

Australian Garden

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HISTORY



A portfolio of trees
The Dale Panorama
A whalebone arch

Threading the jewels

The 'Green Necklace' parklands of Sydney's western harbour

CHRISTINE HAY



AILA NSW Landscape Heritage Listing Project, report cover, image James Quoye

Landscapes are underrepresented on the NSW State Heritage Register (SHR). Built heritage tends to dominate, while natural and cultural landscapes often struggle to get the recognition they deserve, but this is changing. In 2015, the Australian Institute of Landscape Architects (AILA) received funding from the then Office of Environment and Heritage to support a study to inform the Heritage Council's understanding of significant landscapes. The grant required 10 nominations for state heritage listing. Now in 2025 momentum is building with four listings (one of which combines two nominated areas) from the 10 nominations achieved and another two in progress. The study has raised awareness, particularly within government agencies, but also the community, about the recognition, assessment and conservation of significant cultural landscapes.

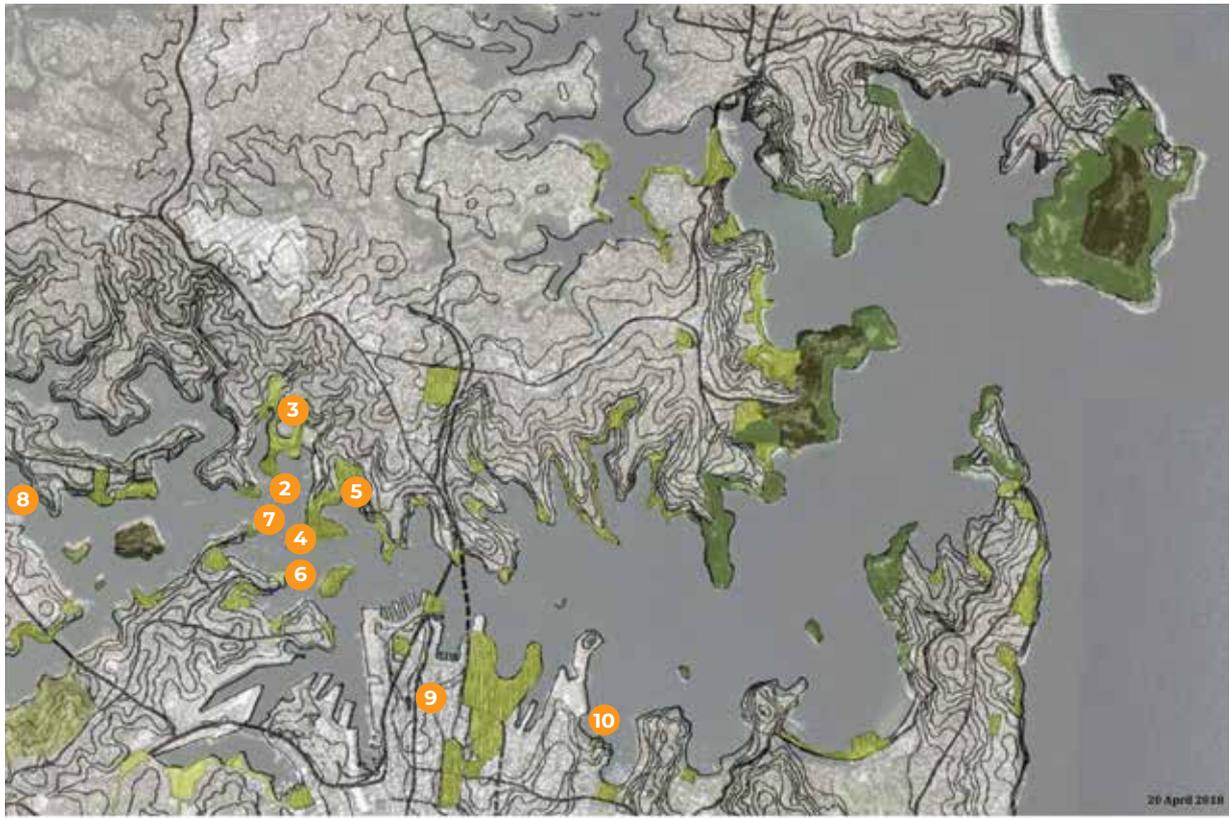
Sydney Harbour and its foreshores were the focus of this inaugural heritage study, which took place on the Traditional Lands of the Gadigal, Cammeraygal, Wangal and Dharawal. The AILA project acknowledges First Nation people's ongoing connection to Country: culture, land, waters, sky.

How to recognise significant landscapes

From the outset, the study aimed to establish a strong methodology for recognising cultural landscapes. Key resources we drew on were Australia-wide, state-wide and regional landscape mapping. These became the foundational layers to our approach and led to the Landscape Lens philosophy that looked beyond traditional cadastral (or lot) boundaries to a whole-of-landscape view of landscapes, both natural and cultural.

OPPOSITE TOP 'Sydney Harbour – The Green Necklace' annotated with AILA Nominations 2–10. SixMaps base with overlay of 2003 drawing 'Sydney Harbour municipal parks and National Park Context' by Craig Burton. AILA Landscape Heritage Group (Source: AILA Landscape Heritage Report 2018 supported by Heritage NSW).

OPPOSITE BOTTOM 'Sydney Harbour State Heritage Register nominations AILA NSW: Visual Catchments.' (Source: AILA Landscape Heritage Report 2018 supported by Heritage NSW)



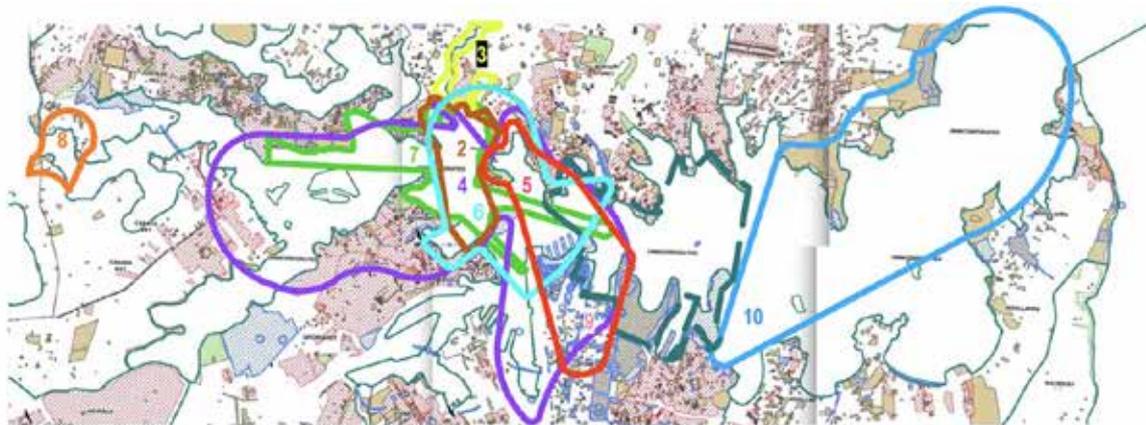
20 April 2018

SYDNEY HARBOUR • THE GREEN NECKLACE

Base map: SixMaps overlay of Sydney Harbour National Park: land-use context survey (courtesy CAB consulting)

- Trust lands / Defence
- National Park
- Open space Park

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Colleen Morris
James Quoyle



- Key**
- 1 Greater Royal National Park (not mapped)
 - 2 Berry Island Reserve
 - 3 Wollstonecraft Foreshore Reserves
 - 4 Balls Head Reserve
 - 5 Berry's Bay Precinct (Canada's Park)
 - 6 Botany Point Park
 - 7 Yurulbin
 - 8 Gladesville Hospital Landscape
 - 9 Lang Park
 - 10 Elizabeth Bay House and Landscape Setting

- Planning Portal Key**
- Property**
-
- Heritage**
- State Heritage Act
 - Conservation Area - General
 - Conservation Area - Aboriginal
 - Conservation Area - Landscape
 - Item - General
 - Item - Aboriginal
 - Item - Archaeological
 - Item - Landscape
 - Sydney Opera House - buffer zone



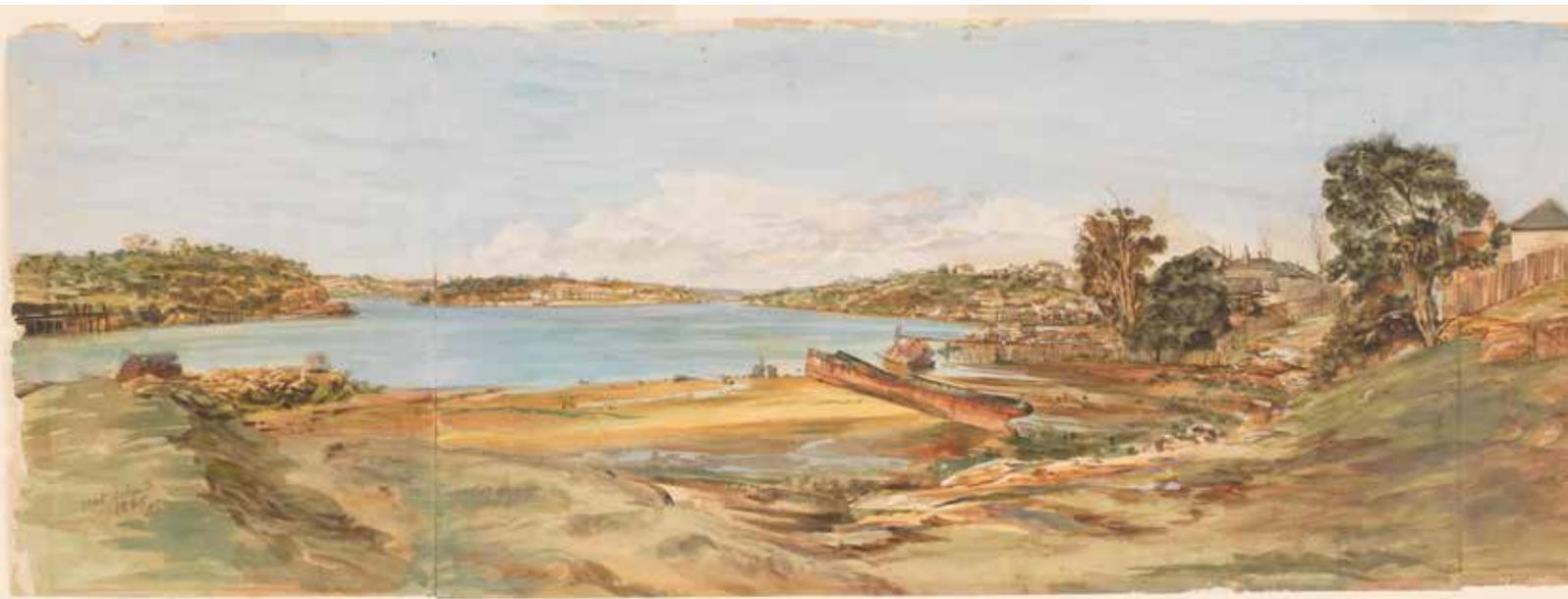
7 May 2018

Christine Hay
Colleen Morris
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note: maps are correct from the Planning Portal NTS
www.planningportal.nsw.gov.au/



SYDNEY HARBOUR • SHR NOMINATIONS AILA NSW: VISUAL CATCHMENTS



Samuel Elyard (1817–1910), *Goat Island 1865*, watercolour, Dixson Galleries, State Library of New South Wales

To identify potential nominations, a framework of natural and cultural values emerged: the Landscape Lens. After testing our method across NSW and the Sydney region, the AILA team developed the following criteria for significant landscapes:

- confluence of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal land use
- water catchments (ridges, slopes, waterlines) with bushland fragments, green open space and connecting cultural layers
- visual, spatial and sensory qualities such as those appreciated from high vantage points and view corridors
- State heritage criteria (a) historic, (b) associational, (c) aesthetic, (d) social (e) scientific (f) rarity and (g) representative
- threatened
- public parks and foreshore reserves that collectively may form a serial or group listing, a World Heritage approach
- significant work by landscape practitioners
- achievable.

Using the lens, documentary analysis of Sydney Harbour revealed its shared and overlapping natural and cultural histories. This included looking into the deep-time history of the harbour from an inland river landscape to a drowned coastal valley, and identifying surviving fragments of ecological communities, evidence of Aboriginal occupation, colonial places and early working-harbour use.

This investigation showed the headlands north and south of the western inner harbour, surrounding Me-Mel (meaning the eye) or Goat

Island, had intersecting natural, cultural, visual and spatial values that met the thresholds of the lens criteria. Me-mel, State heritage listed as Goat Island in April 1999, is associated with Bennelong of the Wangal clan. Its strong connections to the Aboriginal community were further recognised when in 2016, championed by the Hon. Paul Keating (former Prime Minister), the National Parks and Wildlife Service confirmed the planned transfer of Me-Mel to Aboriginal ownership. Keating remarked:

The idea was always to return the conservation of the headlands to as they were before settlement, with Me-Mel — the Aboriginal word for pupil of the eye — at the centre, surrounded by the reconstructed headland at Barangaroo, the great bluff face at Balls Head, the newly retained Ballast Point headland park and the natural park (Yurulbin) that sits at the end of Balmain... [T]he hub would be Goat Island, with the rest of it the spokes. There are not many cities worldwide that still have this kind of natural curtilage and headlands (*Aboriginal News, Australia's Post*, 06 May 2016).

These harbour headlands and their associated reserves were linked by their exceptional values, like a 'green necklace'. And so evolved the vision to conserve Sydney Harbour and its foreshores — a necklace or series of parks, government institutions and Crown lands, fragments of green open space and surviving bushland around the Harbour foreshore, all recognised as a valued cultural landscape within the harbour and Sydney region.

The 10 nominations: progress and celebration

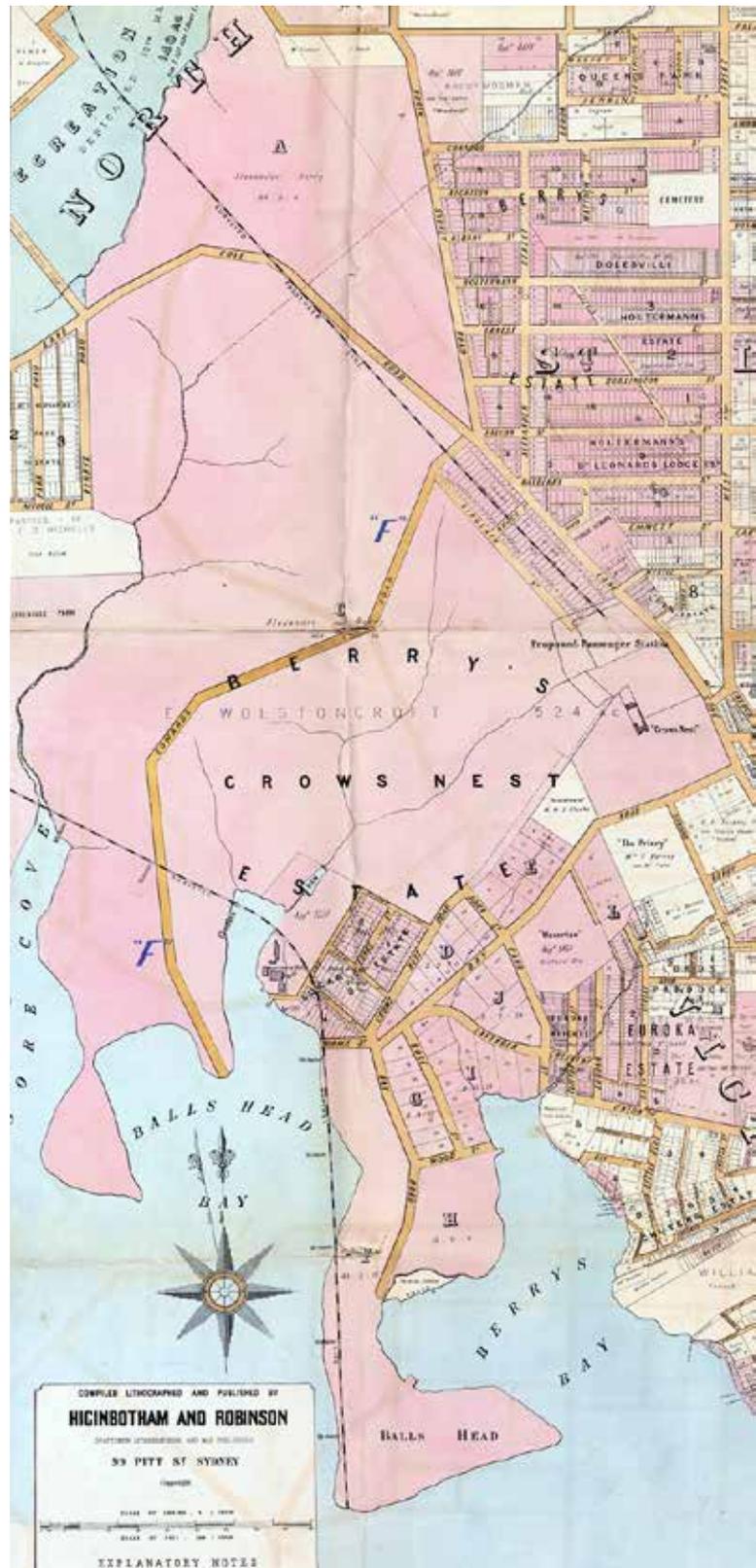
State recognition of Sydney's 'Green Necklace' landscapes is delightfully close at hand. One way of celebrating this has been with walks to some of the nominated locations, organised by the AGHS Sydney Branch.

On 20 October 2023, **BADANGI** became the first listing accomplished from the study to be gazetted. Embracing two nominations (Berry Island Reserve and Wollstonecraft Foreshores) as one landscape, it demonstrated the study's ambitions and strategies.¹

BERRYS BAY PRECINCT (CARRADAH PARK)

was gazetted on 28 March 2025. Located on the northern foreshores of Sydney Harbour, its landmark qualities comprise expansive views, an elevated sandstone landform and a deep waterfront harbour setting. From 1920s to the early 1990s the bay was the site of a major oil storage facility. These characteristics have inspired numerous celebrated Australian artists, including colonial painter Conrad Martens, and modernist work by Roland Wakelin and Roy Le Maistre, who also drew inspiration from the working harbour. Aesthetic values extend to its contemporary parkland, a 21st century interpretation of the Sydney Bush School landscape style by landscape architects McGregor Coxall, which was inspired by both nature and former industrial changes to the site. The place has received multiple awards in recognition of its technical and aesthetic achievements.

BALLAST POINT PARK, gazetted 4 April 2025, is a prominent headland on the southern shores of the harbour. Once a quarry for ballast, a marine villa 'Menevia' and estate then graced its elevated terrain. Later its landscape was flattened under an industrial oil tank storage facility. At the beginning of the 21st century, Ballast Point was returned to public ownership following community activism by the Ballast Point Campaign Committee. Landscape architects McGregor Coxall's post-industrial contemporary landscape design for the place celebrates its natural, industrial and archaeological elements. It is a creative and technical achievement. Like other 'Green Necklace' places, Ballast Point Park contributes to the Sydney Harbour cultural landscape through its visual and spatial character, natural qualities, working harbour history, and as a recreated lost landscape. The significance of its landscape has been recognised by several national and international awards, and recognition by AILA as one of the most 'transformative' parks in Australia.



Plan of Berry's Crows Nest Estate. Higinbotham and Robinson Berry Estate map, 1887. A wharf or other structure is indicated on the site above the word 'Balls' in the 'Balls Head' label. A 'Torpedo Station' is marked at the end of Bay Rd. Source Stanton Library, North Sydney Council

¹ See *Australian Garden History*, vol. 35, no. 4, January 2024.



Stuart Read, Christine Hay and Steve Halliday on the AGHS walking tour at Yurulbin, 10 May 2025, photo Christine Murphy



MIDDLE AND BOTTOM AGHS Sydney's Ballast Point Park walking tour, 6 April 2025, led by Colleen Morris, Christine Hay and James Quoyle, photos Annie Smith

Yurulbin Park and Foreshore and Balls Head Reserve are moving towards listing.

The proposed State listing of **YURULBIN PARK** and Foreshore, on the southern shores of the harbour, will likely recognise one of the earliest endeavours to recapture the qualities of a lost Indigenous landscape in a modern Sydney urban park. Modified since the 1890s for harbour trade and for the shipping industry (1910s to early 1970s), its landscape was interpreted by Bruce Mackenzie and Associates from 1973 to 1976 when they designed and established the park. This rare cultural landscape illustrates the ecological and aesthetic philosophies of the Sydney Bush School of the 1970s and changed public perceptions about the design of public green open space. With the use of indigenous species and recycled materials, the design turned the rocky sandstone forms and levels as well as the evidence of industry, into a holistic scheme. Yurulbin Park was given the AILA Award of Merit in 1986. Yurulbin has become significant as a site commemorating reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians.

BALLS HEAD RESERVE, also proposed to be State listed, is a landmark promontory on the northern foreshores of Sydney Harbour. Intact as a natural, rocky, sandstone headland and shore, its bushland appearance, cliff lines and prominent forested ridge is pivotal to reimagining the harbour as it was prior to colonisation. Evidence of First Nations living on the headland, pre- and post-colonial contact, provides insights into Aboriginal industry and their creative and spiritual engagement with the environment. Commanding panoramic views of exceptional and dramatic quality generate an indelible appreciation of its physical and aesthetic characteristics. Its landform, vegetation and visual and spatial qualities have inspired a high degree of creative expression by celebrated artists, designers such as eminent landscape architect Bruce Mackenzie and poetry by Henry Lawson. Threatened by neglect and industry in the early 20th century, Balls Head Reserve tells the story of early environmental activism in NSW. The campaign during the 1920s and 1930s to have Balls Head dedicated as a public reserve and restored to its former natural state was one of the earliest in NSW. Prominent naturalists and conservationists including, Annie Wyatt (OBE) (the driving force behind the establishment of the National Trust movement in Australia), Walter W Froggatt and David Stead campaigned from 1931 to 1938 for its revegetation. Fortunately, the integrity of its surviving bushland communities remains intact.

PLANTING TREES

BALL'S HEAD RESERVE

To further the beautification of Ball's Head Reserve, North Sydney, a tree-planting ceremony was carried out on the headland to-day by the North Sydney Council in conjunction with the Field Naturalists' Society of New South Wales, the Tree Lovers' Society, and the Australian Forest League.

In the past eight years 1000 trees have been placed on the reserve.

To-day the Field Naturalists' Society presented 200 trees for planting, and an additional 100 were supplied by the council.

Addressing the large gathering, the Mayor (Ald. R. L. Hodgson) paid a tribute to the work of Mr W. W. Froggart, president of the Field Naturalists' Society, for his assistance in carrying out the work.

Sydney Sun, Saturday 4 August 1934. The many letters to the editor on Ball's Head Reserve in the 1920s and '30s show how important the voices of the public were (and still are) in advocating for green spaces.

The Sacrifice of Ball's Head (1916)

BY HENRY LAWSON

They're taking it, the shipping push,
As all the rest must go—
The only spot of cliff and bush
That harbour people know.
The spirit of the past is dead,
North Sydney has no soul—
The State is cutting down Ball's Head
To make a wharf for coal.

Where picnic parties used to go
To spend a glorious day,
With all the scenery of a coast
And not a cent to pay.
The deep cool tangle shall be cleared
To make the glaring roads
And motor lorries jolt and grind
And drag their sordid loads.

First and second verses: <https://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks22/2200591h.html#p266>

Refer to the Heritage NSW website for more information on the listings:

<https://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/topics/heritage>

In 2020, Heritage NSW advised that the remaining AILA nominations would not be progressed towards heritage listing for the time being:

- Gladesville Hospital Landscape
- Lang Park
- Elizabeth Bay House and landscape setting
- Greater Royal National Park.

Towards big picture thinking about cultural landscape

In 2019, the achievements of the *AILA Landscape Heritage study* were recognised by the 'AILA National President's Award', the AILA NSW 'Award of Excellence' and the 'National Trust Heritage Award for Landscape Conservation.' Described as 'ambitious', the awards introduced the Landscape Lens framework and the Green Necklace of Sydney Harbour vision to a broader heritage audience. The study opened up communication between Heritage NSW and AILA, and led to an exchange of views about the identification, values and protection of cultural landscapes.

The listings achieved demonstrate shifts in thinking about cultural landscapes in government. AILA remains intent on working toward recognition of the remaining nominations. And we look forward to many more walking tours. How fulfilling it is to celebrate these significant cultural landscapes of the harbour and region, by embracing their stories and the people connected to them!



Christine Hay (left), an AILA and AGHS member, was part of the landscape heritage consultant team together with AGHS members, James Quoye (centre) and Colleen Morris (right) engaged to produce the AILA Landscape Heritage Conservation Project.