



Aboriginal History, Culture and People in Wandaragutttagurru (Subiaco)





Acknowledgement of Country

We acknowledge the Whadjuk Noongar people as the Traditional Custodians of the area. We recognise their cultural connection to the land and waterways of Subiaco, and their continuing contribution to our City.

Language

It is important to note that there are alternative spellings of Noongar (e.g., Nyungar, Nyoongar, Noongah) and Noongar words. Noongar language, like all traditional languages in Australia, is an oral language. Throughout this document, we have maintained the spelling as Noongar and we respectfully include all peoples in the southwest.

Photographs

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are advised that this document may contain images of deceased persons.

Reconciliation

Reconciliation is a continuous journey focused on strengthening relationships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous Australians, fostering a united and inclusive society. This process acknowledges the profound impact of non-Indigenous settlement on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and advocates for meaningful actions from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

The City envisions a future where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples enjoy the same life opportunities and choices as their non-Indigenous peers, and where a person's racial background does not dictate the length and quality of their life. This vision is anchored in five essential pillars:

- Historical Acceptance
- Race Relations
- Equality and Equity
- Institutional Integrity
- Unity



Artwork by Dana Garlett

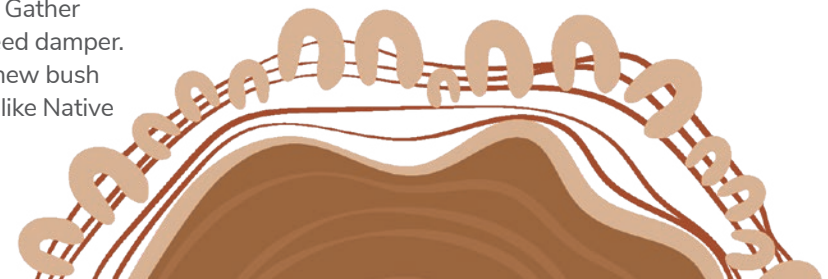
City of Subiaco

Reconciliation Action Plan

On 20 May 2024, **Reconciliation Australia** endorsed the City's first **Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP)** – The Reflect RAP. The Reflect RAP was developed in consultation with the City's Subi RAP Stars Team and local Aboriginal organisations and service providers, such as Yirra Yaakin Theatre Company, the Noongar Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and an Aboriginal Liaison Officer from King Edwards Memorial Hospital.

On 29 May 2024, the City celebrated and launched the Reflect RAP at a community event. The launch was a rich tapestry of cultural performances and activities. We began with a heartfelt Welcome to Country and a Smoking Ceremony by respected Aboriginal Elder Uncle Daniel Garlett. Guests enjoyed some deadly live tunes from Shakara Walley's Last Round Aces Aboriginal band, whilst savouring native treats made by Gather Foods, including kangaroo pies and wattle seed damper. Then everyone made their way down to the new bush tucker garden in Theatre Gardens. Seedlings like Native

River Mint, Lemon Myrtle and Old Man Saltbush were planted by guests in the Wandaraguttagurru (Subiaco) soil of Whadjuk Noongar Country. Johnny Garlett played the didgeridoo, and a cultural dance was performed by the Dadajaal Dance Group. Aboriginal Elder Aunty Dale Tilbrook shared her wisdom about the significance of bush tucker plants to First Nations people. Adding to the garden's charm, a wooden bench seat was created and engraved by the Subiaco Community Men's Shed using recycled jarrah sourced by The Forever Project. The engraving on the bench is inspired by artwork by Dana Garlett (of Paperbark Prints), depicting a graceful Kaarak (black cockatoo) and a couple of cheeky Yaakan (long-necked turtles).





City of Subiaco Reflect Reconciliation Action Plan launch event and planting of the bush tucker garden at Theatre Gardens, May 2024.

Aboriginal History in the City of Subiaco

The City of Subiaco holds a rich history that includes the cultural significance of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, particularly the Whadjuk Noongar people. The Whadjuk people are one of several Noongar peoples who have traditionally inhabited the southwest region of Western Australia for tens of thousands of years.

Before European settlement, the Whadjuk Noongar people lived a nomadic lifestyle, moving with the seasons and the availability of food and water. They maintained a deep connection to the land, which was integral to their cultural and spiritual life. The Wandaraguttagurrip area, now known as Subiaco, provided abundant resources, including bushland rich in flora and fauna, which supported their diet and traditional practices. The Noongar people had a sophisticated understanding of the environment, practicing sustainable land management techniques such as controlled burning to promote the growth of specific plant species and to prevent large-scale bushfires.

The Whadjuk Noongar community had a rich cultural heritage that included complex social structures, languages and traditions. Their society was organised into family groups or mobs, each responsible for specific boodja (territories). They held ceremonies and festivals, passed down Dreamtime stories that explained the creation of the land and its features, and engaged in trade with neighbouring groups. Important cultural sites, including bora grounds (ceremonial sites), rock art and song lines (paths that narrate cultural stories), are scattered throughout the region.

The arrival of European settlers in the early 19th century marked a significant disruption to the traditional way of life for the Whadjuk Noongar people. In 1829, Captain

James Stirling established the Swan River Colony, and soon after, land was rapidly appropriated for agriculture and urban development. The Subiaco area was named after the Benedictine monks who settled there in the 1850s, inspired by the Italian town of Subiaco.

The imposition of European laws and land ownership concepts, combined with the physical displacement of the Noongar people, led to significant cultural disintegration and loss. Traditional hunting grounds and sacred sites were destroyed or restricted, and many Noongar people were forced to adapt to a sedentary lifestyle, often under harsh and discriminatory policies. Diseases introduced by the settlers further devastated the Aboriginal population, who had no immunity to such illnesses.

In recent decades, there has been a growing recognition of the historical injustices faced by the Noongar people and efforts toward reconciliation and cultural revival. The City of Subiaco, like many local governments in Australia, has worked to acknowledge and honour the Traditional Custodians of the land. This includes incorporating Aboriginal heritage into urban planning, preserving significant cultural sites, and promoting the understanding and appreciation of Noongar culture through public art, education programs and cultural events.



Aboriginal Places and People

Wandaraguttagurru

Wandaraguttagurru (Subiaco) is located on the traditional lands of the Whadjuk Noongar peoples and was originally inhabited by the Mooro group, led by Yellagonga, the uncle of Yagan. In 1836, only 28 people were named as belonging to Yellagonga's Mooro community. The Whadjuk Noongar peoples originally named the Subiaco area Wandaraguttagurru, which was the name of a camping ground located in the area lying between Hamersley and Heytesbury Roads. It is likely that Wandaraguttagurru is a directional place name, meaning 'west of the hill camp' or west of Mt. Eliza, or it possibly means the place where snakes are feared. The area was later named Subiaco by the Benedictine monks from Subiaco in Italy, who settled here in 1851.

Wandaraguttagurru is home to many beautiful parks and open spaces, including the Aboriginal heritage sites of Lake Jualbup and Mabel Talbot Park, where Lake Jolimont is located.

Aboriginal Camps

There were also several Aboriginal camps set up in the area, most notably in Shenton Park and Jolimont. The names of several Aboriginal families were recorded at camps at the back of the Infectious Diseases Hospital in West Subiaco, in an area now known as Shenton Park. This camp near the sewerage works held more people than all other western suburbs and included visitors from the country. Located in the bush off Lemnos Street, the camps were made from old sheets of tin and flour bags that had been carried for miles from the nearby Shenton Park tip. To the families living in these camps, Subiaco was known as a crossroad and a good place to find food.

The Jolimont camp was just west of Mabel Talbot Park (Jolimont Swap). Mrs Melba Bodney (nee Armitage) was a well-known Noongar woman who camped in the area.

The smokebushes were delivered to "Mrs Bodney's camp" at Shenton Park and used in flower bunches which were sold in the Subiaco area, on the streets, and in the shops, for six shillings each. The money made would be spent on bread, meat, vegetables and "white man's poison" – a few bottles of wine to provide courage to beg for stale bread from the bakers. Mrs Bodney lived in the area until the 1950s and was an important keeper of Noongar culture and traditions, passing on knowledge and stories to her children. Mrs Bodney hunted and collected traditional foods in the nearby swamps and lakes, which provided an important source of protein. Her son Corrie talks about the food collected in his oral history.

“ Food would be hunted at swamps near the camps. Fires would be made on the edge of the swamp whilst Aboriginal people hunted for turtles, so that the turtles could be cooked straight away. Jolimont Swamp (now known as Jolimont Lake in Mabel Talbot Park) was known as a central turtle, mudfish and gilgie area. At Jolimont Swamp, Clara Layland, locally known as the “Daglish Granny”, camped beside a permanent fresh-water spring situated to the southwest of the lake. ”

Lake Jualbup

Meeyakba Shane Pickett's artwork at Lake Jualbup





Aboriginal Stories in Subiaco

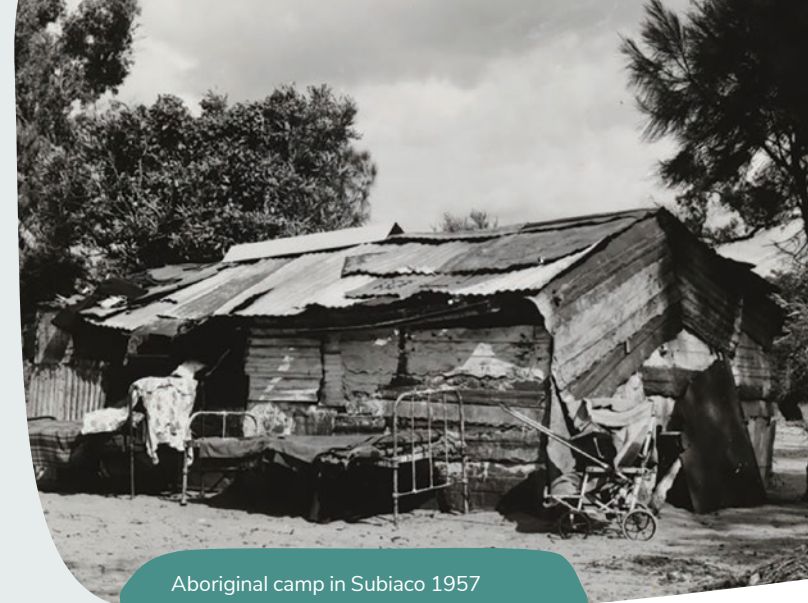
Oral histories collected by the Subiaco Museum reveal the relationship Aboriginal people had with Subiaco; whether as hunting grounds, collecting and selling smokebush, or walking the many 'bidi' from the camps to the coastal sandhills.

“ This is the main crossroads of all the bidi (tracks) where people used to go hunting. This place lies in the centre of a number of traditional cultural and spiritual runs of the Ballaruk and Didjarruk people who have travelled this way since the Dreamtime. They followed the fresh water springs and lakes – that was their survival. All the lakes were their hunting grounds. They had plenty of gilgies (freshwater crayfish), turtles and wildfowl. The women used to bury zamia nuts in the wet ground. We collected quandongs (native peach), johnny coolbung (pigface), bohn (bloodroot), djubak (wild potato), bardi (witchetty grubs), a variety of lizards and occasionally a brush wallaby. We would eat all that was edible on the land in season. ”

Excerpts from oral history of Corrie Bodney, Subiaco Museum collection.

“ The only time they probably camped [in Subiaco] was when they was waiting to go to the coastline. Subiaco was like a transit place. It was a crossroad. It had a few water holes, but in a ceremonial way, it really never had a strong connection. It was a peaceful place. It is a place of freedom that they could visit but big decisions wouldn't happen there. Old fellows used to say that it never had a ground that sung. Like when they hit the ground, it would sing or ring. It never had that ground. ”

Other Aboriginal people camped at the back of the Infectious Diseases Hospital in West Subiaco, in an area now known as the suburb of Shenton Park. This camp was near the sewerage works. It held more people than the other western suburbs camps and included visitors from the country. Mrs. Melba Bodney (nee Armitage) was a well-known senior Aboriginal woman who camped here and collected traditional foods in the Shenton Park area up until the 1950s. She was an important carrier of Aboriginal culture and traditions and passed on this knowledge to her children. Mrs. Bodney hunted and collected traditional foods in the nearby swamps and lakes, including Jolimont Lake, which provided a rich source of aquatic foods and an important source of protein.



Aboriginal camp in Subiaco 1957
(WAN-0017617 (c) Westpix)



Jolimont Lake



St Josephs' Girls' Orphanage c1970
(Subiaco Museum)



St Josephs' Girls' Orphanage c1970
(Subiaco Museum)

Children's Orphanages and Hostels

From 1850 to 1950, many Aboriginal children were institutionalised at New Norcia Mission under Bishop Salvado. The 1874 Industrial Schools Act allowed Mission superintendents to take Aboriginal children from their families. This Act prevented parents from demanding the release of their 'native and half caste' children into their own care and enabled Mission superintendents to take Aboriginal children from any part of the colony to New Norcia until they were 21 years of age.

New Subiaco Monastery, built in 1859, became St Vincent's Boys' Orphanage in 1872. In 1897, the Christian Brothers took over St Vincent's, moving to Clontarf in 1901, on the banks of the Canning River in Waterford. When the boys moved out, the Sisters

of Mercy shifted the girls from the St Mary's School for Aboriginal Girls in Victoria Square in Perth into the vacant Subiaco boys' orphanage. This then became St Joseph's Girls' Orphanage. Both Subiaco orphanages were located in what is now known as the Wembley/ West Leederville area (due to suburb boundary changes).

Life in the orphanages was challenging. In evidence to the Inquiry into Children in Institutional Care, later known as the 'Forgotten Australians' inquiry, a woman described deprivations at St Joseph's Girls Orphanage:

"We were never allowed to keep the presents as the nuns used to take them off us when we got back to the orphanage and would sell them at their fetes."



Myera Aboriginal Hostel 1998
(Subiaco Museum)

From about 1973 until at least 2005, Subiaco was the location of Myera Aboriginal Hostel in Kershaw Street, a government-run education hostel for young Aboriginal people attending high school in Perth.

AIATSIS Map of Indigenous Australia

This map shows the Language groups, Tribes and Nations present on this islands pre-colonisation this island was made up of many different Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australia groups, different and distinct, each with their own culture, customs, language and laws. They are the world's oldest surviving culture; cultures that continue to be expressed in dynamic and contemporary ways. Wandaraguttagurrup (Subiaco) is located in Whadjuk Boodja (Country).



Meeyakba Shane Pickett's artwork on Rokeby Road 1996 (Subiaco Museum)

Contemporary Aboriginal People and Places

Along with historical fringe camp dwellers, the City has been home to several other notable Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The Subiaco Football Club was previously located in Wandaraguttagurrup, and members included Aboriginal players such as Shane Yarran.. The City is also proud of its connection to local Aboriginal artists, such as the late Shane Pickett.

In 2021, 128 residents identified as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and numbers are increasing. 42% of these residents have a Bachelor Degree level qualification or above, compared to 5.4% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across WA. For more data on Aboriginal people in Subiaco, visit the [Australian Bureau of Statistics](#).



Subiaco Oval



Meeyakba Shane Pickett with one of his artworks 1996 (Subiaco Museum)



Aboriginal performers

SIX SEASONS

- **KAMBARANG** October - November - Season of Birth, the wildflower season
- **BIRAK** December - January - Season of the Young, the first summer
- **BUNURU** February- March - Season of the Adolescence, second summer
- **DJERAN** April - May - Season of Adulthood, autumn
- **MAKURU** June - July - Season of Fertility, the first rains
- **DJILBA** August - September - Season of Conception, the second rains



“ Living with dependence on the weather cycle, the Nyoongar people had to master and understand every aspect of the local weather pattern; they had to be nomadic and travel long distances for food and water. At times a season might be cold and rainy so that hunting became difficult, or be dry and hot so waiting by a water hole for thirsting animals was easier than hunting and running long distances for little return. There is a season of thunder where the sky is full of lightning, and a season where the bloom of wildflower somehow brings peace and contentment to mankind, where animals and even the floral blooms seem to celebrate. ... The people practice ceremonies to teach new generations, children and initiates to respect and live with the six seasons. ”

- Meeyakba Shane Pickett



Six Seasons: A Suite of Prints

Artist:
MEEYAKBA SHANE PICKETT

Donor:
City of Subiaco.

Etching on archival paper.
Purchased in 2025.

The Six Seasons display at Subiaco Museum (2025) highlights the Noongar seasonal calendar through a changing focus on the current season. At its centre is a print by Meeyakba Shane Pickett (1957 – 2010), providing a visual and cultural interpretation of the season's significance. Complementing the artwork is an interactive touch table featuring hands-on materials connected to the season, such as natural specimens, animal representations, lake-related elements, books, audio recordings, and puppets. Together, these elements invite visitors to explore Noongar knowledge of seasonal change through sight, touch, and sound.



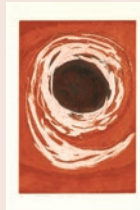
'DJILBA'

The season of Djilba is described by Meeyakba Shane Pickett as “the time for conception in nature’s womb. The rainbow lorikeet sings with happiness, as the frogs sing their love songs and wisdom for life to continue”.



'BIROC'

The season of Biroc (also known as Birak) is described by Meeyakba Shane Pickett as “the season where nature sings the songs of childhood and the beginning of a new summer and warmer weather”.



'BUNUROO'

The season of Bunuroo (also known as Bunuru) is described by Meeyakba Shane Pickett as “the season where many adolescents become adults and the songs of marriage and responsibilities are of importance”.



'WANYARANG'

The season of Wanyarang (also known as Djeran) is described by Meeyakba Shane Pickett as “a time when those who have recently attained adulthood pair up and prepare their places or homes for courtship. Males put on their best costumes to impress the females. Nature prepares itself for the next cycle”.



'MUGUROO'

The season of Muguroo (also known as Makuru) is described by Meeyakba Shane Pickett as the season of courtship and fertility. The magpie sings alone calling for rain and for all his clan to come and listen to the song of fertility. This is the beginning of nature’s new cycle”.



'KAMBARANG'

The season of Kambarang, as described by Meeyakba Shane Pickett, “bursts out in natural blooms of many different plant types to symbolise the birth of nature’s new life, and the boasting is part of the song and dance of the newborn”.

**City of Subiaco
Wandaraguttagurru**

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