

# CULTURAL HERITAGE STATEMENT

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## Barrambin / Victoria Park, Brisbane

*Prepared in support of Section 10 applications under the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Heritage Protection Act 1984 (Cth)*

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*Barrambin is not simply a site that happens to have Aboriginal history associated with it.*

*It is one of the most extensively documented First Nations cultural places in Brisbane, and its significance operates simultaneously across spiritual, ceremonial, ecological, social, and historical dimensions.*

*Each layer is independently substantial. Together they constitute a case that is difficult to overstate.*

## 1. Formal Status: Heritage Recognition by the State of Queensland

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Victoria Park / Barrambin is listed on the *Queensland Heritage Register*, Queensland's principal statutory instrument for heritage protection. It was first listed on 3 December 2007. Critically, the heritage boundary was expanded on 10 December 2021, and a substantially larger area was added on **5 September 2025** — months *after* the Olympic stadium announcement.

That timing is not incidental. The State's own heritage body, applying its own statutory criteria, expanded formal recognition of Barrambin's significance at the precise moment the State Government was legislating to build on it. The contradiction is on the public record.

The Queensland Heritage Register criteria satisfied by Barrambin include: importance in demonstrating the evolution or pattern of Queensland's history; importance for its association with the cultural life of Aboriginal people; and significance as an extensive camp, contact, and cultural site. These are not marginal findings. They are the State's own conclusions.

## **2. Expert Assessment: The Government's Own Heritage Study**

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The Northern Link Environmental Impact Study (2008) — a heritage assessment commissioned by Brisbane City Council and conducted by expert historians — reached the following formal conclusion:

"York's Hollow (Barrambin) is the most important Aboriginal cultural heritage site known within the Study Corridor, and is the place most frequently referred to in the literature concerning Aborigines and early Brisbane."

This is not an advocacy position. It is the recorded conclusion of a government-commissioned heritage study, drawing on the Queensland Department of Natural Resources and Water Indigenous Cultural Heritage Database (Site LB:N62) and on the independent Turrbal and Jagera/Yuggera cultural heritage reports commissioned for the same project.

The Turrbal cultural heritage report, also commissioned by Brisbane City Council, identified Barrambin as a major occupation area and a site of ongoing cultural and spiritual significance, and recommended formal consultation and native title engagement prior to any works. Those recommendations existed on the public record when the decision to build the Olympic stadium was made. They were not followed.

Further expert research by Associate Professor Ray Kerkhove and Professor Ben Wilson of the University of Southern Queensland (2023) confirmed and extended these findings, characterising Barrambin as one of Brisbane's most culturally valuable sites, with remnants of ancient Indigenous practices distributed across the landscape.

## **3. Deep Time Occupation and Regional Significance**

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For tens of thousands of years before European settlement, Barrambin was one of the largest and most significant First Nations gathering places in the

Brisbane region. At various times of year, up to 1,000 people lived on this Country — their camps positioned along ridges above waterholes, in an open woodland of blue gums, ironbarks, spotted gums, and forest oaks, with freshwater lagoons teeming with bream, eels, waterfowl, and reeds.

Barrambin was not merely a local camp. It was a regional hub of First Nations cultural life. Ceremonial gatherings of up to 800 people were recorded here, drawing participants from as far as the Blackall Ranges. Groups travelling to and from Barrambin used established pathways — one running from Mt Coot-tha to Roma Street — that are now followed by Coronation Drive and Milton Road. The place was a node in a living network of cultural exchange, ceremony, trade, and law.

### ***Continuity through colonisation***

Even after European settlement began in earnest in the 1840s, the people did not leave willingly. Between 700 and 1,000 Aboriginal people were recorded at York's Hollow / Barrambin during the 1840s and 1850s — at times outnumbering the settlers themselves. They remained not because they had nowhere else to go, but because this was home.

The continuity of connection to Barrambin did not end with dispossession. Many Aboriginal people who were forcibly removed to missions returned to the park when they were permitted to leave.

Elders alive today were raised alongside people who had lived in Victoria Park as children. Yuggera woman Aunty Deb Sandy, whose family connections to Barrambin span generations, has said:

*"Aboriginal people used to camp there. It was home. It was communal grounds too, for when visitors came from up the coast, out west — for ceremonies, for corroborees and travel ways."*

This is not historical connection.

This is living Country, maintained across every form of colonial pressure over nearly two centuries.

## **4. Spiritual and Ceremonial Significance: Songline, Dreaming, and Sacred Sites**

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Barrambin lies along a songline — a Dreaming track that is simultaneously a spiritual pathway, a navigational system, a legal structure, and a map of cultural obligation. Songlines are not metaphors. They are the living framework through which First Nations peoples maintain their relationship with Country, their obligations to ancestral law, and their identity as custodians.

### ***The Dreaming story of the Brisbane River***

The area contains a sacred bunyip waterhole — the site now encompassing Lake Barrambin and Ibis Island — connected to one of the most significant Dreaming stories of the Turrbal and Yuggera peoples: the creation of the Brisbane River by the Rainbow Serpent Ancestor. In this story, the Ancestor carved the river valley as she fled Goanna across the mountains. Her eggs, carried in her mouth, spilled at the river's mouth and became the islands and the people. Ceremonies performed at Barrambin's waterhole — including rain-making rituals in which a ceremonial leader would dive in to symbolically release the Ancestor — maintained the living relationship between the custodians and this creation narrative.

This is not a historical record of past belief. It is an active, living spiritual relationship with the Country on which the proposed stadium would be built.

### ***The Bora ground***

Barrambin is also the site of a Bora — an initiation ground. Bora sites are among the most protected categories of sacred place in First Nations law across Australia. The presence of a Bora ground at Barrambin is not a peripheral detail. It places the site within the highest tier of cultural significance recognised by both Aboriginal tradition and the relevant legal frameworks.

### ***Archaeological evidence***

The spiritual and ceremonial significance of Barrambin is confirmed by physical evidence. Stone flints, oyster shells, and other archaeological material have been recovered across the site.

**Some of the trees standing at Barrambin today are estimated to be between 200 and 700 years old — pre-dating European settlement, and therefore among the oldest living witnesses to the cultural practices that took place here.**

Possible ancestral remains in the ground have also been raised as a concern by Traditional Owners, a matter that cannot be assessed without a proper heritage investigation that has not been conducted.

## **5. Colonial Violence: A Site of Documented Massacre**

The cultural heritage of Barrambin includes, and cannot be separated from, its history as a site of frontier violence.

This is not incidental context. Under the Act's interpretive framework, sites of massacre and colonial trauma carry heightened significance precisely because of what they represent in the ongoing historical consciousness of First Nations peoples.

- In December 1846, European soldiers raided the Barrambin camp at 11pm, firing into an estimated 300 to 400 people sleeping there. Kitty, daughter of the clan's Elder known to settlers as the Duke of York, died in the affray.
- In November 1849, Turrbal people at Barrambin were shot by military officers after a false report was circulated that they had killed a bullock. Three men were wounded.
- In 1849, two full divisions of a regiment — 24 soldiers — stormed a gathering of between 100 and 500 First Nations people at the site. Many oral traditions describe this as a massacre resulting in significant loss of life.
- In 1846, during a gathering of some 400 Aboriginal people, a constable's attempt to apprehend an Aboriginal resistance leader led to a confrontation in which several residents were shot and wounded, the camp was burned, and many of the wounded fled.
- In 1864, the Volunteer Rifles staged a "mock" attack on the camp, terrifying residents and forcing them to flee — an act understood in the

broader context of the colonial suppression campaigns that followed the Hornet Bank and Cullin-la-ringo massacres.

*"There has never been any justice for stealing this land, and attacking and murdering those people." — Greens Councillor Seal Chong Wah, citing Kerkhove & Wilson (2023)*

This history is formally acknowledged. It is documented in peer-reviewed academic research, in government heritage assessments, and in the Queensland Heritage Register itself. It is part of the site.

It cannot be excavated out of existence — but it can be desecrated beyond recovery.

## **6. The State Has Removed Its Own Protections**

The Queensland Government's Olympic infrastructure legislation — enacted to facilitate stadium construction at Barrambin — specifically curtailed the rights of Traditional Owners under Queensland's Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Act. The new laws shortened consultation timeframes, removed the right to seek stop-work orders or injunctions to protect cultural heritage impacted by Olympic projects, and established a "bespoke process" that bypassed more than fifteen existing State laws, including heritage protections.

Yagarabul Elder Gaja Kerry Charlton confirmed this directly: the project's approval relied on changes to the State's Cultural Heritage Act. In her words: "Care of Country ensures a cultural legacy for our grandchildren's grandchildren — connection to ancestors, ancient trees, healthy waters and lands."

The circumstance that now exists — in which a State Government has actively removed its own legislative safeguards in order to clear a development path through a formally heritage-listed site of the first order of significance — is precisely the contingency the Commonwealth Act was enacted to address. The federal mechanism is now the only instrument with both the legal standing and the independence to give this assessment genuine weight.

## **7. The Irreversibility Principle**

Section 10 of the Act requires a finding that the area is significant and that it is under threat of injury or desecration. Both findings are available on the evidence already before the Minister. Neither is in serious dispute.

What distinguishes this situation from one in which further process might be tolerated is the irreversibility of the threatened harm. Earthworks at Barrambin are scheduled to commence mid-2026. Drilling has already begun. Once ground disturbance of this scale occurs:

### **The Bora ground cannot be restored.**

- The sacred waterhole and its ceremonial function cannot be reconstituted.
- Any ancestral remains disturbed cannot be reinterred in their original context.
- Archaeological material destroyed cannot be recovered.
- The living relationship between the custodians and the physical Country they are obligated to care for cannot be repaired.

A decision deferred until after this harm has occurred is not a cautious decision. In practice, it is a decision against protection. The Act's Section 10 mechanism was designed for exactly this situation: where the evidence of significance is established, where State protections have failed or been removed, and where the threat is immediate and irreversible.

### **Australia cannot afford another Juukan Gorge.**

The international attention on Brisbane 2032, combined with the clarity of the evidence and the directness of the State's legislative manoeuvre to remove Aboriginal cultural heritage protections, means the Commonwealth's response to these Section 10 applications will be scrutinised — by First Nations communities, by the international heritage community, and by history.

## Conclusion

The evidence is clear. Barrambin / Victoria Park, Brisbane is:

- Formally listed on the Queensland Heritage Register, with that listing expanded as recently as September 2025;
- Identified by government-commissioned expert heritage assessment as the most important Aboriginal cultural heritage site in the study area;
- Located on a songline, and the site of a Bora ground, a sacred waterhole, and active Dreaming stories about the creation of the Brisbane River;
- A documented site of colonial massacre, carrying the trauma and the cultural significance that attaches to such places under the Act;
- A place to which its custodians have maintained living, unbroken connection across dispossession, forced removal, and nearly two centuries of colonial pressure;
- Now stripped of State-level cultural heritage protections by specific Olympic legislation; and
- Under imminent threat of irreversible ground disturbance, with earthworks scheduled to commence mid-2026 and drilling already underway.

Every element of the Section 10 test is satisfied. The determination that is called for is a declaration of permanent protection under the Act.

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