The Sunbury Rings and conserving landscapes in the context of urban growth

Michelle Bashta
Abstract
In light of the urban growth rapidly spreading to the outskirts of Melbourne, how do we address issues of cultural landscapes when they come into conflict with the march of urbanisation? This article investigates a landscape in Sunbury on the outskirts of metropolitan Melbourne and the threats posed to it by population growth and the need for new infrastructure. The article critically examines the Victorian heritage system, how it engages with the concept of cultural landscapes and considers new mechanisms of cultural landscape governance.

Introduction
This article examines the issues that face heritage professionals and communities in their efforts to protect cultural landscapes within a heritage system that does not always have the tools to deal with the complexities of these landscapes. While this is an issue that affects many jurisdictions both worldwide and throughout Australia, this paper uses a Victorian example in particular, the Sunbury Rings Cultural Landscape (The Sunbury Rings). The Sunbury Rings contains a range of cultural values and is subject to various heritage protections under Victoria’s legislative framework, however, it has no overarching landscape protection. The discussion will explore a rural area that is becoming increasingly urbanised on the northern outskirts of Melbourne, and it will illustrate how protection of significant cultural landscapes can be balanced with the need for development and infrastructure to accommodate growing populations. The current issues facing landscape management in Victoria are complex, however new programs such as the Historic Urban Landscape approach seen in Ballarat are helping to pave the way forward.

The three earth rings that give the landscape its name are amongst the most significant Aboriginal cultural sites in Victoria. The Sunbury Rings are shallow circular hollows in the earth located on the upper slopes of the valley. It is unknown exactly how the Rings were formed, however it is clear that they were of human construction and not natural occurrences (Frankel 1982). Two of the three Rings that are a part of this landscape are close to each other, and one is located higher on the hill, quite separate from the others. The landscape in this area would have previously been more heavily treed and the upper Ring would not have be easily visible from the other two Rings. The reason for this spatial relationship is unknown, however the Wurundjeri custodians of the Rings speculate that there was potentially a gendered divide between the location of the Rings (Wurundjeri Tribe, pers. comm., 11 March 2015). Whatever the reason for the placement of the Rings, they were, and continue to be, a highly significant place for the local Aboriginal people.
However, the colonisation of the Sunbury area led to a break in the relationship between the local Aboriginal people and the land, including with the Rings. This break resulted in misunderstandings and debates over the Rings meaning and significance as no historical record of their use remained. An archaeological survey was carried out in 1979 by David Frankel, who confirmed that the sites were Aboriginal. While local Aboriginal people had long known about the presence of the Rings, there had been debate as to their origin. The work of Frankel was important in aiding the local Aboriginal people’s claim to the Rings, which had previously been questioned due to the lack of a continuing oral history and historical record. The need for archaeological evidence to provide ‘proof’ of the Aboriginal origin of the site is a clear example of the Authorised Heritage Discourse (AHD), where heritage is only recognised as ‘legitimate’ when a heritage ‘professional’ identifies it as such (Smith 2006). Despite the clear associations with the AHD, this survey did help to establish a clear claim to the Rings for the Traditional Owners. After a protracted process the Rings and their immediate surrounding land was returned to the Traditional Owners, the Wurundjeri Tribe Land and Compensation Cultural Heritage Council, who now manage the land on which the Rings are located.

While there is no surviving evidence as to the use of the Sunbury Rings, it is possible that they had a similar use to rings that exist throughout NSW and Queensland, commonly known as ‘bora’ rings, which were used for ceremonial purposes, including initiation ceremonies (Fuller et al. 2013). Despite the lack of historic oral tradition surrounding the use of the Sunbury Rings, the Traditional Owners are constantly reinterpreting and thinking about the ongoing role of the Rings in the contemporary culture. The Wurundjeri now manage the landscape surrounding the Sunbury Rings and are trying to rehabilitate the surrounding environment including implementing weed eradication projects and undertaking new plantings. In addition to the physical management, the Wurundjeri are also attempting to strengthen their own cultural understanding of the Sunbury Rings and share that understanding with the local community (Kennedy 2015). The Sunbury Rings are a living cultural landscape and are significant for their enduring relationship with the Traditional Owners.

**The wider cultural landscape**

The Rings occupy a small section of the larger Jacksons Creek landscape that also hosts a number of highly significant post-contact heritage places. These sites and the natural environment, work together to form a cultural landscape that has significant historical, aesthetic and scientific values. The cultural landscape possesses elements that are able to express the history and development of the region, including view lines that are important in preserving...
an understanding of the topography and use of land in Sunbury. Aesthetically, Jacksons Creek has long been considered a beautiful area with *The Age* in 1886 describing it as ‘one of the most picturesque to be seen in Australia.’ While the landscape has changed around the valley since 1886, the qualities that led to such a description are still evident today. The history of the area as a place for recreation and enjoying natural beauty has become even more important as modern developments encroach upon the open space.

To the north of the Rings lies Emu Bottom (VHR H274), considered to be one of, if not the oldest, surviving European homesteads in Victoria with the original structure being built in 1836 by George Evans (1785-1876) (Victorian Heritage Database). Evans was one of the first European settlers of the Melbourne area and was the first European to settle in the Sunbury area. Evans considered the land around Jacksons Creek to be prime grazing land and proceeded to fundamentally change his surroundings to suit his needs, including undertaking significant land clearing. The homestead Evans built has likely survived because of its brick construction—it was one of the only substantial buildings erected by settlers in the area. One of Evans’ shipmates also settled around Jacksons Creek, William Jackson who gave his name to the waterway. This early settlement activity had a disastrous impact on the local Aboriginal population, who were swiftly dispossessed of their land by these settlers (Moloney & Johnson 1998: CL1-4). The introduction of hoofed animals, such as sheep and cattle, also impacted on the landscape and destroyed many indigenous plant species, fundamentally altering the presentation of the landscape.

At the southern end of the Sunbury Rings is Rupertswood (VHR H275), one of the largest mansions in Victoria. Rupertswood was built by Sir William Clarke in 1876 (1831-1897) an important pastoralist and landowner and the first Australian born baronet. Clarke’s father (‘Big Clarke’) had purchased much of the land that makes up modern Sunbury and includes the Sunbury Rings as part of a special survey in the early 1840 (Anderson 1966). ‘Special surveys’ were designed to promote settlement in Victoria by selling large tracts of land for the highly discounted price of £1 per acre. Clarke’s special survey was one of nine such surveys carried out in Victoria in the short period they were active, less than 15 months (Chappel 1966: 9-10). The Clarke landholding was one of the largest in the new colony of Victoria and established the Clarkes as an important family in the district (refer to Figure 2). The Rupertswood mansion is of historical and architectural significance to the state of Victoria and provides an important landmark in the Sunbury area. The spires of the mansion can be seen from the site of the Rings and serves as an important visual reminder of the history of the cultural landscape and the interplay between Aboriginal and post-contact heritage at the Sunbury Rings landscape. Rupertswood is a ‘unique representation of an extraordinary and, nowadays inconceivably, affluent way of life’ (Australian Heritage Places Database) and is well known as the birthplace of the Ashes cricket trophy. The Clarke family played a very significant role in the history of Victoria, particularly in regards to agriculture and pastoral land use. The intensification of farming under the Clarkes resulted in the further erosion of the earlier Rings landscape and the Aboriginal connection to the area. There is no evidence that the Clarke family paid any special attention to the Rings and their survival was likely a case of good luck rather than good management.

Figure 2: 1874 map showing the Clarke Special Survey at Jacksons Creek. Source: State Library of Victoria.
The Clarke estate was steadily subdivided and sold off as the township of Sunbury grew around it. The mansion and remaining associated land is now part of the Salesian School. The land continues to be used by the school for agricultural training, continuing the farming use of the land that was begun by Evans and Clarke, at times in conflict with the management of the land by the Wurundjeri and other natural heritage efforts by the local community. Emu Bottom and Rupertswood are not just individually significant buildings, they also have an important relationship with the Jacksons Creek landscape. The continuation of the connection between these two buildings and the landscape demonstrates the narrative of post-contact European settlement in Sunbury and aids in understanding how the arrival of Europeans altered the use and appearance of the land. The Emu Bottom Wetlands on the western edge of Jacksons Creek to the south of the Emu Bottom Homestead is a public recreation reserve that has had significant community support over the last 21 years. The Friends of the Emu Bottom Wetlands Reserve hold community planting days and work to rehabilitate the wetlands. The rehabilitation of the Emu Bottom wetlands has been undertaken in response to the intensive farming that has taken place since European arrival.

Figure 3: 1866 view of Jacksons Creek and the Clarke Estate. Source: State Library of Victoria.

Figure 4: Heritage Overlay map showing Jacksons Creek
Source: Planning Schemes Online.

HO53 = Emu Bottom; HO366 = Canon Gully; HO45 = Rupertswood.
however this rehabilitation also erases the land use history from the landscape and conflicts with the continuing farming practice of the Salesian College. Managing the at times competing uses of the landscape is an ongoing challenge at the Sunbury Rings.

The Sunbury Rings is a landscape that contains a number of significant sites that demonstrate the history of the Sunbury area and the relationship between people and the land. The management of the Sunbury Rings cultural landscape poses many challenges as there are several competing values in the landscape. Reconciling the tensions between the Aboriginal management, the ongoing use of the land for farming, and community efforts to rehabilitate the wetlands, challenges existing compartmentalised heritage frameworks. Effective landscape management can recognise these tensions, as well as their significant connections, and incorporate them into ongoing governance of the Sunbury Rings, however such a system is not currently in place at the cultural landscape.

The Sunbury Rings Cultural Landscape and the Victorian heritage and planning framework

The Sunbury Rings Cultural Landscape includes several significant cultural sites and areas of environmental importance that are best understood as an entire landscape due to their relationship to the land and each other. Parts of this landscape are protected under current heritage and planning controls but the landscape as a whole is not protected despite the important cultural and environmental values that are present. There is a mixture of different heritage and planning protection including Victorian Heritage Register (VHR) and Victorian Heritage Inventory (VHI) sites, Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Register sites, heritage overlays (HO) and environmental significance overlays (ESO), but there is no overarching landscape protection. This is likely the result of the fact that the Victorian heritage and planning framework is tailored to listing individual sites with discrete boundaries, rather than complex landscapes that contain a range of significant values.

Further complicating the management of the Sunbury Rings is the fact that Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal heritage is treated separately within the Victorian system. At the Sunbury Rings neither history can be understood without the other, and creating, an at times, arbitrary divide between these two experiences of the landscape diffuses the significance of the place. The ongoing governance of the landscape is made more difficult by the number of owners and stakeholders that are a part of the management. Having several stakeholders involved in a heritage place (in this case a cultural landscape) is not always a negative. The involvement of a diverse range of stakeholders can create a more vibrant and thoughtful management process, but it can give rise to bureaucratic complications. There are several government agencies that are involved in the management of the Sunbury Rings Cultural Landscape (including Melbourne Water, Parks Victoria and Hume City Council) as well as private owners and community groups who also want to be involved in any long-term management decisions. The management of these, at times competing, stakeholders, is difficult and contributes to some of the complications with incorporating landscapes into existing heritage management frameworks. The interplay of various heritage and planning protection at the Sunbury Rings has meant that the significance of the landscape has

Figure 5: View of Jacksons Creek, including one of the Rings to the right of image and the Railway Bridge and Rupertswood in the distance (photo by the author).
not been recognised in its entirety. The lack of landscape protection has made the Sunbury Rings vulnerable as the formerly rural town of Sunbury becomes an urbanised satellite suburb of Melbourne.

Significant places within the Sunbury Rings are recognised in various different mechanisms, many of which do not acknowledge the connection to the landscape or each other. With regards to the natural values of the Sunbury Rings and Jacksons Creek, Schedule 10 to the Environmental Significance Overlay of Hume City Council (ESO10) covers a large portion of this landscape. This schedule classifies the area as a ‘rural conservation area’ and recognises the significance of the biodiversity. There is significant remnant native vegetation including grasslands, eucalypts and the Jackson Creek waterway. The overlay demonstrates that the landscape is recognised for its environmental significance and it does not include acknowledgement of the cultural values associated with the landscape and their interaction with the natural values that are protected by the ESO. This divide between the recognition of cultural and natural values is not rare in the Western tradition of heritage management, however it can often be an arbitrary distinction that misunderstands the interconnectivity of the two (Leitao & Badman 2015).

**Threats to the Sunbury Rings Cultural Landscape**

As Melbourne continues to grow, more and more pressure is being put on newly suburbanised communities as they adjust to populations that are set to close to double in the next twenty years. Hume City Council, where the Sunbury Rings are located, currently has a population of 200,000 and this is projected to reach nearly 350,000 by 2041 (Hume City Council 2016). As more and more land is taken up to provide housing and services for this new population, cultural landscapes that do not have protection are increasingly under threat.

The Metropolitan Planning Authority (MPA) (2014) has identified seven growth areas on the outskirts of Melbourne, where significant urban growth is envisaged as part of the ‘Plan Melbourne’ vision. Urban growth puts an unavoidable pressure on formerly rural areas and results in the landscapes of these areas being faced with complex challenges (Antrop 2005: 26). In response to this pressure the protection of landscape has often been put in the too hard basket rather than being addressed head on. Many of these outer metropolitan councils have underutilised, or not utilised at all, the Significant Landscape Overlay (SLO) provision of the planning scheme to protect landscapes. The SLO clause has decision guidelines that take into account both cultural and natural values. Of these seven growth areas, Hume, Wyndham and Melton have no SLOs, Whittlesea has two and Mitchell has three (Planning Schemes Online 2016). The councils of Casey and Cardinia have been more proactive with four and seven SLOs, respectively. Many of these SLOs address natural rather than cultural landscapes, however, this gap is understandable given the complexity of protecting multiple cultural values in one place. The challenges of incorporating cultural landscapes into existing heritage frameworks is considered further below, however the impact of these issues on the Sunbury Rings is increasingly becoming apparent.

The Sunbury Rings Cultural Landscape is facing increased development and with it, the need for upgraded infrastructure. There is currently a development proposal to sub-divide land along the western side of Racecourse Road adjacent to the existing subdivision to the west of the Rings. This proposal comes to the edge of Wurundjeri land and the site of the Rings to the west and the north. Additionally the MPA is currently creating a Precinct Structure Plan (PSP) for the area as Sunbury is marked as a key urban growth area within Hume. Jacksons Creek is a major geographical feature that is considered within the PSP and the future of infrastructure in the Sunbury region. There is currently only one road crossing of Jacksons Creek at Sunbury and there is pressure for a new bridge to be built. The introduction of a new bridge into the Sunbury Rings Cultural Landscape risks eroding the multiple heritage values of the landscape. In order to manage the risks associated with the pressure of urban growth, such as a subdivision or a new bridge, it is essential that the cultural and natural heritage values of the entire Sunbury Rings Cultural Landscape are recognised to make sure that any future development or infrastructure in the area sympathetic to the values that people attach to the Sunbury area.
A GTA Consultants report (2015) for the MPA identifies two possible bridge crossings of Jacksons Creek, both of which would have significant impacts on the cultural heritage value of the landscape. The *Opportunities and Constraints Analysis (Cultural Heritage), Jacksons Creek Road Crossings for the North Link Report* (Ecology and Heritage 2014) notes that any bridge crossing over Jacksons Creek should avoid any proximity to the Rings as they ‘are considered to be amongst the most highly significant heritage places to the Wurundjeri’ (Ecology and Heritage 2014: 5). While several reports have been prepared addressing the Aboriginal and post-contact heritage at Jacksons Creek, none of these have had to address the impact on the whole landscape because there is no statutory landscape protection. These assessments need to only look at the places currently registered as heritage sites and as a result the impact of a bridge on the value of the whole landscape has not been effectively considered.

A new bridge introduced into the landscape will not automatically be an adverse outcome for the Sunbury Rings. The nineteenth century railway bridge over Jacksons Creek has become a significant element within the landscape for both its technical and aesthetic significance. The issue that arises when there is no landscape protection is that the route and design does not need to take into account any impact on the landscape values as a whole. The assessments undertaken have viewed the heritage elements of Jacksons Creek as discrete places rather than elements that have a significant relationship to each other and the land surrounding them. While a bridge may avoid the Rings it will likely have an impact on the relationship between the Rings and the landscape of which they are a part. Without an acknowledgement in the planning process of the significant values ascribed to the landscape there is the threat that future intervention will be inappropriate and may degrade the significance of the place. Although the Sunbury Rings Cultural Landscape is only one discrete example, this case highlights the gaps in the current planning process and the difficulties that arise when landscapes need protection and cannot neatly fit into existing mechanisms.

**The challenges of incorporating cultural landscapes within the Victorian planning system**

Unlike individual buildings or distinct precincts, landscapes often have more fluid boundaries and can involve many different landowners and stakeholders. As a result, cultural landscapes often do not neatly fit within the existing provisions of the existing planning mechanisms. The combination of the Heritage Overlay (HO, administered by the *Planning and Environment Act 1987*), the *Heritage Act 1995* and the *Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006* have generally been considered to be sufficient to conserve Victoria’s heritage—however cultural landscapes occupy a difficult place within this system. Most heritage protection has been created to apply to discrete spaces, an approach that does not easily translate into the protection of landscapes, whether they be broad acre rural landscapes, complex urban environments, or something in-between (Brown 2007). At the state level of heritage protection, several cultural landscapes have been listed on the VHR, although there are still very few landscapes with this level of protection. It can be difficult to effectively list landscapes under the provisions of the *Heritage Act 1995*, however, the Heritage Council of Victoria (HCV) has taken a clear interest in addressing the gaps in landscape protection in Victoria. The HCV released updated landscape assessment guidelines in 2015. These guidelines aimed to make the process of identifying, nominating and assessing landscapes clearer and more accessible (HCV 2015). The difficulty of trying to fit cultural landscape management under the existing legislative framework is also being addressed by the ongoing review of the *Heritage Act 1995* (DELWP 2015). The review suggested the inclusion of a designation for ‘heritage areas’ that would include cultural landscapes and urban precincts.

As previously discussed, landscapes such as the Sunbury Rings, are further complicated by the separation of Aboriginal and post-contact heritage in the Victorian system. Analogous to the Sunbury Rings, many cultural landscapes throughout Victoria have complex interplays between Aboriginal and post-contact heritage. Treating these histories separately under legislation ignores these connections and removes the ability to effectively manage and understand the layered histories of many cultural landscapes. The HCV and Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Council
have been working together to address this issue through their 'Shared Heritage Project'. This project includes the establishment of a framework for the recognition of Aboriginal and shared heritage values to augment the existing Framework of Historical Themes (HCV 2010). The divide between the recognition of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal heritage does not only exist at the level of landscapes, nevertheless, cultural landscapes can often provide a very good example in which to explore these connections.

Under the Planning and Environment Act 1987, local governments are increasingly using the Significant Landscape Overlay (SLO) to protect cultural landscapes rather than the Heritage Overlay (HO). The advantage of the SLO over the HO for cultural landscapes is that it takes into account significant views and the impact on the broader landscape without placing the restrictions of the HO on the whole landscape. The HO and the local heritage policies that administer it are generally focussed on managing the level of change to built heritage (though it can also apply to natural elements including trees and gardens). The HO however, is not written to protect landscape relationships in an area like Jacksons Creek. While the SLO is not the panacea to the issues of protecting cultural landscapes, it is a tool that has been increasingly utilised to do so.

Over the last ten years the Victorian government has commissioned three large landscape studies, which has helped to address some of the problems with the planning scheme. The Coastal Spaces Landscape Assessment Study (2006) and the South-west Landscape Assessment Study (2012) saw most of the identified landscapes transformed into SLO’s in the planning schemes of the relevant councils. A similar outcome is hoped after the completion of landscape assessments for northern and central Victoria in 2015. These studies show that landscape is considered to be a serious issue at a governmental level—however they are yet to address the growth areas on the suburban fringes of Melbourne. Melbourne’s suburban fringe is considered to be a part of ‘Metropolitan Melbourne’ and therefore is not included as part of the landscape assessments of these non-urban areas. Not undertaking a landscape assessment for the suburban fringe ignores the increasing pressure of urban growth on landscapes in these areas. There are other landscapes on the outskirts of Melbourne with significance at a local level, and maybe even at a state level, that do not have protection. These places will continue to have the same pressures put on them by urban growth as the Sunbury Rings and sites could be lost before they are even recognised. Without an effective management mechanism, development that is not well-planned may erode significant landscape values in these areas. The benefit of recognising and listing landscapes in these areas is that it then provides the opportunity for new development to be managed sensitively. Such designations and protections do not prevent new development to cater for the needs of a growing urban population, however it does help prevent adverse outcomes on significant landscapes.

Suggesting a new direction

This article has critiqued the existing system of landscape protection in Victoria and how it is failing to effectively manage significant landscapes, particularly in areas faced with rapid urban growth. While landscapes do pose significant challenges to those trying to manage them, there is an increasing recognition of this challenge, and methods and frameworks are being created to address landscape management. There is an increasing acceptance that attempting to fit cultural landscapes into existing heritage frameworks is not working and may not be the best approach to managing these places (Wallace & Buckley 2015: 51).

In Victoria, the regional city of Ballarat is part of an international pilot program implementing the Historic Urban Landscapes (HUL) framework to the management of their growing city and its rich heritage. Analogous to the situation at Sunbury, Ballarat’s population is forecast to grow by 40% from 104,355 in 2016 up to 145,197 (Forecast.id 2015). Ballarat City Council recognise that an increase of this size will have a significant impact on their city and they are working to proactively address the changes that the growth will instigate. Ballarat are utilising HUL to create a system in which heritage is central to the question of urbanisation, rather than something separate and distinct (Bandarin & van Oers 2012: 190). HUL considers urbanisation
as a process and it recommends tools that would be useful when dealing with situations such as what has been occurring at Sunbury, on the urban fringe.

Ballarat has implemented many programs as part of their HUL project that are heavily focussed on engaging the local community and building long-term management and policy. The ‘Visualising Ballarat’ project aims to bring community members, researchers, practitioners and the government together to manage the further development of Ballarat while retaining the characteristics that are considered most significant to the local community. The website set up for this project allows community members to engage with the process and have an impact on the formulation of the policies that the Ballarat City Council is developing to address its urban growth (HUL Ballarat 2015).

The HUL program is one example of how landscapes are being managed that recognises the need to engage communities and recognise where there are multiple (and potentially competing) values within landscapes (Barrett 2015: 245-246). HUL embraces the multiple voices as a reality of a growing city, rather than as a problem to be organised into different compartments according to separate heritage and planning tools. The pilot HUL program in Ballarat may provide a useful contribution to the template for the future management of cultural landscapes across Victoria.

**Conclusion**

This article has explored the difficulties facing the management of cultural landscapes in Victoria especially when trying to fit landscapes into existing heritage frameworks. The example of the Sunbury Rings Cultural Landscape demonstrates how landscape protection is falling short in areas that are facing rapid urban expansion. As urbanisation occurs in formerly rural areas the significance of cultural landscapes is being steadily eroded due to the lack of effective management tools in these areas. The benefit of having landscape protection in place is that it becomes easier to effectively manage the new development required to cater to population growth. The recognition of significant landscapes in the urban growth areas will help to ensure that new development in these areas does not erode the values that attracted people there originally.
Victoria’s existing heritage and planning framework was not created with the protection of cultural landscapes in mind and as a result has instead attempted to retrofit landscape management into the existing system. This has led to the under-representation of cultural landscapes in the heritage system. The shortcomings of the Victorian framework are being increasingly recognised and new tools are being developed to aid in the management of cultural landscapes in Victoria. In the long-term, programs such as HUL may create new opportunities for landscape management that will hopefully address the shortcomings of the existing system.

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