



The Heidelberg Historian

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Next Meeting

Uniting Church Hall, Seddon Street, Ivanhoe
8pm Tuesday 12 February 2008

YAN YEAN RESERVOIR: 150 YEARS

by Lindsay Mann

Our 2008 program begins with a commemoration of 150 years of the Yan Yean Reservoir, still essential water supply for the metropolitan area. It provided our first Melbourne water supply and was the inspiration of ex-convict pioneer architect and engineer, James Blackburn, Melbourne's city surveyor, who never lived to see his idea become reality as he died in March 1854 of typhoid. It was left to another engineer, Matthew Bullock Jackson, to see the project through to its completion with the first supply reaching Melbourne on 31 December 1857 with a hydrant spouting water at the corner of Flinders and Elizabeth Streets before the Governor, Sir Henry Barkly, and a large crowd of celebrating Melbournians.

Our speaker is Lindsay Mann who was born in 1940 and who grew up in Yan Yean. He writes: "Early one morning in late 1945 his mother told him the war was over, and sat him on the post that supported the homestead's front gate. He saw a militia unit marching down Plenty Road, to the beat of a kettledrum. Those men were in the act of a final withdrawal from their tour of duty in guarding one of Melbourne's major water supplies, the Yan Yean Reservoir.

Lindsay had witnessed history, and though he would not realize it for a few years yet, a seed had been planted. As he matured, it would flower into a lifetime interest in local history, and especially in the history of the Yan Yean Reservoir—the oldest large dam in Australia—but more about that on the night.

Currently Lindsay is the president of the Whittlesea Historical Society. He is also the author of three small books on local history subjects, the first being *Arthur's Creek Cemetery: A History* which was written for the Cemetery Trust in 1994 and revised in 2004. In 1996 he self-published *The Plenty Bushrangers of 1842: The First Europeans Hanged in Victoria*. After their capture at present day Whittlesea, they were tried in the Supreme Court, and sentenced to death. [The recent story in our *Historians* by Janine Rizzetti of Judge Willis who conducted their trial was of particular interest to Lindsay.]

In 2000, with contributions from his friends, he produced a book entitled, *Born in a Barn: Greensborough's Uniting Church's First 150 Years--- 1850-2000*. He has also written a number of magazine articles on historical subjects, including many in the *Whittlesea Town Crier*. In 1998 he wrote a story for *Freshwater Fishing Australia* no.43 (Winter) entitled 'Yarra River Cod, Migration by Spring Cart' which tells the story of *Argus* proprietor, Edward Wilson's, project in 1857 to introduce cod into the Plenty River at Whittlesea in an effort to allow them to find their own way into the Yarra, while his really big claim to obscurity is that he is 'a bit of a bush poet' with under a dozen poems to his name.

Lindsay is currently writing a history of the Yan Yean Public Cemetery for the Cemetery Trust. His great ambition though is, one day, to tell the story of Melbourne's agonizing progress towards the founding of the Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works and the acquiring of a sewerage system.

YAN YEAN RESERVOIR: 150 YEARS, cont.

by Lindsay Mann

The story of the Yan Yean Reservoir continues from the talk given by Lindsay Mann in February:

The Yan Yean Extension Works

More substantial works to enlarge the Yan Yean catchment area started in late 1881 or early 1882 to bring the Wallaby Creek, a tributary of the King Parrot Creek, itself a tributary of the Goulburn River, from the other side of the Great Dividing Range. Later the storage capacity of the reservoir was further augmented when the Silver Creek, also on the north side of the Ranges, was diverted into the Wallaby Creek weir. Then the contributions of both creeks flowed in an open channel via a saddle from north to south, then helter-skelter down Jack's Creek into the Toorourrong Reservoir, itself built as part of the Wallaby Creek works; and from there via the Clearwater Channel and the original Inlet Channel into the Yan Yean Reservoir.¹

Introducing the concept of a "Board of Works" to the suburban councils

As early as 1868, at the instigation of the Town Clerk of Melbourne, Edmund Gerald FitzGibbon, a conference of the suburban councils was held to try to get agreement on the need for a metropolitan board of works. Such a board would act as a kind of 'super council' to take on projects that would require the cooperation of, and be of mutual benefit to, more than one municipality. But first the Board would want to purchase the Yan Yean Reservoir. Projects for the MMBW would include the construction and management of the future waterworks, plus the procurement of the sewerage system. Representatives from the city and suburbs would make up the membership of the Board and make it possible to finance works that would be beyond the borrowing capacity of the individuals. It would also mean that Melbourne's major works would no longer be dependant on the whole colony for finance. At first blush, most of the municipalities, especially the outer shires, refused to entertain such a vision, and many of the suburbs showed only a scant interest. Nevertheless there was some support from inner suburbs. This matter was canvassed from time to time, but it took until 1890 before most of the councils came on board, and the Government agreed to negotiate.

Some of the answers received from the shires, when invitations were issued to the first conference, are interesting, with none more so than that from the Shire of Gardiner (today's Malvern). I will not quote the whole letter, but the following extracts will give a clear understanding of its position. According to the letter written by Shire Secretary, Smith Ellis:

The Shire of Gardiner is already unreasonably taxed, in the form of road tolls and market dues, to augment the corporate funds of the City of Melbourne, without the additional imposition of being compelled to contribute to the cost of drainage of the City, a work in which the Shire of Gardiner is in no matter interested...[and is] of opinion that it is not desirable that those matters should be placed under the control of a board constituted in the manner recommended by the Committee as, in a board so constituted, the suburban districts would be materially unrepresented... The Council most emphatically protest against the Shire of Gardiner being included within the limits of jurisdiction of the proposed Board.²

The matter referred to by the organizing committee was that Melbourne would have the greatest number of representatives on the Board, and the rest, two or three depending on their constituent population. The outer shires would have one representative each and were afraid that they would be forced into providing a sewerage infrastructure they could not afford.

Many municipalities were invited to the first conference and still more to the second. A small number of invitees accepted, but many did not; with some apologizing, and others refusing outright to have anything to do with the proposal. Outstanding among the latter was the Shire of Heidelberg, whose Shire Secretary stated that "...The Council have by resolution decided to use all legal means to prevent the District of Heidelberg being included in the Group". "But if any one of those who refused thought they would be crossed off the invitation list they were mistaken!

The City Council had long been desirous of purchasing the Yan Yean Water supply scheme from the Government and those efforts would continue. For a long time its approaches would be dismissed and derided, but eventually the authorities would be brought to the negotiating table.

New works to increase the supply rate from the Yan Yean to Melbourne

When the Yan Yean was opened in 1857, the supply was brought all the way to the Carlton Gardens in a single main. In 1865 the Preston Reservoir was built to filter the water and to act as a distribution reservoir as more suburbs were connected to the system. By 1875, however, Melbourne had grown to such an extent that it was impossible to bring enough water down each day to supply the demand. It was decided to construct a square open box channel or aqueduct, 4ft wide by 3ft 9ins deep, from the Yan Yean to a holding basin to be known as Pipe Head Reservoir at South Morang. The original main that ran between Yan Yean and South Morang was lifted and relaid from South Morang to Preston. This aqueduct has since been removed and the ditch filled, but a magnificent steel flume, carried over the Plenty River on bluestone pillars, is still extant, and because of its historical significance, it is listed by Heritage Victoria.

The citizens of Melbourne had waited patiently, buoyed up by assurances that life would be easier when summer came, because the improvements would make water shortages a thing of the past. So you can imagine the disappointment felt when the new system was completed in January 1876 to find that Melburnians, not only had to go on suffering from the same problems as before, they also had to cope with new and far stricter regulations governing water usage. The *Argus* lampooned the department as bunglers and incompetents, while the department had no sensible explanation for this new failure which had been achieved at a very great cost. It was later revealed that, though the Preston Reservoir was being filled much faster than before, that basin, as had always been the case, could only send the water into the city mains at the speed dictated by gravity. In other words, the department had boosted the supply as far as Preston, but not between Preston and Melbourne. No doubt the water for Melbourne had been diverted to supply newly connected suburbs. It seems that the department had decided to avoid explaining why the long suffering people of Melbourne had to endure such a disappointment.

The Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works

The MMBW would finally be brought into existence by the passing of *An Act to provide for the better local management of the Metropolis and for the creation of a Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works* in December 1890. The 39 members, having been elected by their individual councils, met for the first time as a board on 18 March 1891, and took up their responsibilities on 1 July of the same year.

This achievement was brought about due to the long and sustained efforts of Melbourne's Town Clerk, Edmund G. FitzGibbon, who had worked ceaselessly for 35 years to bring it about, and had been such a thorn in the side of successive Premiers that he was known as 'the Leader of the Opposition'. A reward for his lifetime dedication to the cause, FitzGibbon was elected Chairman.⁴

The MMBW's founding came not a moment too soon, for, in 1890, the deaths recorded in Melbourne from typhoid fever numbered some 9,300 people; or almost 20 deaths per 1000 of the population. This represented more than double the rate for 1880.⁵ But though relief was now in sight, the new sewerage system would not be installed any time soon, with the first house not being connected to the sewer main until August 1897.⁶ It was just in time to allow Melbourne to be chosen as the, temporary, Capital of Australia.

The first 24

Initially, 24 municipalities made up the MMBW. Odd man out in this group was the Shire of Heidelberg. It had stuck to its resolve of 1874, which was reiterated in 1876, "to use all legal means to prevent the district of Heidelberg being included in the group". In any case, Heidelberg had not attended conferences or entered into debate concerning the proposed Board, with even FitzGibbon seeming to have dropped it from his calculations. Nevertheless, it appears as a member at the 1891 inception of the MMBW. I find this an incredible situation, considering that all the other municipalities had "seen the light" and joined of their own free will. Having said that, somebody will probably produce a document showing its wish to be represented.

1. *Australasian* vol.37 (16 August 1884) p. 316

2. PROV VPRS 3181; Unit 612; File no. 74/1743

3. Various files in PROV, VPRS 3181; Unit 612 MMBW 1855-81

4. Tony Dingle and Helen Rasmussen, *Vital Connections: Melbourne and its Board of Works 1891-1991*, Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works, 1991, p. 17

5. *ibid* p.39

6. *ibid* p.69

The continuation of Graeme Speers' talk on his researches in the Titles Office must unavoidably be left over to the next *Historian*.