



Banyule  
CITY COUNCIL

# BANYULE

Heartland of the Wurundjeri willam  
white gum tree dwellers

Looking Into Banyule's Aboriginal Heritage

# INTRODUCING THE WURUNDJERI WILLAM

The Wurundjeri willam and their land were inseparable. Everything (identity, beliefs and way of life) was intricately woven into the fabric of Banyule and beyond.

## THE CLANS AND THEIR LANDS

Melbourne's north-east was once the homeland of the Wurundjeri willam. The Wurundjeri willam also had ties with other clans and lands. They belonged to the Woiworung language group and greater Kulin confederacy.

Woiworung clans occupied the region drained by the Yarra River and its tributaries. The Kulin confederacy was comprised of allied clans from south-central Victoria and six language groups, including the Woiworung. Like all Kulin, the Wurundjeri willam were multilingual with custom dictating that visitors adopt the language of the host clan.



Based on D. Barwick, *Mapping The Past*, in *Aboriginal History*, 1984

Kulin clans belonged to the Waa (crow) moiety or Bunjil (eaglehawk) moiety. The Wurundjeri willam were Waa. When men and women came of age, society ruled they marry someone from the opposite moiety. This law ensured inter-marriage between different clans, with people living in multi-clan bands. Marriage ties helped sustain the Kulin alliance and gave individuals access to the clan lands of their kin.

Today, the Wurundjeri Tribe Land Compensation and Cultural Heritage Council Incorporated are recognised as the Aboriginal custodians of Banyule and Kulin Nations takes care of its powerful cultural heritage.

## THE BATTLER

Born the son of Bebejan and nephew of Billi-billeri, both Wurundjeri willam *ngurungaeta* (head-men), William Barak was destined to become a great leader. He spent his boyhood learning the ways of his ancestors. In the winter of 1835, twelve year old Barak witnessed the signing of John Batman's treaty. Just where this took place remains a mystery. Some say Merri Creek, others the Plenty River, whilst others argue for Darebin Creek.

Billi-billeri was also there. His name was amongst those listed on a treaty that claimed 500,000 acres of Kulin land in exchange for flour, blankets, knives, scissors, mirrors and clothing. The idea of selling their birthright was inconceivable to the Kulin. They believed they were taking part in the *Tanderrum* ceremony, a ritual that involved giving and receiving access to each other's resources.

Hordes of *Ngamajet* (Europeans- 'dead men returned') followed Batman into Kulin land and Barak spent his youth watching his people lose land, life and liberty. In 1863, Simon Wonga (Billi-billeri's son and *ngurungaeta*) won back 2,300 acres of Wurundjeri willam land at Watts River in Healesville. They called the reserve Coranderrk and, in a bid to hold onto it, transformed their country into a thriving European farm.

After his cousin Wonga died in 1874, Barak became *ngurungaeta*. He spent the rest of his days in pursuit of a better life for his people. He resisted the Aboriginal Protection Board's attempts to undermine self-determination, sell Coranderrk and re-locate its residents. His many letters, petitions and trips to Parliament won the ardent support of settlers, journalists, church leaders and politicians.

At the same time, Barak kept his culture alive, telling stories, singing and painting about the old ways. As an old man, he travelled to Gippsland (land of the Kulin's traditional enemies, the Kurnai) to meet with pioneer anthropologist, Alfred Howitt. Together they documented his knowledge of Kulin culture for posterity.

When Barak died in 1903, he left a precious legacy. His descendants still live in Wurundjeri willam country and his culture lives on through them. By bridging the gulf between the Kulin and *Ngamajet*, this courageous, determined man paved the way for reconciliation in Victoria.

### *Billi-billeri's Story: How Birrarung Was Formed*

Once the water of Birrarung (Yarra River- 'river of mists') was locked in the mountains. This great expanse of water was called Moorool ('great water'). It was so large that the Woiworung had little hunting ground. This contrasted with the Wathaurung's and Bunurong's hunting ground, the flat which is now Port Phillip Bay.



William Barak painting a corroboree.  
La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria

*Mo-yarra* ('slow and fast running') was the headman of the Woiworung. He decided to free the country of the water and cut a channel through the hills, in a southerly direction, until he reached *Koo-wee-rup* (Western Port). However, only a little water followed him and the channel gradually closed up.

At a later time, the headman of the tribe was *Bar-wool*. He remembered *Mo-Yarra's* attempt to free the land. He knew that *Mo-Yarra* still lived on the swamps beside *Koo-wee-rup*. Each winter he saw the hilltops covered with the feather-down which *Mo-Yarra* plucked from the water birds sheltering on the swamps.

*Bar-wool* resolved to free the land. He cut a channel up the valley with his stone axe, but was stopped by *Baw-baw*, the mountain. He cut northwards, but was stopped by *Donna Buang* and his brothers. Then he cut westwards, through to the hills to *Warr-an-dyite*. There he met *Yan-yan*, another Woiworung.

*Yan-yan* was busy cutting a channel for the Plenty River in order to drain his homeland of *Morang*. They joined forces and the waters of *Moorool* and *Morang* became *Moo-rool-bark* ('the place where the wide waters were'). They continued their work, and reached *Warringal* (*Heidelberg-Templestowe flats- dingo-jump-up*). There they rested while the waters formed another *Moorool*.

When *Bar-wool* and *Yan-yan* set to work again they had to go much slower because the ground was harder and they were using up too many stone axes. They cut a narrow, twisting track between the *Darebin* and *Merri* Creeks, looking for softer ground. At last they reached *Port Phillip*. The waters of *Moorool* and *Morang* rushed out. Woiworung country was freed from water, but *Port Phillip* was inundated.

*Adapted from S. Wiencke, When the Wattles Bloom Again, 1984*



Billi-billeri, his wife and baby.  
La Trobe Australian Manuscripts Collection, State Library of Victoria

# STONES, SCARS AND SCATTERS

In 1998, Banyule City Council engaged a team of archaeologists to undertake a study of the Aboriginal heritage of the municipality. Over 50 Aboriginal archaeological sites were discovered and two distinct site types were identified: artefact scatters and scarred trees.

## SCATTERS

Artefact scatters look like clusters of angular rocks and are the remains of stone tool manufacture and use. Scatters are found everywhere people went because stone tools were used for just about everything, from hunting to making hunting equipment, from making meals to making clothes and houses.

Substantial scatters were homes. People returned to these locations year after year, adding a new layer to the site with each stay. Others were meeting grounds where the clans regularly united. Small scatters were made by people on the move. Some were overnight camps left by bands travelling from one residence to another. Others were made by hunters stopping to eat, and repair their kit. Each scatter tells its own story.



An artefact scatter: before and after.  
*Sketch by Armsign; photo from the Aboriginal Affairs Victoria Photograph Collection*



## STONES

Turning stones into tools was a highly skilled task, taking much time and patience to master. Tool makers used creek pebbles, called hammerstones, to knock flakes from chunks of stone known as cores.

The stone used to make tools had to be flakable and durable. In Banyule, people favoured silcrete, basalt and quartz. Quartz cobbles are found in waterways like Darebin Creek and basalt and silcrete outcrop along its banks.

The stone masters knew exactly where to strike the core and how much force to use to get the flake they wanted. Different types of tools and stone called for different treatment. Suitable flakes were made into axes, knives or scrapers. Cores, waste flakes and hammerstones were left where they fell, only to be discovered countless years later by roving archaeologists.



A scarred tree: before and after.  
*Sketch by Armsign; photo from the Aboriginal Affairs Victoria Photograph Collection*

## SCARS

Most of Banyule's scarred trees have symmetrical scars in the bark covering their trunks. These were formed when people detached slabs of bark from the trunks with the aid of stone axes. Indentations, made by their axes, are sometimes visible on the scar's surface.

Bark was used to cover the wooden frames of shelters. It was also transformed into canoes, platters, bowls, water buckets and shields. The scar's size and shape suggest how the bark was used. River red gum, manna gum, swamp gum and box trees provided the bark of choice.

A rarer type of scarred tree, also found in Banyule, has a series of toeholds running up the trunk. Hunters made these in order to enter the domain of the possum, prized for its meat and warm fur.

Women used kangaroo tail sinew to sew eighteen or more possum skins into long winter cloaks. When tightly wrapped, these cloaks doubled as drums at corroborees and possum skin yarn was rolled into balls for use in a game reminiscent of Australian Rules football.



A toehold tree: before and after.  
*Sketch from the La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria; photo from the Aboriginal Affairs Victoria Photograph Collection*

# REFLECTIONS OF THE WAY LIFE USED TO BE

When the evidence from Banyule's Aboriginal archaeological sites is pieced together, a colourful picture of the life and times of the Wurundjeri willam emerges.

## WHERE THEY LIVED

Sites are not evenly spread throughout the municipality. Most lie beside major watercourses like Darebin Creek and the Yarra and Plenty Rivers. These sites contain evidence of residential use and repeated occupation, showing that people's lives revolved around the waterways.



La Trobe Picture Collection,  
State Library of Victoria

A few smaller sites lie in the land beyond. This indicates that people periodically left the waterways to obtain locally unavailable resources, perform secret ceremonies or journey to other destinations.

## WHEN THEY LIVED HERE

The concentration of sites near major waterways, in places that contained an abundance of warm weather foods, indicates

that people lived here during the hottest part of the year. They probably timed their arrival to coincide with the *murnong* (yam daisy root) harvest in late spring. The fruitful months that followed climaxed when summer merged with autumn. At this time aquatic plant foods reached their peak and the waters teemed with migrating eels.

The coming of winter marked the end of the seasons of plenty. Bands journeyed to the high country whilst Banyule rested and renewed itself in preparation for their return the following spring.

Dated sites tell us how long Aboriginal people have called Banyule home. Local artefact scatters contain tiny stone tools called microliths, only made during the last 5,000 years. Other archaeological evidence suggests people were living here long before this. Sites at Keilor, in Melbourne, are at least 25,000 years old whilst sites at Lake Mungo, in New South Wales, are now reported to be over 60,000 years old.

Scarred trees represent the most recent phase of Aboriginal occupation and range from 800 years (the maximum lifespan of the tree species used) to 150 years old. Their sudden disappearance after the mid-nineteenth century reflects the catastrophic impact European settlement had on lives of the Wurundjeri willam.

## HOW THEY LIVED

Archaeological and historic evidence show that life by Banyule's waterways was rich and rewarding. Like us, bands spent part of each day working to survive.

Men visited the rivers and swamps to fish and snare birds or padded through the bush on the lookout for the game that provided meat and clothing. Tool makers frequented the riverbanks to quarry stone for tools or chop wood for shelters, canoes and equipment.



La Trobe Australian  
Manuscripts Collection,  
State Library of Victoria



*La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria*

Women and children roamed the water's edge filling water buckets and gathering the tasty roots and shoots of aquatic plants. Bird's eggs were plucked along the way and rushes were slashed for weaving into baskets and fish traps.

In the bush they collected firewood and filled baskets with medicines, sap, seeds and a host of fruit and vegetables. With the gifts of the land in hand, groups drifted back to camp. Here they turned raw materials into the products they needed and feasted upon the fruits of their labour.

Aside from work, there was time to connect with the spirits of Banyule, pass on the teachings and socialise. During the seasons of plenty, the Kulin gathered at locations like the south bank of the Yarra River in Melbourne, *Bolin* swamp in Heidelberg, and *Yan-yan* (where the Plenty River joins the Yarra).

These meetings were held to nurture the alliance between the clans. At some point they altered the course of everyone's life, as this was where marriages were arranged and disputes were resolved.

This was also where people traded the riches of their country. The Wurundjeri willam had much to offer, like beautifully woven rush baskets and precious Mount William greenstone.

It was the place to see and be seen. Young men showed off their strength and dexterity at games and there were corroborees where everyone had a chance to shine.



*La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria*

# HOLDING ONTO OUR HERITAGE

Banyule's Aboriginal sites are all that remains of a unique way of life. They allow us to make a direct connection with the white gum tree dwellers, providing much of what we know and have yet to learn about their world. The conservation of this irreplaceable resource lies in our hands.

## THREATS

People pose the biggest threat to Banyule's sites. Development, like quarrying, construction, or even putting in a new walking track, destroys sites that lie in its path. Individuals can also damage sites. Collecting artefacts leaves only part of the story behind for those who come after. It is against the law to interfere with Aboriginal sites. Those who do, risk fines or imprisonment. These laws are enforced by Aboriginal Affairs Victoria, the heritage body responsible for protecting, documenting and studying Victoria's Aboriginal past.

## THE COUNCIL COMMITS

Banyule City Council is committed to protecting Aboriginal sites. Sites discovered during the 1998 archaeological survey, with special significance to the scientific and Wurundjeri communities, are being conserved. The Council has also included an Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Policy in the Banyule Planning Scheme. This will ensure that use and development of land within Banyule does not impact on Aboriginal sites.



*La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria*

## SITE ALERT!

You may discover a site when out walking or hear about one from a local resident. By reporting the site's whereabouts, you add another piece to the puzzle of our Aboriginal past. You can also help conserve known sites by reporting actions that threaten their preservation. To report your findings please contact:

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