

2. *History*

The history of the study area is a colourful one and follows the major trends which have shaped Australian history since European settlement.

In 1824 Hume and Hovell first entered the area from the north near the present site of Molesworth and described the land as heavily wooded, rugged mountainous country. However, on their return journey through the west of the catchment they reported fine undulating forests and well grasses hills suitable for sheep grazing.

Major Mitchell crossed the Goulburn River twelve years later in 1836 and also reported fine grazing land. This signalled the start of the first wave of squatters into the area between 1837-38. With New South Wales in drought the squatters came south with their flocks and herds, quickly occupying the land along the river and by 1840 Alexandra and Mansfield districts were settled. The land was divided into runs (leases) and fine wool production from Merino sheep was the main economic activity. Some of the runs were huge, Avenel was 60,000 acres, Tallarook – 83,000 acres, Worrrough – 28,000 acres running 4,000 sheep and John Cotton's holdings in the Trawool Valley totalled 60 square miles of land and carried 10,000 sheep.

Wool production prospered between 1838 and 1851, and the towns of Broadford, Seymour and Avenel were established as small settlements providing services at convenient crossings on the main waterways on the road to Sydney.

The depression of 1842-43 caused many leases to change hands and squatters were given the option of purchasing 640 acres as a home station to be cleared and fenced. As early as 1844 it was generally considered by the squatters to be advantageous to burn off during the dryer weather so as to clear the ground and promote regeneration of the native pastures thus supply fresh green feed for their sheep.

The village that was to become Seymour was first surveyed in 1843 on both sides of the river, however the 1847 floods caused the settlement of the west side of the Goulburn River to be abandoned. By 1850 each of the river crossing settlements had grown into significant centres with public houses, blacksmiths, stores and small mixed farms on the outskirts.



Plate 2.1 Horse team transporting machinery for gold mining. Woods Points Road. (Late 19th century) Mansfield Historical Society.

1851 was a year of mixed fortune, the hot dry summer brought the area's first bushfires and gold was first discovered in Central Victoria. Although not discovered in the study area until a few years after the great rush, existing townships such as Seymour and Broadford benefited from the huge volume of traffic on the road to the goldfields of the north-east. Gold discoveries in the late 1850's at Strath Creek, Reedy Creek and fields near Yea, resulted in the establishment of the townships of Alexandra, Mansfield, Yea, Jamieson and Marysville. As the settlements prospered, small secondary industries such as breweries and flour mills were established to cater for the increasing population. By 1855 there was a passenger stage coach through Seymour and road works were in progress. The first bridge across the Goulburn River was erected in 1863 to replace two punts.

The gold rush era meant rapid development and huge increases in population. Within little more than 20 years substantial towns were established with permanent buildings, transport, mail and telegraph services and a system of local government. However, not all settlements on the gold fields survived. By 1890 gold mining had ceased to be of importance and only the larger, more established towns which had developed other industries or which had good agricultural land or forest resources remained.

In order to assist the thousands of immigrants now unable to make a living from gold, the Victorian Parliament passed a series of Land Acts between 1860 and 1869. These Acts released Crown Land previously leased to pastoralists, for free selection by small farmers. Clearing of the land was intensified and thousands of acres of forested hills and valleys were laid bare. Timber became a major resource and an important industry providing building materials, fencing, and firewood for home and industrial power.

The 1860's which saw the commencement of closer settlement was followed by the railway boom of the 1870's which revolutionised transportation.

In 1873 the Melbourne-Albury line reached Seymour which became the first railway town. Population growth and gold discoveries determined the direction of many rail branches. Firewood and milling timber comprised the bulk of railway freight and the railways became the largest employer of labour



*Plate 2.2 Tallarook – Mansfield Line
One of the last steam passenger trains. November
1969.
Australian Railway Historical Society.*

By the late 1800's all the towns in the area were linked by the rail system, except Alexandra where the branch line was not built until 1909 due to the economic depression of the 1890's.

The 1870's and 1880's were prosperous years with secondary industries developing in all towns. Mining gradually gave way to sawmilling in the mountains around Alexandra, Mansfield and Yea and in the south-east of the study area.

The 1890's was a period of general economic depression following the boom of the 1880's. Many businesses were in financial difficulties, land was changing hands, commodity prices were low and unemployment a serious problem. The drought from 1895 to 1902 was the worst in Victoria's history until 1982.

The sawmilling industry, however, was developing, with many mills operating in the hills south-east of Broadford as well as around Alexandra, Mansfield, Yea and in the high country with access to Healesville. Despite the depression public utilities were established in the various towns and roads and bridges were improved.

On the land serious problems were emerging. Not only were prices low and property values declining, but the rabbit plague was causing devastating loss of productivity. Introduced to Victoria in 1859, rabbits had spread and multiplied in their millions competing with livestock for the sparse native grasses and initiating major erosion problems with their burrowing and grazing activities.



Plate 2.3 The Clark and Kidd forestry based sawmill at Rubicon, early 20's. Mansfield Historical Society.



Plate 2.4 Rabbit plague of the late 1800's. Department of Conservation, Forests and Lands.

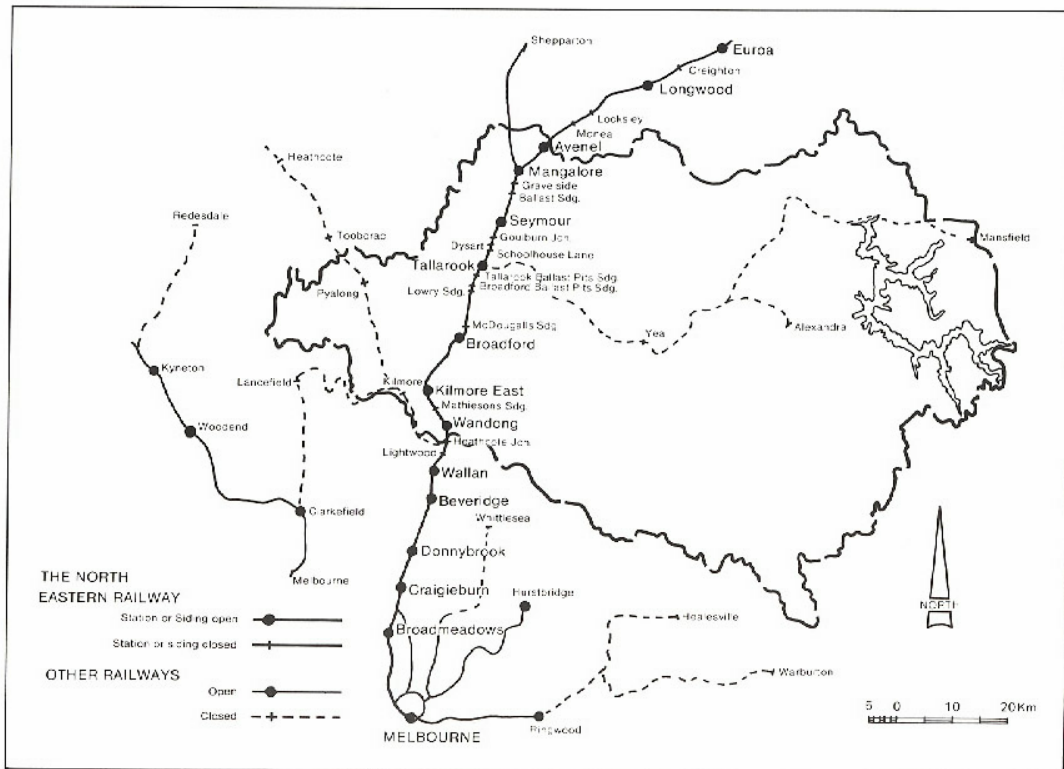


Figure 2.1 Prior and existing railway networks in and around the study area

Away in the south-east Marysville and Narbethong East continued to prosper as part of the large tourist industry which had developed around Healesville.

The visit of Lord Kitchener to Seymour in 1910 was of major importance to the town because it was chosen as the location for a large military camp. Within four years the First World War had broken out and thousands of volunteers left the small towns and farms.

The years before the Great Depression of the 1930's were comparatively prosperous. Farming practices began to improve and mechanisation was introduced. Clover appeared in the pastures and was fertilised with superphosphate. Electric power was introduced in Seymour in 1921 and other towns soon followed. In 1926 the first dam at Eildon, initiated by the worst floods on record in 1916, was

completed. This was to alleviate the problem caused by periodic flooding of the Goulburn River and to supply water for the developing irrigation areas in the Goulburn and Murray Valleys.

The 1930's Depression had disastrous effects on the area, and as in the 1890's there was unemployment and hardship, both on the land and in the towns.

Yea River experienced the worst floods on record in 1934 and the mountain country was devastated by the 1939 fires, which spelt the end of the forest-based mills.

With the outbreak of World War II in September 1939, Puckapunyal Military Camp was established.

As part of the Governments Decentralisation Policy in 1944 textile industries were established to alleviate the cloth shortage after the war and to create employment for the women in country towns.

In 1947 almost half the male work force in the area was employed in primary industries, mainly cropping, dairying and livestock. Timber for milling, firewood and paper manufacture remained the most important secondary industry and the largest employer.

The wool boom of 1949 brought unprecedented prosperity to the graziers and small farmers, many of whom went out of cropping and concentrated solely on fine wool production. The 1950's saw the introduction of Myxomatosis for the control of rabbits and a general improvement in amenities in the various towns such as secondary schools, new hospitals, sewerage, and sporting and cultural facilities. Eildon Weir was enlarged in 1956 providing more water for irrigation.



Plate 2.5 Field hospital Kitchener Camp, 1910, Seymour Historic Society Collection.

The railways, so important for 80 years, now began to decline. Trains were now serviced in Melbourne and with the introduction of the new, more powerful diesel engine replacing steam, fewer were needed to carry freight. The improvement in road transport and the escalation of railway costs, caused branch lines to decline in importance.

Despite the 1956 enlargement of Eildon Weir, there was serious flooding of local streams in Seymour and Yea in 1973 and 1974.

The Hume Freeway Bypass was completed in 1981. The 1982 drought and low commodity prices have caused further rural depression and difficulties for the towns which had lost major passing trade. However the whole region is popular with hobby farmers and those places nearest Melbourne are becoming dormitory towns for commuters. The public sector is now the main employer of labour in most towns. The small processing industries have largely disappeared as have most of the textile industries set up after World War II. The timber industry has been in decline for some years and the rural depression continues, except in the wool sector.



Plate 2.6 On-site mill for cutting firewood near Seymour (circa 1903). Seymour Historical Society.



Plate 2.7 Group of skiers, Mount Buller, 1941. Mansfield Historical Society.

Seymour continues to be the most important town in the study area. Although it is no longer a big railway centre it has recently attracted a number of secondary industries and the Puckapunyal Military camp contributes greatly to its prosperity. Real estate is very bouyant.

Allen's Sweets has recently moved to Broadford widening its industrial base and the Australian Paper Manufacturers Mill established in 1890 is the towns main industry.

Tourism is the growth industry in the towns to the east, based on the snowfields, waterways and forests. Marysville and Narbethong in association with Healesville have been major tourist resorts since the 1880's and are still very popular destinations.

Further Reading

The following list details some information concerning the study area which is presently obtainable through the Seymour Historical Society.

Blanks, H. (1973) *The story of Yea: a 150 year history of the Shire*. Melbourne, The Hawthorn Press.

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Information for this chapter has been supplied by M. Wallis from the reference collection of the Seymour Historical Society and by the historical societies of Mansfield and Alexandra.