

This Federation Trail pays tribute to working people in the City of Port Phillip. The city once contained large industrial sites, particularly in Port Melbourne and South Melbourne. It even sustained a fishing fleet in earlier days. Generations of working people were raised in 'Port' and 'South', creating a strong ethos of individual resilience, independence and community spirit. This trail takes us through former working places such as a fishing lagoon, a former gasworks factory site, working class cottages, a coffee palace, the local school in the 1880's and the estates of the wealthier classes.

Working People's Trail

Start
Lagoon Pier, Port Melbourne
Melway 57 B5

Finish
Lagoon Pier,
Port Melbourne

Length
Four kilometres

Time
Two hours

Trail Key

- | | |
|--|-------------------------------|
| 1 Lagoon Pier | 7 St. Vincent Gardens |
| 2 Lagoon Reserve | 8 Eglinton Villas |
| 3 Gasworks Park gatehouse | 9 The Elms |
| 4 Former Albert Park Infant School, Henderson Street | 10 The Biltmore |
| 5 57 St. Vincent Street | 11 Albert Park Primary School |
| 6 Little Vincent Street | 12 Victoria Avenue |
| | 13 Sandridge Bay Towers |

Refreshments

Bridport Street and Victoria Avenue are home to many pavement cafés and shops.

Where a lagoon flowed to the sea

In 1803 Charles Grimes, the first European surveyor of Port Phillip, wrote in his log: *'came to a salt lagoon about a mile long and a quarter of a mile wide...'*

Our walk starts at Lagoon Pier (1) opposite Beach Road, Port Melbourne. The jetty was once twice as wide as it is today and stood at the outlet of a lagoon that originally had stretched inland for over a mile. In the 1830's the lagoon covered 22 acres and reached almost to the bay. It was later opened to the bay and dredged to create a boat harbour, but was filled in the 1920's.

Josephine Liardet McDonald whose family was the first to settle in Sandridge remembered walking to the lagoon to play and to catch water birds and fish. However by 1875 settlement had heavily polluted the lagoon with sewerage and other waste. A local paper described it as:

'a mess of putrid matter...the stench of which completely taking away the breath of all who happened to be near.'

After the lagoon disappeared, Port's fishing families continued to shelter a boat fleet beside Lagoon Pier and to operate a local fish market.

From Lagoon Pier cross Beaconsfield Parade. Leave the Beach Road at Esplanade East and walk down to Lagoon Reserve at Graham Street.

Along the shores

Esplanade East and Esplanade West follow the former shores of the lagoon. Heading inland from Beaconsfield Parade, note the intensity of recent apartments and housing developments built upon the former lagoon. It is very hard now to imagine this the shoreline of a picturesque waterway rich in bird life. Since the 1980's the former working community of Port Melbourne has become a magnet for thousands of new residents. However as an old Port Melbourne resident reminds us:

'The lagoon itself is still there. It's under the road. The wharves and all are still there. All the piles and everything is still under the road. There'd be old boats and everything...old boats that were laying on the beach, that just got covered up by sand over the years.'

Lagoon Reserve (2) was created on the lagoon after this portion of the lagoon was filled in the 1890's. The view over the park gives you a feeling for the open space that was once a body of water with houses on the banks and an occasional fishermen's pub. Ducks once swam where magpies now hunt for worms. In recent years the park has been landscaped with indigenous plants. Some nearby houses have suffered subsidence from the landfill. Lady Forsters, the first free kindergarten in Melbourne, still operates on the far side of the reserve.



The former Gasworks, now Gasworks Park

The end of the world

Turn right at Graham Street and walk to Pickles Street. In the 1870's Graham Street joined a footbridge that once extended across the Lagoon. There were also footbridges at Rouse and Bridge Streets. Note the new housing developments which recently replaced the two immense gas tanks that once stood here, on the blocks on either side of Graham Street. In 1875 an Aboriginal skeleton was discovered during excavations to build these gas tanks, indicating the lagoon was probably a hunting ground for Aboriginal people.

Port Melbourne's oldest residents remember the day in 1920 when one of the gas tanks exploded. Many local families thought the world had ended. Bolts showered down on the beach and the explosion was heard from Rosebud to Hurstbridge.

*"I was eight years old when it happened, jugs were rattling on the shelves."
"People were out in the street praying on their knees, thought it was the end of the world."
"I was 12 or 14, playing alleys with me mates on the corner...there was a big rumble, a great big fireball, heat scorched us; ran home to mother, scared out of our wits, to see if she was all right."*

Cross over Pickles Street and turn into the gatehouse of the Gasworks Park and Arts Complex (second entrance on the left).

The Demons of Pluto

The park is the former site of the South Melbourne Gasworks which began supplying town gas in 1873. It operated 24 hours per day and employed several hundred men. Coal was hauled from the

Town Pier at the end of Bay Street, Port Melbourne, by horse drawn tram. The Gasworks, the biggest employer in the area, operated until 1957. In 1985 the industrial buildings were converted to a theatre, children's book gallery and artists' studios. The park has also been attractively landscaped with native plants.

Entry to the Gasworks Park (3) from Graham Street is through the former gatehouse. Just past the entrance note the weighbridge, the pay window (now looking into Books Illustrated) and the iron bollards to protect the buildings from coal trucks.

The Gasworks has recorded many oral histories of older workers including participation in Victoria's first sit-in strike in 1937. Several hundred men worked on the site including engine drivers, firemen, stokers, electricians, fitters and conveyor men. Conditions of work were extreme and often dangerous. Coal was baked in ovens or retorts at a temperature of 700 degrees Celsius, giving off gas and leaving coke. In 1886 a local newspaper described the retort house as:

'a huge smoke begrimed chamber where, among heaps of glowing coke and as yet unburned coal, stood the workmen looking like the demons of Pluto.'

A 30-minute audio tour is available which enables you to relive the day to day experiences of workers at the former site as you tour the facility (9209 6207).

Walk through the park to Richardson Street on the opposite side. Cross the road to St. Vincent Street.

Coal dust and cottages

St. Vincent Street takes us uphill from the Gasworks site to St. Vincent Gardens. A hundred years ago it was only a short walk from this working class village to an upper class estate around the gardens. Ironically the tiny Victorian cottages which once housed many Gasworkers and large families are now prized real estate.

It wasn't always so. The wives of Gasworkers recall the constant coal dust that covered their washing and homes. Desperate parents took children with whooping cough to inhale ammonia fumes at the plant. During the depression, children dug under Gasworks fences to steal coal. Gasworks coal trucks sometimes 'accidentally' swerved in the street to lose part of their load.

Number 12 Henderson Street is the former cottage of Roy Fisher, the last Gasworks general manager. He recalls saving the lives of workers overcome by fumes and patching holes high in the giant gas tank with a mechanical drill. Opposite his house at the far end of Henderson Street is the former infant school of **Albert Park Primary School (4)**, now a music facility. The yard of the school is now a housing estate (52-72 St. Vincent Street).

Once small shops existed on most street corners to supply workers and families. In 1943 John Hawthorne was a

delivery boy in a family grocery store at **57 St. Vincent Street (5)**. He was just 16 and worked 52 hours per week for 10/6 (see story: *The Grocers*). John picked up coke from the Gasworks and delivered it to the coal scuttles in the back of people's houses. He collected orders from homes, packed the groceries and then delivered them. **Number 55** was then a butcher shop.



57 St. Vincent Street in 1943

Turn right at Durham Street and then left up Little Vincent Street (6) where in the early hours of the morning the night soil man with horse and cart removed pans from 'dunnys' located in back yards. Many of these old

'sentry boxes' can be seen in yards backing onto the lane. Sewage pipes were not connected to this area until the turn of the century. The brick dunny at the rear of 35 St. Vincent Street is one of the rare remaining few with a bricked-in trap at the base where pans were once removed.

Turn left at Smith Street to return to St. Vincent Street.

Continue up St. Vincent Street. Note the ROBUR sign on your right on the rear wall of a former shop just before you reach the Moubray Street corner.

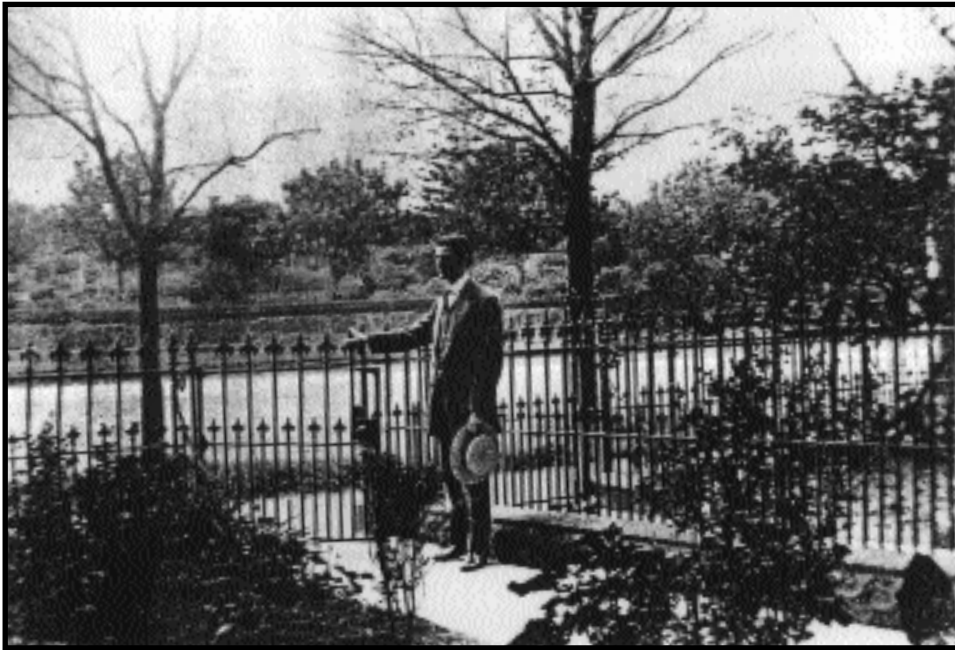
The planting of lemon gums on the nature strip has created a wildlife corridor – musk lorikeets often feed here.

Wealth but not without worry

In St. Vincent Place are located the magnificent **public gardens (7)** which were once the western end of the Albert Park swamp (now Albert Park Lake). Note the deep blue-stone gutters to carry away rainwater that fed the swamp. An ornate cast iron fence once surrounded this park, to which overlooking residents had their

own keys. This fence was melted down to assist the Second World War effort. Note the square fence stumps in the scoria rock wall around the park.

The gardens, laid out in the style of an English estate, are surrounded by some



St. Vincent Gardens around 1914

of the finest Victorian terraces in Australia. In the 19th century the working and upper classes often lived in close proximity. **Note Eglinton Villas on the corner of St. Vincent Street at 99 St. Vincent Place (8).** In 1880 the owner John Webster protested to the Council about the ‘horrible stench’ arising from the night carts and ‘the ear-piercing shrieks of those wretched steam whistles.’

Take a stroll through the gardens along the park tracks and turn right when you reach Montague Street. Note ‘The Elms’, (9) an elegant terrace with its own tower at **53 St. Vincent Place on the Montague Street corner.** This was the home of T.B. Guest, the biscuit manufacturer. Even the wealthy were

prey to the terrors of typhoid and other diseases resulting from the appalling sanitation facilities. In 1884 Mr. Guest wrote in distress after two of his sons died at the Elms: *‘It seems hard enough to lose infants but when they get to 14 and 16 it seems far worse. Out of our eight boys we have only three.’*

Continue down Montague Street to the Albert Park shopping centre at Bridport Street.

Coffee palaces, chemists and cappuccinos

Bridport Street has a marvellous outdoor streetscape, its ‘café society’ showing the strong influence of European immigration since the 1950’s. It also has many heritage shops. See the interior of **Cravens**, a local pharmacy

since 1880, **on the corner of Montague street and Bridport Street.** Note the historic **Biltmore (10)** nearby at **152 Bridport Street**, one of Melbourne’s last remaining historic coffee palaces. Now an apartment block, the Biltmore has served many purposes including the former Albert Park cinema. **Walk west down Bridport Street to Victoria Avenue.** Enjoy a coffee at a pavement table and note the facades of the buildings above the shops.

Schools, pubs and diggers

Cross Victoria Avenue. Bridport Street once continued through what is now reclaimed as the schoolyard of **Albert Park Primary School (11)**, a heritage building constructed in 1873. Together with the nearby infant school (described earlier), the school once held 1200 students. Many Gasworkers’ children would have attended this school. Since the 1950’s many Greek families have moved in to the area and have sent their children here. Frank Beaurepaire (1891-1956), sporting champion, philanthropist and industrialist, was once a small boy in shorts at this school. As were Corporal Boxall and Lance Corporal Moore, both killed in the Boer War 1899-1902. Just past the school at **44 Victoria Avenue** is **Tobruk House**, home of the Rats of Tobruk Association.

Victoria Avenue (12) is aptly named for the Victorian-era terraces and shops that line this street. **At Page Street** can be found the 1888 **Eagle**

Hotel where generations of workers slaked their thirst. Note the upper facades of the shops between Page and Danks Streets on the left-hand side. The terraces opposite have classic cast iron fences, slate roofs, ironwork lace and scrollwork. The terraces **between Richardson and Graham Streets** include polychromatic (two-tone) brickwork. **After Graham Street** note the hi-rise buildings that typically housed migrants and working people during the population boom after Second World War.

Back to Lagoon Pier

At Beaconsfield Parade turn right. It is a five to ten-minute walk along the foreshore to your starting point at Lagoon Pier. Glance into the front entrance of **9 Beach Street** just past Esplanade West to see the giant smoke stack of the Harper’s ‘Starch Factory’, now Sandridge Bay Towers **(13).**