

## **A country of stones is held up to the world**

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"No," said June Gill, "I never could have imagined something like this when I was living on the old mission.

"They blew up our church, you know, and our old houses. They kicked my grandfather, James Lovett, off the mission some time around World War I because he wasn't black enough."

Mrs Gill and her cousin of the Lovett clan, Laura Bell, elders of the Gunditjmarra people, gazed across Lake Condah, its water finally returned after white settlers drained it in the late 1800s, robbing its Indigenous owners of bird life and the eels that had sustained them for thousands of years.

And there, on the lake's bank, came Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews, Environment Minister Josh Frydenberg, the Veterans Affairs Minister and local member for Wannon, Dan Tehan, and assorted VIPs.

It was a long stretch from the time that the Gunditjmarra were herded into a mission station at Lake Condah, their language and traditions banned, only for the mission to be closed and its church blown up with gelignite in the 1950s to ensure everyone left.

Mr Turnbull, Mr Andrews and the other ministers had come to this place in far south-western Victoria, north-east of Portland and east of Heywood, to announce that Lake Condah and the country of stones around it known as Budj Bim, would soon become one of the most famous places in Australia and the world.

He and Mr Andrews were there to announce that the Budj Bim Cultural Landscape, a lava field formed by the eruption of a volcano known as Mt Eccles, was being officially nominated by Australia for what is known as the World Heritage Tentative List. It is the first stage in what is expected to result in Australia's 20th national treasure recognised by UNESCO as a World Heritage site.

"It is the first area [in Australia] exclusively listed for its Aboriginal culture and heritage and it is absolutely an appropriate recognition of its significance and its values," Mr Turnbull said.

He and Mr Andrews and their colleagues had inspected ancient engineering works that allowed the Gunditjmarra people to trap eels in a complex system of weirs and channels that supplied them with enough food to sustain them year-round in villages of stone huts, and to undertake trade. The oldest of the structures dated is around

6600 years old - more than 1500 years older than Stonehenge and the pyramids of Egypt.

"We have today been deeply moved to see such ancient structures of engineering and ingenuity, 7000-year-old structures displaying a deep understanding of the country," Mr Turnbull said.

Mr Andrews promised to bring his 15-year-old son to the area to grant him a proper education about "love of country".

The Portland district had barely seen a bigger day since it became the first area in Victoria to be settled by Europeans in the 1830s. Mr Turnbull and Mr Andrews had earlier ended intense anxiety within Portland's community by announcing a deal to ensure the city's biggest employer, Alcoa's Portland Aluminium plant, would continue operating for at least four years.

With up to 2000 jobs on the line in the city of 10,000 people, many residents had been plunged into gloom since a power outage on December 1 threatened to close the plant for good.

"Since then you'd get asked at the fruit and veg shop and all around what's happening, and you couldn't say," said Ian Merrett, an ingot mill operator who has worked at Alcoa for 29 years. He worried what the future held for his son, Simon, who also worked at the plant, and the sons and daughters of hundreds of others.

"The mood today is great relief," Mr Merrett said. "It's very upbeat in the whole community."

And with this relatively new manufacturing industry saved, the Prime Minister, the Premier and their colleagues headed to Budj Bim to announce the start of world recognition for one of the oldest engineering industries in the world.