

# **The Message Tree Project**

**(2018-2019)**



**Williamstown**

## **Outcomes Report**

**for**

**Handover**

**to**

**Hobsons Bay City Council**

**11 July 2019**

Prepared by

Greg Thorpe

Shared History Facilitator

Yalukit Marnang Pty Ltd

**Funded by a**

**Vibrant Community Grant**

Provided by

Hobsons Bay City Council

**“Fostering respect for First Nations Peoples histories and cultures is important to Council because we want to build a place in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island peoples can feel pride in sharing the richness of their culture in a community that understands, appreciates and values this heritage”**

Innovation Reconciliation Action Plan

January 2019 – January 2021

Hobsons Bay City Council

**“Greg...I am 100% supportive of this project and absolutely humbled that the many who will be joining you in conversation tomorrow have taken the time out of their busy day to consider ‘Our Shared History’ and my Boonwurrung Ancestors and my family’s continued connection to place, our now shared home by Nairn, the Bay”.**

Caroline Martin, Director, Yalukit Marnang

27 February 2019

## **Special Acknowledgement of Country:**

This report was prepared in the City of Hobsons Bay on the lands of the Yalukit Weelam Clan of the Boonwurrung Language Group. Most of the work of this project was conducted at Koort Boork Boork (also known as Williamstown).

### **Acknowledging Elders Past:**

We pay our respects to the spirit and memory of the very many Boonwurrung Elders past. Particularly those who carefully governed this place they called Koort Boork Boork. We especially acknowledge N'Arweet Boollutt (King Benbow) who was seen to lead ceremonies around The Message Tree and in Thompson Street. We acknowledge the deep Boonwurrung suffering and dehumanisation that flowed from colonisation and the invasion of their country by the British from 1835.

### **Elders Present:**

We acknowledge the on-going daily commitment and struggle of Present-day Boonwurrung Elders. Such as N'Arweet Carolyn Briggs whose work to renew Boonwurrung culture, history and community is providing a gift we can all share in. We acknowledge the incredible social, cultural and structural barriers Present-day Elders continue to work to overcome.

### **Elders Future:**

We also acknowledge all Boonwurrung children who we hope to see emerge strong in their cultural identity and emerge as strong Boonwurrung Elders of the future. We respectfully hope our shared celebration of Boonwurrung histories help to foster a growing sense of pride in the Boonwurrung history of cultural, social and economic achievements in the Hobsons Bay area over thousands of years.

### **All First Peoples:**

Finally, we acknowledge all First Peoples living, working or visiting Hobsons Bay and hope that renewed and respectful celebration of our local First Peoples stories creates culturally-safe, healthy, accepting and informed communities for you and for us all.

## Executive Summary:

23 individual stakeholders linked to 14 local organisations participated in 4 stakeholder workshops investing a total of 140 unpaid volunteer hours to consider how best to respectfully celebrate The Message Tree story and its connection to Hobsons Bay's First Peoples (the Boonwurrung Language Group) close to the site of the original tree.

The stakeholder group recommended Hobsons Bay City Council:

- **Use text provided for three interpretive panels** covering three main historical themes within the story for Council to consider.
- **Replant a 'New Message Tree'** at (or very near) to the site of the original tree.
- **Construct a special history and reconciliation node** surrounding a 'New Message Tree' at the Foot of Thompson Street in Nelson Place.
- **Adopt the concept plan provided** to guide construction planning for the history and reconciliation node in Nelson Place.

### Important Historical Findings:

- **Strong social and ceremonial connections exist for Boonwurrung people at The Message Tree site**, going back thousands of years before British arrival.
- **Early colonists used the tree as a community meeting place and information exchange**, particularly prior to Williamstown's first local newspaper.
- **The British and the Boonwurrung both gathered under The Message Tree** during the first 15 years of colonial Williamstown.
- **50 Williamstown residents fought Council's decision to remove the tree** in 1856 requesting Nelson Place be surveyed to 'bend' around the tree.
- **The Message Tree issue was the first ever 'heritage' campaign in Williamstown Council's history** and the first non-unanimous Council decision, being supported by only two of seven Councillors.
- **The 1856 'save the tree' campaigners who valued The Message Tree as the 'ancient' meeting place for Boonwurrung may be a very significant historical record.** This valuing by British colonists of the 1850s of a place for its First Peoples heritage is rare if not unique.

## Special Thanks to Project Participants:

### Core Project Partners:

Special thanks to Snr Sgt Chris Allen and his team at Victoria Police, Williamstown for championing this project and contributing so much time, effort, leadership and support to the project facilitator.

Thanks also to Jenni Mitchell (OA) and Rosa McKenna from Hobsons Bay's local Reconciliation Action Group, Get Up Out West, for their leadership as the lead partner for our grant.

Thanks also to Rosa McKenna and the Spotswood-Kingsville RSL for their auspice of the grant with Get Up Out West.

Very special thanks to Yalukit Marnang Director and Yalukit Weelam Clan woman, Caroline Martin for providing a significant amount of time via phone contacts with the Project Facilitator Greg Thorpe at 'no cost' to the project. Her commitment to support this project despite being heavily committed with a new role as the Creative Director of Melbourne's YIRRAMBOI First Nations Festival was central to the success of this project.

Thanks to Greg Thorpe (Yalukit Marnang) as the Project Facilitator. His leadership has delivered an accessible community collaborative approach which is now the template for a local Shared History Alliance to pursue more shared-history projects together. Thanks also for the many additional hours he contributed to the project 'pro bono' including making himself available to share the story of this project with local community groups at no charge.

### Participating Stakeholders:

Many thanks to all of the community stakeholders who attended and participated at our 4 community stakeholder workshops. Your voluntary attendance, input and enthusiasm has been vital to the success of this project. It is sincerely hoped our collective efforts result in long-lasting tangible outcomes that themselves become a new chapter in the Message Tree story. The following list of workshop members and the organisations and/or interests they represent are as follows:

### Community Sponsorship Partners:

The generosity and community-mindedness of those organisations that provided sponsorship to this community project was very important and built important bridges.

Your provision of in-kind contributions such as meeting rooms, function space, food and administrative supports (such as printing) were much appreciated and added significant additional value to the project.

The following list of sponsoring partners is as follows:

- **The Hobsons Bay Yacht Club:** provision of a meeting room and coffee facilities for our 1<sup>st</sup> Workshop meeting.
- **The Victoria Police Williamstown:** provision of a meeting room for our 2<sup>nd</sup> workshop meeting, the provision of refreshments at our 3<sup>rd</sup> workshop meeting, tangible administrative supports such as printing of minutes and agendas, contribution of hours of labour in the drafting of the grant application and monitoring of project outcomes.
- **The Williamstown Library:** provision of a meeting room for our 3<sup>rd</sup> workshop meeting.
- **The Royal Yacht Club of Victoria (Williamstown):** provision of their conference room for our 4<sup>th</sup> workshop meeting and provision of their main function room for our Handover Ceremony.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Title Page	... Page 1
Special Acknowledgement of Country	... Page 3
Executive Summary	... Page 4
Special Thanks to Project Participants	... Page 5
<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>... Page 9</b>
A Time for ‘Shared History’	... Page 9
First Peoples & Second Peoples	... Page 11
<b>THE MESSAGE TREE PROJECT</b>	<b>... Page 12</b>
Core Project Partners	... Page 12
Choice of Yalukit Marnang to Lead	... Page 12
Project Facilitator Selection	... Page 13
Archival Research Outcomes	... Page 13
Reaching Out to Potential Stakeholders	... Page 13
Stakeholders Engaged	... Page 14
Sponsor-Partners	... Page 15
<b>PROJECT OUTCOMES</b>	<b>... Page 16</b>
Themes for Interpretive Panels	... Page 16
Recommended Text for Interpretive Panels	... Page 16
Images	... Page 17
The 4 <sup>th</sup> Interpretive Panel	... Page 17
Panel No 1	... Page 18
Panel No 2	... Page 19
Panel No 3	... Page 20
A ‘New Message Tree’ at a Special Place	... Page 21
Key Interpretive Node & Siting Recommendations	... Page 22
From Concept Plan to Construction	... Page 22
Installing Temporary Interpretive Panels	... Page 22

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

(continued)

<b>POTENTIAL FUTURE SHARED HISTORY PROJECTS</b>	<b>... Page 23</b>
Potential Sources for Future Project Funding	... Page 23
Additional Community Engagements	... Page 24
Local Media	... Page 24
Heritage Hobsons Bay	... Page 24
Potential Other ‘Spin-Offs’ from this Project	... Page 25
References	... Page 26
<b>APPENDICES</b>	
<b>Professional Bio – Caroline Martin, Yalukit Marnang</b>	<b>Appendix 1</b>
<b>Historical Sources- March 2019</b>	<b>Appendix 2</b>
<b>Stakeholder Workshops – Agendas and Minutes</b>	<b>Appendix 3</b>
<b>Historical Sources Support Text for 3 Interpretive Panels</b>	<b>Appendix 4</b>



## INTRODUCTION:

### A Time for ‘Shared History’

The Message Tree Project came about because a small group of like-minded people got together around the idea that it was time to do more to ‘break the public silence’ surrounding the existence of our First Peoples, the Yalukit Weelam Clan of the Boonwurrung Language Group. Their rich culture and very long history in Koort Boork Boork (now known as Williamstown) sadly remains a deep mystery for far too many people living in the City of Hobson’s Bay.

This silence is not unique to Hobsons Bay by any means. It is a now long-standing national phenomena that is only beginning to shift as Australians come to terms with important new information. Like the defeat of the British colonial legal fantasy of ‘empty land’ (Terra Nullius) with the Wik Decision in the Australian High Court in 1996.

The idea that Australia’s history does not, as so many of us were taught at school, ‘begin’ with the arrival of the British to our shores has opened the door for an apparently increasing number of Australians to explore the history of our First Peoples more deeply. What is being discovered is that our human histories extend well beyond British arrival in 1788 and, as books like Bruce Pascoe’s *Dark Emu* are revealing, it is a history of significant cultural richness and human achievement spanning many thousands of years.

Only this week, on 8 July 2019, the United Nations recognised our Gunditjmara people won World Heritage recognition for their ancient aquiculture site at Budj Bim on the banks of Lake Condah in south-western Victoria. Most Victorian school children remain oblivious to the knowledge that Budj Bim has a town of stone houses where 5,000 Gunditjmara were seen living. A town older than the pyramids in Egypt (Pascoe, 2014). This example of sedentary occupation by really intelligent and creative human beings achieving great civilisation long before 1788, is sadly still not a routine part of learning in Victorian schools.

Even so, our national awareness of these things is now growing, and an increasing number of us no longer accept the words in our National Anthem of “young & free” to accurately describe what we now know to be land with a very old human history. Increasingly we know that our country is the only country where the oldest living human cultures on Earth are found. Knowledge like this naturally creates a ‘thirst’ to know the whole history of our First Peoples, especially those who lived for thousands of years where we are currently living today.

It is a thirst for information that is still often met by what has been called “The Great Australian Silence”. It was in 1968 that that Professor of Anthropology and Sociology at the Institute of Advanced Studies at the Australian National University, W.E.H. Stanner, coined the term ‘The Great Australian Silence’ to describe a national tendency to ‘forget’ about our First Peoples.

Stanner said

*“It is a structural matter, a view from a window that had been carefully placed to exclude a whole quadrant of the landscape. What may have begun as a simple forgetting of other possible views turned under habit and over time into something like a cult of forgetfulness practiced on a national scale.” (Stanner, 1969, p.25).*

He went on to say:

*“We have been able for so long to disremember the aborigines that we are now hard put to keep them in mind even when we most want to do so....I am no historian...but the history I would like to see written would bring into the main flow of its narrative the life and times of men like David Uniapon, Albert Namatjira, Robert Tudawali, Durmugam, Douglas Nicholls, Dexter Daniels and many others. Not to scrape up significance for them but because they typify so vividly the other side of a story over which the great Australian silence reigns.” (Stanner, 1969, p.25).*

In a desire to show ‘respect’ to our First Peoples, break the ‘Great Australian Silence’ and publicly celebrate more of our shared history, Hobson’s Bay City Council is now committing to lead through their recently-released *Innovative Reconciliation Action Plan 2019-2021* which states that

***“Fostering respect for First Nations Peoples histories and cultures is important to Council because we want to build a place in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples can feel pride in sharing the richness of their culture in a community that understands, appreciates and values this heritage” (p.30).***

This idea of ‘respect’ has been central to the Message Tree Project and our approach to this particular shared history has been innovative. Importantly, this project was built around the idea that Boonwurrung history needed a Boonwurrung ‘voice’ close to the centre of the project. Getting the Boonwurrung-owned Yalukit Marnang consultancy to facilitate the process with our local community was fundamental to this approach. We also ‘threw open the doors’ to invite and include as many local story-tellers, history-keepers and other interested groups and individuals to join the stakeholder workshops and contribute to finding a respectful, accurate and sensitive re-telling of the Message Tree story.

The outcomes embodied in this report present an opportunity for the City of Hobsons Bay to now take over implementation to replant a New Message Tree and recreate for us a special place for reconciliation at the public ‘heart’ of Williamstown.

The location identified by this report, at the ‘foot’ of Thompson Street in the main tourist precinct was not ‘selected’ but ‘rediscovered’ by the journey into our shared history.

It is a history that tells of the Boonwurrung people who loved an important tree at an important place named Koort Boork Boork and the first British people to love that same tree and the same important place we now know as Williamstown.

All people in the City of Hobson’s Bay deserve to know who our First Peoples are and to have the opportunity to celebrate The Message Tree story and the special place where it

stood. The time to publicly celebrate our local shared histories has come. May we all soon gather together around the New Message Tree in Nelson Place to do just that.

We now invite Council to embrace our recommendations and our collective 'vision' and prepare this 'special place' to the benefit of all, especially for our First Peoples who have waited so very long for the public silence about their existence in our land to finally end.

### **First Peoples & Second Peoples:**

This report adopts the terms 'First Peoples' or 'First Nations peoples' to define those in our community who may otherwise identify (or be identified) as 'Indigenous', 'Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander' or 'Koorie'.

'First peoples' or 'First Nations peoples' refers to Australia's entire spectrum of multi-cultural first peoples (nations) who owned, governed, farmed, managed and controlled the Australian continent, over many thousands of years, before the entire landmass was colonised for the British Empire from 1788 onwards. These terms are chosen for their capacity to acknowledging the multi-national and multi-cultural nature of the human civilisations that controlled our continent before 1788. The term 'peoples' serves to humanise those peoples who have often been de-humanised and objectified by mainstream British (and Australian) commentators since 1788. The term 'nations' acknowledges the many sovereign national entities that existed on the Australian continent at the commencement of British colonisation in 1788 and that their sovereign rights are still being claimed.

The First Peoples of Hobsons Bay are mostly referred to more specifically by their language group name, Boonwurrung, or at times using their local clan group name of Yalukit Weelam (or Yalukit Willam), or both.

For those who arrived in Australia as migrants, or whose forebears arrived as migrants, after 1788 the term 'Second Nations peoples' or 'Second Peoples' is applied. This allows those Australians who embody cultural identities that link them to their migrant heritage to also be included and humanised on an equal footing. The defining and dividing moment in our combined histories is the year 1788 as this was the year that the British Empire arrived on the lands of the Eora peoples around Botany Bay (Sydney) with no intention of ever leaving. It was the year Britain took the 'possession' of their 'Terra Nullius' (Empty Land) as James Cook had declared the Australian continent, some 18 years earlier at 'Possession Island' in what is today Queensland.

All Australians belong to either our First Peoples story, our Second Peoples story or both as it is a simple function of heredity. Our story is our story and the existence of more than one stories, or even more than one perspective on a story, is not new to our multicultural continent. It is rightly often held up as one of our national strengths.

To realise the strength of our rich, diverse and very long human history in Australia (including having the world's oldest living cultures), it is important that we overcome the inhumanity and arrogance reflected in much of our documented colonial history. The terminology for this report seeks to contribute respectfully to that aim.

## THE MESSAGE TREE PROJECT:

### Core Project Partners:

The Message Tree Project had its inception at the Laverton Hub during NAIDOC celebrations on Mabo Day in 2018. It was in a casual conversation between Jena Galvin and Greg Thorpe that it became clear there were two community organisations looking for local Shared History. Greg had participated in a discussion about a year earlier at Get Up Out West (Hobsons Bay's Reconciliation Action Group) where members were keen to refocus the group around local Boonwurrung histories. On this basis, Greg had engaged a conversation with the Briggs family and, with their blessing set about researching local stories relating to King Benbow (N'Arweet Boollutt). Jena, a Wiradjuri woman, working at Williamstown Police Station was keen to find a way to bring Boonwurrung histories out in public as a project Victoria Police could employ to support community well-being and their engagement with local First Nations groups in our community. Greg told Jena that The Message Tree story was very close to the Williamstown Police station and Jena set up a meeting between Greg and her boss, Snr Sgt. Chris Allen.

On hearing the story, Snr Sgt. Allen immediately wanted the police to take a leadership role in getting a project up to celebrate this story. The police put forward the idea of a Community Grant from Hobsons Bay and began writing the application while Greg brokered the formal involvement of Caroline Martin (Yalukit Marnang) and Rosa McKenna (Get Up Out West & Spotwood-Kingsville RSL). From here a partnership was formed and a clear project conceived and put forward as a grant application for a 'Vibrant Communities Grant' under the 2018 round of Hobsons Bay Community Grants.

### Choice of Yalukit Marnang to Lead.

In keeping with the principles of Shared History being a collaborative process, all partners agreed that to ensure Boonwurrung 'voice' was given maximum space, Yalukit Marnang should receive the funding to provide a project facilitator. This way, everyone involved could be assured that Caroline Martin would not only have a voice but could have agency in the direction of the community process. In addition, Caroline Martin's extensive professional background working with First People's histories and the process of story-telling from the shared-history-approach only strengthened this rationale. In effect, what the project is now beginning to do is to connect our local history stakeholders with the Boonwurrung (via Yalukit Marnang) in a way that can prove mutually beneficial and allow us to all move from this first project to future similar projects within Williamstown and eventually elsewhere in Hobsons Bay. (Caroline Martin's Profession Bio is attached in Appendix 1).

**Project Facilitator Selection:**

Caroline Martin (Yalukit Marnang) nominated Greg Thorpe to lead the community process and create for her a feedback loop to ensure the Boonwurrung 'voice', while still somewhat distant from the project, would remain central.

Greg is a Shared History Facilitator with a professional background as a Cultural Interpreter of Historic Places, primarily on public lands. He lives in Hobsons Bay and has worked closely with Caroline Martin uncovering hidden Boonwurrung histories relevant to the Boonwurrung Estate to the western side of the Maribyrnong River. Greg and Caroline's families have enjoyed a close social connection for many years. Greg's heritage is French, Irish, Scottish and English.

It is from their shared professional interests in Shared History and through their personal social relationship that Caroline has looked to Greg to represent Yalukit Marnang as the Shared History Facilitator for The Message Tree Project.

**Archival Research Outcomes:**

In preparation for the first stakeholder workshop, archival research was undertaken to produce a 41 page 'Historical Sources Document' which was tabled in draft form at the 1<sup>st</sup> Stakeholder Workshop and published to the group as a final copy prior to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Meeting.

A copy of this document is included as *Appendix 2* at the rear of this report.

**Reaching Out to Potential Stakeholders:**

Prior to the 1<sup>st</sup> Stakeholder workshop (28 February 2019) Yalukit Marnang, Williamstown Police and Get Up Out West worked on developing a list of key stakeholders. Anyone likely to have a role in local history either as a tour guide, journalist or local historian was approached to contribute to the process.

Approaches were made to anyone with an obvious link to the story, such as St. Mary's Primary School who have a link to a former Head Teacher, James Wallace, who features in the history.

Immediate neighbours to the site of the original Message Tree were also approached. These included the Lumineer Academy (in the Old Customs House Building) and the Royal Yacht Club of Victoria.

The Williamstown Community and Education Centre Inc were approached as an organisation running regular local history walks and dedicated to community education within Thompson Street and close to the Message Tree site.

Other Stakeholders emerged by word of mouth, such as members from the Conversations of the Curious group and a member of the Friends of Stoney Creek, Phillip Hitchcock. Phillip's original interest in the story came from his enthusiasm for She-oak Trees and his interest in The Message Tree as an important She-oak in Williamstown. Phillip volunteered his services to the group as minute-taker a valued service he did excellently.

Some outreach failed such as attempts to invite secondary schools into the process, however overall this face to face outreach proved highly effective at establishing strong interest in the project for the 1<sup>st</sup> Stakeholder Workshop on 28 February 2019.

This part of the project was not funded by the community grant and thanks must go out to Snr Sgt Chris Allen, Greg Thorpe and Rosa McKenna for this early contribution to the success of the project.

### **Stakeholders Engaged:**

The following is a list of Stakeholder workshop participants who attended one or more of the stakeholder workshops. Each person who joined the group also joined the group email list to receive agendas and minutes. Participants and the organisations they were connected to are as follows:

- Greg Thorpe, Project Facilitator, Yalukit Marnang.
- Marbee Williams, Boonwurrung descendant, Yalukit Marnang.
- Snr Sgt Chris Allen, Victoria Police, Williamstown.
- Jenni Mitchell, Get Up Out West.
- Rosa McKenna, Get Up Out West & Spotswood-Kingsville RSL
- Phillip Hitchcock, Friends of Stony Creek & She-oak Enthusiast.
- Brian Haynes, Local Historian, Moderator of Williamstown History Facebook Page.
- Janet Long, Williamstown Historical Society.
- Pam Kadow, Heritage Librarian, Williamstown Library, City of Hobsons Bay.
- Peter Dewar, Freelance Journalist. Also: local walking group leader at Williamstown Community & Education Centre.
- Tania Blackwell, Coordinator Arts & Culture, Cultural & Economic Development, Hobsons Bay City Council.
- Toni Burton, Arts and Culture Officer, Cultural & Economic Development , Hobsons Bay City Council.
- Mayor, Cr. Jonathon Marsden, City of Hobsons Bay.
- Mark Brophy, CEO, Williamstown Community & Education Centre.
- Sgt Glynn Woolley, Acting Snr Sgt, Victoria Police, Williamstown.
- Uncle Keith Randall, Aboriginal Cultural Liaison Officer, Victoria Police.
- Michael Neumann, Manager, Royal Yacht Club of Victoria, Williamstown.
- Ann Goodwin, Archivist, Royal Yacht Club of Victoria, Williamstown.
- Anthony Hockey, Principal, St.Mary's Catholic Primary School, Williamstown.
- Marise de Quadros, Conversations for the Curious, Williamstown.
- Sgt Paul Menz, Victoria Police, Williamstown.
- Sgt Deb Jecks, Victoria Police, Williamstown.
- Cindy Wright, Get Up Out West.

## Sponsor-Partners:

Sponsor-Partners were invited to join the Message Tree Project with in-kind contributions. These sponsor organisations were invited to also sit in at stakeholder workshops if they were not already attending. The in-kind contributions allowed the small project budget to stretch and achieve more than the original budget allowed for.

Our Sponsor-Partners were:

- **The Hobsons Bay Yacht Club:** provision of a meeting room and coffee facilities for our 1<sup>st</sup> Workshop meeting.
- **The Victoria Police Williamstown:** provision of a meeting room for our 2<sup>nd</sup> workshop meeting, the provision of refreshments at our 3<sup>rd</sup> workshop meeting, tangible administrative supports such as printing of minutes and agendas, contribution of hours of labour in the drafting of the grant application and monitoring of project outcomes.
- **The Williamstown Library:** provision of a meeting room for our 3<sup>rd</sup> workshop meeting.
- **The Royal Yacht Club of Victoria (Williamstown):** provision of their conference room for our 4<sup>th</sup> workshop meeting and provision of their main function room for our Handover Ceremony.

## PROJECT OUTCOMES:

The four stakeholder workshops took place between 28 February 2019 and 30 May 2019.

Workshop documents in the form of Agendas and Minutes are attached at the rear of this document and marked Appendix 3.

### Themes for Interpretive Panels:

The history of The Message Tree was reviewed at the 2<sup>nd</sup> workshop on 28 March 2019 based on the findings of the Historical Sources Document. Here the group worked through the history to identify 3 themes which were all considered important to the overall story.

The three themes selected were:

1. ***The long history of She-oaks at Koort Boork Boork (before Williamstown) and the Boonwurrung. In particular, their connection with The Message Tree as a special place.***
2. ***The Early Colonial Years where the tree becomes known as The Message Tree (Notice Tree) and is shared by the Boonwurrung and the colonists***
3. ***The fight to save the tree in 1856 and 1857 and the Boonwurrung connection being remembered by the campaigners.***

It was agreed that the three themes selected would each be worked into its own interpretive panel consisting of no more than 300 words.

Recommended wording for three panels were submitted to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Stakeholder Workshop on 2 May 2019.

### Recommended Text for Interpretive Panels:

At the 3<sup>rd</sup> Stakeholder Workshop all three panels were reviewed and adopted by the group in line with the following statement:

#### Group Recommendations on Draft Text for Three Panels:

- The three panel drafts presented are a good telling of the key themes in the story and are told respectfully and with sensitivity to the Boonwurrung perspective.
- The text would need additional professional edits to tighten the wording prior to arriving at final text for the panels. The text may also need to be chunked to sit around images.
- In keeping with this project's commitment to a respectful shared-history approach, any final changes to the wording of the panels should be run past Yalukit Marnang for Caroline Martin, to provide comment from a Boonwurrung perspective, prior to production of the panels.



**Images:**

It was agreed that images would be important to break up the text and help the in telling the story and while no group decision was reached on this question a number of positive suggestions are included in the minutes in Appendix 3.

**The 4<sup>th</sup> Interpretive Panel:**

The third workshop also considered an idea put forward to include a 4<sup>th</sup> interpretive panel at the Message Tree site to tell *"...the story of the message tree project, the revival of this shared-history and giving present-day Boonwurrung voice a place to be heard on the cultural importance of this history and it's revival to Boonwurrung today...the group felt it would be a good way of moving the history into the present day while reminding the public that Boonwurrung are not 'gone' from Williamstown but have returned and are working to re-claim, strengthen and share their culture and history again."*(from workshop minutes). This led to the following group decision:

**Recommendation for a 4<sup>th</sup> Panel:**

- Text for a 4<sup>th</sup> Interpretive Panel, in line with the above [see minutes for full version], should be developed by Council with Yalukit Marnang and provided for in the on-site design.

Each panel is designed to be read either as an individual 'element' of the overall story or together to understand all the key themes.

The recommended text for the first three Interpretive panels is shown on pages 18, 19, and 20.

NOTE: Full referencing and in-depth discussion of the historical sources underpinning the text for all three interpretive panels recommended this report is contained in Appendix 4 at the end of this document.

You are standing at a significant site for the Yalukit Willam Clan of the Boonwurrung language group, the First Peoples of Hobson's Bay.

An old She-oak Tree stood here long before British colonisation and was removed in 1857. Around this tree early colonists saw the Yalukit Willam, led by N'Arweet Boollutt (also called "King Benbow"), as they conducted ceremonies and counsels here. This makes this a special place for Boonwurrung people still today.

She-oak are sacred trees to the Boonwurrung. They are associated with the power of Boonwurrung men and it is remembered that when early colonists cut down She-oak Trees Boonwurrung men would feel unhealthy.

The ancient name for this area is Koort Boork Boork, meaning 'clumps of many she-oaks'. A name indicating the importance of She-oak Trees to Boonwurrung here.

In 1837 this place was re-named William's Town by British colonist to honour their King. British invasion of the Boonwurrung Estate was a catastrophic event that caused the rapid decline of Boonwurrung people. West of the Maribyrnong River Boonwurrung women farmed a small sweet potato called *Murnong* on the grassy basalt plains, a very important staple food. Colonists landed thousands of sheep only metres from here and herded them west onto the Boonwurrung's Murnong fields. The sheep soon ate the Murnong crop and quickly sent the Boonwurrung toward starvation, malnutrition and disease.

Stealthily spearing British sheep or taking rice, flour or oats from colonists to replace disappearing Murnong wild game, inevitably led to violent conflicts and the death of Boonwurrung people across their Estates. Clashes with other First Peoples, facing similar pressures from colonisation, also led to Boonwurrung deaths.

Nearly all our First Peoples died under British rule. Here only one resilient family survived to represent the Boonwurrung language group, share the history and continue cultural practices today.

(300 words)

Title: The Boonwurrung People and the Ancient Sheoak

## Panel No 1

British colonisation began here in 1835 when two private companies from Tasmania invaded the Estates of our First Peoples the Yalukit Willam Clan of the Boonwurrung language group. The Estates of other language groups on either side of the Werribee River were also invaded.

Williamstown became the deep-water anchorage for British ships and gave rise to a 'tiny village' that sat alone on the edge of a vast grassy plain to the west. The main British settlement was established near plentiful freshwater on the banks of the Yarra River (now called Central Melbourne).

In the first years of the colony, Melbourne newspapers arrived far too late in Williamstown to be useful, so the townsfolk used the old She-oak tree that once stood here as their 'Message Tree'. News, advertising and public opinions were written on placards and nailed to the tree. Whether seeking a servant or some lost item; selling a horse; needing a job done; reporting an accident or a theft; sharing a new idea or expressing an opinion; the message would go up on the old tree.

Prior to its removal in 1857, the 'Ancient She-oak' had become a town meeting place where a seat had been built around its trunk. Early colonists understood the importance of the tree to the Boonwurrung who still used it. A local poet and teacher between 1847 and 1863, James Wallace, recited poems under its branches and wrote that "*The earliest tradition regarding the Old Tree is to the effect that long before this country was colonised it was held in almost religious veneration by the aboriginals; that it was beneath its umbrageous shade they held their councils...*"

So between 1835 to 1845 a growing British population and a declining Boonwurrung population both used and expressed their connection to The Message Tree.

(300 words)

Heading: "The Boonwurrung and the British - Under 'The Message Tree'"

## Panel No. 2

The Message Tree (or 'Notice Tree') was removed by Williamstown Council as part of road construction works in Nelson Place in early 1857 but not before Council's first public campaign on a heritage issue. At least fifty locals fought to save the old tree arguing it was an important place in the early life of the town but also a special place to our First Peoples, an uncommon consideration among British colonists of the 1850s.

1856 was Williamstown Council's first year. Population was booming following the discovery of gold from 1850. In 1849 the town had "about five hundred people" and by 1857 over 3500. Traffic was turning informal dirt roads to thick mud after rain so, in December 1856, Council unanimously decided to formally mark-out street widths, create gutters and surface roads with crushed rock.

It was soon after realised these works would endanger the much-loved Message Tree so within six days 55 residents, led by James Wallace a local teacher and poet petitioned Council requesting "... *a diversion in the roadway ...to leave the Notice Tree situated at the foot of Thompson Street undisturbed*".

Councillors Moxham and Langford supported efforts to save the tree but were outnumbered on the seven-member Council.

One local who conducted "research" among the protestors to "discover what qualities this tree has apart from other trees...", found how they valued the tree's ancient link to the Boonwurrung stating:

*"It appears that many long years before the arrival of a white man upon these shores, that this part of the colony which we now call Williamstown was selected by the aboriginies as their place of rendezvous every month; and beneath the foliage of that old tree have sat the King...Numerous too have been the corroborees which have taken place on the same spot ..."*

(298 Words)

Heading: The Fight to Save the Message Tree

## Panel No. 3

## A ‘New Message Tree’ at a Special Place:

By the 3<sup>rd</sup> Stakeholder workshop on 2 May 2019, stakeholders had formed a strong desire to see the site of the original Message Tree celebrated as more than a place to read history.

It had become clear that there was a strong desire to see a New Message Tree planted and for it to become a focal point for this history of the Boonwurrung of Koort Boork Boork, the early colonial days of co-habitation and to remember those locals from 1856 who fought valiantly to remember the Boonwurrung and retain a tree which whose charm had connected them all.

The placement of the site on the northern side of the intersection of Thompson Street and Nelson Place was seen to have strong potential to be a dedicated space for National Reconciliation within Williamstown. The intersection itself was seen to offer opportunities for temporary street closure and festivals or public ceremonies to again take place around The Message Tree on special occasions. This led to the 3<sup>rd</sup> workshop arriving at the following recommendation:

### **Recommendation for a ‘New Message Tree’:**

- A New Message Tree be replanted at the ‘foot’ of Thompson Street on the north side of the intersection in front of the Royal Yacht Club of Victoria in the approximate location of the original Message Tree.
- This tree would become the centre-point of an interpretive node for sharing the story of The Message Tree and its association to both the British colonists and the Boonwurrung.
- An appropriately young Drooping She-oak should be planted and an effective protective barrier be erected to allow the tree protection from urban movements while young and small.
- The two juvenile Elm Trees at the western end of the line of elms be removed and transplanted to make space for a Message Tree node.

This issue was re-visited and re-confirmed as a recommendation at the 4<sup>th</sup> and final stakeholder workshop on 30 May 2019, which took place on-site at the ‘foot’ of Thompson Street in Nelson Place. This workshop took the idea of a special interpretive node centred around a New Message Tree into the realm of a collaborative conceptual design. From that workshop the following recommendations were discussed and agreed to by the group.

### Key Interpretive Node & Siting Recommendations:

- a) The location at which to plant the New Message Tree was at the place currently occupied by the juvenile Elm Tree (closest to the mature Elm) at the 'Foot' of Thompson Street.
- b) The New Message Tree should be a Drooping She-oak (*Allocasuarina verticulata*)
- c) This site should become the centre-point for a special node specifically dedicated to telling The Message Tree story and its links to the Boonwurrung.
- d) The special node be designed as a place for gathering, festivals and public ceremony.
- e) The node be designed as a 10 metre circle centred on the New Message Tree with its southern limit extending into the current roadway to the limit of the parking pay and the street be 'bent' around the tree in honour of the 1856 request that this be done for the original tree.
- f) The 4 Interpretive Panels recommended in this report be sited in a circle around the New Message Tree and incorporated in the design of a protective fence/barrier around the juvenile tree.

*(Note: Further information is recorded in the minutes of the 4<sup>th</sup> Stakeholder Workshop – see Appendix 3, attached).*

### From Concept Plan to Construction:

The 4<sup>th</sup> workshop agreed to recommend that:

Council to take the recommendations from our 4<sup>th</sup> Stakeholder Meeting and consider it a concept plan from which to work collaboratively with Yalukit Marnang and this group to create a detailed final plan for construction applying Council's technical and design expertise.

### Installing Temporary Interpretive Panels

The 4<sup>th</sup> workshop agreed to recommend that:

As an interim measure, while construction plans for the interpretive node are being developed, it was suggested that the three interpretive panels be finalised (per recommendation at previous meeting) and placed at the Message Tree site along with information about plans in progress to construct a special node with a 'New Message Tree' at its centre.

## POTENTIAL FUTURE SHARED HISTORY PROJECTS:

At the 3<sup>rd</sup> Stakeholder meeting on 2 May 2019, a decision was reached to keep the stakeholder group together under the group title 'Shared History Alliance' and to use the group email list to invite current project members to this forum.

It was agreed that a number of additional potential shared history projects could be identified around Williamstown and elsewhere in the City of Hobsons Bay, each deserving of a project like The Message Tree Project.

The aim of the Shared History Alliance would be to begin work on researching the historical sources for these stories and identifying potential funding sources to conduct further projects.

The potential projects identified were:

- Story of Baby Anne Jordan & N'Arweet Boollutt
- Story of the Shelly Beach Camp (Commonwealth Park area) and the Boonwurrung
- First Nations men held in Williamstown Prison Hulks?
- Careful re-internment of Boonwurrung Remains – Williamstown Cemetery.
- Schools especially primary schools (where the curriculum is more flexible) need information, local stories to tell and curriculum guides.
- Occupation sites could form a trail; Jawbone, Willi racecourse, Queen St Altona.

It was widely agreed that the next project for the group to focus on would be the story of Baby Anne Jordan and N'Arweet Boollutt.

### Potential Sources for Future Project Funding:

This question was examined at the 3<sup>rd</sup> stakeholder workshop where Mark Brophy from Williamstown Community & Education Centre advised there would be a number of philanthropic or government small grant sources available once a clear project outline had been developed by the Shared History Alliance.

## Additional Community Engagements:

As a result of this project, the following groups and individuals outside of the project were engaged in the knowledge of the project:

### Local Media:

The following news article about the project was published on 8 April in the Star Weekly reaching thousands of homes within the City of Hobsons Bay:

STARWEEKLY.COM.AU NEWS

# Tree's story a unifying message

By Goya Dmytryshchak

The story of an ancient sheoak in Williamstown – significant to the Boonwurrung indigenous people and known as The Message Tree to European settlers – is being brought to life.

Indigenous community members, historians and police are searching for descendants of historical figures who tried to save the tree, which stood at the foot of Thompson Street between the Old Customs House and Williamstown police station.

The tree was used by Europeans to post messages and share news, while the Boonwurrung conducted formal ceremonies at the site.

The Message Tree project is being led by Williamstown police and Hobsons Bay reconciliation group Get Up Out West, who have partnered with consultant company Yalukit Marnang, owned by descendants of the Boonwurrung.

Yalukit Marnang's Greg Thorpe said the tree stood in Nelson Place until 1856, when it was removed to build the roadway.

Local residents fought to save the tree, partly because of its ancient association as a ceremonial place for the first people of Hobsons Bay, the Yalukit willam clan of the Boonwurrung language group.

"This story is important to Boonwurrung people who want to meet the descendants of those who fought to save the tree or record its history," Mr Thorpe said.

"The project is really about rediscovering a story about a tree that was special to the Boonwurrung people and then it was special to the first colonists in Williamstown.

"In 1856, in the first year of Williamstown council, it was removed to make way for Nelson Place to be built.



Rosa McKenna, Acting Senior Sergeant Glyn Woolley, Greg Thorpe, Senior Sergeant Chris Allen and Aboriginal Community Liaison Officer Keith Randall are appealing for descendants of historical figures associated with "The Message Tree". (Damjan Janevski)

"One of things that comes out in the history very strongly is that one of the things that's valued about the tree by the colonists is its strong association and connection to the Boonwurrung people."

Senior Sergeant Chris Allen of Williamstown police said the story, which unfolded virtually on the station's doorstep, struck a chord.

"Respectfully sharing first peoples' histories stands to contribute to the sense of wellbeing in our community, especially for First Nations Australians," he said.

Descendants of the following historical figures associated with the tree are being sought: James Wallace, Cr James Moxham, Captain Langford, William Hall jr and Ann

Morgan, nee Jordan. People who can help are being asked to contact Senior Sergeant Allen at Williamstown police station on 9393 9546.

Yalukit Marnang will lead a Message Tree history walk in Williamstown, for Heritage Hobsons Bay, on Saturday, May 4, from 3pm. To book, visit [eventbrite.com.au/o/heritage-hobsons-bay-15832480968](https://eventbrite.com.au/o/heritage-hobsons-bay-15832480968)

Link to article: <https://www.starweekly.com.au/news/trees-story-unifying-message/>

### Heritage Hobsons Bay:

An on-site walk to share the Message Tree story was included within the Heritage Hobsons Bay festival resulting in a successful event of 4 May, led by Boonwurrung descendant Steve Parker and Message Tree Project Facilitator, Greg Thorpe, on behalf of Yalukit Marnang.





### Talks to Local Community Groups:

As a result of the growing local community interest in the Message Tree Project, the Project Facilitator has been approached to speak to a number of local Williamstown community groups about the history, including Conversations for the Curious, the Williamstown Historical Society and the Rotary Club of Williamstown.

### Potential Other 'Spin-Offs' from this Project:

**Message Tree Song:** Inspired by the Message Tree story and the role of James Wallace, a former Head Teacher at St.Marys Primary School (Williamstown) the school is developing a project to have a song about this story for the school choir to sing.

**Audio visual capture of Boonwurrung Descendant's Voice:** This potential film production project would aim to capture Boonwurrung descendants at the site of the Message Tree giving their view on the revival of this story and its links to their ancestors.

**Message Tree web-page content:** A potential project for Hobsons Bay Libraries (or another appropriate agency) to develop and maintain web-pages that hold Message Tree story content (such as film of Boonwurrung descendants) which can be linked to technology (such as QR Codes) that enable access from the Message Tree interpretive node (via private smartphone technologies) or accessed directly via a web-browser, or both.

**Message Tree Book:** A potential project with Yalukit Marnang to prepare the story of Message Tree and the Boonwurrung of Williamstown as a short publication for community education.

**Message Tree Schools Kit:** A potential project involving Yalukit Marnang to work with local schools to prepare a curriculum kit that supports local schools to teach the Message Tree story and story of the Boonwurrung in Williamstown.

**Boonwurrung Art:** a project within the construction of the Message Tree interpretive node, to find and commission a Boonwurrung artist (or other First Nations artists chosen by Boonwurrung) to reflect Boonwurrung art as part of the pavement, fence or other appropriate element of the node design.

## References:

- Boyce, J., 2011**, *1835: The Founding of Melbourne and the Conquest of Australia*, Black Inc., Collingwood, Victoria.
- Bride, T.F, 1969**, *Letters from Victorian Pioneers*, Heinemann, Melbourne (first published 1898)
- Clark, I., 1995**, *'Scars in the Landscape' A register of massacre sites in Western Victoria 1803-1959*, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, Canberra.
- Clark, I. and Briggs, C., 2011**, *The Yalukit-Willam: The First Peoples of Hobsons Bay*, Hobsons Bay City Council.
- Curtain, A.A, 1889**, *First Pirze Essay on the Early History of Williamstown*, Clark & Co., Printers, Williamstown (copies in the National Library of Australia and Williamstown Library).
- Eidelson, M., 2014**, *Yalukit Willam: The River People of Port Phillip*, City of Port Phillip.
- Elsam, 1934**, *The History of Williamstown from its first settlement to a city 1834-1934*, Williamstown City Council, Revised Ed. (1985).
- Fels, M.H, 2011**, *I Succeeded Once: The Aboriginal Protectorate on the Mornington Peninsula, 1839-1840*, Australian National University Press, Canberra.
- Flannery, T., 2004**, *The Birth of Melbourne*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, Text Publishing, Melbourne.
- Frankel, D., 1982 'An account of Aboriginal Use of the Yam Daisy', *The Artefact*, Vol. 7, (1-2): pp.43-44.
- Pascoe, B., 2014**, *Dark Emu: Black Seeds: Agriculture or Accident?*, Magabala Books Aboriginal Corporation, Broome.
- Presland, G., 2010**, *First People: The Eastern Kulin of Melbourne, Port Phillip & Central Victoria*, Museum Victoria.
- Stanner, W.E.H, 1969**, *After the Dreaming: The Boyer Lectures 1968*, Australian Broadcasting Commission, NSW.
- Stephens, M., 2014**, *The Journal of William Thomas, Assistant Protector of the Aborigines of Port Phillip & Guardian of the Aborigines of Victoria 1839-1867*, (4 Volumes), Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages, Melbourne.
- Strahan Lynne, 1994**, *At the Edge of the Centre: A History of Williamstown*, Hargreen Publishing.