

MANNINGHAM'S INVISIBLE ABORIGINAL HERITAGE

When British settlers began arriving in the Manningham area from the late 1830s, the land clearing they undertook often turned up Aboriginal artefacts. This included implements such as spear heads, axe heads, grinding stones and wooden tools.

Many pioneer families proudly placed such artefacts on their lounge room mantelpiece for visitors to admire, and they usually also retained and protected any scarred trees or stone arrangements on the property they had acquired. However, very few of these artefact sites were ever formally recorded, even though a rich oral history was available for several generations. For instance, I still know the location of campsites, burial sites, birthing trees, canoe trees and an oven.

Aboriginal camp sites and gathering places were for instance, most often located near the junction of a creek with the Yarra. These river and creek junctions were also often areas where rapids were located so were natural places to cross the river. These fords were therefore not only Songline crossing points on the river, they were where Aboriginal fish traps were invariably built.

After the annual October floods, a lot of maintenance work and rebuilding of these fish traps was required over the summer months, in order for the fish traps to be ready for the annual eel harvest season. This annual period of eel migration downriver, then up the east coast of Australia to the Coral Sea, began in mid-February each year. It was therefore a time of intertribal gathering and feasting that ran for a whole lunar month.

In preparation for these gatherings the host tribe would build smoke-houses, which were then stocked with freshly killed kangaroos and possums, so that their guests were fully catered for. However, as British dispossession rapidly proceeded in Victoria from 1835 onward, these traditional fish trap areas soon fell into disrepair and became invisible to European eyes.

I estimate that there are at least twenty such areas of rapids along the Yarra River at Manningham, all of which would have been traditional Aboriginal aquaculture sites. These sites are readily identified if you know what you are looking for, but unfortunately, there has never been any active plan initiated to formally identify, signpost or interpret such areas.

One such typical traditional aquaculture site on the river, is behind Finns Reserve in Templestowe, where the suspension bridge crosses the river at the point Ruffey Creek joins it. A few years ago, I showed Woiwurrung Elders, Dave Wandin and Bill Nicholson this area, and they confirmed that this was indeed the where a traditional Aboriginal aquaculture area would have been. A wonderful viewing of this rapids area, up and down the river, is available from the suspension bridge. Looking east up the river from the bridge, you will see a ridge of rock crossing the river at a slight angle, over which the water is falling.

These are the foundations on which a four-foot-high wall would customarily have been built, in order to dam back the river water and create a deep-water area before the rapids. At a couple of convenient points, sluice gates would have been constructed, leading to some shallow rock runways. These can still be identified heading west along the northern side of the river. This is where the actual eel traps and fish traps would have been placed. The woven Aboriginal eel traps look something like a large witch's hat.

Looking west down the river from the bridge, there would also have been slow-flowing areas beside the shady river banks, which were in fact freshwater mussel farms. These often also doubled-up as yabby farms, because the work of the mussels and yabbies naturally complemented each other. The yabbies would muck the water up and the mussels would purify it.

Aboriginal people consciously used this knowledge to maintain waterholes along creeks, where the creeks were likely to run dry in summer. Dams would be built at convenient points along the creek and freshwater mussels would be introduced in order to stop the water from stagnating. Then to make sure the mussels kept working and breeding, yabbies would be introduced. This therefore meant that there was always a ready supply of mussels, yabbies and fresh water, and was typical of the ecological approach that Aboriginal people always employed.

Further downriver, opposite the Wombat Bend kindergarten, is a deepwater area prior to more rapids and fish traps. This deepwater area was in fact, a blackfish breeding area as well as an eel shelter. Blackfish were also a staple part of the Aboriginal diet as they bred prodigiously.

So next time you view a rapids area along the Yarra like the one at Finns, think about how the geological structures there would have readily lent themselves to the building of weir walls, sluice gates and water races. You might also be able to identify the likely location of shady mussel farm and yabby farm areas, as well as the deepwater fish nursery pools. It will be like you have had your eyes peeled open.