

# THEMATIC ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY

## ABORIGINAL HISTORY

Prepared for

City of Greater Bendigo

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## **Greater Bendigo's original inhabitants**

### **Introduction**

An account of the daily lives of the area's Aboriginal peoples prior to European contact was written during the research for the Greater Bendigo Thematic Environmental History to achieve some understanding of life before European settlement, and to assist with tracing later patterns and changes. The repercussions of colonialism impacted beyond the Greater Bendigo area and it was necessary to extend the account of this area's Aboriginal peoples to a Victorian context, including to trace movement and resettlement beyond this region.

This Aboriginal history was drawn from historical records which include the observations of the first Europeans in the area, who documented what they saw in writing and sketches. Europeans brought their own cultural perceptions, interpretations and understandings to the documentation of Aboriginal life, and the stories recorded were not those of the Aboriginal people themselves.

The historical records have been linked with extracts from the archaeological record, drawing on contemporary scholarly research and investigations of field archaeologists. This too has limitations in what it reveals of Aboriginal life in the pre-contact period, as it substantially relies on what remains and has been unearthed of the physical evidence. Combined, this approach provides glimpses of Aboriginal people before European colonisation, seen through a prism of nineteenth century mind-sets and more contemporary scientific study.

This is the unabridged version of the Aboriginal history researched and prepared for the Thematic Environmental History. A condensed version of this history, bounded by the geographical area of the Greater Bendigo municipality and the post-colonial contact timeframe is included in the latter volume. How the Aboriginal peoples of this country were affected by, and survived, contact with Europeans is detailed in Theme 2 'Peopling Greater Bendigo's places and landscapes' of the Greater Bendigo Thematic Environmental History.

The Aboriginal people and communities in the municipality today have also been consulted in the preparation of this history.

### **Clans and country**

Traditional Aboriginal boundaries were somewhat fluid. The Aboriginal clans who occupied the country of what is today Greater Bendigo are the Jaara Jaara people of the Dja Dja Wurrung language community, the Taungurung peoples and the Barapa Barapa peoples. These Aboriginal language boundaries have been defined by the Victorian Aboriginal Council of Languages (VACL).<sup>1</sup>

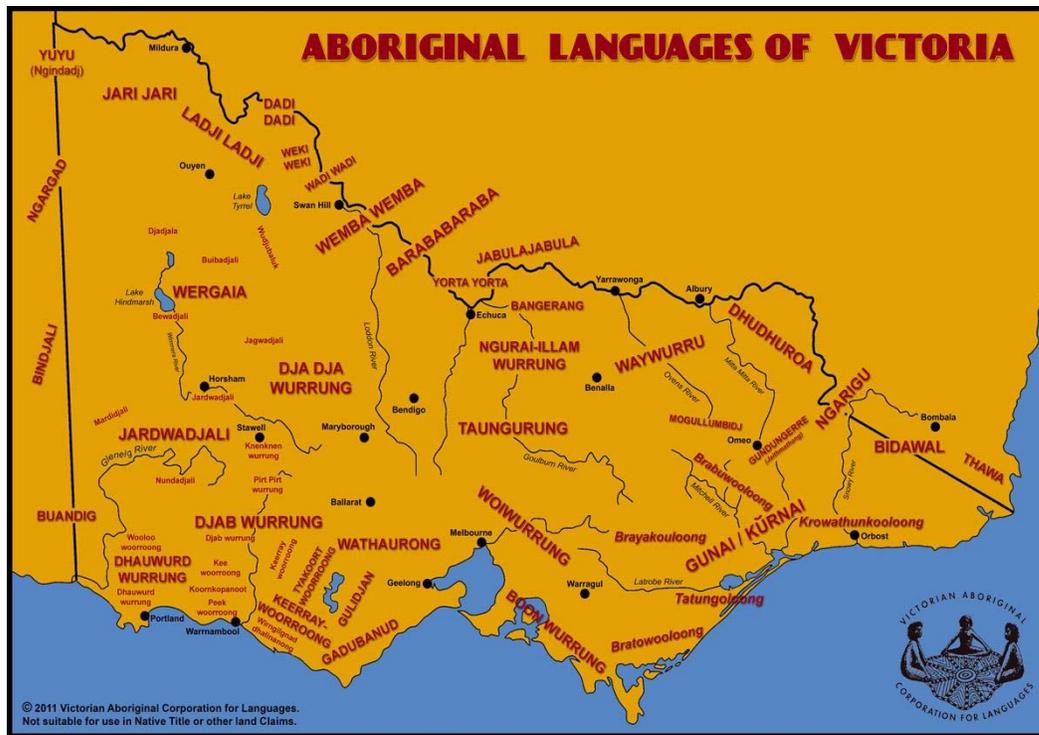


Figure 1 Aboriginal Languages of Victoria.

Source: Victorian Aboriginal Corporation for Languages.

The Jaara Jaara people of the Dja Dja Wurrung language community and Taungurung people were part of the Kulin Nation whose moieties were *bunjil* the wedge tail eagle, and *waa* the crow.

Taungurung country extended from the Dividing Range to the rivers east of the Campaspe River as they enter the plains to the north. Dja Dja Wurrung country was the forest country that extended from the lower foothills of the Dividing Range northwards towards the Riverine Plain. Barapa Barapa country extended to the lower Loddon River districts.

### Aboriginal life on the plains and in the forests

Before the arrival of Europeans in the 1830s, the landscape stretching north from the peaks of the Great Dividing Range, down through the foothills around Bendigo, and on to the Riverine Plain was very different to the landscape of today. The region did not lend itself to large village gatherings, mass exploitation of resources nor dense populations as happened on the rivers to the north.

To the north and west, the Riverine Plain provided particularly rich resources of fish and waterfowl for nine months of the year, which enabled groups such as the Barapa Barapa to live in large village communities. In the winter months, people often dispersed in smaller family groups to eke out a living along the creeks, away from the rivers, or to visit kin and neighbours.

Stone was extremely scarce along the Murray River and its tributaries, but products like string formed a central part of the plains economy along with bone, shell and reeds. People worked in teams to process bulrushes in earth ovens, rolling and weaving the fibre into huge nets as wide as the rivers, to catch fish and water fowl. Reed spears were made in large quantities by Riverine tribes like the Barapa Barapa and were traded into the Bendigo area.

The peoples of Greater Bendigo municipality were mainly forest dwellers. The Jaara Jaara people of the Dja Dja Wurrung community, for example, referred to themselves as the Kalkagoondeet or 'the men of the forest'.<sup>2</sup> The people of the forest moved within country according to seasons, basing their economy on a variety of small, distinct and carefully managed micro-environments.

Wooded and hilly environments, intersected by streams, valleys and chains of ponds, provided a wide variety of plant and animal foods, birds and reptiles, which could supply a family group with most of their needs throughout the year. There was some division of labour in the food quest, with men generally hunting the larger mammals and women gathering the vegetable foods and small game, but there was considerable overlap.

#### *Related places*

Maps of the municipality available through Aboriginal Affairs Victoria show that Aboriginal cultural sensitivity areas exist along all waterways, swamps and forested regions, including the Greater Bendigo National Park, Heathcote Graytown National Park, Mount Sugarloaf Nature Conservation Reserve, Pilchers Bridge Nature Conservation Reserve, Whipstick Nature Conservation Reserve, Shelbourne Nature Conservation Reserve, Crosbie Nature Conservation Area, Lockwood State Forest, One Eye State Forest, Argyle State Forest and Spring Plains Nature Conservation Reserve.<sup>3</sup>

#### *Food*

Plant food was not as prized as meat, but it formed a major part of the diet. In 1839, Edward Stone Parker, Assistant Protector of Aborigines in the North Western District of Victoria, observed that yams, or 'murrnong', formed the chief vegetable subsistence in the area. These and a range of other tubers, bulbs, roots of sedges and rushes, Parker noted, were 'easily extracted by the women with their digging sticks'.<sup>4</sup>

Women used nets to catch small fish, frogs, shrimps and yabbies as well as digging out small mammals and reptiles, such as bandicoots, bilbies, goannas, small lizards or snakes. Other foods brought home in bags and baskets included bird eggs, grubs and insects, a range of seasonal fruits, berries, nuts and leaf greens, as well as grasses and other seeds that could be ground into flour.

Men hunted larger mammals and birds such as kangaroo, wallaby and emu on the nearby plains. They speared fish in streams, netted waterfowl, used axes to cut footholds in the trees to catch possums or collect honey and used throwing sticks to bring down birds.

Mitchell observed the use of a prized seasonal food in October 1836 after crossing the Campaspe River in the vicinity of Mount Camel. The harvested blossoms of a large ironbark were stored in a canoe, steeped in water at night, to make a 'sweet beverage named bool'.<sup>5</sup>

#### *Water*

Aboriginal peoples of the area knew where water could be sourced and information on water sources was passed from generation to generation. The most permanent sources, water holes, were in riverine and creek watercourses and underground springs.

Water supply infrastructure was constructed to maximise seasonal drainage patterns. Channels were engineered and weirs built out of timber stakes, to slow the flow of receding floodwaters and catch fish. Nets, or fences of boughs, were also suspended across waterways to catch ducks and other waterfowl.

When rainfall was scarce, people congregated in smaller groups at more permanent water holes and when moving, carried water in skin bags. Water was also captured in tree trunk hollows and tree roots. Soaks that tapped into the water table were dug between banks into

soft sandy sediments, or at the foot of a sloping rock. Natural depressions in weathered rock were also enlarged by hand and channels were chipped out of surrounding rock to divert water to the well. A flat slab was then placed over the rock well, to reduce evaporation and keep animals out.

#### *Related places*

- Water supply and water management sites including soaks, springs, waterholes, channels and weirs
- Rock wells

#### *Warmth*

Fire was used to keep warm, cook food and make tools. There were three different ways of making fire, all involving friction, but firesticks were preferable to the hard work of making a new fire.

During the day, people made small fires to grill a light meal on the coals, such as fish, lizard, or the liver, heart and kidneys removed from a bigger catch. Such occasional 'dinner camps' left little evidence in the landscape. Where people lit fires repeatedly in the same place, this would show up later as ashy soils, perhaps with a few heat stones and more readily identified as a hearth.

Where a family used the same base repeatedly, ovens and stones were reused and the area became mounded up with ash, cooking debris, humus from vegetable foods and discarded bones. Archaeologists recognise these earth mounds by their shape, colour and composition of the soils. In the Greater Bendigo municipality, a small number of earth mounds have been identified on flat areas beside creeks.

Food taken home to family at the end of the day would usually be cooked communally. Women would dig an earth oven, heat up hot rocks or clay balls inside it and cook the various meat and vegetable foods in layers. Ovens are usually recognised by a quantity of heat stones left in the landscape.

Fire was also used to manage the food landscape. Aboriginal people played an important role in creating open forest for hunting game and maintaining plants and encouraging their abundance.<sup>6</sup> New South Wales Surveyor-General Thomas Mitchell led an exploration party through the region in 1836. He described the country as having 'the appearance of a well-kept park' and he was reluctant to spoil it with his cart tracks.<sup>7</sup>

Squatter Edward Curr took up properties at Wolfscrag near Heathcote and then at Colbinabbin in the early 1840s. He later wrote that Aboriginal people systematically set fire to grass for hunting purposes concluding that '[the Aboriginal] tilled his land and cultivated his pastures with fire'. Curr considered the fire-stick as important to the Aboriginal economy as the spear, the net, or the axe.<sup>8</sup>

Rugs were made of possum, wallaby and kangaroo skins. Possum skin cloaks, essential to survive a cold winter, were particularly valued. Skins would be pegged out to dry, the fat scraped off with mussel shells, the skins rubbed with special fats and ochres to soften and preserve them and then sewn together with a bone needle and the fine sinew of kangaroo tail. The fur was worn next to the body, the skin on the outside; this was painted with red ochre, depicting animals or designs representing an individual's country.

The possum skin cloaks were described by many early Europeans and some can be seen in museum collections. Squatter Edward Curr observed how they were made. The men hunted possums during the day, skinned them on their return to camp and pegged out the skins on a small sheet of bark, placed in front of a fire to gradually dry. The skins were also scored with a mussel-shell in ornamental patterns, before being sewn together.<sup>9</sup> Curr also

described women using a sort of spindle to spin yarn out of the fur of the ring-tailed opossum. This yarn was worn in many folds around the neck as an ornament. Many of the smaller, rectangular scars recorded on trees in the region show where bark was removed for pegging and drying possum skins.

#### *Related places*

- Hearth sites
- Earth cooking mounds and earth ovens

#### *Shelter*

People generally lived in extended family groups along creeks and streams within their own country. Depending on seasonal resources, the size of groups would vary and people might move between different homes throughout the year. The type of dwelling constructed depended on the season, the weather and the intended length of stay.<sup>10</sup> In the forests of Greater Bendigo, bark sheeting was the principal building material.

The simplest shelter comprised a windbreak of branches, twigs and leaves that could be quickly erected when people were on the move. During summer, people often lived in a high, lean-to, gable bark structure that gave shelter from light rain and dew, as well as providing a windbreak that would allow a fire to burn. These were made from large sheets of rigid bark held up by a ridgepole. Similar shelters were also used as workshops where men manufactured tools and weapons.

Dome structures were another common form of construction. Small domes were circular dwellings, built on a light bent pole structure that could be speedily erected. Other more permanent structures were bigger, wider and housed more people. They were covered with bark, paperbark, ferns or grasses, depending on what was available. Some houses were large and sturdy with solid walls and a domed roof, far more permanent than the small day camps erected when people were fishing or digging yams.

Another common structure was a single, central ridgepole with long sheets of bark folded over the central pole. These would be filled in at the ends, again with bark, or left open to allow the breeze through depending on the weather conditions.

Generally each family had its own hut. Unmarried men and boys from about ten years and up lived together, separate from their parents and sisters, in what was known as the single men's camp. Sometimes widows beyond marriageable age shared a house. Dwellings tended to be arranged in a way that ensured a degree of privacy, usually several metres apart and all facing the same way, with their backs to the wind. Fires were arranged so as not to blow smoke or cinders towards neighbours' dwellings.

The interior walls were often decorated with pictures of corroborees, animals or hunting scenes drawn with charcoal or etched into the bark. George Augustus Robinson, Chief Protector of Aborigines, described drawings of people and drays on the inside of a bark hut when travelling in central Victoria in 1843.<sup>11</sup>

#### *Related places*

- Sites associated with seasonal and more permanent camps
- Sites associated with men or women's camps

### **Resources of the plains and forests**

#### *Timber*

A wide range of timbers essential to daily life were readily available. The people of the forest left their marks on trees, with the size and shape of each scar indicating what use had been

made of the tree. Large scars are often evidence of the removal of bark sheeting for the construction of windbreaks and shelter. Medium sized scars show where people carefully removed bark to make dishes for storing food, carrying water, or for large bark baskets to carry babies. Scars made by cutting bark shields, used to deflect thrown spears, are a similar size, while smaller scars show where bowls, dinner plates, or sheets for pegging out possum skins were removed. Grey and black box were favoured trees for bark removal.

Scars were also left from holes cut as footholds for climbing tree trunks, or cut into branches in search of possums, honey and birds, where the nesting holes were enlarged by axe. As the rivers widen towards the plains, and more river red gums are found, long narrow scars show where bark has been cut out to make canoes to cross rivers and carry belongings. Small holes bored into trunks allowed for the food source, grubs, to be hooked out.

Following European colonisation, bark sheeting also became an important building material for the new settlers, providing roofing and occasionally walls of houses and barns. These scars are often rectangular and large, and the small axe marks on the heart-wood are from steel rather than stone axes.

#### *Related places*

- Marker trees
- Scar trees and marked trees, related to different types of bark removal
- Trees cut for possum and honey removal



Figure 2 The scar on this tree is well formed, with axe marks indicating that it is of human rather than natural origin. The size of the scar suggests it could have made a carrying vessel.

Source: Dr Colin Pardoe.



Figure 3 The branch shows several holes cut for possums or honey.  
Source: image provided by Dr Colin Pardoe.

### *Stone*

Stone for making tools was readily available in the foothill country. Silcrete, which has a similar appearance to quartz, was widely used by Aboriginal people for stone tool manufacturing and trade. Silcrete was flaked into knives, woodworking tools, spear points and for hafts to timber handles. There was a silcrete quarry in what was later known as the Huntly district.<sup>12</sup>

Metamorphic stone, prized for axes, was also generally available and axes were used for chopping, chiselling and shaping. They were used to cut extra holes into trees for possums and honey, to prise off sheets of bark for housing, to shape wooden items such as tools and weapons, to make containers for collecting and carrying and to make canoes.

Local Aboriginal people established quarries on the Mount Camel range, where they manufactured greenstone axe blanks for trade and their own use. Virtually all axes found in Greater Bendigo have come from these two quarries and manufacturing sites in the Heathcote Greenstone Belt. The Mount Camel quarry is 40 kilometres from Bendigo to the east across the Campaspe River and the other at Mount William, near Lancefield, 70 kilometres to the south-east of Bendigo.<sup>13</sup> These were the two major sites in Victoria where such axe blanks were produced in quantity until the 1840s.

The making of axes was labour intensive. Joseph Parker, son of Edward Stone Parker, was a keen observer who spent his childhood among the Jaara Jaara people of the Dja Dja Wurrung community. Parker spoke the language of the Jaara Jaara people and documented their traditional cultural practices.<sup>14</sup> According to Parker, a hot fire was lit against an outcrop of basalt or greenstone, with the stone doused with water once hot. Flakes of the right thickness were then easier to prise off, to shape into 'blanks' that were later ground to the desired shape.



Figure 4 This silcrete flake has been retouched along the left-hand side to form a woodworking tool that would have been hafted to a handle using resin.  
Source: Dr Colin Pardoe.



Figure 5 This is a crescentic 'backed blade', with a straight cutting edge. This flake would have been hafted either as a spear barb or on a line with several others to make a composite knife blade.  
Source: Dr Colin Pardoe.



Figure 6 Smoothly polished axe heads were highly prized possessions.  
Source: Dr Colin Pardoe.



Figure 7 Hard seeds such as acacia and nardoo were pounded and ground to make flour. The classic sandstone grinding dish of the arid and semi-arid zones would not withstand this treatment, so harder rock such as silcrete or quartzite was used. Shallow bowl-shaped depressions as seen here are formed from continual pounding and grinding.  
Source: image provided by Dr Colin Pardoe.

To haft the axes, slits were made in wattle trees to extract the gum, which was chewed, placed between two sheets of green bark and covered with hot ashes. The gum was then kneaded vigorously and mixed with lime made from burnt mussel shells ground into powder on a special millstone. The haft itself was made from split wattle canes, made supple using heat and water, before being bound to the stone with liberal application of the gummy cement. On completion, the wood and stone were firmly united, forming an axe.

Other stone sources were accessible, but these were of lesser importance. Indurated sandstone was locally available for the manufacture of large seed-grinding dishes but grass seed grinding was not a dietary staple in this area, as it was further north in New South Wales. The grasses of the region are typically winter grasses with smaller seeds, rather than the larger seeds of summer grasses that are associated with large sandstone dishes. Smaller mortars for pounding hard wattle seed have been recorded.

#### *Related places*

- Tool making sites
- Stone quarries

#### *The daily toolkit*

Typical daily possessions of an Aboriginal man included a kangaroo skin bag, containing tomahawks, shields, waddies and other utensils, as well as a spear and throwing stick carried by hand. The bags might also contain a hafted knife or adze, mussel shells for scraping, bone points or awls for sewing, material for fire making, spare flakes of stone, lumps of ochre, or special fire-hardened pegs for pegging out skins. There might also be lumps of resin and a roll of dried macropod sinew, tendon or hank of string. These were essential for running repairs or for re-hafting stones, bones or shells.<sup>15</sup>

Men devoted considerable time and effort to making and maintaining essential tools and weapons, such as spears, clubs, throwing sticks, shields and axes which were used for both hunting and warfare. Tools were made of stone, bone or shell, which were hafted on to wooden handles to form knives, chisels or scrapers. Some were beautifully finished weapons, often decorated with carvings.

In most of Victoria and New South Wales, men made two kinds of shield. A broad one, of thick sun-dried bark, was used for protection against thrown spears and a much narrower one, made of wood, was used in close fighting with clubs or 'nullanullas'.

There were also two kinds of common spear. One was heavy, made of a hard wood such as Mallee saplings, with jagged wooden edges or small pieces of quartz inserted along the sides and cemented. These were known as jagged or hafted spears, or war spears. The quartz points would break off in the animal, fish, or enemy and cause maximum damage. The other was the reed spear, which was light to carry and effective in hunting. These were composite spears that could be tipped and re-tipped with a range of materials such as hardwoods or emu bones.

Aboriginal women carried a range of utensils in their daily toolkit, including digging sticks and trowels for excavating small mammals, reptiles and yams and woven bags, baskets or containers for carrying food. Women also carried their own small nets for catching perch and yabbies. Some women were responsible for carrying firesticks when moving camp. Other small bags might be used for carrying honey. These were made from very thin bark, sewn up at the sides with either bark twine or the fine sinews of kangaroo tails.

In September 1836, Mitchell headed back across the Dividing Range towards the Coliban River on his return exploratory journey. His party disturbed a group of Aboriginal people who fled, one woman leaving her bag behind. It held two stone hatchets as well as food that

the woman had apparently collected that day including three snakes, three rats, about two pounds of small fish, such as white bait and crayfish, and a quantity of daisy yams which were the staple root vegetable in the region. The bag also held bodkins for sewing clothes and rugs, as well as pieces of coloured ochre for body decoration.<sup>16</sup>

Another important item carried by both men and women were the barbed switches used to extract edible grubs from trees. These and other small items were often stuck in the small nets worn around their foreheads or in arm or waistbands.

### **Interaction between peoples: trade, marriage and warfare**

Making a living as a hunter-gatherer required access to a variety of resources, not all available in one's country. Trade, marriage, and ceremony formed the basis for meetings between different groups and provided a forum for cementing relationships, resolving conflict and adjudicating disagreements.

At specific times of the year, depending on the availability of resources, family groups and whole clans moved to known meeting grounds to meet up with neighbours. They also traded and exchanged items unavailable in their own country.

The forest and river peoples were fond of lerp, a sweet, white, insect secretion or manna found on the leaves of the Mallee scrub. People from the rivers and Mallee would trade lerp and Mallee hardwood spear shafts for the sought after high quality silcrete, axe stone blanks and sandstone available to the forest people of the area.<sup>17</sup>

In the 1870s, Joseph Parker described the widespread trade in stone for axes between the Dja Dja Wurrung and their neighbours. He wrote, 'Messengers were sent by distant tribes to procure stones for the Bur-reek (tomahawk) from the Ja-jow-er-ong people'.<sup>18</sup> Archaeologists have found stone from quarries at Mount William and Mount Camel as far west as the Murray River mouth, east on the other side of Port Phillip Bay and north as far as the Menindee Lakes on the Darling River and the Lachlan and Murrumbidgee Rivers.

Ochre and sandstone blocks were other items from the region traded with neighbours. In return, the Jaara Jaara people of the Dja Dja Wurrung community and Taungurung would acquire the light reed spears made by the Barapa Barapa and fresh water mussel shells for knives.<sup>19</sup>

#### *Related places*

- Aboriginal meeting and trading sites

### **British colonisation**

It is difficult to know the exact Aboriginal population of Australia before British colonisation, but the continent would have supported around 1.6 billion human lives past infancy during an estimated 70,000 years before 1788.<sup>20</sup> The Victorian Aboriginal population was at least 15,000 in 1835. Smallpox outbreaks, likely to have been introduced by Macassan fishermen who visited northern Australia, decimated Aboriginal populations around 1790 and 1830.<sup>21</sup> Assuming that each smallpox epidemic reduced local populations by 50 per cent, the pre-colonial Victorian Aboriginal population is estimated at about 60,000 people.<sup>22</sup> The figure of the Dja Dja Wurrung clans at contact are estimated to have been between 900 and 1,800.<sup>23</sup>

There was irrevocable spiritual and physical disruption to connection to country caused by the Europeans. In the resultant collapse of traditional socio-political structures, disease played a role in the rapid decline of Aboriginal populations of Greater Bendigo. Aboriginal people associated the great rainbow serpent that lived in the north-west of the Port Phillip District, later the Colony of Victoria, *Mindy* for the devastation caused by small pox, but

syphilis introduced by Europeans impacted dramatically on Aboriginal women, causing sterility and an increase in infant mortality.

Aboriginal populations were also affected by inter-tribal conflict when people were forced into country in which they had no connection. James Dredge, Assistant Protector at the Goulburn River Aboriginal Station, claimed that by 1839 the clans on the middle reaches of the Goulburn River, although from the same linguistic groups, had become implacable enemies and could barely communicate with each other.<sup>24</sup> In the early 1840s, western and southern Dja Dja Wurrung peoples were in conflict with Taungurung, Ngurai-illam and Djab Wurrung clans.<sup>25</sup> This warfare was different to traditional disputes where excessive violence over women, trade or ritual transgressions was more controlled.<sup>26</sup>

### **Impacts of squatting on Aboriginal people**

The effect of squatting on Aboriginal peoples was devastating. Traditional food and water sources were interfered with and contaminated by pastoralism. In 1839, Edward Stone Parker of the Loddon Aboriginal Protectorate noted that the country taken up for sheep and cattle runs, including creeks, water courses and rivers, was valued by the Aborigines. In January 1840, Chief Protector of Aborigines George Augustus Robinson also noted changes on Henry Munro's Spring Plains run in the east of Greater Bendigo. This included a dramatic decline in kangaroos and emu, which deprived the indigenous people of 'a large portion of their support and subsistence'.<sup>27</sup>

Aboriginal people were killed in conflicts with squatters. There was a notable increase in Aboriginal-European violence between the years 1838 and 1842, including killings on both side, most likely exacerbated by diminished food and water supplies caused by dry years.<sup>28</sup> Charles Hutton and Henry Munro were associated with what became known as the 'Campaspe Plains Massacre'. Later in 1853, Hutton argued there was blame on both sides, describing the 'Campaspe blacks' as 'mischievous', and also blaming the deaths on influenza.<sup>29</sup>

Despite this violence, Aboriginal labour was integral to the economies of pastoral stations, and strong working relationships were forged between squatters and Aboriginal peoples. Aboriginal men were employed as shearers, woodcutters, shepherds, water carters and fencers and women as needle workers and midwives. In other work prior to 1845, Aboriginal people stoked fires under large coppers and boilers, providing hot water for sheep washing.<sup>30</sup> Aboriginal people also continued their practice of bark cutting, to supply bark sheets for construction. Many of the scarred trees in the region date to this period. Charles Davis of the Mount Camel run showed his respect for local Aboriginal people as the first owners of the country by refusing to remove a scar tree from near his homestead.<sup>31</sup>

The halting of Aboriginal burning impacted on the growth of woodlands and grasslands, the source of pastureland for grazing and farming. Some squatters on the plains realised that the grasslands on which their stock depended had been managed by Aboriginal fire-stick burning. Travelling to the other side of the ranges on his Wolfscrag run, Edward Curr discovered the 'greenest and freshest of kangaroo grass, interspersed with yams, murnong, and other herbs', and noted that the growth was due to the country recently being burnt.<sup>32</sup>

#### *Related places*

- Sites of conflict and violence between European and Aboriginal peoples
- Places of Aboriginal influence, activity and employment on pastoral runs
- Aboriginal camps on pastoral runs
- Camping sites of dislocated peoples

## Aboriginal people on the goldfields

The gold rushes in central Victoria decimated Aboriginal populations.<sup>33</sup> In the early 1850s gold rushes led to worker shortages on pastoral runs and this gave employment to Aboriginal people. Those living on the edges of gold towns fared less well, with many turning to begging and prostitution. In 1858, Parker noted that many of the remaining Jaara Jaara people lived a scanty subsistence on the goldfields.<sup>34</sup> Anecdotal accounts tell stories of Aboriginal communities moving north, away from the diggings to avoid the problems of alcoholism, prostitution and begging.<sup>35</sup> A large Aboriginal camp, for instance, existed at Elmore in 1865.<sup>36</sup>

Local Aboriginal people also mined for gold and acted as guides to mining parties. In 1852 at Bullock Creek, James Bonwick met a group of Aboriginal miners, including one who told him 'Me plenty rich blackfellow.'<sup>37</sup> F McKenzie Clark recalled in *Early Days on Bendigo*, another Aboriginal group at Myers Flat who picked up gold after rain, selling it to pay for provisions.<sup>38</sup> J A Patterson also wrote in *The Goldfields of Victoria in 1862* of Aboriginal miners extracting gold from a reef at Fentiman's.<sup>39</sup>

Traditional practices continued to be a source of income for Aboriginal people, who performed corroborees to raise money. In 1868 at Essendon, clans from Ballarat and Bendigo, presumably Watha Wurrung and Jaara Jaara people of the Dja Dja Wurrung community, staged a two-hour corroboree for a large audience.<sup>40</sup> Aboriginal people also sold and traded possum skin cloaks, fish and game.

### *Related places*

- Places of Aboriginal influence, activity and employment on the goldfields
- Aboriginal camps on the goldfields
- Camping sites of dislocated peoples

## Aboriginal Protectorates

Humanitarian concerns about the declining state of Aboriginal people led to the establishment of the Port Phillip Aboriginal Protectorate in 1838. Its goal was to protect and re-socialise people through teaching agriculture, house construction, reading, writing and religious instruction. The Protectorate stations may have afforded the Jaara Jaara people of the Dja Dja Wurrung and the Taungurung and Barapa Barapa peoples some protection from conflict and violence with European squatters at this time.

Aboriginal peoples of this area were affected by the measures taken to protect them, although the protectorate stations were established outside of the Greater Bendigo municipality. The Chief Protector, George Augustus Robinson, was stationed in Melbourne from April 1838, but four Assistant Protectors had responsibilities for other areas: Geelong and the Western District, Goulburn and North Eastern District, Westernport and Melbourne District, and Mount Macedon and North Western District. The headquarters for Mount Macedon and North Western District, known as the Loddon Aboriginal Protectorate, were located at Franklinford near Daylesford, now Hepburn Shire Council. Those of the Goulburn and North Eastern District, or Goulburn Aboriginal Protectorate, were at Mitchellstown near Nagambie, now Shire of Strathbogie.

Edward Stone Parker was put in charge of the Loddon Aboriginal Protectorate, initially with the headquarters at Yerrip Hills, near Sunbury. Parker began work in 1839, moving from Yerrip Hills to Tarrengower Hill, Maldon, in 1840 and to the Franklinford reserve at Mount Franklin, near Daylesford, that was excised from Alexander Mollison's Coliban run in 1841.<sup>41</sup>

Parker's record keeping documented the lives of local Aboriginal people, including the fracturing of their traditional social and economic systems. In February 1841, according to

his census, the Dja Dja Wurrung numbered approximately 282.<sup>42</sup> That year, several deaths due to disease at the protectorate station convinced many to leave, promising to return when the 'ground should become better'. At this time, Parker estimated that nine-tenths of the women in his care had syphilis. In 1842, visiting northern Djab Wurrung clans were asked to leave on the grounds they were considered too *mainmait*, or foreign.<sup>43</sup>

The situation deteriorated throughout the remainder of the 1840s. In 1844 many Dja Dja Wurrung left Franklinford to visit the Taungurung at the Goulburn Aboriginal Protectorate, while in the following year others visited Franklinford. In 1847, the total number of people visiting the station was only 157. Public houses were operating nearby and alcohol abuse was becoming a problem.<sup>44</sup> The Dja Dja Wurrung deserted the station in 1848, mainly due to sickness and mortality. A total of 124 Aborigines visited the station in this year.<sup>45</sup>

James Dredge was put in charge of the Goulburn Protectorate District in 1839 with headquarters at Mitchellstown, near Nagambie. It is likely that the Taungurung peoples of used the station. Within two weeks of arriving, Dredge reported the poisoning of Aboriginal people with flour laced with arsenic.<sup>46</sup> Dredge resigned his position and was succeeded by William Le Souef in July 1840. By February 1840, almost all surviving Taungurung people were at the station, but when supplies ran out, 262 people moved away.<sup>47</sup>

From 1842, funds were cut to the protectorate stations, reducing their effectiveness. As traditional ways of trading and food collection broke down and supplies at protectorate stations dried up, Aboriginal people became reliant on the blankets, flour, sugar and mutton of white society. Many came to Melbourne in search of food and to conduct business; in January 1844, 675 Aboriginal people camped near Melbourne included groups from the Campaspe and Loddon River regions and the north-west.<sup>48</sup>

Following the recommendations of the 1849 New South Wales Legislative Council's enquiry into the state of Aborigines, which largely represented squatting interests, the Port Phillip District Protectorate was abolished. William Thomas was retained as Guardian of Aborigines. In December 1852, 50 men, 42 women and 50 children survived at Franklinford, a decrease of 50 per cent in less than twelve years.<sup>49</sup>

In 1851, two German missionaries, Reverends Taeger and Spieseke, established an Aboriginal mission station at Lake Boga, near Swan Hill. In 1854, 100 Aboriginal people were at the station, but the usual figure was between 30 and 40.<sup>50</sup> The Barapa Barapa were most likely amongst their number. Efforts to make Aboriginal people work in exchange for their food, housing and clothing met with little success and the mission closed in 1856.

In 1855, most of the original Franklinford protectorate reserve was subdivided and sold. At the time, four Aboriginal families were farming land on the reserve, including Lanky, Yerrebulluk - Dicky and Beembarim - Tommy Farmer.<sup>51</sup> By 1863, according to Parker, 31 adults and seven children remained at Franklinford.<sup>52</sup>

#### *Related places*

- Protectorate stations, ration depots and missions associated with Aboriginal peoples of this country

#### **Aboriginal Reserves**

The protectorate system was replaced by a system of reserves and rationing which was established in 1860 and by 1863, a number of specified camping places, ration depots and reserves were in place. In country Victoria, honorary correspondents managed the depots on behalf of the Central Board Appointed to Watch Over the Interests of the Aborigines.

Aboriginal peoples of the area were caught up in the reserve system and in later re-settlement programs, though no Aboriginal reserves and ration depots were established in

Greater Bendigo. The remaining Jaara Jaara people of the Dja Dja Wurrung community at Franklinford, for instance, were re-settled at Coranderrk Aboriginal Reserve at present day Healesville, when an investigation into conditions in 1864 found the old protectorate school unfit for instruction and the farms abandoned.<sup>53</sup> The school was recommended for closure and the children removed to Coranderrk.

Under the 1869 *Aboriginal Protection Act*, the Central Board became the Board for the Protection of the Aborigines and provided for six Aboriginal reserves. The coercive Act allowed the Governor to prescribe where and how Aborigines lived and to take charge of orphaned and neglected children. Superintendent of Coranderrk, John Green was responsible for relocating Aboriginal people to the reserves, arguing that all Aboriginal children should be removed from their 'old haunts'.<sup>54</sup> In 1877, Green reported that he had brought people to Coranderrk from the Goulburn, Jim Crow at Mount Franklin, Sandhurst, the Terricks, the Murray and Echuca.<sup>55</sup>

Surviving Jaara Jaara people of the Dja Dja Wurrung community, Barapa Barapa and Taungurung peoples were also resettled at the Maloga Mission Reserve. The Maloga Mission was established in Bangerang and Yorta Yorta country on the New South Wales side of the Murray River in 1874. In 1889, the Aboriginal people were relocated to the newly reserved Cumeragunga Mission, just a few miles away. Cumeragunga residents retained their links to Greater Bendigo: a Huntly resident remembers her father-in-law playing football in the 1890s in the Bagshot district with young men from Cumeragunga.<sup>56</sup>

From 1886 Victorian assimilation policy sought to remove Aboriginal people of mixed descent from Aboriginal stations or reserves, to merge into white society. The *Aborigines Act* of 1890 further extended state powers to separate Aboriginal children from their families. In 1901, the Victorian census recorded just 652 Aboriginal people, a sharp decline from the 1877 total of 1,067 people.<sup>57</sup>

The 1927 census revealed there were only 514 Aboriginal people living in Victoria, with 293 living in 'supervised camps' or reserves.<sup>58</sup> In 1939, Cumeragunga residents went on strike to highlight their poor living conditions and crossed the Murray River. Some returned to Greater Bendigo to reside and rekindle relationships with their families and ancestral homeland. The Firebrace family, for example, lived at Campaspe Park when Jack Neale owned the property in the 1940s.<sup>59</sup>

Legislation since 1860 effectively moved people off country, but the reserve system in the radically changing landscape of the mid-to-late nineteenth century may have saved the lives of Aboriginal people. Today's Victorian Aboriginal population, including people living in Greater Bendigo, are descended from approximately 500 individuals that were living on Aboriginal reserves in the 1870s.<sup>60</sup>

#### *Related places*

- Reserves associated with Aboriginal peoples of this country
- Camping sites of dislocated groups

#### **Fighting for Identity**

The *Aborigines Act* 1910 lessened, but did not remove, the legal distinction between the rights of the white population and Aboriginal people in Victoria. Despite this, many Aboriginal people responded to the call to enlist during World War One.<sup>61</sup> Aboriginal people from Greater Bendigo, as elsewhere, signed up to serve their country, including drover Leslie Moyle who was born in Bendigo in 1898.<sup>62</sup>

In 1967, Aboriginal people were officially included in the census and in 1970 the first act to recognise Aboriginal people's entitlement to land in Victoria was passed. In 1972, there

were 6,371 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in Victoria, 16,570 in 1991 and 25,900 in 2001. This strong population growth was due to a continued high birth rate, lower infant mortality, a preference for large families, better health and a greater willingness for some people to identify as Aboriginal.<sup>63</sup>

Traditional owners have remained resilient and maintained a strong cultural connection to their country in the Greater Bendigo municipality. Today, support to the community is provided through the Bendigo and District Aboriginal Co-Operative, *Dja Dja* Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation, Barapa Barapa Nation Aboriginal Corporation and the Taungurung Clans Aboriginal Corporation.

Native title claims for their country have been the subject of an eighteen month negotiation between the *Dja Dja* Wurrung people and the Victorian Government under the *Victorian Traditional Owner Settlement Act 2010*.<sup>64</sup> Settled on 28 March 2013, the agreement represents resolution of native title claims to approximately 266, 532 hectares of Crown land, or around three per cent of Crown land in Victoria.<sup>65</sup> The settlement recognises the *Dja Dja* Wurrung as the traditional owners of the area that covers north of the Great Dividing Range from Franklindford, including the catchment areas of the Richardson, Avon, Avoca, Loddon and Campaspe rivers and Crown land in the City of Greater Bendigo, Lake Boort and part of Lake Buloke

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1 Where possible, the spellings of tribal and clan designations are those as used by these Aboriginal groups today. Other names are taken from Ian D. Clark's 'Aboriginal Languages and Clans: An Historical Atlas of Western and Central Victoria 1800-1900', Monash Publications in Geography Number 37, Monash University, Melbourne, Vic, 1990.

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