

ECOMUSEUM BROADSHEETS



2 GETTING AROUND

TRANSPORT IN EARLY MELBOURNE

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



Colonial Sugar Refinery, Yarraville with ships at the wharf in the 1890s, (CSR Archives)

By Water

Long before Europeans built roads, railways, punts and bridges in the Port Phillip District, Aborigines crossed the region on foot, or boated along rivers and streams in small, bark canoes. In their daily routines, they traversed their territories in search of food and materials for producing tools, clothing and artwork. For them, the journey was part of the search. For Europeans, the journey was an obstacle to be endured on the way to a destination.

The first Europeans in the Port Phillip District were Charles Grimes, John Fleming and the crew of the *Cumberland*. They surveyed the northern end of Port Phillip Bay and, at the mouth of the Yarra, they launched a row boat and explored the Maribyrnong and Yarra Rivers, as far as the rocky fords at Avondale Heights and Dight's Falls. Although they climbed the banks for broader views, they did not venture far from their boat, being unimpressed by the flat, rocky, dry land they found.

More than thirty years later, John Batman, in search of new pastoral land for graziers in Tasmania, also explored the same area. However, he was more impressed with the open grasslands and travelled further on foot.

On Foot

The land west of Port Phillip Bay is a vast basalt plain, mostly flat and sparsely wooded. It was easy to explore beyond the banks of its waterways. Batman wrote that 'a gig or carriage may be driven in any direction for twenty miles without the possibility of upsetting.'

Batman's glowing reports quickly led to a huge influx of graziers and sheep onto the plains. Most of them came from Van Diemen's Land and were landed at Point Gellibrand, Williamstown. From there they spread out west and north toward the Werribee River and along the western bank of the Maribyrnong. The rivers, which provided initial access to the hinterland, and were vital for watering sheep on the dry plains, were now barriers against direct crossings of the plains.

Funded by the Ministry for Conservation Forests and Lands

Fording the Rivers

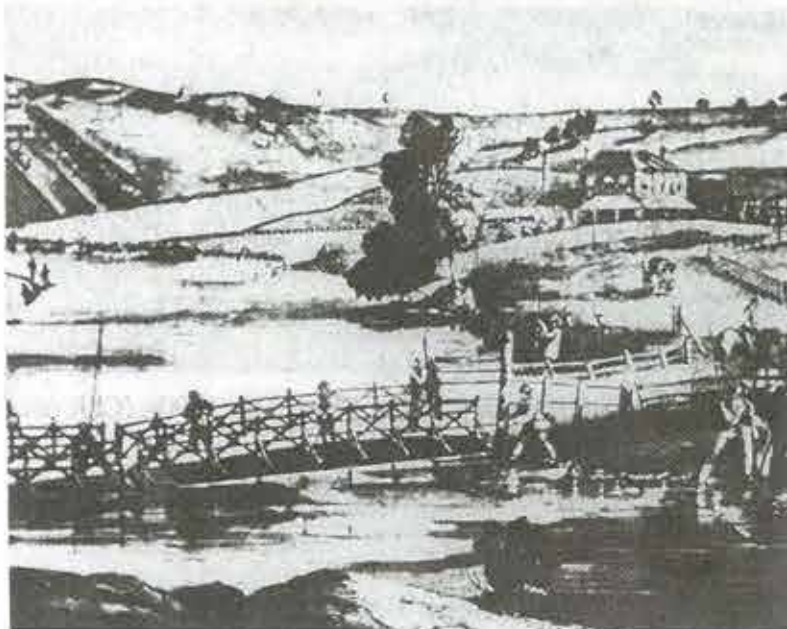
The same shallow rocks and fords which halted boats, became the means by which graziers and others crossed the region's rivers on the way from one settlement to another or when driving their flocks inland.

Travellers from Melbourne to Geelong had to make their way north through what is now Flemington, Essendon, Moonee Ponds, North Melbourne and Avondale Heights (a journey of thirteen kilometres) to the first safe crossing at the ford at Braybrook, before heading south-west toward the Werribee and Little River crossings.

Cart tracks soon criss-crossed the flat plains, between farms and converged at settlements by the fords.

Ferries and Punts

By 1837 Captain William Lonsdale, Port Phillip's first police magistrate and administrator, offered his boat as the first 'ferry' service across the Maribyrnong River, providing a quicker journey for passengers from ships anchored at Williamstown. The Yarra River remained too shallow and tortuous for larger ships to navigate for many decades. Lonsdale's ferry operated near the present Footscray Road [Mel 42 E6], just above the original junction of the Yarra and Maribyrnong Rivers, meeting a track which cut through the West Melbourne Swamp. In wet weather the swamp was impassable and so people still had to make their way to the Braybrook ford if they were bound for Melbourne.



Raleigh's Punt, Maribyrnong, (*Illustrated Australian News* 27/11/1866)

By 1839, Levien's punt, was operating near the end of Bunbury Street. [Mel 42 E5] It sank in 1841 and was replaced by another with rails for livestock and lights for night time operation. In the 1840s, ownership of the punt changed hands several times, until 1849, when the last owner, Michael Lynch, moved it a mile up the River, to the site of today's Lynch's Bridge. [Mel 42 F3] The punt was actually licensed and operated by Lynch's sister, Anne Harrison.

Other Punts included John O'Farrell's, at Footscray from 1855 to 1862 and Joseph Raleigh's, in Maribyrnong from 1847.

The seaport of Williamstown, still isolated and underdeveloped by the mid-1840s, was brought a little closer to Melbourne by a ferry service installed by J.S. Spottiswoode in 1849, near the Stony Creek. This was replaced by a steam ferry in 1873, which operated for ninety years. [Mel 56 C3]



Mt. Alexander Road during the Gold Rushes, (Essendon Historical Society)

Settlements

At the fords and punts drovers watered their stock or travellers stopped to refresh themselves and by 1840, inns provided shelter and marked the start of the first settlements. The foundations of one early inn have recently been excavated in Wingfield Street Footscray. The cart tracks between the villages became the main highways when road reserves were marked in Government surveys from 1837. Parts of Geelong Road from Footscray date from this period. However, it was for many decades a primitive track, with few signs of civilization as a contemporary description suggests:

There is not much traffic on the road, and we are not aware that there is any public conveyance between [Melbourne and Geelong]. At the Werribee River, about half way, and the Little River, within eighteen miles of Geelong, both of which are dry watercourses for the greater part of the year, there are two indifferent inns. From this very uninviting state of the road, therefore, few people from Melbourne travel by land to Geelong; and when the Portland Bay district require to visit the metropolis of Victoria, they ride to Geelong on horseback ... and proceed by steamboat to the City.

from Mossman and Bannister, *Australia Visited and Revisited* London, 1853



One of the chaff-cutting teams which provided chaff to feed Melbourne's horses, (Jack Findlater)

The Railways

The first railway through Melbourne's western region was the Geelong line from Newport, with a branch extension to Williamstown Pier. The track was being laid in 1854, but did not open until 1857 and was privately owned.

Another line ran from Melbourne, through Footscray township, then on to Bendigo and the Murray River. It began as a commercial venture and was built to a very high standard. However, the line ran into difficulty and was purchased by the Victorian Government before completion. It was opened to Sunbury by 1859.

The other major line was to Ballarat, branching from the Northern Railway at Braybrook. This was begun in 1884 and led to Braybrook Junction being promoted as a major industrial suburb, the 'Manchester of Australia.' Connecting links to Broadmeadows and Newport built in the 1920s meant that most passenger and goods trains to the west and north of the state went through the western suburbs. To cross the deep river valleys two spectacular steel trestle bridges were built; one over the Werribee River in 1884 and another over the Maribyrnong in 1927.

These rail lines had a great impact in developing Melbourne's west. They opened such areas as Werribee and Lara to picnickers and holiday-makers. Before the 1880s, Cobb and Co. coach-connections from Keilor Road Station to Melton and Bacchus Marsh had already made areas accessible. With the increasing rail-traffic, the rural centres began to develop. Closer to Melbourne the rail links gave strong impetus to industrial growth at Sunshine, Footscray and Williamstown.

Williamstown had languished as Melbourne's forgotten seaport in the 1840s. It was isolated from main transport networks. The rail-links connected the town with the western region, Ballarat and the Murray River, revitalizing it as a rail/sea terminus.

The Goldrush

In the early 1850s, the discovery of gold in Victoria brought thousands of people to the Ballarat and Bendigo goldfields. To reach them diggers had to cross the Werribee and Keilor Plains.

Most prospectors made their ways to the diggings on foot having to cope with dust and fires in summer and mud in winter.

A popular route was along Mt Alexander Road, through Flemington and Essendon, then across the Maribyrnong River at Keilor, then on to the plains. Diggers Rest gets its name from a goldrush stopping place. Others went via Deep Creek at Bulla, going on to Sunbury and Gisborne. Roads were generally atrocious and travel was often a hardship: 'we were bogged nearly all day, when we got one dray out, the other went down. Here we had to stop with our drays up to the axles in water, and camp on a kind of island.' [Isaac Batey, *The Pioneers of Sunbury District*]. Mt Alexander Road was an exception. Because it was frequently used, it was well maintained. It was described as the most important road in the colony.

It was not until the late 1850s and early '60s that municipal councils and Road Districts were formed to assist in the development of roads and the proper construction of roads with crushed bluestone and cobbles began.

Local townships developed to serve this increased traffic. Keilor was proclaimed a village in 1850 and was a popular stopping-point 'with a good inn, several nice cottages and a store or two.' [Mrs Clacy, *A Lady's Visit to the Gold Diggings of Australia in 1852-53*]

Bacchus Marsh grew, not just from passing traffic, but also by supplying food and timber to the nearby goldfields. Cobb and Co. coaches were the first public transport across the west but were expensive and so only for the wealthy.



Footscray Railway Station in the 1920s, (Norman De Pomeroy)

Bridges

New roads and rail lines often meant new bridges were constructed in a hurry which often proved inadequate during the goldrushes and were occasionally washed away in heavy floods. This happened to the Keilor Bridge in May, 1852.

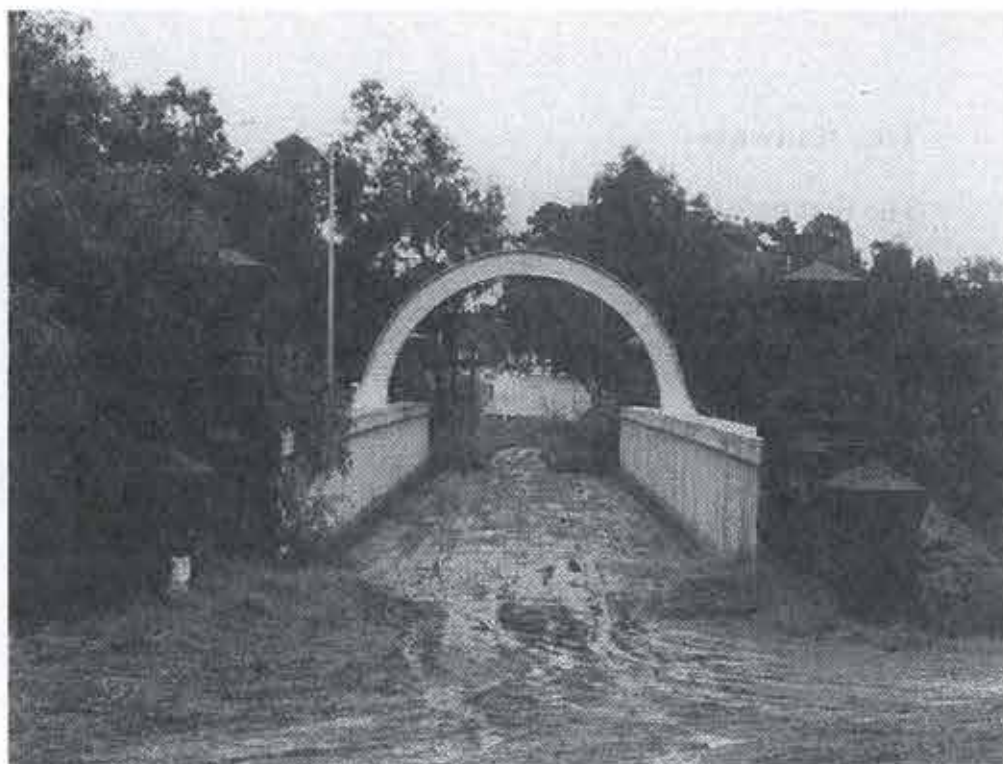
In the 1860s and '70s, many bridges were built of locally quarried bluestone which withstood flooding. Many of these bridges still stand today, such as those at Brooklyn and Melton over the Kororoit Creek and Bulla over Deep Creek.

Crossing the Maribyrnong River remained one of the major obstacles for traffic headed west. The first rail-link across the River was the railway bridge near Footscray, erected in 1858. It was an iron box girder bridge with large bluestone abutments. Much of its metal structure was imported from Manchester. The girder was rebuilt in 1914. The rail line to Footscray was electrified in 1920 and the extra bridge alongside was built in 1975.

At the same time as the first railway bridge was erected, Joseph Raleigh's punt in Maribyrnong was replaced with a pontoon bridge, that is, one that floats upon the water. A fixed timber bridge was built in 1869 but gave way to a Monier concrete bridge in 1911. A tramway bridge alongside, was built in 1942 and in 1968 both were demolished and the current bridge built.

The second bridge across the Maribyrnong replaced John O'Farrell's punt in 1863. It was a timber bridge with a moveable centre to allow river traffic to pass. It lasted until 1903 and the present bridge was built in 1969.

During the 1800s it was important that the River remained navigable by boats to ferry raw materials and finished products to and from factories and quarries. The bridge replacing Lynch's punt, at Newmarket in 1864, was a wooden draw-bridge. This only lasted twenty years being rebuilt in 1882, 1909 and 1939.



Bluestone and iron bridge across the Maribyrnong in Keilor

The Napier Street bridge was first built in 1895 and had an opening span. It was replaced in 1958 by the present Shepherd Bridge. Commercial fishing boats today go no further than this bridge. Large cargo ships anchor at the Yarraville wharves or enter Coode Canal to the Yarra wharves and docks.

A footbridge of interest across the Maribyrnong is the old stockbridge at Newmarket which linked the now demolished Angliss Meatworks in Footscray and the Melbourne City Abattoirs in Newmarket. This stockbridge was installed in 1941 having been removed from over the Yarra River at Punt Road. It was built in 1894.

The patterns of our roads and railways were created through a mixture of accident and necessity. Major roads were the quickest routes between developing centres and convenient river crossings, natural or artificial. As roads and rail developed, they opened new areas and helped the expansion of industry and urban sprawl, as well as servicing those areas already established.

