

## Travelling: Roads, Railways and Bridges

Tracks were fanning out from Melbourne across the plains, soon after settlement. The main route to Portland and to Mount Macedon went through Keilor, at first by a ford, then via a timber bridge over the Maribyrnong River. Another route was via Solomon's Ford, from what is now North Road in Avondale Heights and across present day Sunshine towards Geelong, or to turn north along the route of what is now Sunshine Avenue to join up with the Mount Macedon Road.

In 1846, the Mount Macedon Road was 'the most important highway in the district', but a serious flood that year caused problems: Part of a bridge over the Maribyrnong River was carried away and no bullock drays or heavy carts could pass until the damage was partially repaired.

### **Main route to the goldfields**

100,000 migrants arrived in Melbourne in 1852 alone, often making their way to the goldfields on foot and pushing wheelbarrows laden with their goods and equipment. A sketch in a London newspaper in February 1853 depicts the hopeful diggers.

Many gold seekers travelled to Ballarat via Geelong but thousands travelled through Keilor and across the Keilor Plains, taking the northerly track to Mount Alexander (Castlemaine) and Bendigo, or the westward track after Keilor towards Melton, Bacchus Marsh and Ballarat.

The Mount Alexander Road through Keilor was soon the main route to the goldfields. It was said once that more people travelled on this road than on any road in England. The road out of Keilor was also the most notorious section in winter, a quagmire that carts would be stuck in for weeks.

In 1854, the American firm of Cobb and Co. began running their efficient coaches to the gold fields at Castlemaine and Bendigo, with Keilor as their first main stop. Their practice was to arrange the journey in short stretches or 'legs', usually about ten miles in length. At the end of each stretch the coach was supplied with fresh horses. Keilor was therefore a logical stopping point, being ten miles from town. Cobb & Co. quickly became the largest coaching company in Victoria and later throughout the whole country. Most of the early drivers were Americans who were extremely skilled and were paid very high wages.

So important was the Mount Alexander Road that the Victorian Government spent vast sums on a new bridge over the Maribyrnong River at Keilor, opened in 1855. This was a timber lattice girder bridge, on the lines of similar bridges in America. The abutments were of bluestone, 38 feet high, and the span of the bridge 160 feet. The design was influenced by the factor that the river could rise 30 feet in time of flood. The bridge eventually cost £20,000.

Rough tracks went through the area in the early 1850s, the predecessors of today's Ballarat Road and Geelong Road. The Ballarat Road was a possible route to the

diggings, via Deer Park, but seems to have been less used. In the 1850s -60s, responsibility for road construction was handed over to Road District Boards. In the Brimbank area, the Braybrook Road District was established in 1860 and the Keilor Road District in 1861. The latter contributed to the construction of a new bridge over the Maribyrnong, the iron bridge at Keilor, built in 1868 and still surviving.

### **First Government Railway**

The coming of the first Government railway in Victoria brought hundreds of workers to the district, for the construction of the Melbourne, Mount Alexander and Murray River Railway. The contract was awarded to Cornish & Co. at a cost of £3,356,937. It was the greatest public work in Australia up to that time. The firm paid a deposit of £40,000 and started work near Footscray on 7 June 1858. The first stretch of line, Footscray to Sunbury, going through the Brimbank area, was 21 miles. This included constructing a bluestone railway bridge over Stony Creek, at Sunshine, and bluestone railway culverts in the St.Albans area.

The contractors, Cornish & Bruce, brought out stonemasons from England to work on the bridges and culverts. I.K. Brunel, one of Britain's leading railway engineers, was the Inspecting Officer supervising the contracts in England, so many aspects of the line's design, operation and construction were influenced by British practice and Brunel's individual railway philosophy, for example, wide tracks, generous earthworks, solid masonry, gentle grades. It was also very costly.

The firm made rapid progress and completed work on a single track by 13 January 1859. This was a day of great celebration, with the Governor of Victoria, Sir Henry Barklay, on a special train going first to Williamstown, then through Footscray at 30 miles an hour and on to Sunbury. Two other trains from Melbourne were delayed and a mounted messenger was sent to look for the trains. They finally arrived and lunch in the contractors' workshops began at 4 p.m. Toasts included one to 'the working men of the Melbourne & Mount Alexander Line of Railway'.

The Sunbury line was open for passenger traffic on 10 February 1859, with three trains from Melbourne to Sunbury a day and four trains from Sunbury to Melbourne. By arrangement, the main coaching companies running to and from Sandhurst, connected with trains at Diggers Rest. The Keilor Road station opened for business on 1 March 1859. Another station opened in the Brimbank area, at 'Albion and Darlington', nine miles from Melbourne, on 5 January 1860, but this was closed at the end of the same year.

Workers completed a second line of rail to Sunbury and a goods service began on 11 July 1859. By the end of 1859, the new Victorian Railways Department had received £29,455 revenue from the Sunbury line though its expenses totalled just over £27,000. Of the 83,558 passengers who had travelled on the line, 13,689 had left from Keilor Road. In October 1862 the line to Castlemaine and Bendigo was finished and officially opened.

The coming of the iron road to the Brimbank area led to a new group of workers residing in the area. These were railway employees looking after the lines and the railway gates, and living in houses owned by the Victorian Railways. A number of women were railway gatekeepers.

It was some years before a railway went through the Brimbank area to Ballarat. Train travellers to Ballarat went via Geelong on a line opened in 1862. On 2 April 1884 a line between Braybrook Junction and Melton was opened, a distance of 15.65 miles. During the next three years the section to Bacchus Marsh was completed but trains could not go through to Ballarat, until December 1889. In the meantime, a goods line between Newport and Braybrook Junction was completed by 24 September 1887. This wealth of connecting railway lines was seen as a key factor in inducing industries to settle in the area. Railway sidings went off from the main lines to the quarries and new factories. 'Braybrook Junction' was described as 'the greatest junction in Victoria'.

Braybrook Junction Station opened in 1885 and St.Albans Station in 1887, facilities which helped to encourage settlement. The St.Albans station resulted from approaches by the Cosmopolitan Land & Banking Company who sent a cheque for £700 towards its erection and another £500 towards the cost of a siding. A suburban train service, with more frequent trains, was introduced in 1888. According to a timetable of 1889, the St.Albans-Melbourne journey took 30 minutes and the Braybrook Junction -Melbourne journey, 20 minutes.

Goods and passenger traffic increased with the coming of H.V.McKay's Harvester Works. In 1907, the station changed its name to Sunshine. One contemporary photograph shows a stream of workers leaving the station for the Harvester works. Another photo shows the station platform jammed with workers waiting for their homeward train. A new station opened to serve the growing suburb of 'Albion' on 24 November 1919, following initiatives by H.V.McKay. Electrification of suburban railway lines began in 1919, a new electricity sub-station was built at Albion and by 1921 the line between Footscray and St.Albans had been electrified.

With the construction of the Albion-Broadmeadows line and Dynon bypass, the majority of Victorian country freight services, with the exception of the Gippsland line, ran through Sunshine.