

JAMES CLARK - THE PEARL KING

James Clark was born on the 2nd October 1858 on the Hunter River in NSW to parents Adam and Louisa (nee Sheaff). Adam Clark was a fisherman, but drowned around 1861 when James was three. At the age of 12, James came to Brisbane and found work two years later in 1872 at James Campbell and Sons at New Farm, as a plasterer's boy. Here he eventually learned bookkeeping and business methods and showed some potential for business success. He left the company in 1881 and left for Cape York, inspired by stories about the pearling industry.

He set up a partnership with Frank Jardine, but when the partnership ended, he took his half of the fleet to Friday Island. After those beds declined, he relocated his fleet to Broome in 1886. He took part in lobbying against Japanese pearling licenses, which led to the Act of 1890.

In 1885 he married Jessie Smith at St John's in Sydney. He was very forward thinking: he introduced diving equipment, and experimented with commercial shell farming. Becoming dissatisfied with the Queensland generous granting of licenses, he registered a company in the Dutch Indies, and gained a license for the Aru Islands.

In 1896 he became interested in opal fields west of Longreach, which led him to invest in the pastoral industry. Two years later he formed a partnership with Peter Tait and converted his property Boongoondoon from a cattle to a sheep station. The partnership was very successful and acquired some of Australia's best sheep stations.

Pearl luggers used to moor at a wharf in New Farm, where the Riverside Reception Centre stands. James Clark bought the land in this area, from the River to what is now Elystan Road, between Bowen Terrace and Turner Avenue. What is known as Oxlade Drive was then called River Road. Brisbane Council resumed some of James's land to extend River Road and make Oxlade Drive, naming it after local alderman and businessman, Allen Oxlade.

In 1898 Clark built his home, Wybenia, on this land. It was a fine turn of the century style home, with wide verandahs and wooden fretwork, railings and brackets. It has a tiled roof, a central gable and a rotunda at the end of the verandah. The house no longer exists, and the Riverside Reception Centre, the Merthyr Bowls Club (established in 1931 as the Limbless Soldiers Bowling Club for returned servicemen) and the Cerebral Palsy League ended up acquiring the site.

The house was used in WWII as a barracks for the Women's Australian Auxiliary Air Force.



Wybenia House