Often overlooked in favour of its glitzy harbour sister, the Parramatta River offers secrets (wade out to the shipwrecks) and surprises (keep your eyes peeled for the stingrays). Dominic Rolfe explores this historic waterway.

The Sydney Harbour Bridge nearly killed the Parramatta River. Before the Coathamper opened in 1932, vehicles heading north from the city were shunted across five bridges, three over the Parramatta River. One of them, the old Gladesville Bridge, would swing open for the colliers and sailing ships. Queues of drivers and pedestrians had to pause and breathe in the working river as the funnels and masts drifted by. But then the shiny new bridge took the glory – and the traffic – and by 1964, when the new Gladesville Bridge opened, allowing traffic to stream across, the river seemed destined for obscurity.

But the forgotten river is fighting back. Its banks are busy with new residential estates, clean-up campaigns have seen native marine life return and the history of the river is being reclaimed along with the river itself. "People don't appreciate that the Parramatta River was like the Murray-Darling, with paddle steamers and boats," says Tim Smith, a maritime archaeologist with the NSW Heritage Office. "Parramatta was settled by Europeans because they could get there by the river. Before there was any road or rail transport, the river was the highway."

Less than three months after settling in Sydney Cove, Governor Phillip and a detachment of marines journeyed up the river. Searching for fresh water and fertile soil to help provide for a young colony suffering from food shortages, Phillip decided on Parramatta as the best place to establish a farm.

Recent surveys have dated human use of the river back 30,000 years – the local Burraramattagal clan called the upper reaches Burraramata, "the place of eels" or "the head of the river". The trees and grasslands by the river were a rich source of food and local clans feasted on mud oysters, mullet, eels and yams. There are fewer eels now but here is a river teeming with life and activity."
Cruise to Parramatta on a RiverCat

Before the city rubs the sleep from its eyes, ferry master Greg Sullivan climbs into the wheelhouse for his first run of the day. The flat water moves like mercury as the ferry cuts westwards from the Thames Street depot in Balmain and heads upstream. “This is my favourite part of the river,” says Sullivan, as the engines echo from the underside of the Gladesville Bridge. “Here up to Rydalmere. The bays and inlets always have a different look and you start to get some interaction with other boats... and the early-morning rowers.”

Two pelicans stand like sentries on the Abbotsford wharf as the RiverCat docks and a handful of commuters board. “There’s a real sense of community on the run,” says Sarah Blackwell, 44, one of Sullivan’s crew. “I used to work in a funeral home. Now I enjoy being able to sell return tickets.”

You could call the Parramatta River Sullivan’s aquatic mistress, given the amount of time he spends watching its shifting moods. Sullivan, 47, has piloted RiverCats on the Parramatta-Circular Quay route since they began operating in 1992 and has seen the life of the river evolve. “It was a working river when I started,” he says. “Now it’s all gone to the yachtsies and the pleasure craft.” But the river still offers some lovely surprises. “Just the other day, we saw two dolphins off Drummoyne.”

View Homebush Bay’s incredible hulks

A few steps off the cycling path that circles the waterbird refuge in Sydney Olympic Park is a most startling vista. On the site of the old shipbreaking yards in Homebush Bay are rusting, mangrove-ridden hulks, listing decomposing barges and a tugboat aground in shallow waters. At dawn, as the mist rises off the wrecks, it’s as though the vessels’ funnels are puffing smoke on their last run down the river.

One of the wrecks, the Ayfield, was a collier that saw service in the Pacific during World War II and later ran on the famous “sixty mile” coal route between Newcastle and Sydney. The vessel came to its inglorious end in 1972 when it was scuttled in the bay. Now it sits as a monument to a time when the river was the city’s lifeblood.

At the northern end of the walking track is a viewing platform and viewing towers — ideal spots from which to conjure up the river’s working past.

While the gaze of the city is fixed eastwards on the glamour of the Opera House and the Harbour Bridge, the Parramatta River is quietly maturing behind our backs.
**Watch out for river life**

The NSW Department of Primary Industries warns against eating any fish caught in the Parramatta River, which is still polluted with dioxins that were a by-product of Union Carbide’s manufacture of the defoliant Agent Orange at Rhodes for the Vietnam War. Nonetheless, the river hosts a surprising wealth of aquatic life, including stingrays, dolphins, fairy penguins and even the odd bull shark.

There are more than 8000 specimens of fish from the Parramatta River region housed at the Australian Museum. Mark McGrouther, the museum’s ichthyology collection manager, believes the river collection represents between 100 and 200 species, including those that have strayed upstream from the harbour. By comparison, there are only 360 or so species found in the whole of Europe.

The museum’s collection includes sharks, rays and bony fishes including Anguilla reinhardtii, the longfin eel, which is one of the river’s more unusual characters. In breeding season, the adults head downstream and swim hundreds of kilometres to their spawning grounds near New Caledonia to breed. The young eels, or elvers, take about a year to return.

**Explore the Newington Armory**

The Newington Armory, where munitions were stored from 1897 until the Royal Australian Navy moved off the site in 1999, was a dangerous place to work. It was so dangerous that the armory once relied solely on bicycles and a train to move staff and goods around for fear of a vehicle spark setting off an explosion. “Only when the Americans came in during World War II did they allow cars,” explains Sydney Olympic Park ranger Sandra Hall, “and they gave each driver a fire extinguisher.”

Workers’ overalls were without cuffs or pockets so that gunpowder could not be inadvertently (or deliberately) collected and anything that could cause an explosion, such as transistors and watches, was put in a “smokes box”. Behind original sandstone gates, the armory’s buildings have non-sparking timber block floors and copper finishes – from hinges and finials to benchtops and windows – which helped the building to protect against lightning strikes.

These days, the bunkers that once stored 1500 barrels of gunpowder are open for “Bombs, Bullets and Bunkers” tours. The narrow-gauge electric train that carried goods around the site takes visitors on a 4.5-kilometre trip on Sundays, while the Armory Wharf Café caters to hordes of daytrippers, many of whom cycle in. The restored administrative offices recently opened to offer a snapshot of the facility’s past.

“When we set up the office of the administrator, one of the men who used to work here came in and said, ‘Hey, that’s my old desk, that’s my old chair’,” says Hall. “Then he turned to the uniform hanging on the rack and said, ‘That’s my coat.’ And when we opened it up, there was his name.”

**Discover Yaralla Estate’s faded splendour**

In the early 20th century, Yaralla Estate was the place to be. Bands greeted guests arriving on private steamers before they moved up through a grove of exotic trees, past a grotto and an Italianate terrace to the Victorian mansion. Dame Edith Walker, who inherited the sprawling estate from her merchant banker father, Thomas, in 1886, hosted lavish functions and royal guests, such as the Prince of Wales in 1920. “Even Banjo Paterson’s daughter was married on the estate,” says Trish Sihan from the Concord Heritage Society. “Anyone who was anybody came here.”

Dame Edith had one of the finest car fleets in NSW, including one of its few Rolls-Royce Silver Ghosts. The estate also included its own power station and Australia’s first squash court. “Edith even had a wave machine built in the pool to keep the water fresh,” says Sihan.

When Dame Edith, a great philanthropist, died in 1937, Yaralla was bequeathed to the state to be used as a convalescent hospital. Today, the mansion is administered by the NSW Department of Health. The 24-hectare grounds are open to walkers but the mansion itself is only open to the

**Delve into Cockatoo Island’s industrial past**

Like Hugh Jackman’s mutating character in X-Men Origins: Wolverine, which was partly filmed on Cockatoo Island, the site of the old navy dockyards continues to bristle with its own transformation. Visitors can dart through tunnels that cross the island, peer into the cramped convict-era barracks and marvel at letters that once created the propeller shafts of Australian naval destroyers.

Shipbuilding ceased on Cockatoo Island in 1992 and since 2001, the Sydney Harbour Federation Trust has been restoring the island for public use. It has hosted the →
The Monlake Ferry and its operators Atilla Catalca and Steve Catalca. 4. Ryde Bridge. 5. Shipping containers rise from the mangroves at Clyde. 6 and 7. Gledswood Hospital’s former meat safe, abattoir and bakery. 8. Ruins at Gledswood Hospital.

 Bennetts of Sydney, comedy and music festivals, and is fast becoming a hot spot for the New Year’s Eve fireworks.

 Two heritage homes, built in 1915 for the medical officer and engineering manager of the former dockyards, have been renovated and can be rented for holiday stays. Tents can be hired for pitching in the campground and a tennis court with uninterrupted water views is $10 an hour.

 Entry to the island is free and up to 22 ferry services run here from Circular Quay every day. A 90-minute audio guide, available for $5 from the muster station by the wharf, covers 26 pieces of interest, including underground grain silos that convict gangs carved out of the rock with little more than hand tools.

 **Toast Australia’s first brewer at Kissing Point**

 There’s a reason for beer drinkers to feel a little misty-eyed at this section of the Parramatta River, which is now a residential area. From 1798, former convict James Squire ran the tavern The Maiting Shovel at the end of Kissing Point wharf. Squire arrived with the First Fleet and within four years was living on land he had granted beside the river.

 It was here that he brewed the colony’s first beer. “The land grant was the halfway point between Sydney Cove and Parramatta,” says Gregory Boxall, author of The River: Sydney Cove to Parramatta, on why the watering hole was so successful. “It was the perfect place to stop for thirsty crews.” As a measure of how quickly beer took hold, Squire’s funeral in 1822 was the largest the colony had ever seen.

 Kissing Point (now Putney) has another historical facet - when well-known Aborigine Bennelong died in 1813, he was buried there in Squire’s orchard.

 **Discover a woolly pioneer**

 If Australia once rode on the sheep’s back, Elizabeth Farm could be considered the place where the wool industry took its first tentative steps. The farm, a 20-minute walk from the ferry terminal at Parramatta, was built in 1793 for John Macarthur, who took the colony’s first fleece back to Britain. His travels meant that his wife, Elizabeth, ran the farm until she died in 1850. “Elizabeth Farm was mostly run by women,” says the Historic Houses Trust’s Bronwyn Alcorn, who adds that five years after buying the farm in 1904, William Swann died, leaving his wife and daughters there until 1986.

 Using John Macarthur’s logbooks, landscape architects have restored the property’s gardens to reflect the original 1830s layout and to include the country’s oldest surviving olive tree and other, more exotic, plants. Inside, reproductions of furniture, portraits and objects belonging to the Macarthur family visitors straight back into the 19th century.