

## **How Geology and Geography can influence History: Canterbury Road**

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begins at Burke Road, renamed in the 1860's as a tribute to Robert O'Hara Burke of Burke & Wills fame. It is hard to resist calling Canterbury Road "Burke & hills," for it is the undulations that dominate much of its length on the 25.8 km journey to Montrose: undulations which are hills and mounds, three of each – Surrey **Hills**, Box **Hill** and Forest **Hill** are followed by **Vermont**, **Heathmont** and **Montrose**, all on the way to Mount Dandenong.

That it is hilly country has been important in its history. The hills promote rain, which created the forested areas for the pioneer woodcutters, and on early maps where Canterbury Road is now, there is marked a "woodcutters' track." These wetter areas east of Melbourne contrast with the broad meadows to the west, and attracted the vineyards (Bal-wyn: Gaelic "home of the vine") and orchards which dominated early Canterbury Road and its immediate surrounds. Another historical impact of the elevated areas has been their desirability for residential use, starting way back in the 1850's and 60's as many of Melbourne's wealthy citizens bypassed the flat inner suburbs and came up the country to Camberwell to build their mansions. Ever since, land use in the eastern suburbs has been essentially residential – Camberwell and its surrounds is the largest residential, non-industrial suburban area in Australia. There are other ways in which geology has affected history along Canterbury Road. The "Shenley Wiggle" at East Camberwell; the railway from East Camberwell across Canterbury Road at Canterbury and on to Chatham following the W Creek bed; the sports grounds near Middleborough Road which owe their location to Gardiner's Creek; the previously straight road for many km, veering left at Vermont to avoid dropping down into the Dandenong Creek valley, then turning sharply at Heathmont to follow the Wicklow ridge. Next, the road falls down into the extended "sunkland" of Bayswater North and Kilsyth, unattractive swamps until drainage works allowed the industrial estates which now dominate this area. A further and quite explicit geological impact is the Montrose quarry. Yet another illustration of the influence of build is that the railway pushes out east along land higher than the Yarra River to the north and Dandenong Creek to the south, and for the middle suburbs from Canterbury to Heathmont it was the advent of the railway station that stimulated village, then suburban residential and retail development. Overall, the hills are not dramatic enough to need zig-zagging or bypassing, nor have the valleys needed bridges, but these build features have had a strong influence on the history of Canterbury Road.

Geography has also been very influential. The location of Canterbury Road has been another defining factor in its land use and development. To the west have been Melbourne city and suburbs, constantly encroaching, and to the east are the Dandenongs, attracting day-trippers and even holidayers before beaches and Bali became more attractive. Of course, both Melbourne, at the top of the bay and the mouth of the Yarra, and the Dandenong Ranges, could well be in the paragraph above, as geologically based. So can the location of Eastlink, being along creek valleys and having a huge impact on road use east since its opening. Above all, the history of Canterbury Road has been the story of Melbourne's suburban expansion. Subdivisions into building blocks in the 1880's in Camberwell move out to Box Hill in the 1920's and Heathmont in the 1950's. It is geography in the climatic sense which has encouraged Melbourne to have this suburban sprawl as residents built single storey homes on their own quarter-acre blocks in a way different from much of the rest of the world!

An interesting theme for further analysis is how History has affected Canterbury Road's history! Land use along the road has of course varied over time, technology and community lifestyles being two important factors. Shopping strips, churches, road traffic, shopping centres with extensive off-road carparks, large industrial parks, numerous child-minding centres, retirement villages, health professionals by the score, apartment blocks – all deserve historical attention as they illustrate past and present society.

However it is the geology and geography which provide the starting points for any historical study of Canterbury Road – as indeed they do for anywhere!

*Gerry Robinson, June 2014*