



Hobart's Underground

An insight into tunnels below

When walking through Hobart have you ever wondered what could be going on only metres below your feet?

You can gain a sneak peek of the eerie underworld from the mall where Wellington Bridge has been partly exposed and also near the hospital in Collins Street. It is easy to stand there gazing into the darkness of these tunnels expecting or indeed hoping to see a glimpse of someone or something scurrying by. Perhaps your imagination runs wild with thoughts of a foreign world existing below our relaxing and friendly city.

Well it's not like a scene from Mad Max however there is a real and interesting history of purpose-built tunnels which undercut various parts of the city and beyond.

These vary from purpose-built tubes for regular access, including those within drainage and water supply systems, to a well-developed system of drains. Some of the drains are built of hand-made bricks and are (just) large enough to clamber through.

Other tunnels were constructed to hide law-breakers or as part of military forts. The existence of some is certain, but others, such as the tunnel supposed to have connected the old Hobart Town Goal to the then Court House near the Murray/Macquarie Street intersection, have not been ascertained. Disgraced prisoners were led to the dock via a tunnel from the penitentiary next to the courtrooms in Campbell Street, a section of which is still accessible.

Also beneath a city are the invisible links which unite a town: the communal systems such as water, sewerage and gas reticulation and telephone networks. Connection of these early systems forced a community to co-operate for mutual benefit, but often resulted in conflict such as that experienced over Hobart's first water scheme. With new technology, some of these systems became redundant.

Hobart, like other cities, has basements and other underground areas for living, commerce and entertainment. Living underground has traditionally been associated with disadvantaged sections of the community, as rental costs tend to be low. The tradition is less common today, but basements still form an active part of many buildings in the Central Business District.

THE HOBART RIVULET: A REVIVED STREAM

Residents and visitors of Hobart today wonder how our ancestors managed to pollute and build over a pristine stream which in 1804 was the original reason for the town's location. Over the next 150 years, the stream was gradually walled in as a long culvert and then built over. During the nineteenth century a series of events allowed what was the original lifeblood of the town to become a mere ditch for the disposal of refuse. Today the Hobart Rivulet is the cleanest it has been since the 1820s. This cycle reflects the history of the city generally, as developments above ground affected those in subterranean Hobart.

In recent years, rediscovery of the Hobart Rivulet has led to a reassessment of its place in the fabric of the town. However, the current generation of young residents may not have been the first to occupy the rivulet. In the 1860s, neglected children living on the streets and under archways in the town were rescued by the well-meaning philanthropists who initiated the Ragged School which was located in the adjacent suburb of Wapping.

Acknowledgments:

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But where today's 'street kids' have rediscovered the creek as a wild place, to many who grew up within living memory, it was part of their backyard; sometimes smelly and sometimes raging in flood, but there to be explored or ignored just as the Domain or the foothills of Mt Wellington were. Lads attending the Police Boys Club in Liverpool Street on a Saturday afternoon in the 1950s often strayed to explore the rivulet.

The storm-water drains running into Park Rivulet enabled a group of Hobart youngsters to sneak into Holydene (on the corner of Campbell and Bathurst Streets) where they would:

shoo several of their ducks down into the tunnel. Accomplices would be waiting to catch them as they emerged into the main rivulet near the Campbell Street entrance to the twin culvert. Often, lengthy chases up and down the tunnels would ensue.

Richard Flanagan, the Tasmanian-born author and Hobartian, recalls 'nicking' flickering PWD lamps and exploring the rivulet with mates. In December 1985, Wilderness Society co-ordinator Geoff Law and two others, including environmentalist Dave Harries, sailed down the rivulet: two on a rubber raft, the other on a *Li-lo*. Geoff Law recalled that the stream was in flood from an easterly downpour, and they were swept along more or less out of control, despite the use of paddles, which was particularly scary because they had neglected to bring a torch for the dark stretches beneath the city. The expeditioners pulled out at Collins Street near the hospital

In the 1990s, historian and teacher John Williamson started conducting regular tours through the Hobart Rivulet beneath the city. Beginning at the rear of the hospital in Collins Street, the excursion uses inspection lights to explore the waterway. During the 1970s, tours were taken on an occasional basis by Allan McCormack, then City Engineer, who also remembers finding evidence, such as empty wine bottles, indicating that the homeless used the rivulet as a shelter during that era.

The impression that the rivulet creates today is one of the old meeting the new; with the sandstone of Wellington Bridge and the brick vaulted Warwick Tunnel merging with concrete walls. Juxtaposed with this image are signs of occupation in the form of spray painted graffiti: some clever, some predictable, some poignant and most, artistic – but all talking. They range from the Internet mail site of the Cave Clan - a national and international group who explore underneath cities - to a large, sad-eyed spaniel; which together with many messages, political statements and names become a 21st century broadsheet on the rivulet wall. All speak of people seeking to keep an identity.

Apart from tourists, those using the city rivulet range from 'street kids' to artists and a Hobart musician who has



recorded a CD in the Warwick Tunnel to take advantage of the tunnel's natural acoustics. Other young Hobart residents use the tunnels and drains as a form of urban casting or cave exploration.

Whilst there is much focus on Hobart rivulet it was by no means alone. Two other important rivulets that helped to shape the city are the Domain/Park Rivulet and the Sandy Bay/Wellington rivulet.

The Domain/Park Rivulet

Another small but, in ecological and historical terms, significant stream ran into the town rivulet from the north. This stream was originally called the Domain Rivulet but is now Park Rivulet, and it runs parallel to the Brooker Highway which, in turn, was originally Park Street. Its water gathered from the hills around Knocklofty and Mount Stuart to the west, and the Queen's Domain, or Park, to the east.

A smaller stream runs from Mount Stuart into this rivulet, joining it underneath the present-day sportsground at Campbell Street Primary School.⁴⁸ This field was originally the burial ground for Trinity Church, while the section nearest the junction of the Domain Rivulet was the prisoners' burial ground.⁴⁹

Joining the Hobart Rivulet near Collins Street, the two streams originally emptied into Sullivans Cove, forming a shallow flood plain which produced the causeway linking Hunter Island at low tide. The banks of the Park Rivulet, like the lower section of the Hobart Rivulet, became the site for industrial use.



Sandy Bay/Wellington Rivulet

South of the city, the Wellington (now Sandy Bay) Rivulet, flowing from Dynnyrne through the former rural landscape and running under the vaulted Sandy Bay Road Bridge, also served local communities. With its banks held by stone, brick and concrete, the Sandy Bay Rivulet today is a reminder of how the Hobart Rivulet may have looked before being gradually covered. At Quayle Street, the stream is visible before flowing into the River Derwent at Marieville Esplanade, and is unique in being the only Hobart stream that has not been enclosed.

However, the rivulet was far from clean in the late nineteenth century. In the 1880s, residents along its course contracted typhoid. A committee found that the Wellington Rivulet was in a 'terribly polluted state caused by refuse from water closets and tips running into the stream'.

Below Ground Entertainment

Earlier generations of Hobartians had either regular or intermittent underground contact. Permanent underground establishments included shops, homes and places of entertainment and refreshment located in the basements of existing buildings. Some establishments and structures were located underground for privacy or concealment purposes.

In the post-1960 period, changing lifestyles produced a demographic drift from the inner city to the new suburbs on the outskirts of the expanding city. Before this period, however, Hobartians lived within the Central Business District in greater numbers, and basements were more commonly used as living space. As rents in basements were cheaper, they tended to attract occupants from marginalised sections of the community.



“RHYTHM”
DANCE NEWS OF O.H.A. ASSEMBLIES.

“THE CONTINENTAL,” SATURDAY, 12th MAY, 1934.—No. 6.

Direction:
Old Hobartian Association
“THE CONTINENTAL,” MACQUARIE STREET,
HOBART.



Music by
POPE'S RITZ DANCE BAND.

Dance Instructress:
MISS BEATTIE JORDAN.

Box 575-F, G.P.O. Hobart. A. W. POTTER, Secretary.

Hotels and inns were traditionally built with cellars for structural reasons as well as for storage purposes. A study of the basement of McLarens Hotel in Collins Street revealed the former use of the cellar for storage of barrels, and its continued use by the current occupants. In the nineteenth century, Hobart Town publicans suffered from the steep topography and ineffective drainage, which caused floodwaters to invade their cellars.

The Theatre Royal in Argyle Street still has an underground section consisting of change rooms, orchestra pit and below stage facilities.

From the 1930s, Hobart has had at least three nightclubs/ dance halls and two movie theatres underground. The nightclubs were especially active during the Second World War - possibly due to the fear of air raids - and continued after the war until musical tastes and venues changed.

The Stage Door Canteen

Around 1940, the Stage Door Canteen nightclub was registered as a restaurant and located in the basement of the Colonial Mutual Insurance Company's Bursary Building in Elizabeth Street, opposite the GPO.

The Continental

The Continental was an earlier dance hall located under one of the buildings no longer existing on the south side of



Macquarie Street, below the Harrington Street intersection. The Continental building was demolished in the late 1960s to make way for the current high-rise office block.

The Royale/Sapphire Ballroom

Located below where Rundles the Jewellers used to be in Liverpool Street, this dance hall was known as the Royale in the 1950s when Charles Browne had his School of Dancing there (1953–56) followed by Sim Johnstone's School in 1957. From 1960, a further change saw the Evelyn Goodrich School of Dance, specialising in ballroom dancing, based there and continuing for 25 years when the name was changed to the Sapphire. The Sapphire Ballroom is still in occasional use and is now known as the Basement. But in its hey-day of the 1950s and 1960s it was a well-attended dancing venue and survived as a dance hall until 1990.

Movie Theatres

A small theatre called the Variety operated for many years in the basement of a premises below the former Soundy's buildings in Elizabeth Street between Collins and Liverpool Streets (now the Mall).

The cramped nature of the theatre meant that the film projector had to be located behind the screen. During the 1990s Noni's Jazz Cellar was situated in a section of that same site. Another below-ground newsreel theatre called the Tatler, which had a more conventional projection system, was located in Murray Street and situated down a flight of steps between Collins and Liverpool Streets. In the 1990s the former café site below the T&G Building was the last attempt at a basement cinema.

Cafés

A tearoom-café for service men and women on leave during the Second World War was located in the basement of the T&G Building on the corner of Murray and Collins Streets, where Lorna Oliphant and others worked as volunteers. Another underground café, called the Blue Grotto, was located under the former AMP building. After the war, from 1946 to 1954, the premises was a private library and bookshop run by a woman known as 'Aunt Gretchen Kalbfell' who was the granddaughter of immigrants from Germany.

Adjacent to the Tatler's downstairs entrance was the Golden Bamboo - operated by the Chung family - Hobart's first 'sophisticated' Chinese restaurant where, in the 1960s, Tasmanians were encouraged to try using chopsticks for the first time.

Goodwills Café. Another well-known café was under Goodwills Store in Elizabeth Street, where families visiting Hobart for shopping would take children for a special outing. This basement café has a claim to fame as the setting for the inaugural meeting of the Tasmanian branch of the Liberal Party in 1947, with its federal leader and founder, (Sir) Robert Menzies, in attendance. The location of such a major event in an unobtrusive café reflects various aspects of the period, including the folksy, grass roots nature of the party's origins and the clandestine nature of some activities of that era with its obsessive concerns about the Communist Party. There was also a lack of alternative neutral venues for men and women to meet, and where alcohol was not served.

Changed attitudes to the subterranean world over the last fifty years parallels a comparable change in the wider world above the ground. The need to keep the waterways of the suburbs clean for the sake of the community's health was part of the early twentieth century sense of social responsibility. However, the response, which was to control the rivulets by burying them in large pipes, was also an early twentieth century reaction that might be described as the industrialisation of the streams and the environment generally. A similar approach in the mid-twentieth century saw the appropriation of Tasmanian rivers for industrial use by damming.

The current view of the Hobart Rivulet as a 'wild place' needs to be tempered with the realisation that the fact that the tunnel is now habitable and accessible for excursions is due to the lobbying of compassionate people of all kinds, irrespective of their backgrounds or political beliefs, throughout its history.

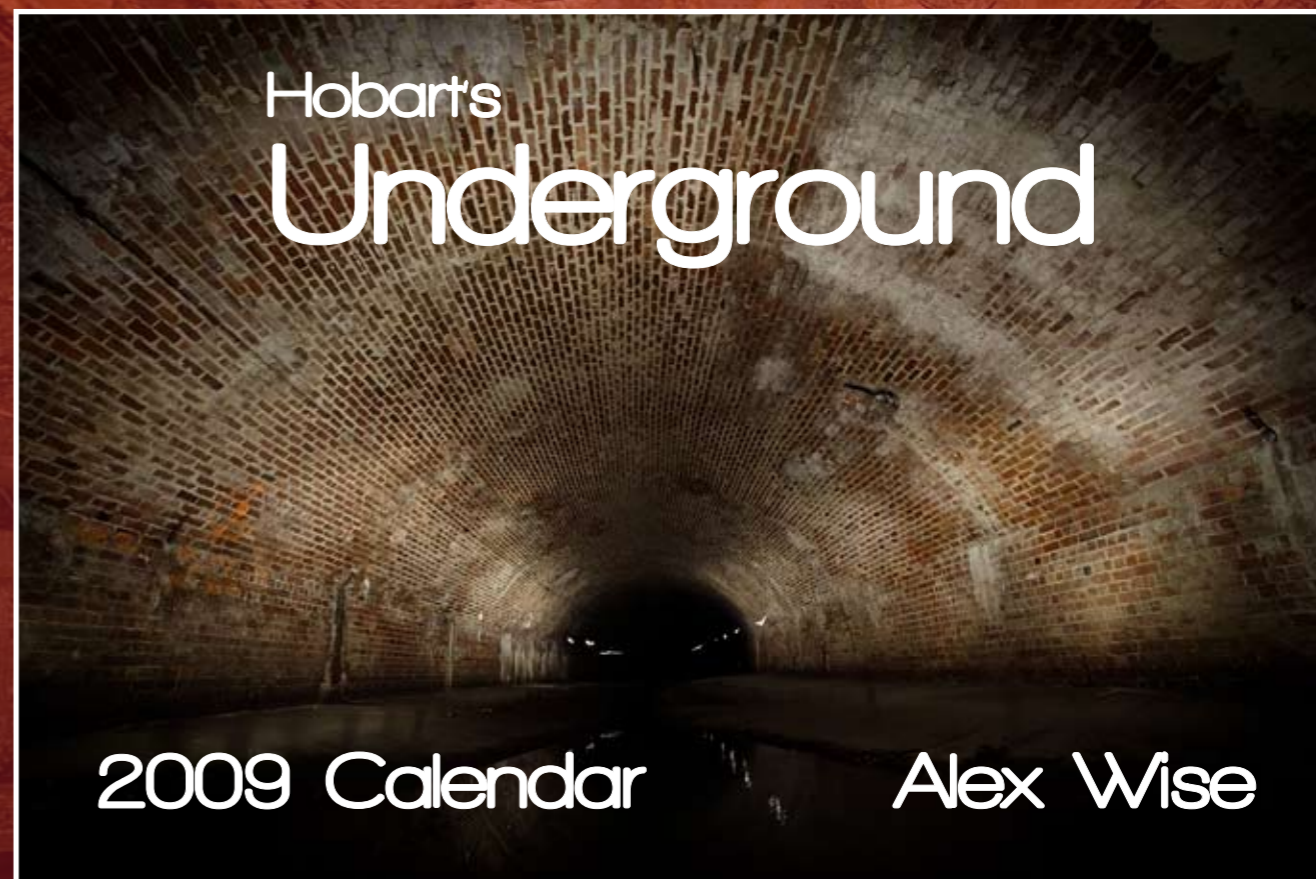


For an indepth look into Hobarts underground tunnels purchase Hobart City Council's publication - Underground Hobart: the world beneath the city Available from SCENE Print & Design, Channel Court Kingston for \$24.95.



This magnificent calendar features images from local photographer

Alex Wise



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Underground

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