

YARNUPINGS

ABORIGINAL HERITAGE OFFICE NEWSLETTER ISSUE 3 - SEPTEMBER 2026



ISSUE 3 · SEPTEMBER 2026

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NEWSLETTER OF THE ABORIGINAL HERITAGE OFFICE



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The cooler months are a really exciting time across the northern part of Sydney. Winter sees clear ocean waters and cuttlefish mating season and the anticipation of spring brings a colour explosion with wildflowers blooming.

The September issue is a special one. We welcome our new staff member, Emily Thornton. And we farewell the legend that is Karen Smith.

Phil has been away for an incredible adventure and shares his experiences and learnings with us.

Enjoy the articles and the photos of flowers and fish!

Brent, Karen, Phil, Susan, Kyle & Emily



IMAGE BY SUSAN WHITBY

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MULLET - WURRIDJAL



GREY NURSE SHARK
- WURRIDJAL



SYDNEY ROCK OYSTER
- WURRIDJAL

WINTER IN CABBAGE TREE BAY



PHOTOS BY SUSAN WHITBY

WINTER IN CABBAGE TREE BAY

PHOTOS BY SUSAN WHITBY

INTRODUCING OUR NEW STAFF MEMBER – EMILY THORNTON

We are excited to welcome Emily Thornton to the AHO team as the new Education Officer.

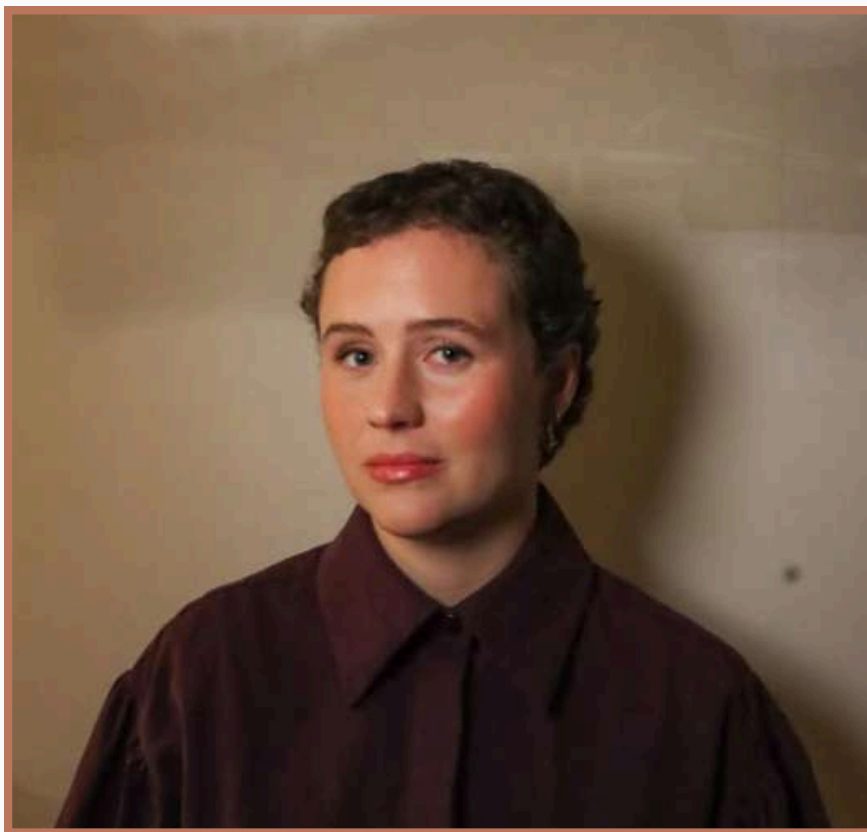
Emily Thornton is a Birrbay and Dunghutti Saltwater-Freshwater woman and is the Aboriginal Heritage Office's Education Officer. She is passionate about sharing Aboriginal histories and ways of knowing through engaging educational experiences that encourage a deeper understanding of Country and the continuing strength of Aboriginal communities.

Emily delivers guided walks, school excursions, presentations and community programs across the Aboriginal Heritage Office's partner Council areas. Drawing on her background in music, education and cultural research, she enjoys creating opportunities for people of all ages to connect with Aboriginal heritage and view the local landscape through an Aboriginal perspective.

Emily is currently undertaking postgraduate research in Musicology at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, University of Sydney. Her research explores Aboriginal perspectives in music and cultural practice, with a particular interest in how knowledge, storytelling and relationships to Country can be shared through creative practice.

Through her work with the Aboriginal Heritage Office, Emily is committed to fostering respectful relationships, supporting truth-telling, and helping the community better understand and value the rich Aboriginal heritage of northern Sydney.

Welcome Emily! We are excited to have you join the AHO and wish you the best of luck in your new role as Education Officer.



NGOONUNGI SEASON

MURRAI'YUNGORY- COOL GETTING WARMER

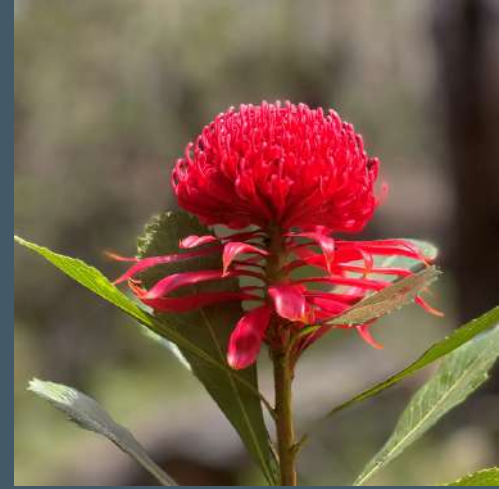
BY EMILY THORNTON

Did you know that the Greater Sydney region can be understood through a six-season calendar? For the Wodi Wodi people of the Dharawal Nation, the changing seasons are part of a complex and interconnected system of environmental knowledge, where the behaviour of plants, animals, weather and people provides important signs of seasonal change.

Traditional Knowledge Holder Dr Frances Bodkin shares this knowledge in her book, describing the daily cycle, gamaruwamumu; the annual cycle of six seasons; and the mudong cycle, which occurs over approximately 11-12 years.

These cycles reflect a deep understanding of Country, developed and maintained by Aboriginal people over thousands of generations.

We are now entering Murrai'yunggory, a time when the cold winds of winter have passed and the days begin to grow warmer. Country responds to these changes in remarkable ways. The buds of the waratah begin to swell and redden, flying foxes gather in vast numbers, gentle rains fall, and flowers become heavy with nectar.



NGOONUNGI SEASON

MURRAI'YUNGORY- COOL GETTING WARMER

Ngoonungi (flying foxes) can be heard calling in the skies over Sydney at dusk as they make their way to their gathering places. These gatherings can comprise many thousands of individuals and are an important seasonal sign. Murrai'yungory is also a time of birthing for flying foxes, as the cycle of the species continues in response to the changing conditions of Country.

This season also brings important changes in the behaviour of other animals. Wombats enter their mating period, while the familiar call of the Gugagura (kookaburra) can be heard across the landscape. Their distinctive calls are part of the seasonal soundscape, as males challenge one another over territory and access to females. Their nesting sites can be found in tree hollows and other suitable places throughout the bushland.

For thousands of years, these observations have provided Aboriginal communities with a detailed way of understanding when particular plants flower, when animals breed, when food becomes available and when weather patterns change. Rather than seeing each of these events in isolation, Dharawal seasonal knowledge recognises the relationships between them.

Murrai'yungory reminds us that a season is more than a date on a calendar. It is a living pattern of relationships between people, plants, animals, weather and Country. By paying attention to these seasonal indicators, we can deepen our understanding of the natural world around us and recognise the continuing importance of Aboriginal ecological knowledge.



WILDFLOWERS IN THE SYDNEY LANGUAGE



WADANGGARI-
BANKSIA

GADIGALBUDYARI-
CHRISTMAS BELLS

WARADA-
WARATAH

WANDANGULI-
WATTLE

BANDA-
DWARF APPLE GUM

MAMBARA-
GEEBUNG

BURUWAN-
ROCK LILY







Bush
Tucker
Garden



VOLUNTEER NEWS

BY SUSAN WHITBY

The Volunteer Site Monitoring Program is successful with 130 volunteers and continues to increase. The result is an enhanced awareness and appreciation for Aboriginal heritage and history amongst the community. The Volunteer Site Monitoring Program helps the AHO monitor sites by keeping them informed of damage that may otherwise go unnoticed for longer. The number of volunteer site reports received enables an improved standard of site management for a significant number of these priceless cultural heritage sites. The program continues to run safely, and without incident.

During site monitoring events, the AHO volunteers see some awesome things, from beautiful wildlife, to sparkling waters, to midden material to artwork. Please enjoy some of thier images.

For more information about the Volunteer program or to express your interest in volunteering, please email ahovolunteer@northernbeaches.nsw.gov.au

**VOLUNTEERS DO
NOT NECESSARILY
HAVE THE TIME;
THEY JUST HAVE
THE HEART.**



MY LAST NEWSLETTER ARTICLE FROM KAREN... OR IS IT?

BY KAREN SMITH

I leave the AHO in good hands, so please continue to support the Aboriginal Heritage Office and the work in Site Protection and Education.

I will be sad to say goodbye to the Councils and their staff and the Schools and Communities. The relationships I have built over this time have been challenging fulfilling and humbling. I will miss the open faces of the children as they learn about the history, Aboriginal people and the sites. I will miss the appreciation and honest comments from the teachers who have thanked me and told me they have learned 'a lot'. I will miss the Local Government employees who have supported me in my education role and have worked to create the best events possible to allow the best outcomes for our events. I will miss the Church groups; the women's groups the men's sheds and the plethora of community members and groups who have been unwavering in their support in my role as Education Officer, I have seen myself as a truth teller. This has had a personal impact on my life which is one of the reasons for my retirement.

The Education Officer has a profound and important role in educating our Councils communities and schools. As Emily Thornton steps into this role, please support her in any way you can. She is a brave young intelligent person and as Education Officer she will easily step into my boots.

My last year at the AHO has seen many changes. We have our new manager Brent Emmons, who has hit the ground, running. The office will continue to grow and thrive under his continuing leadership. The AHO are now charging for our walks and talks.



... OR IS IT?

This has been a long time coming and will support our work in the office. For many years I did not know whether I would have a job, due to our funding model. I also have not attended a conference or training since covid. So hopefully this will all change.

We have a new logo and branding on our uniforms, brochures and reports. This was created by Kyle Nettleton. Kyle and his wife Channy have also painted a mural on the toilet block outside the office which gives the AHO and Freshwater dignity and a sense of place.

Susan Whitby has grown the Volunteer program to great heights. We now have many more very dedicated volunteers, some who have joined me from walks to presentations and one who was inspired to write my biography. Susan is also a brilliant photographer – so watch out for her.

Phil Hunt has always been an inspiration to me, not only for his friendship or his incredible site work, but for his deep spirit in caring for the creatures of the world and for Country. His Buddhist sensibilities often guided me when I received mean or uncaring emails or comments.

I hope I may see you in the future at AHO events. Perhaps the Yarn Up series will start again. You may hear from me again in the Newsletter with stories from the road.

Thank you AHO and our supporting Councils – Northern Beaches, Kur-ring-gai, Lane Cove Willoughby and North Sydney. Thank you to our wonderful Volunteers and supporters.



SOLASTALGIA VS INWARD MIGRATION

BY PHIL HUNT

The world seems to be changing at an alarming rate. We humans are programmed to be alert to danger and sensitive to risk. Those of us who spent time in the twentieth century might look back with longing. Those who are of the twenty-first century may look ahead with dread. On a fragile planet surrounded by the cold vacuum of space, things might seem bleak. Fortunately, humans have long been working out ways to survive and even flourish in hard times. There is hope to be found in old and new traditions alike.

The word **solastalgia** somehow eluded me until quite recently. Reading its meaning and its roots for the first time brought some clarity, mixed with sadness. The feelings we experience seeing the environment in which we live diminish and often where we feel we have little control are not comfortable to dwell in and can be overwhelming.

Is it better to experience solastalgia and be aware of negative changes around you, or not feel it and be content with what happens? Knowledge, ignorance, indifference - is it a case of choosing your preferred blend?

In April I packed my long service leave bag and headed to Nepal. (Since I first started writing this, the big flood has occurred and the world is looking to that small, landlocked country with great concern. It makes this article feel a bit insensitive. If you are reading this, then we've decided its still worth putting out.)

Two things were on top of my long service list. Continue with the project my wife and I have been working on for over 20 years and secondly, go up the mountains on pilgrimage. The first is based at a Tibetan Buddhist monastery in Kathmandu Valley. When we first went there in 2001 there were some older westerners, former hippies, who told us how much of the valley was was rice fields and greenery when they came in the late 60s and 70s. Amazing to imagine. Every year since, I've seen the unstoppable march of concrete. Almost like another glacier has receded, but less dramatically, and left a moraine of 4 storey buildings. This visit felt unusually hot. Hotter days meant uncomfortable nights as the concrete held in the heat.



SOLASTALGIA VS INWARD MIGRATION

The nights are quite beautiful with glittering lights below, with the younger monks shouting verses that they are trying to memorise or with the debate season when groups sit and challenge each other in ritual duels of logic. Yet the sounds of the city have been encroaching the monastery, almost ring barking this hilltop refuge.

The pilgrimage in the mountains was fabulous. Three weeks visiting special places in Solu Khumbu associated with one of my teachers. There is far too much to even summarise in a short article. Yaks, mighty mountains, welcoming villagers. It is an incongruous thing to write about the pilgrimage that I went on, that was so delightful and think of those who had theirs destroyed in cataclysm a few months later. Pilgrimage is supposed to be about transforming worldly experience into something transcendental. I don't think anyone really believes they won't return from it.

It is strange to be in a place where there are no cars, where everything is embedded with manual labour, where the oxygen is scant, and yet you can still get wifi. I was looking forward to being out of contact. There it is- pulsing connectivity at your fingertips. Even at 4000m the latest unwanted news can be had and shared. The recent catastrophic flood shows how lifesaving this technology can be. However, it can be less welcome for those wanting peace and quiet, for retreat and reflection. Even in a remote region, it means self-control is the only real restraint to distraction. That's sadly something you can't pack in your bag, buy on the track or download.

My wife and I did a retreat at Lawudo cave in 2005. We went straight up to the tiny settlement of Lawudo built around the cave and did our retreat. We only had a couple of days to explore afterwards. This time the group I was with was mostly moving from place to place. In 2005 Lawudo residents told us of changes in water availability in winter as the glaciers retreated. Not far away in Thame, the still raw wound of lost landscape is frightening, the result of a burst glacial dam in 2024. Arable land is so precious here and much of the hand-built fields are gone. Seeing ruins in other places and disused retreat spaces gives the impression of a lost ancient past.



THE VIEW FROM THE MONASTERY,
KATHMANDU ENCROACHING



LAWUDO CAVE UNDER THE BOULDER



SOLASTALGIA VS INWARD MIGRATION

It is true that many meditation caves were already abandoned with the increasing connectivity with the wider world in the late 20th century, yet many ruins are only from the 2015 earthquake (Yarnupings, July 2015).

Above the village of Phortse, there are many caves and it must have been an amazing meditation industry. Now this village is famous for having the most Everest summiteers, skilled guides from local Sherpa families helping international visitors try their luck. An imported idea of what it means to reach the highest goal.

The geography lessons that I learned in high school were, sadly, for a different planet. The weather has changed, the natural places are diminished, the urban spaces have ballooned and the thousands of different human cultures are bleeding into a global t-shirt clad hybrid. Cultures and traditions have always changed, often as a result of external factors, like a changing environment. The pressures from our morphing climate can be seen everywhere.

While the planet has changed, the principles from those geography lesson remain true. Cause and effect. This result comes from those directly related causes and conditions. The digitally dexterous modern sciences have greatly advanced humanity's ability to measure, assess, predict. Traditional sciences might be the analogue version. One time in central Australia, Arrernte Country, there was a change in the weather. I was sure that there was a message on the eastern wind, but I don't speak the language. I still don't know what the message was. Local knowledge is key.

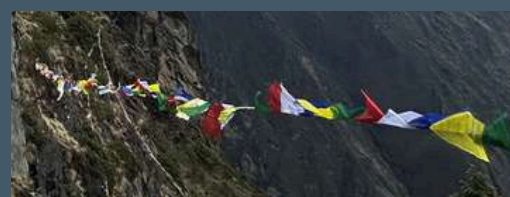
Having time off, I could catch up on some reading. Greg Mullins' Fire Storm was a teary experience, remembering and hearing about dangerous fires, the dedication of our fireies and the indifference and stubbornness of some of our politicians. Greg's understanding of fire weather, learned initially from his father and the old residents of northern Sydney, shows how important local and shared knowledge is. The best way to face difficulties is to realise early that they are coming. There is no place on earth where problems don't arise and, like the game of Hide and Seek, they come ready or not.



ASPIRATIONAL PHIL ABOVE PHORTSE



THE EARTHQUAKE DAMAGED EXTENSION TO A RETREAT CAVE, PHORTSE



SOLASTALGIA VS INWARD MIGRATION

Preparation gives time to identify options to prevent or reduce impacts. Unfortunately, this precious environmental knowledge is becoming outdated against the fury of climate change. New learning is required. Greg's book is wonderful. Just the Appendix is like a textbook for understanding the principles of fire behaviour. It is a reminder of how important it is to understand a place in its specific local context. It has parallels to Victor Steffensen's Fire Country. Two masters of their crafts, but from different traditions, and both on the forefront of positive adaptation to the Pyrocene.

In a Sherpa guesthouse I came across Robert Macfarlane's *Is a River Alive?* A Journey with Water. Another example of misery and hope, perhaps like most rivers today, polluted here and free flowing, bursting with life there. Archaeologists know that humans have always lived in difficult times. The ruins of the past are what we immerse ourselves in. For me, old bits and pieces of past lives are not much use on their own.

It is the knowledge and wisdom that are the real gems. There is still much we can learn from what has survived and what is being relearned from the diversity of locally evolved cultures. With some modern ingenuity, and with the inspiration of individuals and communities leading the way, especially our courageous, compassionate youth, what's not to be hopeful about?

On my pilgrimage, I found an unexpected positive aspect of the wifi and modern technology. Sharing photos from my father's trek in 1979 with Sherpa families today. He always took slides. They had been digitised and soon I was receiving them, showing, then sharing them via WhatsApp. I didn't realise he had come up this same side valley as me (well, he did it first!). The owner of a rebuilt hotel in Thame pointed to a building next to the group of tents of the trekkers. "That's my old house", she said. Destroyed in 2024 but rebuilt with hope for the future. In Lukla another Sherpa scrolled through the images and stopped at one. "My grandfather". The 1979 photos show mountain sides with little vegetation. The need for firewood and the ever-present yaks had stripped most larger shrubs and trees. There is much greater tree cover now. The national park status and electricity are two contributing factors to the regeneration of the land.



SOLASTALGIA VS INWARD MIGRATION



SNOW ON THE FIELDS OF THAME IN 1979



RAW WOUNDS, THAME IN 2026

Perhaps my favourite part of the pilgrimage was learning about sa.khung (unromantically called 'earth holes'). At Lawudo, I of course spent some time in the cave (not just an overhang but fully equipped with wall, windows, door and an electricity). I also went to the nearby sa.khung. Here the Lawudo Lama and his main disciple would sit outside meditating with the most incredible panoramic view. Our group did an incense puja and offered prayer flags. I kept returning at different times. Cradled by earth, with juniper bushes around, growling rivers far below and out of sight, steep mountains, jagged snowy peaks occasionally showing above, bustling clouds, sun and moon and stars, the eagles on the wind, the small birds busy below. Here you could be awed with beginningless time and symphonic space. That mountain, small for the Himalayas, unfathomable for Australia, is still being heaved up from an ancient ocean that it once lay beneath. The clouds, driven by winds that are generated by the heat of the sun on monsoonal plains far from sight. A mighty mountain, yet still dragged down by water, gravity and eternity.

INCENSE PUJA AT THE SA.KHUNG, LAWUDO



THE MOONLIT VIEW





SOLASTALGIA VS INWARD MIGRATION

What is an **inward migration**? Another term I wasn't aware of earlier. The Waanyi nation author Alexis Wright explains:

An inward migration can also be thought of as closing one's country, closing the door, sealing off the home place in the mind from others. It is through an inward gaze that we go back to country in thoughts and in dreams. We return to talk with the spirits about how the deep feelings of culture can be thought through, cared about, and compared with our knowledge of the world. It is where we examine truth, and it is through our soul-searching that art and beauty can grow, regenerate, deepen the connections—just as country renews and fulfills its own stories¹.

Our world is under pressure, and it can seem unfair. Why us? Why now? First Nations peoples in what we call Australia have been facing the unimaginable since newcomers enforced their new laws. Older generations past watched productive coastal shores disappear as the warming Holocene era arrived. They passed those stories on. Adaption is possible. Knowledge is transferable. Adversity is the rich soil from which resilience grows.

Through our stories of country, we know how closely related and interconnected we are, not only to each other but to everything else in the continuous cycles of life. We are taught resilience through the stories of regeneration that have ensured the survival of our culture—a culture that has always remained central in our sovereignty of mind. This sense of sovereignty and self-governance is embedded in our spirit and drives our awareness and insistence that all times are important, and no time is resolved¹.

Solastagia, like nostalgia, like many emotions, can be wallowed in with not much to show for the time spent. Perhaps it can be tasted or sipped and used as a motivation for more beneficial action. The Information Age has unintendedly unleashed a deluge of opinion, outrage and false certainty.

*EACH ONE OF US IS RESPONSIBLE
FOR ALL OTHER LIVING BEINGS'
HAPPINESS, BESIDES OUR OWN. AS A
RESULT, YOUR LOVING KINDNESS IS
THE MOST WISH-FULFILLING THING IN
LIFE, MORE PRECIOUS THAN
ANYTHING ELSE IN THIS WORLD. THAT
MAKES FOR A MOST SATISFYING,
FULFILLING LIFE.*

LAMA ZOPA RINPOCHE (REINCARNATION OF
THE LAWUDO LAMA

I can't speak for those on pilgrimage who were caught up in the Nepal flood. The grief and mayhem to all affected is personal and immeasurable. For those pilgrims that I have met over the years, you could say that they are drawn towards the slow and difficult path to knowledge and expect difficulties. You don't have to climb a mountain to utilise these ancient human skills of reflection and retreat. Your local patch has so many places awaiting your presence. These spaces need us as much as we need them. We thrive together. Maybe we have entered into a period of unprecedance. Maybe more disasters are coming. Maybe we are just the right people to be here for them.

1. Alexis Wright, 2022, The Inward Migration during Apocalyptic Times, Emergencemagazine.org

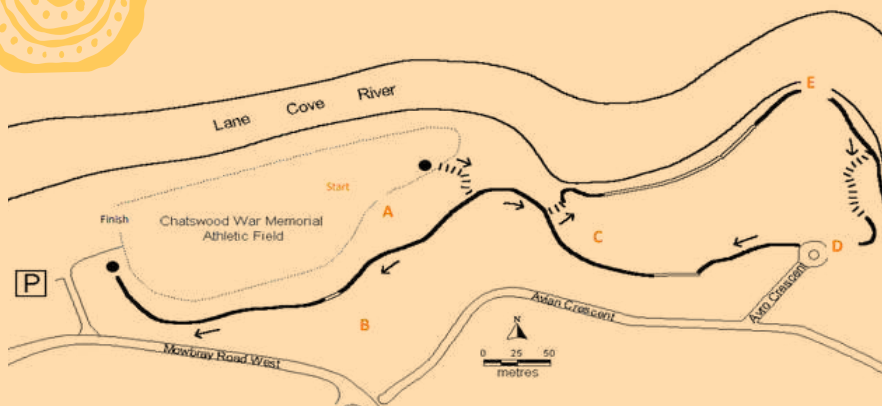
WONDERFUL WALKS - GARADI TRACK

BLACK COCKATOO TRACK MOWBRAY PARK



Willoughby City Council is an area abundant with local Aboriginal history with over 100 sites located within the council area. Other areas you may wish to explore include the North Arm Walking Track and Harold Reid Foreshore Track.

You are about to embark on a reflective journey exploring the cultural remains and mysteries of the Aboriginal people once living in Mowbray Park. The sites you will discover tell their story even though the people themselves have been displaced from this land.



Transport

Public: Catch bus 534 from Chatswood Station to the corner of Epping Road and Mowbray Road West.

A path goes under Epping Road to Mowbray Road West where you can enter the Chatswood War Memorial Athletic Field (2 min walk from bus stop).

Private: There is a car park at the Chatswood War Memorial Athletic Field on Mowbray Road West.

Walk Details

Total Length: 1.2km, Walking Time: 30 minutes, Grade: Medium, Surface: Steep steps, sturdy shoes required.

Key Locations & Cultural Sites

Badangi ('Rock Oyster')

A midden is a place where remains from eating countless shellfish meals have accumulated along with bones, artefacts and tools.

Mugu ('Stone Hatchet')

Axe grinding grooves are created by using water and rubbing the basalt stone back and forth on the wet rock to sharpen the axe.

D) Barani—Barrabuga ('Yesterday-Tomorrow')

Elevated on this sandstone platform you are able to see a jungle of buildings rising from the horizon. Imagine this view in 1787.

