DOCKSIDE

DOCKLANDS WALKING TOURS

> "THE LIFEBLOOD OF OUR CITY, OUR STATE AND OUR COUNTRY IS HERE, ON THE WHARVES."

Bill Gardner
Wharfie who became Lord Mayor of Melbourne, 1982-83

Explore the rich heritage of Docklands when its bustling wharves, warehouses and railways formed part of Melbourne's lifeblood. Take a tour through the past and discover what life was like in Melbourne's industrial heart.

01 A swampy start
Following European settlement in 1835, Melbourne grew quickly. On the City's western edge, Docklands was an expansive saltwater wetland called the West Melbourne Swamp. The Swamp quickly became home to a range of unpleasant industries, including tanneries and abattoirs. In 1873 the area was reserved for the future use of the Port and railways.

02 A Coode solution
From the mid 1800s Melbourne's economy was booming. The main trade link to the world was by sea, but accessing Melbourne's riverside docks via the Yarra River was hazardous and slow. Sir John Coode proposed a solution that involved digging a new canal and deep water harbour in the West Melbourne Swamp.

03 An engineering triumph
The Coode Canal excavation began in 1880. It was backbreaking work, digging through solid ground and mud. In 1889 work commenced on excavating the new harbour. For years, men toiled through mud assisted by the few tools available. Completed in 1892, the new Victoria Dock was an engineering triumph.

04 A curate of cargo
The new harbour meant Docklands was filled with wharf activity. A huge variety of cargo passed through Victoria Dock, reflecting the needs of the thriving city. Cargo was handled by wharfies working in gangs of 17. This was reduced to 11 as mechanisation increased.

05 Hooked on the sheep's back
Wool was vital to the nation's economy, and Victoria Dock was a major wool distribution centre. Bales were loaded using a sling, and maneuvered into place with the wharfie's 'hook'. Loading wool was an unpopular job. Bales were heavy and oddly shaped, and if wet, they could be crawling with insects.

06 If you're fit, it's down the pit
The pit was the lowest section of a ship accessed via a series of steep ladders. Handling cargo in cramped, dark conditions was unpleasant, backbreaking and dangerous. Working the wharves was preferred – so wharfies liked it when the doctor considered them medically unfit to tackle the ladders.

07 Constant renovation
In a break from tradition, Victoria Dock was constructed using Australian timber piles instead of concrete and masonry piles. This was considered to be a great triumph for local ingenuity. Nevertheless, wear and tear on the docks was substantial. Constant renovation and repair work was required to keep Victoria Dock operational.

08 Water control
A signal station was erected in 1934 to manage harbor shipping movements. It was a simple structure, reminiscent of a lighthouse. In 1966, this was replaced with a concrete Shipping Control Tower which offered 24 hour operation. Water traffic today is managed by a large control tower located downstream from Docklands.

09 Loading care
Loading cargo onto ships required a high level of skill – an unbalanced ship could sink. Cargo needed to be tightly stacked to maximise space and minimise movement. Poorly loaded cargo could damage or destabilise the vessel. Loading vehicles by crane was particularly challenging, but the development of roll on-off vessels reduced these complexities.

10 Pig iron penalty
Pig iron was especially hard to load. The ingots weighed 25 to 30 kilograms each and were loaded into tubs. It was heavy, noisy work and no earmuffs were supplied. In the early days penalty rates were negotiated between wharfies and stevedores, and handling pig iron would have attracted a 'noise penalty rate'.

11 Worst of conditions
Early 20th century wharf work was physically demanding, hazardous and paid according to tonnage moved during a shift. With bagged cargo, a gang had to shift up to 130 tons a day in all sorts of conditions. No protective clothing or equipment was supplied until successful union action was taken.

12 Striking power
The Waterside Workers Federation sought to improve working conditions for wharfies. But wins were peppered with strikes. The strike most etched in port history occurred in 1928 when union demands for improved work conditions were ignored. Wharfies were forced to continue competing for shifts and to work in increasingly dangerous situations. They went on strike, leading to riots and arrests.

13 Rail to ship
Transportation of goods between rail and sea has always relied on a close working relationship between the railway and stevedores. At Docklands, railway lines were everywhere, running from goods sheds and shunting yards, down along piers to stop beside ships or warehouses or beneath cranes for loading.

14 On a mission
Built in 1917, the Mission to Seafarers is an architectural gem created to house an extraordinary organisation. Operating continuously in Melbourne since 1857, the Mission offers sanctuary to visiting seafarers who spend long periods away from home, often in harsh and dangerous conditions.

15 Grandest of sheds
The railways' Goods Sheds No. 1 and 2 were striking buildings, with architecture that demonstrated the importance of the railways to the colony. Lined with internal platforms, these sheds facilitated the easy transfer of goods to and from train wagons that ran on tracks through the centre of each shed.

16 Batman's Hill
Batman's Hill was a small hill that used to be located near the site of Southern Cross Station. It was named after John Batman, one of two men credited with the foundation of Melbourne. Batman's Hill was flattened in the 1860s to extend the railway terminus and build the Goods Shed No.1.

17 The wailing wall
The red brick wall that runs along Flinders Street was built in 1890. It is the last reminder of Batman's Hill, with the wall being built to retain the edge of the hill's southern slope. Known as the 'wailing wall', for years it was a de-facto meeting places for wharfies awaiting work.

18 Power and prestige
The 1880s were boom years for Melbourne. Public offices built during this period reflected wealth and power, and perhaps none so well as the Victorian Railways Administration Headquarters (now the Melbourne Hotel). Completed in 1893, the multi-level, Italianate Victorian building was, at that time, the largest office building in Melbourne.

19 Criss cross lines
The development of Docklands has been hugely influenced by the railway. A mass of rail lines linked the docks, warehouses and local factories to a host of rail sheds, many specifically built for trades. Docklands was the lifeblood of Melbourne with ships and trains continually coming and going distributing cargo.

20 A royal warehouse
The Queen's Warehouse has been the site of significant events in Australian history. It commenced life as a Customs bond store in 1890, storing cargo pending payment of government tariffs. The first Commonwealth stamps and banknotes were printed here in 1913, and during WWII, it became a key distribution point for wartime goods.

21 A gassy pong
For more than 100 years the West Melbourne Gasworks operated in Docklands. Opening in 1855, it was the earliest coal gas plant in Australia, and was considered an 'accepted symbol of modernity and progress'. It required tonnes of coal daily to maintain gas production. It was demolished in the 1970s.

22 Checking cargo
There was always high demand for work on the docks. However fluctuating cargo needs originally meant that paid work was unpredictable, and offered as required. Desperate for work, some wharfies used bribery and intimidation to gain regular shifts, and pilfering was rife. To combat stealing, check points were set up.

23 Dudley mansions
The 1930s Depression hit Melbourne hard. Vacant land at the end of Dudley Street (now Docklands Drive) became a tip site, and desperate people moved in, surviving on what they could find. About 60 makeshift dwellings were built on the Dudley Flats, known as the 'Dudley mansions'.
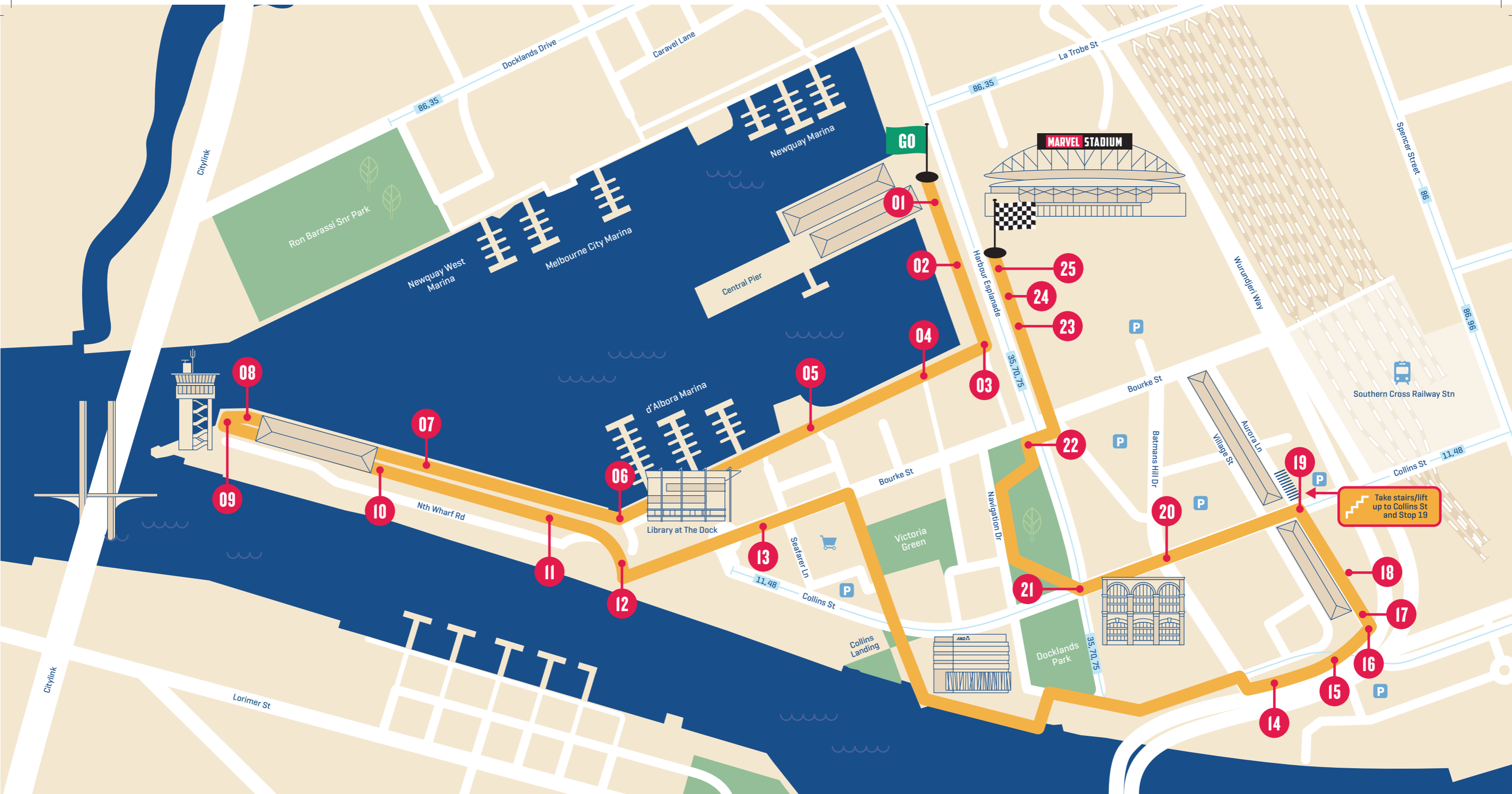
24 Cargo to container
Shipping underwent a rapid change around the 1960s, due largely to the emergence of containerisation. Containers required lots of space for storage and loading, and Victoria Dock with its fixed cranes and adjacent warehouses just wasn't suitable. By the early 1980s, Docklands – the once bustling industrial heart of Melbourne – was derelict and abandoned.

25 Docklands reborn
Nearly 200 hectares of waterfront land adjacent to the Melbourne CBD cannot be ignored for long. In the early 1990s, Victoria was in a state of recession. With a view to reinvigorating the economy and reconnecting Melbourne to its waterfront, the Victorian Government released the Docklands area for redevelopment.

Download the Melbourne Docklands Walking Tours app to obtain full access to the written, visual and audio content of the Dockside walking tour.

Available on Apple or Android.

GO

MARVEL STADIUM

Take stairs/lift up to Collins St and Stop 19

Ron Barassi Snr Park
Newquay Marina
Newquay West Marina
Melbourne City Marina
Central Pier
d'Albora Marina
Library at The Dock
Victoria Green
Collins Landing
Docklands Park
Southern Cross Railway Stn

Docklands Drive
Caravel Lane
La Trobe St
Spencer Street
Harbour Esplanade
Bourke St
Wurundjeri Way
Batmans Hill Dr
Aurora Ln
Village St
Navigation Dr
Seafarer Ln
Collins St
Nth Wharf Rd
Lorimer St
Citylink

86, 35
86, 35
86, 96
86
11, 48
35, 70, 75
35, 70, 75
11, 48

DOCKSIDE
HERITAGE TRAIL

Trail Length 4.5km   Duration 1.5 to 2hrs

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