) Port Road and an area of 4 acres was declared a public wharf reserve. This area was also known as the Port Creek Settlement. The original canal and dock were described this way:

> [a] *channel was formed by hacking through the mangroves, and a primitive dock was made of black mud piled up on the bank of the river. Pine logs were driven into the water and enforced by interlaced tea-tree branches to prevent sand slides.*

Geyer & Donovan (1996:2) elaborate: 'Adelaide's port was located in the Port Reach area of present day West Lakes. With its 'eerie tangle of mangroves, a black and viscous creek, banks and shoals of mud … two hours in a bullock dray from Adelaide' it was quickly dubbed "Port Misery", yet it was the settlers' most vital link with the outside world'. Alexander Tolmer recalled his arrival in February 1840 in his *Reminiscences of an Adventurous and Chequered Career at Home and at the Antipodes,* London, 1882:

> *Never shall I forget … the wretched night we spent on board in the creek, owing to the myriads of mosquitoes … The next morning we again weighed anchor, and proceeded up the creek about a mile further, to Port Misery, a name which it well deserved. Of course, in those days there was no wharf or facility for landing passengers, who were each carried on shore on the sailors' backs and their luggage thrown promiscuously on the muddy beach, and unless promptly removed, frequently damaged by the rising tide …*

A similar view was expressed in the reflections of T. Horton James, recorded in *Six Months in South Australia*:

> *PASSENGERS LANDING AT THE PORT*
> *The shore is an uninhabitable swamp, and the few people who are living in the wigwams at Port Adelaide are too busily engaged in landing boards and rolling up casks, to take any notice of a party of ladies and gentlemen up to their knees in mud trying to reach the shore. This is at last managed, without the loss of either life or limb, but it is certainly anything but pleasant. Arrived on the dry land—the party wash the mud off their legs, and put on their shoes and stockings, then carrying their trunks as well as they can, the sailors having all gone back to look after the boat and get her afloat, they all walk up the side of a little canal, as it is called, which brings them to the only spot of land at the creek free from inundations, which is called the sand hill, where one or two grog shops, made of branches of trees, are seen, a few native blacks stark naked, and a large iron store painted white belonging to the Commissioners. This is Port Adelaide! Port Misery would be a better name; for nothing in any other part of the world can surpass it in every thing that is wretched and inconvenient (*South Australian Register, 29 November, 1839).

Evidence of the location of South Australia's first port and its history has become lost through urban development. In the 1970s the tidal basin of the Port Reach was dredged to become a 'lake' and land was reclaimed for housing in the West Lakes waterfront development. The connection between the upper and lower reaches of the river is now disguised by a causeway across the river (Bower Road). The old port is currently marked by an historic marker dedicated in 1986, South Australia's Jubilee 150 year, on the approximate location of the river site (Figure 77), and an old anchor (not from colonial times) marks the landing wharf site at the Port Road/Webb Street/Frederick Street intersection (Figure 78).

Figure 77 Settler's Landing Historic Marker, 2011

Figure 78 Site of end of Old Canal, 2011

Kraehenbuehl (1996:2) noted that 'the removal of large mangrove trees at Port Adelaide for their timber, used in wharf construction, began the destruction of mangrove woodland along the St Vincent Gulf that continues into these modern days'. There is a small area of remnant mangrove forest just north of the Old Port site at Mangrove Cove *Patangga* on the north western side of Bower Road (Figure 65 above).

Early colonist A. H. Davis noted that the mangroves which lined the saltwater creeks were extensively burned to provide an alkali for soap making and were very efficient for that purpose and that the 'pretty sprinkling of cypress trees … were found so useful by the early settlers in building, that they have almost wholly disappeared; and it is rare thing to see any of them'.

Destruction of The Pinery

Fenner and Cleland (in Kraehenbuehl, 1996:189) outlined of The Pinery that 'The land was bought by the government for soldier settlements but found to be unsuitable. As part of it is leased as golf-links, it is to be hoped that this interesting bit of country will be preserved in future more or less intact'. This did not occur. The area was gradually cleared and developed for fairways and greens between 1955 and 1970. Fenner and Cleland were astute in noting that 'Its interest as a reserve is somewhat offset by the prevalence of mosquitoes'.

Kraehenbuehl (1996:189) explained that the area of The Pinery he had seen in the 1950s, referenced above, was 'totally destroyed by sand contractors between 1955 and 1958'. Narno, the Native Pine, is now a rare sight in the area. There are some examples in the West Lakes Golf Course (Figure 79), about a kilometer to the south of the Old Port site.

Figure 79 Narno *Native Pine*, West Lakes Golf Course, 2012

Destruction of the Dunal System

Kraehenbuehl (1996:7) outlined that 'about 1954 and 1955, sand companies obtained the contract to remove those parts of the dunes stretching between Queenstown and the vicinity of modern–day Football Park [at

West Lakes].' One small reflection of the dune in the Queenstown area remains. It is immediately adjacent to the Old Port landing site and is topped by a house (Figure 80).

Figure 80 House on dune, Port Road, Queenstown, 2011

Destruction of the Estuarine Environment

After a gradual loss and decline over a century, the construction of the waterfront suburb of West Lakes in the 1970s dramatically and forever changed the estuarine, mangrove and samphire environment of the region. The following sequence of aerial images (Figure 81, Figure 82, Figure 83 & Figure 84) depicts the change to the locale.

Figure 81 Tennyson and the Port River, 1945 (SACPB)

Figure 82 Port River/West Lakes region, 1959 (SACPB)

Figure 83 Port River Middle/Upper Reach now West Lakes, 1959

Figure 84 West Lakes prior to filling the basin, 1974

As Kraehenbuehl noted:

One of the largest development projects after the war was the West Lakes Reclamation scheme which commenced in 1970; some of the best samphire flats and last coppices of Kangaroo honey-myrtle habitat were removed and levelled for the future West Lakes Shopping Centre and Football Park stadium. A consequence of this destruction of samphire habitat is that many plants of these areas have been given a rare-endangered status for the Southern Lofty region of South Australia (Kraehenbuehl, 1996:7).

The dramatic change to the region's ecological systems and the Kaurna cultural landscape is shown in the following images (Figure 85, Figure 86, Figure 87, Figure 88 & Figure 89).

Figure 85 The Port River bordered by mangrove and samphire near West Lakes, 1960
(Photo D. N. Kraehenbuehl)

Figure 86 Comparable view, West Lakes, 2011

Figure 87 Kangaroo honey-myrtle (Melaleuca halmaturorum), site of West Lakes Shopping Centre, 1966 (Photo D.N. Kraehenbuehl)

Figure 88 West Lakes Shopping Centre and Football Park Stadium, 2010

Figure 89 Kangaroo honey-myrtle (Melaleuca halmaturorum) along the Port River, Grange, 1962 (Photo D. N. Kraehenbuehl)

This area has been the subject of a sister report, *Kaurna Cultural Mapping for a part of the Yerta Bulti region known as Old Port Adelaide 'Port Misery' and the Port Creek Settlement* which provides further bi-cultural writing. The relevant Kaurna information is repeated here. The City of Port Adelaide Enfield *Kaurna Cultural Heritage Survey* (2007) provides further information on the extended Port Adelaide region.

4.5 Pathawilyangga Patawalonga/Glenelg

(Includes suburbs West Beach, Glenelg North, Novar Gardens)

To the south of Witongga was Pathawilyangga where the waters flowing south eventually reached the sea. Although mainly outside of the Charles Sturt Council's area it was part of the interconnected river/wetlands ecological system of the western Adelaide region and part of the cultural system for Kaurna. The area is therefore included here. The 1837 drawing by Skipper (Figure 90) depicts Kaurna meyunna in the Pathawilyangga area.

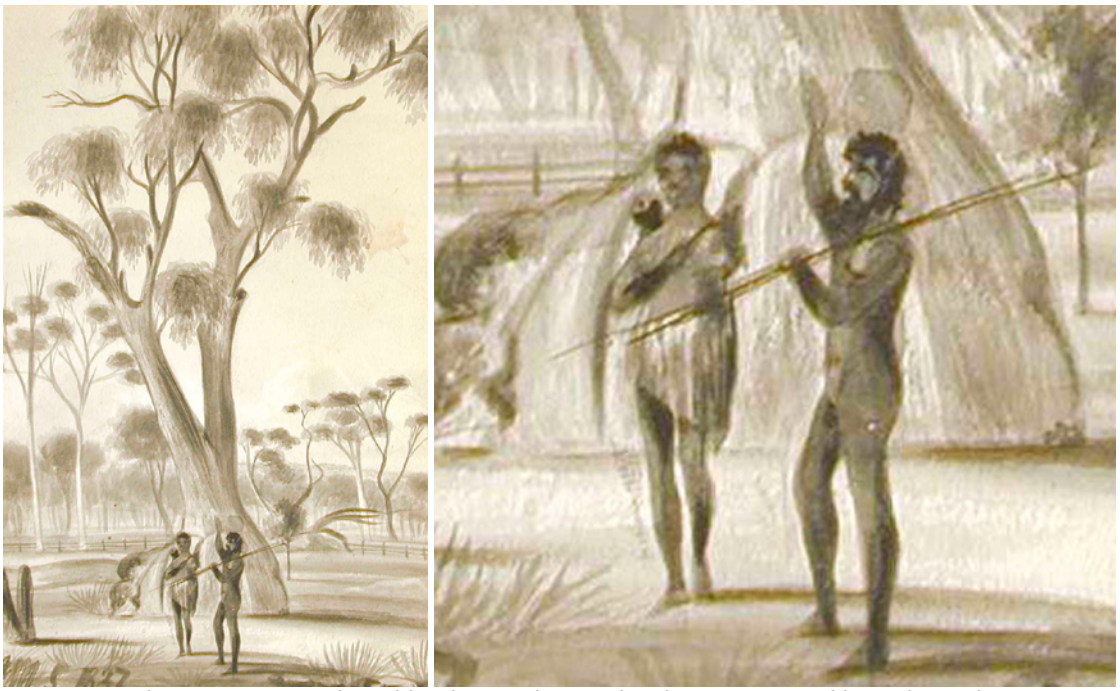

Figure 90 Kaurna alongside River Redgum, Glenelg, 1837, J. M Skipper (AGSA)