

Guildford's Sugar Gum Trees - Sentinels of History

Introduction

The 'sugar gum' is a eucalyptus tree. Its botanical name is *Eucalyptus Cladocalyx*. It can grow to 35 metres high in ideal conditions. It is a tall upright tree with smooth barked trunk in cream, brown and orange tones, its dark glossy leaves contrasting with creamy white ascending branches.

Sugar gums were originally found only in South Australia, in the southern Flinders Ranges, on Kangaroo Island and near Port Lincoln on the Eyre Peninsula.¹ They have since been planted across Australia as they became popular for street tree plantings and for use in the timber industry.



Sugar gum trees of Guildford
Photograph B.Dundas

By the late nineteenth century in South Australia they had become popularly known as 'sugar gums'. Cattle enjoyed their sweet-tasting immature foliage (later found to contain a high level of the chemical compound *glucoside*²). The prolific white blossom proved a substantial source of nectar for bees, and by attracting them could improve local pollination and availability of honey.

The striking foliage and majestic form of these trees made them popular subjects or background for the nineteenth-century Australian Impressionist artists such as Hans Heysen.

Mr. John Ednie Brown and the sugar gums

The man noted for his efforts in popularising the planting of sugar gums in South Australia and then Western Australia, was John Ednie Brown (1848-1899). Scottish-born, he left school at 15 to work with his father, a deputy-surveyor of woods and forests, and developed a love and extensive knowledge of trees. He was appointed Conservator of Forests in South Australia in 1878 and is noted for his important writing *A Treatise on Practical Tree Culture in South Australia*.³ He promoted sugar gum trees as desirable trees to plant in semi arid and low rainfall areas in Australia. He found their timber was useful for the building industry and encouraged development of plantations of these trees.

In 1896 John Ednie Brown was appointed as Conservator of Forests in Western Australia. He developed a State tree nursery near Guildford (relocated to Drakesbrook in 1897⁴) to raise a variety of trees, including sugar gums, for planting in forests, parks and country areas.



Mr. Ednie Brown experimented with a system of planting successfully developed in India⁵. He grew sugar gum trees in bamboo tubes about 5 inches (12 cm) long. The seedling could be planted straight in the ground with the tube, thus protecting the seedling and its roots from damage. Between 150 and 200 of these tubes could fit in a small box for transporting long distances. Thousands of gum trees were grown this way each year by the State Nursery and transported great distances across Western Australia.

Queen Victoria's Jubilee and WA's first Arbor Day

Along with the promotional work of John Ednie Brown, two particular events in 1897 led to extensive plantings of sugar gum trees in Guildford and other parts of Western Australia. These were Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee - a celebration of the 60th anniversary of her coronation as Britain's monarch - and the inaugural Arbor Day, created to teach recognition of the effects of deforestation and afforestation.

Queen Victoria was England's longest serving Monarch. During her reign the British Empire expanded and many new colonies were settled. The royal birthdays, coronations and visits were celebrated by the colonies across the world. In WA, every town and community celebrated Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee with balls, sports days, grand dinners and ornamental tree plantings.^{6 7}



E. cladocalyx in bamboo
Photograph B.Dundas

It was suggested that the first Arbor Day should be held in connection with the Jubilee celebrations⁸. In 1897 the Forestry Department gave West Australian schools a variety of trees for planting on 20 June - Arbor Day. Children at Government Schools also received a silver commemorative medal and Infant School children received a special enamel mug on this occasion.⁹ Arbor Day continues to be commemorated annually, to teach children to value and respect our trees.

John Ednie Brown provided seedling trees to many schools and councils from his State Nursery. Guildford received 60 such trees for its school children and 200 for the Council for its Arbor Day and Jubilee celebrations¹⁰.

Guildford's sugar gum trees

The Jubilee Celebrations in 1897 coincided with another important event in Guildford - the relocation of the railway. In 1881 the Eastern Railway was constructed from Fremantle to Guildford. When work commenced to extend it through the town in 1882, the people of Guildford requested the railway be diverted down the middle of the main street, rather than in a straight line through their central town park -Stirling Square.

However, the railway caused great inconvenience in the main street, the trains were noisy and dirty and horses were often frightened by the big steam trains.



Hence in 1897 the railway line was relocated from the centre of James Street to a new route that cut through the southern section of Stirling Square. The railway line and park were then fenced and new tree plantings were established in James Street, around the new boundary of the square and in an avenue from Meadow Street to St. Matthew's Church. It is believed that many of these trees are the sugar gums that stand today. Sugar gums continued to be planted through the town in the original, wide streets - in Swan Street (1902) and Hill Street (1904).¹¹ The Councillors were proud of their town and their new trees. Councillor Guppy stated,

*" I must return to my own true love of beautifying the town. I have at all times advocated street tree planting. In all civilized countries it is recognized that the tree planting acts more beneficially on the health of a population and the maintenance is amply repaid by the enhancement of beauty to the town. "*¹²

While sugar gum trees were planted extensively throughout Western Australia at the turn of last century, they were usually planted as feature trees at a focal point in town such as railway stations or parks. In Guildford, however, they were planted throughout the town. The sugar gums grew to create a tall central spine of greenery down James Street and a major feature on the wide street reserves of Market, Hill and Swan Streets. They formed a border to Stirling Square and provided a central avenue leading to St Matthew's Anglican Church, forming part of the recognisable charm and character of this early colonial town.

Sugar gums and the State Electricity Commission

In September 1950 the Guildford Council was shocked to hear that the State Electricity Commission planned to erect a 66,000 volt power cable through the northern road reserve of James Street, which would lead to the loss of all the sugar gum trees between the Bassendean bridge and East Street. Councillor Anderson stated that:

*" Guildford's gum trees were beautiful and one of the features of the town... and it would be criminal if they were disfigured".*¹³



The sugar gums in James Street Guildford 1920s
Reproduced with permission of the West Australian

Strong community opposition to this plan resulted in the SEC rerouting the power to the south side of the road, and the sugar gums were saved. In the words of Councillor Anderson's poem:

*The trees asked no favours,
Other than to line our portals fair,
And with Eucalyptus leaves
To scent the friendly air.*¹⁴



Sugar gums and the Main Roads Department

In September 1953 a proposal to widen James Street and remove 21 trees was presented to the Guildford Council.¹⁵ This work was to be funded by the Main Roads Department and required the removal of all the sugar gum trees between Johnson and Meadow Streets. Mayor Hicks was shocked at the Council's decision to approve the plans. There was widespread concern in both Guildford and the wider community. A petition was presented to Council and residents wrote to the papers and council.¹⁶ Mrs. J. Hamersley hoped the efforts of ratepayers would be successful in saving the beautiful gums of James Street:

" These must be the finest specimens in the metropolitan area and their removal will not only be felt by those who grew up with the trees but also by those who pass through the town".¹⁷

Other residents argued the removal was an unnecessary destruction of one of the outstanding natural landmarks - the soaring stately gums of Guildford.¹⁸ The Guildford Town Clerk countered that the trees were unsuitable as street trees and should be replaced with smaller specimens set back on the road reserve (30). In November 1953, fifteen sugar gum trees were removed from James Street between Johnson and Meadow Streets. However, the remaining gum trees survived as fine examples of Australian colonial streetscapes.

Guildford sugar gums in recent times

In 1975 the Main Roads Department considered removing all the sugar gums along James Street. The Guildford community was greatly angered at the proposal. Community concern resulted in the trees being saved and the Shire of Swan agreeing in 1976, to pruning treatment 'to extend the lives of the trees and beautify the streetscape'.

The magnificent stands of sugar gum trees have remained in the streets of Guildford, with only occasional removals of an individual tree following road works, complaints from nearby property owners or the falling of a large limb.

A Valued Heritage

In 1998, the City of Swan sought advice from an arboricultural specialist on the health of 21 trees in James Street. The report was presented to Council in January 1999. Council recommended the removal of ten trees and a community meeting was called.¹⁹ Prominent landscape architect Mr. John Oldham told the meeting:

" It would be a disaster to remove the trees - not just for Guildford but for WA. "²⁰

The City agreed to a request from the meeting to engage three specialists to obtain detailed reports and a review of the planned road works.²¹ Assessments were completed by July 1999. The Council resolved to remove 15 trees at its July meeting, a decision contrary to the officer's recommendation and at odds with information provided in the specialists' reports²².



The community of Guildford responded immediately. Two young people moved into the trees and set up a camp that night. Within days, people from Guildford, the hills and beach suburbs moved and camped in tents from the west to east ends of James Street. Local businesses offered food as a demonstration of public support. Candlelight vigils and a large community dinner were held down the main street. Tree experts, including Mr. Barry Oldfield and international environmentalist Mr. David Bellamy, came to offer their support for the retention of the trees.



David Bellamy and Barry Oldfield with Guildford resident Patsy Molloy
Reproduced with permission of P.Molloy

The Guildford Association analysed the arboricultural reports and noted that only one tree was consistently recorded as dangerous by all three specialists. The City of Swan agreed to modify its planned work to a pruning of necessary dead limbs and to hold an electors meeting. A subsequent review of the trees resulted in the mayor announcing:

"The arboriculturalists have changed their view on what should happen to the trees... they are not as dangerous as first thought." ²³

The City of Swan agreed to a programme of ongoing maintenance for the trees and infill or replanting the street with new sugar gums. The City also presented a seat to the community on 24 July 1999 in recognition of the community's involvement in saving the trees, Guildford's focus on trees and the International Year of the Tree. ²⁴

Today, the Guildford sugar gums continue to line the main streets in regal splendour, proud sentinels of the town's history.



ENDNOTES

- ¹ Holliday I., Watton G. Gardiner's Companion to Eucalypts. Lansdowne Publishing
- ²nd Ed.1997 pp 64-65.
- ² The juvenile foliage was also found to be poisonous when ruminants consumed some other plants....in White mallee E .anceps(R.Br.ex Maid) Blakely Names : see Sugar Gum
[www.pir.sa.gov.au/ data/assets/pdf file/0017/71900/Native Trees of South Australia Part 3.pdf](http://www.pir.sa.gov.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0017/71900/Native_Trees_of_South_Australia_Part_3.pdf)
- ³ Brown John Ednie Council of Heads of Australasian Herbaria Australian National Herbarium
<http://www.anbg.gov.au/biography/brown-john-e.html>
- ⁴ The West Australian 29.9.1897 p 7a
- ⁵ The West Australian 18.9.1896 p 5a
- ⁶ The West Australian 7.1.1897 p 4b
- ⁷ The West Australian 29.9.1897 p 7a
- ⁸ The West Australian 26.5.1897 p5i
- ⁹ The West Australian 18.6.1897 p 5g
- ¹⁰ The West Australian 20.7.1897 p5c
- ¹¹ Guildford Municipal Council Minute Books 2.6.1898 SRO Cons 1881 Item 1
- ¹² Guildford Municipal Council Minute Books 11.4.1896 SRO Cons 1110 Item 12
- ¹³ Cr. Anderson quoted in Swan Express 27.8.1953 p12
- ¹⁴ Swan Express 27.8.1953p12
- ¹⁵ Swan Express 24.9.1953 p1
- ¹⁶ Swan Express 1.10.1953 p15
- ¹⁷ Swan Express 24.9.1953 p4
- ¹⁸ Swan Express 15.1953
- ¹⁹ Sugar Gums James Street Ordinary Meeting Council, City of Swan 20.1.1999 Item 7.6
- ²⁰ Gums Out on a Limb Sunday Times 17.1.1999 p11
- ²¹ Sugar Gums James Street Ordinary Meeting of Council, City of Swan 7.8.1999 Item 7.4
- ²² Sugar Gums James Street Ordinary meeting of Council, City of Swan 14.7.1999 Item 12.2
- ²³ Pruning Brightens Trees' Chances The Midland Reporter 11.8.1999 p3
- ²⁴ Pruning brightens Trees' Chances The Midland Reporter 11.8.1999 p3

For purposes of further research: copies of the Swan Express, more recent Council Minutes and local photos are held by the Local History Section of the Midland Library, corner of Great Eastern Highway and Helena Street, Midland, WA.

Copies of all newspapers and other referenced material area available from State Records Office and the Battye Library. Perth, Western Australia. Appointments are necessary if class visits are planned to any of the aforementioned facilities.

