

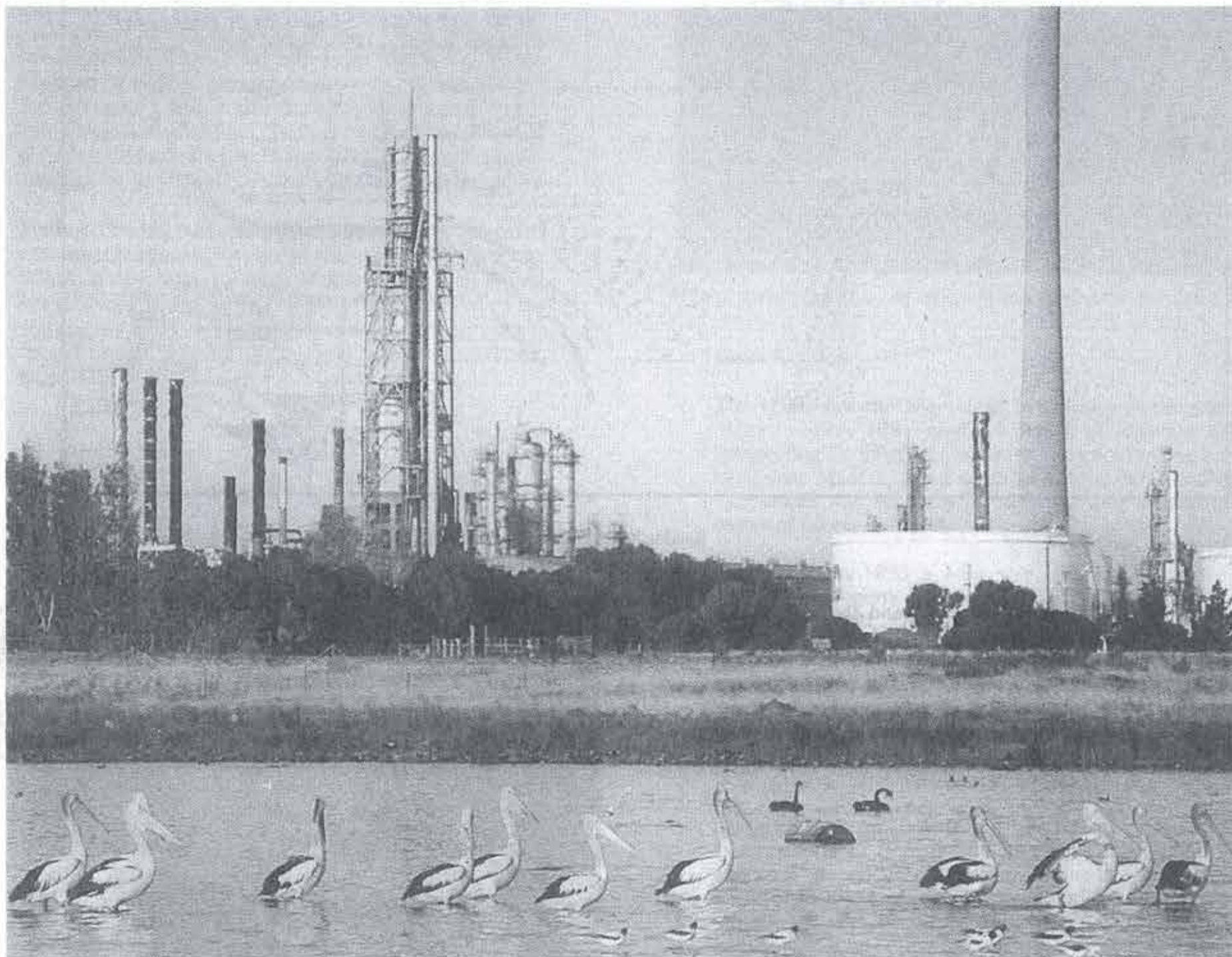
ECOMUSEUM BROADSHEETS



3 ALTONA

TOWN BY THE SEA

A series of information sheets on the history and environment of Melbourne's West



Altona petrochemical industries with Cherry Lake in the foreground. (Photo: Geoff Inkster)

Rocks and Sand

Altona forms part of the coastal fringe of the Werribee plains, the eastern extremity of a vast basalt or volcanic lava flow across Victoria's western district. Altona's coastline has a thin coat of shelly and silty sand over its volcanic rock-bed. These soils are recent in geological terms. Much of the shelly sand was deposited around 5,000 to 6,000 years ago when the sea-level was nearly three metres higher than at present.

The volcanic rock underneath, exposed at North and East Altona, is about one to five million years old. Otherwise it is only exposed along the coast near Seaholme, in uniformly weathered blocks. Below the basalt is yet more silty and sandy rock, but this time 300 to 400 million years old, ranging from fifty to about 250 metres below sea level. It is in this rock that Altona's brown coal seams were found.

First Residents

Aborigines came to the Port Phillip District at least 40,000 years ago. They experienced 'recent' geological changes, like the rise and fall of sea-levels and the alterations of river and creek courses.

Aborigines lived as hunter-gatherers and used all the resources available in their territorial areas. The Port Phillip area was very rich in food, particularly in the wetlands of swamps, streams and sea shore. The foods included kangaroos, wallabies, emus, fish, eels, shellfish, grass seeds, plant roots, berries and fruit.

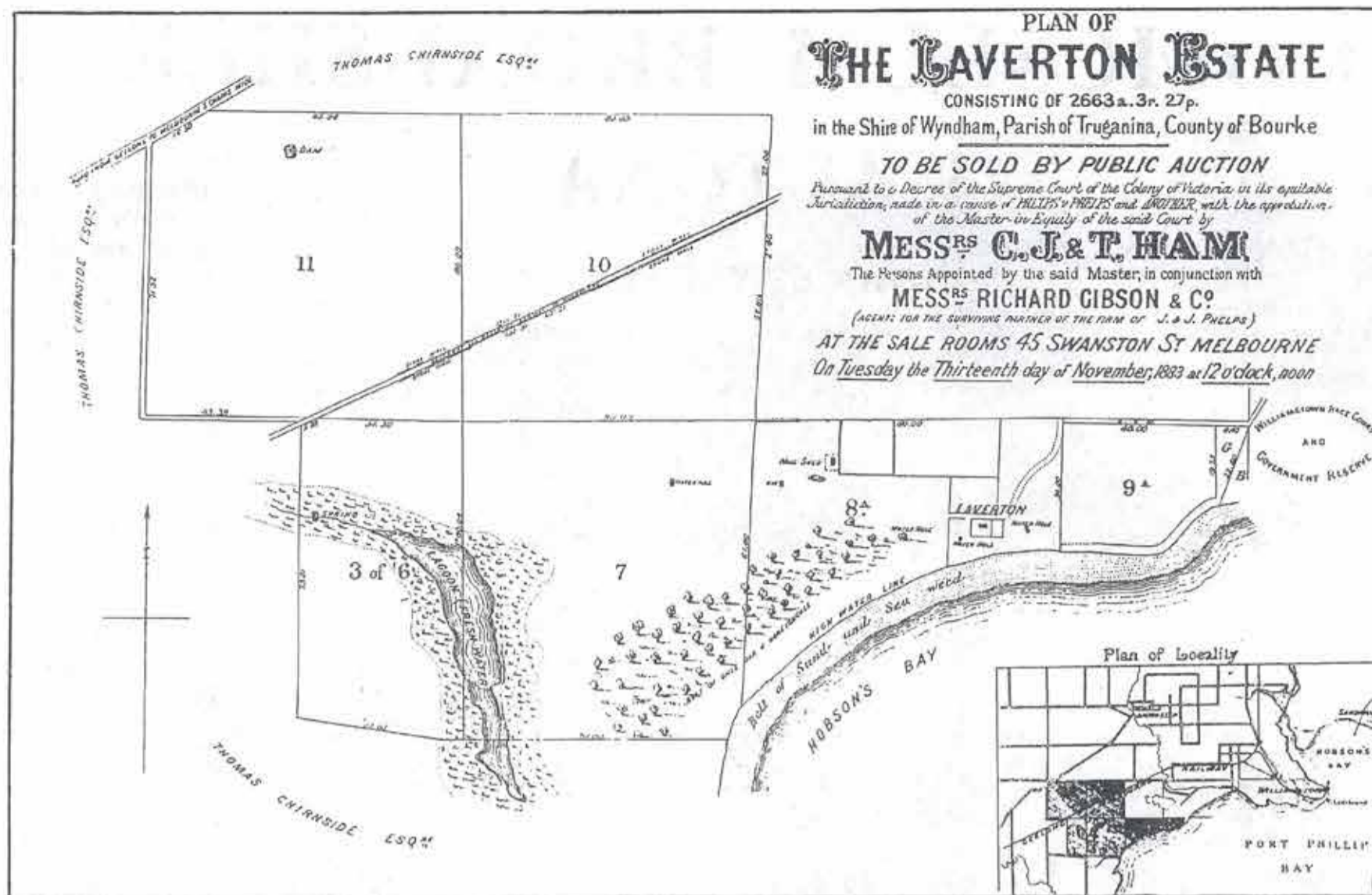
There were two tribes around Port Phillip. The Woiworong foraged and hunted near the head of the bay and to the west. The Bunurong lived around the Mornington Peninsula but also moved west around the coast to the Werribee River, part of an area which now includes Williamstown, Altona, Werribee South, Footscray and Sunshine.

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Auction notice for Laverton Estate 13/11/1883. (University of Melbourne Archives)

Each tribe was divided into clans and the clan which occupied the narrow western coastal strip were the Yalukit.willam. Foraging groups consisted of at least one family unit, but in the Port Phillip region where food was plentiful it was possible for several families to group together in a band of about thirty people. The swamps at Cherry Lake, Laverton and Skeleton Creek were particularly rich foraging grounds

When Europeans arrived permanently in the 1830s, the Aboriginal hunter-gatherer lifestyle was totally disrupted. Many plants and animals which they ate became scarce as sheep began to fill the plains. Up to the 1880s there was a deliberate policy of removing Aborigines onto mission stations and reserves. By this stage the Yalukit.willam clan had long since been broken up and dispersed.

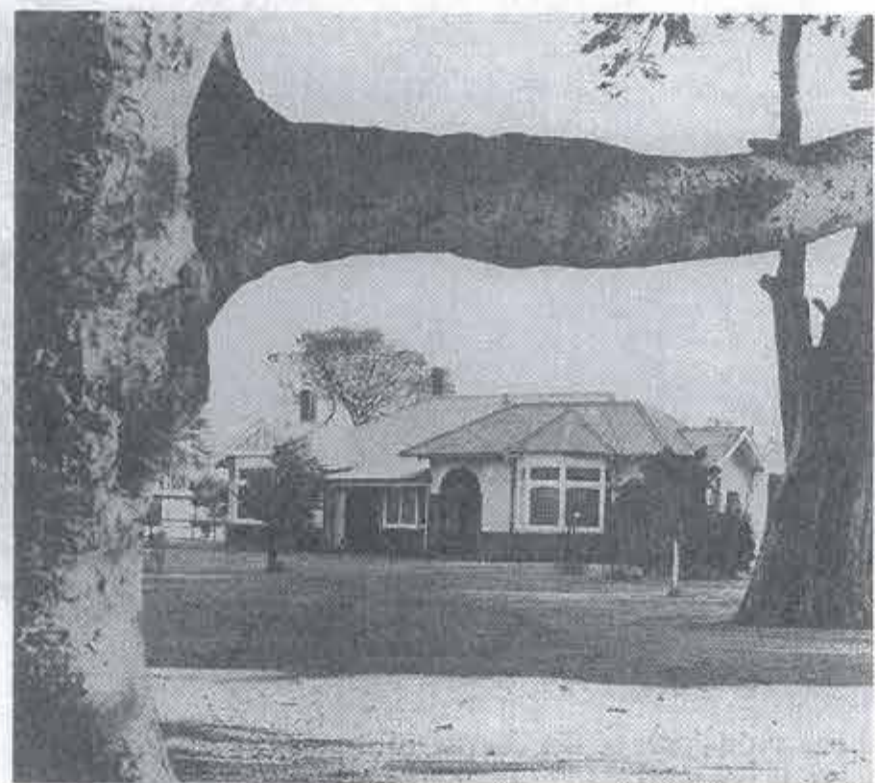
The First Europeans

The first European explorers such as Matthew Flinders in 1802, James Fleming and Charles Grimes in 1803, and Hume and Hovell in 1824 crossed the Werribee plains near Altona. Fleming briefly described Kororoit and Skeleton Creeks. '...one ends in a swamp, the other salt water where we crossed it, the country very level, some plains, stony, and much water to lodge in it in wet weather.'

The Racecourse

In 1873-1874, a two-tier grandstand was built at the mouth of the Kororoit Creek. This was the beginning of the Williamstown Racecourse. During the 1890s and early 1900s this track was rated the third major course in Victoria, with eight popular meetings a year.

The racecourse also included a curator's cottage, a railway siding from the Geelong line, spectacular gardens and a footbridge across the Creek, behind the grandstand. During World War Two the course was closed off for army use and during restoration in 1946 the grandstand was gutted by fire. It never reopened and all that remains today is a solitary palm tree and a pile of rubble.



Laverton Homestead, Queen St. Altona

The plains they spoke of were the open grasslands, kept free of trees or bushes by Aborigines burning the area. When pastoralists from Van Diemen's Land began the permanent settlement of the district in 1835, the land between Skeleton and Kororoit Creeks (roughly the City of Altona today) was part of the unlicensed run of John Helder Wedge, a member of the Port Phillip Association. He built his hut by the Werribee River. Within a year there were 2,600 sheep on Wedge's run.

The first legal grazing licence in the area was to William Robert Wrede, issued in 1838. He named his home which stood somewhere in Seaholme, 'Altona'. He died in 1857. Alfred Langhorn was the other early settler in the area, having arrived in 1836 and later built the Laverton homestead which is now used by the Historical Society.

Closer Settlement

The main occupation in Altona until the 1900s was mixed farming. The Wyndham Road District was established in 1862 to levy rates from local residents for improvements to roads and bridges. It changed its name to the Shire of Werribee in 1909.

The Melbourne-Geelong rail-line opened in 1857 but the township of Altona did not begin until 1888, when it was subdivided by a syndicate called the Altona Bay Estate Company Limited. Mains water was connected, a 1,300 foot pier and a branch-line from the Geelong railway to Pier Street were installed. The new suburb took Wrede's original homestead name and was promoted as the 'Margate of Melbourne', a seaside town to rival Brighton.

Melbourne's big land sales boom of the 1880s saw many new areas purchased by private real-estate speculators for suburban development. Land at Altona sold well at first but faltered during the depression of the 1890s when the real estate market collapsed and passenger train services to Altona ceased. The 'new and model suburb' of Laverton, failed to fulfil the developers ambitions.



ABC Cafe, Rotunda and pier in the 1920s Pier St. (Altona Historical Society)

Further closer settlement faltered until the twentieth century, but the suburban and industrial push from Melbourne had begun. Mixed farming still dominated for several decades, but a second attempt to develop Altona began in 1917, when passenger trains resumed. Land sold well and many amenities and services expanded, including local representation on the Werribee Council. Before 1917 there were less than twenty homes in Altona, but by the early 1930s there were more than 400.

During the Great Depression of the 1930s workers' and fishermen's cottages were dotted among the unmade streets of the partly-developed suburb.

The third boom came after World War Two, as it did for many other areas in Melbourne. This was the result of large scale post-war migration from Europe which continued throughout the 1950s and into the '60s. By 1961 there were nearly 4,000 homes in Altona. The growing petrochemical industries helped attract many skilled and unskilled migrants to the district. By 1957 Altona had the income and population to form its own shire. By 1968 it was large enough to be proclaimed a city. However, since the early 1970s the population has remained steady at around 33,000.



Part of advertisement for land sales at Altona. (Living Museum of the West)

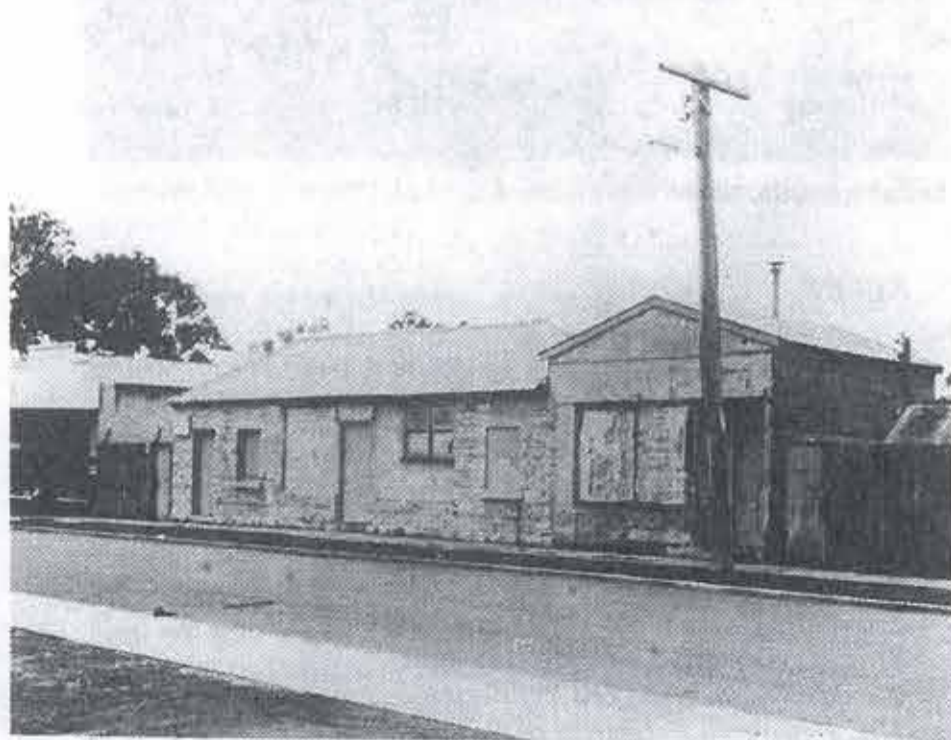
Coal Mining

The 1880s saw the beginnings of industry in the Altona district. From 1881 to 1884 the Williamstown Coal Prospecting Company searched for black coal in two bores sunk near Maddox Road south of the Geelong rail-line. The search was unsuccessful although they located thin seams of poorer quality brown coal.

From 1893 to 1895 a bore was sunk on David Ross' 'Hatherley' property in search of coal, but after flooding this also closed. On the western side of the Altona subdivision more coal mines were sunk. No. 28 Wren Street is the site of a mine which operated from about 1894 to 1896. Evidence of the mining activity may still be observed in the artificial rise of the land.

A more successful mining venture stood nearby at Harrington Square. Although changing ownership several times, this mine extracted thousands of tons of brown coal between 1906 and 1919. It closed as a result of the State Electricity Commission's development of the La Trobe Valley.

A little further west of this mine was the site of Altona's last operating coal mine which worked from 1928 to 1931. Around 200 million tons of brown coal underlies most of Altona, reaching its greatest thickness near Skeleton Creek.

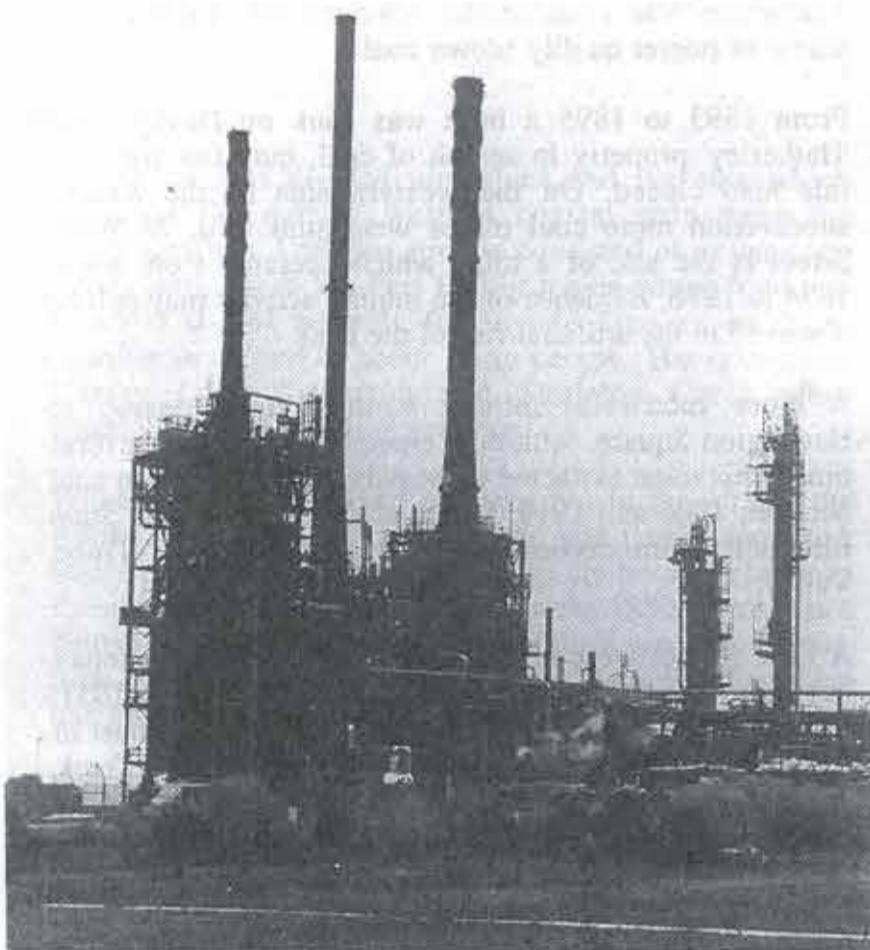


Old butcher shop Queen St. Demolished in the 1960s. (Altona Historical Society)

Petro-chemical Industries

In 1924 Australia's petroleum industry began with Commonwealth Oil Refineries processing crude oil into petroleum products at a small site north of the Geelong railway near Kororoit Creek. This is now owned by B.P. Little expansion occurred until 1949 when Petroleum Refineries (Australia) began oil and bitumen processing at the corner of Millers and Kororoit Creek Roads, and expanded into petroleum refining in 1955. Close by, Australian Carbon Black was established in 1958. A little further west, the Altona Petrochemical Company began operations in 1960, producing petroleum-based products such as synthetic rubber, styrene, chlorine, caustic soda, P.V.C. resins and latexes, polystyrene, polyvinyl acetate and sulphur.

Many other related industries sprang up nearby in the 1960s, creating a huge complex of interdependent sites which now dominate much of the Altona landscape. The large tracts of lands left as buffer zones around the factories add to their visual impact.



Refining towers, Altona Petrochemical Co. Ltd. (Photo: P. Haffenden)

SITES

1. Exposed volcanic rock, 1-5 million years old
2. Area subdivided by Altona Bay Estate Company Limited
3. Williamstown Racecourse
4. Mines of Williamstown Coal Prospecting Company
5. Hatherley property bore
6. Wren Street mine
7. Harrington Square mine
8. Altona's last operating coal mine
9. Commonwealth Oil Refineries
10. Petroleum Refineries of Australia
11. Australian Carbon Black
12. Altona Petrochemical Complex
13. Areas of significant wetlands and coastal habitats

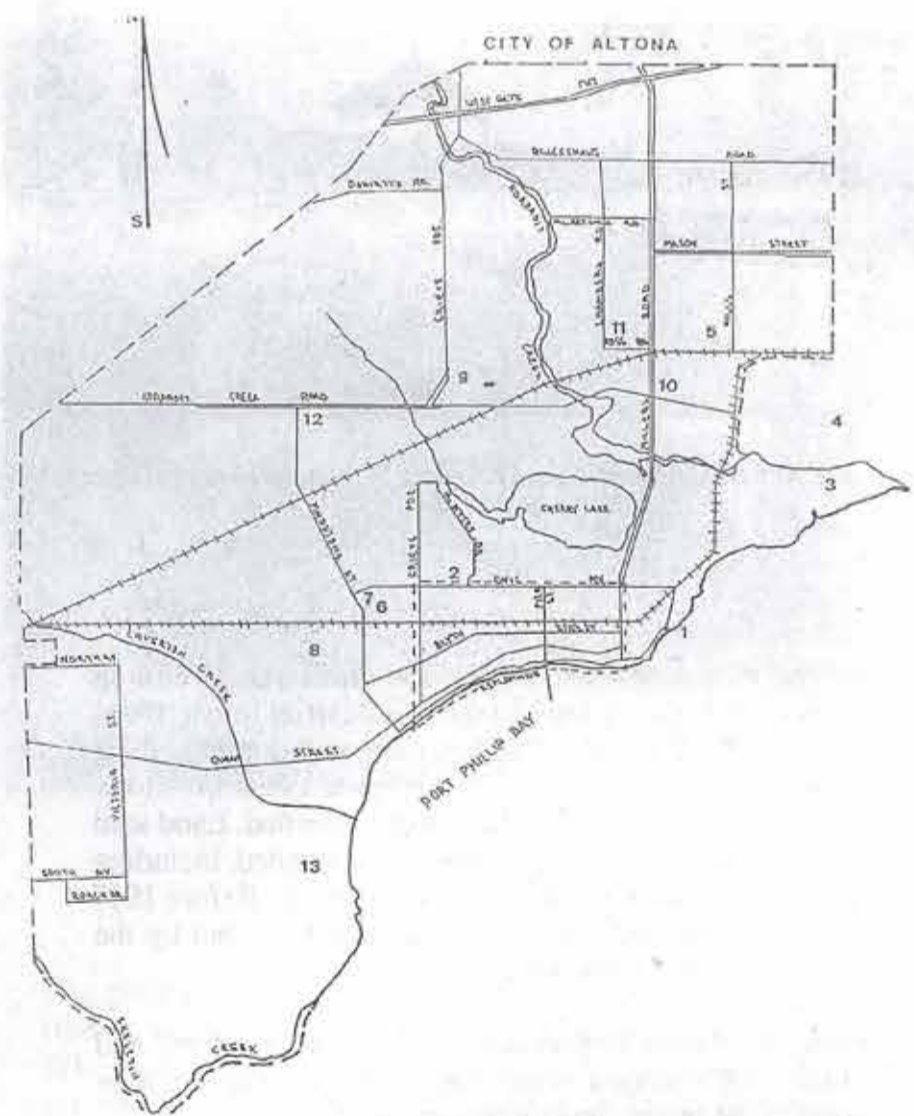
Written by Rod Faulkner and Gary Vines



Lone Palm tree at the Williamstown Racecourse. (Photo: P. Haffenden)

Wildlife Habitats

The open spaces of the refineries' buffer zone, Cheetham Salt Works and Board of Works drainage reserves have also helped Altona to retain wetland environments of international importance. Wetlands and foreshore wildlife habitats, either surviving intact from pre-European settlement, or created and enhanced by industry and public bodies provide a haven for colonies of endangered migratory birds. Such areas within a major metropolitan zone are very rare and of world significance.



Sources

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