

Yallarwah Place and NAIDOC Week 2026: A Local Contribution to “50 Years of Deadly

Summary

- NAIDOC Week 2026 (5–12 July) theme: “50 Years of Deadly”
- Yallarwah Place (JHH) is a nationally significant reconciliation memorial
- Established in 1999 as part of the Yallarwah Bicentenary Memorial
- Co-created by Paul F Walsh OAM and Dr Ray Kelly
- Funded through the Novocastrian Tales (1997) community storytelling project
- Represents community collaboration, storytelling, and shared history
- Supported by Hunter Living Histories through interviews and digital archives
- Currently facing:
 - Loss of interpretive items
 - Environmental and maintenance concerns
- Presents an opportunity for:
 - renewed visibility and engagement
 - archival recovery and preservation
- Strongly aligns with NAIDOC 2026 focus on:
 - cultural strength
 - storytelling
 - intergenerational knowledge
- Recommended as a central focus for JHH NAIDOC 2026 programming

NAIDOC Week 2026, held from 5–12 July, marks a significant national milestone under the theme “50 Years of Deadly.” This theme celebrates five decades of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander resilience, leadership, and cultural strength, while recognising the importance of storytelling, community leadership, and intergenerational knowledge sharing.

Within Hunter New England Health and John Hunter Hospital (JHH), Yallarwah Place provides a strong local example through which this theme can be meaningfully explored. This report proposes that Yallarwah Place be positioned as a central focus for NAIDOC Week 2026 activities.

Historical Background and Significance

Yallarwah Place is part of the Yallarwah Bicentenary Memorial, established in 1999 on the grounds of John Hunter Hospital. The site includes:

- Yallarwah Place (accommodation building)
- Bicentenary Walk
- Circle of Reflection

The memorial is regarded as one of Australia's first inclusive Indigenous and non-Indigenous memorials, reflecting both symbolic design and collaborative construction.

It was co-created by Paul F Walsh OAM and Dr Ray Kelly, an Aboriginal author, representing a shared commitment to reconciliation.

The memorial acknowledges:

Aboriginal people, European settlers, and convicts who lived and died in the Hunter region between 1797 and 1997.

Its development involved extensive community participation, making it a significant example of grassroots reconciliation.

Origins in Community Storytelling: Novocastrian Tales

The establishment of Yallarwah Place was made possible through the Novocastrian Tales (1997) project. This publication brought together stories, poems, and reflections from across the Hunter region.

The project:

- Generated significant financial support for Yallarwah Place
- Mobilised strong community engagement
- Demonstrated the power of storytelling to drive tangible outcomes

This progression—from storytelling to a built memorial—demonstrates how cultural expression can lead to collective action and lasting legacy.

Living Histories and Ongoing Interpretation

The work of Hunter Living Histories (University of Newcastle) plays a key role in preserving and sharing the story of Yallarwah Place.

Their contributions include:

- Oral history interviews
- Digital archives
- Public access to historical materials

This ensures the site remains a living cultural resource, connecting past contributors with present and future audiences.

Current Condition and Emerging Challenges

1. Recent observations have identified challenges affecting the site:
 - Loss of interpretive elements
 - Missing artworks, plaques, and displays
 - Removal of original contextual materials
2. Environmental and site impacts
 - Changes to surrounding landscape
 - Deterioration of site condition

These issues reduce the visibility and interpretive value of the site but also highlight the need for renewed attention to preservation and care.

Relevance to NAIDOC Week 2026, and the theme “50 Years of Deadly” reflects:

- Cultural strength
- Community leadership
- The importance of storytelling

Yallarwah Place embodies these principles through:

- Its community-led origins
- Its role in reconciliation and remembrance
- Its ongoing cultural relevance

As a site within a healthcare setting, it also reinforces the idea that:

Healing is cultural, communal, and connected to shared history.

Conclusion

Yallarwah Place represents a powerful example of community-driven reconciliation, emerging from storytelling and realised through collective action. Its continued relevance is supported by archival work and community memory, while its current condition highlights the importance of stewardship.

Positioning Yallarwah Place as part of NAIDOC Week 2026 at John Hunter Hospital provides an opportunity to:

- Celebrate local contributions to reconciliation
- Strengthen cultural awareness within a health setting
- Support preservation and future engagement

This report recommends that Yallarwah Place be recognised as a focal point for NAIDOC 2026 activities at JHH.

Reference List

- Hunter Living Histories. Yallarwah Interviews:
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