



About history

A brief history of Sydney Road

From the land of the Wurundjeri, Sydney Road emerged. Filled with an ever-changing palette of colour, the land was bountiful with life, movement and the sounds of nature. Animals roamed freely and in abundance, flora grew aplenty and the Wurundjeri lived harmoniously off the land. Yet with the arrival of Europeans the grassy plains were irreversibly altered and then removed as order and symmetry were imposed upon the land.

Dividing the land between the Merri and Moonee Ponds Creeks in two, Sydney Road was created. First surveyed by Robert Hoddle in 1837, the crudely constructed road provided the boundary lines for the elongated allotments that flanked it. Originally named Brunswick Road, then Pentridge Road and finally Sydney Road in 1850, the road serviced the local farmers and residents as well as providing a route to the newly constructed Pentridge Stockade. With assistance from the prisoners, the poorly made road was improved but for nearly seventy years, its deplorable condition continued to arouse much controversy.



Sydney Road, looking south from Blyth Street, c.1908
(Moreland City Libraries)



R. Davidson's Sydney Road Grocery Store, c.1863

As the nineteenth century advanced, Sydney Road transformed itself from a rural road to a bustling urban streetscape. With the land booms of the mid 1800s and 1880s, the built environment of hotels, shops, churches, council properties and houses replaced farms and open land. By 1879 the horse-drawn tram added to the road's commotion and in 1887, Sydney Road entered the modern times with the arrival of the cable tram.

With people seeking to capitalise on the road's centrality and passing traffic, Sydney Road became the commercial spine of Brunswick. People flocked to its shops and businesses as the road became populated with advertisements, window displays and hawkers. With Friday night trading, the road became a site for socialising and gossip as families went about procuring their weekly purchases.

Sydney Road has been the scene for some bitter sectarian clashes. In 1896, some 40,000 Catholics assembled at the corner of Brunswick Road and Sydney Road to protest against the 1500 Orange men and women assembled to commemorate the annual Protestant Battle of the Boyne. What ensued was mayhem with the hurling of abuse, violence and arrests. Thirty-one years later, the Catholics were again at the center of controversy when thousands protested outside Sydney Road's Empire Theatre over a film that they believed denigrated the Catholic faith.

During World War One, Sydney Road became a site of commemoration and patriotism as people lined the road to cheer passing troops on their way to Broadmeadow's military camp, frequented the businesses of returned soldiers and assisted in charity drives. Later it was also the site where people commemorated the dead as private and public memorials dotted the road. During World War Two, the impact of the 'brown out' and the threat of imminent invasion were apparent within the streetscape as lights were extinguished and trenches dug.

Between the interwar years, the devastating impact of the Great Depression was observed on Sydney Road. Shops and businesses closed as profit margins plummeted, the Town Hall became a depot for the unemployed and impoverished and the road became a stage where people voiced their frustrations. Yet it was also the place where schemes were devised to better people's lives and that of the community, from a 'Made in Australia' festival to the establishment of a local branch of the Communist Party.

From the 1900s, Sydney Road was a space where people collectively asserted their political desires, allegiances and frustrations, whether it be the Communist or Socialist Parties, pacifism or the ultra-right Australian National Action. It followed a tradition of Friday night speeches where orators would assemble on street corners and talk about politics, religion or anything else of interest. In 1933, the controversial free speech campaign culminated in Noel Counihan chaining himself inside a cage and delivering an illegal speech in front of a crowd of thousands on Sydney Road.



Unveiling the Boar War Memorial in front of the Brunswick Town Hall, 1906
(Moreland City Libraries)



Sydney Road's Empire Theatre, 1915
(Moreland City Libraries)

From its formative years, Sydney Road has been ethnically diverse as Anglo-Saxons have had to share the streetscape with a myriad of other cultures, religions and ethnicities. In endeavoring to meet their unique cultural, culinary, religious and linguistic needs, immigrants have altered the road by creating new businesses, wearing different attire, introducing new foods and establishing new social venues. In doing so, they aligned the road with riches, from sumptuous food and exotic goods to a cacophony of languages and a rainbow of skin hues.

Having weathered the perpetual cycle of boom and bust and the devastating impact of shopping centers, Sydney Road is now on the rise. The road has sought to retain its relevancy and economic potential with its council, businesses and traders' association offering people more than just manufactured and controlled environments. Instead they offer a multifaceted and perpetually evolving road, complete with idiosyncrasies, characters and drama. Consequently, Sydney Road is more than just a thoroughfare or commercial road, but also the cultural, political and social heartland of a community and a suburb.

Material from Laura Donati's *Almost Pretty: A History of Sydney Road*. For enquiries, please contact Laura on 9387 7570 or [click here](#) to email Laura.

For enquiries about the Brunswick Community History Group, please contact Francesca Folk-Scolaro on 9387 1194 or visit their [website](#).

[privacy statement](#) | [disclaimer statement](#) | [copyright statement](#)

Sydney Road Brunswick Association. PO Box 770, Brunswick Lower, 3056.
Phone: 03 9380 2005 Fax: 03 9380 4930 info@sydneyroad.com.au ©2006



web design by [beyond the page](#) 2006