Trees as heritage items

Whether or not to list certain types of trees on a council heritage register may become a challenging question when undertaking a survey of cultural landscape items for the heritage study of a shire.

But before addressing that question, there is the primary one: should any trees be listed at all? There are still some anthropocentric people who doubt it, presumably on the basis that because trees are organic things that grow, mature, become senescent, and die, they are essentially ephemeral. A bushfire, a chainsaw, a dose of poison or insect attack can wipe them out, virtually overnight. Moreover, such people may argue, trees are not actually created or designed by humans, so why should they be included as heritage items in cultural landscapes? While they may be accepted as an integral part of ecosystems in wildernesses, rainforests or national parks — and hence warrant a general, collective listing under the criteria for natural heritage — what justification is there for including them in cultural landscapes?

Part of the answer lies in the symbolism or meanings that humans have long attributed to trees. First, they typify the eternal cycles of birth, growth, maturity, decay, death and rebirth. Or as sources of fruit, timber, shade, shelter, and general amenity. At least as far back as the ancient Persians, there has been a cult of the tree which, together with its location by a stream, was regarded as the symbol of life. Trees such as cypresses have long been used in conjunction with mausoleums or graves, because while their sombre colour or form suggested mourning, they also symbolised life and regeneration. The list of associative attributes of trees and shrubs with various emotions or states of the human condition is long: lilies for purity, rosemary for remembrance, and so on. Shakespeare drew on them freely.

Another aspect is that trees have been deliberately used for centuries in landscape design. For example:

- For their bold, vertical qualities — like exclamation marks on a flat terrain (eg. the Norfolk Island pines in Centennial Park).
- As ‘signature’ plantings to mark an individual’s or family’s home.
- To create a sense of anticipation, unfolding and revealing/arrival at a special place (eg. the grand carriage drives to mansions in 18th century England).
- To define spaces, through perimeter or buffer plantings.
- To separate, by means of living screens, different land uses or activities.
- For protection against strong prevailing winds (eg. the many windrows in the western districts of Victoria [see figure 1]).
- To re-create the parklike qualities of savannah lands, so favoured by our ancestors, especially huntsmen.
- To remind us of our natural heritage, our ‘paradise lost’.

For all these reasons — and the above list is not exhaustive — trees have a special place in cultural landscapes, and so form part of our cultural heritage. Some councils have even established a Special Tree Register to ensure that certain trees, single ones or in groups, which the community regards as significant are properly
Figure 1: A good example of perimeter and window plantings at Nyara, a dairy farm near Mallanganee. These are characteristic plantings and contributory items, but do not yet warrant heritage listing. (Photograph W. Mayne-Wilson)

protected for the pleasure of present and future generations.

Bearing this rich cultural legacy in mind, some decisions about trees we encountered during the heritage study of Kyogle Shire were quite straightforward. For example, there are several avenues of mature trees planted along entry driveways more than 50-70 years ago, as part of a deliberate landscaping scheme to herald the approach to, and arrival at, a substantial homestead or village, or simply to advertise its presence in the landscape. Because such avenues formed an integral part of those places' setting and interpretation, it was decided they should be listed as part of that place.

Avenues of trees were also planted in the shire to commemorate local soldiers killed at war, such as the avenue of Jacarandas on the approach road to Kyogle, or the avenue of Camphor Laurels at Mallanganee. Then there were trees, singly or in groups, to mark a family birth. For example, at Dyraaba station, figs were planted to celebrate the birth of each new born child. At another station, they marked a marriage. In other instances, trees were planted as markers for the grave of eminent first settlers in a district. For example, Hoop and Bunya pines were planted by the Robertson family to mark the graves of Jane Robertson and her maid/companion at Old Bonalbo, while Chinese elms were used to mark the graves of the Bruxner family at Sandilands (see figure 2).

Another typical use for trees in the shire was to define the perimeter of the home garden or paddock — or indeed as a substitute for a garden itself. (Shrubs...
Figure 2 A fine avenue of Chinese elms, planted by Sir Michael Bruxner, an early owner of the cattle run Sandilands and a former leader of the Country party and Deputy Premier of NSW. Although the homestead burned down some decades ago, the trees warrant a heritage listing, both because of their association and because of their aesthetic and rarity value (in Kyogle). (Photograph: W. Mayne-Wilson, 1996)

and soft perennials not only appeared too small and insignificant in such broad landscapes, they also required too much care and watering for busy dairyfarmers.) In other cases, trees were used to provide both shelter to homesteads against wind and hail storms, and shade for cattle against the sweltering heat. Such trees regularly included Hoop pines, Bunyas, Camphor Laurels, figs, pines and Jacarandas. Less common varieties included Kurrajongs, Coral Trees, cypresses, and bottle brushes, as well as Bangalay, cabbage tree and Canary Island palms.

However, there were also individual mature trees of outstanding height, form and quality which were admired by all to whom we spoke, but about which nothing was known: who planted them, for what purpose, when, and why that particular species? Sometimes they were outstanding remnants of a once remarkable rainforest or grove of river red gums. Or survivors of a garden from which the house had been removed (eg. isolated clumps of golden bamboo once used to mark the entry to it; or a row of trees of outstanding form and beauty whose sole purpose appeared to be as a screen or windbreak — a customary farming practice in the region). But who knows, perhaps the tree planter also had aesthetic purposes in mind. While these trees provided protection for animals and generally provided amenity and welcome vertical elements in the landscape, did they warrant heritage listing? Moreover, although it may be desirable to provide them with some form of protection or conservation, would listing on a heritage schedule really achieve that?
It appeared, on consideration, that unless such plantings were made by an identifiable person of some local eminence, and for an identifiable (including design) purpose, the majority would probably best be covered in a general way by a tightly worded tree preservation order, firmly but intelligently administered by a council officer with good horticultural training. Such an order would need to be enforceable in rural areas, including working farms, by highly mobile officers. However, would such a proposal really be practical? Another approach would be for avenues or rows of trees to be listed as contributory items where:

- The homestead or settlement for which they were planted had disappeared (or been removed).
- They were not associated with a homestead but deliberately planted both as a practical amenity and with an aesthetic purpose.
- They could be traced to a particular landscape gardener.
- They performed a significant aesthetic role, as an attractive focal point or striking landmark, within the cultural landscape, and the community said it valued them.

In such cases, one could argue that they represented a particular custom, cultural practice, or taste in a particular historical period, and therefore had a combination of social and historic, and even aesthetic, significance.

However, it was decided that rows of mature trees (eg. Hoop pines, Bunyas and Camphor Laurels) simply used for windbreaks or boundary definition/enclosure on working farms should be regarded as part of normal farming or gardening practice, and did not warrant individual listing. Such types of plantings could be covered in a section of the heritage study describing those elements which, while not considered heritage items in themselves, nevertheless contributed significantly to the character of a cultural landscape. As such, they could be classed as characteristic or typical elements which the farming community should be encouraged to protect.

Finally, the question remains about how to treat handsome trees that are remnants of the original forest cover of the area. They tell us of the pre-settlement land cover, and they may be important sources for regeneration of endangered species. If it is not practical to list them as heritage items, should they be protected in some other way? Perhaps the best way would be to undertake an educational program, encouraging farmers to protect and foster these trees and take deliberate regenerative action. Other groups such as Land Care and Greening Australia could have a role to play here.

All these considerations have been addressed in the first draft of the heritage study. It has yet to be submitted to council, and the response of the people of the shire is awaited with interest.