



Indigenous connections to the site

The Royal Botanic Gardens Cranbourne and indeed much of North and Central Victoria rests upon the ancestral lands of the Kulin Nation. Bundjil - the Kulin Creator still watches over Cranbourne today, in the form of the Wedge Tailed Eagle. Waa - the Australian Raven still calls across the same lands, and the descendants of the Kulin people continue to live here. The traditional custodians of this region are the Mayone Balluk clan, of the larger Boonerwung language group, who are in turn part of the vast Kulin Nation. The Mayone Balluk community traditionally ranged from about the Carrum Swamp to the head of Western Port Bay and the upper sections of the Mornington Peninsula.

Food

Boonerwung lands provided a rich and varied food supply of both plants and animals. Dinner included Reptiles, Fish, Invertebrates and particularly Mammals such as possums, wallabies, bandicoots, koalas, wombats, native rats and mice and grey kangaroos. Birds were plentiful with at least 271 species inhabiting the area. These species included ducks, terns, gulls, cormorants, pelican, ibis, swans and herons. The birds were a food source throughout the year and their eggs could be harvested in spring and early summer. Hunting was mainly 'Kulin work', or the men's role.

Vegetable foods formed the greater part of the diet because of their reliability and the diversity of available sources. Such important plant knowledge and gathering was primarily Ba-gurrk, or the woman's role.

Records show over 50 edible plants in the Mornington Peninsula area alone. Such plants included austral bracken, bulrushes, manna gum, and cherry ballart. Different parts of different plants were eaten, including the roots or tubers, fruits, seeds and flowers. The tubers or roots were the staple food source, and they were available for harvest throughout the whole year. Fruits and flowers were seasonal.

Fibre, tools and medicine

Plants that provided fibre were an important resource. Fibrous material was needed for string and cord making for nets, fishing lines, ropes, dilly bags, baskets and eel traps.

Stems and flower stalks were used for spear shafts and spear throwers. Wood from tree trunks was used for making implements and tools such as bowls, shields, boomerangs, axe handles and water carriers. Paperbark was used for baby blankets, artwork and even cooking much like today's al-foil.

Local stone was used to make tools such as spearheads, blades and cooking and grinding implements. Local fungus provided food, while still others were used as tinder in fire making.

Many of the plants collected for food purposes also had important medicinal qualities, such as easing aches and pains, curing a fever, even relief from snake bite. Different

parts of the plant were used such as crushed leaves, roots or an infusion of leaves.

A huge knowledge base was built up and above all was the Land and Kulin connection to all its elements and its intrinsic spirit, passed on from word and song by the Elders.

The Cultural Tsunami

European contact with the Boonerwung was early in the 19th century due to the presence of sealers in the Western Port region. The Boonerwung population and that of the entire Kulin Nation declined rapidly after contact between these two worlds, due to the effects of alcohol, guns and in particular via introduced disease. So much so, that incredibly by 1839, (only 4 years after the white settlement of Melbourne) only 83 Boonerwung remained in the Western Port Bay and Mornington Peninsula area from a population estimated to be between 250 and 500 prior to 1800. An estimated population decrease of 80%.

By 1844 many new settlers had taken up grazing licenses on the peninsula with tens of thousands of hard hoofed animals such as sheep and cattle destroying many native plant foods vital to the Boonerwung. The native animal game was driven off the land or hunted out by the settlers. In effect the entire traditional economy was collapsing around them. To the point where even some reports exist of Aboriginal people themselves being hunted down and killed or poisoned for gathering food on their traditional land; land now claimed by the white settlers.

Aboriginal opposition to the takeover of their land was fierce but was no match for troopers and guns. However it was not only violence that took its toll. Aboriginal birth numbers plummeted too as the traditional people witnessed the dramatic and detrimental change on their lifestyle, lands and their very soul. In the presence of European encroachment they did not want to bring children into an environment, which for them was changing for the worse.

It is important to remember how quickly and dramatically the population decreased; again a cultural tsunami. By 1841 the Victorian traditional Aboriginal population had dropped to about 2000 and by 1887 there were only 774 Aboriginal people left in the whole of Victoria. Their traditional way of life changed forever.

Early Melbourne statistics

Year	Colonists	Sheep	Cattle	Horses
Oct 1835 (1)	200	25,500	100	57
Late 1837 (1)	1,000	~	~	~
(Census) 1838 (2)	2,278	700,000	500,000	2,000
1841 (1)	20,000	~	~	~
Sept 1851 (3)	(16 yr after contact) 80,000 (Melb.23,000)	16 yr after contact) 6,647,557	16 yr after contact) 483,202	(16 yr after contact) 2,916

(1) 'Aborigines in Colonial Victoria' M.F Christie 1979 p.29

(2) 'Bushland to Botanic' RBG Guides 1996 p.6

'The Life and Adventures of William Buckley' J. Morgan 1852 (re. 1996)

p.161-170 "Statistics of the Province of Victoria 1851"

Additional census data 1851 re. Acres under cultivation 51,536

Victoria pop. 80,000* (Melb.23,000, Geelong 8,000+*), NSW 192,000 (Sydney 44,000),

Sth Aust. 68,000 (Ade.15,000), Tas. 68,000 (Hobart 20,000)

~ Due to Gold rush population explosion i.e Jan1852 arrival of 6,209 to the port of Melb. In one month alone! (p.177)

Aboriginal population (Early Melbourne)

Years	1836-37	1839-42	1852	1863
Wauthaurang	375	118	31	15
Jajowurrung	~	300	142	38
Woiworung& Boonwurrung	350	207	59	33
Taungerong	~	600	~	95
Total		1225		181

#4 stats from Museum Vic Human Journeys~ gallery of life storyline

Even with early census approximations at best b/w 15+years of 1842 to 1863

By 1863, 80%-85% of the original population ceased to exist.

Out of an original family of 10 ~ 8 would die in the "Melbourne area".

Data collated by Dean Stewart 2003

Aboriginal Revival & Continuity

Aboriginal people not only survived the immense turmoil that shook their traditional civilization and beliefs to its very core, but today are actually reawakening many aspects of their culture and special connections to their Country. Aboriginal people are part of our 21st century community and have an ardent wish to share their long heritage of this land and people in a respectful way. Here at the RBGC we have the special contribution from Vicki Nicholson-Brown, a Wurundjeri Elder of the Kulin Nation, in her capacity as Aboriginal and Cultural Liaison Officer. Vicki too, as a proud committed Aboriginal woman, is keen to learn and share our past and create a better future for all people, for the generations that are to follow us.