

Recapturing the history of Brewarrina Mission

Interpretative signs reveal the hidden stories of the former Aboriginal Mission site

Project	Interpretation
Type of work	Education and promotion
Funding	\$10,070
Project cost	\$10,070
Heritage listing	State Heritage Register No. 01732
Local government area	Brewarrina Shire Council
Applicant	Woganurra Aboriginal Co-op

Project aim To interpret the site of the Old Aboriginal Mission near Brewarrina

Funding focus This program targets funding to projects that conserve, promote and increase understanding of Aboriginal heritage

“Even though the old mission buildings are no longer there, we will have a spiritual connection with the land there, it is part of our Aboriginal cultural heritage and our history,”
Aboriginal Elder June Barker



Interpretative plaques heighten the visitor experience and ensure a significant part of Aboriginal cultural heritage can be passed on to future generations

Photo by Adell Hyslop



Heritage Council of NSW members and local Aboriginal elders came together for an afternoon of healing and stories at the Mission site during the Council's regional visit to Bourke and Brewarrina in September 2004

Photo by Adell Hyslop

Brewarrina Aboriginal Mission, located 14.5 km from the present town of Brewarrina, was the first institution in NSW to officially segregate Aboriginal people from white settlers. Established by the Aborigines Protection Board, the Brewarrina Mission housed Aboriginal families from as far away as Tibooburra, Angledool, Goodooga and Culgoa, as well as the Brewarrina

district.

It was also the longest-running mission in NSW, operating from 1896 to 1966. Over the years, the mission came to include a clinic, a butcher's shop, a school, a hall, a garage and the manager's home.

By the time the mission was closed, very few people lived a traditional lifestyle or spoke their traditional language. Time passed and the buildings disappeared leaving only the cemetery, which received its last burial in 1971, as the sole physical reminder of the Mission's purpose.

However thanks to their own memories of growing up there, many Aboriginal elders still maintain a strong 'sense of belonging' to the site itself. But with each passing year, the memories and stories of the former Mission risked being lost.

Two senior elders Roy and June Barker, who held strong familial links to the Brewarrina district approached the Heritage Council of NSW in 2004 seeking funding to clean the site and install some interpretation signs.

"There are not many elders left who remember where these old mission sites used to be," 'Aunty' June wrote in her original application for funding.

"We still go out and visit the old mission cemetery where a lot of our loved ones are buried. We know a lot of the Elders who came to the Mission in the early days were from different tribal groups. They died and were buried here, not in their homeland country,"

"For us to see the sites preserved by plaques and to see the old photos of where our ancestors once lived is all we have left to pass on to our younger generations," said Aunty June.

"The old Brewarrina Mission History will be a great project to share with everyone," Aunty June said.

Working in 50 °C heat, members of the Aboriginal community cleared the site of debris left over from years of neglect and installed a series of 15 plaques at the locations of the various buildings, including the old school house, pump room, store room, butcher's shop, the manager's house – known as 'The Big House' and girls' dormitory.

In 2003 June and Roy Barker received a NSW Government Heritage Volunteer Award for their contributions to Aboriginal heritage.

In 2006 the Brewarrina Mission site was listed on the State Heritage Register becoming the second item of state significant Aboriginal heritage in the Brewarrina district.

With thanks to:

June Barker, Aboriginal Elder, Woganurra Aboriginal Co-op

