



A condensed history

In 1977, the City of Gosnells was formally declared. Although city status was not achieved until this date, Gosnells had been a gazetted municipal area since 1907. By that date humans had already used the area for thousands of years.

The first people to use the area as part of their domain were the Aborigines. Aboriginal people had no permanent settlements but they would have known the area in intimate detail, being aware of every landform. In 1829, their lifestyle and culture was changed forever by an influx of settlers from Great Britain.

The east coast of Australia had already been claimed and settled by Britain in 1788. By the 1820s, British fears that the French might claim the western half of the Australian continent resulted in the British settling it themselves. To an empire the size of Great Britain, the fact that the land was already occupied by groups of hunters and gatherers was of no consequence.

Early settlers were given grants of land proportionate to the value of goods they brought with them to the new colony. The more goods that they brought with them, the more land they were given. The first Europeans to settle in what is now the City of Gosnells included Thomas Hester and John Davis, who arrived with their families on a ship named the Lotus in 1829. Another early settler was John Randal Phillips, who named his farm "Maddington" after Maddington in England.

Life for the early settlers consisted of much hard work. Anything not imported by ship had to be made locally and most early residences were constructed of mud brick. Before crops could be planted, the land had to be cleared with nothing more than fire, horses and hand tools. Even those settlers who were able to bring servants out with them had to do much physical work themselves.

Such hardships would have adversely affected the health of John Davis and his wife Frances, on their property at the junction of the Canning and Southern Rivers. After toiling to establish their farm, they died in the mid 1830s while still in their fifties.

To the Aboriginal people, the experience of white settlement would have been devastating. Whole areas of bushland that would have had practical or spiritual significance were cleared of both vegetation and wildlife. While some Aborigines certainly died from acts of European violence, many more would have been killed by diseases such as tuberculosis and influenza, which came with the settlers and to which Aborigines had little or no natural immunity.

Open conflict also existed between Aborigines and settlers. Aboriginal people frequently fired the land as part of their hunting and gathering activities and many settlers had their crops and homes destroyed as a result of this practice. Aborigines carried out other acts in more deliberate opposition to the settlers.

John Phillips was one of the local settlers who came into conflict with Aboriginal people. Apart from having his crops burnt, Phillips lost much of his livestock and poultry to the Aborigines. Phillips himself had survived being speared and some of his employees were killed.

Despite this, Phillips may have acknowledged that he was occupying an Aboriginal domain that had once been relied upon as a food source, as by 1837 he was feeding Aborigines from his own provisions. By the 1840s, many of the tensions between



Aborigines and settlers in the Perth area had eased, possibly as a result of Aborigines realising that the settlers were never going to retreat to their home countries and that further resistance would only lead to unwelcome reprisals.

In the 1830s, John and Frances Davis had died while trying to establish their farming property. In 1862, this property, known as Canning Location 16, was purchased from subsequent owners by Charles Gosnell of the London based cosmetic firm of John Gosnell & Co. None of the Gosnell family lived on this land and the property seems to have been bought solely as a real estate investment.

Also in the 1860s, a small settlement based around a multi-purpose building servicing as school, church, police station and courthouse had appeared in what is now called Kenwick. Situated on the main road to Albany, this settlement has virtually disappeared, the only surviving fragment being the graveyard now known as the Kenwick Pioneer Cemetery.

Similarly defunct is the timber haulage route created in the 1870s, which once passed through the area. Established by local entrepreneurs Benjamin Mason and Francis Bird, the most significant trace of the timberline is the Mason & Bird Heritage Trail in the hills behind the Bickley Reservoir.

By 1900, the population of Western Australia had increased considerably with the gold rush of the 1890s. This increased population meant that there were added demands for more land for houses, orchards and market gardens to be opened up closer to Perth. At this time, the area later to be known as the City of Gosnells consisted mostly of larger farming properties. The fact that two major watercourses (the Southern and Canning Rivers) ran through the area, along with the major road to Albany and the recently constructed Perth to Bunbury railway line, made this land very desirable to developers wishing to cut it into smaller holdings.

By 1910 many of the larger farming properties were cut into smaller lots. Two of the farms dissected around this time were named “Kenwick” and “Maddington” and gave these names to newly developed areas excised from them. Two other properties named “Seaforth” and “Thornlie”, which also gave their names to areas of housing, were not subdivided until much later.

The piece of land that was marketed and sold with the greatest fanfare was the farm that had been allocated to John and Frances Davis in 1829 and purchased from subsequent owners by Charles Gosnell in 1862. This land was sold by the Gosnell family to developers who began marketing it as the Gosnell’s Estate in 1903.

The name “Gosnell” would have been well known to folk at this time because the family company was a major producer of toiletries and cosmetics. The developers chose to promote the quality of local soil by advertising that the Gosnell Company had originally bought the property in order to grow flowers for the manufacture of perfume. However, there is no evidence of this and it is probably untrue. The marketing succeeded, many blocks sold and a railway station was established for Gosnells.

At this time, the general area from Kelmscott to Bentley had been known as “The Canning”, after the river running through it. The former police station at Kenwick had been referred to as the Canning Police Station and the racecourse, established in the 1870s where the Maddington industrial area now stands, was called Canning Park. The local government body administering the area was the Canning Roads Board and it soon became evident that, with so many people living over such a widespread



area, it would be better if the Canning Roads Board split into independent units. Thus it was that the Gosnells Roads Board was officially declared in 1907.

The original Gosnells Roads Board offices were located in Maddington and were destroyed by fire, along with all the records they contained in 1928. New offices were built in Maddington and local administration for the area did not move to Gosnells until 1973, when the present offices were opened near the corner of Gosnells Road and the Albany Highway.

The first half of the twentieth century saw the area grow slowly, with market gardens, orchards and poultry farms being established there, along with residential housing lots. Despite being part of the same municipality, areas such as Gosnells and Maddington developed separate community identities with individual townsite areas and separate competitive sporting teams.

The next major change was to occur after the Second World War, with Perth seeing its largest influx of migrants from overseas since the gold rush of the 1890s. Many more subdivisions took place with the emphasis being on smaller residential lots rather than farmlets and market gardens. In the five years from 1954, a farm named Thornlie transformed to a suburb of the same name, complete with a bus service, shops, street lighting and rubbish collection.

A real estate boom in the 1960s saw the local population continue to rise. Many of the new residents were young families and the area saw a proliferation of primary schools, soon followed by the construction of new high schools. It is worth noting that, in 1960, there were no high schools between Cannington and Armadale and that the population of the Gosnells Shire rose from 11,000 to 21,000 between 1966 and 1970.

Further developments in the 1970s saw the suburbanisation of areas such as Huntingdale and Langford. This trend continued into the 1980s with many of the housing and farmlet properties, originally part of larger farms earlier in the century, being subdivided themselves into smaller and more dense housing blocks.

Many of the higher density housing sites were specially developed for occupation by the area's growing number of senior citizens. The earliest of these was the Amaroo Retirement Village which opened its doors to residents in September 1971.

With so much redevelopment taking place, many of Gosnells' earlier buildings were demolished to make way for new structures. However, the late 1980s and early 1990s saw increased value being placed on sites of historical interest by members of the community.

The Gosnells Council had acquired the 1912 Wilkinson Homestead site which stands near the 1930s gravesite of John and Frances Davis, in the 1970s. The homestead was refurbished as a museum and opened to the public in 1988. It is now known as the City of Gosnells Museum – Wilkinson Homestead and is located alongside John Okey Davis Park.

The Gosnells Hotel, originally built in 1907, was purchased by hotelier Geoff Ogden and renovated in a manner consistent with its original appearance. The hotel is now the oldest public building in the City of Gosnells. Many of the district's oldest private homes also underwent tasteful renovations by new owners who favoured recondition over demolition.



The municipality of Gosnells is no longer several small townships in the countryside along the Albany Highway. It is part of the Perth suburbs and is relatively close to the centre of Perth compared to many urban areas. A position along major road and rail routes has made it viable for a strategy of development and renewal to be devised in the late 1990s. This strategy, which takes social, economic and aesthetic considerations into account, saw the municipality of Gosnells leave the twentieth century with the largest degree of public and media interest in the area since the subdivisions of 1903.