

HISTORICAL WALKING TOUR

Monday 3 August, 2026



SYDNEY *EST. 1992*
Brunswick ROAD
ASSOCIATION

In partnership with the Brunswick Community History Group, the Sydney Road Brunswick Association (SRBA) welcomes you to this Sydney Road Brunswick precinct Historical Walking Tour.

Led by local experts from the Brunswick Community History Group, this tour will take a leisurely walk around the Sydney Road Brunswick precinct, exploring locations of interest for a deep dive into the history.

This tour will focus on the personalities, pioneers, and places that have left their mark within the Sydney Road Brunswick precinct, between Dawson Street and Brunswick Road, with stops and conversations that include:

- Brunswick Mechanics Institute
- The Retreat Hotel
- Brunswick Town Hall
- Brunswick Uniting Church
- Former Holeproof Factory
- Lyric Theatre (now The Brunswick Club)
- George's Pastry Shop (now Good Days)
- Miss R. E. Yon (now Record Paradise)
- Glew's Claypit (now Barkly Square)
- Sarah Sands Hotel (now The Wild Geese)



STOP 1 Brunswick Mechanics Institute

270 Sydney Road, Brunswick



The Brunswick Mechanics Institute was erected in 1868-1870, and was one of a hundred established in Victoria by that date, with the purpose of supporting education for working people of the area.

The Institute was built on land donated by Theodotus Sumner, who owned the land down to Merri Creek. The building was constructed using local bricks.

The Brunswick Public Library was housed in the Institute from 1868 until 1976, and in 1976 Brunswick Council considered demolishing the building for a new library. This was opposed by the East Brunswick Progress Association, and by the National Trust which had earlier classified the building. The proposal was then dropped and the library was moved to the small hall in the municipal office building across the road.

After this, the Institute was used variously as offices, meeting rooms and an art gallery. It is now primarily a performance space.

STOP 2 The Retreat Hotel

280 Sydney Road, Brunswick

The Retreat Hotel was Brunswick's first hotel, built in 1842 by W. F. A. Rucker as the Retreat Inn. It was a single storey building and Amelia Shaw was the first Innkeeper and licensee in 1842. She was possibly Brunswick's first businesswoman.

The hotel's licence also provided for a weighbridge which served the bullock and horse drays from the stone quarries in East Brunswick. The land behind the hotel was used as a cricket ground and public baths at various times too.

John Anderson was the second licensee in 1843.

During the goldrush era, the 1850s, the licensee was George Stanway. Stanway died in October 1852 and his widow Catherine took over – until 1862 when she became insolvent. By this time she had remarried and had changed her name to Catherine Clinton.

In the 1860s the hotel was owned by the land developer and member of parliament David Blair, who made over the ownership to his wife Lydia in 1865. During his ownership he made available the land behind the hotel for the newly formed Cricket Club. Best Overend, local builder and architect, donated and erected the fence around the ground. Michael Dawson, who owned a large tract of land west of Sydney Road, donated the pavilion. Later public baths were reportedly on this site – prior to the opening of the Brunswick Baths in 1913.

In about 1879 the name of the inn was changed to Retreat Hotel.

The hotel was rebuilt in 1892 as a two storey building, and it was then that the weighbridge disappeared.

One of the most famous incidents to occur near the Retreat Hotel was the Free Speech Fight on 6 May 1933. Les Barnes recalled that *"One of the free speech fighters climbed on top of a car on to the veranda of the Retreat Hotel and caused a great furore amongst the police. They had to go inside the pub and out on to the veranda to get him. Another man was waiting to buy a couple of bottles after hours and the police caught him and charged him with loitering. He was fined for being at the Free Speech Fight instead of for after hours trading!"*

During the 1980s and 90s the Retreat was managed by the Trikaliotis family, and they developed it as a music venue. It was particularly known for Greek rebetika music.

Paul Kelly performed here during the 1980s. Unfortunately the venue was so full of cigarette smoke that patrons had to get down on the floor to see him!

It was sold in 2003 and there were fears it would be redeveloped as apartments but this did not occur and it continues as a pub and music venue.



The Retreat before it was rebuilt in 1892. Picture credit: Merri-bek Libraries.



STOP 3 Brunswick Town Hall

233 Sydney Road, Brunswick

The central section of the Town Hall was built in 1876/77. Previously the Council had their meeting rooms and offices further to the north.

In 1926 a further wing of offices was built on the south side, and a large hall on Dawson Street was constructed in the Moderne style.

It was designed by Wilson and Charles R. Heath (1926) and remodelled (1937), by Peck and Kemter.

In 1937, renovations were carried out to the building fronting on Sydney Road, and the central section was enlarged towards the street, with the portico added.



The complex was threatened with demolition in 1973 when the Brunswick Council resolved to build a new civic centre and offices on the site. The East Brunswick Progress Association, led by the indomitable Vic and Vida Little, fought against this proposal (largely on the grounds of cost) and it did not proceed.

In 1992 the large hall was converted into a library, and the smaller hall, which had housed the library since 1976, was converted back into a hall.

The image above is the Town Hall in 1907. The Boer War memorial was later moved to Hooper Reserve at the Brunswick Road tram stop.

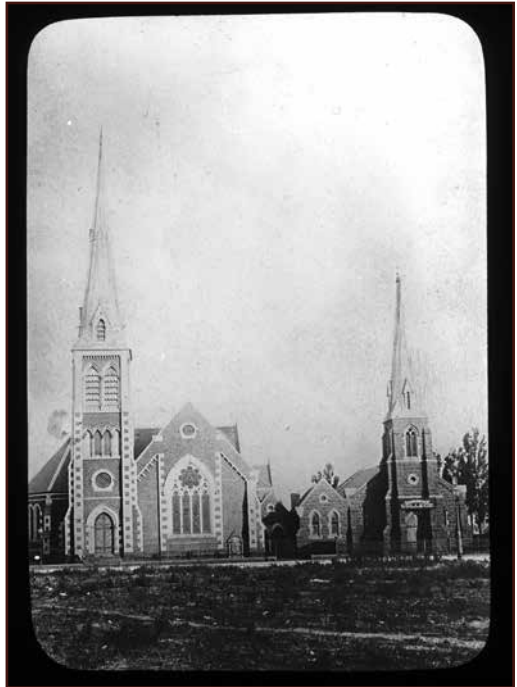
STOP 4 Brunswick Uniting Church

214 Sydney Road, Brunswick

The first Presbyterian Church in Brunswick was built in 1855 and was situated at what is now, 276 Brunswick Road. It was a bluestone building which was later converted into a house. The house now on this site may have been built on the foundations of the original church.

In 1865, the church was donated land by William Dods, in the more central location of Sydney Road, and this is where the bluestone church was built. The church was designed by Charles Webb and is particularly notable for the cream brick spire. The bricks themselves were manufactured in Brunswick by John Glew.

By 1885 the church was too small, so a larger church was built. It was designed by Evander McIver, a local resident, and member of the church. He designed 22 Presbyterian churches in Victoria as well as having a successful career as a municipal engineer and surveyor. The new church was designed to complement the older church.



The first Presbyterian Minister in Brunswick was Reverend Allan MacVean who served the area from 1854-1896. A memorial tablet to him is in the church with the epitaph "Faithful Pastor, Sincere Friend, Loyal Colonist".

With the merging of three Protestant denominations in 1977, this church became a Uniting Church. Then in 2005 it merged with the South West Brunswick Uniting Church in Union Street. Extensive renovations were carried out in 2010.

The Brunswick Uniting Church has an active presence in the community. It is particularly notable for its refugee welcome program. The church building has excellent acoustics and is a venue for the annual Beethoven Festival.

STOP 5 **Former Holeproof Factory**

Corner of Merri Street and Dods Street

The Holeproof factory was the largest of many clothing factories operating in Brunswick during the twentieth century. In 1930 it was estimated that it produced 2 million pairs of stockings annually.

Holeproof Brunswick had its origins in 1920 when Atlas Knitting and Spinning Mills were established in Weston Street. Two of the directors, George Foletta and Andrew Staley purchased the firm in 1921 and renamed it Prestige Limited. In 1924 the pair parted company. Staley, with the financial backing of his uncle and trading as Staley and Staley, set up his own hosiery factory in Merri Street. In 1929 he reached a licencing agreement with Holeproof in the United States to use their name. The following year Prime Minister James Scullin laid the foundation stone for a new five storey factory. The administration of the company was at 204 Sydney Road – just in front of the factory.

The company and the Prestige Mills on the other side of Sydney Road were known for their commitment to employing local residents, especially women. In the 1930s the two companies employed about 1,200 people each. Steady employment in the factories made a big difference to local families during the Depression.

Holeproof also looked after its workers with the provision of a canteen and a company nurse as well as fostering many social and sporting activities for their employees. Holeproof and Prestige paid award wages and conditions were a great improvement on the sweatshops traditionally found in the clothing industry.

In 1963, Prestige and Holeproof merged once again, and the company was acquired by Dunlop in 1968. In the meantime, other Holeproof factories were established in the eastern suburbs.

The clothing industry in Australia was decimated by the removal of tariffs in the 1980s and '90s, and in 2009 Pacific Dunlop decided to cease local manufacturing and move operations to China.

The Prestige factory was derelict by the 1980s when it was destroyed by fire. The Brunswick Holeproof factory had closed by 1979 and in about 2000 the building was converted to apartments. The foundation stone laid by Prime Minister Scullin in 1930 had been moved to Box Hill and then the Nunawading factory. When the latter closed in 2009 the stone was rescued by a former Holeproof employee and, after intervention by Francesca Folk Scolaro of Brunswick Community History Group, was relocated to the foyer of the apartment complex.

Information obtained from chapter by Cecile Trioli in 'Brunswick; One History Many Voices' 1994 pp 127-130, 'Holeproof Brunswick and Other Mills' by Paul Darragh & Moreland History News No. 9 February 2013.



The Holeproof factory under construction in 1930. Photo credit: Brunswick Library.



The foundation stone and a photo of former employees in the foyer of the apartment complex.



Undated photo of Holeproof employees.



Interior of the apartments now in the Holeproof building.

This was used as the home of Nina Proudman in the TV series Offspring.

3 apartment photos from Jellis Craig website.



STOP 6 Lyric Theatre (now The Brunswick Club)

203 Sydney Road, Brunswick

The Lyric Theatre was Brunswick's first purpose-built cinema and as such, was opened to great acclaim in September 1911.

It operated as a cinema until 1931, when at this point the then lease holders, Hoyts, decided they could not afford to wire both this and their other picture theatre, the Empire (where Aldi is now), for sound required for the "talkies".



Later the building was used as a boxing stadium and also the Casino Dance Hall.

For many years since then it has been the proud home of The Brunswick Club, and achieved a measure of notoriety when it was the site of the gangland shooting of Lewis Moran in 2004.



*Soldiers gathering in the Lyric Theatre prior to going to war in 1915.
Picture credit: Merri-bek Libraries.*

STOP 7 George's Pastry Shop (now Good Days) 165 Sydney Road, Brunswick

The sign reads 'George Rath High Class Pastrycook.'

Rath, who had a factory in North Melbourne, was a cake-making expert who manufactured a 10-ton cake for the Centenary of Melbourne celebrations in 1934 - which is said to have been cut up into 2,500 pieces.

The following year, in his role as Vice-Consul for Austria, he made a special chocolate cake for the visiting Vienna Boys Choir. During the 1940s he had this cake shop at 165 Sydney Road, Brunswick, right next door to the Cornish Arms Hotel.



*The ghost sign drawing attention to the High Class Pastries.
Picture credit: Cheryl Griffin.*

Victoria's 100th Birthday
A
10-ton CAKE
has been cut up and wrapped in Cellaphane Paper, enclosed in small tins, and packed in tri-colored cartons ready for posting.
Now is YOUR opportunity to secure your FIRST CENTENARY SOUVENIR!
Send to your friends in Australia and abroad.

USE THIS ORDER FORM.
Mr. W. J. McCASKILL,
Superintendent and Secretary,
Victorian Deaf & Dumb Institution,
St. Kilda Road, Prahran, S.I.
Please forward _____ pieces of CENTENARY BIRTHDAY CAKE to _____
(State Mr., Mrs. or Miss)
Price 1/- Postage 3d. extra.
Will you assist to sell our quota and help 134 DEAF and DUMB CHILDREN?



STOP 8 Miss R.E. Yon (now Record Paradise)

159 Sydney Road, Brunswick

Miss Ruby Ethel Ah Yon (1885-1937) was a dressmaker of Chinese heritage who conducted her business from 159 Sydney Road, Brunswick (image on next page), from about 1917 – 1937. She previously had a shop in High Street Northcote. She married Alexander Hoy Ling and was sometimes known by this name.



Her story is interesting in terms of Chinese migration to Australia.

Her grandfather Ah Ket migrated from southern China in the 1850s during the Gold Rush. After some time at the diggings he became a tobacco farmer near Wangaratta.

*Miss Yon's distinctive balcony.
Picture credit: Peter Holmes.*

He married Hing Ung in 1864 and they had 8 children. One of these, Margaret Yon, became the mother of Ruby Ethel and the only son was William Ah Ket (1876-1936) – reputed to be the first Chinese-Australian barrister. In this capacity he advocated for the rights of Chinese migrants and against the White Australia Policy.

For many years this shop was Olive Grove – a workshop and retail outlet for local craftspeople.



Miss Yon's workshop, 1920s. Miss Yon is believed to be on the left at the back – supervising the workers. Picture credit: Margaret Logan, whose grandmother worked for Miss Yon.

STOP 9 Barkly Square Shopping Centre

90-106 Sydney Road, Brunswick

The area now occupied by the shopping centre carpark was once a giant clay quarry and was surrounded by brickworks. John Glew established the brickworks in 1857 after he had exhausted his clays in the Phillipstown area, west of Sydney Road. Barkly Bricks and the Brunswick Brick and Tile Company were also located here at different times.



By the late 1970's the pit had been filled and the site was purchased by a consortium, which included Coles; and, the shopping centre was planned.

The filled area (which was the pit) could not be built on, so this area was transformed into the carpark behind Barkly Square Shopping Centre itself.

Some members of the community objected to the shopping centre while others welcomed the construction of a large supermarket – which Brunswick lacked at that time.

The centre opened in 1983 and has become a community focus.



John Glew's claypit and brickworks where Barkly Square carpark now is.
Photo credit: Merri-bek Libraries.

STOP 10 Sarah Sands Hotel (now The Wild Geese)

29 Sydney Road, Brunswick

Sarah Sands is the fourth oldest hotel in Brunswick and dates from the Gold Rush period of 1854. The name relates to the ship which brought the hotel's first owner, Robert Barry, to Victoria in 1852. The 1846 date on the hotel is the year the ship was launched.

The hotel was rebuilt in 1872 and from 1906-1966, had a veranda around both levels. Brunswick Council required that the veranda be removed in 1966 due to the danger of cars running into it.

The intersection outside the hotel was the scene of sectarian riots in 1896. Members of the Loyal Orange movement held a march to commemorate the Protestant victory in the Battle of the Boyne in Ireland in 1690. They were met by a crowd of Catholics from St Ambrose Church and a violent altercation ensued. The following year this scenario was repeated with an estimated 30,000 people crowding the intersection.

From around 1997-2017 the Sarah Sands building was the Bridie O'Reilly Irish Pub – the scene of many noisy St Patrick's Day parties.

After Bridie O'Reilly ceased operation the hotel was closed for several years. New owners restored the façade, refurbished the interior, and built apartments at the rear. The hotel reopened as the Sarah Sands in 2021 and in 2024 was leased by the Celtic Club who carried out another refurbishment of the interior and re-named it The Wild Geese – which is a name for the Irish diaspora.



The Sarah Sands in the 1920s showing the veranda. The chimney in the background was at the cable tram engine house – later Sam's Tyres – next door.

Picture credit: Merri-bek Libraries.

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