

The road to Gundagai can be a journey of discovery

A conversation with heritage consultant Jillian Comber on developing a community based heritage study for Gundagai

Project	Gundagai Community based heritage study Years 1-2
Type of work	Community based heritage study
Funding	\$10,000
Project cost	\$22,166
Local government area	Gundagai Shire Council
Applicant	Gundagai Shire Council

Project aim To undertake a community based heritage study for the Gundagai local government area

Funding focus This program targets funding to the delivery of local government heritage management for the preparation of heritage planning reports including Community-based heritage studies, reviews to identify, promote and assist the management of heritage items in the local government area

The local government heritage management program funds a range of planning studies including community based heritage studies, archaeological management plans and Aboriginal heritage studies

“The most surprising and pleasant outcome of the Gundagai community based heritage study was discovering the beauty of the shire and particularly Gundagai itself, which is a very intact historic town”. Study co-ordinator Jillian Comber



*Restored verandah and shopfronts
Photo courtesy of Comber Consultants Pty Ltd*



*Gundagai's famous Prince Alfred timber road and rail bridge
Photo by Heritage Branch*

A community based heritage study is a first step towards developing the heritage schedule for a Local Environmental Plan. Recently the Heritage Branch spoke to leading heritage consultant **Jillian Comber** about how she went about developing a community based heritage study for the town of Gundagai which has set a new benchmark for projects of this kind.

What is the basis of a community based heritage study?

Most heritage studies are based on a process established by the Heritage Branch and therefore are fairly similar in approach.

Some slight differences may emerge out of an area's unique history or in the individual characteristics of the people you meet. These can influence the development of the inventory and the subsequent study recommendations and possible funding or other incentives recommended to support heritage items.

For example the key themes for Gundagai's community based heritage study related to its history of settlement and local industries such as mining.

What are the components of a community based heritage study?

There are several components that make up a community based heritage study. Firstly, a thematic history reveals the distinctive strands that make up its history; which in turn help to identify the key places that provide the evidence of those stories. Then the inventory of heritage assets is developed, which ultimately becomes the local environment plan's heritage schedule.

Equally important are the community consultation and the management of recommendations. Without adequate recommendations that will lead to the protection and conservation of the significant places that have been identified and recorded, the community based heritage study will ultimately be a waste of time and effort.

The Gundagai community based heritage study was a team effort. My role involved co-ordinating the community consultation while my colleagues Caroline Plim wrote the history and Cathy Fisher collected data on most of the sites.

How do you undertake a community based heritage study?

The approach to a community based heritage study varies with each community and depends on whether the local Council already has a heritage committee or whether there is a local historical society, Chamber of Commerce, Rotary or other service clubs.

I normally talk to Council's list of key people first and from there as many community groups as possible extending this contact to land care groups, school groups, TAFE etc.

I hold public meetings, advertise in the local paper and even raise the subject with people when buying lunch, petrol or just having a cup of tea in the local cafe. You need to talk to these groups several times as people need time to consider what you have said and then come back and ask further questions.

It is essential to spend time in the local area to give people time to hear about you and what you are doing and to then just drop in to discuss the heritage study with you.

What are the constraints and challenges in conducting a community based heritage study?

Time and funding are the major restrictions. Building contacts is time consuming but an absolutely necessary aspect of a heritage study. A local heritage advisor would already have a network of contacts but I came in to the Gundagai study as an external consultant which initially made it more difficult to engage the community.

With thanks to Jillian Comber, Director, Comber Consultants Pty Ltd