



## ACT Heritage Council

### BACKGROUND INFORMATION GINNINDERRA CREEK CORROBOREE GROUND CULTURAL GATHERING PLACE (BLOCK 1621, BELCONNEN)

At its meeting of 27 May 2021 the ACT Heritage Council decided that the Ginninderra Creek Corroboree Ground Cultural Gathering Place was eligible for registration.

The information contained in this report was considered by the ACT Heritage Council in assessing the nomination for the Ginninderra Creek Corroboree Ground Cultural Gathering Place against the heritage significance criteria outlined in s10 of the *Heritage Act 2004*.

#### HISTORY

The Ginninderra Creek Corroboree Ground Cultural Gathering Place is a place of intangible cultural heritage value to the Aboriginal communities in the Canberra region located within a broader associative cultural landscape. This place, situated within a network of pathways and song-lines, was utilised by local Aboriginal people, likely in association with other Aboriginal groups visiting the region for cultural gatherings.

#### *Aboriginal Cultural Values*

Ginninderra Creek Corroboree Ground Cultural Gathering Place is located on a pathway that followed Ginninderra Creek. This pathway linked the ochre sites near the headwaters of the creek, with the initiation sites near its junction with the Murrumbidgee River.

The pathway follows Ginninderra Creek... the pathway was used all times of the year, different plants and fruits around at different times of the year. That's a frequently used pathway as well. And there's other significant places along the Ginninderra Creekline, closer up to the headwaters you've got the ochre sites as well (Wally Bell in Waters 2017, p82<sup>1</sup>).

As Aboriginal groups travelled along the pathway they would camp nearby and gather at the corroboree ground for communal activities including song, dance and the teaching of young people. It was a shared space used by all members of the Aboriginal community before splitting into smaller groups based on age and gender.

Pathway from Mulligan's Flat Reserve at the headwaters of the Ginninderra Creek that comes down to the Falls and the Murrumbidgee River. There's a ceremonial area up the creek, behind Parkwood Eggs. It was used as a general ceremonial area and for the young men's initiation, then they travelled down to the young men's initiation site at the top of the Falls (Wally Bell in Waters 2017, p82).

Further along the pathway separate locations were used for the initiation of boys and girls into adulthood and associated cultural activities which were restricted to the relevant community members.

[Ginninderra Falls] The Falls represent the washing away of boyhood (Wally Bell in Waters 2017, p90).

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<sup>1</sup> A detailed assessment of Aboriginal cultural values for the region was compiled in association with the Ginninderra Development Project. It identified eight special places as part of the local heritage landscape, focal points of the interactions described above, one of which is the Corroboree Ground (Place 2) (Waters 2017). It also provides a detailed compilation of Aboriginal cultural information and historical references. The quoted extracts from interviews with Aboriginal knowledge holders are copied directly from this report.

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Above the falls there's a ceremony area... what I was told that everyone was to be reconnected. Coming to this cleansed the young male for their journey (Tyronne Bell in Waters 2017, p91).

[Women's Business Hill] ...where the old women got the young men ready for initiation and then handed them over to the men. It had to be near the initiation area (Alice Williams in Waters 2017, p84).

Women elders were involved... they were based back in the hills and the young men were at the rocks and the [Ginninderra] falls (Alice Williams in Waters 2017, p84).

[Women's Story Site] This area is for women's business (Violet Sheridan in Waters 2017, p104).

This is a highly significant women's area, it's a story site and is related to young women's initiation business (Alice Williams in Waters 2017, p104).

The first stage in the initiation of young men occurred near the Ginninderra Falls. There was also a probable location for the initiation of young women nearby. Other identified cultural places, including locations for both men's and women's business, form part of this cultural landscape associated with the initiation rituals. Ginninderra Creek Corroboree Ground Cultural Gathering Place is one of the places within this associative network. It holds particular value as the place, closest to the restricted initiation areas in this pathway, where all Aboriginal people gathered regardless of age or gender.

Ginninderra Creek Corroboree Ground Cultural Gathering Place, along with the nearby sites associated with the initiation of young adults, was one stage in a complex regional network of cultural places that included sites in the Brindabella Mountains, Tuggeranong, Tidbinbilla, the Bogong Peaks, and Black Mountain.

One area Dad spoke about was Black Mountain, did business up there and then came down to Ginninderra, the preparation was at Black Mountain and then on to Ginninderra and that connection to water. Values are to do with water... (Tyronne Bell in Waters 2017, p80).

...[there's a] pathway going up to the Brindabella's... there's a major site down before Wee Jasper for ceremony that they travelled to from the Falls. There's a pathway from Black Mountain to the Falls... and people travelled down the Murrumbidgee to the Yass River as well. There were lots of different pathways and Dad and Aunties and Uncles all used to travel over here and the Falls was a stop on the way, this was before my time... [The pathways] are also about the spiritual journey and the songlines as well (Tyronne Bell in Waters 2017, p80).

A pathway ran from the [Ginninderra] Falls to the Bogong Peaks for further ceremony... The Falls is a preparation area, there would be others along the Murrumbidgee River as they walked up into the higher peaks (Alice Williams in Waters 2017, p80).

[Ginninderra Creek] connected up with Brindabella which is our songline, it's part of our Brindabella songline. The songline runs through the Brindabellas, connects up to Kosciuszko and Brungle and Tumut. There's a strong cultural feeling and value to the songline... For the Bogong feast tribes came from the coast, out west, Victoria. We would all meet up in the mountains (Joe House in Waters 2017, p81).

The songlines and pathways go from the Falls area to Gungahlin and out to Lake George and Black Mountain. They did women's business and young men's business at the Falls and then they travelled to Black Mountain and then separated onto different paths for the men and the women elders to travel up to Tuggeranong. Tuggeranong was a ceremonial business place. Women's business and men's business... On the other side of the [Murrumbidgee] River Tidbinbilla Mountains was one of the main meeting places and ceremony areas – the Yuin, the Wiradjuri, the Gundungurra, the Ngarigu – they all came up at Bogong Moth time (Richie Allen in Waters 2017, p81).

Thus, the Ginninderra Creek Corroboree Ground Cultural Gathering Place is also testament to the broader links between this site and other pathways, songlines and nodes in the associative cultural landscape.

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### *Ethnohistorical accounts and archaeological evidence for Aboriginal occupation in the ACT Region*

Aboriginal people have utilised resources in and inhabited the Canberra region for the past 25,000 years. The oldest evidence for human activity within the region is from Birragai Rockshelter in the foothills of the Namadgi Ranges (Flood, et al. 1987, Theden-Ringl 2016). This date places the earliest evidence for human activity in the Pleistocene epoch at a time when the high country was colder than today. Another site, Wee Jasper 99, is located in the foothills of the Namadgi Ranges on the margins of the high-country and also contains evidence for early human activity in this region dating to the terminal Pleistocene, around 14,000 years ago (Theden-Ringl and Langley 2018). Although the latter site is not located within the current administrative borders of the ACT it is evidence for the earliest land-use within the wider region.

The Aboriginal people of the Canberra region most likely lived in small groups with occasional larger gatherings taking place for ceremonial purposes and resource gathering (Flood 1980). Ethnographic and archaeological evidence has been used to argue that the Ginninderra Plain, extending to either side of the Ginninderra Creek, would likely have been a rich and stable resource ground for a small, but distinct, “band” of (10-20) Aboriginal people who would join with other such bands in the region for occasional larger gatherings (Kabaila 1997).

Since the city of Canberra is located on the southern tablelands of the Great Dividing Range in the foothills of the high-country, this region served as a conduit through which Aboriginal populations moved in order to access the higher mountain ranges within the ACT and NSW. Evidence for human activity in the high country is marked by sporadic occupation and shifts in occupation through time, but shows a marked increase in evidence for human activity over the last 1000 years (Theden-Ringl 2016). Occupation history shows that the highlands were used sporadically, most likely for ceremonial reasons and resource gathering. 19<sup>th</sup> century ethnography accounts recorded the seasonal collection of bogong moths in the alpine areas as a food source by Aboriginal peoples (Flood 1980). The bogong moths gather in caves and rocky outcrops of the alpine ranges to aestivate, providing an abundant food source in the Summer months between November and January. Seasonal gatherings of Aboriginal people to collect this resource included gathering members of the tribe together and members of different tribes who travelled to the region.<sup>2</sup> These larger groups could have numbered from 500-700 people. Although ethnohistorical records do not refer to the Ginninderra Creek Corroboree Ground Cultural Gathering Place specifically - given its location on a pathway, as well as its association with nearby Aboriginal sites on the Murrumbidgee River and proximity to the northern end of the Brindabella Ranges - it is probable that it was one location in the network of places used during these seasonal gatherings. The Murrumbidgee River corridor was a known route into the mountains. It is probable that marriage, ceremonies, and trade were also associated with these larger gatherings.

Negative impacts, both direct and indirect, on the Aboriginal populations after colonisation were immense (see Waters 2017). The Aboriginal populations were decimated by disease in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Loss of access to traditional resources, due to sectioning of the land, exacerbated the population decline and lifestyle losses. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, many of the remaining people were forced to live on reserves, the most significant being those at Yass, Tumut and Cowra. However, Aboriginal people descended from those inhabiting the region at colonisation continued to live in the area and it is these peoples who attest to the cultural heritage values of the Ginninderra Creek Corroboree Ground Cultural Gathering Place.

### *Environmental context*

Before European land use practices changed the local environment, the Ginninderra Creek formed a chain-of-ponds wetland in the vicinity of the Ginninderra Creek Corroboree Ground Cultural Gathering Place (ACGR 2008). The wooded, floodplains would have contained deep, discontinuous ponds that sustained plants and animals along its course for most of the time - a comparatively rich habitat for plants and animals used by Aboriginal people as food resources. Close to the site, the creek flowed through an incised gorge between resistant bedrock spurs. The wetlands would have spread both north and south of this incision, so the presence of this persistent, hard point within the landscape would have been important to the Aboriginal groups. It would have provided both a predictable locality to find surface water, even in dry conditions, and a key vantage point. It is thought that Aboriginal campsites were generally located on well-drained ground with a northern or eastern aspect, within one kilometre of a water source (most within one hundred metres), and without undue vulnerability to attack on spurs or open flats (Flood 1980). All features that make this point on the Ginninderra Creek a desirable location.

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<sup>2</sup> Detailed citations of original historical sources relating to the moth hunts can be found in Flood (1980) and Waters (2017).

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Environmental and geomorphological assessment of this area shows that it has experienced cycles of soil formation and loss over extended periods of geological time (ACGR 2008). Consequently, the reworking of discarded artefacts would have been common and *in situ* deposits rare even before the impacts of colonisation occurred. Nonetheless, European land use practises exacerbated landscape change. The area nearby is known to have been used by European settlers for ploughlands in a period pre-dating 1915 and which may extend as early as the 1830's (Boot and Kuskie 1994), causing significant disturbance to any artefactual evidence for Aboriginal presence. Later activities significantly disturbed both these ploughlands and any remaining evidence for Aboriginal land-use activities prior to this. As a result, landforms and soils were gullied and partially stripped of topsoil causing significant disturbance and redistribution of artefacts. Consequently, *in situ* deposits are rare and even those deposits that are found may contain artefacts of mixed ages.

### **Material Culture**

A series of archaeological investigations have been undertaken at the location of the Ginninderra Creek Corroboree Ground Cultural Gathering Place and in the surrounding area. These serve to emphasise the local cultural activities, with relatively high level of stone artefact finds substantially supporting the claims of the Aboriginal stakeholders that Ginninderra Creek was an area of relatively high usage. Numerous studies have shown that the areas in the immediate vicinity of Ginninderra Creek possess high densities of stone artefacts compared to areas of the landscape further away, suggesting that the Ginninderra Creek was used repeatedly over a long period of time.

A series of archaeological surveys that have been undertaken with relation to land developments in the vicinity of the Ginninderra Creek Corroboree Ground Cultural Gathering Place and the nearby Ginninderra Creek have established that the highest density of artefacts can be found closest to the creek. In contrast, areas away from the banks of the creek possess evidence for Aboriginal presence at a comparatively low intensity. After the 2003 bushfires in Canberra, surveys showed several artefact scatters in this vicinity, most with less than 10 artefacts, but one had 78 and another 28, which Charles Dearling (on site record forms lodged with ACT Heritage) interpreted as "probably part of a continuous scatter across the landscape." There were five surface scatters located on the opposite side of the creek that included artefact numbers above 10 artefacts, with one containing 38 artefacts (Kuskie and Boot 1992). To the northeast salvage and subsurface excavations revealed low level scatters (Boot and Kuskie 1994). Archaeological investigations for the Macgregor West Estate development, an area to the south-east of the corroboree ground, revealed low-density scatters and isolated finds both on the surface and in sub-surface testing (BIOSIS 2009a, 2009b, Saunders 2007d), although a stone ground hatchet head, a relatively rare artefact type in this area was located about 500 metres from the Ginninderra Creek Corroboree Ground Cultural Gathering Place. A survey of Block 1622, which is located close to the south-west edge of the nominated area, found no artefacts (NOHC 2013). Likewise, the Parkwood Sewer was a development about 400 meters to the south, away from Ginninderra Creek but close to a smaller inlet stream, the survey found no artefacts – although a previous heritage record for a single artefact at this site existed it was not relocated (NOHC 2014). These sparse scatters in the areas away from Ginninderra Creek probably represent transit through country, low level resource gathering activities, and occasional use for campgrounds when the creek environs were uninhabitable due to flooding. The artefact densities increase closer to the Ginninderra Creek, but all probably represent activities that were most likely associated with larger camps near the creeklines, such as MW5.

The location of site MW5<sup>3</sup> directly adjacent to the Ginninderra Creek Corroboree Ground Cultural Gathering Place strongly supports the argument that this was a gathering place for Aboriginal people. There is evidence for distinct activity areas with higher densities of artefacts within the site, including locations of stone artefact manufacture and reduction (NOHC 2009). Some types of core reduction represented in the assemblage were unusual for assemblages in the ACT. Because retouched artefacts were often found separate from areas where artefacts were manufactured, archaeologists have suggested that this might be representative of discrete activity areas. There is evidence that some stone materials were not local to the vicinity, chert and silcrete artefacts occurred in very small pieces which probably represents conservation of the relatively scarce resource. Other stone types were not as heavily reduced and probably come from relatively close areas. Charcoal, wood and bone artefacts were also found and a hearth area was excavated, directly demonstrating that the Aboriginal people were camping in this area.

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<sup>3</sup> MW5 was first reported as a surface scatter of 120 stone artefacts in 2007 (Saunders 2007b). (Although MW5 is included on a map on page 13 of Saunders (2007a), no details are contained until later reports.) A series of archaeological investigations and recommendation regarding this site followed (Saunders 2007c, 2007d, NOHC 2008a, 2008b, 2008c, 2009).

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MW5 has a high density of artefacts compared to other sub-surface archaeological excavations in the ACT (NOHC 2011). It has an extrapolated average incidence of 27 artefacts per m<sup>2</sup> and a maximum incidence of 120 per m<sup>2</sup>.<sup>4</sup> Sites with comparable densities in the ACT region include: BPAD1, located closer to the headwaters of Ginninderra Creek, in Gungahlin (total no. artefacts 292; av. areal 39.7/m<sup>2</sup>, max. 252m<sup>2</sup>), and Hume West (total no. artefacts 335; av. areal 46/m<sup>2</sup> for HA1/PAD1). Hume PAD 6C also proved to have some instances where the artefacts per square meter were very high (NOHC 2016). The highest incidence of artefacts per square meter was 127/m<sup>2</sup> in Pit 51. However, the distribution of artefacts was variable and the average compared to the aforementioned sites was consequently much lower. Although the average and maximum areal incidence at MW5 is less when compared to the some of the other sites these must be viewed within the context of the much greater excavated area and overall assemblage size at MW5, particularly compared to BPAD1 and Hume West. The high number of total excavated artefacts from MW5 corresponds with a higher diversity of stone and artefact types evident in this assemblage, although all raw materials can be found within the broader ACT region. The high numbers of artefacts found at MW5, found in relatively few other sites in the ACT, supports the argument that this location, close to the Ginninderra Creek Corroboree Ground Cultural Gathering Place, was a gathering place for Aboriginal people used on numerous occasions in the past.

### **DESCRIPTION**

The Ginninderra Creek Corroboree Ground Cultural Gathering Place is a place of intangible heritage value located on the border of the Australian Capital Territory and New South Wales, within the District of Belconnen. It is located on what is now rural pastureland composed of gently undulating terrain between Ginninderra Creek and the Parkwood Egg facility, adjacent to the suburb of McGregor. The area of the Ginninderra Creek Corroboree Ground Cultural Gathering Place was surveyed by Waters Consultancy in consultation with key Aboriginal knowledge holders.

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<sup>4</sup> This refers to the areal incidence, which is a conflation of the artefact numbers from all depths. Because there is very little vertical integrity in these archaeological sites the areal incidence best reflects the distribution of activities with the sites. The test-pit sizes often vary so the figures are extrapolated from the excavated totals to give an estimate per square metre that can be used for comparisons of density between different areas of a site or with different sites.

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SITE PLAN

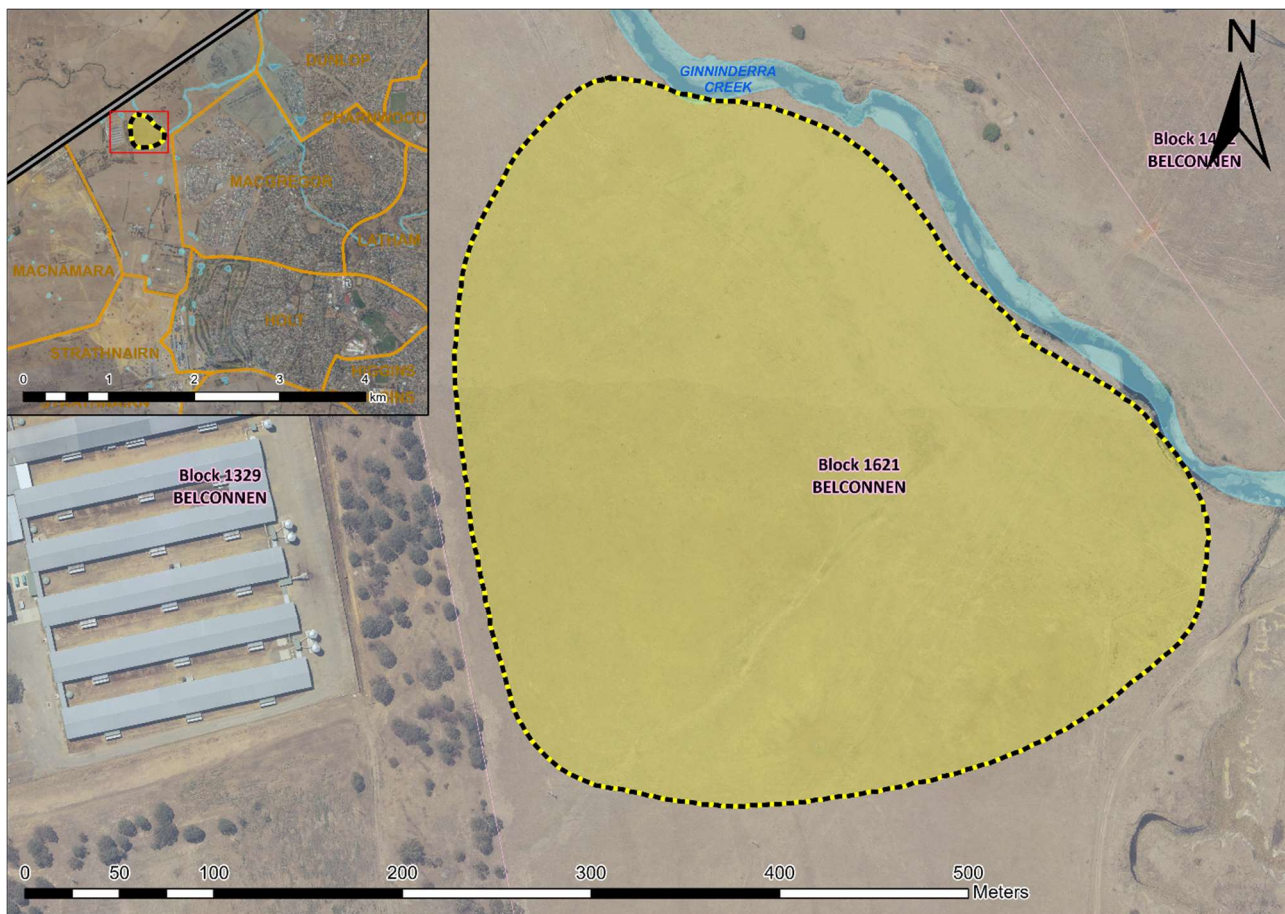


Figure 1: Ginninderra Creek CorroboREE Ground Cultural Gathering Place site boundary.



**BACKGROUND INFORMATION – GINNINDERRA CREEK CORROBOREE GROUND CULTURAL GATHERING PLACE**

**IMAGES**



**Image 1:** View west towards the CorroboREE Ground from the Bicentennial Trail with Ginninderra Creek on the right (photograph by Korey Moon, Waters Consultancy Pty Ltd, 2017; in Waters 2020).



**Image 2:** Ginninderra Creek on the right and the CorroboREE Ground on the left (photograph by Korey Moon, Waters Consultancy Pty Ltd, 2017; in Waters 2020).



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**Image 3:** Corroboree Ground with trees on the western boundary (photograph by Korey Moon, Waters Consultancy Pty Ltd, 2017; in Waters 2020).



**Image 4:** Ginninderra Creek near the Corroboree Ground (photograph by Korey Moon, Waters Consultancy Pty Ltd, 2017; in Waters 2020).



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