

ADELAIDE: A Brief History

Tandanya – Aboriginal Adelaide

Before European settlers arrived on the Australian continent in 1788, Aboriginal groups had occupied this land for at least 40,000 years. By 1800, the Adelaide plains were occupied by a group now known as the Kurna (pronounced G-ah'na or G-ow'na). Their territory was a narrow tract of land stretching from Crystal Brook to Cape Jervis, bounded on the east by the Mount Lofty Ranges. When the European settlers arrived in 1836, about 300 Kurna people were living on the Adelaide plains. The area chosen for the site of Adelaide was known to the Kurna as Tandanya 'the place of the red kangaroo'. It was a special place linked to Tarnda, a sacred being who was transformed into a red kangaroo.

The arrival of the British settlers soon disrupted the balance achieved between the Kurna and Tandanya. The Kurna way of life that relied on mobility within their defined territory was in direct conflict with the Europeans' plans to survey and sell their land. Within twenty years, many Kurna had died from illnesses and diseases introduced by the settlers. The survivors were transported to a native settlement at Poonindie, near Port Lincoln on the Eyre Peninsula, well outside Kurna territory. Only since the 1960s have some people of Kurna descent started to come back to Adelaide to live.

Wakefield's Scheme and Light's Plan



Theodolite used in Light's survey of Adelaide

The plan for South Australia was based on a scheme for systematic colonization devised by Edward Gibbon Wakefield in England in the 1830s. He suggested that instead of granting land free to settlers, as had happened in most other colonies, land should be sold. The money could then fund the emigration of free settlers to the colony.

The British government agreed to sanction the experimental colony only if land was pre-sold to raise at least 35,000 pounds. Sales were hastened by the granting of one town acre in Adelaide for every purchase of 80 rural acres. The province and its capital were named, planned, advertised and largely sold before a single settler had seen their new home.

The first governor was John Hindmarsh, but it was the province's surveyor-general, Colonel William Light, who is most remembered as the founder of Adelaide. It was Light who was given the task of finding a site for the capital city, laying out its town acres, and subdividing the adjoining country sections.

Adelaide was divided into two districts on each side of the River Torrens. The river separated South Adelaide (commonly called the city or simply, Adelaide) from North Adelaide. South Adelaide comprised 700 one-acre blocks (Town Acres), and North Adelaide 342 blocks. Between the two districts, along the river, and completely encircling them, 2,300 acres were reserved as Park Lands for recreation and public functions.

The grid pattern of streets was relieved in Adelaide by a central square, Victoria Square, balanced by four smaller squares: Light, Whitmore, Hindmarsh and Hurtle. North Adelaide had Wellington Square. Sites for public functions such as Government House, government stores, botanical gardens, a hospital, cemetery and Aboriginal reserve were provided in the Park Lands. The main government offices were to be placed near Victoria Square, where many are still.

Although the site had been the subject of furious debate, the layout of the city soon became a source of colonial pride. A city plan with park lands, squares and terraces that is has attracted lasting admiration for its conception and survival.

Imperial Adelaide



The Lion (statue) outside Parliament House was a gift from the British House of Commons

The white settlers who came to South Australia were keen to leave some aspects of their life in England behind. Many of them were Protestant Christians, such as Baptists, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Methodists and Unitarians, who suffered civil restrictions in Britain because they did not conform to the Church of England. These Nonconformists, or Dissenters, believed Wakefield's plan for systematic colonization offered them freedom from a system that privileged the followers of the established Church of England. But in most other respects, planners and settlers imagined Adelaide would grow up much like any other thriving British provincial town.

Adelaide was named after Queen Adelaide, the consort of King William IV. After settlement, the system of government in South Australia went through the recognised stages of a British imperial dominion: government by governor, by a select council and finally by a democratically elected parliament with an upper and lower house, similar to those in the other colonies of Australia and the British dominions such as Canada and New Zealand.

It was also part of Wakefield's plan that there should be transported to the experimental colony those graces of civilization that would ensure the colony's development as a pleasant and cultured society. The first cultural association, the South Australian Literary and Scientific Association, was set up two years before settlement. It arranged for a library of 117 volumes of books to arrive in a trunk along with the first settlers in 1836. Other groups established early were the Agricultural Society in 1839, the Adelaide Philosophical Society in 1853 and the South Australian Society of the Arts in 1856.

In 1856 several of the cultural societies teamed up and became, by Act of Parliament, the South Australian Institute. Government assistance was sought for the provision of a new home for the Institute. The opening of the Institute Building on North Terrace in 1860 paved the way for future co-operation between the Government and the public in regard to cultural initiatives, a pattern that still continues.

The area between North Terrace and the River Torrens was originally part of Adelaide's Park Lands. Seven sections of the Park Lands were put under the control of the colonial government. In later years, when each cultural or educational body (library, museum, art gallery or university) asked for space, the government followed the precedent of 1860 and granted land from their North Terrace government reserve. This area has now become Adelaide's cultural boulevard.

City State

Adelaide was established as the capital city of South Australia. It is the seat of power, the financial and the cultural centre, the headquarters of organizations, and the starting point and terminus of all major roads and railways, shipping lines and air routes. South Australia has always been a city state, with a huge but thinly-populated region dominated by a city built, before there was any rural industry to sustain it. Like 'commercial cities' in other countries newly occupied by Europeans, Adelaide was developed to open up the land beyond (the hinterland) for farming and mining and to tie-in with the advanced industries of Britain.



Adelaide's Coat of Arms in the Edmund Wright House foyer

The Adelaide plains and nearby foothills became South Australia's first agricultural region and farming persisted alongside other trades well into the twentieth century. The vineyards and paddocks close to the city centre contributed to Adelaide's garden city image, but they also made an important economic contribution.

The inland siting of the city had an important bearing on the development of the surrounding plain, as it provided opportunities for profitable subdivision in all directions. The green belt of the Park Lands had the effect of a 'city wall', containing the city and defining its boundaries, while separate villages outside the wall, like Hindmarsh, Norwood and Unley, later became part of the suburban sprawl beyond. However the only successful 'suburban' subdivisions in the early period of settlement were close to Adelaide or the villages, because most residents had to walk to work. There were some private horse-drawn services and a government train line was opened in 1856 between Adelaide and Port Adelaide, but there was no other public transport. Only wealthy families on their 'country estates', or merchants in their 'rural villas', could afford to keep horses and commute to the city. From 1878 horse-trams on iron tracks made city-suburban travel available to the other residents.

From the 1860s the city's developing role as a metropolitan centre was reflected in the facilities which were constructed there, including tram sheds, valve houses for the region's first reticulated water supply and the electricity power station. Reticulated water was supplied to Adelaide as early as 1861 after the construction of the Thorndon Park Reservoir. Gas was supplied from gas works at Brompton from 1863 and electricity was generated at the Grenfell Street Power House from 1901. Many financial institutions contributed to the monumental character of the city's major thoroughfare, King William Street. The narrower Rundle and Hindley Streets have remained as the retail focus of the city with small shops, hotels and large department stores. As the suburbs grew, Adelaide became a business district central to its metropolitan population.

The city's social life has contributed to a varied range of housing, hotels, schools, and churches, which together represented the interests and efforts of generations of city dwellers and city-visitors. Adelaide was called the 'City of Churches', but it was equally a city of hotels. Church spires and factory chimneys dominated the nineteenth century skyline and hotels the street corners. The hotels, with verandahs and balconies festooned with iron lacework, have done much to establish the character of Adelaide.

While the Park Lands provided a recreation space for rich and poor, house sites overlooking them were popular with the Adelaide gentry, especially during the boom years of the 1870s and 1880s. In the eastern colonies the gentry tended to live on their rural estates. South Australia's pastoral kings ruled and prospered in Adelaide, their station homesteads occupied by managers, their woolclips financing the construction of grand homes in Brougham Place or East Terrace, seaside residences at Glenelg and Brighton and mansions on 'country' estates convenient to town, at Glen Osmond, Torrens Park and Walkerville. They added to this rural income with investment in city properties or suburban subdivision. This emerging 'Adelaide establishment' was joined by successful merchants and professional people who also built on a grand scale.



Brighton Beach in 1915

The labouring classes also found accommodation in the city, but not on the same grand scale. Rather than overlooking the Park Lands, they crowded in to rented semi-detached cottages, terraced houses and single fronted villas in the southern and western sections of the city.

Many of these same cottages today have been purchased and renovated by more affluent workers, who are eager to embrace the excitement of city living, while many of the grand homes have been replaced by, or converted into, shops and offices.

Adelaide's People

The development of Adelaide's social character is best attributed to the complex variety of migrants who settled on its shores. From its beginnings Adelaide was dominated by British culture. Although a significant number of German Lutherans settled in the villages of Klemzig, Hahndorf and in the Barossa Valley, they did not challenge British dominance.

While throughout the first decades of the 20th century British immigrants continued to dominate, a small number Italian, Greek, Bulgarian and Lebanese settlers also made their mark in Adelaide and its surrounding suburbs and even in regional towns. Many worked in the retail industry, in farming and in the fishing industry.

After the Second World War, the arrival of large numbers of European refugees and immigrants transformed the social life of the city. By far the most predominant were Italians and Greeks, with others coming from the Netherlands, Poland, Hungary, Ukraine and the Baltic countries contributing a significant contingent.



Croatian service at St Patrick's Grote Street 1995. The church is shared by several migrant groups

Cultural diversity was further expanded during the 1970s as Vietnamese and Latin American immigrants and refugees arrived. Adelaide's cultural landscape bloomed under the presence of so many cultural influences. Orthodox churches and Buddhist temples pushed their way into a British dominated skyline. Clubs and language schools were established to preserve each distinctive culture, while continental delicatessens, such as the Star Grocery in Hindley Street, coffee bars like the Moka Bar in Morphett Street and Asian grocery stores in the Market, influenced the wider society.

Immigrants changed Adelaide's cuisine and eating patterns. Many Italian, Greek, Bulgarian and Vietnamese immigrants worked as market gardeners in Adelaide's western, northern and north-eastern suburbs. They supplied the Central Market not only with the staples of Anglo-Australian cooking, but also the ingredients for their own dishes. Adelaide people began to eat out at European-style restaurants and cafes, especially when licensing laws were relaxed during the 1960s. As the 1970s progressed, restaurants were opened by the newer migrants from Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand.

Every year Adelaide hosts many festivals and events which celebrate the traditions, dances, songs and food of different homelands, including the Polish Harvest Festival, the Italian Carnevale and the German Schutzenfest. On Yorke Peninsula, the descendants of South Australia's early Cornish settlers hold their Kernewek Lowender, the largest Cornish festival in the world.

The most prominent of all festival events is the Adelaide Festival of Arts which brings together local, interstate and international artists to celebrate the diversity of cultural activity throughout the world.