

History of Subiaco

The Noongar people of the Swan River and Swan Coastal Plains inhabited the area now known as the City of Subiaco before and during the early days of European settlement. They are the traditional landowners, keepers of knowledge, custodians and carers of the land and waterways.

Among the first Europeans to settle in the local area was a group of Benedictine monks who arrived in 1851 and established a monastery called New Subiaco north of the present boundary of the City of Subiaco. They named the settlement after the Italian town of Subiaco, founding place of the Benedictine order.

European settlement remained sparse until 1881, when the Perth to Fremantle railway was established. Development of retail and industry ensued, with land in Subiaco much cheaper than in Perth. The name Subiaco was adopted for the railway platform near the monastery and later for the cluster of houses and businesses that grew around it.

Subiaco's population increased dramatically in the 1890s due to a depression in the eastern states and the gold rush in Kalgoorlie, Western Australia. Families clustered in tents and makeshift dwellings around water sources near the railway line and the present site of Subiaco Primary School. Sub-division of allotments in the local area occurred in the 1890s and early in the new century, encouraging many settlers to purchase land and build homes. Subiaco was proclaimed a municipality in 1897 and Rokeby Road quickly became Subiaco's focal point.

In the early 1900s, the Subiaco council acquired endowment land near the Perth-Fremantle railway line and designated it as an area for secondary industry. The municipality leased this land to different businesses across different trades, leading to significant industrial growth in the first half of the twentieth century.

In 1952, the municipality officially became the City of Subiaco. Less than a decade later, the City came under threat of boundary changes and calls for local government reform. Overwhelming support from residents and ratepayers, the efforts of parliamentarian Tom Dadour and the strong stance of an experienced Council successfully defended the City's boundaries throughout the 1960s and early 1970s.

Despite residents' and ratepayers' unification against amalgamations during this period, the community was divided about the best way forward for the ageing City. Infrastructure throughout the municipality fell into disrepair, rats and flies infested streets and construction of high density flats increased. Subiaco's standing as a residential city was rapidly declining. Many residents believed conservation and restoration of the City's old world charm was the key to regenerating the local area, while others believed demolition and progressive reconstruction was the answer.

The early 1970s saw increasing demolition of single residence dwellings for the development of commercial and multi-unit dwellings. A change of Council in 1978 generated a significant shift in the City's approach to town planning in the 1980s. Committed to reversing trends that threatened to destroy the City's character, Council amended planning laws to encourage the conservation of built heritage. At the same time, the City focused on regenerating the municipality through initiatives like road and traffic management, parking administration, waste removal, laneway alteration and conversion to underground power. The rejuvenation efforts resulted in higher property values and an improved perception of Subiaco as a place to live and visit.

From the late 1980s redevelopment efforts focused on the industrial sites along the railway line, as factories, warehouses and yards had started to appear run down and seemed out of place in a revitalised inner-city community with high property values. Crown and endowment land that had been leased for industrial use since the early twentieth century began to be considered for residential development. The Subiaco Redevelopment Authority (SRA) was established in 1994 to coordinate the efforts of local government and many State Government departments to successfully develop the land that was once home to major industries. As part of an urban renewal project named 'Subi Centro' the SRA sank the railway line through Subiaco, developed a new railway station and created new neighbourhoods, roads, and commercial and retail space on an 80 hectare site. Development in that vein continues today, with residential housing being built on the former sites of major factories.

This continues today, as the State Government's Subi East project is rejuvenating a 35 hectare site along the railway line in the north east of the City. Site of Subiaco Oval and the former Princess Margaret Children's hospital it will be transformed into a vibrant city village. Diverse residential options will join the 2019 built secondary school Bob Hawke College, and public green spaces. The development is expected to dramatically increase the population of the City and increase the vibrancy of the historic Subiaco Town Centre.

To learn more about the history of Subiaco, visit the Subiaco Museum.

This information is available in alternative formats upon request.