

# **MANAGING THE PEOPLE'S GROUND:**

MEMORIES, EXPERIENCES AND FANATICISM  
CAUGHT UP IN HERITAGE CONTROLS

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## **Abstract**

The sports loving community of Victoria, and indeed Australia, feel ownership of the Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG). The strongly held view is that it belongs to the people. This affection and regard reflects its history, but also the shared memories and experiences of the fans who crowd the stadium on a weekly basis to watch cricket in summer and football in winter.

The MCG and its surrounding landscape, Yarra Park, are protected as separate entities under National (MCG) and State (MCG and Yarra Park) heritage legislation. With the statutory controls comes defined boundaries, separate statements of significance, permit policies and the like which control change and development of the two places.

This paper focuses on the statutory heritage management of the MCG and Yarra Park, and what this means for the fans. It also examines whether the two places, given their common history and interconnected use, warrant consideration as a single heritage entity with an integrated approach to the management of the stadium and its setting.

## Introduction

The sports loving community of Victoria, and indeed Australia, feel ownership of the Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG). It is, quite simply, the People's Ground. It is held in high regard worldwide and with much affection by Australians. It holds a special place in the collective memory and experiences of the numerous fans who crowd the stadium to watch cricket in summer, football in winter and special events throughout the year.

The MCG and its surrounding landscape, Yarra Park, are both managed by the Melbourne Cricket Club (MCC) on behalf of the Melbourne Cricket Ground Trust (MCG Trust). However, they are treated as separate entities by Heritage Victoria, with individual listings on the Victorian Heritage Register (VHR). The National Heritage List includes the MCG only. The statutory VHR controls accordingly have defined boundaries for the two places, separate statements of significance, and different permit policies and permit exemptions which guide and control change and development of the separate places. The two places also have independent management plans, although the Conservation Management Plan for the MCG (Allom Lovell & Associates, Bryce Raworth, 2000) addresses the park. The latter report was also written prior to Yarra Park being included in the VHR.

Lovell Chen has advised the MCC on its management of the stadium and Yarra Park for some years, and this paper draws on that experience. It focuses on the statutory heritage controls, and how these have been applied with regard to the nature of the heritage values of both places, and with particular recognition of the stature and status of the MCG. While the stadium as a whole is significant, the significance derives from its history and ongoing use, its regard in the community, and the overall stadium form surrounding the oval. The building fabric per se holds little intrinsic heritage value. The heritage value of Yarra Park has been identified purely on historical grounds, as part of Melbourne's early parkland reserves, with little reference to its importance as the setting for the MCG.

For the fans, on game day, it is the facilities and amenities which matter most, with the vast majority unaware of the heritage regime or the nature of the heritage significance of the stadium and the park.

This paper also examines whether the two places, the MCG and Yarra Park, given their common and integrated management, shared history and interconnected use, warrant consideration as a single heritage entity. The park provides facilities which support the operation of the stadium on game day, and all approaches to the MCG traverse Yarra Park. Walking through the park, to and from the ground, is a key patron experience, and one which has been enhanced by the MCC in recent times. In heritage terms, Yarra Park also clearly forms the curtilage to the ground, and provides the landscape setting to the stadium.

## MCG: the beginning

The use of the descriptor 'ground' does not do justice to this magnificent heritage place, which had its origins as a crudely fenced paddock for playing cricket in the then Police Paddock (later Yarra Park).

The Melbourne Cricket Club was founded in 1838, when there were some 1,300 people living in Melbourne. This makes it one of the oldest formally constituted organisations in Victoria. It has subsequently grown into one of the largest sporting clubs in the world, with some 100,000 members, and as of August 2016, more than 242,000 people on the waiting list (Melbourne Cricket Club, Waiting List, 2016).



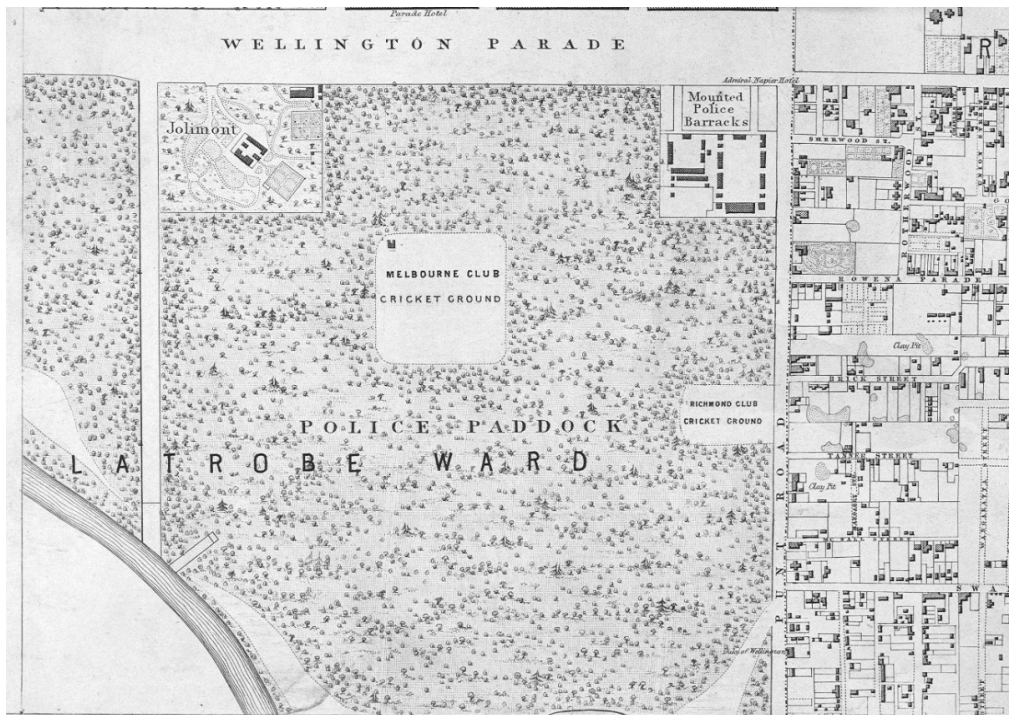


Figure 1 1855 Kearney Map of Melbourne, showing the early 'Melbourne Club Cricket Ground' in the Police Paddock.  
Source: Maps Collection, State Library of Victoria

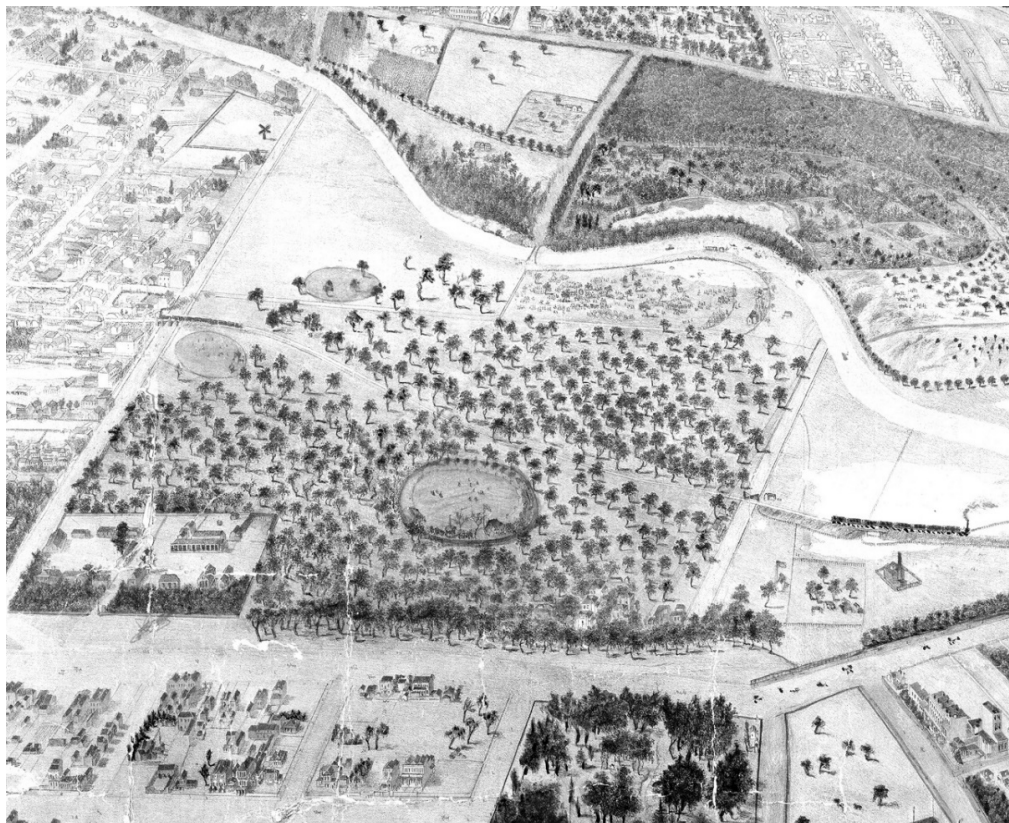


Figure 2 De Gruchy and Leigh, isometric plan of 1866, showing the MCG in parklands  
Source: La Trobe Picture Collection, State Library of Victoria

The Melbourne Cricket Ground was established later, in 1853, when the MCC was allocated 10 acres of Crown land between the Yarra River and Wellington Parade, on which to establish a cricket ground. It was a heavily wooded area, with the Mounted Police barracks and stables as neighbours. The Richmond Cricket Ground (RCG, now known as the Punt Road Oval and home of the Richmond Football Club) was another early neighbour (Figure 1). The 10 acres were cleared and fenced, but the rough surface wasn't ready for cricket until 1854 (Batchelder, 2005: 34-8).

The first game of football was played on the ground in July 1858, between Melbourne Grammar and Scotch College. Games of football, likely variations on English rugby, had been played in Melbourne since the 1840s. In 1859, the Melbourne Football Club was also formed, and was based here, being one of the earliest football clubs in the world (Batchelder, 2005: 52-4). The land was permanently reserved in December 1861 as a metropolitan cricket ground (MCG Act 2009, p.1).

The MCG has subsequently evolved into one of the world's great sporting stadiums. According to Greg Baum, Chief Sports Columnist and Associate Editor of *The Age*, who is not normally given to hyperbole (Melbourne Cricket Ground, 2016):

The MCG...is to this city what the Opera House is to Sydney, the Eiffel Tower to Paris and the Statue of Liberty is to New York; it symbolises Melbourne to the world. It inspires reverence.

### **MCG: the evolving stadium**

The MCC has at its own expense funded the development of the stadium throughout its history, at least in the period leading up to the Commonwealth Games redevelopment of the 2000s (Batchelder, 2005: XII). The MCC, despite being 'only' a sports club, oversees the 'progressive management and development of one of the country's greatest assets' (Melbourne Cricket Club, Club History, 2016).

On the way to becoming a stadium, many grandstands have come and gone at the MCG. According to the report, *Architecture at the MCG: The History of Building the Melbourne Cricket Ground*, by Gina Levenspiel, of Lovell Chen (prepared for the MCC in 2006), the grandstand in which we are gathered (the 'New Northern Stand', completed in 2006 for the Commonwealth Games) is the fifteenth to have been constructed at the ground.

The MCG is demonstrably a place which has continually remade and regenerated itself, eventually achieving the continuous, if not seamless, stadium form. In heritage circles, we talk of the historical evolution of places, of ongoing growth and development which can be an attribute of significance. The MCG is an exemplar of this type of heritage place. It has continually evolved to meet the demands and expectations of fans and MCC members. The latter especially have had a significant say in the development of the ground, and the wait to gain club membership is long and tedious, with high expectations upon being granted that membership.

The MCG has also grown in size as it has grown in importance. It has consistently strived to be bigger and better, in its grandstands, facilities and amenities. At a point in time, it went past the Sydney Cricket Ground (SCG), and past similar facilities in other state capitals. Those places, including the SCG, still retain discreet and discernible grandstands, but they are not comparable in terms of the stadium form.

Within the stadium, about 20 per cent of the seating is located in the members' reserve, to which access is restricted to members and guests. There is also a concentration of members' facilities in the reserve, including bars, dining rooms, the MCC library and MCC museum. But the majority of the stadium, and all of Yarra Park, remain publicly accessible.



Figure 3 MCG and Yarra Park, 1937; with the stadium form emerging.  
Source: RAAF Museum



Figure 4 MCG and Yarra Park, 1969. The stadium has further evolved.  
Source: National Archives of Australia

## **MCG: the arrival of heritage controls**

The MCG was added to the Victorian Heritage Register in April 2001. The VHR statement of significance identifies the place as being of historical, social, aesthetic and architectural significance. The historical and social significance derives from the MCG being 'one of the oldest and largest capacity contained sporting venues in the world and one of the best-known of international cricket grounds'; and since the late nineteenth century, 'the main venue and symbolic home of Australian Rules Football in Melbourne'. The association with the MCC and 1956 Melbourne Olympic Games is also significant. The aesthetic significance relates to the 'overall form and scale', with the MCG being a landmark 'on the edge of the city', a 'vast stadium which retains its traditional parkland setting', and a place of 'considerable aesthetic power and significance' and 'energy and great atmosphere'. The architectural significance refers to the 1927 Members Pavilion (since demolished) and the 1992 Great Southern Stand (recently upgraded).

Inclusion in the VHR came some 148 years after the ground was established, and 143 years after the first Australian Rules football game. The State level heritage control arrived at a moment in time, at a 'snapshot' of the MCG as it was then. It also came when the MCG was on the verge of another major transformation. It was to be the flagship venue for the 2006 Commonwealth Games, and the existing facilities and stands – other than the Great Southern Stand – were seen as outdated and inadequate.

When it was registered, the MCG incorporated the 1927 Members Pavilion; Northern (or Olympic) Stand constructed for the 1956 Olympic Games; 1968 Western (Ponsford) Stand; 1986 Australian Gallery of Sport; 1992 Great Southern Stand; and the 1984 light towers. These are all evident in the 1990s image at Figure 7, but only the Great Southern Stand and light towers remain, with the Gallery of Sport relocated into the New Northern Stand and renamed the National Sports Museum. Clearly, the introduction of heritage controls did not stop the ongoing evolution and growth of the ground.

Of the above, the 1927 Members Pavilion was a building of significance, and there was a strong attachment to it on the part of many MCC members. But the Pavilion, together with the Ponsford and Western stands, were to make way for the New Northern Stand.

Without oversimplifying the heritage debate which ensued over the proposed development, Heritage Victoria's approval of the works reflected the historical and social significance of the ground, and the aesthetic significance inherent in the stadium form. The key points of the argument were (Allom Lovell & Associates: 2001):

- The redevelopment would enhance the standing and status of the MCG as one of the oldest and largest continuously operating sports venues in the world.
- The redevelopment would maintain the MCG as the premier cricket and Australian Rules Football venue in Australia.
- The New Northern Stand would retain the ongoing association with the Melbourne Cricket Club, and incorporate a dedicated and differentiated Members Pavilion in the prime spectator position at the ground, coupled with modern members' facilities.
- The development would sustain the place as the 'People's Ground', and a 'living icon' of the Melbourne cultural and sporting landscape.
- Aesthetically, the landmark qualities, overall form and vast scale of the stadium would be reinforced, with the stadium form emphasised through construction of the large new encircling stand, to complement and connect with the Great Southern Stand.

- Maintaining the MCG's ongoing role as a major sports stadium, with its strong community attachment, would enhance the historical and social significance of the place.

The VHR permit policy and permit exemptions are also key considerations, and provide insight into Heritage Victoria's approach to the heritage management of this place. Notwithstanding that these refer to buildings which were demolished as part of the Commonwealth Games redevelopment, the exemptions allow for a comprehensive range of works, other than structural works, to be undertaken without the need for a permit. The works anticipated in the exemptions enable the place to continue to function as a premier sports stadium, and to evolve to meet the members and fans expectations.

The inclusion on the National Heritage List (NHL), in December 2005, came on the eve of the Games. The NHL statement of significance also emphasises the historical and social significance, and refers to 'the continuity of use' of the MCG for cricket and football (Department of the Environment and Energy, 2016). The statement recognises that the 'significance of the MCG extends far beyond that of a mere sports stadium', with the ground having assumed an identity 'beyond that of a sporting venue'. Clearly, there is universal recognition that this is more than a 'ground'.

The MCG has continued to evolve since 2006, to support its function and operation, and provide more and better facilities for fans. Developments since then, which Heritage Victoria has approved or facilitated through permit exemptions, include:

- Major renewal and refurbishment of the Great Southern Stand
- Replacement of the two electronic scoreboards with larger digital screens
- Introduction of a high-density and free WiFi network
- Home club 'theming', with LED lighting in club colours surrounding the stadium exterior, digital signage along the concourse, and internal LED signage around the oval fence
- 'Grow lights' to improve turf growth during winter
- Portable cricket pitches
- More bars and café/food outlets added to the Members Pavilion

Demonstrably, the heritage controls have not hindered change, and have not got in the way of the MCC developing and maintaining a premier sporting facility for its members and fans. The heritage management regime has also enhanced the social value, and maintained the stadium's capacity to generate new memories and experiences for its fans.





Figure 5 MCG in the period immediately prior to its heritage registration, the 1927 Members Pavilion is at bottom centre.

Source: Heritage Victoria, Victorian Heritage Register: MCG



Figure 6 The MCG today, the entrance to the Members Stand (in the New Northern Stand) is at bottom right.

Source: Nearmap 14 December 2015

### Yarra Park: the beginning

The land now known as Yarra Park was first occupied by the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation. It was a wooded grassland with low-lying marshes and lagoons rising from the Yarra River; and was resource rich and used for hunting, camping and ceremonies, including corroborees (Lovell Chen, 2011: 6).

Following the European settlement of Melbourne, the broader park area was reserved for Police Paddock and Government Paddock purposes (John Patrick Pty Ltd, 2001: 4). These paddocks were subsequently reduced in size through the reservation of land for Charles La Trobe's residence 'Jolimont' in 1839, the MCG in 1853, Richmond Cricket Ground (RCG) in 1855, and the Melbourne to Hawthorn railway line in 1859 which divided the paddocks into northern and southern sections (Lovell Chen, 2011: 7). In 1867, a vastly reduced section of the original paddocks, to the north of the railway line, was temporarily reserved as Yarra Park, with the MCG to its south and the RCG to the south-east. The permanent reservation, as a site for a public park, followed in 1873 (Melbourne (Yarra Park) Land Act 1980, p.1). Together with Royal Park, Princes Park, Albert Park and Fawkner Park, Yarra Park formed part of La Trobe's vision for an outer ring of parks reserved for recreational purposes surrounding the centre of Melbourne (Heritage Victoria, Yarra Park, 2016).

Yarra Park retained a broadly open and natural treed setting, with informal pathways laid out from the 1860s along 'desire lines' or key pedestrian routes. These traversed the park between Melbourne and Richmond (east-west) and East Melbourne and the Botanical Gardens (north-south), with the evolving MCG in the park's south (Lovell Chen, 2011: 7). The more formal aspects of the landscape were laid out by Clement Hodgkinson in 1873 (Heritage Victoria, Yarra Park, 2016).

### **Yarra Park: management**

The management of Yarra Park was vested with the Board of Land and Works and the City of Melbourne in 1873; with the City of Melbourne managing the park until 2010. As noted, today Yarra Park, along with the MCG, is managed by the MCC on behalf of the MCG Trust. While management of the park by the MCC recognises the integrated nature of the two places, and the importance of Yarra Park as the functional setting for the MCG, the heritage controls limit the extent to which integrated management can be achieved. This also exacerbates the division between the two interrelated places.

### **Yarra Park: heritage controls**

Yarra Park was included in the VHR in May 2010 as a place of historical significance. The historical significance relates to:

- The park's reservation as a key component of Governor La Trobe's system of parks surrounding Melbourne
- Its role in the development of Australian Rules Football
- As an important Aboriginal ceremonial, camping and contact site
- The associations with Governor La Trobe, Police Magistrate William Lonsdale, the mounted police force, and Clement Hodgkinson

The extent of registration relates to the land and does not identify specific elements or trees, however the *Heritage Management Plan* (Lovell Chen, 2011: 6) identifies that the elm avenues, scarred trees and network of pathways are of primary significance, while the row of oaks, electrical substation, Brunton Avenue drinking fountains, MCG footbridge and historic directional signage are of secondary significance.

The inclusion of Yarra Park in the VHR came nine years after the registration of the MCG. While the VHR statement of significance for the MCG identifies its 'traditional parkland setting' as a component of the stadium's aesthetic significance, at the time of registration Yarra Park was not included (Heritage Victoria, MCG, 2016). When the park was finally registered, the statement of significance did not acknowledge its importance as the setting for the MCG, and the extent of registration specifically excluded both the MCG and the RCG. There is no formal

recognition of the historical and integral relationship between Yarra Park and the MCG (nor the RCG) in the statutory heritage controls, but this relationship has existed for over 160 years.

### **Yarra Park: use and setting**

Yarra Park has played an important role as the parkland setting for the MCG since the ground was established in the 1850s, and its vegetated and natural character is juxtaposed with the large world class stadium at its southern edge. The park provides the key pedestrian approach to the MCG and as a result is experienced by almost every visitor to the ground. These visitors may not know the name Yarra Park, but almost every Melbournian would describe it as the park around the MCG or view it as one and the same place, which reflects the integral nature of the park and the ground.

In addition to being a public park for the recreation of the inhabitants of Melbourne, Yarra Park has traditionally been the setting for fan revelries (or disappointment) following a game at the MCG and, more controversially, used as the MCG car park. Since 1920 at the request of the RACV, and with MCC support, Yarra Park has been used for (paid) car parking on game days (*The Age*, 3/12/1920, p.6). While not without its detractors, this historical use of the park is acknowledged in the VHR statement of significance.

The concourse that surrounds the MCG has also incrementally expanded into Yarra Park over time, including through the erection of signage, cricket training wickets, temporary food and merchandise stalls, and statues (Parade of Champions). In addition, a cricket pitch nursery has been located to the east end of the park. Yarra Park also accommodates temporary events (afforded a permit exemption as part of the VHR registration) associated with the cricket and football seasons, including a game day AFL children's playground; the AFL Grand Final and Boxing Day Test match events (often extending over a period of days); and more recently the Foxtel Footy Festival which is run over a series of days during Grand Final week. These events encourage fans, even those not attending a game, to visit Yarra Park and experience the game day atmosphere of a sporting event.

Since management of Yarra Park was transferred to the MCC in 2010, a number of significant projects have been undertaken within the bounds of the park. These include:

- Installation of an award winning underground water recycling and treatment plant, the recycled water from which is used throughout Yarra Park.
- Installation of 5/6 statues along Jolimont Avenue, the 'Avenue of Legends' (extending the 'Parade of Champions' from the concourse).
- Upgrade of park infrastructure including signage, seating, tables, rubbish bins, lighting, play equipment and BBQs.

Yarra Park will continue to play a significant role in supporting the ongoing use and visitor experience associated with the MCG, and the continuing evolution of the stadium. The important consideration from a heritage management perspective, is to maintain the historical significance of Yarra Park as an open, vegetated parkland on the edge of the city, but also to recognise its significance as the setting for an Australian landmark, and its use by fans and visitors to the MCG. The statutory heritage controls which apply to both places do not encourage an integrated approach to the management of the ground and the park, and we would recommend that this needs further consideration to ensure that the heritage values and significance of the place as a whole is appropriately managed and enhanced in the future.



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## IMAGES

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- Nearmap
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Anita Brady, BA (Hons) (Melb) MA Public History (Monash), is an Associate Director of Lovell Chen. She has been involved in cultural heritage practice in the public and private sectors for 28 years, and joined Lovell Chen in 2001. Anita leads a multi-disciplinary team with expertise in architecture, archaeology, history and planning. The team produces a variety of heritage reports and outputs, including heritage impact statements, conservation management plans (CMPs), municipal heritage studies, heritage appraisals and assessments, submissions to panels and hearings, expert evidence, and heritage interpretation reports.

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Katherine White, BSocSci (Planning) (Hons) (RMIT) M Urban and Cultural Heritage (Melb) CPP MPIA MICOMOS, is a Senior Associate (Heritage Planning) at Lovell Chen. She joined the practice in 2004, and has over 10 years' experience in heritage planning. Katherine coordinates a multi-disciplinary team which works on a variety of heritage planning projects, including preparation of heritage appraisals and heritage impact statements, facilitation of planning approvals and Heritage Victoria permit applications, and preparation of expert evidence.