

Australia's cultural influences - 1

Read about the town of Broome in the north-west of Western Australia and the diverse cultures that have formed and influenced the development of the community.

Inhabiting the region for around 40 000 years, the Yawaru people were the first people to live in the Broome region.

By the mid-1800s, British and other European settlers began inhabiting the Broome area to set up stations for their flocks of sheep.

These settlers discovered valuable beds of oysters with mother of pearl shells in the waters around Broome. At the time, mother of pearl was used widely in Europe and America for making buttons and decorating ornaments and other items. This discovery brought a rapid and steady influx of settlers to the region.

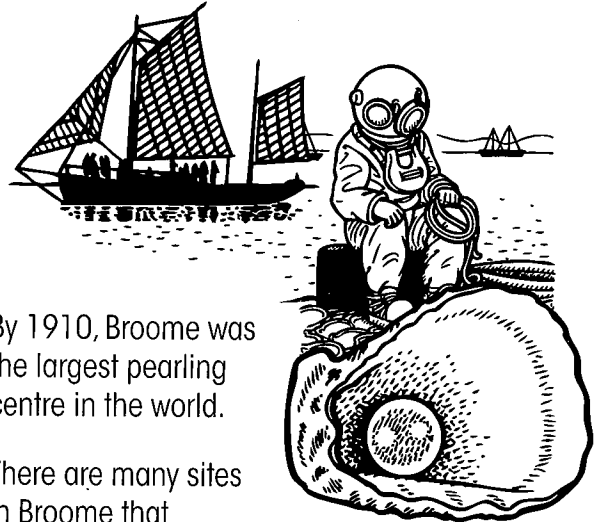
It wasn't long before the beds of oysters in the shallows were exhausted, so divers began collecting them from the deeper waters. Initially, the local Aboriginal people would free dive to collect the shells in waters as deep as 10 metres. Without equipment or readily available medical attention, this was a risky and dangerous practice.

As the industry grew, many people flocked to Broome from across Asia. Large numbers of Japanese divers, who used dive suits to go into deeper waters, came to replace the Aboriginal free divers. Although this was safer than free diving, it was still very dangerous and many divers perished in rough weather, from shark attacks or from decompression sickness (the bends).

Men from (now) Malaysia, the Philippines and Koepang in Indonesia came to work as deckhands on the boats or labourers on land. Often they were indentured labourers (meaning they worked for no pay for a number of years to 'pay off' the cost of their passage to Australia, paid for by a 'boss' or an agent).

Segregation was practised in Broome and people had different statuses according to their ethnicity. Most of the shopkeepers in Broome were Chinese while European people owned the pearl lugger fleets. Malay, Koepang, Filipino and Aboriginal people were poorly or unpaid labourers and were unlikely to own property or assets.

After Federation in 1901, the Australian government introduced the White Australia Policy, which restricted non-white people from immigrating to Australia. The pearling industry would have suffered as most of the divers and workers came from Asia, so Broome was exempted from the policy.



By 1910, Broome was the largest pearling centre in the world.

There are many sites in Broome that represent the different cultures and people who settled there.

Chinatown has been a major centre since around 1900. There were once pearl sheds, eateries and pool halls and today there are many shops, pearl showrooms and cafes there.

Sun Pictures, an iconic establishment in Broome, was originally a store and then a traditional Japanese Noh theatre. It was built by the Yamasaki family around 1900. The store was bought by a pearler and converted into a cinema and has been running as an open air movie theatre since 1916, the world's oldest of its type.

The Japanese cemetery in Broome is the burial place for hundreds of Japanese divers who lost their lives while diving for pearls. It is the largest Japanese cemetery in Australia and the first recorded burial here was in 1896. As well as a cemetery, this site is a popular tourist attraction today.

Many people from Broome have Asian, Aboriginal and European ancestry.