

A RIVER RED GUM GUARDS YOUR JOURNEY

Aboriginal people believe that anything with a form or a shape has a spirit of its own. You only have to stand in front of the massive 500 year old River Red Gum at Heide Museum of Modern Art in Bulleen, to know this is true. It was obvious to the earliest settlers in this area from the 1840's that this was a special tree, not just because it was scarred by a canoe having been cut from it, but because local Aboriginal people also often used to congregate there.

The land on which the tree stands was eventually bought by artists John and Sunday Reed in 1934. They opened up their home to like-minded artists such as Sidney Nolan, Albert Tucker and Joy Hester, and this gave birth to the present day Museum of Modern Art 'Heide'. This stately tree stands in Heide's upper car park at 7 Templestowe Road in Bulleen.

Standing at the tree you can see that a couple of hundred years ago, a four metre length of bark was harvested to make a canoe. The precise year this was done can't be determined, the month certainly can. In the ninth lunar month, which occupies all of August, the sap starts to rise in trees. This means they give up their bark more easily, so August is the Aboriginal Bark Harvest Season. This also precedes the October rains and the annual flooding along the Yarra Valley, so this is when new canoes were needed.

Harvesting bark in August also gave the tree the greatest chance of survival, so it could begin healing before the heat of summer. These scars are almost always on the south-east side, which was also a deliberate strategy to ensure the tree's survival. Most of the heat of the day in summer is from the north and west, whilst the desiccating winds are from the south-west and north-west. It is after all just common decency to protect the spirit of the tree, especially when it has just given birth to the spirit of your canoe.

Since the Upper Yarra Dam was built in 1956, the Yarra rarely floods nowadays and Red River Gums suffer from not having their feet wet each spring, but this tree is in obvious good health and houses colonies of birds and bees. This is because the Gardeners at Heide regularly soak its root system and trim any dead wood.

The height of the scar on the south-east side is about four metres. The width of the original cut has been reduced by the bark slowly growing back over the scar. However about half-way up, you can see by the way the tree branches grow laterally, that its growth was interrupted. This was probably caused by a lightning strike about 200 years ago. When this happens, the sap instantly boils and the tree explodes as if hit by a bomb.

This is however no ordinary canoe tree. It is also a 'Songline Marker Tree'. In other words it is a silent sentinel that marks a traditional Aboriginal travel route. These routes are called 'Songlines' because just like the GPS in your car, Aboriginal people composed songs recounting the various natural and man-made landmarks, so they could find their way, even in unfamiliar territory. Just as when you travel overseas to another country you wouldn't think to go without your passport, neither would Aboriginal people, and the song was in fact your passport to safe travel.

The longest known Songline stretches 3,500 kilometres from Uluru to Byron Bay. It was also celestially coded into the constellation movements and would have taken over four months to complete one way. The reason why such trips would be made is simple. People from Byron Bay wanted to see the Sacred Rock and the people from Uluru wanted to see the sea.

Marker Trees come in four types Scarred, Ring, Arched or Spiral. Yingabeal is a good example of a Scarred Marker Tree. A Ring Marker Tree is where two branches are tied or spliced so they fuse and leave a hole like the eye of a needle. An Arched Marker Tree is where two saplings are fused to grow from two trunks into a single trunk. Such trees usually mark a birthing spot. A Spiral Marker Tree is a genetic freak where about one in every 20,000 trees grow with a spiral grain. These 'corkscrew trees' were only allowed to grow on Songlines, and because they were useless for timber, settlers rarely cut them down, so they can often still be seen along our highways.

The Heide River Gum is however no ordinary common-or-garden Scarred Marker Tree. It in fact marks the junction of Songlines going in five different directions. First leads west over the river ford near the Heidelberg Bridge, then splits off to Songlines along Greensborough Road, Bell Street and Heidelberg Road. Second leads south past Bolin-Bolin Billabong and on to meet the Doncaster Road-High Street Songline. Third heads south-east along Manningham Road to Shoppingtown where it joins the Doncaster Road-Mitcham Road Songline. Fourth heads east along the high floodline route of Templestowe Road. Fifth follows the meandering northeast course along the south side of the Yarra from Melbourne to Healesville.

In October 2013 a special ceremony was held at which Wurundjeri Elder Uncle Bill Nicholson named the tree 'Yingabeal'. The name is drawn from the Woiwurrung words 'Yinga' meaning sing and 'Beal' meaning River Red Gum. So together, it means the 'River Red Gum Songline Marker Tree' at Heide.