

PEEL-HARVEY

The Decline and Rescue of an Ecosystem

Excerpt from book by Keith Bradby
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The Development Divide

Excerpts from Chapter 6, 'Fumbling Forward: Tackling the problem, 1980s', pp. 132-134.

We all have different visions for the areas we love. Many people see the Peel's future as an urbanised aquatic playground, with the dual attractions of coast and estuary.

A role model for such a vision is Queensland's Gold Coast. Developers and companies saw similar potential around Mandurah. Large tracts of land had been purchased during the late 1970s, and development proposals were soon being put forward. The pros and cons of Gold Coast style developments were often hotly debated in the local papers. A number of the local proposals were based on the construction of artificial canals, with large profits to be made through selling residential blocks that faced onto the water.

By the end of 1980, a number of major canal proposals were waiting for government permission to proceed. The largest of these were on the samphire flats flanking the Mandurah Channel. On the western side, the Parry Corporation was planning to establish a prestige residential area, while on the eastern side of the channel the giant John Holland construction group proposed to build a canal estate stretching from Soldiers Cove to the Creery wetlands. Other canals were planned along the Murray River, and at Mandurah Marina.

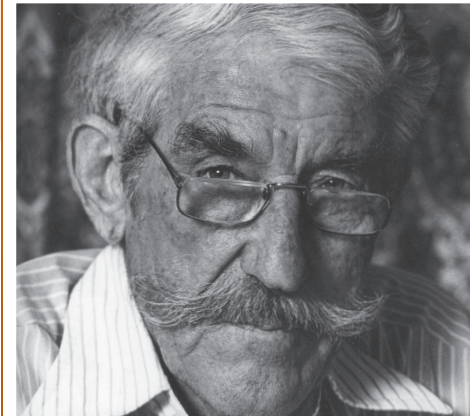
However, the main development thrust in Mandurah during the 1980s was suburban, with the town steadily expanding to the south through Halls Head and Falcon, east through Coondanup and new suburbs along the Serpentine River, and northwards along the coast. Mandurah's population trebled during the 1980s and had almost reached the 30 000 mark by the end of the decade. In 1987, the town of Mandurah became officially recognised as WA's newest city.

While these new suburbs were carved out of the banksia and tuart woodlands surrounding the town, it was the canal developments planned for the foreshores that stirred continual controversy. In January 1983, the EPA announced its conditional approval of the Parry and John Holland canal estates flanking the Mandurah Channel. In May, the Mandurah Council acted decisively by rejecting rezoning applications for both developments.

But the Council remained under constant pressure from the developers for a positive decision, and debate continued. When 1983's *Nodularia* bloom banked up at the site of the proposed canals, prominent local conservationist Len Howard was quick to draw the link. In a letter to the Premier, he urged the State Government to *'take a firm stand on any development likely to exacerbate those problems'*. In December, Premier Burke urged a 'cooling off period'.

A few months later, after a meeting with the then Minister for Town Planning, David Parker, the Council agreed to initiate the rezoning process, and to hold a public referendum on the issue. Ratepayers went to the polls on 24 March 1984 and voted against both projects. However, the referendum was not legally binding on the Council, and in August it voted to accept the rezoning, subject to final approval by the Minister for Planning. That approval came in December, allowing the first stages of each development to proceed.

Whatever the local community may have thought of the developments, blocks sold rapidly, and by the end of the decade prestige homes were being built on both canal estates.



Highly regarded 'environmental warrior' and co-founder of the Peel Preservation Group (1974), Len Howard. Len passed away in April 1998. Photo courtesy Peel Preservation Group'.

Chronology

6 Nov 1970: *Coastal Districts Times* reports fisherman Bill Tatham's concerns about the design of the Yunderup Canals: *'One thing is certain. The channel into the estuary lies directly across the migration paths of the prawns'*.

26 Nov 1981: Chairman of the Waterways Commission receives a petition of 4150 signatures demanding that no canal projects be approved near the mouth of the Peel Inlet.

Dec 1983: During the 'cooling off' period over the canal proposals, the Premier reviewed research findings for any link between the canal proposals and the decline in water quality. In Feb 1984 he stated there was no evidence of a link.

2011: "The protection of the Creery Wetlands had strong public support and resulted in a number of community members standing for Council on this issue – all of who were elected. This significantly changed the structure of the Council to one more focussed on the protection of Mandurah's natural features." *Keith Holmes, Former spokesperson Creery Wetland Support Group and Mayor of Mandurah (1995 to 2005)*