

PART B: SHIRE OF MANJIMUP MUNICIPAL HERITAGE INVENTORY THEMATIC FRAMEWORK

The basis of this Thematic Framework was prepared by Heritage and Conservation Professionals in the original compilation of the Shire of Manjimup Municipal Heritage Inventory in 1995. The Historical Overview was upgraded in 2004/5 by Heritage TODAY during the Review Process of the Heritage Inventory. Further contributions were made with the help of interested people from the community.

5.0 Pre-settlement: Aboriginal History prior to the arrival of the Europeans

Compared with the inland arid desert regions, the south-west corner of Western Australia was a well watered and fertile region which supported Nyungar (the word is spelt and pronounced in a variety of different ways in different parts of the region) Aboriginal people for at least 40,000 years before the first European contact in the 17th century. Nyungar is the generic term used today which embraces all these regional groups and defines those people of Aboriginal descent whose ancestors originally occupied the whole of the south-west. The term Nyungar originally meant man or people. The number of Nyungars living in the south-west in 1829, the year of European invasion and settlement, can only be estimated. An early observer in 1841 put the number at about three thousand in the then occupied lands and a later researcher, after assessing the archaeological evidence, considered this to be a likely figure.¹

Evidence of the Aboriginal occupation of the land in the coastal region of the Shire of Manjimup is mostly in the form of lost and discarded artefact material and debris piles left at suitable rock tool fabricating sites. Other evidence is found in the edible marine shell scattered along the coast particularly at Cape Beaufort and Malimup.² In the Northcliffe area there are twenty known Aboriginal archaeological sites associated with pre-white settlement.³

During the 200 years from 1616 to 1827, Dutch, French and English ships on trading and scientific expeditions sailed along the west coast of Australia. In some instances Nyungar contact with these Europeans was made. The light skinned Europeans (Wedjelas) were regarded as the djanga, or spirits of deceased Nyungars returning to their birthplace from the islands to the west where the souls of the dead were thought to rest. This belief arose from the supposition that the spirits would not return to places with which they were not acquainted in a previous existence.⁴

A Nyungar woman recounted the djanga story in 1993, as told by her grandmother:

¹ Collard, Len *A Nyungar Interpretation of Ellensbrook and Wonnerup Homesteads* Compiled for the National Trust April 1994.

² *Northcliffe Remembers*; A Compilation by Northcliffe Residents page 6

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

The old Aborigines used to say that years ago there used to be a big bird that lived down around this part of the country and he was a huge white bird. One day the bird flew away and went across the sea and then they didn't know where he went to. But when they seen the (white people's) ships coming in with the big sails up, they thought it was the bird coming back. So they all went down to greet the bird that was coming back and the white people landed on the shore⁵

The Nyungars lived in closely knit family groups related by kinship, and over the previous centuries, they had evolved a sound social framework and a finely tuned established order. Aborigines had a close relationship with the land and their identity was both embodied in and derived from the places to which they were connected. The different groups understood the implication of tribal territories, boundaries and sacred places. The attitude of the early Aboriginal people to the land was in part owing to their religious beliefs, and also to their responsibilities towards the land and their rights to it which were inherited through kinship. Their rich culture and traditions were passed down to the younger generations through the power of legend, dance, story and song.⁶

The arrival of the Europeans, with their different attitudes to land ownership and tenure, was to have a devastating effect upon the traditional way of life of the Aboriginal people. The occupation of Nyungar lands led the two groups into an irreconcilable clash that saw the Nyungars lose control of their ancestral kallip (fire places) and homelands.⁷

Patricia and Ian Crawford have compiled an interesting book that provides a history of the Northcliffe area from a unique viewpoint. *Contested Country* was written after much consultation with the Nyungar descendents of the district such as Glen Kelly who provided a local perspective on land management and burning. In the first chapter the Murrum and their Country Ian Crawford said:

By writing about beliefs as something held in the past, we do not wish to imply that Nyungar people have relinquished their traditional beliefs, but rather that the record was made a long time ago and reflects information given at that time. We certainly do not mean any disrespect to those who do hold the beliefs and understandings of their ancestors.⁸

Heritage TODAY concurs with this sentiment.

The Department of Aboriginal Affairs holds a register of the Aboriginal heritage places in the district. This list is far from complete, and other sites exist which have not yet been recorded with the Department. These are likely to include archaeological

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Statement written by *Heritage TODAY* and approved by Department of Aboriginal Affairs 1995.

⁷ Collard, Len *A Nyungar Interpretation of Ellensbrook and Wonnerup Homesteads* researched and compiled for the National Trust April 1994. (Nyungar Informant F:1993)

⁸ Crawford, P. and I., *Contested Country: A History of the Northcliffe area, Western Australia* UWA 2003 p.11.

sites with physical evidence of Aboriginal occupation, ethnographic sites where the Aboriginal community has knowledge of mythology and usage of particular places, and historical sites relating to more recent events in the lives of members of the Aboriginal community or documented in the writings of early researchers. Under the Aboriginal Heritage Act 1972-1980, all Aboriginal sites in Western Australia are protected whether they are known to this department or not.⁹

⁹ Aboriginal Affairs Department 1999