

WONDER – on the founding of South Australia!

The Foundation of South Australia

South Australia was created administratively 16,000 kilometres away by the British parliament at Westminster, London. As European powers expanded their dominions overseas at the start of the nineteenth century, settlement by Europeans of vast unmapped tracts of Australia was seen as strategically desirable. Captain Charles Sturt who sailed down the River Murray in 1829–30, provided reports back to London of the evident arable lands available near the Murray's mouth. Concurrently Edward Gibbon Wakefield in London was espousing theories of systematic colonisation in Australasia. Religious dissenters, socially aspiring middle classes and entrepreneurs saw the confluence of these events as opportunities. Wonder what happened next?

- 1831** “Proposal to His Majesty’s Government for Founding a Colony on the South Coast of Australia” prepared by political radicals and reformers is rejected.
- 1833** The South Australian Association (formed by Wakefield, Gouger and others) lobbies the British Government to set up a new colony.
- 1834** The *South Australia (Foundation) Act 1834* of the British Parliament is passed: "An Act to empower His Majesty to erect South Australia into a British Province or Provinces and to provide for the Colonization and Government thereof".
- 1835** In May the British Government appoints Colonization Commissioners to oversee the implementation of the Act and to control sales of land.
- The Act required a certain amount of land be sold before the colony could be established. The money from the sale of land was intended to be used to fund poorer people to migrate to the colony, so providing a labour force.
- With slow land sales causing delay, George Fife Angas and other wealthy individuals form the South Australian Company in October and purchase most of the unsold land.
- 1836** In January four ships sail from England on behalf of the South Australian Company, followed a few months later by three ships of the Colonization Commission and two privately chartered ships, now collectively referred to as the “First Fleet of South Australia”.

WONDER – on the founding of South Australia!

1836 Letters Patent are issued on 19th February establishing the “Province of South Australia”. Captain John Hindmarsh is appointed Governor and Colonel William Light as Surveyor-General of the new colony.

On 28th December the “new British Province of South Australia” is proclaimed at Glenelg.

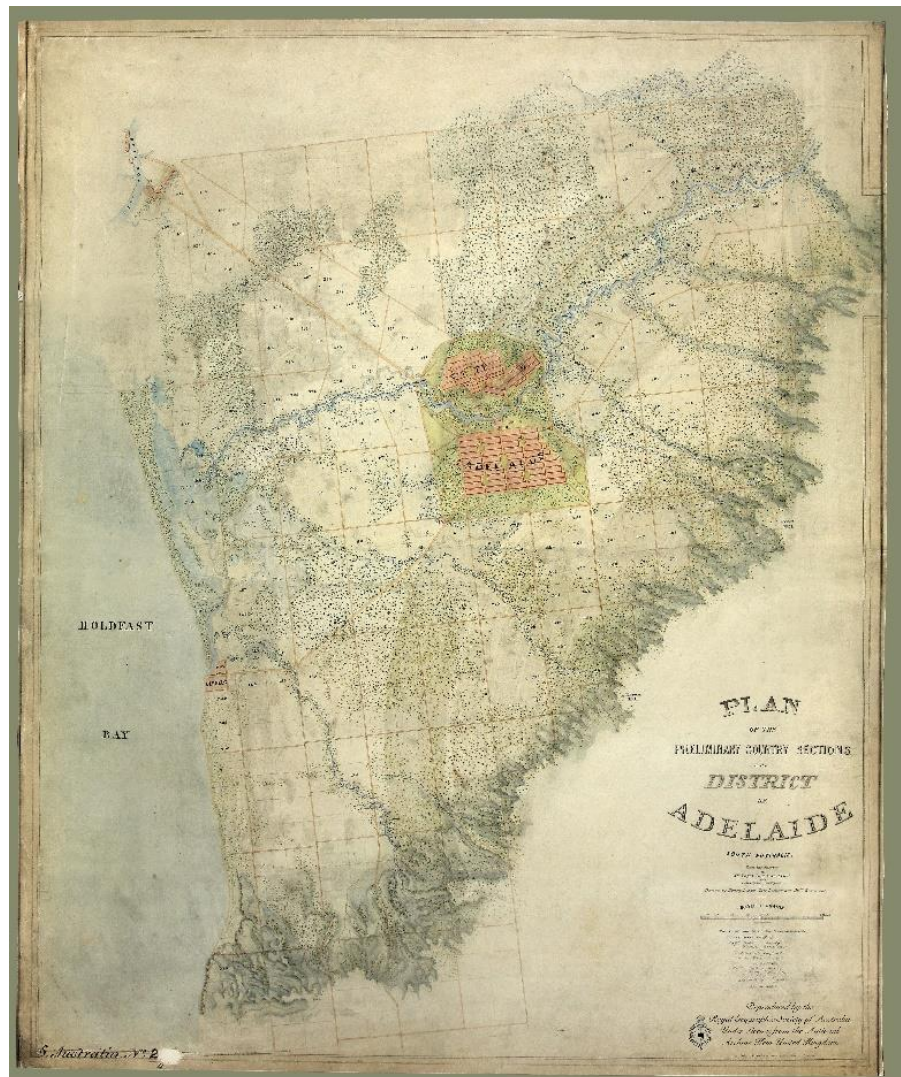
1837 On 11th January the first survey peg for the City of Adelaide is placed on the corner of North Terrace and West Terrace.

The most urgent initial tasks in establishing the colony were to choose the site and to survey the land into suitable blocks for sale. **Colonel William Light**, the surveyor-general, was charged with these tasks.

The city survey was completed by March 1837 and the rural survey by May 1838, allowing for selection of pre-purchased blocks and sale of remaining blocks.

The 1837 map ‘*Plan of the District of Adelaide*’ was based on Light’s original map and clearly shows the main arterial roads, the rivers and creeks, including the flood site of the Torrens at Hindmarsh, and those areas lightly wooded.

By October 1838 a cadastral map of the entire District of Adelaide had been completed.



Henry Nixon’s map 1837 – copies on sale through the Society

WONDER – on the founding of South Australia!

Colonel William Light – first Surveyor-General

Colonel William Light was charged with the responsibility of supervising and enacting the inaugural survey of the new province of South Australia, assisted by deputy-surveyor Kingston and surveyor Finniss.

Arrival in South Australia

Light's ship *Rapid* departed England on 1st May 1836 and arrived at Kangaroo Island on 17th August. Light first explored the Gulf St Vincent by sailing to Rapid Bay and heading north, finding the Port River at the end of September. After Kingston's arrival in October Light divided his survey party in two with one party under Kingston to explore the area around Holdfast Bay and the other under Finniss to explore around Rapid Bay.

Choosing the site for Adelaide

Light explored the Port River in November, describing it as "*one of the finest little harbours I ever saw.*" He then sailed to Port Lincoln on Spencer's Gulf to assess its suitability for settlement, as he had been ordered to, but rejected the location due to the lack of available water and hazardous harbor entrance. On the 24th December Colonel Light walked over the plain to that part of the river where Mr Kingston had pitched his tent and decided on this site for the City of Adelaide and that of Port Adelaide for its harbor. On 29th December Light chose the position of the town, Governor Hindmarsh inspected it on 30th and Kingston recorded it on 31st December 1836

Survey of Adelaide

On 3rd January 1837 Light set up his survey camp and began an intensive examination of the ground to establish the best method for laying out the town. The survey commenced on 11th January, with the first survey peg being placed at the corner of North and West Terraces. By 7th February Light had prepared a map of the town and surrounding district. The city survey was completed by 10th March and included 1042 city acre blocks for settlement. The survey of the rural sections was completed by 17th May 1838.

Light's Survey Work

By June 1838 almost 150,000 acres (607 sq. km) had been surveyed and mapped out around Adelaide and at Rapid Bay, Yankalilla, around the Onkaparinga River and on Kangaroo Island. Following his resignation as surveyor-general on 21st June 1838, Light formed a private company with Finniss and three other former staff. They surveyed the Port River, the village of Marion, and the towns of Glenelg and Gawler.

WONDER – on the founding of South Australia!

Light's Vision

The exact site for Adelaide was chosen by Colonel Light *“Because it was on a beautiful and gently-rising ground and formed altogether a better connection with the river than any other place”* and he observed that the site was central to good land throughout its vicinity and at no inconvenient distance from the Port. In an unpublished letter dated October 5th 1837 to fellow surveyor Mr. William Jacob, Colonel Light writes *“I was never sanguine on any point but one, and that was the eligibility of the site for Adelaide; in that I was always confident.”*

Light's chosen site for the main settlement caused debate and discord among many of the settlers and officials. Other sites at Port Lincoln, Port Adelaide and Encounter Bay had been championed by various interests but were all rejected by Light.

Light was confident that history would vindicate his choice:

“The reasons that led me to fix Adelaide where it is I do not expect to be generally understood or calmly judged at the present. My enemies, however, have done me the good service of fixing the whole responsibility upon me. I am perfectly willing to bear it, and I leave it to posterity and not to them to decide whether I am entitled to praise or blame.”

In Memoriam

There are many memorials around South Australia to Colonel William Light, who was given a State Funeral on his death. *Light Square and tomb*, City of Adelaide, *Light Square* in Marion and in Gawler, *Colonel Light Gardens*, *Light Pass*, *Gulnare*, *Lower Light*, *Light's View*, and Light's concept of garden cities surrounded by parklands including the City of Adelaide and many country towns.



Light's Dumpy Level – RGSSA

WONDER – on the founding of South Australia!

Biography of William Light – founder of Adelaide

Born: 27th April 1786 in Kuala Kedah, Malaya (now Malaysia)

Died: 6th October 1839 in Adelaide, South Australia

Early years

William Light's father, Captain Francis Light (c.1740–1794), was a British explorer who founded the British colony of Penang and its capital George Town in 1786 – the year of William's birth. His mother, Martinha Rozells, was traditionally a Princess of Kedah and may have been Portuguese Eurasian. William Light spent his infant years in Penang, but at the age of six his parents sent him to England to be educated by his father's friend, Charles Doughty, of Theberton, Suffolk. He showed early aptitude for languages and sketching.



Portrait of William Light – RGSSA

Soldier and adventurer

In 1799, as a teenager, Light entered the navy as a volunteer, leaving two years later as a midshipman. While travelling in France in May 1803 he was made a civilian internee at Verdun but escaped on 5 January 1804. Light travelled to Calcutta in 1805 for his sister's wedding on 9 March, and was present on 19 November 1806 when his brother-in-law, Major Welsh, disarmed a portion of his Indian regiment to avert a massacre.

Light purchased a cornetcy in the 4th Dragoons in May 1808 and was promoted to lieutenant in April 1809. He served with distinction throughout the Peninsular War. His skills as a linguist and his ability to draw well, report

WONDER – on the founding of South Australia!

accurately and show great tact resulted in his often being used to confer with guerrilla bands. He became a junior staff officer at Wellington's headquarters in November 1812, employed on mapping, reconnaissance, and liaison duties. On return from Spain in 1814, he purchased a captaincy in the infantry. On half-pay after Waterloo, which he just missed, he spent some time travelling in Europe before returning to serve again on full pay in the Channel Islands, Scotland, and Ireland.

In 1821 he quit the army with the brevet rank of major and on 24 May was reported to have married his first wife E. Perois in Londonderry (his wife is assumed to have died young and without children). In 1823 he became aide-de-camp to Sir Robert Wilson, who raised an international force to help the Spanish 'Liberales' in their constitutional struggle against King Ferdinand, and served in the Spanish revolutionary army with the rank of lieutenant-colonel.

Travels and art

Light was a gifted and prolific painter and sketcher. In 1824 he married Mary Bennet, daughter of the third Duke of Richmond. The couple travelled widely in Europe, Light making many sketches, some being published in *Sicilian Scenery* (London, 1823) and *Views of Pompeii* (London, 1828). Light bought the yacht *Gulnare* in 1827 and the couple sailed leisurely round the Mediterranean for some years. At Alexandria in 1830 he became friendly with Mohammed Ali, then rising to power as the founder of modern Egypt. To recruit British officers for the Pasha's navy, Light sailed his yacht to England leaving Mary in Egypt. Light and Mary separated in 1832 but the couple never divorced. In 1834 Light commanded the paddle steamer *Nile* on its voyage from England to join the Egyptian navy and he continued to run the *Nile* between Egypt and Syria during 1835.

South Australia

Light returned to London in January 1836 and in February was appointed surveyor-general of South Australia. He fitted out the brig *Rapid* and on 1 May 1836 sailed in command of her with some of his staff and his companion Maria Gandy and her young brothers, arriving in South Australia in mid-August.

Light served as surveyor-general until his resignation on 21 June 1838. In this role he both selected the site for Adelaide and carried out its inaugural survey. Later he formed a private surveying company and continued surveying work in South Australia. His ill-health due to tuberculosis became increasingly worse and he passed away on 6 October 1839, aged 53 years.

WONDER – on the founding of South Australia!

Light and Maria Gandy in South Australia 1836–1839

The brig *Rapid* arrived in South Australia in August 1836 under the command of Colonel William Light. On board were his companion Maria Gandy and her two young brothers, William and Edward. Initially they lived aboard ship, then moved into the camp established by Finniss at Rapid Bay. Once the town of Adelaide was established, their residence became a hut attached to the survey office on the slopes between North Terrace and the river Torrens.



The brig Rapid in a gale – RGSSA

With the release of rural land in 1838, Light had the good fortune to make the first selection and chose the 134-acre section adjacent to the Torrens river and Parklands, near to the road to Port Adelaide. After taking possession of the land on 28 August 1838 the construction of their house commenced. The house was built by Maria's brother William Gandy and originally named 'Theberton Cottage' after Light's childhood home in Suffolk – the later spelling 'Thebarton' resulted from a transcription error.

Light and Gandy moved to Thebarton Cottage in January 1839, before it was completed, after a disastrous fire completely destroyed the Land and Survey Office and the adjoining huts belonging to Light and James Hurtle Fisher, the Resident Commissioner. Many of the province's early records were lost in the fire. The fire also destroyed Light's private papers including diaries that he had been keeping for over 30 years and his portfolio of drawings and paintings from his years in Egypt and the Peninsula.

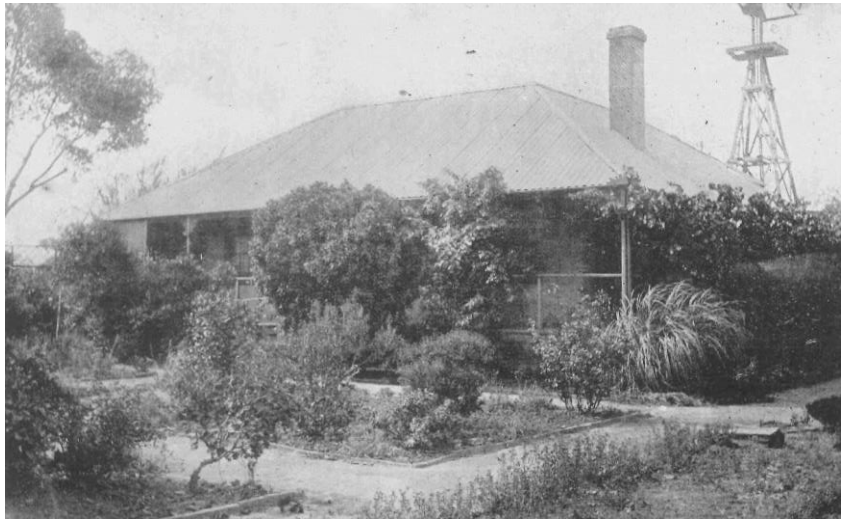
Light began the initial phase in the subdivision of his country section and first advertised land for sale there on 23 February 1839. Sadly, he did not live long enough to see the development of the village of Thebarton that he helped to create.

WONDER – on the founding of South Australia!

Thebarton Cottage

The cottage was described in a TO LET notice from 1841 as:

“On the banks of the Torrens, at Thebarton, formerly the residence of the late Colonel Light, a substantial brick-built house, containing four large and lofty rooms, one underground and a back kitchen – commands a fine view of the bay – a garden in a fine state of cultivation – a stable, with saddle-room – and a well of capital water.”



Colonel Light's cottage circa 1902

Thebarton Cottage was demolished towards the end of 1926 after public attempts to save it failed. The site eventually became the Brewing Company. In 1997 the Royal Geographical Society, with others, placed an interpretive sign on the northern bank of the Torrens near the corner of Port Road and Adam Street pointing out that Colonel Light's cottage was nearby.

Since 2022, when the brewery was demolished, there has been extensive archaeological work at the site. The foundations of Thebarton Cottage were uncovered in February 2023.

Maria Gandy – after Light

Maria Gandy (23 November 1811 – 14 December 1847) was Light's housekeeper and companion during his time in South Australia. She nursed him in 1839 during his final days and was the sole beneficiary of his will. Maria subsequently married Dr George Mayo on 7 July 1840, nine months after Light's death. They had four children together (three survived to adulthood), founding a dynasty of high achieving South Australians. Maria died of tuberculosis in 1847 and was buried (with her new-born daughter) in the Mayo family plot at the West Terrace Cemetery. A memorial to Maria Gandy was unveiled on 23 November 2011 (her 200th birthday) at the corner of Albert and Maria Streets in Thebarton.

WONDER – on the founding of South Australia!

The colony's first inhabitants

The *South Australia Act 1834* described the land as "waste" and "uninhabited" but, unlike other colonies in Australia, the British settlement of South Australia did not assume the principle of *terra nullius* (Latin for nobody's land) when the colonists originally arrived.

The Letters Patent establishing the Province of South Australia issued in February 1836 stated:

*"Provided always that nothing in those our Letters Patent contained shall affect or be construed to affect the rights of any **Aboriginal Natives** of the said Province to the actual occupation or enjoyment in their own Persons or in the persons of their descendants of any lands there in now actually occupied or enjoyed by such **Natives**".*

William A. Cawthorne was an artist and teacher who arrived in Australia in 1841. He kept a journal (1844–1859) and other papers dating up to 1871 on the manners and customs of the Aboriginal people, with special reference to South Australia.

His books include *"The Legend of Kuperree"* or *"The Red Kangaroo"*, *"Menge, the Mineralogist"* and *"The Islanders"*, a fictional account based on the early history of settlement of Kangaroo Island.

Cawthorne's *"Rough Notes on the Manners and Customs of the Natives"*, written in 1844, was published in the 1925–26 Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society of Australasia (SA Branch).

He said that the natives exist in separate bodies as wandering tribes, acknowledge no head, and of course no subordination, excepting the respect due to age, which is paramount and honoured in proportion. The will of each is absolute. There is no bond to unite them beyond that of mutual security as a tribe, and no law to defend themselves individually but their own personal



Letters Patent issued 1836

WONDER – on the founding of South Australia!

powers; neither apparent order nor system regulates their affairs, whether warlike or domestic.

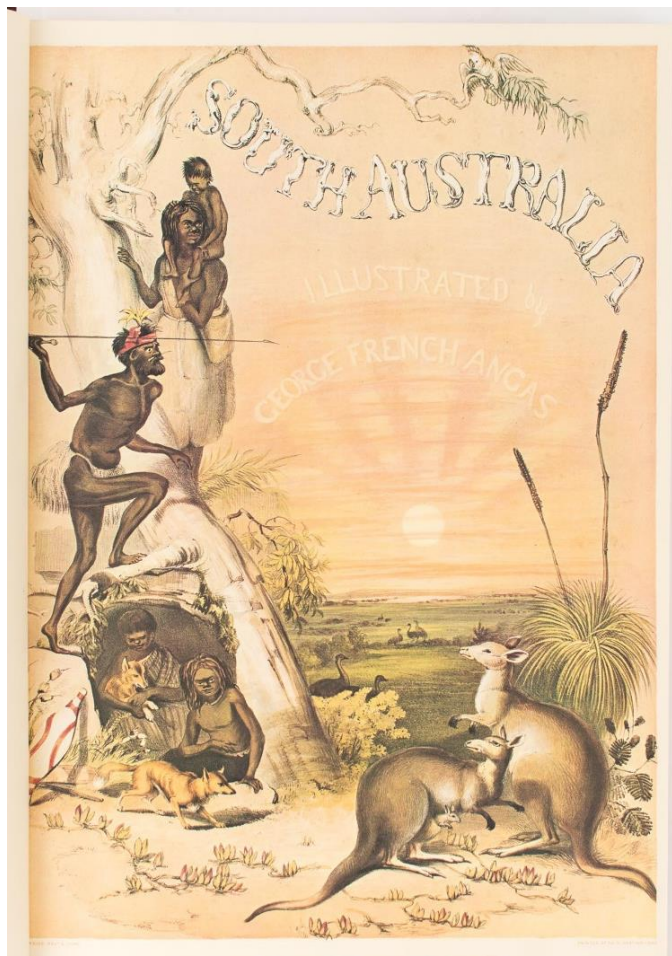
They differ but very little from Europeans. In point of stature the men vary from five feet six inches to six feet in height and are tolerably well proportioned; some are perfect models of symmetry and possess a considerable degree of muscular strength.

A very interesting corroboree is as follows: The dancers, always the young and middle-aged of the tribe, don themselves as fine as possible – feathers on their heads and behind their backs, kangaroo-teeth over their forehead, a bone through their nose, their bodies highly painted, some with red and white dots, some all red, others all white; some in wavy lines tinged with red, others with large patches of these colours; some paint themselves like skeletons.

They consider the firmament with its bodies as a land similar to what they are living on. Therefore, they say the Milky Way is a large river, along the banks of which reeds are growing, the dark spots in it are water lagoons in which monsters called "yura" are living, the white clouds near the Milky Way are the ashes of a species of parakeets which were assembled there by a constellation and afterwards treacherously roasted.

It is their opinion that all the celestial bodies were formerly living upon the earth, partly as animals, partly as men, and that they left the lower region to exchange for the higher one.

But a remarkable feature in the history of the natives – there is no such thing as idolatry.



South Australia illustrated G. F. Angas 1844 RGSSA

WONDER – on the founding of South Australia!

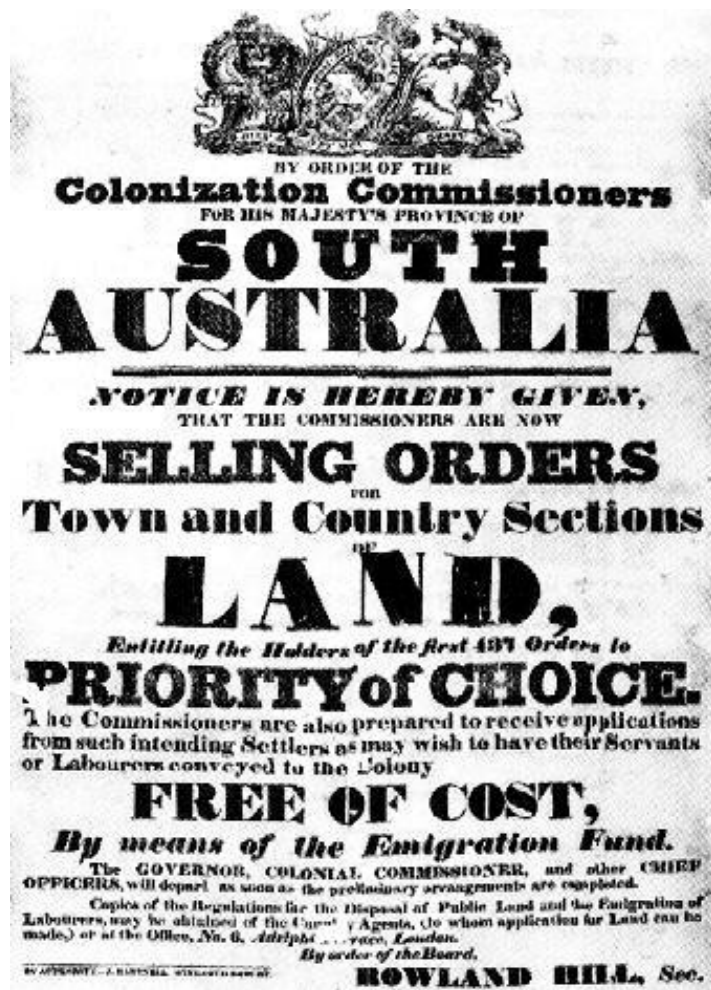
Development and Land Speculation

Land sales preceded the settlement of South Australia, with buyers of Preliminary Land Orders paying £81 for an 80-acre rural section and one town acre. Regulations published in February 1836 specified that surveys should always precede sales, that surveyed rural land be divided into 80-acre sections, and land should not be sold for less than £1 per acre. In addition, 'Special Surveys' could be requested by anyone who deposited £4,000. When the land price was later reduced to 12 shillings per acre the pre-sold 80-acre sections equated to 134-acre sections.

Light was instructed to survey the 437 Preliminary Land Orders as 134-acre blocks *"in a form convenient for occupation and fencing with a reserve road adjoining each section"* and to survey the remaining land into 80-acre sections *"in the best manner you can"*. The two section sizes are observable today in the layout of Adelaide's major roads.

The holders of the Preliminary Land Orders selected their town acres on 17th March 1837 and the remainder of the town acres were sold at auction. The rural sections would not be available until later when their survey was complete and a map drawn up. This situation resulted in a short period of intense land speculation with the purchase and resale of the city blocks. Late in 1839 city acres were selling for £300 to £2,000 with this speculation being made possible by the constant stream of new settlers.

The rural sections were finally available for selection on 17th May 1838. Many sections close to the city were quickly subdivided and sold to ordinary people



1835 advertisement – Wikimedia Commons

WONDER – on the founding of South Australia!

who quite openly stated that they intended to work their own small acre or half-acre lots and form a village – a state of affairs completely unacceptable to the original proposals of the colonization societies that had initiated the idea of settling South Australia.

By 1839 lots were being offered for sale in private villages and townships around Adelaide. As an example, Bowden was first subdivided into 10-acre lots, with a lottery used to determine successful bidders. The land there was said to be suitable for brickmaking and the 10-acre lots were soon subdivided into smaller allotments with small streets. By April 1840 Colonel Light's estates on the southern side of the Torrens were similarly sold and the area named Thebarton after his cottage.

The need for residential suburbs and rural service centres led to speculative buying and subdivision of many rural sections in the vicinity of Adelaide, resulting in the creation of about thirty villages. The subdivision of rural sections to make way for urban development continued, eventually resulting in the entire District of Adelaide that had been mapped and surveyed by Light becoming a single urban metropolis.

Adelaide's distinctive plan has stood the test of time

The Letters of Instruction to Light stated: *“You will make streets of ample width, arrange them with reference to the convenience of the inhabitants and the beauty and salubrity of the town; and you will make the necessary reserves for squares, public walks, and quays”* and further directed that all land on the coast and adjoining navigable rivers and lakes be reserved as a public land.

Adelaide today still reflects Light's original plan. The magnificent park lands, public beaches and wide streets (mitigating traffic congestion) have made Adelaide one of the world's most liveable cities. In 2008, Light's 1837 Adelaide Park Lands and City Layout was placed on the National Heritage List as *“a significant example of early colonial planning which has retained key elements of its historical layout for over one hundred and seventy years.”*



Light's plan of Adelaide – State Library

WONDER – on the founding of South Australia!

Reminiscences from the Proceedings of the RGSSA

Below are some quotations from the Proceedings of the RGSSA demonstrating how quickly real estate had developed since 1836, and a few issues associated with that development.

- 1902** At the last annual meeting of the Society 1902 the President, on behalf of your Council called attention to *the desirableness of making an "effort" to obtain* from some of the pioneers of the state who are now rapidly passing away, *valuable records and impressions* in reference to the early history of South Australia (*The Proceedings Volume V 1902–02*).
- 1902** On October 13, 1840, *the formal opening of the McLaren Wharf at the South Australian Company's Basin, Port Adelaide*, took place, and it was then named after Mr David McLaren the manager for the [South Australian] company. It was a grand affair for those days and no expense was spared to make it a success. (*The Proceedings Volume V 1902–02*).
- 1915–16** On June 8, 1838, the brig *Siren* left Launceston for Adelaide with 800 sheep, 4 bullocks, and 4 horses. On 27th December, 1838, the *Parteena* arrived from Sydney with 1,400 wethers. For her *first livestock South Australia was chiefly indebted to New South Wales and Van Diemen 's Land*. No sooner was it known that purchasers were to be found in Adelaide than preparations were made in each of those settlements to supply the demand. Guided only by their opinions; thither, enterprising and adventurous individuals undertook to convey cattle and sheep from the Middle District of New South Wales, and traversing waste after waste, arrived safe at their destination. (*The Proceedings Volume XVII 1915–16*).
- 1926–27** In 1851 *South Australia was ill-prepared to bear the slightest strain*, for the solid prosperity of the previous five years had given place to a speculative boom. Mining shares and real estate were sold at inflated prices, and transactions in every kind of property were effected on a credit basis extending over unusually long periods. (*The Proceedings XXVII 1926–27*)

WONDER – on the founding of South Australia!

- 1938–39** Mr. C. P. Mountford, Honorary Assistant in Ethnology, South Australian Museum, delivered an illustrated lecture on "*Aboriginal Rock Carvings in South Australia*" on the evening. (*The Proceedings XL 1938–39*).
- 1940–41** SOME ABORIGINAL ROUTES IN THE WESTERN PORTION OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA By T. HARVEY JOHNSTON, University of Adelaide; A visit to Ooldea in August, 1939, as a member of an expedition organised by the Board for Anthropological Research, University of Adelaide, (*The Proceedings XLII 1940–41*).
- 1943–44** Many South Australians now know the Coorong area, but to others a brief description may be of interest. The delta of the River Murray is rather complex – just below Tailem Bend the river empties into the large body of water known as Lake Alexandrina. At its lower extremity the lake is divided by a large peninsula, on which *Narrung and the aboriginal settlement of Point McLeay* are situated. (*The Proceedings XLV 1943–44*).
- 1996** *East Torrens, Walkerville, and Adelaide, 1996*, these LGAs have experienced *extensive gentrification* in the last two decades and contain premium real estate, largely related to their residential desirability. (*S.A. Geographical Journal 95 1996*).
- 2002–03** Without a local doctor we're disadvantaged in attracting newcomers. It's made it harder because people are a bit hesitant to come here and retire. (Local government expert, Saddleworth)
People don't come to live in a town *because* there's a doctor. They just assume that there *will* be one. (Real estate dealer) (*S.A. Geographical Journal Vol 101 2002–03*)
- 2008** Harvey and Clarke discuss the interaction of climate change related coastal impacts with social and environmental changes and note that the 'Sea change phenomena(sic) is causing different social impacts, such as: a) creating new coastal communities in pristine coastal areas; b) changing the social mix of existing coastal retirement or 'lifestyle' communities by raising property values and affecting housing affordability; c) creating gentrification of some areas often focused on waterfront real estate creating a divide with adjacent more affordable housing stock' (*S.A. Geographical Journal Vol 107 2008*)

WONDER – on the founding of South Australia!

Postscript

It is a testament to the early planning of Adelaide that it has survived almost two centuries of concentrated settlement and become one of the world's most liveable cities.

As Colonel Light wrote "*I leave to posterity, ... to decide*".

We need your help!

The Royal Geographical Society of S.A. Inc. is a charitable not for profit association shaping the geography of South Australia.

You can be a part of this Society, located among the State's cultural institutions by volunteering 3 – 4 hours per week, in the library, providing advice on publications, education, membership support or events and lectures.

More tangible assistance may be provided though cash donations to our Adopt a Book program (conservation), library or scholarship funds. Contact the Society for more information.