

A BRIEF HISTORY OF ST ALBANS 1850 - 1956

The 1850s: Optimism

The history of the European settlement of St Albans can be surmised from studying the development of the Shires of Keilor and Braybrook, each of which was responsible for their respective half of the neighbourhood.

The first recorded European explorers who visited the area were the Surveyor-General Charles Grimes of Tasmania and James Flemming. In 1803 they explored around Braybrook and Keilor, but declared that it was not suitable for agriculture because there were too many rocks. Then in 1824 Hamilton Hume and William Hovell traipsed from Sydney to the District of Port Phillip, as Victoria was then known, trying to reach Westernport Bay. They passed through St Albans on 15 December 1824 on their way south, and then again on the 19th on their way back to Sydney.



The brass plaque and stone memorial at the Keilor Plains railway station (corner of Taylors Road and East Esplanade) commemorates their visit. When Hume and Hovell returned to Sydney their reports highly praised the quality of the pastureland in Port Phillip, so that may have been an incentive for Hume's friend, John Batman of Tasmania, to come looking for new pastures when all the good land in Tasmania had been allocated.



So it was that in 1835 John Batman came across Bass Strait looking for grazing land, and his party boated up the Maribyrnong River and walked through the grasslands that would later become a core section of St Albans. He described the plains along the Maribyrnong (Saltwater) River as beautiful sheep pasture, and stock grazing was indeed one of the pursuits of the earliest European settlers to the area. The prognosis for the sheep industry was well judged, because in 1836 there were 27,000 sheep and only 200 Europeans in Victoria. The latter did increase to 500 in 1837, but it was no contest, as by then the sheep already numbered 100,000.

These new settlers were seeking pasture to establish livestock herds; they quickly dispersed throughout the countryside looking for unoccupied grassland to call their own. It was the era when squatters took control of large tracts of land, so that before long there was little opportunity for newcomers to acquire "unoccupied" land for farming purposes in the established central district; the new people always had to keep moving further inland. Much of the land around St Albans was owned (or at least controlled) by the Taylors of Keilor and the Clarkes of Sunbury.



Sheep grazing in the lush pastures of St Albans.

Then the discovery of gold at Ballarat and Bendigo in the 1850s brought about significant social and economic change to the whole colony. The biggest ever surge in Victoria's population occurred at this time, as fortune-seeking miners rushed to the goldfields to stake their claim for prosperity. In 1851 the population had already reached 77,000. More people soon followed, both the quick-fortune seekers and a steadier inflow of families attracted by the image of making a new start in a land of opportunity. The pace of immigration was such that by 1861 Victoria's population had reached 461,000.

The consequence of these events was to put pressure on the colonial government to make land available for residential and small-farming purposes. Eventually the squatters lost their grip over Crown lands and their great estates were broken down into small farmlets and sold to the public. This is what attracted people to the area from the 1870s onwards: the possibility of acquiring land.

Keilor had been declared a township in 1850, and local settlement was enhanced by the movement of people through the district on their way to the goldfields, because some may have spent money on overnight accommodation and in replenishing supplies, but it seems that drinking at the two Keilor pubs was a popular activity. According to the Essendon Gazette:

"It was rather a singular sight then to see two or three hundred diggers in a row extending from the door of the public house awaiting their turn to enter. On being served they passed out by a back door, and if he required another drink he went around and took up his position at the lower end of the row."

Soon the land between Sunshine and Keilor was occupied by the mainly British Europeans, and the area that now lies between Keilor Downs and the centre of St Albans was called Keilor Plains. Then in 1863 the area became known as the Keilor-Braybrook Farmers Common, because settlers for miles around could graze their stock here.

Transport to the area was greatly improved in February 1859 when the Bendigo railway was opened for public traffic between Footscray, Diggers Rest and Sunbury, and then the Sydenham station opened in March 1859.

It's interesting that the railway station that was recently built near the Hume and Hovell memorial has been named Keilor Plains, and I also understand that some of the surrounding residents want to have the neighbourhood also named Keilor Plains.

The earliest settlers in the St Albans district go back to at least the 1850s, but the Closer Settlement land sale in 1868 brought in a lot more people to the district at one particular time with the specific aim of settling on their allotments as resident farmers. The Land Acts of 1865 and 1869 divided up the large holdings and made the land available for small farms at affordable prices - selectors were taking over from the squatters. Land in Keilor Plains and the Farmers Common became available from 1868 onwards, and people from near and far bid for the 60- to 80-acre farmlets. A selector received a license to rent the land for the first few years, during which time they had to make improvements, usually in the form of erecting fences and buildings, and sowing crops or pasture for stock. After three years they could either buy the land outright or continue paying rent for up to seven years until the purchase price was paid in full.

The



Argus.

6,990.

MELBOURNE, TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 3, 1868.

PRICE 3d.

THE KEILOR COMMON.

Notwithstanding the unfavourable state of the morning, a concourse of about 300 persons found their way to the secluded village of Keilor, before nine o'clock yesterday morning, anxious to have a chance in Mr. Grant's newest lottery. The land open for selection comprised the common that hitherto had been available to the farmers around Keilor, Kororoit, Maribyrnong, and Derrimut, and was surveyed into sixty-eight allotments of an average of eighty acres in extent. The adjoining lands had been sold recently at from £2 10s. to £5 per acre, and the lands opened for selection were considered to be worth about that price; and, if sold by auction, would probably have realised about £3 to £4 per acre, according to situation. Any fortunate selector might, therefore, reasonably consider his chance worth at least £100. This, no doubt, was the great inducement that brought such a large number from all parts of the surrounding district, through such a miserably wet morning, and at such an early hour. From Gisborne and from Gipps Land, from Melton and from Melbourne, and from every known spot between these places selectors put in an appearance. Yet of the 300 persons present there did not appear to be more than one-tenth who really meant, or were capable, of complying with the spirit of the regulations—*bona fide* occupation and cultivation. The well-to-do farmer from Melton was not likely to leave his forge and take up his abode on the Keilor Plains, as he no doubt is more useful and better paid shoeing other farmers' horses than turning farmer himself. The storekeeper at Carlton is not likely to leave his shop to hold the plough. The publican at Footscray might possibly be looking out for a good site for a future "Plough Inn" amongst the new landed proprietary nominated yesterday; and the numerous members of the Legislative Assembly that put in an appearance might possibly have an eye to the remarkably easy-going constituency of West Bourke, and wish to qualify themselves as local men.

The regulations under which the land was selected were as follows:—

"Persons desirous of applying for any of these allotments should be in attendance at the Court-house, Keilor, at nine o'clock a.m. on Monday, November 2. At that time the commissioner and his assistant will commence to issue to each intending applicant one lot ticket inscribed with the name of the applicant, and which shall be forthwith deposited in the lot ticket-box.

"Every person who shall be within the court-house, or within the enclosure around it, before ten a.m. on the day alluded to, shall be deemed entitled to receive a lot ticket, but no person who may arrive after that time shall be allowed to obtain one.

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"When all the persons in attendance before ten o'clock a.m. shall have obtained lot tickets and deposited them in the box, the commissioner or his assistant shall proceed to publicly draw therefrom a lot ticket, and announce the name thereon. The person whose name is so called shall then come forward and answer such questions as the commissioner may deem expedient to ask relative to his or her occupation, the quantity of land held by the applicant in fee or under rent, and the purpose for which the occupation of land in the Keilor district is wanted. If the commissioner is satisfied that the application is *bona fide* and unobjectionable, the applicant shall then be allowed to select one of the aforesaid allotments, and his or her name shall then be recorded, with a view to subsequent issue of a licence for the allotment selected.

"If, however, the commissioner be not satisfied as to the *bona fides* of the applicant, or eligibility to hold a licence under the 42nd section of the Amending Land Act, he shall have full power to refuse to allow the applicant to select any allotment.

"The lot tickets will be successively drawn from the box until all the aforesaid allotments have been taken up by eligible applicants."

Messrs. Morrah and Harding, of the Crown Lands department, were the commissioners to conduct the selection, and these gentlemen carried out their instructions in a manner that gave the greatest satisfaction to all. The proceedings commenced at nine o'clock by every one who chose entering the room and signing a ticket, and placing it in the rotary ballot-box. This lasted till nearly ten o'clock, when some 210 tickets had been so disposed of. At ten o'clock the door was closed, and Mr. Morrah, in the usual manner, took the first ticket from the box, after turning the latter several times. The name was called, and the person entered, passed a brief examination as to his or her *bona fides*, and signed an application for the particular allotment he fancied. This process was continued until all the allotments were applied for. In some instances the commissioners seemed to have some doubts of the *bona fides* of certain selectors, and for the selections in these cases other selectors were permitted to apply, and the commissioners would afterwards decide who should be entitled to the lease. In several cases the parties were considered ineligible, or found the lot they wanted already taken up. In these cases, they passed on without making a selection. The following is the order in which the names were called, and the numbers after the names indicate the numbers on the plan of the ground selected:—

selected:—

William Ellis, 48; W. Keating, 7; Joseph Watson, 6; Joseph Oliver, 5; James Fitzpatrick, 0; B. G. Davies, M.L.A., 46; Edward Cahill, 4; Samuel Mansfield, 19; James Scott, 47; James Lamb, 48; Thomas Opie, 45; Isabella Williams, 42; John Cavanagh, 20; F. G. Anderson, 8; Michael Maher, 7; James Bibby, 41; Patrick Foley, 0; Henry Hannah, 0; Thos. Cahill, 0; Owen Finn, 0; William Connor, 18; John Delahay, 9; Roddy Kennedy, 6; James Tweddell, 3; Francis Butchart, 31; James Mitchell, 0; Morgan Williams, 0; Wm. Malloy, 3; Margaret Cahill, 15; John Delahunty, 35; John Tweddell, 8; David Newell, 37; Edward Burgess, 24; John Sloane, 14; John Wilson, 10; Catherine Kelly, 0; George Arbuthnot, 0; C. Quall, 16; Rob. Jenkins, 0; David Milburn, 29; Henry Dwan, 47; Charles Forrest, 0; James Finn, 19; George Davis, 14; J. Corcoran, 14; James Christie, 32; Thos. Cranwell, 15; T. Hogan, 0; J. Callaghan, 17; T. Beale, 10; John Cummins, 16; Robt. M'Namara, 46; Henry Parker, 27; John Foley, 23; Wm. V. M'Millan, 39; James Harrick, 33; Richard O'Riagh, 0; W. Cummins, 22; B. Opie, 28; M. Higgins, 12; Chas. Donohue, 0; Thos. Hart, 11; Matthew Harrison, 26; M. Harrison, junr., 34; Alex. Blackwood, 11; H. Savage, 0; Wm. M' Lellan, M.L.A., 25; Samuel Jones, 31; James Delahay, 7; Ed. O'Donnell, 39; William Scott, 13; Daniel Hurley, 0; Wm. Murphy, 21; John O'Shansey, 21; Thos. Dawson, 0; Hugh M'Anley, 0; Josiah Ball, 0; Dugald M'Phail, 0; James M'Intyre, 0; W. H. Powell, 47; P. Ryan, 12; T. M'Namara, 36; Patrick Dwyer, 18; David Johnson, 0;

M. M'Donald, 19; R. G. Ely, 17; Thos. M'Kinlay, 0; Edward Downs, 0; P. Phelan, 37.

The birth of St Albans - the selection of land on the Keilor Common, 2 November 1868.

1870-1890: Opportunity

The increasing number of children in the area called for the provision of a local school, especially when the Victorian Education Act of 1872 made it compulsory for children to attend school between the ages of 6 and 14 years. St Albans didn't get its own school until 1889 when it commenced in a rented house in Adelaide Street, near where the Brimbank Secondary College is now located. The Education Department paid the princely sum of one shilling per week for the hire of the cottage, so they weren't risking too much of their venture capital on the exercise.



The first St Albans Primary School in Adelaide Street with Miss Couston, 1894.

However, the small farms in St Albans were never really profitable because the acreage was too small and the water supply was inadequate. After a few years, some of these early farmers were happy to sell their holdings to the land speculators, who were relying on the positive economic trends of the 1880s to bring about their own fortunes through private real estate development.

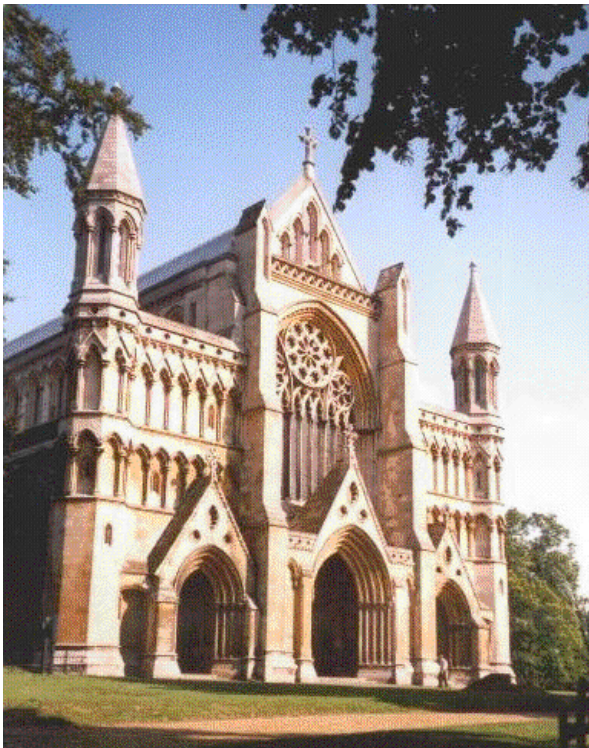
The 1881 Victorian Municipal Directory gives a less than flattering report of the Keilor township and the farming accomplishments of its 191 residents:

"The neighbouring country is known as Keilor Plains, and is partially cultivated. The Keilor Plains are not cultivated, agriculture is mostly abandoned, only a few choice spots on the bends of the river are cultivated. There have been no pastoral tenants for nearly twenty years, most of the land that did not belong to private owners has been granted for selection and is now used for grazing purposes with the exception of the small portion demanded for cultivation by the Land Act."

1887: Coming of Age

It was the late 'eighties that gave St Albans its own name and identity. Land developer Alfred Padley and his Cosmopolitan Land and Banking Company bought a number of these farmlets and subdivided them for residential properties. He then wrote to the Railway Commissioners in 1886 and negotiated for the construction of a station to be called St Albans, which was the first time that name had been proposed.

The new station was open for business on 1 February 1887 for passengers and light goods, but it wasn't a routine stop on the journey, as passengers wanting to alight there had notify the guard at the previous station. There were only three trains running daily from Melbourne to Bendigo, and three from Bendigo to Melbourne. But from then on the district became known by the name of its railway station.



Where did the name come from? Local historians who have researched this question discovered that the station (and therefore the district) was named after the English town and Abbey of St Albans, which itself is named after the first British martyr, Saint Alban, who died for the Christian faith in about 304AD; the first abbey there in 793 was built to house Saint Alban's relics. The area also has other important historical roots, as at one stage it was the third largest Roman city in England, known by the name of Verulamium, which most likely translates as "the town on the River Ver". A grander abbey and church were built in the eleventh century using bricks from the ruined Roman city, and then experienced cycles of decay and renovation. The Abbey Church eventually became the parish church, and in 1877 it was elevated to the status of a Cathedral.

Sir Francis Bacon (1561-1626) the English philosopher, essayist, and statesman, was probably one of the most famous people connected with the area, but there were also many other links with religious affairs, aristocratic life, and political events. It is understandable why Mrs Padley, whose family history was strongly linked to St Albans, would want to propose the name as a local memorial to her historical roots.

1890-1930: Stasis

However, Alfred Padley's dream of St Albans becoming the semi-rural retreat of Melbourne's professional classes was demolished with the economic downturn in the 1890s, which was to have a prolonged effect on the local community. At the turn of the century the place was just a little hamlet with a station and small general store cum post office set amidst farm paddocks. A suburban steam train would come from the city in the morning, and the Bendigo Express in the evening would collect passengers if it was flagged down. Local educational facilities were improved when the Education Department built the St Albans State School No. 2969 on the corner of West Esplanade and Ruth Street. It would serve the community pretty much unchanged for the next fifty years.



St Albans State School No. 2969.

For the next 30 years there was very little change in the small rural village of fewer than 200 people.

1930-1950: Awakening

There was little change in the area during the early 1900s, until after the end of the First World War. During this time, it seems that the population numbers in St Albans remained the same, fewer than 200 people. A new site in West Esplanade for the primary school had been obtained in 1900 and the Education Department built a bigger school next to the railway line. It provided for the junior school needs of the district for the next 50 years.

In these areas there was little motorised traffic in the early 1900s. The personal transport available to people was the horse and cart. In rural areas the local school often had a horse paddock adjacent to the schoolyard for the children who came to school on their ponies, and these obliging creatures were usually good for a passenger or two.

In October 1921 the railway line from Footscray was electrified and a regular electric train service between Spencer Street and St. Albans was inaugurated. Wooden railway gates were placed on the crossing, not to keep any traffic at bay, but to save any wandering stock from being killed. Speaking of stock, those readers who paid attention to the earlier statistics will be interested to know that in 1921 there were 1.5 million people and 12.3 million sheep in Victoria.

At this stage in Australia, 97.7% of the population was either born in Australasia or in the British Isles. In Victoria, the population was fractionally more of British stock at 98.1% - only 0.9% of people were born in (non-British) European countries, and only 0.3% in Asia; it seems that the populations was fairly homogenous, statistically speaking.

The 'twenties was a time of economic revival after WW1, and the ambitions of industrial development had its positive effect on suburban development. There some new settlement in St Albans to the extent that by 1932 the population had reached about 600. For example, some of the

workers recruited for the factories in Albion and Sunshine established their homes in Pommie Paddock, around Percy Street. It was a significant addition to a small settlement. According to local history:

"In the late 'twenties St Albans was depicted as a small and very windy country town twelve miles from Melbourne with a population less than 200, consisting mainly of crop farmers, rail workers, and a few factory workers. One could still hardly call it a town, as all it consisted of was four small wooden shops (general store, mixed business, green grocer, and butcher), a wooden three-roomed school, two wooden churches, and a small Mechanics Institute Hall. Nobody knew where St Albans was. There was still no electricity, no roads, no water supply, no sewerage — as some residents who still remember the times say — there was nothing."



Early St Albans football team: such groups provided both recreational and social outlets for people.

In the 1920s the school was becoming overcrowded as the existing facilities could not cope adequately with the enrolment, which had reached a total of 80 pupils. Three teachers were working in the one room in a building that needed repairs was hardly a quality environment.

Electricity came to a limited area of St Albans in 1930. Street lights were a real luxury, as people could now be about after dark without tripping over rocks or running into cattle. However, for people living away from the central area, it was another twenty years before the power lines were extended to the outskirts. In those days few people could not afford to pay for private extension of such services, so they did without.

Nevertheless, progress was happening, and by 1932 the population had reached 600 people. However, the boom and crash cycle was repeating itself. The dreams of further residential development by local builders such as Walmer Coleman were frustrated by the Great Depression. People who had bought his houses ended up abandoning them because they went broke. And so the little village progressed minimally for another generation.

The next major improvement occurred in 1940 when a town water supply was partially installed by the Board of Works. By the 1950s there were still only a few water mains going along the arterial roads, but the MMBW permitted trunk services to be extended from these water mains; for example, you could dig a trench and put galvanised pipe along to the mains. You could then sell off the right to tap into that to your neighbours along the way.

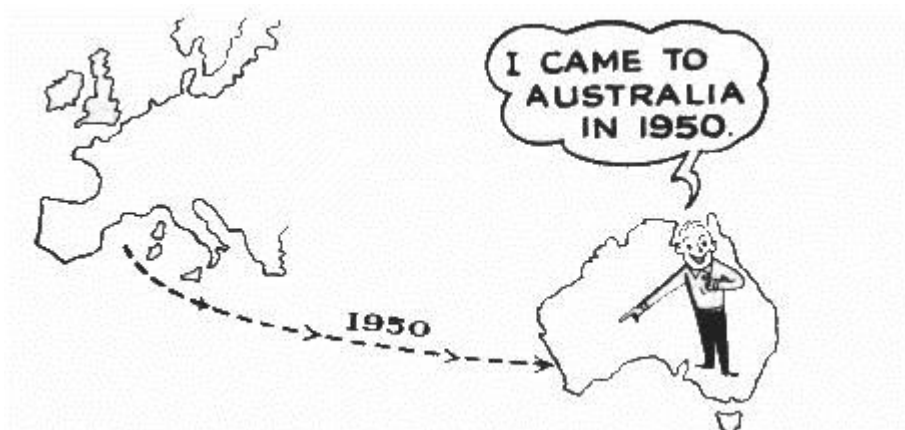
The sparsely populated semi-rural nature of the neighbourhood can still be surmised from the population statistics from the 1947 Census. At that time the Shire of Keilor had a total of 3,000 people. Most of the residential development in St Albans had been on the Keilor side of the municipal boundary. The Shire of Braybrook (Sunshine) had a significantly higher population of 15,000 people, but their settlement was nowhere near the St Albans neighbourhood.

1950-1955: Turning Point

In the early 1950s the population had increased to 900, so progress was occurring, but not as rapidly as some would have hoped. As one-time local farmer and real estate agent John Stevens put it:

“People came to St. Albans and saw so many rocks and the wind sweeping over the plains and thought no-one could live under those conditions.”

Then the post-WW2 era brought about a long, sustained economic growth. In the 1950s the expansion of the immigration program and the growth of secondary industry in the west brought a new lease of life to the old farming subdivisions. The austerity of the war years had created a backlog of demand for housing and household consumer goods, and this demand was further fueled by the new immigration.



The migration journey as depicted in English for Newcomers to Australia, 1956.

Private enterprise welcomed the influx. Buying a St Albans bungalow on easy repayment terms stretched over a few years gave migrant families an opportunity to establish themselves, and from 1953 onwards they came in their thousands. The St Albans population literally skyrocketed, increasing from 900 in 1953 to 4,000 in 1955. It was the most incredible growth in its history, and it's no wonder that the government departments and the social planners of the day had not anticipated the demand for educational and community services.

Unimproved blocks of land that had been languishing on the market for decades were suddenly in demand as the New Australians came looking for work and their own plot of land. House blocks that couldn't be sold during the 'forties for as little as £8 suddenly became desirable at £50 and more, and by the 'sixties they had increased in value to £750.

Local builders and real estate agents were suddenly working overtime. The typical St Albans bungalow was a one-room, unlined, weatherboard construction without water, gas, or electricity. There was no sewerage connection at the time to any local properties, and the basic bungalow contract didn't even include an outhouse. For many people, this was often no worse than what they had been surviving in since the war, and they were happy to build on these basics. Others had the impression they were buying fully established dwellings and were bitterly disappointed when they saw the meagreness of their new home.



The basic St Albans bungalow: one room, no amenities.

This building boom was a positive impetus for the local economy, and between 1950 and 1956 there was also a great development by local businesses. Though Easton's timberyard near the station was still operating, and the Hounslows had their own small yard in Main Road East, the Stevens brothers established a new timber yard and hardware store in East Esplanade in 1954, and this supplied the new generation of owner-builders with all their building products. This was the era, much commented on previously, when the men of St Albans would be seen balancing great lengths of timber on their pushbikes, as they took home pieces they would be working with on the weekend.

These European migrants also brought a new energy to cultivating the land. Previously, the locals relied on a horse and plough to break up the soil to start their garden plots. The new settlers got out their picks and shovels and did it by hand. Pretty soon many of the bungalows were surrounded by their own vegetable garden and orchard of fruit trees, as proof of their owner's, and the soil's, productivity. These mini market-gardens sometimes took up the whole back yard, and sometimes even the front yard. In harvest season it was all hands to the task, as the summer bounty was preserved, pickled, bottled, or otherwise cured and stacked away in the larders.



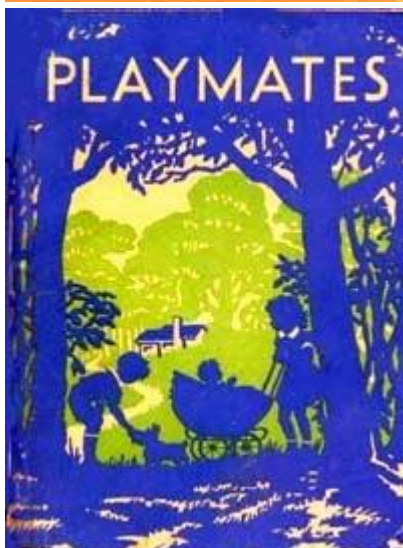
A typical 1955 back yard with the veggie garden near the back door and the clothes line strung from the house. Cars were not common.

And suddenly the old primary school was inundated with so many requests for enrolment that it could not cope with the numbers. In 1954 there were 750 children enrolled at the school, with 622 attending the site in West Esplanade, 48 going off to Deer Park, and 94 accommodated at the Mechanics Institute Hall in East Esplanade.



The census figures for the year show that Victoria was starting to get just a little bit more cosmopolitan in its makeup, as the Australasian- and British-born cohort was now 94.4% while the "foreign-born" represented 5.6%. For St Albans, a retrospective guesstimate is that already 75% of the residents were "foreign-born" - now that is what I call being really cosmopolitan.

Migrant children who often started school without any knowledge of English were introduced to the written word through the popular John and Betty, Playmates, and Holidays readers. The antics of John, Betty, Fluff and Scottie were followed through the delightful illustrations until mastery of a few words developed. Seven-year-olds were put into Bubs grade to learn a smattering of English and then progressed to Grade 1 during the year. Occasionally a child did so well they progressed from Bubs grade to Grade 2 within the first year, though this was the exception.



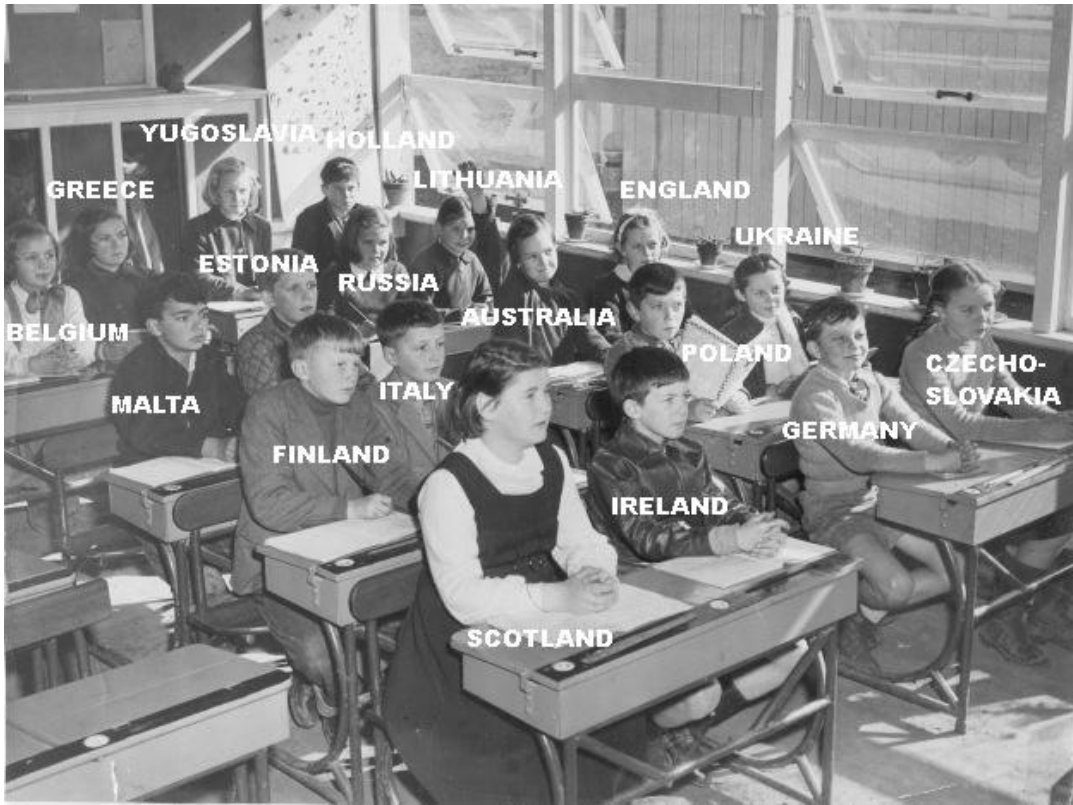
Local residents who had been lobbying for extra primary schools and a high school were relieved when the Education Department finally announced that new buildings would be started in 1955. It was the start of a new era of local education and a new chapter in local history, and it not go unnoticed by the media.

Even The Argus, Melbourne's main daily newspaper at the time, discovered this wondrous new suburb where the classrooms were like a little League of Nations, because they represented people from all over the world. And so it was that the Argus photographers came to St Albans to duly witness the birth of this new era. In 1956 the students from the old primary school were snapped for posterity and labelled with their country of origin as proof of their cosmopolitan background. For good measure the photographers lined up these young migrant icons in the front yard of the school for another snapshot of history.



Just to prove this was not a fly-by-night interest, the media came back in 1957 and snapped the High School's collection of pupils representing the 28 nations enrolled at the school, and they came back in 1958 to witness the official opening of the High School.

So, it is indeed accurate to state that 1956 was the start of a new educational era in St Albans, as the district experienced a rate of population increase that was double that witnessed in Victoria during the heyday of the gold rushes.



St Albans Primary School students, nationality profile, 1956.



Mr Boyle (center back) and "National Assembly" students from St Albans Primary School, 1956.

Joseph Ribarow.