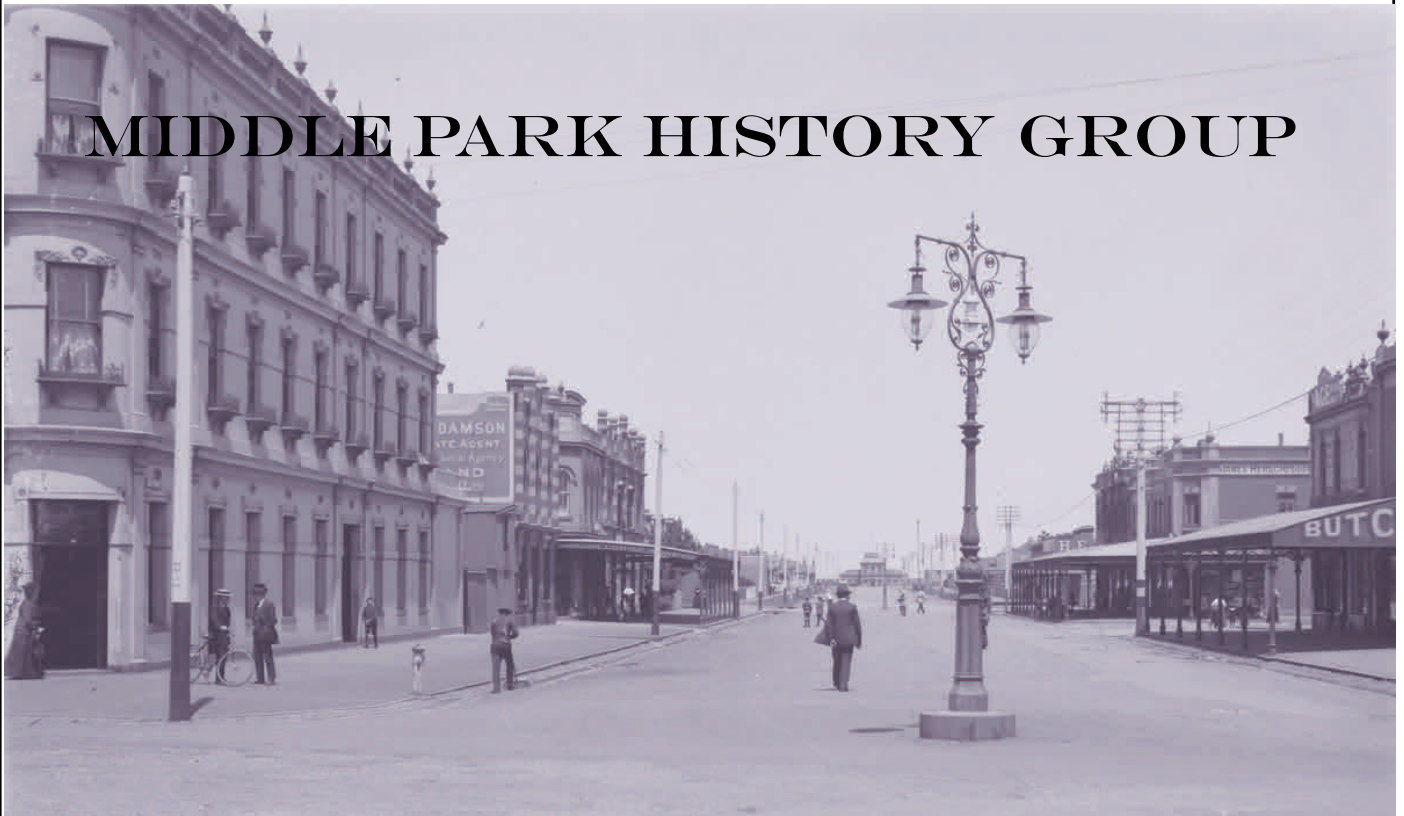


# MIDDLE PARK HISTORY GROUP



## Editorial

It is summer so some of us have time to get to the beach. Rubbish on the beach has always been an issue but while it was unwanted shellfish washing ashore last century it is now litter. Our city regularly cleans our beach for us and our visitors but as recounted in this issue the methods used have not always been the same. December 2019 marked the ten year anniversary of Beach Patrol, a local community organization committed to keeping the Middle Park beach clean and safe. Members of Beach Patrol walk the beach on every second Saturday morning collecting litter. All residents are welcome

to join. To be informed of its activities visit the website

<https://www.beachpatrol.com.au/BeachGroups/3206>

To earn a Beach Patrol 3206 T-shirt join in on 8 February 2020 at 9 am in front of the Sandbar Café.

In this issue we have another article by Sonya Cameron on activities in Middle Park 100 years ago and another mystery object.

*Gary Poore*

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## Beach cleaning horses

*Sonya Cameron*



This image of an early beach-cleaning machine was donated to the Middle Park History Group by Stan Cheevers whose father is driving the horses.

In the 1940s there were constant complaints by the local life-saving clubs and members of the public about the filthy state of the Middle Park beaches. Food scraps, broken glass and mussel shells were the cause of cut feet and the food and mussels attracted flies. The issue was further complicated by the fact that the Harbour Trust was responsible for beach cleaning to the high water mark and the Foreshore Committee and the South Melbourne Council responsible for the remaining beach area.

During the busy season the Council employed two men, but because of the nature of the debris, normal beach cleaning methods did not work. In 1947, the South Melbourne City Engineer (Mr

R.A. Hiscock) invented a new machine which he improvised from a potato-digging machine. The machine, hauled along the sand by three horses (the youngest of which was put into the deeper water), was fitted with a wire sieve through which the sand fell and onto which rubbish collected. A trial of this new method of cleaning the beach occurred in November 1947 and experiments using the converted potato-digger were to continue.

In the summer of 1948 a particularly large number of mussels were washed up on the beach after a severe storm and, as they decomposed, they released hydrogen sulphide into the air causing many complaints by residents and beach

goers. The city engineer, Mr Hiscock, consulted with experts to find if there was a machine that could do a thorough cleaning job as machines ranging from potato-diggers to graders had been unsuccessful. A further infestation of mussel shells occurred in January 1949 and the following article appeared in *The Herald* on 19 January 1949, p. 5.

### Many Try To Find 'Ambergris'

*Drawn by the publicity about a man who found what he claimed was ambergris, hundreds of people went to **Middle Park** beach today. Scores of men with sacks were there yesterday, taking away washed-up mussels to bottle and sell them. Today the mussels were starting to rot. The South Melbourne City Engineer (Mr R. A. Hiscock) said today that bayside beaches had probably seen the last big wash-up of mussels for years. He said these mussels were part of those loosened by a big storm last April. The last flooding of the shore with mussels had cost South Melbourne City Council about £1600 to clear. This one would cost about £900. Today four bulldozers with mechanical shovels, eight horse-drawn carts and five trucks were busy hauling away the mussels. They took them to South Melbourne tip to be buried.*

Whether Hiscock's converted potato-digging machine was ultimately successful is unknown because the next time we hear of a beach-cleaning machine is in 1952 when an Essendon jeweller, Mr L.G. Emeny, designed a machine consisting of a giant roller. "The inside face of the roller is fitted with scoops, which the sand is thrown into as it enters the machine through a larger scoop 8 ft. wide. As the inside scoops revolve they pass the sand into a large sieve which catches the debris and allows the sand to return to the beach." (*The Herald*, 6 Oct 1952 p. 6). But rather than being pulled along by horses, this beach cleaning machine is towed by a tractor. Several months later, this beach cleaning machine was languishing in the South Melbourne's Depot as the company formed to further develop the machine was unable to meet the costs of manufacture due to rising costs. For the time being, beach cleaning reverted to hand-cleaning methods, carried out by Council staff and life-saving patrols.

In 1954, newspapers were still full of articles regarding the filthy state of Middle Park's beaches, including the ever-present mussel shells. The Council reported that it employed two men seven days a week to clean the South Melbourne beaches. They rake the mussels and other rubbish into heaps and then two horses and drays are used to cart it away.



INVENTOR Mr L. C. Emeny (left) with his beach cleaning machine at South Melbourne beach today.

It is not known for how long the South Melbourne Council continued to experiment with a combination of horses and mechanical methods for beach cleaning but these two photos show that horses were in use into the 1970s.

Below is the beach cleaning machine that today greets early risers who head on down to



the beach in the morning. Instead of horses there is a tractor, but the device being pulled behind it looks very similar to those being pulled by horses in the past.



*Beach cleaning, 1960-1970 (CoPP, sm0884)* Two enormous Clydesdale horses dragging a plough which is digging into the sand of the beach. The sand appears to be falling through chicken wire at the back.

*Left: Beach cleaning 1950-1960 (CoPP, sm0887)* Three men inspecting the hopper at the back of a horse-drawn plough. Possibly an early beach cleaning mechanism.



## Mussels in Port Phillip Bay — problem or delicacy?

Gary Poore

Sonya Cameron's article (pages 2–4) rightly attributes the need for beach cleaning last century to piles of mussels accumulating on Middle Park beach. Mussel shells are uncommon and live mussels rare on the beach these days – although a kilo or more of mussels can be purchased at South Melbourne Market. Blue mussels are a native shellfish now cultivated at farms such as at Beaumaris and Portarlington. So what happened to the mussels at Middle Park?

Blue mussels require a hard surface to grow to full edible size. The bottom of Port Phillip Bay is largely shelly, sandy or muddy, not ideal in itself for mussels. But the accumulation over eons of dead shell can be the genesis of patchy reefs on which baby mussels can grow. Shellfish reefs such as this were common in pre-European Port Phillip Bay providing mussels, and flat oysters, to local Aborigines. During storms, these reefs become dislodged and come ashore where they die. This was noted 130 years ago by W.P. Buckhurst who wrote to *The Argus* (28 November 1891):

*“Sir – After every south-westerly “buster” or gale during the last four or five years tons of fine mussels are washed up on the beach between St Kilda and Sandridge at South Melbourne, and there, after a hot day or two, become an abominable nuisance. What does this indicate? To my mind it shows clearly that during the last few years extensive mussel banks have grown up on the comparatively shallow mud or sand banks extending out two or three miles from St Kilda towards Williamstown.”*

Dredging for oysters, a more popular delicacy than mussels, began in Port Phillip Bay in the 1960s and rapidly expanded to target the even more profitable scallops. Mussels were a significant bycatch that could be sold to Melburnians as they developed more sophisticated diets. The harvest peaked in 1974

and again in 1986 but declined rapidly thereafter. Shellfish dredging is highly destructive and the reefs throughout the bay were destroyed and disappeared within two or three decades. Dredging is now banned by Fisheries regulations in Port Phillip Bay.

Today occasional dead mussel shells wash up on Middle Park beach but living mussels can be seen on the piles of the Kerferd Road pier, one of the only hard surfaces left.

Beach cleaning still takes place but the target now is plastic and glass litter.

For further detail see:

Ford, J. R. & Hamer, P. (2016) The forgotten shellfish reefs of coastal Victoria: documenting the loss of a marine ecosystem over 200 years since European settlement. *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Victoria*, 128, 87–105. <https://www.publish.csiro.au/paper/RS16008>



## 100 years ago

### Sonya Cameron

The Middle Park Surf Club was formed in early 1917 with the objective of promoting swimming and lifesaving and to help maintain order on Middle Park beach. It was affiliated with the Royal Life Saving Society and actively took part in the many summer swimming and lifesaving competitions. It is not clear from what part of Middle Park beach they operated, but it was probably on that part of the beach near Nimmo Street as, in April 1917, they requested the South Melbourne Council to provide funds for the erection of a gentlemen's dressing shed on the beach near the end of Nimmo Street. Approval was given by The Council in July 1918. In June 1919 they again made a request to the South Melbourne Council, this time for the supply of a surf reel and life line, which was subsequently provided. It was thanks to the timely provision of these two items that led to this rescue, reported in a Melbourne newspaper, *Weekly Times*, 27 December 1919, p. 32.

#### **BOYS ESCAPE DROWNING**

##### **RESCUED BY SURF CLUB**

Venturing on the Bay at Middle Park on a small raft kept afloat by four kerosene tins, two boys, named Wainbridge and Duggan, aged eight and 10 years respectively, living in Richardson street, Middle Park, were being rapidly carried out to sea by the rough north wind on Sunday morning when they were rescued by the members of the Middle Park Surf Club.

Leonard Collins and Roy Bingham, members of the club, saw the perilous plight of the two boys, and plunged into the sea from a jetty at the foot of Harold street, and other members quickly ran the reel out and set about the task of bringing all four to land, as the violent sea caused maximum danger conditions. After a struggle, in which the Surf Club members did good work, all were rescued.

Mr S. D. Smith, president of the Middle Park Surf Club, states that the boys on the raft were within an ace of losing their lives. The incident created a good deal of excitement.

## MPHG activities

### MPHG President's Report

Unfortunately Australia began 2020 with catastrophic fires and we express our sadness at the tragic effects on firefighters, communities and wildlife.

Our AGM on Mon 4 November 2019 was well attended with our excellent guest speaker Adair Bunnett on the history of Napier Street Aged Care and its buildings formerly a huge 19th century orphanage. Staff and volunteers from Napier also attended on the night.

The new elected Middle Park committee includes Meyer Eidelson, Gary Poore, Tony Liston and Sonya Cameron.

Our esteemed treasurer Sonya reported a healthy balance of \$29,052.33. Perhaps a

donation to the 'furies' should be considered.

This year we commence a new and exciting book publishing venture – the first-ever history of Albert Park – and are establishing a publications committee to oversee that task for any interested members.

In the second week of February 2020 we also start our history project at Middle Park Primary School by training young pupils to use museum archive sheets and to catalogue historic objects. To assist, we are lending them over fifty historic 'mystery' objects to catalogue.

Looking forward to meeting you all at our next general meeting Monday 3 February 2020.

*Meyer Eidelson*

*President, Middle Park History Group*

## Mystery objects(s)



We expect that only old-time residents, those here in the 1970s will be able to recognise these mystery objects.

## MPHG meeting schedule 2020

Monday 3 February 2020 – Steven Haby, Secretary Librarian, Prahran Mechanics' Institute

**Sparks to St Kilda, trams to the beach and buses through Middle Park: a look at train, tram and bus services through Middle Park since the 1850s**

Monday 6 April 2020 – Dr Sophie Couchman  
**Mee How Ah Muoy – Architect**

### **NOTE THE NEW MEETING PLACE**

All meetings for 2020 and the future are at 7:30 pm at the Middle Park Primary School and are followed by supper.

Enter the school via the gate in **Richardson Street** between the Infant School on the left and the Main School on the right. The entrance to the Infant School Hall is via a door on the left towards the rear, about 20 metres into the school grounds.



### **Your MPHG committee**

President:	Meyer Eidelson
Vice-President:	Vacant
Secretary:	Vacant
Treasurer:	Sonya Cameron
Committee members:	Tony Liston, Gary Poore