

## High Street Northcote

In many ways the history of High Street is a history of Darebin. It was the first road in Darebin and has been at the centre of the social, cultural and political heart of the city from its earliest beginnings. It could be argued that the City of Darebin has grown up around High Street.

In 1837 Victorian land surveyor, Robert Hoddle, began to lay out Melbourne's roads. Using poorly paid, and often poorly skilled surveyors, road networks were laid out and sites established for towns.

Hoddle had envisaged a grand boulevard (now Hoddle Street) sweeping northwards from Collingwood, through Northcote and onwards past Preston. Due to the location of the ford at the Merri Creek he was forced to make a sharp turn in the road where High Street meets Queens Parade.

Hoddle's surveyors also paid too little attention to local geographic features and as a result High Street flowed up the steepest part of Rucker's Hill instead of more logically flowing around St. Georges Road or Victoria Road.

A consequence of this surveying mistake was that by March 1854 the Government was calling for tenders to build an embankment up the south side of Rucker's Hill and create a cutting at the top of the hill. This was the first of several attempts to build an embankment up Rucker's Hill.

A further example of the surveyors ignoring the lay of the land was the line of High Street past Dundas Street. Here High Street drops below the line of the ridge. This meant that in poor weather this part of the road was nearly unusable due to mud.

Until at least the 1860s High Street was known as Plenty Road. The road was a dirt track, although we know some settlers used crushed rock on the parts of the track adjoining their property. Swift, in his history of Northcote, comments that early excavations of High Street showed signs that the road was corduroyed at some stage. This was a style of road making which involved laying logs along the road to give traction in poor weather.

Plenty Road was considered to begin in Reilly Street in the city and to continue along Smith Street and Queens Parade up to Dundas Street. After Dundas Street, High Street was known as Epping Road and later South Preston Road.

September 11, 1848 was a significant day for High Street when it was officially gazetted as a road. It was one of the oldest roads in Victoria, the oldest being Heidelberg Road. In 1853 Victoria only had eight roads, underlying the significance of the area at that time. The Victorian Government had committed £10,000 on road improvements to the Great Plenty Road. This included:

- £291 11s for maintenance work between 4th and 5th mile post, Northcote, May 1861;
- £75 for repair to Northcote toll house;
- £24 5s for fencing on Great Plenty Road, Northcote, near toll house;

Much of the money to pay for these works came from tolls. In December 1861 the toll house on the Plenty Road at Northcote was leased to G. Handasyde for £2,988 per

annum. Handasyde was in the toll business as he also leased tolls on the Mount Alexander Road in Carlsruhe, Golden Point and Harcourt. By 5 January 1854 real estate agents Gibbs, Rowley and Co. were selling land along High Street stating,

“The rapidly rising dwellings, shops, stores, & gardens in a high state of cultivation in the immediate vicinity, and lastly, the Great Plenty Road, now nearly completed (being a continuation of Brunswick-street, Collingwood) given a stirling value to the property now brought forward.

The distance is only two and a half miles from the well known Brunswick Hotel, Brunswick-street, with a fine macadamised road from the city.”

Gibbs, Rowling and Co. were exaggerating slightly, the road was only macadamised from the junction of Heidelberg Road and Plenty Road (now Queens Parade) in Clifton Hill to the base of Rucker’s Hill. Travellers were then faced with the difficult climb up the hill. On a hot day this would have made the sight of the Peacock Inn Hotel on the top of Rucker’s Hill seem very inviting.

The road past Rucker’s Hill continued to be a track, although well used. At Dundas street the road forked with the High Street continuing straight up to Whittlesea whilst Plenty Road forked off to the right, heading towards the Yan Yean Reservoir.

By the mid 1850s signs of civilisation were appearing along High Street’s length.

The Pilgrim Inn Hotel had operated from along side the street almost since its conception but it was joined by the Peacock Inn Hotel and Shannon Hotel in 1854.

The Northcote Arms Hotel in modern day Clifton Hill was another popular stopover for travellers.

In 1848 William Shade opened an ironmongery on High Street, just below Separation Street, and he was soon joined by Edwin Bastings general store, opposite the Peacock Inn Hotel. In Preston Edward Wood opened his general store, whilst Samuel Jeffreys had a farm slightly north of Wood’s store. In 1856 the Preston Arms Hotel joined the increasing number of hotels opening along High Street.

During the 1850s High Street attracted about 200 travellers a week, a useful number of potential customers for the local shopkeepers. Over the next ten years an increasing number of general or pioneer stores opened, as well as the ever useful blacksmiths, butchers and shoe makers. Bastings store in Northcote and Wood’s store in Preston operated as the local post offices.

During the 1860s and 70s High Street was a busy and undoubtedly messy and smelly street as up to 10,000 horses, sheep and cattle moved down its length each week. The horses were bound for Kirks Bazaar in Collins Street, the premier horse selling business in Melbourne. These horses were frequently agisted on Plants Paddock at the base of Rucker’s hill. The sheep and cattle were destined for the abattoirs of Northcote and tanneries of Preston.

In those early days the growth area for High Street was from Rucker’s Hill to Separation Street in Northcote and from Dundas Street to Bell Street in Preston.

Michael Pender had planted a large plantation of wattle trees on his property adjoining High Street in Thornbury, whilst on the west side of High Street, Job Smith operated a farm, which lay just north of the Pilgrim Inn Hotel.

By the early 1880s Northcote was beginning to develop. Of the 289 properties in the township, 250 lay on High Street. This development was not mirrored in Preston

where Plenty Road offered a much better all weather road than the low lying High Street. After its early start around Tyler Street development in Preston was now concentrated in the triangle between High Street, Plenty Road and Bell Street. Tanneries began to appear along both Plenty and High Streets as well as the usual black smitheries, general stores, ironmongers, etc.

One of the defining features of High Street was the development of industry along its length. For Northcote this included the Northcote Brickworks laying just a few yards along Separation Street from the main road, and a large number of butchers and abattoirs. High Street Preston was the site of several large tanneries. It was little wonder that Preston and Northcote did not enjoy a high reputation as a place to visit. Northcote in particular enjoyed a reputation as being "toxic".

It was probably this toxicity that drove the residents off High Street and into the outlying new estates being developed from the 1880s onwards. Over the next twenty years most of High Street lost its residential element as shops and industries took over. This development was mainly restricted to Northcote as large parts of Preston remained stubbornly rural.

The growth in High Street Northcote was enhanced when the embankment up Rucker's Hill was completed in 1890. Combined with the boom of the late 1880s and early 90s Northcote was flourishing. Gas lighting had already come to the borough in 1875, extending from All Saints Church in Westgarth for a mile up High Street.

The depression of the 1890s slowed down development but by the time of the First World War Northcote had over 500 shops stretching from the Northcote Town Hall through to Dundas Street.

During the 1920s Preston finally took off and it enjoyed a period of great prosperity and growth. High Street had been largely empty from Bell Street stretching north towards Regent Street but within a few years 598 shops lined High Street Preston. The area around the Preston Town Hall went from paddocks to a thriving shopping centre in only a few years.

With this growth in shopping came an increase in traffic. In 1927 3,560 vehicles used High Street, by 1947 it had swelled to 6,543 and by 1957 16,133 cars were moved up and down the busy road. Not since the heyday of the cattle and horse industry did High Street see such trade.

1946 saw the first traffic lights installed in High Street at the Westgarth intersection. Just a few short years later things began to sour for High Street. For many years Preston had lost trade to the Northcote shopping strip but now Collingwood, Brunswick and Coburg were luring both Northcote and Preston shoppers out of the district.

Competitions for best shop fronts, sponsored by the various traders associations attempted to lure customers back but the opening of Northland in 1966 made the task even harder. During the next thirty years High Street continued to struggle against the big shopping centres.

Over the last few years retail shopping in High Street has started to redefine itself. Northcote was become home to a number of upmarket coffee shops, and High Street South Preston is seeing many of its former industrial sites becoming medium density housing.