



Digging at the State Library Station site

The largest archaeological digs in Victorian history took place in the heart of the CBD as part of the Metro Tunnel Project.

In 2018 before construction began at the sites of the Metro Tunnel’s Town Hall and State Library stations, more than 100 archaeologists, heritage experts, university students and community participants carefully sifted through layers of fill and soil.

These digs were a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to unearth a treasure trove of early Melbourne life, dating back to the earliest days of the city’s European settlement.

Architectural remains found on site include wheel ruts, cesspits, bluestone footings and the timber structures of cottages, shops, hotels and pubs.

A selection of artefacts were on temporary display at the project’s visitor centre, Metro Tunnel HQ, and significant items are now permanently stored by Heritage Victoria for future generations.

Major construction ramped up on the Metro Tunnel’s two new CBD stations after the archaeological dig was finished in 2018.

The stations will be open to passengers in 2025.

Archaeology at a glance:



Digs lasting several months across each site



Uncovered 1 million artefacts across both CBD sites



Artefacts dating back to the 1830s



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A wealth of buried treasure

The biggest digs in Victorian history unearthed a million treasures from Melbourne's past, lost through floorboards and buried in backyards well over a century ago. These artefacts paint a vivid picture of 19th-century Melbourne, while helping bring some of the city's historical tales to life.



Dental dramas

Between 1890s and 1930s

Around a thousand human teeth have been found – an intriguing legacy of the business that dentist and surgeon JJ Forster ran at 11 Swanston Street from 1898.

Many teeth show obvious signs of decay, often with root exposure, meaning their bearers would have suffered excruciating pain prior to removal.

JJ Forster's trade in extractions was evidently flourishing – but success was not without its pitfalls.

He was the target of a high-profile blackmail case in 1909 when letters were sent demanding £50 under threat of death "by bullet or bomb". The threat was traced by police to a 16-year-old boy, who planned to use the cash to buy a film projector and tour the country screening movies.



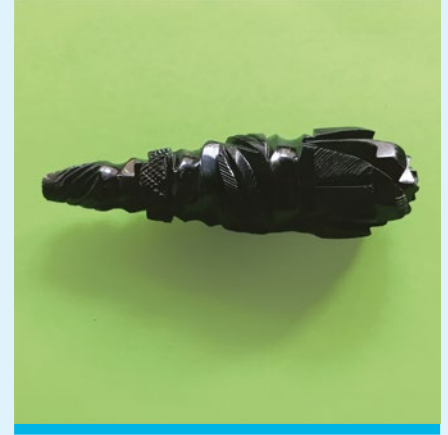
The tree of knowledge

Pre-1850

Remnants of Melbourne's pre-settlement woodland have been uncovered at 377-391 Swanston Street, buried below deposits associated with the earliest known European settlement of northern Melbourne.

The tree remnants are a rare snapshot of the extensive woodland that characterised the northern portion of Port Phillip Bay, before and during the early years of its settlement by John Batman.

The woodland was cleared at the time of Melbourne's northern expansion that began with the Victorian gold rush.



The Victorian jet set

Between 1860 and 1890

An ornately carved jet earring probably dropped from the ear of a well-to-do woman at one of the hotels at 13 Swanston Street – eventually falling through the floorboards, only to be discovered by archaeologists some 150 years later.

Jet, a type of fossilised wood, is formed over millions of years and considered a gemstone. It became particularly popular after the death of Queen Victoria's husband Albert in 1861, when she began sporting jet mourning jewellery. One of the most prized sources of jet is in Whitby, a coastal town in England, where it was mined by perilously lowering men on ropes down crumbling cliff faces to reach the precious stone.

Melbourne's early coffee beans

Between the 1940s and 50s

Perfectly preserved coffee beans from Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) have been discovered during the Metro Tunnel Project's archaeological dig in the deposit near Young and Jackson. The location was a former grocer's shop which burnt down in 1855, leaving the coffee beans as a relic from the fire.





A roaring success

Between 1860s and 1890s

Chinese immigration to Victoria during the gold rush resulted in increased importation of ceramics such as ginger jars, storage jars, teapots, woks and opium paraphernalia.

A moulded stoneware figure of a Foo Lion (Lion of Buddha) recovered from 377-391 Swanston Street may have formed part of the lid of a teapot – the lion's mouth serving as a vent.



The whole box and dice

Between the 1850s and early 1920s

These gambling items may shed some light on unusual taxation methods placed on playing cards and dice produced in England between 1711 and 1862. Such items were taxed heavily to raise money for the war against France. At least 20 dice, made predominantly from cattle bone or ivory, were recovered from 13 Swanston Street, a site occupied by hotels from the 1850s to the early 1920s.



Slingshot snapshot

Between 1840 and 1860s

A slingshot made from a forked stick and leather horse bridle was found in a cesspit deposit at 13 Swanston Street and likely to have been a child's toy.

Scraps of woollen textile also found may have been used to form a pocket for launching a projectile such as a lead shot. Slingshots could prove deadly to small animals such as rabbits, birds and rats.



Student Archaeologist

Matt O'Reilly

More than 60 students and community members were given a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to take part in Victoria's biggest-ever archaeological digs.

Matt O'Reilly, a student from La Trobe University, shares some insights from his time on the Metro Tunnel's big digs.

Q: How did you first become interested in archaeology?

My love of history and archaeology began at six years of age, while I was watching a certain 'Doctor Jones' attempt to hunt down the Holy Grail. I now realise there is a slight difference between archaeology and the adventures in the Indiana Jones movies. However, I still get that awesome feeling of discovery whenever something pops out of the ground.

Q: What did an average day on the digs look like?

Mornings began with a pre-start meeting where we were assigned jobs for the day. This varied from cleaning and cataloguing various artefacts, to excavating and sifting through the historical sites we were working on. My role changed every day and that's what I love most about working in archaeology.

Q: What was your most memorable moment on Victoria's biggest digs?

My most memorable moment changes with every artefact or old bluestone building footing that I uncover. Each artefact is a piece of history brought back for future generations to cherish. I'm really lucky to have worked on a project that allowed me to shine a light on Melbourne's past.



Town Hall

Six non-heritage buildings near the corner of Flinders and Swanston streets were demolished to build the new Town Hall Station, including several fast food outlets and Port Phillip Arcade.

The historically significant site has undergone tremendous change since Melbourne's founder John Batman paid £100 for a section of the land in 1837. Batman built a seven-room timber structure on the site that became known as Roxburgh Cottage. Historical documents show that in 1838 the property was known locally as Miss Cooke's Seminary for Ladies. This was the first school for girls to be established in Melbourne and Batman's three youngest daughters boarded at the school.

By the 1850s when the gold rush struck, brick and timber buildings were constructed on Swanston Street and occupied by an ironmonger, a wine and spirits merchant, a publican and solicitor. It was also the site of hotels and other businesses including tobacconists, grocers, small warehouses and one of Melbourne's earliest dentists, JJ Forster.



State Library

To build the new State Library Station, 12 non-heritage buildings near the corner of La Trobe and Swanston streets and on Little La Trobe Street were demolished, including fast food outlets and a residential tower.

The earliest known buildings on the main frontages along Swanston Street comprised retail shops and commercial stores, which were occupied by a variety of butchers, fishmongers, printers and other merchants. These type of stores remained in this location throughout the 19th century.

In contrast to the commercial character of the Swanston Street frontages, the La Trobe Street sites were more light industrial in nature, including a variety of warehouses and professions such as carriage builders, ironmongers and blacksmiths.



Fun for kids!

Archaeology Adventure, a fun learning activity based on the Metro Tunnel Project digs, is available with the Minecraft: Education Edition of Mini Melbourne. You can find this and other opportunities for kids to learn about Victoria's biggest ever public transport project at metrotunnel.vic.gov.au/education.



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