



Water and the Australian city: Lessons from history

Industry Note
Program A: Society
Project A2.1

Summary

Most Australians live in suburban, single-family, detached houses. This historical and continuing housing preference means that providing water and sewerage services are expensive. Australians have traditionally been profligate with water, but have always shown remarkable willingness to adapt water usage during times of crisis.

urban living, and for low-density, detached dwellings. The form and culture of contemporary Australian cities reflect decisions made by previous generations; an example of 'path-dependency'.

Introduction

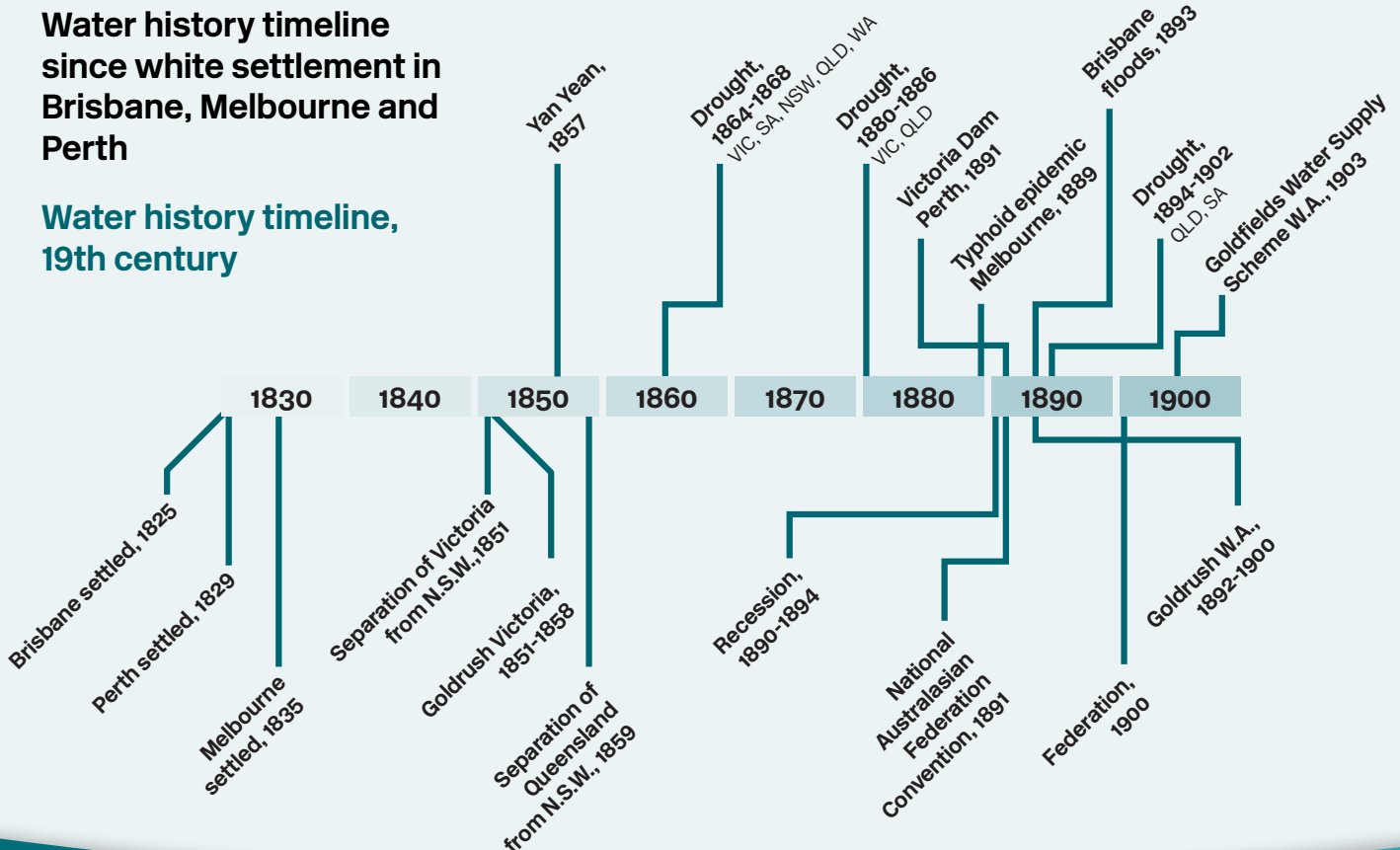
How Australians live today reflects powerful historical and cultural ideas, which impact on how we use water in our homes. Since the late nineteenth century Australians have demonstrated a clear preference for suburban rather than

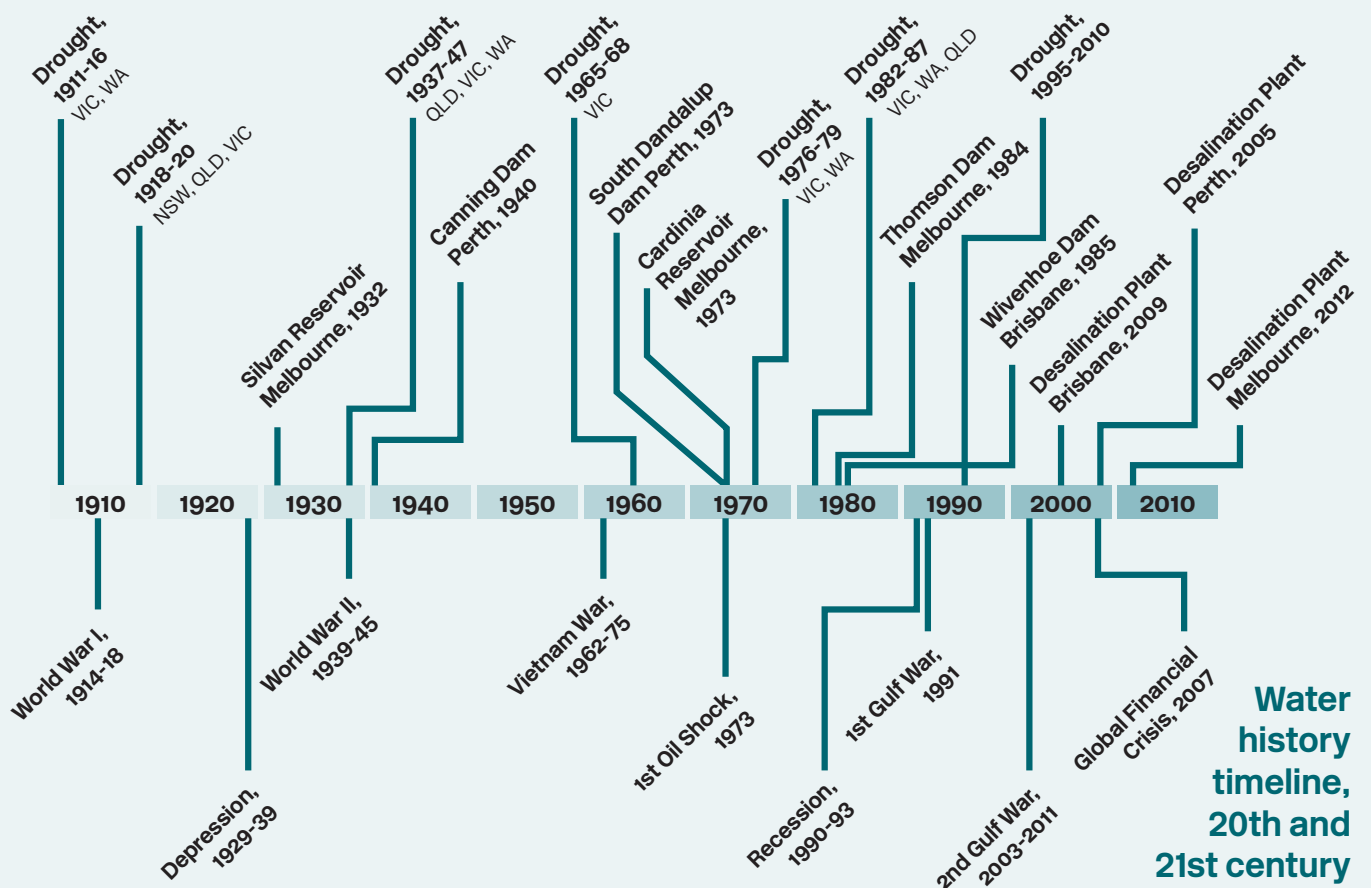
History of drought and flood 1788-2015

Water availability and scarcity has been shaped by distinct weather patterns, topographical and geological attributes as well as the structures and functions of three Australian cities – Brisbane, Melbourne and Perth – through different periods of population growth, economic change and land use.

Water history timeline since white settlement in Brisbane, Melbourne and Perth

Water history timeline, 19th century





Lessons from history

Three key points can be taken from an historical analysis of Brisbane, Melbourne and Perth:

1. Path dependency has a strong impact. Decisions made in the past impact on the present. For example, the use of 'big engineering' solutions such as new and ever-larger dams and desalination plants ties water supply and demand into a particular model which can make domestic water conservation difficult.
2. Australians have demonstrated a willingness to conserve water in times of crisis. The historical evidence overwhelmingly demonstrates that once the impacts of drought and wasteful usage of water have been explained, urban Australians have adapted their water use and behaviours to fit the short-term need for restraint, for example the recent Millennium drought 140L/155L per day/person campaigns. Public education campaigns about the importance of water sensitivity should remain a key component of public policy.
3. To achieve water sensitive cities we need to take the past into account. It is highly unlikely that Australian families will give up their preferences for low-density modes of living. Suburbia and the 'lifestyle' that it affords is intrinsic to Australians' understandings of themselves, and has been for numerous generations now. The way Australians live in cities must be taken into account when devising policy and water infrastructure. Path dependency is a strong influence on the way in which water is delivered and on how it can be conserved. Importantly, the historical record shows that ordinary citizens have always willingly adapted their water usage or they adopt more sustainable water practices for the duration of droughts and other water crises.


About the research


This research was conducted as part of Understanding social processes to achieve water sensitive futures (Project A2.1).

The objectives of this project were to understand and document the social and historical processes of domestic water use in Australian cities. This study maps historical and contemporary urban water use cultures and social practices in order to better understand how and why we use water the way we do, and to use this information and evidence to better inform future policy agendas.

Further information

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Water Sensitive Cities