

Opening credits

LIZ: Underfoot: the Facility is a history of the lives and afterlives of Melbourne's Yarra Bend Insane Asylum, and all the institutions of social control that have stood on this site.

That means you'll hear some harrowing stories of institutional abuse, many kinds of violence, and suicide. There's offensive language from historical sources, and also we swear a lot.

QJH: Underfoot: The Facility was made on what is, always was, and forever will be Wurundjeri and Boonwurrung land.

It's mostly about the bit of Wurundjeri land where the Yarra River meets Merri Creek.

If you want the full immersive experience at the actual places we mention, you'll find maps, photos, transcripts and other material at 3cr.org.au/underfoot.

QJH: I'm Jinghua Qian.

LIZ: I'm Liz Crash.

QJH: And you're listening to Underfoot: The Facility.

[AUDIO: an audio montage followed by some music from "Let's take a trip to Melbourne", a jaunty 1934 tune written by Jack O'Hagan and sung by Clement Q Williams.]¹

Track 1: Beautiful, natural prison

LIZ: Melbourne is mostly flat. But it's also criss-crossed by rivers and creeks, and this is where you'll find sloping banks, little river valleys. About 3 kilometres northeast of Melbourne's CBD, the Yarra River makes a broad loop, enclosing some 260 hectares of hilly, forested land. This is Yarra Bend. And it's Wurundjeri land. Always was, always will be.

QJH: When the British colonised Melbourne, they decided to keep a bit of bush and parkland here. So it's only when you stand in certain spots, at the top of the hill, or on the bridge, that you can even see the city.

We decided to start here because it's pretty, basically.

LIZ: It's rejuvenating! You are *welcome*, listeners.

[AUDIO: field recordings of birds]

¹ <https://www.nfsa.gov.au/collection/curated/asset/96131-lets-take-trip-melbourne-clement-q-williams>

QJH: It's pretty – and also pretty fucking haunted.

That's basically the whole vibe of this place and this story: on the one hand, it's this lovely open green space with rolling hills and a crinkly river where people have picnics and play sport. On the other, it's this place that's heavy with ghosts and overlapping histories of containment and control.

Because over the years, Yarra Bend has been home to an insane asylum, a women's prison, a Native School, a police barracks, an AIDS hospital, and more. It's a lot!

LIZ: The French philosopher Michel Foucault asked: "Is it surprising that *prisons resemble* factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all *resemble prisons*?"

What he meant was that all of these institutions, in contemporary society, have a similar function, similar methods. All of them are trying to form and reform good citizens, disciplined workers. So no, it's not surprising that the school, the hospital, the prison, the barracks, all have a certain something in common architecturally.

But here at Yarra Bend, they weren't just similar, they were in the very same place, layered over one another; often, the very same building.

[AUDIO: brickwork and construction sounds]

QJH: But before Yarra Bend was a park or an asylum or a hospital or a prison, it was Aboriginal land. It still is.

LIZ: This spot, where Merri Creek joins the Yarra and narrows over rock falls, was a traditional meeting place and river crossing for the Wurundjeri clans. **It's Site 1 on our map, Dights Falls.**

QJH: But that's not a natural waterfall, even I can see that. It looks like concrete steps.

LIZ: No, that's an artificial weir that was built for a flour mill in 1841. It's been rebuilt a few times since and it's caused a bunch of issues for fish migration. But before that there was actually a natural rock fall here, and Wurundjeri people used this part of the river for their fish traps.

QJH: So the colonials had this idea that they were preserving wilderness here, but of course it was a landscape that was already actively managed by Wurundjeri people.

LIZ: Yup, and then the first colonial institutions at Yarra Bend, from the late 1830s, were attempts to manage and control Wurundjeri people and assimilate them into white society. The Aboriginal Protectorate was located here, there was a school for Aboriginal children, and the Native Police had their barracks here too. Those sites were all just clustered upstream of here, **at Sites 2, 3 and 4 on our map.**

But these institutions didn't stay in Yarra Bend for long. The colonial government's ultimate goal was to force Aboriginal communities out of the city and onto regional reservations like Coranderrk, which they did, shortly after the asylum was built.

Health, then and now

QJH: Right, so in 1848, this picturesque site right here was chosen for Melbourne's first purpose-built insane asylum. You can't see much evidence of the asylum anymore, but if we head east to **Site 5 on our map**, we'll be standing in what was once the asylum cemetery. More than 1000 people died here over the decades that the asylum operated, and most were buried right here. Underfoot.

LIZ: The cemetery lies beneath what's now touted as Melbourne's premier public golf course. Spooky. The graves are unmarked, but there's a hint of the bodies beneath if you pay attention to the vegetation – the rows of austere cypress trees once divided sections of the cemetery.

It's one of many ironies of this site, that the troubled souls who died in the asylum are now interred in a different kind of health facility – a sports ground.

QJH: We tend to think of those as kind of opposing things – a park or sports field is an emblem of freedom, leisure and openness, while an asylum is a site of fear, subjugation and imprisonment. But I wonder if they're really so opposed.

It always makes me think of corsetry – how so many people now see corsets as these symbols of horror and oppression, containing and constricting the body. But then others argue that modern regimes of fitness and dieting are more suppressive, more insidious, more totalitarian in a way, because we've internalised the constriction and it's reshaping not just our bodies but our appetites.

So I wonder if an asylum is just a more visible incarnation of something that's now internalised, and if an asylum and a golf course are two sides of the same coin. They're facilities within the same regime of health and wellness.

Yarra Bend Asylum

LIZ: And at the time the asylum was built, leisure and recreation was a big part of psychiatric care. This site was specifically chosen for its beauty. The thinking was that patients would benefit from the fresh air and nature.

It was huge, too – it wasn't just one big imposing building, it was more like a village, and it took up, like, half the park.

This is how *The Argus* describes it in 1886:

But it is all so sweet and wholesome; there is such a growth of vegetation, the buildings are dotted about so much like an Australian township, it is difficult to believe one's self in a lunatic asylum. Several fine dogs are to be seen, too; they are all in good care.²

QJH: It sounds almost cute. But also, the site was chosen precisely because it was hard to escape. The grounds were enclosed by the looping river, and by ha-ha walls – high walls set into a ditch to create the illusion of openness while keeping patients contained.

LIZ: You can't see the ha-ha walls at all now, and even the course of the river has been altered further since then. The only visible architecture that's left of the asylum complex is the bluestone pillar at **Site 7 on our map**, which was part of the main gate.

QJH: The pillar feels very gothic and imposing. And when you think about a Victorian era asylum, you probably imagine something quite miserable and horrifying with people chained up or strapped into straitjackets. The language is confronting too: the residents are called idiots, imbeciles, lunatics, maniacs and savages. And for sure, some of the treatment was punitive, even abusive.

But every era imagines itself more enlightened than the last. It's dangerous to assume that mental health care today is superior in every way.

Psychiatric care was a hot topic in the 19th century with a gradual shift from “custody to cure” as they called it. So instead of leaving people locked up in prisons, workhouses and religious charity homes, reformers advocated for purpose-built mental health facilities that were seen to provide humane, progressive, scientific care.

LIZ: If you read the Melbourne papers from the time, there's this vibe of like, “What would London do?” And in London, attitudes were changing.

So in 1829, a patient at Lincoln Lunatic Asylum in England, William Scriver, died after being left in a straitjacket overnight without supervision. So, by the mid 19th century when Yarra Bend Asylum was built, English asylums like Lincoln and Hanwell had started to phase out the use of restraints. Reformers advocated for occupational therapy and the use of rewards and punishments – a moral regime, instead of physical restraints. Quite a few of the doctors and superintendents in Australian facilities had come straight from London – Thomas Embling, for instance, had been at Hanwell before he became Resident Medical Officer at Yarra Bend.

QJH: This expertise was really sought after because there was a bit of a panic about the rate of mental illness in the colony – Jill Giese writes about this in her book, *The Maddest Place on Earth*.

And one of the major debates she talks about was around whether it's better to have one big building or this sort of village structure. That's why we've got Kew Asylum on the other side

² <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/6092270>

of the river — that opened 30 years after Yarra Bend, when Yarra Bend was getting overcrowded.

When Kew Asylum was first proposed, it was seen as the more modern, superior facility for being one big building, because it was supposed to have intentionally designed wards for different kinds of patients, whereas Yarra Bend was kind of this sprawling complex that just kept getting more and more cottages added on as the population grew. It's kinda funny to have two sides of the debate literally facing off against each other, on the two sides of the river.

LIZ: And they did keep facing off. Later on, it seems like Yarra Bend became romanticised again. For example, here's the Vagabond, a undercover journalist, comparing the two in 1876:

If at Yarra Bend I saw no ill-treatment, an absence of clouting, and a general passive kindness towards patients, it was not, I believe, because the men originally are any better than their fellows at Kew - it arises solely from the fact that at Yarra Bend the lunatic is treated as suffering from a disease, and the attendant is his nurse, whilst at Kew the lunatic is a prisoner, and the attendant his gaoler.³

Fairhaven

LIZ: So there were – and still are – a lot of theories for why Victoria was, as they called it, the maddest place on earth. But if we look at the death certificates of patients who died in Victorian asylums, that might give us some insight. One of the most common conditions they had was “total paralysis of the insane” or “general paralysis”.

QJH: What is total paralysis of the insane? It sounds like a band name.

LIZ: Well, let's have a look at the coronial inquest into the death of James Casrotti at Yarra Bend in 1899.

QJH: It says here...

On admission the patient was mildly excited and restless + full of delusions. His general bodily health was unsatisfactory and he had all the symptoms of general paralysis.

In the above condition he remained, until the 27th when he was seized with convulsions and became unconscious. In this condition he remained until the 29th inst. when he – [I can't read this, sorry] – and died at 10:40 am that date.⁴

And then the actual cause of death is “Abscess of the brain”.

³ <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/5900265>

⁴ <https://www.ancestry.com.au/discoveryui-content/view/36582:61863>

LIZ: Yeah, that was the classic postmortem confirmation of total paralysis of the insane. At the time, they weren't really sure what caused it. But by around the turn of the century it became clearer that this was a sexually transmitted disease.

QJH: It's syphilis isn't it!

LIZ: Yes syphilis! It wasn't until 1905 that we figured out what syphilis actually *is*. It's a bacterial infection – *Treponema pallidum pallidum* – that eats holes in whatever part of your body harbours the infection. So could be your face, could be your lungs, could be your brain, in which case it's "total paralysis of the insane", or neurosyphilis.

QJH: Ooh yes, I've seen the prosthetic noses that people who'd lost their noses to syphilis would sometimes wear, they're actually quite beautiful – some are cast from metal, others carved from ivory.⁵ And do you know about the No Nose Club?

LIZ: No...

QJH: So I think this was more a running joke rather than an actual club, but through the 18th and 19th centuries there were a bunch of pamphlets and newspaper columns that referenced the idea of clubs and parties where people who had facial abscesses that had eaten away at their nose could gather and relax in a noseless environment.⁶ And there's no evidence that these parties actually existed, but it's interesting to me that the concept had such longevity. It feels similar to right-wing attacks on minority spaces now, like ridiculing the idea that people might want to connect with others who share their experience. And one of the first references, a humour publication from 1709, lists "No Nose Club" alongside the "Sodomites or Mollies Club". So it's got this whiff of, how dare these freaks find each other and have a nice time. Anyway sorry, tell me more about how the diagnosis of syphilis changed.

LIZ: Yeah so whereas in the past people were aware of syphilis, it took so many different forms and of course it wasn't always clear that stuff like paralysis of the insane was related to, say, the sores you'd had on your dick 20 years earlier. But discovery of the bacterial infection led to a radically improved understanding of the disease and better treatment. That hugely reduced the incidence of neurosyphilis, but also by this point Yarra Bend was seen as hopelessly outdated in both its treatment methods and physical infrastructure, so it closed in 1927.

But then the buildings were repurposed as a compulsory STI treatment facility known as Fairhaven.

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<https://collection.sciencemuseumgroup.org.uk/objects/co126952/artificial-nose-europe-1601-1800-artificial-nose>

<https://x.com/HunterianLondon/status/1749809677360361519>

<https://collection.sciencemuseumgroup.org.uk/objects/co126940/ivory-artificial-nose-europe-1701-1800-artificial-nose>

⁶ <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/TS18740218.2.16>

<https://wellcomecollection.org/works/ubvvdta>

<https://trove.nla.gov.au/work/211099841>

QJH: Which was just women, yeah — so basically they moved out the men who they didn't know had syphilis, and moved in women who they alleged had syphilis? Or some other venereal disease.

LIZ: Yeah, it surprised me that you actually didn't need to have any signs of disease at all for a judge to issue a compulsory treatment order.

So a typical example is Kathleen McMullen. In 1929, she was 19, she was living in Melbourne away from home, she didn't really have a legit income source, and she was busted going in and out of various gentlemen's homes at late hours.

QJH: Uh oh.

LIZ: So having been reported to the courts as a slag, the judge asked her if she would rather go to Fairhaven or the Oakleigh convent. She said she would rather go to prison.⁷ She was told that wasn't an option, so she went for the convent.

QJH: Why did she think prison was better than Fairhaven or the convent?

LIZ: Maybe she'd heard they had better food? I know in 1943, two 17-year-old girls tried to escape Fairhaven by prying apart the iron sheets of the wall with a tablespoon, and their complaint was that they weren't getting enough to eat. They were caught and fined for the damage, but a number of women and girls did escape Fairhaven. In the historical record, where this shows up is usually when they get busted again for "lacking a visible means of support" or "vagrancy".

QJH: Okay so this is ostensibly about treating a disease, but it's really just whorephobia and another one of these generic moral rectification facilities for producing respectable women, right?

LIZ: Yeah, it was basically the same type of place as the Abbotsford convent and Magdalene laundry across the river. But shortly after WWII, advances in the availability of next gen antibiotics made treatment quicker and easier, and in 1956 the Fairhaven buildings were repurposed again for the newly established Fairlea Women's prison.

Fairlea Women's Prison

LIZ: So prior to this, there was no dedicated women's prison in Victoria. The only maximum security facility was a unit in Pentridge, which was a men's prison. So at first, everyone was like "Fairlea's gonna be so great, we're gonna have a proper women's prison that's going to treat these social issues at their source, it's going to change lives," but it was cooked pretty much from the get-go. A lot of people thought the actual buildings were a problem.

QJH: These were the same bluestone buildings that were originally built for the Yarra Bend Insane Asylum, right? People had been complaining about their condition for about a hundred years at this point!

⁷ <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/165007657>

LIZ: Well, they did put in some extensions and subdivisions, mostly wood, extremely flammable. There were several fires over the years, including a major fire in 1986 which killed three women, and finally led to the demolition of the original buildings in 1996. All that's left now is the foundations, and you can't see those.

Fairfield Infectious Diseases Hospital

LIZ: What you can see, the buildings that still exist, is the old Fairfield Infectious Diseases Hospital – Fairhaven was originally a ward in this hospital.

QJH: Yeah, it's a TAFE now, Melbourne Polytechnic, and it's open to walk through. I study glass at one of the other campuses actually – it's really funny to me because all their branding says Melb Poly which sounds like a polyamory club.

LIZ: You can kind of tell from walking around that it used to be a hospital, it's got all that glass. When it first opened in 1904, it was focused on fever, cholera, those diseases that declined in impact after WWII with improved vaccines and antibiotics. Then they moved on to viral research – the Burnet Institute started here – but there was still a sense that we were beating epidemic disease. Right up until about, ooh, 1983, when the AIDS epidemic hit Australia. Fairfield Hospital became the centre of HIV/AIDS treatment and research in Victoria, partly because of its focus on viral research, but partly because it quickly developed a reputation as the only hospital that treated HIV-positive people with respect.

QJH: Or at all, even. There's some awful stories from this period. People were denied life-saving surgery and died at home, purely because they were HIV-positive. But there are also some really beautiful stories out of Fairfield Hospital, of being people nursed by their lovers. A lot of gay and lesbian health workers asked to work here specifically.⁸

LIZ: Fairfield Hospital was seen by the community as a welcoming place. Visitors and residents might take a turn in the AIDS Memorial Garden, which was built in 1988 with wide paths of rose bushes and discreet memorial plaques. And it's not just a manicured garden, it backs onto the river and bushland.

[AUDIO: field recordings from the AIDS Memorial Garden]

QJH: It's a pretty garden, but it's sad, isn't it? It feels like a place that was very used and very loved that is now sort of forgotten.

LIZ: It's a little bedraggled these days. Because Fairfield Hospital is no longer a hospital. It was shut down in 1996, the same year as Fairlea Women's Prison, and its research functions were transferred to other hospitals. The hospital buildings were turned over to the TAFE.

⁸ <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/122094808>
<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/122277856>

We lost a lot of schools and hospitals in the 90s in Victoria – budget cuts. But there was also a general push for deinstitutionalisation, and a lot of the old psychiatric hospitals were closed everywhere. All in all, by '96, Yarra Bend was no longer really the centre of all these facilities of discipline and punishment and reform and treatment.

QJH: Not so fast! There's one more. See that sign?

Thomas Embling Hospital

LIZ: So you kind of have to push your way through some tall hedges to see the sign, but it says... "Restricted Area, No Trespassing", oops. And then there's a very tall fence and an unmarked building, it's all pretty mysterious. What do they not want us to see?

QJH: This is the Thomas Embling Hospital, Melbourne's forensic psychiatric hospital – which is to say it's the psych hospital for people incarcerated in Victoria, serving a sentence or awaiting trial for some offence. But it also detains people who were found NOT guilty due to mental impairment.⁹

The Monash shooter, for example, do you remember that story? It's stuck in my mind because it happened in the Menzies building at Monash where I went to uni. In 2002 he killed two people, and injured five others, but he was suffering such severe delusions of persecution that he was found not *criminally* responsible. So he couldn't be sent to prison. Instead he was sent to Thomas Embling Hospital, where he remains to this day, as far as I can tell.

LIZ: He's still there? Wow. When is he due for release?

QJH: Never, probably. His case is supposed to be reviewed after 25 years but it's a bit of a black box once you're inside the Thomas Embling.

LIZ: We've heard that name before.

QJH: Yeah, he was the resident medical officer at Yarra Bend Lunatic Asylum.

LIZ: Yeah, his legacy is now kind of celebrated – he's seen as a reformer of the system from how it was in the bad old days, when patients were treated as prisoners????

QJH: So it's really perfect that they named the new psychiatric prison after him. Everything comes full circle.

LIZ: Jinghua! So cynical! It's progress!!!! This time, for real.

⁹ <https://www.forensicare.vic.gov.au/about-us/mental-illness-and-the-criminal-law/>

More details on the legislative framework can be found here:

https://www.lawreform.vic.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Submission_CP_19_Forensicare_11.0_9.13.pdf Essentially, being "sentenced to" a period at Thomas Embling is a minimum review period, intended to prevent arbitrary and indefinite detention, but often functioning as the reverse – 25 years is a long time!

Closing credits

LIZ: Underfoot: The Facility was produced with support from 3CR Community Radio, the City of Yarra, and the Public Records Office Victoria, on Wurundjeri and Boonwurrung land. We pay our respects to their elders past and present.

You can find out more about Underfoot at 3cr.org.au/underfoot.

[AUDIO: “Where the lazy river goes by”, recorded with Mario ‘Harp’ Lorenzi and His Rhythmics in January 1937 whilst Melbourne-born singer Marjorie Stedeford was living and working in London.¹⁰]

¹⁰ <https://www.nfsa.gov.au/collection/curated/asset/82579-where-lazy-river-goes-marjorie-stedeford>