

Our Indigenous History and Heritage

Nestled in the foothills of the Dandenong Ranges for tens of thousands of years, the area in which Greater Dandenong is now located was the territory of the Wurundjeri and Boonerwung (or Bunurong) tribes of the Kulin Nation. Research has shown that the availability and occurrence of water most influenced living patterns in prehistory (L. Smith 1991). Indigenous land use patterns show concentrations of people around the former Carrum Swamp, the floodplain, wetlands and elevated areas along Dandenong Creek.

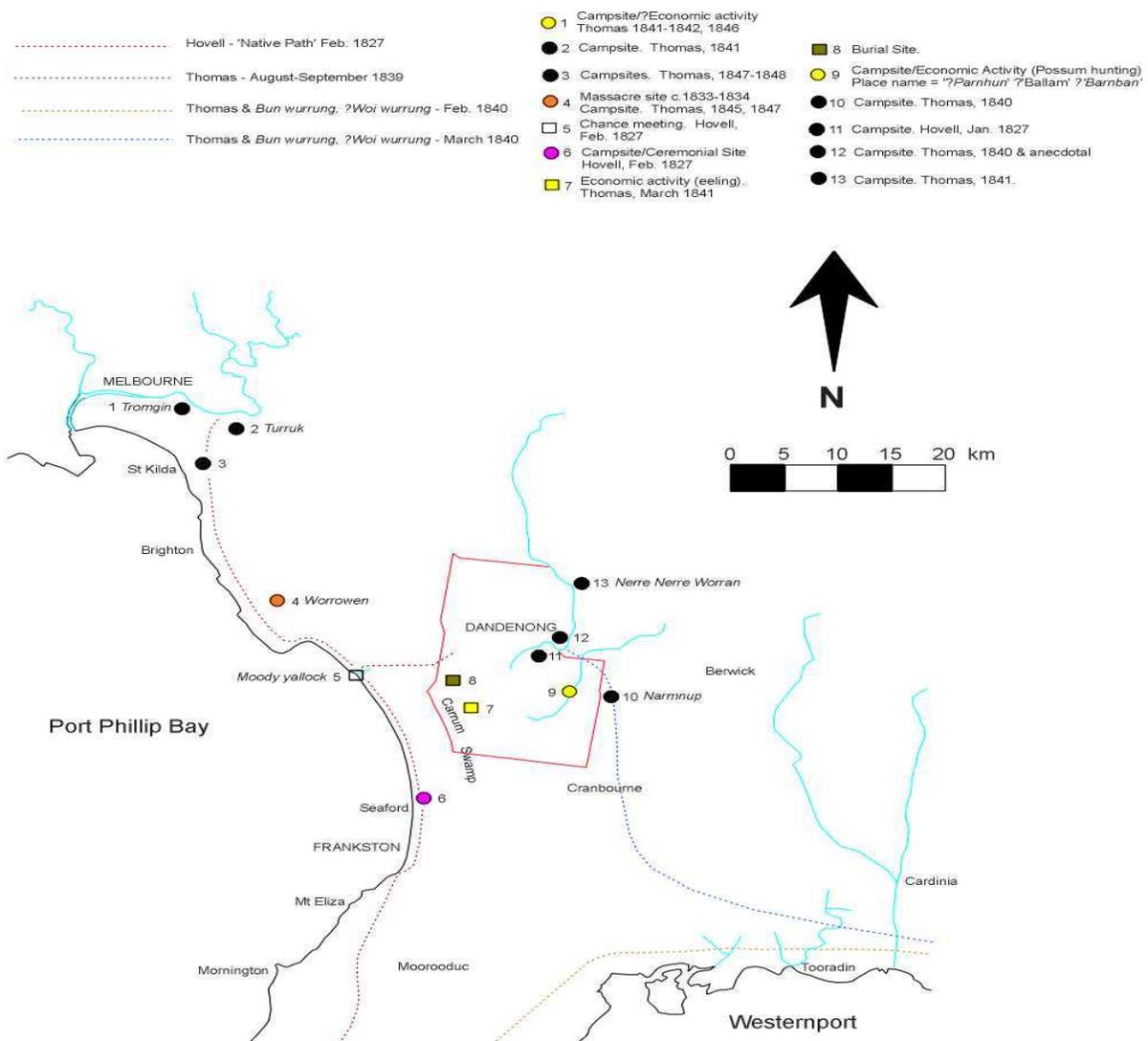


Figure 6: Location of *Bunwurrung* places in and near the City of Greater Dandenong, which are recorded in the ethnographic literature.

Sources: Places 1-4, Clark & Heydon, 1998: 49-53
 Place 5, Hovell, February 1827 in Hibbins, 1984: 5
 Place 6, Hovell, February 1827 in Hibbins, 1984: 6
 Place 7, Thomas, Journals, March 1841
 Place 8, Hailebury College Magazine, 1971
 Place 9, Hibbins, 1984: 12
 Place 10, Thomas, 1841 in HRV: 578-579
 Place 11, Hovell, January 1827 in Hibbins, 1984: 4
 Place 12, Thomas, 1841 in HRV: 578-579
 Place 13, Thomas, 1841 in HRV: 578-579

The Bunurong People

The Bunurong People are Indigenous People from south-east Victoria. Their traditional lands are from the Werribee River in the north-west down to Wilson's Promontory in the south-east taking in the catchments of the old Carrum swamp, Tarwin River and Westernport Bay and including Mornington Peninsula, French and Phillip Islands.

The Bunurong People were part of a language group or nation known as Kulin (Koolin). The Bunurong People prefer to be described as Kulin or Bunurong rather than Koorie (Koori), which is a word from another Aboriginal language.

The City of Greater Dandenong lies across the boundary of two neighbouring Bunurong Clans; it takes in the south-eastern land of the Ngaruk Willam Bunurong and the north-west land of the Mayone Bulluk Bunurong.

As with most Indigenous Peoples of the world, Mayone Bulluk's and Ngaruk Willam's cultural, ceremonial and spiritual life was dictated by the seasons through the availability of their sustainable natural resources. Through thousands of years of observation, the Bunurong People were able to predict the availability of their seasonal resources by certain changes in plant growth and animal behaviour.



Carrum Carrum Swamp today

Aboriginal living patterns were severely disrupted when European settlers arrived in the Port Phillip region. The Aboriginal population declined by 80 per cent in the period from 1834 to 1850. When compounded by the loss of land and the disappearance of traditional ways of life, the adverse affects for local indigenous people were dramatic.

Captain William Lonsdale, one of the earliest Dandenong landholders, at the wishes of Governor La Trobe formed the Native Police Corps and appointed C.L. de Villiers as its commander. The saga of the Native Police Corps and the “rounding up” of the local Aborigines was highly political from the outset.

In 1837 George Langhorne wanted to set up a mission on the Dandenong Creek but the site chosen had already been taken up by local squatters. With constant changes to Administrators in the Colony, each of whom had a different opinion on the role of the native police, the mission and the rights of squatters, it became a contest between the various players as to who could wield the most power and influence over the decision making processes.

As Niall Brennan states in the Chronicles of Dandenong “... *the struggle went deeper than a mere clash of personalities. The squatters were opposed to the police for reasons good and bad. The lawless elements among the white men disliked police of any sort, and native police especially. The better type of squatters resented any plan that might diminish the usefulness of the Blacks to themselves. Some squatters, well intentioned but paternalistic, believed that the best interests of the Blacks were served by being ‘looked after’ by white men; that is to say, using the Blacks as cheap hands around the property.*”

Cultural heritage sites remaining within the City representing these early periods include the remains of important meeting and ceremonial sites for Aboriginal tribes, many of which still have deep significance and meaning for contemporary Aboriginal residents.

There are important groups of highly valued scarred trees on public and private land. Many of the trees exhibit scars representing the harvesting of bark for manufacture of items for daily use. Some scars are foot and hand holds which provided access to the upper reaches of trees for food sources such as honey.



Aboriginal ScarTree

In the majority of cases, most Aboriginal heritage sites in Greater Dandenong lie below the present surface of the ground, where they are excavated by professional archaeologists and representatives from the local Aboriginal community. All sites of Aboriginal cultural heritage are protected against disturbance or destruction by State and Commonwealth legislation. The Victorian Government introduced the Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006. This Act replaces Part 11A of the Commonwealth Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Protection Act 1984 and the State Archaeological and Aboriginal Relics Preservation Act 1972. The new Act provides more effective protection of Aboriginal cultural heritage and broadens Aboriginal community involvement in decision-making.

The Act links the protection of Aboriginal cultural heritage more directly with planning and land development processes. It does not seek to stop or delay development. It establishes a process by which Aboriginal heritage can be protected and managed, with the involvement of Aboriginal people, while allowing development to proceed. The Act also includes processes for dispute resolution including review of certain decisions through the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT).

As well as establishing the Aboriginal Heritage Council to advise the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs on Aboriginal Heritage Management, it also provides for local Aboriginal organisations to be involved in the decision making process.

Larger developments and many high impact activities in culturally sensitive landscapes can cause significant harm to Aboriginal cultural heritage. The Act prescribes circumstances in which a Cultural Heritage Management Plan will be required for certain types of development or activities located in sensitive areas before they can commence.

A recent example of heritage protection within the City of Greater Dandenong has been the work undertaken in conjunction with Thiess John Holland and the

development of the EastLink project and their ability to be able to work with the local community in protecting sites of significance. Council's role as the local authority on planning matters means we can influence the process and outcomes through building positive relationships.

There are 556 people of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander origin living in Greater Dandenong today, making up approximately 0.4% of the area's population or 2% of the 25,000 Indigenous people living in Victoria. (ABS Statistics 2008)

Although this is a relatively small number of people actually living in the area, the services provided by the Dandenong and District Aborigines Co-operative Limited, the Bunurong Health Service and other agencies, reach far out into the South East region of Victoria. The health service which operates from the same location as the Co-operative aims to keep Kooris living in the Dandenong and Mornington Peninsula areas fully informed about what services and programs the organisation can deliver to help meet their needs now and into the future.

Council continues to support the Bunurong People in continuing to practice their traditions and culture, to help preserve and protect the sites that remain of their pre-settlement history and to educate and inform today's society of the value and richness of that culture and history.

It is acknowledged that Aboriginal cultural heritage is an in-valuable part of the history of this City and Council continues to seek ways to protect and preserve this heritage in sympathy with the many demands placed on the land under Council's control.

Each year, the Aboriginal community celebrates its survival and significant events in its history. These celebrations centre around Reconciliation Week (May 27 to June 3) and NAIDOC Week (first full week in July). Greater Dandenong continues to be a staunch supporter of these events and joins with the Aboriginal community to celebrate.