

Who's who in Hyde Park at night?

By MALCOLM BROWN

It is the place of the dreaming, the manicured central park of Sydney, where a dropout might sit by day, gazing on the Central Business District, clutching his fortified wine and thinking of the life that might have been.

It's a place of gentleness, where visitors court pigeons with crumbs of bread and some sneak in by darkness to throw crusts to the furtive possums.

And it is a place of violence. Hyde Park. Proclaimed a public recreation area in 1810, it has not lost its reputation for spasmodic violence and danger, despite police and ranger patrols and increased lighting.

Newspaper files log the incidents: a 21-year-old woman sexually assaulted in February, 1987; a man assaulted by three men in May, 1987, stabbed and robbed.

In July last year, Chief Inspector Sheldon Spooner, commander of the Central Police Patrol of Sydney, said there was continuing danger of muggings in Hyde Park.

In December last year, a police sergeant, Trevor Hille, was savagely assaulted as he crossed the park at night. The attack prompted a major upgrading in lighting and patrols. Police admitted it was no guarantee of safety.

If a St Mary's Cathedral choirboy made up a yarn last Friday to get himself out of a spot of bother, saying he fought off three youths trying to rob him in the park, nobody in law-enforcement circles is laughing.

The types of people in the park vary by the hour, as I discovered during a 12-hour visit from 6 pm on Saturday.

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One such couple, Fred Hirlian and Diane Papazian, were enjoying the stroll before they met a friend at an airline bus depot in Oxford Street.

"Generally it's pretty good," said Mr Hirlian. "I have been here before, sometimes at night, and have never had any fears."

At 8 pm, with the crowds gone, the possums descended by the dozen. There were flying foxes and the occasional stray cat.

The homeless were more apparent, too. Like "The Turk", an old man with a trolley containing his worldly possessions. Or "The Strassbourg Man", who spins a tale about having been made a general in World War II.

Some of society's malastream remained, but they were mostly in company. "I have heard of the place's reputation," said Kathy Sumerville, 19, of Maroubra. "But provided I am with friends I am all right."

After 8 pm, a change came over the park. There were police patrols, on motorcycle and horseback. There was a hint of tension in the air.

In the distance, the sudden scream of a police siren. A bottle smashed on a Park Street footpath. In a subtle way, a battle may be said to have begun — between order and disorder, goodness and evil.

An old man lay down on a bench with a blanket over him to sleep, draining a bottle of McWilliams Royal Reserve Port as he did so. But it was uncomfortable and

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it was cold. A few minutes later, he was gone, leaving the blanket and the empty.

At 9 pm, Sydney City Council ordinance inspectors Greg Taylor and Greg Baker began a five-hour patrol through the park.

It is a lonely and boring job, with experiences that are at times sad, funny, disgusting, menacing.

"If we see couples fornicating, we tell them to move on," said Greg Taylor. "But we have a two-way radio if we need help."

Sometimes people are found sick, or even dead.

From 10 pm, groups of youths, some smelling strongly of alcohol, started moving through the

park, screaming and shouting. That went on for hours.

At 2 am, in the darkness near the War Memorial, a gentleman asked me if I wanted "a head job". I told him I had had my hair cut just the other week and hurried away.

At 3 am there was a brief skirmish between two groups near Park Street. I hurried to the spot, to see figures sprinting away.

At 4 am, three youths from Green Valley asked me where the Cross was because they wanted some harlots. I told them to go the other way, to Town Hall Station, and get a train home.

Then the place went quiet. Even the possums retreated to the sanctuary of the branches. At 5 am, I went into a thicket to see

where they were and almost tripped over a prone figure beneath a blanket.

As dawn approached, William Duncan Sutherland, a service pensioner of Surry Hills, who had been up since 3 am collecting aluminium cans, started flattening them with a hammer on a park pathway, for sale for \$1.60 a kilo.

An old man, alone, scratching a little extra from the city streets in the early hours. But a survivor.

"Oh, I'm not afraid of the louts," he said. "One fellow did lift me up once and try to shove me into the garbage bin I was sorting through. But I followed him to Margaret Street, and when he saw the hammer in my hand, he took off."