

Hibiscus historic links

by Ed Parker

Centenary suburbs bushland is valued for harbouring a wide range of native fauna. But our local bushland also provides links to our colonial and indigenous history.

Hibiscus plants, well known to gardeners for dramatic floral displays, are inevitably highly cultivated varieties often derived from exotic locations. In Centenary's riverfront bushland, however, we have our own, but equally dramatic, native Hibiscus thriving as it has done for hundreds of years.

The plant is *Hibiscus heterophyllus*, sometimes called Native Rosella or simply Native Hibiscus.

Its existence in Brisbane was noted by John Oxley in the first European recorded travels along the Brisbane River in 1823 and 1824. On both trips, Oxley stopped at what we now call Mount Ommaney (his name for the mount was 'Green Hill').

Oxley's botanist, Allan Cunningham, noted upstream from their Mount Ommaney encampment in September 1824 the river banks were "timbered with Apple Tree (*Angophora* species) *Hibiscus heterophyllus* is very frequent on the immediate bank clothed with a profusion of its specious flowers. Pelicans, Black Swan ... and Ducks were very abundant in every reach of the River ...".



A pensive Pelican at Pullen Reach, Riverhills. Photo: E Parker

This portrays a scene not unlike some riverfront stretches today!

A later visitor to this area, botanist Charles Fraser, travelling upstream with Captain Logan and Cunningham on 11 July 1828 provided the indigenous connection. His recorded sightings of the same Native Hibiscus used the common name 'Native Cordage Tree', acknowledging the functional value of the tree to Aboriginal people.

Aboriginal people used the root bark of *Hibiscus heterophyllus* to produce a strong fibre. The fibre was fashioned into practical items such as fishing nets and dilly bags. The leaves of the Hibiscus were also used to make a refreshing drink.



Hibiscus heterophyllus (Native Hibiscus) in full flower. Photo: E Parker

Hibiscus heterophyllus grows as a slender shrub or small tree with large, showy white flowers with a dark red centre, though on Brisbane's north side it has yellow flowers. It flowers most prolifically in spring but also at other times of the year.

(The explorer's journal references are as recorded in Steele JG, 1972, *The Explorers of the Moreton Bay District*, UoQ Press.)

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