

**Aboriginal
History
of the
Waverley Area**

A Discussion paper

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Introduction

This history was prepared as an attempt to present an overview of the different theories regarding the Aboriginal people of Sydney - with an emphasis on the Waverley area - before European occupation.

At Waverley Library we have often been asked for the Aboriginal history of the area and have found that the information is minimal and the sources are scattered. This paper is an attempt to bring together, in a concise format, a representative sample of the relevant information and sources available in the library's collection. Obviously, this is not an exhaustive treatise on a topic which deserves more thorough examination and research. However, it does draw together the salient points while presenting a good starting point and guidelines for further investigation.

Edith Meadows. Reference Department, Waverley Library. September 1998. Updated August 1999.

Aboriginal History of the Waverley Area

There is very little 'history', as we know it, of the Aboriginal people who lived in the area now known as Waverley prior to 1788 and during the early years of the colony. That Aboriginal people roamed over the area is evidenced by the existence of:

- Rock carvings at the Bondi Golf Course, Ben Buckler Reserve and the coastal walk at Mackenzie's Point which are protected by State legislation. These depict various fish species and were probably formed by 'pecking' small holes in the rock surface with a pointed stone or shell and later joined together by grooving the rock. The age of these engravings is not known, however they could be up to 2,000 years old. The largest group of carvings is at what was probably a ceremonial ground situated in the Bondi Golf Course which depicts what could be described as the first record of a shark attack at Bondi Beach. An 8 metre figure of a shark - whose face has unfortunately worn away - appears to be attacking a large male figure that is swimming diagonally away from the creature. It was originally thought that the shark was a whale but the dorsal and pectoral fins identify it as a shark. The male figure has been described as an iguana or lizard man due to a long tail that was engraved below him and there is some speculation that he was engraved after a Heath Monitor lizard eroded away.
- The Aboriginal path from Port Jackson to Bondi Bay. This is mapped in the book *A Difficult Infant* edited by Graeme Alpin¹ and described as *a major Aboriginal path in the Sydney region as deduced from the available ethno historical evidence with good evidence for its position.*
- The dune edge of Bondi Beach which was the site of an Aboriginal midden containing shellfish debris, stone working implements and stone artefacts (grindstone, nose ornaments, scrapers, spear points, etc.) Development within the area has since destroyed this site with remnants probably under Queen Elizabeth Drive. Items which were saved are on display at the Australian Museum, Sydney.
- Artefacts - Bondi Points - found at Bondi at a large site on the northern end of the beach in 1899. According to the *Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia* these were *first called 'chipped-back surgical knives' because they are shaped like a scalpel or penknife blade, the name 'Bondi' was given to them in 1943...Bondi Points are part of a larger class of 'backed blades' but they are long and thin, in contrast to other microliths which are shorter and often geometric in shape. However, there is a clear size distinction between the groups. Bondi points were first made in Australia about 4,500 years ago...These tools were probably used as spear points and barbs, with the blunted back and the blunter end of the tool being held in place by resin, as with more recent death spears. Bondi points and*

¹ *A difficult infant Sydney before Macquarie*, edited by Graeme Alpin. Kensington, N.S.W.: New South Wales University Press, 1988, Figure 2.3.

*other backed blades were no longer commonly made when whites arrived.*²

- Findings which suggest a considerable Aboriginal heritage which has been built over by private and public development. In a Sydney Morning Herald article of March 9, 1996 – “Hands across history”- journalist Debra Jopson reported that *Sydney sits astride a gigantic Aboriginal art gallery*. The article included a photograph of an Aboriginal engraving found under a garage floor in the Eastern Suburbs.
- Rock shelters around the harbour and coastline which were made use of as living quarters. A letter to Waverley Library from the Australian Museum's Anthropology Department (18th July, 1984) refers to the *Account of the English colony of New South Wales, 1798-1802* by D. Collins as confirming that *the early settlers used the occupational debris (rich in phosphates) around the shelters for their gardens. This destroyed many habitations and has made archaeological work in this region very difficult.*

There can be little doubt, also, that Aboriginal people made use of the abundant fresh water available at Bondi, Tamarama and Bronte and that they fished and collected seafood from these waters and shores.

Somewhere on the coast, for instance, *In a cove on the sea-side, between Botany Bay and Port Jackson, he [Phillip] suddenly fell in with an armed party of natives, in number between two and three hundred men, women and children.*³

Straight away, however, difficulties arise in identifying firstly the major language group that inhabited the area of Sydney between Port Jackson and Botany Bay and secondly the particular band of that language group in the general Waverley area.

Most researchers agree that Sydney was the ancestral territory of the Eora people who roamed over the area from Broken Bay to Botany Bay. Because Eora is said to mean 'the people' or 'people', this title is not satisfactory to everyone and some writers have chosen to call the coastal Aborigines of this area the 'Sydney people'. In his book *The Road to Botany Bay*, Paul Carter⁴ notes that *from the outset, the Aborigines' words were plucked from their social context, transcribed (and probably misheard) and served up as piquant quotations*. In effect, many names given to places, people and things by the white colonists because they were thought to be Aboriginal names were probably generic terms in the relevant Aboriginal language. Eora, therefore, might well be what the Sydney people called themselves but not in the formal sense of naming that Europeans recognise.

Even where different researchers have agreed that there was a distinct group of coastal

² *The Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history, society and culture*. Canberra Aboriginal Studies Press for AITSIS, 1994, p.139.

³ David Collins, *An account of the English colony in New South Wales With remarks on the dispositions, customs, manners, etc, of the native inhabitants of that country*. Sydney: Reed, 1975, pp.24-5.

⁴ Paul Carter, *The road to Botany Bay an essay in spatial history*. London: Faber and Faber, 1987.

Aborigines in the Sydney area - whether they refer to these as Eora or not - controversy remains over the language group to which these people belonged. There are basically two schools of thought. One is that the coastal Aborigines were part of the Darug (spelt variously as Dharug, Dharuk, Daruk) language group and that their language was a dialect of the Darug tongue. The Darug ranged over the Cumberland Plain west of Sydney to the Blue Mountains. According to others, this theory is based on the comparison of linguistic data recorded in the late 1800s and early 1900s after Aboriginal society had been severely disrupted by European occupation. There had been, by this time, a smallpox epidemic that had wiped out many of the coastal Aborigines and continuing development of the harbour and coastal areas had pushed many of the remaining Aborigines further inland.

According to Heather Goodall:

*Smallpox first hit Kooris near Sydney in 1789, barely twelve months after the First Fleet landed. A single disaster like this would have led to major problems of reorganisation and regrouping, but the Kooris of Sydney then had to face the impact of influenza, measles and other diseases. Only in the hardest-hit area, around Botany Bay and the southern shores of Port Jackson itself, was the loss of life so high from disease and violence in the first 5 years of the colony that large-scale immigration occurred. Mahroot, a Koori who belonged to the land around Botany Bay, told a Select Committee in 1845 that only our adults from his community of over 40 remained alive. He explained that because of the loss of so many of his own people, Kooris speaking a separate language, from around Liverpool (either western Dharuk or Gandangara people) had moved into his country, some of them living in relationships with the three remaining women from the Cooks River group.*⁵

Thus, the second major theory is that the Eora or Sydney Aborigines were a totally different language group to the Darug. A typical example given as rationale for this argument appears in Robert Hughes' *The Fatal Shore*:

*In 1791, as white settlement was pushing out past Windsor and the Hawkesbury River, Governor Phillip was surprised to find on its banks 'people who made use of several words we could not understand, and it soon appear'd that they had a language different from that used by the natives we have hitherto been acquainted with.'*⁶

Representatives of the Darug people today claim that the language spoken by the Eora people of Sydney was a dialect of Darug.⁷ However, this conclusion seems to be based - or at least partly based - on the work of James Kohen who has been the major proponent of the argument that the

⁵ Heather Goodall, *Invasion to embassy: land in Aboriginal politics in New South Wales*, 177 1972. St. Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1996, pp. 24, 25.

⁶ Robert Hughes, *The fatal shore: the epic of Australia's founding*. New York: Knopf, 1987, p. 10.

⁷ James Kohen, *The Darug and their neighbours: the traditional Aboriginal owners of the Sydney region*. Darug Link in association with Blacktown and District Historical Society, 1993, p.10.

coastal Aborigines of Sydney were part of the same language group as the Darug.⁸

As to the name of the particular band of the Eora that might have roamed over what is now the Waverley area, this too is shrouded in mystery. Firstly it is important to note that the Eora was divided up into several groups or 'hordes'. According to Collins:

*Each family has a particular place of residence from which is derived its distinguishing name. This is formed by adding the monosyllable Gal to the name of the place: thus ...those who live on the north shore of Port Jackson are called Cam-er-ray-gal, that part of the harbour being distinguished from others by the name of Cam-mer-ray.*⁹

According to Tindale¹⁰, the south side of Port Jackson from South Head to Long Cove was the territory of the Cadigal (also rendered as Kadigal, Cadi, Caddiegal).

Peter Turbett goes further: *The territory of the Cadigal people stretched along the south side of Port Jackson from South Head to about Petersham. Their southern boundary is unknown.*¹¹

Another source, Kohen and Lampert¹², refers to the Birrabirragal horde with a map that places this group on the beach side of South Head. Consequently, this same information appears in the work of the Australian Archaeological Survey Consultants Pty Ltd who put together a report to Waverley Council in 1995 entitled *The Waverley Area: An Aboriginal Perspective*. This work concludes:

*The area between Port Jackson and Botany Bay was occupied by a group who referred to themselves as the Eora. Whether the Eora were a separate and distinctive language group, or a dialectic coastal sub-group of the Dharug is uncertain. Within the area occupied by the Eora there appears to have been two main clan groups, near the area that is now the Waverley Council area. These clans are the Birrabirragal and the Cadigal. The authors assume that one of these groups would have had custodial rights to this area.*¹³

The source of the name 'Birrabirragal' is unclear and so it is difficult to accept it as conclusive - it is by no means universally disseminated although mentioned in the Kohen and Lampert work as well as the book - also written by Kohen - *The Darug and Their Neighbours* (referred to

⁸ See the article by Anne Ross, cited elsewhere in this essay, for her analysis of this and the opposing model.

⁹ Collins, Op. Cit., p.453.

¹⁰ Norman B. Tindale, *Aboriginal tribes of Australia: their terrain, environmental controls, distribution, limits and proper names*. Canberra: Australian National University, 1974.

¹¹ Peter Turbett, *The Aborigines of the Sydney district before 1788*. Kenthurst, N.S.W.: Kangaroo Press, 1989, p.22.

¹² J.L. Kohen and Ronald Lampert, "Hunters and fishers in the Sydney region" in *Australians to 1788*, edited by D. J. Mulvaney and Peter J. White. Broadway, N.S.W.: Fairfax, Syme and Weldon, 1987, pp.345, 351.

¹³ Australian Archaeological Survey Consultants Pty Ltd, *The Waverley Council area: an Aboriginal perspective: a report to the Waverley Council*. [Sydney]: The Council, 1995, p.36.

elsewhere in this paper). In the latter, the author gives the meaning for Birrabirragal as Sow and Pigs, a reef in Sydney Harbour between South and Middle Heads.

In a footnote to their work, Kohen and Lampert offer the following as a rationale for the derivation of Aboriginal locality and band names:

The list of bands in the Sydney area is based on many references. In some instances there is a good correlation between a number of sources: the Cadigal of Sydney Cove are mentioned by several writers. But it is sometimes necessary to integrate different kinds of information from several sources. To locate the Muru-ora-dial, a 'tribe' mentioned by William Dawes (in his 'Grammatical forms of the language of New South Wales, in the Neighbourhood of Sydney by Dawes', 179ms, School of Oriental and African Studies Library, University of London), the name was first translated using Dawes' and Matthews' vocabularies as 'pathway-place-belonging-to'. It was then recognised that Collins talks about an Aborigine named Merooberra, a title which denoted not only a personal name but also a locality and band name. R. Hill and G. Thornton ('Notes on the Aborigines of New South Wales', Sydney 1892) state the town Maroubra was named after a 'tribe' who lived in that area. The location of the Muru-ora-dial becomes apparent when it is recognised that the pathway which ran between Port Jackson and Botany Bay ran along the coast through Maroubra.¹⁴

There is, however, no indication of the derivation of the name 'Birrabirragal' and therefore no real indication of whether this is the name of a band that roamed what are now the Eastern Suburbs of Sydney. Kohen lists Aboriginal clans of the Sydney region in his book *The Darug and their Neighbours*, claiming that these are 'derived from ethnographic accounts, 1828 census, blanket returns'.¹⁵

Anne Ross examines Kohen's sources and concludes:

Kohen's primary source for evidence of the Dharug language and its dialects is a manuscript compiled by Surveyor William Dawes, prepared in 1790, being a grammar and vocabulary 'in the neighbourhood of Sydney'. Kohen provides no analysis of this document. There is no indication that it attempts to distinguish between languages, or of how Dawes determines the geographical boundaries of the various languages and dialects in the area. In fact, Kohen cites Dawes's documentation of the names and locations of various named groups in the Sydney area, but it is unclear whether these were regarded by Dawes as 'tribes', 'bands', 'family groups' or in some other way. Nor is it clear from Kohen's description which 'band' spoke which dialect of which language. Kohen's other sources include Hill in 1892, Fraser in 1892 and Howitt in 1904, all clearly too late to be of much value in reconstructing tribal patterns in Sydney in 1788.¹⁶

As for the claim by some authors on the subject, that Bondi was the traditional home of the

¹⁴ Kohen and Lampert, Op. Cit., p.462.

¹⁵ Kohen, Op. Cit., pp.20-21.

¹⁶ Anne Ross, "Tribal and linguistic boundaries: a reassessment of the evidence" in *A difficult infant: Sydney before Macquarie*, edited by Graeme Alpin. Kensington, N.S.W.: New South Wales University Press, 1988, pp.51-2.

Biddigal or Bidjigal band, this seems very unlikely. It appears that this particular band inhabited either the Castle Hill area or the Botany Bay area between the Cooks and Georges rivers.

In a memo dated 16/2/88 to the Assistant Deputy Town Clerk, Waverley's then Chief Librarian Ron Lander, reported that in his *History of the Waverley Municipal District* (1959) Dowd quotes Raymond de Cusak as saying that the top of the sea cliff at Murriverie, the site of the Aboriginal rock engravings re-grooved by Mr. de Cusak, "was the main ceremonial Ground where the Biddigal tribe of Aborigines held their sacred rituals and danced their corroborees until about the early 1800s."

Lander concludes: *I am unaware of any other acceptance of that statement, except by Council's naming of the Biddigal Reserve, presumably as a direct result of it.* Further investigation has found nothing to support Mr. De Cusaks naming of the 'Biddigal' as the local Bondi clan of the Eora.

Summary

- There is clear evidence that Aboriginal people occupied sites in the area now known as Waverley in the period before European occupation.
- There are two main schools of thought regarding the language group to which the Sydney - and therefore the people roaming the Waverley area - belonged. These are.:
 - 1) that the Eora (Sydney people) were a distinct language group and not part of the Darug language group.
 - 2) that the Darug people were the language group that roamed over Sydney from the harbour, across the Cumberland Plain and west to Lithgow. This theory says that the Eora were the coastal Darug, Eora being the Darug word for people.
- There is no clear evidence for the name/s of the particular band/s that roamed what is now the Waverley area. However, on the evidence examined, it seems unlikely that Bondi was the home of the Biddigal band even though there is a Biddigal Reserve in the area.

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