Wybalenna is one of the most significant Aboriginal historical places in Tasmania. It is located on the west coast of Flinders Island, the largest island in the eastern part of Bass Strait.

In response to the escalating conflict between Aboriginal people and colonists during the 1820s, the colonial authorities discussed options to remove the Aboriginal people from their lands. The activities of ‘roving parties’ in the 1820s, George Robinson’s so-called ‘friendly mission’ in 1829 – 1831, and the Black Line in 1830, led to an agreement – or, some say, a treaty – between Aboriginal clan leaders and Governor Arthur in October 1831. The agreement led to the progressive removal of Aboriginal people from mainland Tasmania from 1831 to 1835.

After trialling several sites to house the removed Aboriginal people, Commandant W J Darling settled on the current site on Flinders Island in February 1833. It was named ‘Wybalenna’. This was chosen as it meant ‘Black man’s houses’ in the language of the Ben Lomond people, the largest Aboriginal nation at the site.

**Continuing cultural practices**

Different clans went into the bush for weeks at a time hunting kangaroo, which they preferred more than the salted meat of the daily rations. In the bush they would perform adapted ceremonies, songs and other cultural practices using substitutes for the valued red ochre that Robinson had banned from the settlement. Robinson declared new English names for almost every Aboriginal person.

**Life at Wybalenna**

In 1833, there were 57 Aboriginal people and 50 colonists at Wybalenna. From 1832 to 1835 about a dozen children were removed from Wybalenna to attend the Orphan School in Hobart. George Robinson became Commandant of the settlement in October 1835 and the Aboriginal people who had travelled with him since 1830, including Trukanini and Wurati, arrived at Wybalenna at this time. Several Aboriginal people from New South Wales and South Australia were also at Wybalenna for a time.

**Schools at Wybalenna**

Schooling at Wybalenna began in 1834. The teachings included reading and writing in English, with a select group of Aboriginal children as the
teachers – usually children of the clan leaders. As well as the weekday schools a Saturday evening school began in 1836. Male clan leaders spoke in their first language to their own clan, then to all Aboriginal people in the ‘pidgin’ language of the settlement. The school and chapel were located in one of the huts belonging to the Ben Lomond clan until July 1838 when the brick chapel was built. Sunday church services were announced with the ringing of a bell and raising the Union Jack. Attendance was not compulsory and less than one third of Aboriginal people attended.

In September 1836, two young men aged about 15, Walter Arthur (Ben Lomond) and Thomas Bruny (an orphan), began writing the ‘Aboriginal or Flinders Island Chronicle’. In the beginning, Robinson supervised their writing very closely but gradually the writers gained more independence. This is the earliest known newspaper written by Aboriginal people in Australia.

After Wybalenna

Following the departure of George Robinson to Port Philip (now Victoria) in February 1839, there was a dramatic reduction in resources provided to the Settlement. Most of the convicts and soldiers were removed. Doctor Jeanneret was appointed Commandant in 1842. Children were again removed to the Orphan School against their parents’ wishes. In February 1846, Walter Arthur and other Aboriginal people petitioned Queen Victoria to prevent Jeanneret returning. In spite of the petition, Jeanneret was reinstated. Conflict escalated and in 1847, Governor Denison ordered the closure of Wybalenna. By the time the settlement closed in 1847, approximately 130 people had died at Wybalenna. On 18 October 1847, the remaining 14 men, 23 women and 10 children were removed from Wybalenna and taken to the former convict station at putalina / Oyster Cove.

During the 1970s and 1980s, increased interest in the site, and the cemetery in particular, led to archaeological surveys and the making of the film, ‘Black Man’s Houses’. In April 1999 the State Government handed the land title of Wybalenna to the Aboriginal Land Council of Tasmania who are responsible for the ongoing management of Wybalenna.