

# MY VIEW

NOEL MURPHY EXPLORES OUR WILD WEST



A lovely old Liardet painting shows Geelong from Western Beach back when Aborigines camped along The Esplanade. It dates to the 1840s and the tribesfolk seem a bit bemused by the changes to their bayside.

There have been lots of changes since, of course. A good few more are happening now as

investors plunge into the thick of all things inner-west. It's a nice old part of the world among the bayside peppercorns and palms, so it's not surprising people are cottoning on.

It wasn't always that way. In his novel *Illywhacker*, Peter Carey talks about Geelong turning its back on the bay, throwing up woolstores and walls to the water. It was a polluted mess for a long time, too.

There was a time when travelling Western Beach offered traps for the unwary, who got lost in its dense bush. Old lore has it, too, of rum-running, illegal immigrants and smuggling in tunnels from the waterfront to pubs, notably The Max and the Terminus.

It was the wild west. The last illegal arrival I heard of, though, was a frogman who emerged from the water at a New Year on the Pier bash to unzip his wetsuit and step out in a tuxedo. Very Sean Connery. Oh, and also some so-called hairy Peruvians from artist/author Robert Ingpen's wonderful *Poppykettle* tales, bronzed in their puttees and tunics, in a kids' playground.

Dig about Western Beach and you'll find a charming treasure trove. Wood ovens, Texas hamburgers, antiques, churches and bowling club on one side; yachts, masts, boat clubs, jetties, historic bollards, cliffs and promenades on the other.

In between lie tales of a local Glastonbury thorn, reputedly from the tree Joseph of Arimathea planted when he took Mary to England after Christ's death. There's an Egyptian mummy's head, which might have been in the old teachers' college at Lunan House, stashed away with other artefacts from the former Geelong museum. It was taken from the Valley of the Kings and donated to Geelong by a Mr E.J. Haynes.

The first photograph of Geelong was probably a shot snapped at Western Beach. The beautifully restored Brown Brothers iron store nearby, for years a decrepit disposals store, is heritage-listed to the eyeballs and



(DUNROBIN STUDIOS/ALAMY)

**“DIG ABOUT WESTERN BEACH AND YOU’LL FIND A CHARMING TREASURE TROVE.”**

dates to the roaring days. Silos, a grog shop with the most curious alcohol range in town, car yards, the rattle of trains, a car wash and a strip club have all punctuated the area.

The thing of wonder to me is the architectural aspect of this newly popular inner-west. A convention centre, if Spring Street gets it right, will become a landmark. New apartment complexes are rising, too – The Mercer and Miramar, notably – to match high-rises a block or two away in the CBD.

Deakin Uni's Waterfront campus, which once housed Ford's earliest Geelong operations, has had a few reincarnations since its woolstore beginnings. Today, it hosts an architecture school, which produced blokes like Steve Tillinger, who designed The

Mercer's clever matrix of responses to the water, greenery and sky of the area.

It's funny how things go round. I remember going to Western Beach as a pup in archi school myself. Buchan, Laird & Bawden's architecture studio was there in a terrific old Victorian house of dichromatic brickwork and bull-nosed verandahs – it's still there today, pretty as ever.

As I say, these days Western Beach is a pretty sweet enclave of heritage and contemporary homes for those with coin. It's also home to a flamboyant ex-mayor, who knows an investment when he sees one. Sadly, though, his mayoral flags are no more. City Hall prevailed on him to remove them. Some people just have no sense of place. ●