



Threads of Conservation

Social fabric • Fabric and place • Conserving fabric

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Hector Abrahams is an architect with almost 30 years in conservation practice. He has worked on buildings and formed landscapes of national significance in Australia and New Zealand, including the Sydney and Brisbane GPOs, the Treaty House at Waitangi and the Auckland Museum. Currently Hector is providing advice on the Australian National Memorial at Villers-Bretonneux, France.

Meg Quinlisk is a Sydney-based historian who has worked in heritage conservation since 2001. Her research and analysis have contributed to conservation planning for World Heritage-listed Tasmanian homesteads Woolmers and Brickendon, Don Bradman's boyhood home in Bowral NSW and the NSW Parliament House.

Darren Mitchell, a commemorations and war memorials specialist, was formerly the Director of the NSW Office for Veterans' Affairs with responsibility for Sydney's ANZAC Memorial and leadership of school pilgrimages to the Western Front. He was a recipient of a Churchill Fellowship focussed on sustaining remembrance of Australia's wartime sacrifices.

The 'Other' Gallipoli: Locating Significance at the Australian National Memorial, Villers-Bretonneux

Paper Abstract

Australian Prime Minister Billy Hughes mooted the idea for a national memorial at Villers-Bretonneux in April 1919, but it was the Imperial War Graves Commission that eventually built the Memorial, opened by the King in 1938.

In writing the recent conservation plan for the Australian National Memorial (ANM), we grappled with some incongruous aspects of its significance. Several questions persisted: Do Australians know this memorial exists? Is it more relevant to a now-expired notion of "Empire" than it is to contemporary Australia? Is the significance a modern construct, promulgated by the Australian government to draw attention (and unruly crowds) away from Gallipoli?

This paper will present our approach to the assessment task by the authors who come from three quite different fields of expertise.

- The physical fabric: The Memorial is an interesting example of a place where the physical fabric has a separate significance of its own, apart from the overall meaning or use of the place.
- The history: As part of a battlefield, the site already had war-time significance prior to its selection in 1919 as the site of the ANM. The significance of the original intention for the Memorial was carefully considered, even though this intention never gained fruition.
- The commemoration: How the ongoing commemorative practice meets the physical fabric and gives meaning to the site as a place of collective significance for the Australian memory of the Western Front.

We found the significance of the ANM at Villers-Bretonneux is located at the intersection of an allusion to history, its built fabric and its use for formal and informal commemorative practices. Importantly, for a place made because of its historical significance (as a battlefield), there is a sense that its significance (rather than its use) is forming and re-forming *the place* over time, as knowledge and attitudes toward the place change.