

Wil-im-ee Moor-ring (Mount William quarry)

The Mount William quarry at Lancefield is a large heritage site of international importance where Aboriginal people quarried greenstone from stone outcrops to make their axes.

'When neighbouring tribes wanted stone for tomahawks they sent a messenger to Billibellary to say they would take opossum rugs and other things if he would give them stone for them. Billibellary's father when he was alive split up the stones and give it away for presents such as rugs, weapons, ornaments, belts, necklaces — three pieces of stone were given for a possum rug. People sometimes give presents in advance to get stone bye and bye.' — William Barak's description to anthropologist Alfred Howitt circa 1884.

For perhaps thousands of years, Aboriginal people quarried the superb greenstone (volcanic diorite) from stone outcrops on what is now called Mount William to make their axes. The quarry was the centre of an extraordinary trading network that extended 700 kilometres up into New South Wales and also into South Australia.

These axes were highly prized and traded for goods such as possum skins and other valuable resources. The trade also had important social functions. It strengthened

bonds between social groups and reinforced kinship links, as well as birthplace and ceremonial obligations. Access to the quarry required the permission of several elders such as Wurundjeri william clan leader Billibellary who inherited the rights (see p. 26).

Stone outcrops were fractured using fire alternated with cold water, and the stone was levered loose with fire-hardened poles. Using stone anvils as work benches, the stones would be fashioned into blanks. These were later sharpened into axe heads using abrasive sandstone to achieve a sharp edge. A large sandstone boulder with thirty-one grooves made by the sharpening of stone axes is located at Mount Macedon, thirty kilometres away. St Kilda foreshore was also recorded as a location for sandstone suitable for grinding axes.

The quarry site covered forty hectares and the vast number of scattered rock fragments among the anvil stones is testimony to the industry of the tool makers. Researcher Isabel McBryde estimated there were 268 mining pits, eighteen of which were several metres deep surrounded by at least thirty-four discrete flaking floors, with debris up to twenty metres in diameter including some featuring a central outcropping rock used as an anvil. The site is of international significance and is listed on the National Register of Important Cultural Places.



Top: Greenstone outcrop used to harvest stone for axes, Mount William quarry. Right: Stone flakes from quarrying activity, Mount William quarry.

In 2012, the Wurundjeri Council collected stone from the quarry to make axes with which to build a Koorong or canoe from a River Red Gum at Plenty Gorge to strengthen their traditional culture (see p. 50).

The quarry is seventy-eight kilometres north of Melbourne. Access to the quarry requires the permission of the Wurundjeri Council. Public excursions to the site are usually organised annually by the Council during the Lancefield Agricultural Show held in October. For further information contact the Wurundjeri Tribe Land Cultural Heritage Council Inc. on (03) 8673 0901.



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GIVING BACK

On 23 October 2012, ceremonial fires of burning gum leaves welcomed 200 Kulin elders and guests to a special ceremony on Mount William. They were there to witness the federal Minister for Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, the Hon. Jenny Macklin MP formally hand over the title of the Mount William axe quarry to the Wurundjeri people. Also present were the Macedon Ranges Council who had gifted the quarry land to the Federal Indigenous Land Corporation in 1997. The title to a 9.1 hectare property in Sunbury containing the ceremonial earth rings was also handed over. The Wurundjeri Tribe Land Cultural Heritage Council now own these lands permanently to ensure their preservation.

Wedge-tailed eagles circled overhead in clear skies as elder Bill Nicholson, accepted the land on behalf of the Wurundjeri community. He said it was a fitting omen that Bunjil the eagle

had come to witness this historic return of his traditional country.

Professor Isabel McBryde from the Australian National University School of History, who pioneered groundbreaking research into Mount William over many years, spoke passionately about the benefits of research done in close collaboration between Aboriginal people, historians and archaeologists.

At the ceremony, Minister Macklin said, 'It's an enormous privilege to be on your land, your country, on this significant occasion. The Wurundjeri people were the original custodians of this site and it is only fitting that it is now returned to them. This is an opportunity to better understand each other and it is days like today that makes it real.'

Above: Visitors explore Wil-im-ee Moor-ring at the handover ceremony, 23 October 2012.