

Maribyrnong - historic themes shaping the west

Emma Russell, July 2022.



City of Maribyrnong's heritage – the tangible and intangible evidence of its history – tells a complex story of growth, change, decline, adaptation, and diversity going back eons to the creation of the landscape. It includes many thousands of years of custodianship by people of the Woi wurrung language group, as well as 180 years of colonization, settlement and immigration by diverse and numerous generations, lives, and cultures. All leave their marks on Maribyrnong.

The following summarised historic themes encompass these peoples' stories. We did this work for Maribyrnong City Council for use during community consultation earlier this year as part of their Heritage Plan Review Project.

Woi wurrung cultural heritage

The Woi wurrung language group included the Wurundjeri and the Bunerong clans who have been here for over 40,000 years. They are custodians of a vast tract of land that stretched from west to east well beyond what later become Melbourne and wrapped around the coast to what is now the Nepean Peninsula. They have witnessed major changes in their landscape created by ancient volcanoes and the flooding of the bay 10,000 years ago at the end of the last Ice Age. Many of these stories are captured in the oral histories passed down from generation to generation.

In the last 10,000 years the landscape has remained largely unchanged, but under the custodianship of the Woi wurrung fire management maintained open grasslands, fish traps captured the annual migration of eels, stone was excavated to make tools and weapons, and the people moved with the seasons from the hills to the lowlands and up and down river to take advantage of the best living conditions and food opportunities, and to manage their custodial responsibilities in a sustainable manner.

After the arrival of the Europeans, firstly in 1803 but permanently in 1835, change to the landscape and to the Woi wurrung way of life

was impactful and immediate. They were pushed off their country into reserves, so returned to look for a new home away from the missions, and to find work in the post-war and depression years. They found their country transformed but work was to be had in Maribyrnong's meat, explosives, and textiles industries.

These years marked the beginning of the Aboriginal Rights movement of the early twentieth century and by the 1930s and 1940s many Indigenous people living in what later become Maribyrnong were part of this movement to reclaim their culture and their right to custodianship over country.

There are several homes in Footscray, Yarraville, and Seddon where Indigenous people met to support each other as part of the Aboriginal Rights Movement, but also to maintain a community within a community, in what had become an unrecognisable and often hostile place. The William Barak Pictorial Memorial is an important site north of Duke Street, Braybrook overlooking the River, which itself has been named with an anglicised version of the Aboriginal term for 'I can hear a ringtail possum' and in 1994 that term was also given to the new local government authority.



Source: Living Museum of the West 'Still Here' exhibition and website : https://www.livingmuseum.org.au/exhibitions/still_here/still_here_panel2.html



Source: Maggolee website, Maribyrnong page: <https://www.maggolee.org.au/lga/maribyrnong>

Built heritage

Maribyrnong's 'built heritage' refers to all those places constructed across the area, but they also represent the changes in opportunities, needs and aspirations.

It was one of the first areas settled by Europeans as it had a good river and flat land, making it easier to settle or travel inland. From a punt on the Saltwater River (Maribyrnong River) in 1939 near the Yarra River junction people could travel to Williamstown, Geelong and further. This 'Saltwater settlement' was later made the Village Reserve of Footscray. Braybrook, further upstream the River, was another village reserve established in 1840.

With the sale of Crown Land by 1843 landowning was early compared to other parts of Melbourne and properties were used for agriculture or farming, with the odd hut, shed or other farm building dotted across the landscape. Other landholdings were subdivided and sold off as residential lots in the 1850s.

Maribyrnong's built form followed main roads such as Ballarat Road, which facilitated transport of goods, as did the railway lines and the River. In the first half of the twentieth century the landscape began changing from one of farming to an industrial landscape as many companies took advantage of these transport routes and the flat cheap land to expand their operations.

While several townships were established during the 19th century, the phenomenon of large-scale employer and government housing began to fill the gaps between main roads and small towns in places like Braybrook, Maidstone and Tottenham. This was accelerated during World War 2 when the Federal Government's Munition Workers' House Scheme built 235 houses in Braybrook and Sunshine. After the war the Housing Commission of Victoria developed the Braybrook-Maidstone estate with over 2,000 new homes as well as flats and homes in other parts of what is now Maribyrnong.

Today, the Maribyrnong Planning Scheme includes Heritage Overlays to ensure protection of places that have contributed to or represent significant aspects of the history of the area.



*It was still largely farm or open land south of the Maribyrnong River in and around Braybrook.
Source: <https://1945.melbourne/>*

Archaeological heritage

Archaeological heritage works with built and intangible heritage to demonstrate the history of a place and can demonstrate past ways of life, and original structures of long-standing and often changed buildings, or formations of roads, waterways and other ways in which landscapes have changed.

Opportunities for greater understandings of the post-contact/early settler era can still be found within the original town reserves of Footscray and Braybrook, of 19th and early-mid 20th century working life and industry at sites of former manufactories, and along the Maribyrnong River between Braybrook and Maribyrnong there are six artefact scatter sites telling of pre-contact Woiwurrung life in the area.

Maritime heritage

Bordered on the east and north by the Maribyrnong River the City of Maribyrnong has a rich maritime heritage that goes back tens of thousands of years. 'Maritime' relates to the ocean and the Maribyrnong River was once known as the Saltwater River due to the tidal reaches of the ocean from Port Phillip Bay, which came as far as Solomon's Ford in Avondale Heights.

Archaeological heritage, oral histories, and written records of the Indigenous way of life in the immediate post-contact era has shown the importance of the river for food and transport to the local Woi wurrung people.

The first non-Aboriginal people on the Maribyrnong was a surveying party in 1803 headed by Charles Grimes, aboard the Cumberland. They rowed up river as far as the 'rock falls' at present-day Avondale Heights and noted an Aboriginal fish trap there.

After Melbourne was founded in 1835 it became used for industry – transporting raw material and produce, and as a drain for refuse. There were slaughtering houses and melting-down establishments at present-day Kensington and Braybrook and, briefly, at Yarraville and then at Maribyrnong. Abattoirs at Newmarket attracted associated industries such as tanneries, piggeries, fell-mongers, soap and candle-makers. In the 1860s and 1870s industry spread to the Footscray side of the river. Producers of fertilisers and

chemicals followed, so by the early twentieth century a series of belching chimney stacks and factories lined the riverbank from Dynon Road to Francis St, all of them using the river for washing, refuse and transportation. The factories generated thousands of jobs but gained Footscray the reputation of the smelliest place in Melbourne.

The Melbourne Harbour Trust was formed in 1877 to manage the Port of Melbourne and was responsible for the Maribyrnong River as far as Footscray. A new course was created for the Yarra River, the old junction between the two rivers near Footscray was blocked, and land was reclaimed along the banks of the Maribyrnong, to deepen and widen the river for easier navigation and to constructing massive wharves at Yarraville and Footscray.

The river and its environs have served as a recreational resource for nearby residents who use it for boating, fishing, and enjoying the riverbank. But it has also offered work to thousands of people in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and stimulated the development of Melbourne's west as an industrial centre.

Some traces of the busy scene that was the Maribyrnong River in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries can be glimpsed along the river. To learn more take a self-guided walk of the Maribyrnong River Heritage Trail.



*Lesley Sinclair, artist,
'Little ships on the
Maribyrnong River',
1953
Source:
State Library Victoria,
Accession no:
H93.498/1*

Industrial heritage

The City of Maribyrnong's identity as a centre for industry in Victoria stretches back to the 1840s when the first industrial establishment opened on the Maribyrnong River. Industry grew along the banks of the river, especially at Footscray and Yarraville but also Maribyrnong and Braybrook during the nineteenth century. During the 20th century it began to jump established residential areas and spread along developing main traffic routes to take advantage of transport corridors - Geelong Road, Ballarat Road, Sunshine Road, and eventually Hampstead Road in Maribyrnong. The wide-open spaces that once existed began to fill with industry during the first half of the twentieth century and after WW2.

Quarrying was another form of industry that has existed in Maribyrnong for tens of thousands of years, providing the Woi wurrung with stone for shelters, dwellings, eel-traps, axes, spear points, choppers and other tools. Basalt, found across much of Melbourne's west and north, is the cooled, hardened outpourings of lava from ancient volcanic eruptions. This has been cut and blasted since the 1840s to build laneways, kerbs, bridges, houses and institutional buildings from prisons to court houses and Parliament House.

Industry has changed enormously in response to technology and society's needs and demands but its strong presence across much of Maribyrnong since the 19th century has been a double edged sword. It has been a noxious presence spewing pollution into nearby waters, air, land and homes or depleting the landscape of its natural beauty, structure, and life. It has also provided much-needed employment to enormous numbers of men and women, young and old in skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled roles.

Many companies and industries also played significant roles in the development of Australian trade, commerce, industry, and agriculture for decades. They've provided local, national, and international markets with meat products, sugar products, fertilisers and chemicals, and processed and manufactured foods amongst many others.

Supporting these industries has been an interdependent transport network now evident from railways, bridges and wharves and which also provided local employment.



Ballarat Road was the home of the huge ETA peanut butter factory
Source: <https://reciperemiscing.wordpress.com/2016/08/07/the-history-of-peanut-butter/>

Defence heritage

The defence industry was an important constituent of the City of Maribyrnong's late 19th and early 20th century industrial heritage. Again, due to flat, wide, sparsely populated areas, the river enabling transport to and from the Port, an established industrial presence along the river, and a ready workforce, the munitions and explosives industry developed in places like Maribyrnong, Maidstone and Footscray.

These places were once known as 'the Arsenal of Australia'. Lyons Street in Footscray was the site of the Colony's powder magazine in the 1860s, but soon it was not deemed isolated enough and Jack's Magazine was built upstream at Maidstone in the late 1870s. This was replaced by the Truganina Explosives Reserve. The privately owned Colonial Ammunition Company in Footscray became Australia's first ammunition factory. Factories producing cordite - an alternative to gunpowder - and explosives were also established in Maribyrnong in the late 1890s and early 1900s.

During and after World War One all these factories were developed further providing not just ammunition and explosives for defence use

but also explosives and chemical products for commercial and civil use. These included acids, lead-free paints, lacquers, cements, solvents, and other products. During the 1920s the Munitions Supply Laboratories in Maribyrnong was known as 'the biggest industrial research establishment in Australia' while the Explosives and Factory Filling Group, also in Maribyrnong, was 'the centre of the chemical engineering industry in Australia'.

These factories grew considerably in size and scope in the years prior to World War Two as Australia prepared its defences. They became several hundred buildings in extent, with innumerable concrete or brick shelters for storage of, or protection from, explosives. As well as manufacturing, Maribyrnong, Tottenham, Braybrook, and Footscray were also sites for drill halls, training, administration, living and storage for the armed forces, as well as the army veterinary hospital.

Today most of these sites have been cleared and replaced, often with medium density housing, but you can learn more about Maribyrnong's defence heritage by visiting Jack's Magazine at <https://www.jacksmagazine.org.au/>



'A battalion on manoeuvres, Braybrook', c.1942

Source: State Library Victoria, Argus Newspaper Collection, Accession H99.201/2098

Natural heritage

The natural heritage of the City of Maribyrnong has had a guiding influence on the overall history and heritage of the place.

Maribyrnong sits at the confluence of the Yarra River and the Maribyrnong River, which forms its eastern and northern boundaries. It lies at the eastern edge of the vast Victorian Volcanic Plain on a bed of hard basalt rock and, apart from some steep escarpments along the Maribyrnong River valley, the area is almost entirely flat or only gently undulating.

This lent the City to river based industries, including as a once-integral part of the Port of Melbourne, or industries that require large spaces, and to large scale housing developments, all of which have had a significant and hugely detrimental impact on Maribyrnong's indigenous vegetation and wildlife.

Today some remnants of most indigenous vegetation types persist. These generally occur close to the perimeter of Maribyrnong, associated

with the river, or the Braybrook Rail Reserve. A scattering of indigenous vegetation occurs along Stony Creek.

Revegetated parklands such as Newells Paddock, Pipemarkers Park and Stony Creek provide habitat for fauna. Environments along the Maribyrnong River being cared for today are utilised by numerous locally significant bird species, while the upper regions of the River contain habitat suitable for the regionally significant Water Rat.

Since the latter decades of the 20th century the natural conservation movement has encouraged appreciation of the river for its own sake, rather than for the support it provides our industries and maritime activities. Local activist groups have highlighted the harm done to the river by industry, and successive state and federal governments have introduced environmental protection measures. Pollution controls, de-snagging, and other measures have enabled some wildlife and plantlife to return and flourish.



'Drooping Sheoak';

Source: recreatingthecountry.com.au.png

Migrant heritage

The first migrants to arrive in today's City of Maribyrnong were the original migrant settlers of the 1830s. Some left their mark in the form of names given to places, such as Solomon's Ford. Most non-indigenous residents of the area were migrants up to the 1850s or 1860s, by which time many families had settled and had Australian-born children.

Assisted migrants or imported skilled workers from England and Scotland arrived during the 1880s and 1890s as the manufacturing base expanded and large employers sought a bigger workforce. Other families settled in the area after trying their luck on the goldfields. Apart from several street and district names, the legacy of these people can be seen and felt in the many institutions that form part of the fabric of Maribyrnong's life today, including churches, pubs, and sporting clubs.

Until the 1940s, the City's population was overwhelmingly Australian-born or from the British Isles, although a Maltese community were living in Braybrook and working at Albion Quarries during the 1920s. After the Second World War, waves of migrants and refugees arrived from across Europe and the

Americas. By 1966, almost a third of the population was born overseas, mostly in Italy, Greece, Malta, Poland, the former Republic of Yugoslavia, Ukraine, and Germany. In some parts of the City the overseas born were three to four times those of the early 1930s.

Because of the large numbers coming to Australia in the post-WW2 years the government established hostels to accommodate them during the adjustment and settlement period. There was a hostel in Maribyrnong in the old pyrotechnics section of the Explosives factory, and in Brooklyn. By 1954 1,000 people were housed at the Maribyrnong hostel in Nissen huts and other buildings. It became known as the Midway Migrant Hostel. In the 1970s it was a temporary home to refugees from Southeast Asia, and in the 1980s for those from the central Americas.

The impact of waves of multicultural migration on the City of Maribyrnong can be seen in a variety of sites, such as social and sporting clubs, churches, temples and mosques of various denominations, and in the variety of shops, cafes and restaurants that are operated by people from various cultural backgrounds. Hopkins, Barkly and Leeds Streets in Footscray are particular examples.



*The Quang Minh Temple at 18 Burke Street, Braybrook
Source: History At Work, 2021*

Community heritage

We know a little about Woi wurrung community life from some early settlers' journals as well as oral histories passed down through generations. A site on the west side of the Maribyrnong River at Footscray was noted by Aboriginal Chief Protector George Robinson in March 1841 as having four large camp ovens, some 12 feet wide - 'it must have been a favourite resort'.

The practice of large 19th and early 20th century companies housing their employees produced work-related communities of not just workers but also their families. Raleigh's 'Castle' was an early example, although that was for male single workers only, but the Melbourne Meat Preserving Co, the Colonial Sugar Refinery, William Angliss Meatworks, Pennells, and I.C.I.A.N.Z all provided homes from a row of cottages to a full-blown estate for their workers and families.

For the very early colonial settlers, private homes, and outdoor places such as the riverbank and parks were used for community events. Soon however, community and church halls provided indoor spaces large enough to hold social events, political meetings, and community groups such

as the local progress associations, youth clubs and scout groups. These have been replaced in recent years by community 'centres' that offer a range of services, drop-ins, and meeting rooms. Similarly, there was at least one Mechanics Institute providing newspapers, books, public lectures, and opportunities for self-education established in 1855 in Footscray, but today there are five libraries across the city.

Braybrook can lay claim to the first public radio broadcast from a new broadcasting station in today's Ashley Street, the official opening of which was a concert by Dame Nellie Melba on 13 October 1924 at His Majesty's Theatre in Collins Street in aid of the Limbless Soldiers' Fund. The broadcasting station was one of the most powerful in the world in its day and was leased by the local radio station 3LO (ABC Melbourne).

As the population grew and the demographics of the City changed with post-war and subsequent migration expressions of community life have grown to include temples, mosques and orthodox churches as well as shopping strips heavily influenced by one or another migrant culture.



Mechanics Institute, Footscray, ca. 1926

Source: State Library of Victoria, Accession No: H90.160/829

Activist heritage

Maribyrnong has a strong heritage of activism over issues ranging from working conditions to racism, to diversity and inclusion, to pollution and conservation.

While industry was allowed and even encouraged along the river eventually the smell and pollution became too much for locals. Campaigns to control or licence the 'noxious trades' in the 1920s and '30s began to disrupt local elections and disturbed residents commonly vented their frustration in the local papers. Eventually licencing and pollution controls became a state matter and began to be implemented.

Working conditions were difficult enough anyway for a working population focused on semi- or unskilled work in the factories and shops. At Yarraville in 1884 a pioneering move was made by shopkeepers to reduce their working hours (12 on weekdays and 15 on Saturdays) by instigating a half holiday day each week, at first on

Wednesdays but eventually it was changed to Saturday giving them almost a weekend as we know it by the mid-1890s, although the rest of Melbourne did not adopt this until 1909.

We have already seen that many Indigenous people returned to the west of Melbourne looking for work after walking off the missions and reserves in the 1920s. Several of these people became community leaders and the Aboriginal Rights movement was very strong in Footscray and Maribyrnong.

The many pockets of low-income or socio-economically deprived residents have led to another strong theme of activism in Maribyrnong, that of community activists seeking equality, support and a 'fair go' for the most disadvantaged. Groups like the Salvation Army established themselves in the area, and many individuals like Les Twentyman have given years of work to disaffected youth in the area.



Noxious Trades a Necessary Evil

Source: *Sunshine Advocate*, 28 August 1936, p.3

Footscray Football Club hero and footballer Doug Hawkins supporting the Victorian Public Tenants Association.
Source: <https://vpta.org.au/public-proud2/public-and-proud/auto-draft>



'Les Twentyman is fighting for the western suburbs and the kids who live in them, trying to make sure they have better chances in life'
Source: Eugene Benson, 'Life on streets with Les: Gangs, pangs, pride of "wild west"', *Star Weekly*, 21 August 2012t