

Historic Aboriginal hearse to carry Mungo Man home to country

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The steel-pressed wheels of this Aboriginal hearse have traversed thousands of kilometres, criss-crossing the country roads of southern Australian as it carried Indigenous people on their last journey home to be buried on country.

Purchased by the Aboriginal Advancement League in Melbourne in the 1970s, it drove as far as Sydney, Adelaide and Tamworth before it was retired, acquired by Melbourne Museum in 1988 and put on proud display in the Bunjilaka Aboriginal Cultural Centre.



The former Victorian Aboriginal Funeral Service hearse has been recommissioned for the repatriation of the remains of more than 100 Aboriginal people from the National Museum of Australia in Canberra.

Eventually, the exhibition changed and the Chrysler Valiant station wagon was drained of brake fluid and fuel, and placed in the museum's vast storage facility.

Now, at the request of the traditional owners from the Willandra Lakes region in south-west New South Wales, the hearse has been lovingly restored and will return to the road for an extraordinary purpose: to carry the ochre-daubed remains of the 40,000-year-old Mungo Man and 104 other ancient ancestors back to country.



Uncle Herb Patten, who used to drive the hearse for the Aboriginal Funeral Service, gets behind the wheel again to help transport the remains of people including Mungo Man.

The widely-publicised discovery of the Mungo Man remains at Lake Mungo in 1974 (and Mungo Lady five years before), are still the oldest known human remains found in Australia, and one of the world's earliest known ritual cremations.

But the traditional owners of the Willandra region – the Mutthi Mutthi, Paakantyi and Ngiyampaa peoples – were profoundly unhappy their ancestors had been dug up and taken to the Australian National University in Canberra.

They've led a 40-year fight to have their ancestors repatriated – literally "returned to their country" – and on November 14, Mungo Man and the 104 other ancestors will begin their journey home.

For Mutthi Mutthi elder Aunty Patsy Winch, this powerful moment will honour her people's rich culture and history. "It's about what has been happening for 40,000 years. We'll cleanse the ancestors with the smoke from eucalyptus leaves, as we've always done."

The Aboriginal Hearse – sporting new "Mungo1" number plates – will begin its 800-kilometre journey in Canberra. Mungo Man will be placed inside a jet-black custom-made casket of 8000-year-old river wood, donated by geologist Dr Jim Bowler, who first uncovered his remains.

Placed in the white laminate interior of the hearse, Mungo Man's casket will sit alongside containers cradling the other ancestors, with the Ngunnawal people of the Australian Capital Territory to preside over a departure ceremony.



Members of the Murray family, whose father John Stewart Murray established the funeral service, stage a smoking ceremony with Museum Victoria curator Kimberley Moulton (centre) to welcome back the hearse.

Then the old hearse will be driven by community members, followed by a bus of traditional owners, to ceremonies in the towns of Wagga Wagga, Hay and Balranald, before arriving at Lake Mungo on November 17.

Mutthi Mutthi woman Aunty Mary Pappin remembers the hearse bringing the bodies of loved ones home to Balranald after they had passed away in Melbourne: "We really wanted to use the hearse. It's symbolic, and it will be carrying some very, very special people."

Sadly, that's the world we live in. Culture is not considered an important issue.

Michael Young, traditional owner

The Aboriginal hearse was bought as part of a long-running campaign to establish a culturally sensitive, affordable burial service.

Fitzroy elder Aunty Edna Brown established a funeral fund in 1960s inner-city Fitzroy, after she saw an Aboriginal person buried as a pauper in an unmarked grave, says her granddaughter, Marj Thorpe.

"When we got the hearse it was a big thing. It was so beautiful, much better than the station wagons we'd been using," she says.

The hearse – its doors proudly emblazoned with the Aboriginal flag – was purchased in 1976, and Aboriginal leader Uncle John Stewart Murray was one of its tireless drivers.

As a young boy, Stewart Murray had been shown by his grandfathers how to cover up ancient burial sites they came across in the bush.

He continued to care for the dead, including five years in the Australian Army when he was always the first to volunteer for burial parties.

"He said we should respect the dead and respect the living," says Stewart Murray's son, Gary Murray.

Stewart Murray, and his fellow driver and Gunaikurnai elder Uncle Herb Patten, covered thousands of kilometres together. They took it in turns to drive while hymns played on the radio.

When Melbourne Museum got the request from Willandra elders to use the hearse, they quickly agreed the cultural object should be "reactivated", says Kimberley Moulton, senior curator of South Eastern Aboriginal Collections.

"We instantly wanted to get this car on the road for the community; our Aboriginal Advisory Committee and everyone was behind it," Ms Moulton said.

Nick Kovatch at Caulfield Jag, who specialises in unique restorations, replaced the car's braking system, shock absorbers and fuel units. A delicate touch-up and hand polish brought the paintwork and chrome railings back to their full glory. A dozen Willandra elders travelled to the Caulfield workshop to see the hearse's restoration.

Dr Bowler, now a professorial fellow at Melbourne University, found Mungo Man in 1974 while on a field trip, when he spotted a glinting forehead bone in a dune on the edge of Lake Mungo.

Five years earlier, he'd also found the partly-cremated remains of Mungo Lady, who, like Mungo Man, is estimated to be between 38,000 and 42,000 years old.

Exhumed, the Mungo Man remains revealed a man of about 178 centimetres tall, who lay in his grave with his long legs crossed at the ankle and his limbs anointed with ochre from more than 100 kilometres away. Dental wear and osteoarthritis in his shoulder put his age at about 50 years.

Mungo Man and Mungo Lady forced scientists to recalibrate previous assumptions about the journey into Australia by modern humans, and led to the creation of the Mungo National Park and the region's World Heritage status.

But Aboriginal traditional owners were forthright with Dr Bowler about the removal: "They corrected us: 'You got your own history, you have white Australia and the Queen. You stick to your history and leave ours alone'," he says.

For decades, Dr Bowler has added his voice to calls for repatriation.

Mungo Lady was returned to country in 1991, and Mungo Man was formally repatriated with an apology from the ANU in 2015 and temporarily moved to the National Museum of Australia, where he has lain since.

In July, it was revealed that years of archaeological excavation in an ancient camp-site on Mirrar country in Kakadu, in the Northern Territory, had uncovered stone tools aged at 65,000 years, extending the record of Aboriginal life in Australia.

While scientists have a preoccupation with the linear timeline of human expansion, traditional owners have their own creation stories.

In the Willandra region these include their totem, the kangaroo, says Paakantyi and Parintyi elder Michael Young, who sits on the Lake Mungo repatriation committee. These are sacred stories that are told on country, and not shared through the media.

Some Aboriginal people believe their ancestors have always been here. Others agree with theories of evolution and migratory routes, and point to the holistic relationship with country their ancestors developed over millennia, he says.

Traditional owners have asked the federal or NSW government to invest in a fitting "keeping place" for ancestral remains but successive government have failed to provide funding.

For now, Mungo Man and the 104 other ancestors will be kept in a pre-existing building on their return.

Michael Young is disappointed a keeping place has not yet been funded. "Sadly, that's the world we live in. Culture is not considered an important issue".

The repatriation on November 17 will be followed by a [Return to Country](#) community festival on November 18 at Nowingi Place in Mildura. It will feature Archie Roach performing with Shane Howard, Kutcha Edwards and Isaiah Firebrace.