PARRAMATTA
River

HEAD WEST ALONG SYDNEY’S HISTORIC WATERWAY, WHICH HAS A WEALTH OF
BOATING ACTIVITIES, PICTURESQUE WETLANDS AND FISHING GROUNDS TO EXPLORE.

By Katrina Lobley

Sail far enough along the Parramatta River and you can’t fail to notice a broken white column mounted on a rock near the water’s edge at Henley.

The simple monument is dedicated to the short but spectacular life of Henry Searle, one of Australia’s greatest rowers, who died in 1889 at just 23. The column also marks the finish line, where, a year earlier, Searle comprehensively defeated the world rowing champion.

Searle’s Monument is one of the landmarks along the Parramatta River, which officially merges with Sydney Harbour at Longnose Point, Birchgrove and Manns Point, Greenwich. For most of its length, the river twists and curls into an astonishing number of exotic-sounding bays and coves: Hen and Chicken Bay, Iron Cove, Looking Glass Gay, Bedlam Bay and so on.

There is even the odd sandy beach – at Cabarita Point and Callan Park – to sprawl out on.

Since the Sydney Olympic Games were held at Homebush Bay in 2000, there has been a dramatic rise in activity on the river. On any given day, it bustles with yachts and powerboats, tinnies, canoes, kayaks and RiverCat ferries (seven low-wash catamarans named after famous Australian sportswomen).

The river, which is tidal to Charles Street Weir at Parramatta, is jam-packed with things to see – if you know what to look for.

Colonial History

As a key link between the settlements of Sydney and Parramatta, the Parramatta River played an important role in Australia’s colonial history. It’s no surprise to discover that early settlers nostalgically named many river localities after places along the River Thames, such as Greenwich, Woolwich and Henley.

Today, the Parramatta River is still vital for industry, with many large factories operating along the riverbanks, but it’s also home to wetlands, vast stretches of open space, sailing and rowing clubs, unit blocks and posh waterfront mansions. Yaralla House, in Concord (pictured here) is one of the oldest and largest and has considerable historical significance.

There are four islands along the river: Rodd Island in Iron Cove, and Cockatoo, Spectacle and Snapper islands, huddled between Woolwich and Birchgrove. In the late 19th century, Rodd Island was used as a biological laboratory by a team from the Pasteur Institute in France, and also as a temporary quarantine area for a pet dog that French actress Sarah Bernhardt brought with her to Australia.

From tiny Looking Glass Bay, sailors can see Banjo Paterson Cottage Restaurant – a large stone cottage surrounded by green lawns that the young A.B. Paterson called home while at Sydney Grammar School.

Inside Hen and Chicken Bay, which incorporates France, Canada and Exile Bays, Yaralla House, Concord
there’s an important memorial standing in Bayview Park. In both English and French, it pays tribute to the 39 French-Canadians who, in 1840, were exiled to Sydney for life for their role in political uprisings in Ontario and Quebec. They were eventually granted pardons in 1843-44.

River sailors must also make way for the Mortlake ferry, widely known as the Putney punt — the last vehicular ferry operating in the Sydney area. It continuously crosses the river in the early mornings and late afternoons during the week, and the last ferry service is at Bayview Park and Melrose Park at Meadowbank.

FISHING AND MARINE LIFE

Although there are plenty of fish such as bream, flathead, tailor and trevally in the river, the latest recommendation from the NSW Food Authority is that no fish caught west of the Harbour Bridge should be eaten due to the elevated dioxin levels detected in some fish and seafood. Fish can still be eaten from areas east of the Harbour Bridge, north of Homebush Bay, between Homebush Bay and West Nursing Station Reserve, and on the Georges River. In summer, flathead, tailor and trevally in the river, the latest recommendation from the NSW Food Authority is that no fish caught west of the Harbour Bridge should be eaten due to the elevated dioxin levels detected in some fish and seafood. Fish can still be eaten from areas east of the Harbour Bridge, north of Homebush Bay, between Homebush Bay and West Nursing Station Reserve, and on the Georges River.

The 39 maps list 495 fishing spots in and around Sydney Olympic Park and Melrose Park at Meadowbank. The 39 maps list 495 fishing spots in and around Sydney Olympic Park and Melrose Park at Meadowbank.

Fishing Guide to Sydney-Hawkesbury, by Gary Brown, Australian Fishing Network, $24.95. Available from selected book stores or direct from the publisher (02 9874 2266).”

Other services include daily dockmaster assistance, a sewage pump-out facility and internet. The marine’s friendly assistant manager, Nic Bailey, can help you if you want to find out more about Henry Searle — the famous sculler just happens to be his great-great-great uncle.

RECOMMENDED READING

The River: Sydney Cove to Parramatta, by Gregory Flanell, Brush Farm Historical Society, $30.95, $49.95 hardcover. Available from selected book stores or direct from the publisher (02 9874 2266). Flanell, also a keen yachtsman, penned this fascinating history of the Parramatta River in 2005, after researching the river for the Sydney Olympic Co-ordination Authority.


Get out the binoculars to see which migratory species regularly spot these parts. Penguins have also been seen in the waters around Hunters Hill and Lookout Glass Point. Salmons can get their land legs back by walking or cycling around the network of paths lining the river. Good places to explore are Sydney Olympic Park and Melanie Park at Meadowbank.