

## Aboriginal Culture and history in the Manning Valley

The original occupiers of the Manning Valley were speakers of the Birpai Aboriginal language. Today the term Birpai has come to signify these people rather than just the language. The first European settlers and explorers arrived in the Manning Valley in the early 1800s. As they arrived they observed the lifestyle of a populous Aboriginal people, spread over the entire region, occupying all manner of ecosystems, marine, riverine and inland. There were distinct groups of Aboriginal people attributed lands around various points in the landscape. These distinct groups had lifestyles and material cultures varying slightly from one another, depending upon their immediate environment, however, they all spoke the Birpai language, and at this level could be considered as one.

People moved extensively throughout their own tribal lands with great freedom, and it was observed that a group would rarely occupy the same camp for periods longer than a week. Movement across different tribal lands was not as free and subject to obtaining permission from the traditional owners of the land. However, various groups of people were often observed to visit neighbouring and distant groups for the purposes of carrying out ceremonies or sharing in episodic and periodic food abundances.

Lifestyles of the Birpai people at the time of European arrival and settlement of Australia are outlined in various early ethnographic accounts. Early settlers and surveyors recounted many descriptions and stories of the Aboriginal population they encountered. There is quite a lot of information describing Aboriginal economic behaviour, food gathering, movement about the countryside, material culture and social life. There were descriptions of tribal groups, languages, dances, ceremonies and in some cases, conflict.

Early ethnographic accounts reveal quite a lot of information about the manners and customs and material culture of these people. In 1851, Thomas New wrote that the women wore cloaks made from animal skins and were very proficient in making bags and nets from spun bark fibre and the hair of small marsupials. Mr Allan, whose reminiscences were recounted by Fitzpatrick in "Peeps into the Past", also noted that the women excelled in making nets and bags from twine. The nets were used in fishing and snaring and the bags for carrying heavy loads. They used a small wooden spindle with a hook at one end to spin the fibre. The men wore waist bands made of animal skins with tassels of smaller skins and animal tails in front and behind. They wore elaborate hairdos, often had a large bone piercing their nose and had extensive tattoos over their backs and arms.

Their material culture was elaborate and varied. There were a variety of weapons made including long handled clubs, boomerangs, spears, spear throwers and shields and there were particular methods for making these implements.

## Bush foods and dance

Use and knowledge of traditional bush foods and medicines is another way in which Aboriginal traditional culture has continued in contemporary Aboriginal communities.

A study of old time dance musicians in NSW carried out by Sullivan (1988) found some interesting continuities in Aboriginal musical tradition, not only in their musical versatility but also in the adaptation of traditional craft. For example Wallaby tail sinews would be used to string instruments.

The early songs reflected cultural continuity as well as change. Themes of songs centered around contact and land as well as stemming from tribal versions. Traditional dance is still practised in Purfleet. Bert Marr (snr) currently teaches and demonstrates traditional dance

arrangements to preschool age children.

A mural in the old Commonwealth Bank foyer in Taree depicts a local Aboriginal legend about Nuruna, the warrior and Bilinga the magpie who became black by flying through a forest fire. Traditional styles of Aboriginal art are also taught in the local community.

## Language

The language spoken by the Birpai people has contributed to many place names in the Greater Taree City area. Even the name Taree comes from the Aboriginal name Taree-bit for native fig. These names are a tangible link with Aboriginal culture and a constant reminder of the past speakers of the language. Unfortunately, there are now no speakers of the traditional language, though many people would still use and understand words and expressions. Ella Simon was one of the last people to be a fluent speaker, having been taught by her grandmother. Ella found this a very sad position to be in and noted that although many Aboriginal words were in use in the area, often they came from surrounding tribal languages and not from the Birpai.

Although there are no living traditional speakers, the language is far from lost. In the 1960s a Swedish linguist, Nils Holmer made tape recordings of conversations of well known elders of the Birpai people. These language tapes are stored in the Institute of Aboriginal Studies in Canberra. They could constitute a very valuable resource for the future education of young Aboriginal people in this area. A local radio program, The Birpai Hour presented by Veronica Davison, has broadcast excerpts from these tapes for public listening. It is hoped that in the future Aboriginal language will be able to be incorporated into school curricula.

The Purfleet preschool, which is open to Aboriginal and non Aboriginal children, also encourages and initiates the use of Aboriginal words, in everyday conversation, games and songs. Children are thus encouraged from an early age to be interested and proud of this continuity and practice of this aspect of Aboriginal traditional cultural knowledge.

## Burial sites

These are places where Aboriginal people buried their dead. Across Australia there is a wide variation in burial practice. People may be buried in isolated graves, or in cemeteries, where there is a long custom of burial. The bodies may be placed in differing positions and attitudes. They may be buried in a sitting position or in an extended fashion and burial may be primary or secondary. In the Greater Taree area several types of burials were recorded, with slight variations depending upon individual circumstances. Burial places are of high significance to living Aboriginal people, and disturbance of such places is deeply offensive. There were four burial sites on the register and one new burial site was recorded.

One early observer described the burial practice of the new Waw Wyper Tribe, inhabitants of the Manning area. He noted that there were variations in burial practices even for the one group of people. People, who had died what appeared to be a natural death, were placed in graves near where they passed away, but people who had been victims of foul play or accident were taken to be buried near where the original misfortune had befallen them.

Wilf Conners in his book *Pioneering Days around Taree* notes one method of internment. Aboriginal warriors and elders were buried in a sitting position and the places of burial could be later identified as rounded sunken depressions. Apparently the burial ground in Wingham demonstrated this, but it is now very overgrown and it would be very difficult to locate the original grave positions.

There are many references throughout the available literature, describing areas in which the Aboriginal people of the Taree area buried their dead. Most of these references only give very sketchy geographical details of the site locations. Burial grounds, are however, mentioned for places such as an area along Koola Creek, between the Cross and Bully Mountains and along beaches. As well as being buried in traditional burial grounds Aboriginal people were also interned in historic cemeteries. Billy Bungay, for example, was buried in the Bungay cemetery.

## Archaeological Investigation

There are a wide range of archaeological materials which could be predicted to occur in the Greater Taree City area, based upon a general knowledge of prehistoric site types and locations recorded in varying environments throughout Southern Australia. The Greater Taree City area encompasses a broad range of environmental and topographic situations. There has been very little previous archaeological investigation carried out in the City of Greater Taree and the prehistory of the region is virtually an open book.

As at February 1990 there were 42 Aboriginal sites listed on the Register held by the National Parks and Wildlife Service. Considering the size of the city area, over 4000 square kilometres, this gives an average site density of one site per hundred square kilometres, a far from realistic figure. Further, these sites fall mainly within the coastal strip of the region, leaving much of the coastal hinterland and inland areas devoid of sites. In the light of descriptions of Aboriginal occupation given in early historic records this would seem an unlikely reflection of the real pattern of occupation and of site location.

The coastal predominance of site location so far indicated is likely to be a reflection of a general tendency for sites to be recorded in areas most frequented by the current population, such as along beaches and at popular tourist areas. In order to gain some idea as to whether the locational patterns evident were real, a brief reconnaissance-type archaeological survey was carried out. The city of Greater Taree area was divided into categories of differing topography and vegetation. Small areas from all categories were looked at throughout the city area.

A total of 59 sites were recorded. This more than doubled the existing number of sites on record and, as nearly all areas surveyed revealed the presence of Aboriginal sites, this demonstrated a widespread occupation of the region. This study did not have the scope for a very detailed nor highly systematic coverage. However, from the results obtained it can be seen that there is a high likelihood of site occurrence throughout most of the city area.

## Fish traps

These are often large permanent constructions made to aid in the mass capture of fish. They exist in coastal and riverine areas and may be constructed from various materials, commonly stone or wood. Fish traps were often constructed to operate with tidal rises and falls. They reveal valuable information about Aboriginal technology and social behaviour, as they are more likely to represent communal rather than individual effort. There are no fish traps previously recorded in the area and none were located during the field survey.

During the course of a brief field survey 59 new sites were recorded. This more than doubled the existing number recorded (42) and placed sites in previously "blank" areas of the shire. The success of the survey that was undertaken in just a short while underlines the potential for site occurrence throughout the city area. A need for further survey work designed to concentrate on site recording in tracts of land, or research to investigate a

particular site, is strongly indicated. The types of sites recorded included scarred trees, artefact scatters, shell middens, manufacturing sites and ceremonial sites. Although there are no published dates for the prehistory of this area it is likely, upon looking at the sites recorded, that they date to the more recent prehistoric past.

## Traditional sites in the region

All Aboriginal sites are of interest and are significant to members of the Purfleet Taree Aboriginal community. In many cases they are actively conserved and/or their locations concealed to minimise damage occurring through visitation. Certain sites are regarded as suitable for public viewing, particularly for use in educational programs for Aboriginal and non Aboriginal people. Damage to Aboriginal sites would most commonly be caused by ignorance and over visitation. A short program of education to heighten public awareness of the nature and value of Aboriginal sites would be a very positive development. Until such programmes are developed however, it is anticipated that there will be Aboriginal resistance to the publicising of such locations.

There are further and more specific concerns of the Aboriginal community, in relation to specific sites and situations. Access to various site areas within the Greater Taree area is also of concern to many Aboriginal people. In several instances continued access to a particular site is having a detrimental effect on the site. In the case of sites located along the present frontal dune along the beach north of Farquhar Park, four wheel drive access to the beach is disturbing pipi midden deposits. Two rock shelter sites are also very close to a walking trail and car park at Hallidays Point, giving rise to potential disturbance.

*Extracts from the Greater Taree Aboriginal Heritage Study  
By J Klaver and KJ Kefferan, National Heritage Studies Pty Ltd*

*A small part of this heritage study entailed the search for Aboriginal sites across the landscape of the Greater Taree City area, to add to the list already compiled by the National Parks and Wildlife Service. These sites were then to be assessed in order to determine whether any were suitable for nomination to the register of the national estate.*