

The Boon wurrung People and the Ancient She oak

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

The ancient name for this area is Koort Boork, meaning 'clumps of many she-oaks', a name indicating the importance of She-oak trees to Boon wurrung people.

In 1837 this place was re-named "William's Town" by British colonists to honour their King. British invasion of the Boon wurrung Estate was a catastrophic event that caused the rapid decline of Boon wurrung people. West of the Maribyrnong River, Boon wurrung 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 Boon wurrung's Murnong fields. The sheep soon ate the Murnong crop and quickly sent the Boon wurrung people 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 Boon wurrung people across their Estates. Clashes with other First Peoples, facing similar pressures from colonisation, also led to Boon wurrung deaths; nearly all our First Peoples died under British rule. Here only one resilient family survived to represent the Boon wurrung language group, share the history and continue cultural practices today.

The corner of Nelson Place and Thompson Street, Williamstown is a significant site for the Yalukit-willam clan of the Boon wurrung language group, the First People of Hobsons Bay.

The Boon wurrung and the British - Under 'The Message Tree'

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 Boon wurrung language group. The Estates of other language groups on either side of the Werribee River were also invaded.

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 Boon wurrung people who still used it. Between 1847 and 1863 a local poet and teacher, 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..."

Between 1835 to 1845 a growing British population and a declining Boon wurrung population used and expressed their connection to "The Message Tree".

The Fight to Save the Message Tree

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 not only 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 approximately 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". Within six days fifty residents, led by local teacher and poet James Wallace, 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 residents valued the tree's ancient link to the Boon wurrung 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 Aborigines 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 ..."

This research was compiled by local resident and cultural historian Greg Thorpe in consultation with Caroline Martin, Boon wurrung custodian and Director of Yalikut Marnang in 2019. This research project was funded through Hobsons Bay City Council's Community Grants as a shared history research project that included contributions from twenty- three individuals representing fourteen local organisations.