Greater Bendigo's framework of historical themes

Statement of Significance

What is significant?
Greater Bendigo is a major municipality of northern Victoria. It includes the State's third largest city, Bendigo, rural areas, and hinterland towns of Axedale, Elmore, Heathcote, Marong and Redesdale. Extensive natural areas, including Box-Ironbark forests, are set aside in national and regional parks, crown land reserves, and public forests, as well as occurring on private land.

Aboriginal clans occupied the forests and plains of the area, before the arrival of pastoralists in the later 1830s and 1840s and still maintain a connection to this country. The discovery of gold in the municipal area in the early 1850s generated an extraordinary period of development; it brought diggers and settlers to Greater Bendigo, who established a rich and culturally diverse society. The expansion and influence of gold mining also impacted on the development of industry, manufacturing and commerce. The municipal landscape of today reflects all these layers of history and culture, in the spatial layout of urban areas, agricultural land, and natural environments.

How is it significant?
Greater Bendigo is of outstanding historical, social, aesthetic, architectural, and scientific significance.

Why is it significant?
Greater Bendigo is of historical and social significance. It was the location of one of Victoria's earliest alluvial gold rushes, followed by the establishment and expansion of quartz mining. The Bendigo-Eaglehawk field was one of the world's great nineteenth century quartz mining centres (the largest in eastern Australia and the second largest in Australia after Kalgoorlie). The colossal output helped sustain global financial systems and trade, and was a significant contributor to the development of Melbourne. The mining activity initiated significant innovations and developments in commerce, manufacturing and technology. Examples include the first mining stock exchange in Australia (in the Beehive Building on Pall Mall), one of the largest railway workshops in Australia, and the foundation of Bendigo Bank and the Myer retail empire.

Construction of a reliable water supply in the Coliban Water reservoir system also influenced historical development, including the location and viability of settlements and horticulture. Transnational immigration associated with gold mining brought a diversity of traditions and cultural practice. In particular the Cornish, German and Chinese miners have made significant and ongoing contributions to the culture and development of Greater Bendigo.

German immigrant architects designed buildings which are now regarded as some of the most significant in regional Victoria, helping to make the municipality of aesthetic/architectural significance. Bendigo city has one of the highest concentrations of Victorian Heritage Registered properties in the State, and two of regional Australia's most architecturally distinguished boulevards in Pall Mall and View Street. Bendigo has an outstanding collection of historic civic buildings, complemented by more modest collections of civic buildings in other towns. Significant structures in Greater Bendigo include those associated with industry, public utilities, mining, transport, agriculture, engineering and manufacturing. Boom style homes and gardens built by mining speculators contrast with an extensive collection of modest German and Cornish miners’ cottages.

Many small settlements also retain buildings associated with gold rushes. In addition, there are significant buildings that represent a diverse vernacular tradition. There are also fine examples of 19th century town planning layouts and botanic gardens, public parks and avenues of trees. Extensive natural areas, including Box-Ironbark forests, rivers, hills and valleys of cultural and aesthetic significance provide a contrast to the urban centres and agricultural landscapes.

The municipality is of scientific significance. Numerous historical and archaeological sites associated with different phases and types of gold mining and processing survive, and demonstrate aspects of mining technology. There are also outstanding examples of manufacturing industry associated with restructuring of the mining industry, in particular foundries and engineering works for defence and agriculture, where advances in technology were also made. There are in addition natural sites of significance throughout the municipality, including geological and geomorphological sites. These include the Big Hill ridge which marks the southern gateway to Bendigo.
Shaping Greater Bendigo’s environment
Greater Bendigo’s diverse environment has profoundly shaped the historical development of the municipality. The quartz of the West Victorian Uplands bore gold for one of the richest rushes in the world, and the red duplex soils gave the nineteenth century architecture its distinctively coloured brickwork.

The extensive periods of climatic dryness has, from the earliest gold rush days, fuelled the search for permanent industrial and residential water supplies. The development of the gold industry extensively impacted upon the Box-Ironbark forests and woodlands but there was increasing awareness of the need for better forest management due to dwindling timber supplies. Through the introduction of forest activity infrastructure, 36 per cent of the pre-European vegetation remains.

The treescapes of the Goldfields bioregion today are characterised by extensive coppiced regrowth; in this way they are a living reminder of the area’s gold history. Greater Bendigo’s geology defines a sense of place; landmarks such as Mount Camel Range and Big Hill ridge continue to be significant to indigenous and non-indigenous residents alike.

Peopling Greater Bendigo’s places and landscape
The history of Greater Bendigo’s original inhabitants is ultimately one of resilience; the Aboriginal peoples of this country continue to live in the municipality, having survived displacement and decimation. The traditional owners’ connection to country is strong and has recently been recognised by a historic settlement under the Traditional Owner Settlement Act 2010. Exploration was crucial to European discovery of this country, relying information to the pastoralists and squatters who followed and settled in the explorers’ wake.

The gold rushes transformed the nation from a country dependent on convict labour and pastoralism to a booming economy with international connections. From 1852, two thirds of the immigrants coming to Australia were heading for Victoria, the majority of who were destined for the goldfields. The influx of people included Chinese, Cornish, Irish and Germans, who settled here becoming communities with a presence in Greater Bendigo today. Settlement was promoted through the establishment of small allotments with the 1860s Land Acts, and later with closer and smaller settlement schemes, often on land once used for pastoral runs.

Connecting Greater Bendigo by transport and communications
The first pathways in the Greater Bendigo municipality were made by Aboriginal peoples and it is likely that Europeans utilised these existing tracks and access ways. In the early phase of European settlement, there was limited need for transport infrastructure: pastoral runs were largely run from Melbourne.

The rush to the goldfields in the 1850s preceded colonial organisation but the wealth of the Greater Bendigo goldfields drove the construction of roads and tracks. In the early phase of European settlement, there was limited need for transport infrastructure: pastoral runs were largely run from Melbourne.

Building Greater Bendigo’s industries and workforce
Various stages of the mining process, whether alluvial or quartz mining, supported a growing local and later regional manufacturing industry, including ore processing, and equipment, fuses and explosives. The need for manufacturing efficiency and economy to increase mining returns also encouraged innovations in manufacturing, and Greater Bendigo is known for numerous industrial ‘firsts’ and inventions.

Manufacturers took advantage of the burgeoning population to produce foodstuffs as well as materials such as bricks for construction and forged metals. Providing goods and services for the growing goldfields community was another way to make money. Commerce was often a more reliable source of income than prospecting and mining; and many entrepreneurs used the capital made from mining to establish successful local businesses. An active financial precinct developed with prominent banks and stock exchanges, generating one of Australia’s oldest building societies, the Bendigo Bank.

The many hotels and inns of the goldfields remain visible today as a testament of an ubiquitous and successful industry that serviced travellers and miners alike.

Building towns, cities and the Greater Bendigo area
Squatting brought about changes to the Greater Bendigo landscape, followed by the gradual survey and sale of squatters’ land into smaller allotments and the evolving delineation of the landscape into freehold land, productive country, and reserved Crown land.

The initial inward push into the region was to exploit the possibilities of a pastoral industry but the pressure for urbanisation was instigated by residents of the goldfields and primarily determined by the exploitation of mining.

The surveys of Sandhurst and surrounding towns drawn by Richard Larrôt, allowed for wide-mials, sweeps of terraces, large lots and reserves for parks and gardens, envisaging the future Bendigo on a grand scale. These plans were eventually realised by architects and builders, many of whom were migrants, in the magnificent civic, religious and commercial architecture of the urban areas, built around the grand residential dwellings of mining magnates and prominent citizens, and the vernacular, working class, cottages of miners who first settled in the creek and alluvial gullies seeking their fortunes.

Building Greater Bendigo’s cultural and creative life
Regulation of working hours provided time, outside of labour and livelihood, for sport and recreation. In the hard life of miners, sporting pursuits such as horse racing, cricket, football, boxing, gymnastics, athletics and foot races were popular. With increasing affluence, sports also became more regulated.

Local councils provided sporting facilities such as horse and foot racing tracks, cricket and football grounds, and later swimming pools and sports facilities. The goldfields were also known for a culture of heavy drinking and the emergence of temperance halls promoted other activities such as lectures, recitals, concerts, meetings and theatre.

The wealthy cosmopolitan nature of the goldfields nurtured a picture gallery and several grand theatres in the nineteenth century and a number of ornate cinemas in the early twentieth century. This strong tradition of arts and culture continues today with the Bendigo Art Gallery, The Capital Theatre and La Trobe University Visual Arts Centre.