



## ACT Heritage Council

### BACKGROUND INFORMATION

#### Corroboree Ground and Aboriginal Cultural Area, Queanbeyan River

##### Block 700 MAJURA

Part Blocks 662, 663, 699, 680, 701, 702, 703, 704 MAJURA

Part Blocks 2002, 2091, 2117 JERRABOMBERRA

OAKS ESTATE Block 22, Section 2; Block 13, Section 3; Block 4, Section 13; Block 6, Section 13, Block 5, Section 14; Part Block 15, Section 2; Part Block 19, Section 2; Part Block 20, Section 2; Part Block 21, Section 2; Part Block 5, Section 13; Part Block 1, Section 14; Part Block 4, Section 14; Part Block 1, Section 17

At its meeting of 16 November 2017 the ACT Heritage Council decided that the Corroboree Ground and Aboriginal Cultural Area, Queanbeyan River was eligible for registration.

The information contained in this report was considered by the ACT Heritage Council in assessing the nomination for the Corroboree Ground and Aboriginal Cultural Area, Queanbeyan River against the heritage significance criteria outlined in s 10 of the *Heritage Act 2004*.

### HISTORY

The Ngunnawal people are traditionally affiliated with the lands within the Canberra region. In this citation, 'Aboriginal community' refers to the Ngunnawal people and other Aboriginal groups within the ACT who draw significance from the place. Whilst the term 'Aboriginal community' acknowledges these groups in the ACT, it is recognised that their traditional territories extend outside contemporary borders. These places attest to a rich history of Aboriginal connection to the area. Traditional Aboriginal society in Canberra during the nineteenth century suffered from dramatic depopulation and alienation from traditional land based resources, although some important social institutions like intertribal gatherings and corroborees were retained to a degree at least until the 1860s.

The Aboriginal history of the ACT extends from the present day back many thousands of years, and is evidenced by both the tangible and intangible aspects of Aboriginal culture and history. The earliest evidence of Aboriginal people in the region comes from Birrigai Rock Shelter in Tidbinbilla, dating back to over 25,000 years ago (Flood, 1995:116; and Theden-Ringl, 2016:26). Activity at Birrigai has been linked to seasonal gatherings of local and regional Aboriginal people who would come together along Aboriginal pathways, and participate in a series of meetings and ceremonies along the way.

A 1995 publication titled *A collaborative essay by Ngunnawal people and other Canberra based Aboriginal artists* captures the significance and history of the ACT, the Molonglo River<sup>1</sup>, and the Bogong Moth ceremonies in the voices of Aboriginal people:

*Every year the moths come from the Darling Downs in Queensland, western New South Wales and as far as Mt Buffalo in Victoria carrying the spirit of the moths with them (4–5).*

*Aboriginal people arrived for the ceremonies when the spirit of the moths flew over the country. Ngunnawal people came not just from here but as far afield as Brungle (Tumut) and BoorenYaouk (Burrinjuck) and they also crossed the Bulgaa (Brindabellas). Visitors were also invited to participate. This ceremony was a happening time for young boys and of course it was part of the tradition to listen to the spirits (5).*

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<sup>1</sup> The name 'Molonglo' is said to mean, 'the sound of thunder,' according to the *Ngunnawal Language Handbook* (Ngunnawal Language Centre, 2002)

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*The sites represented in the exhibition are associated with the Bogong moth ceremony at the beginning of the Morumbeeja (Murrumbidgee) River. These sites are now called different names: Mt Ginggerri near Jedbinbilla (Tidbinbilla) was a ceremonial site for men and Birrigai was part of the track. Some of the camps that happened around Canberra were at the Queanbeyan River, Yanpilla (Pialligo), Kurrajong (Capitol Hill), the Black Hill camp (Black Mountain) and the Red Hill mob (Gungahlin). At Yirrayarra (Uriarra), the cooking rock, women cooked the Bogong Moths which the men brought down from the mountains (5).*

*The Molonglo river which runs through our country is associated with the snake. We call him the Guddy. He is one of the spirits of the place like the Dooliga, the hairy people who protect our sacred sites. We associate the girrahwah (great goanna), the eagle and the platypus with the river. The trees along the river supplied timber for canoes and other objects of ceremonial and everyday use and they continue to provide shelter for a variety of animals, birds and insect life (6).*

The Corroboree Ground and Aboriginal Cultural Area, Queanbeyan River was a focus of activity where Aboriginal people from the Limestone Plains and surrounding regions gathered to feast on Bogong moths. During this period, groups would gather in the alpine regions south and southwest of the ACT to feast on the plentiful supply of Bogong moths as they aestivated over summer (Flood, 1980; Flood, 1995:239–240; Gale 1991:57–58; Kabaila, 2005:28–31). One of these pathways follows the Molonglo River and includes a camping ground and meeting place at its junction with the Queanbeyan River, now the area around Oaks Estate, although the exact location would have been influenced by the best location for the conditions at the particular time of year or the activity involved (Flood, 1980: 162–168). The area was visited by Aboriginal groups using the established pathway to pass through the land of the local Aboriginal people who continually occupied the entire area over successive generations as evidenced by the scattered stone artefacts that can be found in the area as well as early European accounts.

European accounts (Figure 1) show that the Corroboree Ground and Aboriginal Cultural Area, Queanbeyan River at the junction of the rivers was still being used as a pathway and camping ground in 1862 when several groups from Braidwood, Yass and Bland Plains gathered for a corroboree at a location within sight of the Oaks. The description reads “...the blacks were encamped on the bank of the Queanbeyan River, opposite the Oaks, the residence of Dr. Hayley, from which place the inmates saw the camp fires and heard noises as of quarrelling...”. This significant ethnographic account allows the location of a corroboree, killing and burial to be determined with relative accuracy and provides information about traditional burial practices. It also provides evidence of the callously inquisitive way in which Aboriginal burials were interfered with.

Pathways are a vital element in the Aboriginal landscape as access to resources and as trade routes. They played an important role in social interaction between groups as well as in ceremonial and religious occasions. They are intrinsic to the Aboriginal cultural experience not only as physical ways of moving between places but as knowledge of how places are interconnected which was passed on in rich and varied forms of cultural representation (Kabaila, 2005:27–28). The Molonglo River has been noted as an important pathway by Flood (1980: 162–168) and upstream from Oaks Estate has other important functions known to the Aboriginal community including important cultural sites in and near Molonglo Gorge as well as being a boundary region between groups as identified in maps by Tindale (1974) and Horton (1996). Because the river corridors are part of a known pathway and a meeting/corroboree ground, there is a high probability of them containing areas of significance for Aboriginal heritage. It was noted that the Representative Aboriginal Organisations (RAO) “...have expressed the opinion that this site may hold significance for them.” (NOHC, 2013: 25).

The importance of the Molonglo River to Aboriginal people is paralleled with that of the Murrumbidgee River corridor where over two hundred Aboriginal sites including open camp sites, stone quarries, scarred trees and ceremonial sites had been recorded by the early 1990s (Klaver 1993). Thousands of stone artefacts have been recovered from sand bodies adjacent to the Molonglo River at Pialligo since the early 1970s as the result of work carried out by the Canberra Archaeological Society (NOHC, 2013).

**SHOCKING MURDER OF A BLACKFELLOW.—**  
During the last eight or ten days two or three tribes of blackfellows from Braidwood, Yass, and Bland Plains, have visited this town, giving us a display of their deep degradation, in wandering the streets by day, drunk and quarrelsome, and assembling nightly for "corroboree." Yesterday afternoon a report reached us that the body of one of these blacks, supposed to be Billy the Ram, was found dead on the bank of the river, near Dr. Hayley's residence. Later in the day, Dr. Morton, the Coroner, furnished us with the following particulars gathered from the depositions taken at the inquest. Last Tuesday night the blacks were encamped on the bank of the Queanbeyan river, opposite the Oaks, the residence of Dr. Hayley, from which place the inmates saw the camp fires and heard noises as of quarrelling amongst the blackfellows and their gins. The next day a son of Dr. Hayley's saw three or four blacks digging a hole a little distance from their camp, and near the camp something wrapped in a blanket, like a dead body. Information was given to the police, and Senior Constable Reilly proceeded to the spot, and disinterred the body, which was rolled up in a blanket, doubled, and tied up. At the bottom of the grave there were a tin pot, necklace, and several articles of attire. The body was that of a male, about forty years of age; decomposition had set in; the cuticle was partly pulled off; there was a wound just below the right shoulder, penetrating the muscles to the bone, made apparently by a tomahawk or spear; the right wrist was dislocated, and the left arm nearly severed a little below the shoulder, the bone being broken through; the head had undergone considerable injuries from contusions, the face was much disfigured, the front teeth loosened, and the left eye knocked out, and a fracture of the skull. The jury found a verdict, "that the deceased was murdered by certain aboriginals unknown, by various wounds having been inflicted upon him by means of tomahawks or other implements."

Figure 1 Excerpt from the Queanbeyan Age 5 April 1862

Transcript:

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Claoué-Long (2006: 17) recounts this story which was also printed in the Goulbourn newspapers. It noted that an investigation, recorded that the man, identified as Billy Chinnum also known as Billy the Ram, had been killed, perhaps as punishment for transgressing traditional laws.

This is among one of few historical references to Corroborees in the Canberra area. One of the earliest written records of Aboriginal life on the Limestone Plains was recorded at Tuggeranong Homestead in 1831. William Edward Riley visited Tuggeranong in that year and recorded in great detail a 'Corobberie at Tuggranon' [sic]. His account evocatively records sounds, smells and sights (William Edward Riley Papers, Documents 1817–1856).

William Davis Wright (cited in Avery 1994), who grew up with the Aboriginal people of the Lanyon area during the 1840's and 1850's, recorded that at the time of first white settlement the 'Kamberra tribe' numbered between 400 and 500 individuals, and met once a year for a big corroboree. They would then divide into smaller groups of 20 to 30 and commence "flitting from one spot to another, living on the animal, grub and plant life and moving on as they exhausted each place."

Bluett (cited in Avery 1994) claimed that Pialligo was used for "frequent local social gatherings", and the foot of Black Mountain was the scene of "all tribe peagants [sic]". Wright (1923: 57–58) also noted from conversations with the Kamberra tribe, that their corroboree grounds were located at Acton and near 'Canberra Church' near the Duntroon dairy.

Avery also cites Robinson, who in 1927, on the basis of "definite local assertion" identified a corroboree ground located on what is now known as 'Corroboree Park' in the suburb of Ainslie. As of 2017 this park lies within the heritage registered Corroboree Park Precinct.

In terms of burials, Claoué-Long (2006) has collected information pertaining to certain recordings on the Limestone Plains and in the surrounding region. Some were recorded as 'traditional,' performed by Aboriginal people, or by European people under instruction (such as the McKeahnie family for Jimmy the Rover). Others appear to have been performed according to European custom. She lists burials of certain individuals at Ginninderra, Charnwood, Glenwood, Booroomba, Queanbeyan, Cotter Falls, and Tharwa (Onyong). Of these, Onyong's Grave Site is listed on the ACT Heritage Register.

## DESCRIPTION

Corroboree Ground and Aboriginal Cultural Area, Queanbeyan River is generally typified by gently rolling terrain at its highest point the area is around 570 m (Australian Height Datum).

It includes areas north and south of, and at the confluence of the Queanbeyan and Molonglo Rivers. The northern portion of the study area above the Molonglo River contains an ephemeral drainage line which contributes to the Molonglo River from that direction.

The exact location of Corroboree Ground and Aboriginal Cultural Area, Queanbeyan River is no longer clear, although the relatively flat area at the confluence of the Molonglo and Queanbeyan rivers was likely a focal point for gatherings and ceremonies, and is visible from the vantage point of the Oaks, as detailed in the Queanbeyan Age account of 1862. However, Corroboree Ground and Aboriginal Cultural Area, Queanbeyan River would likely have included the area north, of the Molonglo River, as shown in Figure 2, as social, cultural, and environmental changes over time could have meant that gatherings, movement, and ceremonies may not have taken place at the exact place on every occasion. For this reason, it is highly likely that the area indicated by the 100 year flood plain on the south side of the Molonglo River was also a focus for cultural activity.

Due to the association of this portion of the Molonglo and Queanbeyan rivers with important Aboriginal ceremonies, events, and lifeways, the area as a whole, as shown in Figure 2, is important to the Aboriginal people of the ACT and surrounds, and shall be taken to be equivalent to the site boundary of Corroboree Ground and Aboriginal Cultural Area, Queanbeyan River for the purposes of this registration. The boundary shown in Figure 2 encloses an area of archaeological potential identified by the RAOs and Navin Officer Heritage Consultants in 2013. As this area of archaeological potential is broadly associated with a specific, significant activity (i.e. a corroboree), the area has been included within the registration boundary. A sand quarry, established during the 1950s, has been excluded from the boundary owing to significant levels of sub-surface disturbance.

Physical condition and integrity

Pre-European modification, the Corroboree Ground and Aboriginal Cultural Area, Queanbeyan River was described by Charles Throsby Smith, one of the team of Europeans to first visit the area, as “a most beautiful forest as far as we could see, thinly wooded by Gums and Bastard Box, the tops of the Hills stony and stone sand, but in the valleys a fine Rich Soil” (cited in Watson (1927) p.9) Since then the area has been cleared with little remnant vegetation remaining. The rivers have been affected by the growth of willow and other weed species that had significantly slowed the flow of water, but recent clearing and rejuvenation of the river corridor has seen a significant reduction of weed species.

Aside from disruptions due to exotic vegetation, Corroboree Ground and Aboriginal Cultural Area, Queanbeyan River would not have changed dramatically since this time and is likely to preserve evidence of Aboriginal use of the area during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, including the 1862 corroboree. Further, Corroboree Ground and Aboriginal Cultural Area, Queanbeyan River lies within the 100 year flood zone, a depositional environment with deep alluvial soils, which usually allow for sound preservation of cultural material in context.

The boundary, as demonstrated in Image 1, captures several artefact scatters identified in 2013 (NOHC), the 100 year flood zone, several eucalypts of considerable age with potential cultural scars, and, coinciding with the area described as the corroboree and burial site in 1862, a large area identified as having moderate archaeological potential (NOHC 2013).

Image 1: Site Plan: Corroboree Ground and Aboriginal Cultural Area, Queanbeyan River (Jerrabomberra and Majura)



Corroboree Ground and Aboriginal Cultural Area, Queanbeyan River (Jerrabomberra and Majura)



**Image 2 view from the north side of Molonglo River towards Oaks Estate. ‘The Oaks’ would be visible without mature trees on the river bank (ACT Heritage 2017)**



**Image 3 One of several Eucalypts in the registration boundary (ACT Heritage 2017)**



**Image 4 Phalaris at the junction of the rivers, demonstrating lack of surface visibility in the area in 2017 (ACT Heritage 2017)**



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