

THE LAND BOOM

schemes on the Murray River found its way to Melbourne, as did the riches from the Broken Hill silver mines. English investors saw a profitable outlet for their money and enormous sums became available to borrowers in addition to considerable local funds.

The public debt doubled from £20,000,000 to £40,000,000 and in one day the operations on the Melbourne Stock Exchange exceeded £2,000,000. Speculation was rife everywhere. In the exuberance of newly-acquired and apparently unlimited wealth, new companies were floated every week to give those who were too timid to speculate as individuals an opportunity to share in the general prosperity.

Many fortunes were made and mansions with grand staircases, ballrooms and picture galleries were built in their dozens. Artists from Europe found their talents in keen demand and reaped a rich harvest. Liveried servants, hitherto unknown outside the portals of Government House, were common enough to cause no surprise. Men who had previously considered themselves well paid at £250 a year now found it necessary to maintain a staff and stables which many a landed aristocrat in England would have found difficulty in supporting.

The city, too, shared in this extravaganza of building, and the character of Collins Street which distinguishes it to this day was formed during this period. The port facilities were expanded to meet the growing needs. Apart from the development of new river wharves, Victoria Dock was constructed in the low-lying swampy land west of the city adjoining the north bank of the Yarra.

With the help of building societies the ever-spreading suburbs made their contribution by rows of brick terraces as well as thousands of individual dwellings, identified today by their front bay windows and their elaborate tiled verandahs decorated with cast-iron lace. To meet this expansion, a cable tramway company was formed. Rails were laid down radiating from the city to a distance of about four miles. This company operated under a charter which expired in 1916.

The population was now approaching the half million mark. Danger to the public health from drains and privies was causing such concern that after years of agitation Parliament passed legislation in 1890 which established the Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works as the central authority responsible for the water supply and sewerage of the metropolis. Another undertaking authorised at this time was the Coode Canal which, by cutting across a large bend in the lower reaches of the Yarra, saved much time for ships in their slow journey up the river.

Financial Collapse

Much of the apparent prosperity of the preceding ten years was speculative and as the end of the decade approached, the foreseeing could detect clouds on the economic horizon. To most people, however, the end of this



1840



1860



1880

The evolution of Collins Street

"boom" period came with tragic suddenness. Confidence was shattered and the nineties opened under ominous auspices.

A run on the banks forced almost all of them to close their doors against panic-stricken depositors. Land and finance companies went into liquidation as did many individuals. Three of the largest speculators became insolvent, with a total indebtedness of more than £1,000,000. Half-built houses remained in their unfinished state, while others just completed, stood without ever having had a tenant.

Just as Victoria was slowly recovering from its financial upset Australia began to suffer from a disastrous drought in the late nineties and Victoria did not escape its ravages. Only in 1900 did the rainfall touch the State average and 1902 was the driest year on record. It is small wonder, therefore, that so many people left Melbourne. Despite a high and steady birth rate, the population of the city increased but little over a period of 15 years, and for a time actually declined.

This was the era the trade union movement began to gain strength. The shearers' strike followed by the great maritime strike accentuated the uncertainty of the times.

The 20th Century

With the turn of the century a better period dawned. The Boer War had ended. With the federation of the Australian States in 1900, the aged Queen had sent her grandson, then Duke of York and later King George V, to open the first Federal Parliament in Melbourne, chosen as the temporary seat of Commonwealth Government until a permanent home could be prepared. In preparation for the Duke's visit St. Kilda Road was transformed into a tree-lined highway and has since been included amongst the beautiful and renowned boulevards of the world.

By 1904 fires were being lit again in the brick kilns and builders once more were being employed at their trade, this time in the erection of the Queen Anne type of villa with its red tiled roof ornamented with terra-cotta griffins and dragons, characteristic of the older parts of Malvern and other eastern suburbs. For those who could not afford such pretentious dwellings, the weather-board cottage, by virtue of its relative cheapness, offered a very satisfactory alternative and has continued to hold its place ever since. Revived migration provided more tenants, and when war broke out in 1914 the volume of building construction was greater than at any time in the previous 25 years.

Soldiers returning from overseas in 1919 found electrification of the suburban railway system in progress. Electric trams had also made their appearance. Whereas the cable system radiated from the city, the first electric lines were built circumferentially to link one suburb to another. The end of the war ushered in a period of public borrowing to finance the repatriation and housing of soldiers, and public works of all kinds.

Throughout the world noticeable changes in the life and habits of the people were taking place. The advances made with the internal combustion engine had brought about a revolution in road transport necessitating improved roads everywhere. The garage attached to the private house was no longer a novelty and with motor buses to supplement fixed rail transport the metropolis spread still further afield. It was in these early post-war years that rapid expansion of the metropolis in the eastern and southern suburbs engulfed much valuable food-producing land.

During the war years difficulty had been experienced in obtaining manufactured goods from abroad, with the result that many secondary industries had been established. With many men taken from productive employment for war service, large numbers of women went to work in industry as well as into commercial occupations. Their numbers exceeded anything previously known. With so many women out of the home, food establishments, such as delicatessens and luncheon rooms, were opened in increasing numbers all over the city. Transport of goods as well as people brought the first signs of traffic congestion. Added to this, the central city area was drawing business away from those suburbs which had enjoyed a widespread patronage during the previous generation. The cinema, with its day-time sessions, added to the city's attractions.

The movement of people from rural areas to the large towns and cities, which had begun overseas with the industrial revolution, now gained impetus in Australia, too, and Melbourne continued to grow. To supply extra power for the increasing industrial demand, the State Electricity Commission was established and to operate street transport more efficiently, the tramway system was placed under the control of a newly-formed Board.

Houses and factories were in keen demand and the work of the private builder was supplemented by homes financed by the State and Federal Governments. Land which had been subdivided in the eighties was now being built on, and new suburbs came into being. During the period 1920 to 1930 some 70,000 houses were built and thousands more allotments marked out. Land speculators were operating again, more concerned with obtaining a maximum frontage to sell than with providing open space and other amenities or with co-ordinating one subdivision to another. The areas subdivided were far beyond the needs of the day.

With a population near the million mark, Melbourne had begun to sprawl, although for some time various organisations had been advocating legislation to prevent this. Realising the unsatisfactory conditions which were resulting from this rapid growth without control and without regard to the future, the Melbourne City Council successfully pressed the Government to set up a Town Planning Commission to deal with the question.

After some years of investigation, the Commission in 1929 produced an excellent report for the future guidance of metropolitan development. The presentation of the report