

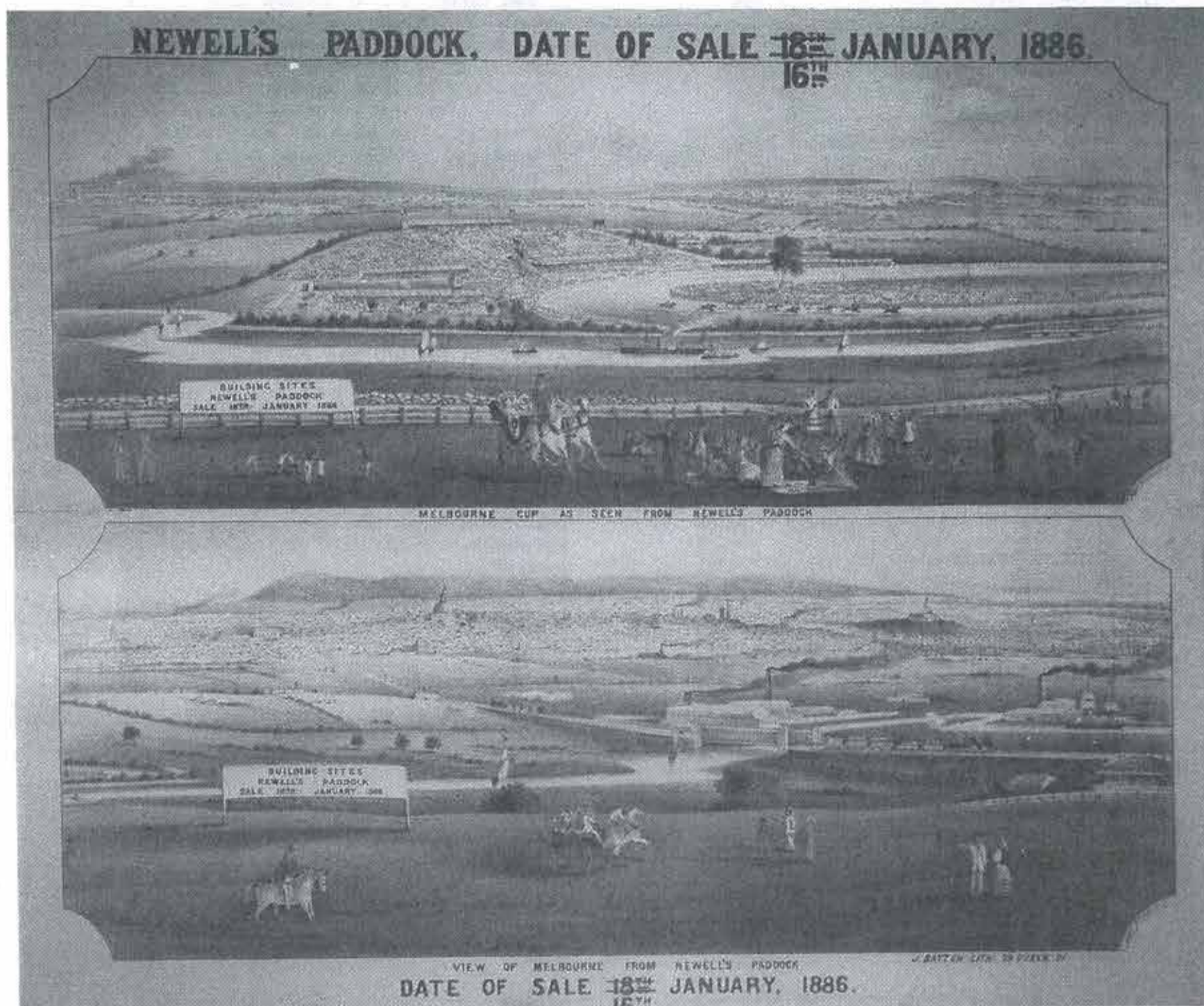
ECOMUSEUM BROADSHEETS



4 MARIBYRNONG RIVER

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

A RIVER OF HISTORY



Sale poster for the Land on the Maribyrnong in Footscray with racecourse and industries in the background. (Footscray Historical Society)

The Maribyrnong River is one of Melbourne's major urban waterways. Its headwaters flow from the Cobaw Ranges and Mt Macedon through Deep Creek and Jackson's Creek. Other streams which feed into the river are Emu, Dry, Taylor's and Steele Creeks. The river winds through Keilor, Sunshine, Essendon and Footscray before flowing into the Yarra River near Port Melbourne. While the Maribyrnong is salt water as high as Avondale Heights, where the tides are halted by natural fords, the Yarra was fresh down to Queen Street and so was chosen for the first settlement. The early explorers named the Rivers the Saltwater and Freshwater respectively.

Rocks and soil

The Maribyrnong River Valley cuts deeply through the lava flows of the Keilor and Werribee Plains. This basalt rock was created after violent volcanic eruptions in the Pleistocene Age, around two million years ago.

The soils within the Valley itself are fertile sediments but most of the plain is composed of heavy clay which dries and cracks in summer and becomes waterlogged in winter. The valley has a complex series of soils deposited onto natural terraces by floods. These terraces can tell us about the past climate of the region.

Volcanic rock cools slowly but hardens quickly. This means it cracks and forms geometric shapes as it cools. Spectacular formations are to be found on the banks of Jackson's Creek at the Organ Pipes National Park. Here are vertical columns which are usually hexagonal but columns with up to 8 sides have been found. A little downstream, older silurian sedimentary rocks are also exposed.

Funded by the Ministry for Conservation Forests and Lands

The Plants

The vegetation in and around the Maribyrnong River valley changed dramatically with the urban growth of Melbourne. Much of the land that is now Footscray and Sunshine was covered with open forest of she-oak while native pastures of Kangaroo grass carpeted the river banks and plains beyond. Near Essendon were taller river red gum and grey box woodlands.

Red Gums also grew upstream of Avondale Heights on the river's edge, along with Bottlebrush and extensive reed beds. These may still be seen around the Horseshoe Bend at the Maribyrnong Explosives Factory and Brimbank Park, Keilor. At the confluence of the Maribyrnong and its tributaries was lightwood wattle and tree violet scrub, with tussocky grassland beyond. The Maribyrnong valley has retained a few remnants of native vegetation of local or regional significance.

Aboriginal Archaeology

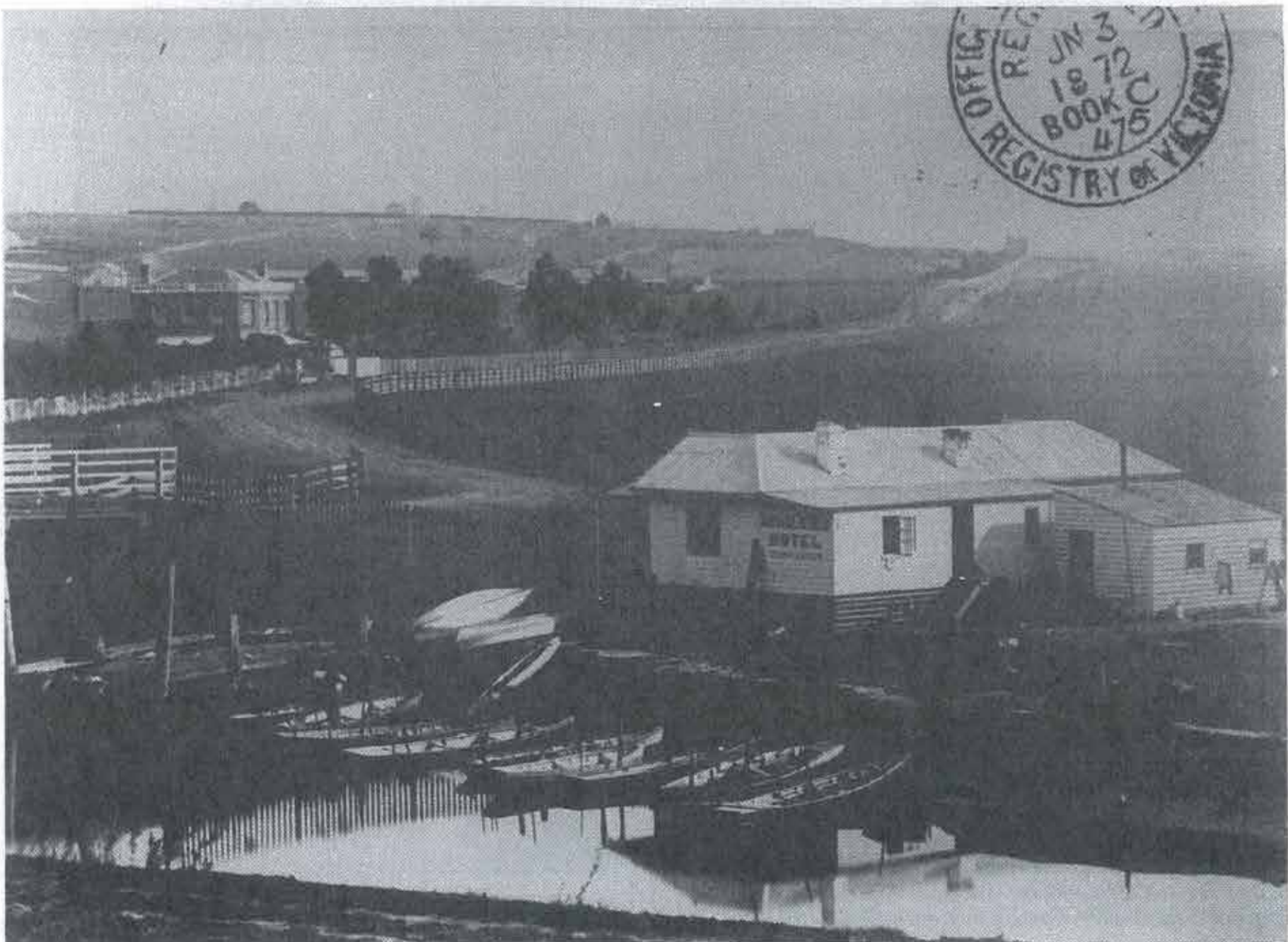
Some of Australia's most important Aboriginal archaeological sites are located in the Maribyrnong River Valley. In 1940, an Aboriginal skull was found during excavation of a sand pit, on Dry Creek near the Maribyrnong in Keilor. It has been dated to about 15,000 years old. Further investigations have unearthed evidence of campsites as old as 40,000 years indicating it is one of the oldest human habitations in Australia.

Explorers

James Fleming, Charles Grimes and five seamen on a survey of Bass Strait and Port Phillip in February, 1803, launched a small rowing boat from their ship and made their way up the Maribyrnong River:

Thursday 3rd ...went in the boat up the Great River [the mouth of the Yarra]; at between two and three miles it divided into two; we took the left hand stream [the Maribyrnong] ... The land became high, where we landed and went on a hill. The soil a reddish loam from ten to fifteen inches deep. Saw a large lagoon at a distance. Went over the hill to a large swamp [Moonee Ponds?] ... No trees for many miles. Came to the boat and proceeded on: passed two dingles, no water; came to a third where we found some water ... Opposite this land is stony soil; stiff blue clay, and no trees only some straggling oaks by the side of the river ... came to rocks [The ford at Avondale Heights?] could not get the boat over; crossed it at a place the natives had made for catching fish. It was still salt though a great fall; went about two miles on the hills which are level at the top and full of stones, the land very bad, and very few trees ... came to the river a little higher up and found it excellent fresh water, where it divided. [Taylors Creek]

Fleming reported the land around Port Phillip was poor quality and so it was not permanently settled by Europeans until more than thirty years later. John Batman, representing a syndicate of pastoralists from Van Deimen's Land (Tasmania) in 1835, was more impressed by the land and his reports sparked the new settlement on the Yarra River.



Anglers' and Maribyrnong Bridge Hotels, with boats for hire, 1872. (State Library of Victoria)

Pastoral Occupation

The push for new sheep grazing land was great in these years. By 1840 most of the best pastoral land on the Keilor and Werribee Plains was already occupied by 'squatters' operating large scale runs. This included almost all the land adjoining the Maribyrnong River.

Water for stock was very important for pastoralists. The land was dry and river frontages were highly valued. Many smaller creeks were likely to disappear in the summer, but in its middle reaches the Maribyrnong was a reliable source of fresh water.

The first to drive flocks of sheep across the Maribyrnong was John Aitken who took up land at Mt Aitken near Gisborne in May, 1836. He probably crossed the River at one of its natural fords around Braybrook. In that same year, brothers Samuel and William Jackson settled on Jackson's Creek near Sunbury. Then came Joseph Solomon, who held land near Braybrook, with his homestead where Medway Golf Course now stands.

The rush for pastoral land in Port Phillip was rapid and led to an inevitable collapse in the local market for sheep, especially after wool prices dropped in Britain. Many graziers went bankrupt, selling their land or their leases to squatters with greater capital and larger holdings. By 1850 the land was held in fewer and larger runs. By the late 1840s. WJT Clarke held more private property than any other individual landholder in the colony, with over 90,000 acres on the Keilor/Werribee Plains alone. He displaced earlier settlers like John Aitken and the Jackson brothers. The Clarke family home, begun the year Clarke died, 1874, was built on Jackson's original lease and was called Rupertswood. It is now the Silesian Roman Catholic College.



Floods on the Maribyrnong at Footscray c.1930. (Norman De Pomeroy)

Industry

The Victorian goldrushes from 1851, brought a huge influx of people to the colony, and so provided needs for increased goods and services. Also, as people returned luckless from the goldfields to Melbourne, they provided the labour force needed to expand industry. A rising population also increased demand for closer settlement.

The river attracted a variety of industries, particularly the noxious trades which required transport by sea, a water supply and a convenient drain for their wastes. Lack of control of their growth and operation led to Melbourne's two main rivers being heavily polluted. There were slaughterhouses, boiling down works, tanneries, glue works, bone mills, fellmongeries, a wool washer and a soap works on the Maribyrnong by the 1860s. There was also the City Abattoirs at Kensington and several meat preserving companies. Between them they poured more than 2,000 tons of blood and offal into the river each year.

Other offensive industries congregated nearby such as Cuming Smith's acid works of 1871, the Apollo candle works of 1873 and the Yarraville Sugar Refinery of 1874. On top of all this, the rivers were also used for household sewage, and in the Maribyrnong, this filth was regularly met by incoming tides, and pushed back as far as the fords at Braybrook.

The boiling down works, which rendered sheep fat into tallow for export and manufacture of soap and candles, were mostly located along the Maribyrnong. In the 1840s, when the rural depression hit Victoria, the boiling down works were the saviors of the graziers. The long history of pollution and neglect of our rivers dates from this period.



Aerial view of the river at Footscray, c.1950 (Footscray Historical Society)

Kensington and Footscray earned such names as 'Worst Smellbourne' and 'Stinkopolis' from the noxious odours of their industries. The creation of a sewerage system under the management of the Board of Works from the 1890s only partly alleviate the problem. Tighter controls on industries did not arise until well into the twentieth century and even today are difficult to police.

Despite the severe degradation they caused, some of these industries were vital to the development of Melbourne. Like the Melbourne Meat Preserving Company of 1868-1888 they made important technological developments and pioneered exports. The west's industries helped make Melbourne one of the largest and most significant cities of the world in the late 1800s.

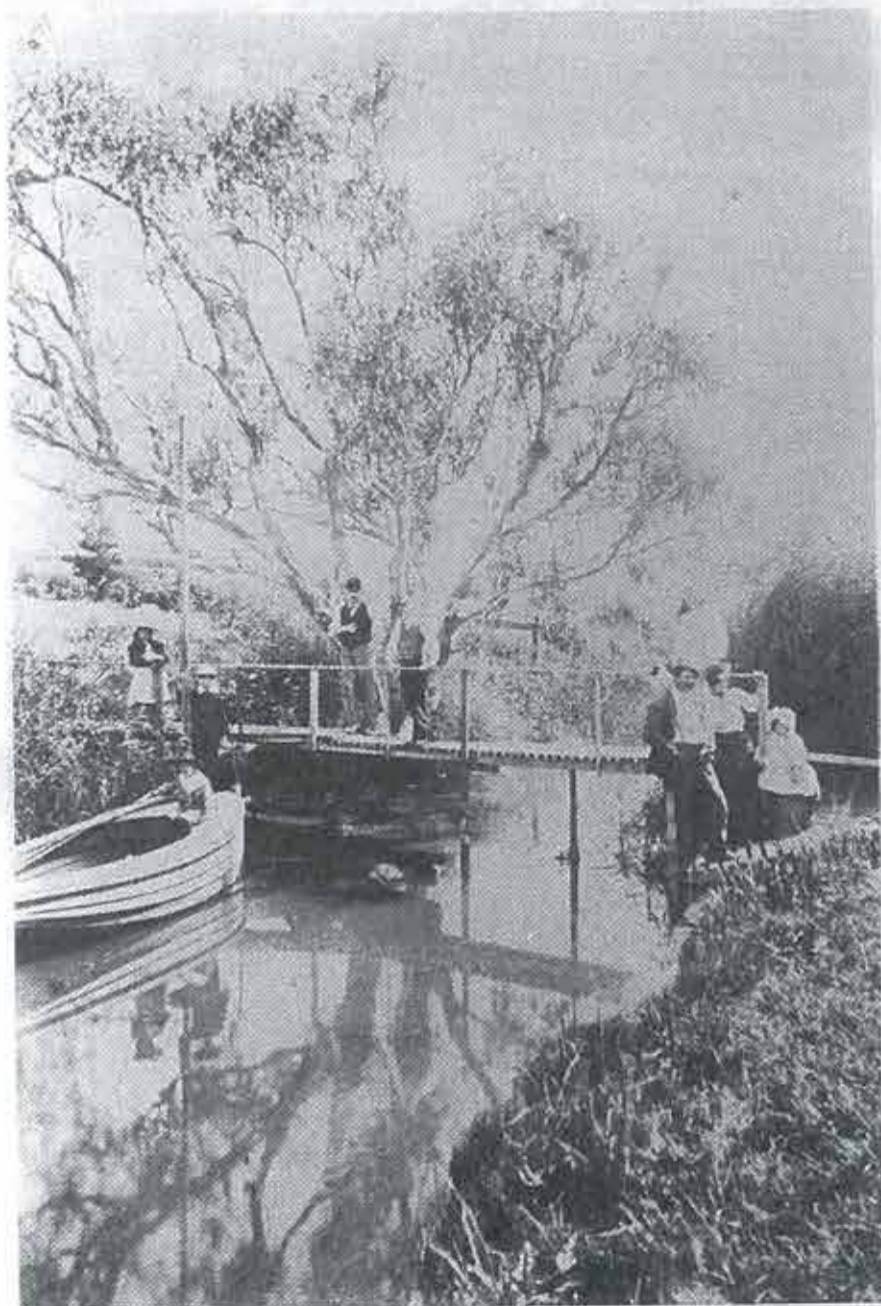
Munitions

Another characteristic industry of the Maribyrnong valley is the munitions industry, comprising the 1878 gunpowder magazine, the Ammunition Factory begun in 1889, the 1909 Explosives and 1922 Ordnance Factories. The Ammunition Factory was the first in Australia. Originally built on the river flats it expanded to Gordon Street in 1910.

All three factories were vital to Australia's war production when their combined work force was around 20,000, producing in excess of thirty million pounds worth of munitions. Their importance meant security was strict during World War Two, with blackouts and air-raid drills more common than elsewhere. A river curfew was imposed upon the Maribyrnong Valley and local buses were darkened to prevent detection from the air.

Recreation

Despite all the industry and pollution, the Maribyrnong River offered some pleasure spots. There was the Wine Hall near Steele Creek, begun in 1894. It operated as a refreshment house, serving local wines and other drinks to picnickers and boaters. Commercial passenger boats began operating along the Maribyrnong in 1896 and the Wine Hall hit its heyday in 1906 when trams from Flemington Bridge linked with boats at the Anglers Arms Hotel. Later, the Wine Hall's clientele declined and it became a 'sly grog' supplier before closing altogether.



Picnic party near the Wine Hall on Steele Creek c.1900. (Col Hulett, Sunshine)

Nearby, the Riverview Teagardens operated by the Hicks family, began in 1909. The gardens were elaborate, with sportsgrounds, kiosks, dance hall and aviaries. The Hicks soon held a monopoly on Maribyrnong pleasure cruises. One of their boats, the 'River Queen', held over 200 people. The Gardens and cruises were very popular in the 1920s and '30s. They closed during the War and could not regain their popularity afterwards. They ceased in 1947.

Today

The Maribyrnong River Valley has seen much abuse and neglect for more than 130 years. Today it is improved, as much from declining industrial activity which has meant reduced pollution, as from direct action. A revived interest in the urban environment and especially the waterways, has led to improved management and access. Bicycle tracks follow its banks and river cruises have begun again. The river also has an active 'Friends' group who keep a watchful eye over councils and departments responsible for management of the river valley.

For further information on the Maribyrnong River Valley, especially the history of specific sites, contact the Living Museum of the West.



Maribyrnong River Cruises M.V. Blackbird, offers cruises on the River.

Sources

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