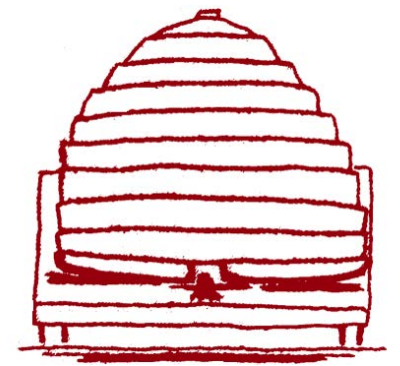


Heidelberg in the 1890s: boom to gloom



In the early 1890s a devastating economic depression swept through the eastern states of Australia. It was brought on by uncontrolled land speculation, bank and building society failures and corrupt practices. Heidelberg was not immune.

The land boom in Fairfield, spurred by railway extensions in the 1880s, collapsed in 1894. Land bought in the late 1880s at £250 per acre now sold at £20 per acre.

Dairying, mining and fruit growing were the main local industries. Heidelberg farmers struggled, with dairymen selling milk for just half the price obtained seven years previously. Orchardists had extra losses due to pilfering.

The 1895-96 dry summer of failed and re-planted crops led to increased farm costs (and snakes!) and compounded anxieties and hardships in the district. However Kangaroo Ground farmers did benefit to some extent from higher prices for their scarce crops.

The total population of the Heidelberg district (42 square miles or 10,878 ha) was about 4,300. The townships of Alphington, Fairfield, Ivanhoe, Heidelberg, Greensborough and Diamond Creek accounted for over 700 houses, about 2,200 people, and most boasted at least two hotels and two churches. As the main mode of transport, horse-drawn coaches ran twice daily from the district's outer areas to Heidelberg and then into the city.



Heidelberg
looking towards the village
from Austin Hospital hill,
c.1890.
Photographer: WH Ferguson
Source: State Library Victoria



Hints of recovery

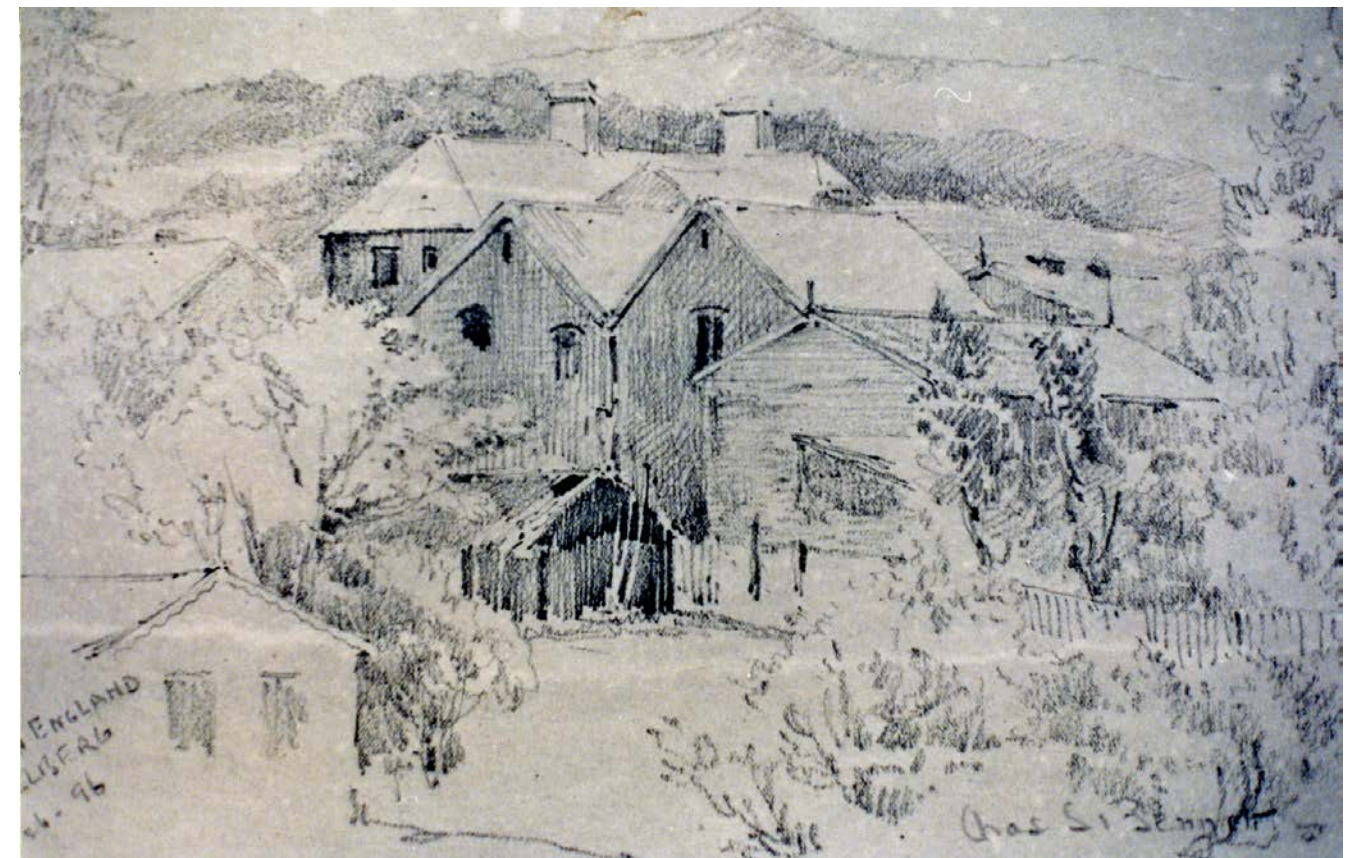
The mid-1890s saw the formation of several local groups, such as the Shire of Heidelberg Musical Society, Heidelberg Tennis Club, Diamond Creek Football Club and Ivanhoe Cricket Club. However, the Victorian Agricultural Society, meeting at their Old England Hotel headquarters in Heidelberg, decided to wind up the Society. Meanwhile the Commercial Bank opened agencies at Diamond Creek and Eltham. A new wing opened at Austin Hospital for Incurables, but hospital drainage remained a problem for the Shire Council. Gas lamps now lit formed footpaths.

In early 1896 Heidelbergers saw the first signs of recovery with increased work opportunities. Land sales picked up steam with the prospect of a shorter, cheaper, direct rail link from the city via Clifton Hill to Heidelberg to replace the route via Royal Park and North Carlton. Unfortunately, prices for some farm produce remained low.

The Queen's Diamond Jubilee, May 1896, was celebrated with fireworks and the roasting of a bullock on a spit in Cape Street, Heidelberg.

By the end of the 1890s the beautiful village of Heidelberg with its picturesque surrounding country showed signs that it was soon to re-awaken.

The direct railway link from the City to Heidelberg (via Clifton Hill) led in November 1901 to holiday influxes of thousands. A new wave in land speculation hinted at the new 'Toorak of the north'.



Sketch of Old England Hotel by Chas S. Bennett, February 1896.



Fundraising in the 1890s

Despite the depression and drought, the Heidelberg community actively raised funds for hospital charities, churches, sporting clubs, community groups, schools and other institutions.

Popular fundraising activities included concerts, cake stalls, fetes, bazaars and garden parties. Local residents like the McCrackens hosted such events at their homes.

SCOTS CHURCH HEIDELBERG

On Queen's Birthday, a garden fete and cake and fancy fair will be held on the grounds of Banyule House, Heidelberg (per favour of Mrs M McCracken), from 12 till 5 p.m. Special attractions will be provided in the shape of a gipsy tent, athletic games, maypole dance, flower competition, concert, etc. The price of admission is fixed at 1s. for adults and 6d for children.

Evelyn Observer
Friday 18 May 1894, p.2

The Heidelberg Brass Band often entertained locals and visitors in Heidelberg Park and took up collections to support their band, although takings were slightly down in late 1894 due to the hard

times. Concerts at the Heidelberg Football Club and sporting matches, such as muff cricket (with players in fancy dress), helped to raise funds for the clubs, the Austin Hospital for Incurables and other charities.

People gathered at the Kangaroo Ground Hall in May 1894 for 'songs, recitations and a farce' to raise money for the Watson's Creek school. In 1896 the Kangaroo Ground Dramatic Club gave 'an entertainment' in the Heidelberg Recreation Hall to aid the Austin Hospital.

The community also supported individuals. When the Commercial Bank retrenched the long-serving manager of its Heidelberg Branch with one week's notice in November 1894, local reaction was prompt and energetic. A petition attracted 150 signatures and a deputation of residents travelled to the Bank's head office.

Disappointingly, Mr Booth was not reinstated, but a testimonial gift of around £45 was collected and presented. 'The result is considered very satisfactory when it is taken into consideration the depressing state of the times through which we are at present passing', observed the *Mercury and Weekly Courier* on 20 December 1894.