

TOWN & COUNTRY

Sydney's Great West Walk traverses a landscape of woodlands, river systems and parklands whilst also offering an insight into some Australia's oldest architecture.

WORDS AND PHOTOS **TARA WELLS**

LOCKDOWN'S silver lining was discovering more in our backyards than first imagined. So used to looking further afield – to a far flung national park, an iconic interstate walk or passport-compulsory treks inspired by yet another hiking memoir – many were surprised by what we found closer to home.

But in a prescient move executed in blissful pre-2020 ignorance, a group of volunteers had already spent years determinedly mapping routes across Sydney that previously only locals knew about. And when I say 'local', I mean, can't-leave-your-LGA-during-lockdown local.

The Walking Volunteers, map in hands, approached landholders and councils for collaboration. Sydney's Great West Walk was launched in late 2019. It's a 65km urban route stretching from Parramatta to Penrith at the foot of the Blue Mountains and it explores the tensions between natural bushland and human impact, between development and regeneration.

Off we go

It's fitting then, that the walk starts in Parramatta, the true geographic centre of Sydney's spread out populace, far from the harbour the city imagines as its epicentre. The Burramattagal and nearby Bidjigal had long enjoyed the land's abundance along what is now known

as the Parramatta River, the farthest reaching tributary off Port Jackson ('Sydney Harbour'). It didn't take long for the newly arrived Europeans of 1788 to discover the same thing. By year's end the colonists had formed a second settlement, riverside, in the current Parramatta Park, near the start of the Great West Walk.

This clash of beyond-time and early colonial history means walkers miss a sightseeing trick if they simply start from the walk's trailhead (if I can apply that word to Parramatta's busy train station hub). Like the full walk, there is beauty to be found here but a walker must seek it out rather than be slapped in the face with panoramic views.

Parramatta's highrises leave surprising pockets of untouched history. One of the most extensive archaeological sites is under the Skye Suites hotel. Even with a sign for the Phillip Ruddock Heritage Centre, I nearly missed the cutaway from street level and door leading down to the underutilised but worthy site. And I nearly mistook the glass-encased ruins of the convict-era hospitals for modern landscaping (notice old lemon trees still bearing fruit). The unmissable Female Factory demands a slightly longer detour up river. It's the largest, oldest and most intact convict women's site in Australia, dating from 1821. Plans are afoot for the building's currently closed interior to become a museum.







Clockwise From Above:
GWW track marker.

Victoria Bridge. Penrith
Regional Council.

Breakfast Creek.

Blacktown Showground.



“IT IS NATURE - REFINED BY PEOPLE - AT ITS BEST,”

On to the official Great West Walk then, which steps off from Parramatta Park. It's been a public park since 1858 and earlier was the site of the governor's private domain: pine, English oaks and Old Parliament House are relics of those times; the dominant forest red gum, broad-leaved ironbark and river oak speak to longer timeframes.

This, I think enthusiastically, is going to be one great walk. And it is, yes, but like any long walk, there are highlights and everything else. Hopefully the not-as-good bits are still, well... good. Unfortunately the Great West Walk is, in some places, the Fairly Mediocre West Walk.

Seeing green

In an effort to link up Western Sydney's green spaces, the route follows many suburban creeks. The Redbank Track alongside

Toongabbie Creek is like an aspiring musician ex-lover who skips band practice: you fall in love with potential rather than reality. Here, weeds are frequently above head-height while a faded sign proclaims that 20 years earlier there was an admirable attempt at bush regeneration. It ignores what any bushcare volunteer – or relationship counsellor – will tell you: The Work Does Not End.

Particularly after leaving Parramatta Park's bushland gloriousness and before reaching Blacktown, there is a concentration of lowlights that are also dotted along the walk's length: masses of weeds; dumped or stormwater-swept rubbish; grass corridors flanked by Colorbond fences; walking behind factories, through industrial areas and next to train lines; and following paths cleared for enormous transmission towers. If the creeks are not in need of serious TLC it's because they've been

WHERE TO STAY

There is just enough accommodation to make an inn-to-inn style walk viable. Sydney's second airport, due to open in 2026, means expected hotel openings will multiply nearby options. There are no campgrounds or caravan parks.

Parramatta: Holiday Inn; Novotel; ParkRoyal; SKYE Suites; plus more

Blacktown: Travelodge

Rooty Hill: Novotel Sydney West HQ

Penrith: Mercure; Quality Inn

For walkers who prefer a single location, choose Parramatta. It's well-connected to public transport for route stops, and to the rest of Sydney and (existing) airports.

(The writer was hosted by SKYE Suites Parramatta and Travelodge Hotel Blacktown.)

concreted to within an inch of their sheer-walled channelled life.

The Great West Walk's track marker – an outline of a boot coloured with a blue and yellow skyline – shows up in the most handy of places (although the map remains essential). But a depressing number of discarded shopping trolleys both trackside and dumped in creeks pose as an alternate marker. This walk forced me to consider human impact and the complex, time-consuming, cross-governmental, community-led solutions required to transform a walk's potential into self-actualised Great-ness.

It's not all bad. The highlights are very, very good. There's even better to come but next up is Blacktown Showground Precinct. Discard mental images of a typical showground and replace it with a verdant, nature-filled thriving public space. It uses 'bioretention basins' of aquatic plants and layers of soil, sand and gravel to capture and treat pollutants. To the onlooker, this hardworking stormwater filtering environment is simply pretty. It is nature – refined by people – at its best.

A hill by any other name

At least three new-ish housing developments (all extraordinary, in the sense of better than ordinary) that I pass through feature plentiful established trees, common green space, and use the same best practice philosophy around water capture and usage. It's an Oprah-atic relief to know that when society knows better, it does better. After all, in a few kilometres I'll be walking through the Hawkesbury-Nepean Valley Floodplain... the lack of any kind of hill is a clear sign that when water happens, it is a potential problem for built environments.

NEED TO KNOW

To follow a free self-guided walk of Parramatta's historic CBD, download the Dictionary of Sydney Walks app by the State Library of NSW. For more information and a downloadable map of the Great West Walk, see greatwestwalk.com.au

About the author

Tara Wells is the author of *The Bondi to Manly Walk: The Definitive Guidebook* (\$34.99/ newsouthbooks.com.au).

Left To Right:

Wianamatta walk path.

Nurragingy Reserve,
Western Sydney Parklands.

Nepean River Walk.

The exception to the no-hill rule is Rooty Hill which – astonishing after walking with little change in elevation (I barely noticed any rise at Seven Hills) – is actually, yes, a hill. It's the reward just before a short M7 motorway stint, although a slight detour is needed. At only 74 metres, the grassy hillock affords 270 degree views over the region and a first glimpse of the looming Blue Mountains beyond Penrith. The surprise from this perspective is that there are trees, trees and more trees: not just on the distant mountains but stretching in all directions and towering over most buildings.

I should have been less surprised, given that I'd just followed 7km of path through the 5280 hectare Western Sydney Parklands, one of the largest urban parks in Australia. The park's many precincts and usages, some commercial, means it's not all bushland, although the section covered by the Great West Walk is. No sooner had I stepped off the roadside into the park than I spotted a wallaby bounding pass, oblivious to the nearby traffic.

The park is Cumberland Plain woodland, full of grey box, forest red gum, rough-barked

apple gum and swamp oak. There are scarred trees, if you know what you're looking for, signs of the long land use by the Warraywarri. Birds are plentiful including bellbirds here and in more pockets along the route. Yet another grey-headed flying fox colony, a threatened species, chatters loudly when they're supposed to be sleeping.

Nurragingy Reserve within the parklands is perfect for a restorative lunch break. I choose a picnic table in a quiet bush setting (the 'Ibis Picnic Area', although I reckon they'd be there even without the sign) then wander over the neighbouring stone bridge and pagodas of the Chang Lai Yuan Chinese Gardens.

Rest and restoration

The Great West Walk showcases stories of reuse and regeneration. An extensively restored 1880s sandstone brick cottage, 'Neoblie House', sits beside the Great Western Highway at Mount Druitt. It is fenced off, waiting for a decision on a recent lease proposal. At Ropes Crossing, a decommissioned railway station serving a former munitions factory incorporates its heritage into a sensitively planned playground.

Not far from there, the most shining example of reuse is what the National Parks and Wildlife Service calls "a park in the making". Wianamatta Regional Park protects plants and animals endemic to the Cumberland Plain. I can't even hear distant traffic in the extensive grounds, and clearly neither can the wallaby and family of 'roos twitching their ears in my direction. There are emus too apparently, although I don't see any. A fat black and or mistletoe moth, native to Australia – crawls



WALK NOTES | GREAT WEST WALK, NSW

Distance: 65km | **Time:** 3-4 days | **Grade:** easy



The Great West Walk is a 65km walking route stretching from Parramatta to the foot of the Blue Mountains. The walk traverses a varied landscape of protected Cumberland Plain woodland, local river systems, public parklands, Australia's oldest architecture, some of Western Sydney's most iconic urban landscapes.

ange caterpillar – a future over my black and orange daypack like a lost cousin.

There is no clear end-point to the Great West Walk at Penrith because the map suggests walkers continue to Katoomba in the Blue Mountains. So the best way to end is walking both banks of the Nepean River Walk loop. It's a definite highlight that, on the day I'm walking, shows off a very full river gushing over the Emu Ford.

What is the benefit of naming a walking route if it's not already a glittering example of everything amazing? Simply, it directs attention and resources to it. The government announced last August that more than 26,000 trees will be planted along the Great West Walk. I saw many plantings but often the telltale sign was a remnant stake rather than a thriving tree. (More weeding, mulching, watering and rubbish collection is needed to

complement tree-planting credentials.)

There were so many hidden surprises, so much positive change and far more green than I imagined on the Great West Walk. "Would you ever have thought it...?" my walking companion exclaims to everyone she talks to about the walk. Walking this route means that the known is cared for in a way that the avoided can only aspire to. Expect more change, for the greener. 🌱

