



Department of Planning,
Lands and Heritage



HERITAGE
COUNCIL



Shire of Northam
Heritage, Commerce and Lifestyle



2026

NORTHAM REGIONAL HERITAGE CONFERENCE PROGRAM

NORTHAM RECREATION CENTRE

7-8 MAY 2026



Message from the Chair of the Heritage Council of Western Australia

Heritage is not only the preservation of what has come before us, it is the collection of epic stories that shape who we are today and who we aspire to become. Across the Wheatbelt, these stories are woven through rail lines that connected isolated towns, engineering feats that opened the interior, generations of farming innovation, and the resilience of communities who built their lives amid vast skies and wide horizons. Northam stands at the heart of this narrative: a place shaped by movement, ingenuity, and the meeting of many cultures over time.

As we gather for this year's Northam Regional Heritage Conference, we reflect on a region defined by enterprise and adaptation. From early infrastructure that transformed Western Australia's growth, to the experiences of people arriving through Northam's migrant centres, to the everyday triumphs and challenges of rural life, these stories continue to define the Wheatbelt's character and inspire its future.

Across this region, the long presence of Aboriginal peoples is reflected in ancient cultural sites, songlines, and the enduring connections to Country. Significant places such as gnamma holes, vital water sources created and maintained over generations, remind us of deep knowledge systems and stewardship that continue to shape the Wheatbelt's identity today.

Heritage influences tourism, local economies, education, design, environmental management, and community wellbeing. Our heritage places and collections face new pressures from climate impacts to changing regional landscapes but they also hold enormous potential for revitalisation, creativity, and economic activation.

We acknowledge and thank the local governments, community groups and regional champions who contribute to this event and to heritage work across the Wheatbelt. Your dedication ensures the region's bold, challenging, and remarkable stories continue to be told.

I wish you an inspiring and engaging conference. May the conversations ahead spark new ideas, strengthen connections, and help us continue shaping the future of heritage in the Wheatbelt together.

Darren Foster

Heritage Council WA Chair

Message from the Shire of Northam

The Shire of Northam is a local government organisation which provides a number of community and governance services that contribute to the ongoing growth and development of the area. Comprising the townsites of Northam, Wundowie, Bakers Hill, Clackline, Spencers Brook, and Grass Valley, among other smaller localities, the Shire of Northam is a diverse local government with substantial growth and development projected in coming years, making it a great place to live, work, invest, and grow.

This growth and development however, is built upon the foundations of a deep-rooted respect for the social, cultural, political, and physical heritage of the area that has shaped who we are as a community and who we hope to be in the future. We are delighted to host the Heritage Conference this year and to have this opportunity to showcase everything we love about our own Heritage.



Image: Shire of Northam offices – Angie Roe Photography

NETWORKING EVENT

Date: Wednesday 6 May

Time: 6:00pm networking | 7:30pm stargazing

Location: Sound Shell, Bernard Park, Minson Avenue
(parking is available at the park)

Light refreshments will be served

Star Tracks Astro Events will deliver an unforgettable stargazing experience that blends the ancient with the modern – interweaving Aboriginal knowledge, European constellations and contemporary space science into a cultural journey beneath the stars.

The night sky will feature a stunning waning gibbous Moon. Through telescopes you will be view lunar craters and the Moon's dramatic surface up close, along with Jupiter, the King of the Planets, with its distinctive equatorial bands and the line of its large Galilean moons. The Aboriginal star pattern of the Kangaroo will also be highlighted.

Star Tracks Astro Events aims to make the wonders of astronomy accessible to all, especially regional communities, using Western Australia's world-class dark skies as a natural theatre to inspire, educate and connect people through the night sky.

Northam has been recognised as one of Western Australia's Astrotourism Towns since July 2019. These towns play an important role in protecting dark night skies so stargazing can continued to be enjoyed by residents and visitors alike.

Bernard Park is also home to the Giant Planisphere. This large rotating star wheel can be turned to show which stars are visible in the sky at any time of the year.

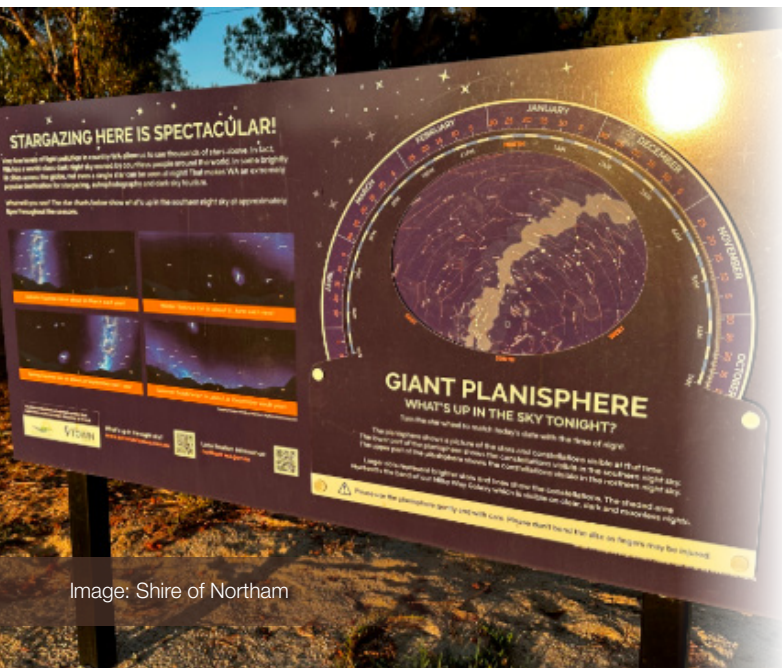


Image: Shire of Northam

CONFERENCE DAY ONE

THURSDAY 7 MAY

Registration desk will open from 8:00am at Northam Recreation Centre

TIME ACTIVITY

9:00am	<p>Welcome to delegates Emcee Theresa Lee</p> <p>Welcome to Country</p> <p>Welcome to delegates Minister for Heritage Hon Simone McGurk MLA Minister for Aboriginal Affairs Hon Don Punch MLA</p>
9:30am – 10:00am	<p>Northam: First settlement to railway boom Jeffrey Pollard</p>
10:00am – 10:30am	<p>Ballardong Aboriginal Corporation presentation</p>
<p>10:30am – 11:00am MORNING TEA</p>	
11:00am – 11:30am	<p>'Country, Colonisation, and Continuity: Avondale Farm's Living Landscape' – Avondale Farm on Ballardong Noongar Country, Beverley Kelly Ripplingale and Noongar Land Enterprise</p>
11:30am – 12:00pm	<p>First Nations Languages as carriers of heritage Sue Hanson</p>
12:00pm – 12:30pm	<p>Heritage Council of WA answers your questions HCWA Chair Darren Foster</p>
<p>12:30pm – 1:30pm LUNCH</p>	

TIME	ACTIVITY		
1:30pm – 2:00pm	Travel to site visit venue		
2:00pm – 3:00pm	Site visit 1 Bilya Koort Boodja guided tour	Site visit 2 Morby Cottage tour (travel by bus)	Site visit 3 Guided walking tour of the heritage buildings (starting at the Visitor Centre)
3:00pm – 3:30pm	Travel to site visit venue		
3:30pm – 4:30pm	Site visit 4 Bilya Koort Boodja guided tour	Site visit 5 Morby Cottage tour (travel by bus)	Site visit 6 Guided walking tour of the heritage buildings (starting at the Visitor Centre)

NETWORKING EVENT – HISTORY SLAM

Date: Thursday 7 May

Time: 5:00pm – 7:00pm

Location: The Rec Hotel beer garden

For more information and to register:
[History Slam 2026 Tickets, Thursday, May 7 from 5 pm to 7 pm | Eventbrite](#)



Image: Northam CBD night – M Bankhurst

CONFERENCE DAY TWO

FRIDAY 8 MAY

Registration desk will open from 8:00am at Northam Recreation Centre

TIME	ACTIVITY
8:30am – 9:00am	Welcome to delegates Emcee Theresa Lee
	Concurrent session 1 Select from the following two options:
	Hospitality Room
	Meeting Room
9:00am – 9:30am	Snuggling and cuddling in Northam – a few days without the gumnut babies Anthea Harris
	Anna Salen, the ship that launched 10,000 names Amanda Lovitt
9:30am – 10:00am	‘This will be my last act on earth’. Ernest William Carter Jennifer McRae
	Digitising the Migrant Paper Trail: does it obviate the tyranny of distance? Nonja Peters
10:00am – 10:30am	First in Line: Northam’s connections to the Coolgardie Water Supply Scheme Diana Frylink
	Weaving Diversity into City of Gosnells heritage Leigh Barrett
10:30am – 11:00am	MORNING TEA

TIME ACTIVITY

	Concurrent session 2 Select from the following two options:		
	Hospitality Room	Meeting Room	
11:00am – 11:30am	Culture, Country and Catchments: Integrating Heritage and Environmental Restoration Yvonne Power	Love among the Ruins Michael Wells	
11:30am – 12:00pm	Truth-telling on the Gogulyar Bilya – In Various Ways Carol Littlefair	List-en to the Past! A look at what the history of Northam’s heritage listings from the 1970s to today tells us about changing attitudes towards our history and heritage Sian Ferraz	
12:00pm – 12:30pm	The Noongar Land Enterprise Group (NLE): Culturally Appropriate, Commercially Sustainable – Showcasing NLE, its projects and approach Alan Beattie	Character-Led Interpretation: Lessons from the Fireman Jack Project Michael van Tiel	
12:30pm – 12:40pm	Emcee wraps up event. Shire of Northam President Cr Chris Antonio thanks attendees. HCWA Chair closes the conference.		

12:40pm – 1:40pm

LUNCH

1:40pm – 2:00pm	Travel to site visit venue		
2:00pm	Site visit 1 Northam Library Iwanoff talk and library tour	Site visit 2 St John the Evangelist Anglican Church tour	Site visit 4 Bilya Koort Boodja guided tour
2:30pm		Site visit 3 Walking tour of historic bells	
3:00pm	Site visits end		

DAY 1 PRESENTATION SUMMARIES

Northam: First settlement to railway boom

Jeffrey Pollard, Northam and District Historical Society

Northam originally developed from Morby Farm north towards Newcastle (Toodyay) with the construction of Northam's first church, and the first police station near Morby.

Former convict, Thomas Wilding built his flour mill and the Avon Bridge Hotel to the west in 1858, and Ainsworth's Store, later the Farmers Home Inn, then the Shamrock Hotel, and now the Farmers' Home Inn again, was built in 1866. The arrival of a railway spur line from Spencers Brook on 13 October 1886, and the construction of Northam's first railway station on the western edge of Northam elongated the settlement even more.

With the discovery of gold in the Yilgarn lead to the construction of the Eastern Goldfields Railway in the early 1890s, with Northam as the jumping off point for this major rail link.

The boom from this was substantial and long lasting, a new larger railway station was constructed, with Goods Shed, steam locomotive running sheds, and a large marshalling yard. By 1907, the railways employed over a thousand people, living in Northam and the surrounding areas. The economic impact led to Northam becoming the largest town in the Wheatbelt, with a building boom of residential houses, banks, businesses and government agencies lasting until the Great Depression.



Image: Northam, Morby Cottage – M Blackhurst

**‘Country, Colonisation, and Continuity:
Avondale Farm’s Living Landscape’ – Avondale
Farm on Ballardong Noongar Country, Beverley**

*Kelly Rippingale, National Trust WA and
Noongar Land Enterprise*

This presentation will outline the significance of Avondale Farm on Ballardong Noongar Country in WA’s wheatbelt, and the challenges of managing a complex site with multiple tenants and uses. It will explore the collaboration between the National Trust and Noongar Land Enterprise Group to activate and care for the site in culturally appropriate ways.

First Nations Languages as carriers of heritage

*Sue Hanson, Goldfields Aboriginal
Language Centre*

Languages are generally thought of as a communication mechanism. A means of expressing thoughts, ideas and feelings. However, languages themselves carry heritage and relics of past events. This talk will look at some of the ways Australian First Nations languages carry heritage, with examples from several languages.

**Heritage Council of Western Australia answers
your questions**

HCWA Chair Darren Foster and other members

Do you have any questions for the Heritage Council or wanted to know more about their role? This session will take questions from conference attendees.



Image: St John the Evangelist Church – M Bankhurst

DAY 2 PRESENTATION SUMMARIES

Concurrent session 1

Snuggling and cuddling in Northam – a few days without the gumnut babies

Anthea Harris, South Perth Historical Society

May Gibbs knew that she wanted to marry James Ossoli (J.O.) Kelly the first time they met. They married in Perth on 17 April 1919 and had a three day honeymoon in Northam.

‘Snugglepot and Cuddlepie: Their Adventures Wonderful’ was published in 1918 and selling fast. J.O. was expected to expand book sales through his overseas connections. The mature age love story of Mr. and Mrs. Kelly is worthy of a Hollywood movie - and their life together began in Northam. Why Northam?

‘This will be my last act on earth’. Ernest William Carter

Jennifer McRae

Ernest William Carter was an entrepreneurial T’Othersider from Victoria, who contributed to the agricultural transformation of Westralia’s Avon region (Northam/Meckering). Ern’s generosity, honesty, relentless work ethic and adversity to risk improved the economic wellbeing of not just his family, but his community and the colony. The pressure of his frenetic work ethic and a downturn in the chaff market led to Ern experiencing a psychosis which contributed to his untimely death in 1908.

First in Line: Northam’s connections to the Coolgardie Water Supply Scheme

Diana Frylink, National Trust WA

The Avon Valley’s Connection to the Golden Pipeline – featuring key history of the Seabrook Battery, Burlong Pool, continuous works and history of water supply to the area.

Anna Salen, the ship that launched 10,000 names

Amanda Lovitt

The Anna Salen ship brought approximately 10,000 displaced persons to Australia between 1949 and 1955, many of whom spent months in Northam. The presentation includes sites that are useful in researching Eastern European families as well as the project itself. Over 8,500 stories have been told on a social media platform to allow ease of access and engagement. Photographs and details of lives from ordinary to famous are included. The presentation was incredibly well received at the Northam Multicultural Festival as well as the Museum of the Great Southern and other regional libraries. It is a period of West Australian heritage that has shaped our current lives and needs to be told.



Digitising the Migrant Paper Trail: does it obviate the tyranny of distance?

Nonja Peters

Migrating people leave behind paper trails in local, state, and national sight and sound archives in their country of origin, countries of temporary residence (for example as forced labourers), departure & arrival/host counties, which we collectively refer to as ‘common cultural heritage’ or mutual heritage. Once digitised, these archival materials can enrich oral history interviews, family films, documentaries, & photographs. Conversely, personal collections and oral histories underpin social science research & add context and meaning to policy and administrative files used by researchers. This presentation looks at what the digitised material is used for and issues that arise from the process of digitising.

Weaving Diversity into City of Gosnells heritage

Leigh Barrett, City of Gosnells

The City of Gosnells population is very culturally diverse with over 43% of the population born overseas but this is not reflected in the Museum and Community History Collections. Weaving Diversity into City of Gosnells Heritage is a project which aims to improve the representation of diverse cultural groups in the collections.

Concurrent session 2

Culture, Country and Catchments: Integrating Heritage and Environmental Restoration

Yvonne Power, Everick Heritage

The Avon River’s environmental challenges (salinity, biodiversity loss, and altered waterways) echo those seen across much of Western Australia. In this talk, we explore the deep interconnection between environmental restoration and cultural heritage. Drawing on examples from river systems elsewhere in WA (and across Australia), we show how heritage assessment and management can support ecological rehabilitation when Traditional Owners and scientists work together. The presentation outlines case studies where Indigenous ecological and local ecological knowledge come together for land repair, and waterway management. It highlights how “repairing Country” can also mean repairing community connection and identity, creating opportunities for shared stewardship of landscapes that have been shaped by both cultural memory and environmental change.

Truth-telling on the Gogulyar Bilya – In Various Ways

Carol Littlefair

Carol Littlefair will discuss a collaborative project centred on the Gerald Mission site beside the Gogulyar Bilya/Avon River in York.

This unique initiative brings together Ballardong cultural heritage, archaeology and contemporary art, woven into an Aboriginal River Trail planned for later this year.

A short-lived institution during the 1850s, the Gerald Mission is a significant early truth-telling site with a confronting history.

It was a place where Noongar children and young adults were taken from their families, foreshadowing the practices that would later define the Stolen Generations.

Today, it is being interpreted through a multi-layered perspective, weaving together Ballardong knowledge, historical evidence and artistic reflection.

The Noongar Land Enterprise Group (NLE): Culturally Appropriate, Commercially Sustainable – Showcasing NLE, its projects and approach

Alan Beattie, Noongar Land Enterprise Group

The NLE is the only Aboriginal grower group in Australia, 5 yrs ago the NLE employed its first employee, it now employees 20 plus staff with over 50% being First Nations. Much of our work is based on Ballardong Boodja including our Boola Boornap native tree farm which is located 5kms Perth side of Northam and will produce in excess of 1 million native seedlings this year for land



Image: CBH Silos, with artwork by HENSE and Phlegm - FORM – Swift Hound Photography

restoration and carbon projects. The presentation will showcase NLE as an organisation and its projects with a particular focus on Boola Boornap as this is located in the Avon region.

Love among the Ruins

Michael Wells, National Trust WA

As heritage managers, we are sometimes dealing with places that may have considerable significance and that we wish to conserve – but they have no practical use, and are potentially

in a state of irreversible decline – a ‘ruin’. There are unique and challenging management issues in this area, including dealing with community expectations. This issue is not going away. The number of places on our heritage lists continues to grow, and we do not have unlimited resources to manage them. For some places, ‘managed decline’ is the only option. This presentation discusses work that has been done in Australia and overseas in this area, and uses some real-life examples from the National Trust portfolio, including in the Avon Valley.



Image: Northam Town Hall – M Blackhurst

List-en to the Past! A look at what the history of Northam's heritage listings from the 1970s to today tells us about changing attitudes towards our history and heritage

Sian Ferraz, Dar Studio

Building on my previous talk in Albany where I provided some viewpoints on changing attitudes towards 'heritage' (i.e. younger heritage, different heritage) I propose to review the trends of heritage listing in Northam and how places over time are recognised by different organisations/audiences and for different purposes. This will cover the recognition of places in the 1970s and 80s by the National Trust and Register of the National Estate, followed by Municipal Inventories and the State Register in the 1990s, and also how regional development and growth (such as Northam being announced as a 'Super Town' in 2011) triggers a re-look at what places should be protected.

Character-Led Interpretation: Lessons from the Fireman Jack Project

Michael van Tiel, Department Fire and Emergency Services

Fireman Jack began as a small interpretive idea for a neighbourhood walk and has grown into a fully developed 1930s narrative voice guiding visitors through Perth's Murray Street East heritage precinct. Last year, the project received the Professor David Dolan Award for its innovative storytelling approach. This presentation outlines how the character evolved, how the narrative was shaped, and what this process can offer other heritage neighbourhoods seeking engaging, place-based interpretation.





Image (above): Northam, St Saviours Church, Katrine Road – M Blackhurst

Image (cover): Northam Flour Mill, with The Last Swan mural - FORM – M Blackhurst

You can also find the Heritage Council of Western Australia (HCWA) on LinkedIn!

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