

Welcome to Melbourne

Historical snapshot: 1835-1940

We're Australia's second-largest city and the capital of Victoria, the country's most southern mainland state.

Melbourne is one of the great multicultural cities of the world and a significant meeting place.

At the 2016 Census 28.4% of Victoria's population were born overseas and 49.1% of Victorians were either born overseas or have a parent who was born overseas. Victorians come from more than 200 countries, speak 260 languages and dialects and follow 135 religious faiths. Most of the overseas-born Victorians came to Australia as migrants hoping to find a better life for themselves and their children.

Melbourne's current population stands at just over 4.5 million (2019). We're the fastest growing city in Australia and our rail network needs to keep up with that growth. That's why we're building the Metro Tunnel, Victoria's biggest ever public transport infrastructure project.

But it wasn't always this way...

Pre-European settlement

The area around Port Phillip and the Yarra Valley, on which the city now stands, is traditionally the land of the Kulin nation. Before European settlement, the Kulin people, an alliance of several language groups of Indigenous Australians, had lived in the area for an estimated 31,000 to 40,000 years. For the Wurundjeri, Boon Wurrung, Taungurong, Djab Wurrung and the Wathaurung who make up the Kulin nation, Melbourne has always been an important meeting place and location for events of social, educational, sporting and cultural significance.

On 6 June 1835, John Batman, a grazier, explorer and entrepreneur, signed a treaty with eight Wurundjeri elders in which he purported to buy 600,000 acres (2,400 km²) of land around Melbourne for a group of businessmen known as the Port Phillip Association. Two days later, he wrote in his journal: "This will be the place for a village."

Batman's Treaty is considered significant as it was the first, and only, documented time when Europeans negotiated their presence and occupation of Aboriginal lands directly with the traditional owners. However, the validity of Batman's Treaty has been widely disputed. Since neither Batman, nor the Indigenous Australians spoke anything like the same language, it is almost certain that they had very different ideas about what was happening here. The European system of owning property was entirely alien to almost all Aboriginal peoples. They almost certainly saw the treaty signing as a series of gift exchanges and a traditional ceremony that allowed for temporary access to and use of the land.

Early days

The city was founded on 30 August 1835 by free settlers from the prison colony in Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania). It began as a collection

of tents and huts on the banks of the Yarra River and was named in honour of the British Prime Minister, William Lamb, 2nd Viscount Melbourne. In 1837 surveyor Robert Hoddle laid out his grand vision for the city, a series of broad streets divided by narrower laneways that is now known as the Hoddle Grid. The excavation site in Archaeology Adventure, located on the corner of Flinders and Swanston streets, was the gateway to Melbourne from the start.

Like most Australian colonies, the original reason for the British occupation of Victoria was the fear of possible French settlement. The real driver, however, was access to rich and fertile farming land. Over the next 15 years the settler population of Victoria grew to around 80,000 people, with some 20,000 living in Melbourne. In theory, Victoria could have remained a rural economy but the discovery of gold changed everything.

The Gold Rush

In 1851 gold was discovered at several locations in Victoria, most notably around Ballarat and Bendigo. These were some of the richest gold fields the world had ever seen. The resulting gold rush radically transformed Victoria. In 1852 alone, 75,000 people arrived in the colony, mostly from England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales but also from America (where the earlier California gold rush was already in decline), China and Germany. This, combined with a very high birth rate, led to rapid population growth. Victoria's population reached 400,000 in 1857 and 500,000 by 1860.

Gold, and the associated growth in agriculture and manufacturing, turned Melbourne into the economic centre of Australia and ushered in the era known as "Marvellous Melbourne". The city spread east and north over the surrounding flat grasslands, and south down the eastern shore of Port Phillip Bay. The first city railway station in Australia opened at Flinders Street in 1854 and plans to build the grand terminus that stands on that site today commenced in the 1882.

At about the same time, directly across the intersection, the foundation stone was laid for the magnificent Anglican cathedral of St Paul's.

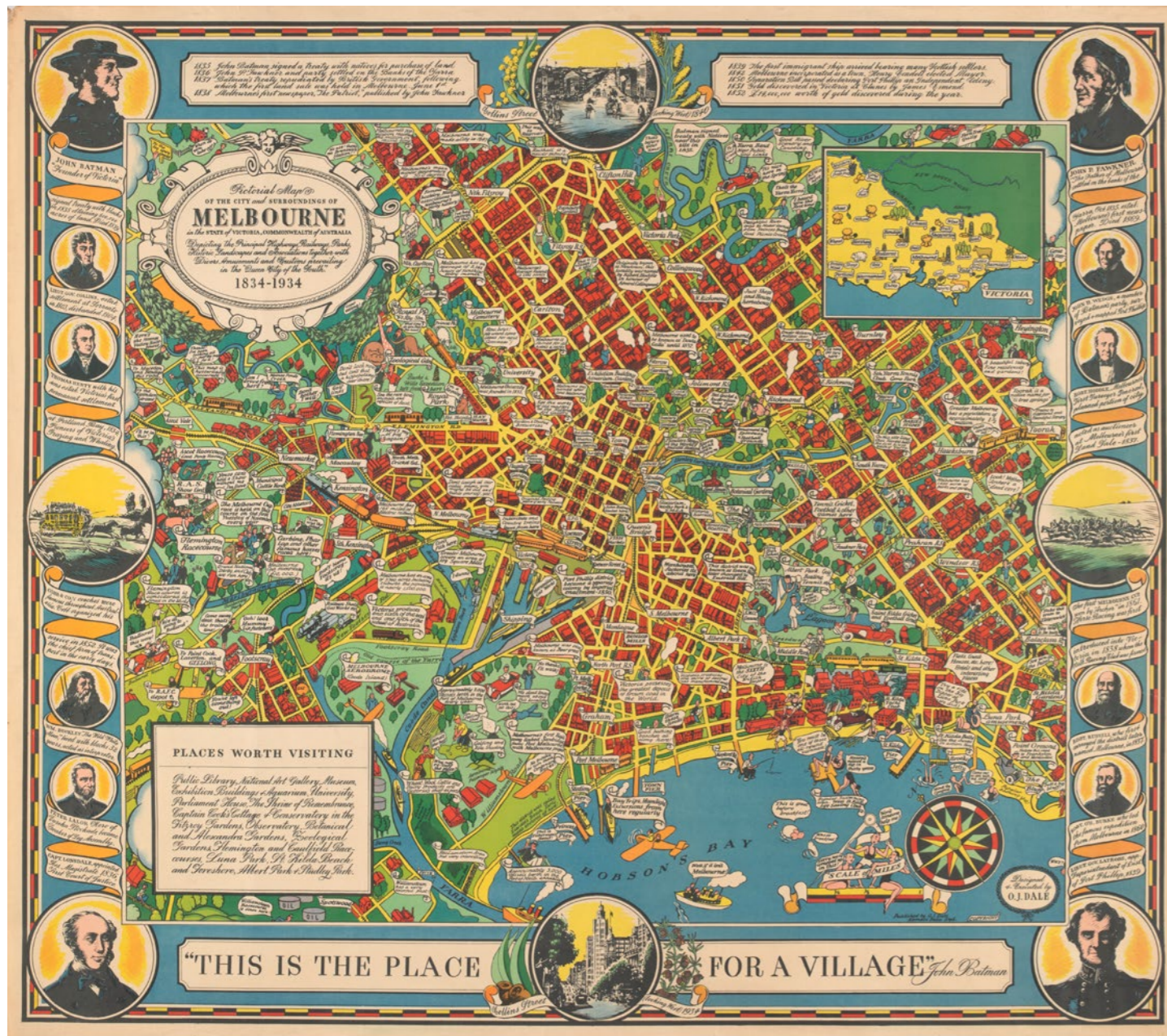
The gold rush boom continued through the 1860s and '70s. Despite the steady arrival of migrants, Victoria continued to suffer from severe labour shortages, and this pushed up wages until they were the highest in the world. Victoria became known as "the working man's paradise".

1890-1940

By 1891 the gold had run out and the boom ended abruptly. Banks and other businesses failed in large numbers, thousands of shareholders lost their money, placing tens of thousands of workers out of work. Although there are no reliable statistics, there was probably 20 per cent unemployment in Melbourne throughout the 1890s. With few prospects for settlers, immigration came to a virtual standstill. By 1905 Sydney had resumed its place as Australia's largest city.

Melbourne's mood was also darkened by the terrible sacrifices of World War I. As a percentage of the total population, the number of Australian soldiers killed in this conflict was among the highest in the world - 16,000 of the 112,000 Victorians who enlisted lost their lives. The Spanish Flu epidemic that came shortly after the war wiped out a further 4000 Victorians. There was a modest revival of prosperity in the 1920s, and the population reached one million in 1930, but the Wall Street Crash in 1929 brought another period of economic depression that lasted until World War II.

After World War II, a new era of increasing prosperity arrived, fuelled by high prices for Victoria's wool, increased government spending on transport and education, and the stimulus of renewed high immigration. Unlike pre-war immigration, which had been mostly from the British Isles, the period immediately after World War II brought an influx of Europeans, among them many refugees from the conflict in eastern and central Europe.



"This is the place for a village," John Batman. Pictorial map of the city and surroundings of Melbourne in the State of Victoria, Commonwealth of Australia, O. J Dale 1934. State Library of Victoria.