ABORIGINAL HISTORY ALONG THE COOKS RIVER









Australian Government

CooksRiver ALLIANCE

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Aboriginal people have lived along the Cooks River for more than a thousand generations, watching the lower river slowly take form over many millennia. They were impacted greatly by the arrival of Europeans, but Aboriginal people have continued to visit and use the river since that time. In recent decades, Aboriginal people from other areas who have come to live along the river have developed a strong sense of custodianship for Aboriginal heritage and the environment. It remains a greatly valued river.

'We respectfully acknowledge the traditional custodians of the Cooks River catchment, together with other Aboriginal people who have made it their home.'



Hand stencils in a rockshelter above the river

Aboriginal people lived in this shelter at Earlwood over many generations, and left these intimate and enduring traces of their presence

Source: MDCA 2012



Living by the river in the 1830s

Aboriginal people continued to live along the river after the arrival of Europeans, fishing its waters and camping along its banks

Source: State Library NSW DL PXX 31 image 2a



Visiting Europeans in the 1920s

Aboriginal people living at Peakhurst in the 1920s visited the St Elmo property at Kingsgrove on their way to see family at La Perouse

Source: Hill & Madden 2004, p. 93



Reflection and protection in the 2000s

This space at Tempe remembers the traditional Aboriginal people of the river, and looks over to a midden protected by local community members

Source: MDCA 2016

This history was written by historian Dr Paul Irish of MDCA on behalf of the Cooks River Alliance.

MDCA

HERITAGE ARCHAEOLOGY HISTORY ▼ ASSESSMENT MANAGEMENT INTERPRETATION

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WARNING: Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander readers should note that this document may contain images of deceased Aboriginal people.

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1 INTRODUCTION

The Cooks River Catchment Aboriginal History Project

This history has been written as part of the Cooks River Catchment Aboriginal History Project that has been undertaken by MDCA on behalf of the Cooks River Alliance. It was completed between May 2016 and May 2017 and aimed to:

- Conduct comprehensive research into the long history of Aboriginal associations with the Cooks River catchment from the archaeological past and the oral and documentary history of more recent times and up to the present.
- Distil project research into a detailed, readable Aboriginal history of the Cooks River catchment.
- Assemble source materials and research in a manner that allows the development of resources targeted to a diverse range of users across different media.

The project grew out of the Alliance's desire to know more about the Aboriginal history of the catchment than the limited published sources that are currently available. The aim of this history is to bring together the variety of records which have been examined during the project and to provide a narrative history of the Aboriginal use of the Cooks River catchment from ancient times to the present day.

Methodology and outcomes

The project involved two main components – archival research and oral history, which were undertaken concurrently.

ARCHIVAL RESEARCH

The aim of the archival research component of the project was to compile, catalogue and synthesise existing research and known sources of information about Aboriginal history within the Cooks River catchment, and then to conduct targeted research to push our knowledge further. It examined both archaeological and historical records.

There is no central repository of all information concerning Aboriginal sites and artefacts in New South Wales. For this project, Aboriginal heritage research was undertaken primarily through a search of the Aboriginal Sites Register in the Office of Environment & Heritage Aboriginal Heritage Information Management System (the 'AHIMS Register') as well as previous Aboriginal heritage reports available through the AHIMS Register and local libraries. In addition, the collections of the Australian Museum were searched using suburb and place keywords to determine which Aboriginal artefacts had been donated to the museum over the past century or so from within the catchment. Finally, records of additional Aboriginal sites and artefacts were found through online searches of newspaper articles and websites e.g. referring to burials uncovered during roadworks, or middens found in local backyards.

Historical research was undertaken at the State Library of NSW (SLNSW), State Records NSW (SRNSW), Ashfield Library, Campsie Library, Marrickville Library, Rockdale Library, Strathfield Library and the City of Sydney Archives. In addition, published and unpublished material from past studies by MDCA historian Dr Paul Irish was utilised. Research was also undertaken of online resources such as the National Library TROVE website and various catalogues and listings.

Sources examined included primary archival material such as government documents, newspaper reports, maps, paintings, sketches, register recordings, unpublished specialist heritage and other reports and a range of printed sources. This research did not aim to systematically search all sources but to broaden the scope of past histories, start to fill some important chronological gaps and to investigate further records suspected to contain relevant information.

In addition to this history, the outcomes of this research were:

- compilation of a source list, providing an overview of all relevant material examined. Where possible some form of copy was taken of records e.g. photographs or photocopies or electronic copies of documents for research purposes. It is possible that this material could serve as a rudimentary research archive for those wishing to conduct further research in future; and

- preparation of a list of places including pre-contact Aboriginal archaeological sites and places used historically by Aboriginal people. These places were divided into the approximate periods used in this history, and have formed the basis for the maps used at the start of each section.

ORAL HISTORY

The aim of the oral history component of the project was to document the diverse range of experiences that Aboriginal people have had within living memory, along the length of the river. Initially this involved examining local libraries and other collections to locate any previous Aboriginal oral histories. This revealed that a number of oral history interviews had been undertaken between the late 1990s and 2005 as part of the Marrickville Aboriginal History Project, and others had been published more recently as part of the Bankstown Aboriginal Elders Oral History Project. [1] These existing oral histories were examined and where they contained information of relevance to the current project, were transcribed (where this had not already been done).

For the current study, an additional 12 oral histories were undertaken by Asher Milgate. Potential interviewees were located through the existing Aboriginal community contacts of the Cooks River Alliance, people referred to in past oral histories, and through initial discussions with Aboriginal community members. After initial discussions by phone and/or in person, interview sessions were conducted by the river or in other locations, and were recorded on high quality video. In addition, photograph sessions were undertaken to capture high quality images of each person.

Each video interview was edited to a 10-15 minute clip featuring the most relevant portions of the interview to the Cooks River. These were then provided to each interviewee for approval, along with a release form specifying the permissible uses of the edited video and photos.

The twelve interviewed people were:



Lester Bostock



Ray Davison



Suzanne Ingram



Michael Ingrey



Deb Lennis



Allen Madden



Nathan Moran



Jenny Newman



Nardi Simpson



Jenny Thomsen



Ann Weldon



Jason Wing

PROJECT RECORDS

It has been recommended to the Cooks River Alliance that this history, copies of the edited video interviews and photographic portraits, and hard or electronic version of all sources copies during project research, be stored in the local history library of one of the member Councils, with appropriate access conditions/restrictions.

Authorship and acknowledgements

This history was written by Dr Paul Irish. Archival research was primarily undertaken by Paul Irish. Tamika Goward assisted with archaeological and archival research, and transcription of past oral histories. Oral history interviews and associated photography were undertaken by Asher Milgate.

MDCA wish to thank Cath Renwick (formerly of the Cooks River Alliance) for initiating the project and securing funding from the Australian Government for the project, and for providing Aboriginal community introductions and contacts from her years of association with the Alliance and the river. Cooks River Alliance Participation Coordinators Marcy Urken, and later Isabel Durie, are also thanked for their guidance and assistance throughout the project. The help of local librarians from the various libraries across the Cooks River catchment, librarians and archivists from the State Library of NSW and NSW State Archives, and Australian Museum collections officer Allison Dejanovic is also greatly appreciated. We also acknowledge the valuable work of the Marrickville Aboriginal Consultative Committee in pulling together so many historical facts and valuable resources through the Marrickville Aboriginal History Project.

Both Paul Irish and Asher Milgate wish to thank the Aboriginal community members who gave of their time to speak with Asher and share their knowledge and stories. We are also grateful to Nathan Moran (CEO) from the Metropolitan Local Aboriginal Land Council for his support of the project.

Note on the use of sources

Please note that permission has been obtained for the Cooks River Alliance to publish the images in this history as a free online educational resource. These images may not be copied and republished without obtaining specific permission from the relevant library or archives or, in the case of the portraits of oral history interviewees, from the subjects themselves in accordance with the signed usage agreements for this project.

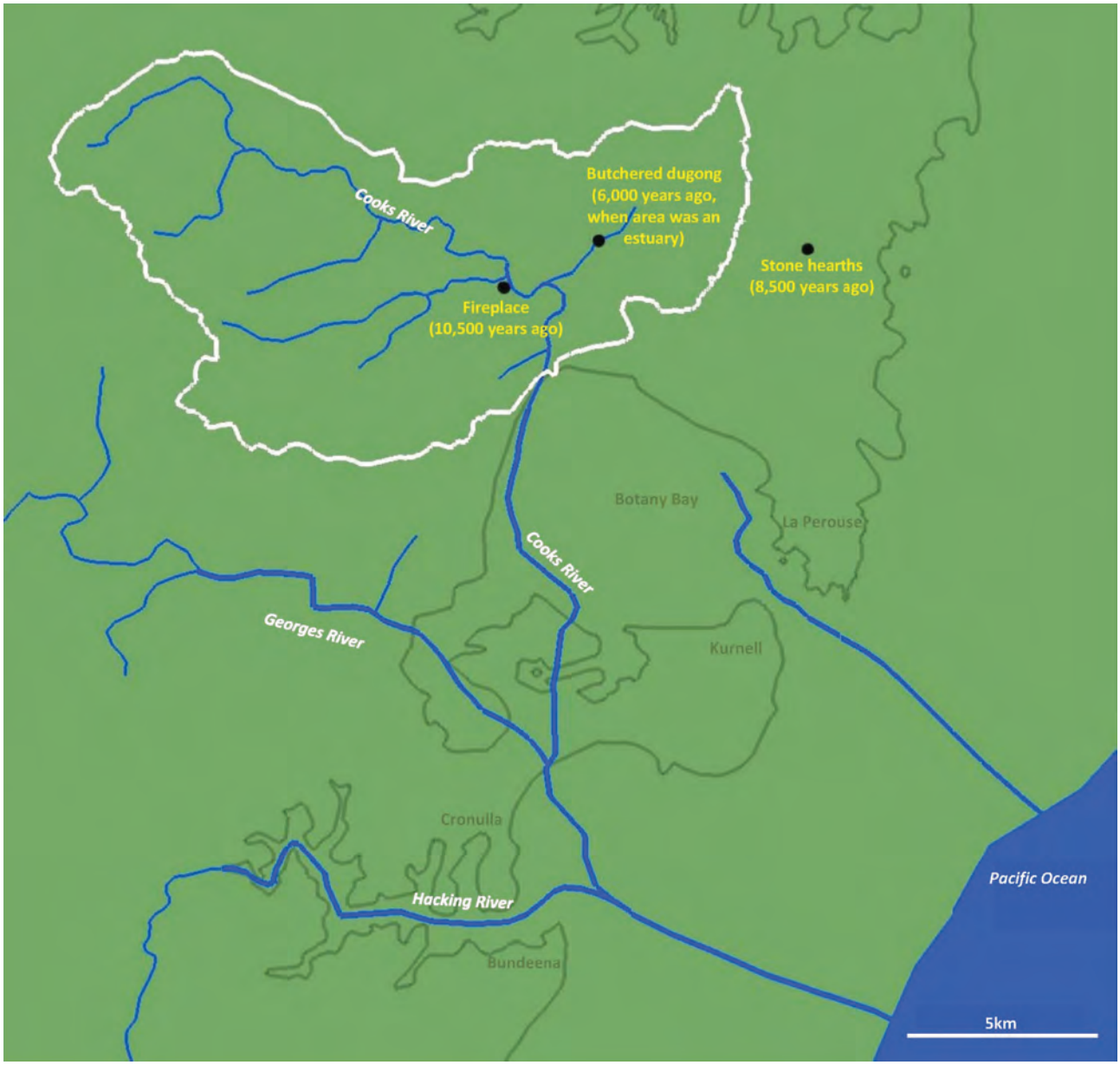


Figure 1. The possible river course c.20,000 years ago and some early Aboriginal places.

[The current coastline and landmarks are in grey in the background and the current river catchment is shown in white. The ancient river course is approximate only and not all tributaries are known. It is based on an interpretation of Albani, *et al.* 1997 and Roy & Crawford 1981:197. The Aboriginal places date to later than the period shown in the map, when the river and Botany Bay were changing].

The many lives of the Cooks River

The Cooks River has flowed in many different directions over its long life. If we travelled back one hundred years we would see another four kilometres of the lower river – now covered by the airport tarmac – snaking its way through an estuary to meet Botany Bay more than a kilometre further east of today's opening. If we could travel back another century we would see the whole length of the river

Aboriginal people have already been living in Sydney for a long time. Sea levels are lower meaning the coast is further east than today, and the Cooks River is twice as long as the one we know.

20,000 years ago

An ancient fireplace shows that Aboriginal people were living at Wolli Creek. The Cooks River at this time is freshwater and Botany Bay does not yet exist.

10,500 years ago

and all its streams – from Botany Bay to Beverley Hills to Chullora to Waterloo – in their pre-industrial beauty. No excavated storm channels or filled in wetlands and, except for a patchwork of farms and tracks, still flanked by vast forests. Go back another fifty years (about a dozen generations before today) and the river would be completely unaltered by Europeans, and yet to be seen by Cook's curious crew in 1770.

But the changes do not stop there. Travelling back further we would see that there have been periods over the last 6,000 years where Botany Bay and its surrounding wetlands have extended perhaps as far north as Moore Park, flooding the lower Cooks River. [2] Around 8,000 years (or about 400 generations) ago Botany Bay was still being formed. Sea levels had been rising for thousands of years after glaciers elsewhere in the world melted at the end of the last ice age, but the waters were only starting to pass through the rocky heads of what is now Botany Bay. The Cooks River snaked its way south from Kyeemagh across the swampy sand plain of what was to become the bay. [3] The Kurnell Peninsula had just been formed as the southern shore of the bay and pushed the Cooks River east towards the rising ocean.

Finally, we stop around 20,000 years (or 1,000 generations) ago. The world was in the middle of the last ice age. There was no ice in Sydney, but temperatures were cooler and sea levels were much lower, leaving the coast many kilometres further east than today. Botany Bay and the sandy Kurnell Peninsula did not exist. The Cooks River instead flowed south through sand flats and swamps from Kyeemagh, met the Georges River where the Kurnell Peninsula now sits, and continued on to be joined by the Hacking River before reaching the ocean several kilometres further to the east (**Figure 1**). This ancient river was nearly twice as long as the river we know today. All of that lower half is now flooded by Botany Bay, Bate Bay and the Pacific Ocean, or covered by the vast sands of Kurnell.

Aboriginal creation stories speak of the formation of lands and rivers in the Dreaming. As a non-Aboriginal archaeologist and historian, I do not claim to understand the deep spiritual connections of Aboriginal people to the Cooks River, and I do not assume that there is a neat way to reconcile these beliefs with what we know from western science about the river's ancient history. But for the purpose of understanding the Aboriginal history of the Cooks River, we know that Aboriginal people have experienced all of its many lives through so many generations that it becomes meaningless to count them – but far more than the dozen or so generations that Europeans have known the river.

The first fishers

By 20,000 years ago, when the ancient river was flowing, Aboriginal people had already been in the Sydney region for thousands of years. The earliest documented evidence of Aboriginal people living along the Cooks River is a 10,500 year old fireplace discovered during an archaeological dig next to Tempe House at Wolli Creek. [4] The fireplace consisted of a concentration of charcoal in a roughly dinner-plate sized patch of soil. Stone artefacts were found in the dig above the level of the charcoal, and have been suggested to be of similar age, but they are more likely to be considerably younger. [5]

The Cooks River at this time was a freshwater stream, as Botany Bay was not yet formed and the tidal reaches of the river were much further to the south-east. We know from a remarkable find deep in the massive sand dunes of the eastern suburbs at Randwick that Aboriginal people were already fishing in the area at this time. Here, the 8,500 years old stones of a hearth were found to be spattered with grease from a freshwater fish that was cooked over the fire. [6] At this time Aboriginal people at Randwick were living in the same dune and swamp environment that extended west to the Cooks River at Wolli Creek. A few stone artefacts were also found at the site, but much of the Aboriginal toolkit in this period is likely to have been made from wood and other organic materials, which break down quickly in sand and have not survived.

Aboriginal people changed their food gathering as the rising seas and shifting environment presented new challenges and opportunities. We can see an example of this from an amazing find at Beaconsfield in the 1890s during the construction of what is now known as Alexandra Canal. The canal traced the natural line of Shea's Creek, which emptied into the Cooks River on the western edge of the airport, but this evidence was older than the creek. After Botany Bay was formed around 6,500 years ago, there were periods of slightly warmer and higher seas, which extended the bay northwards as open water and wetlands, perhaps as far as Moore Park. [7] The warmer waters brought large sea mammals called dugongs much further south

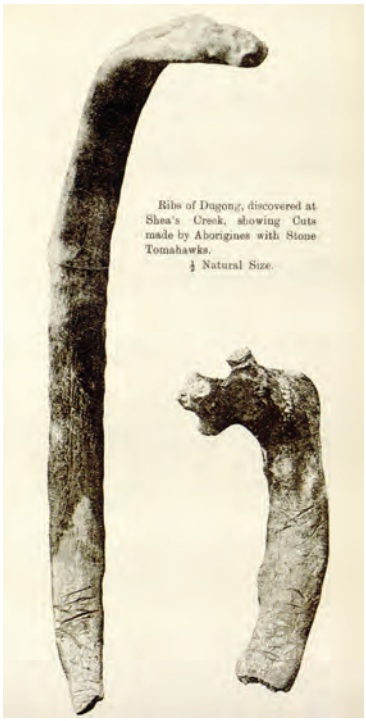
Warmer sea temperatures bring a dugong south into Botany Bay where it is butchered by Aboriginal people around the present day Alexandra Canal.

6,000 years ago

An Aboriginal campsite along the river at Kendrick Park in Tempe was in use by this time. Aboriginal people gathered shellfish from the mudflats nearby.

4,500 years ago

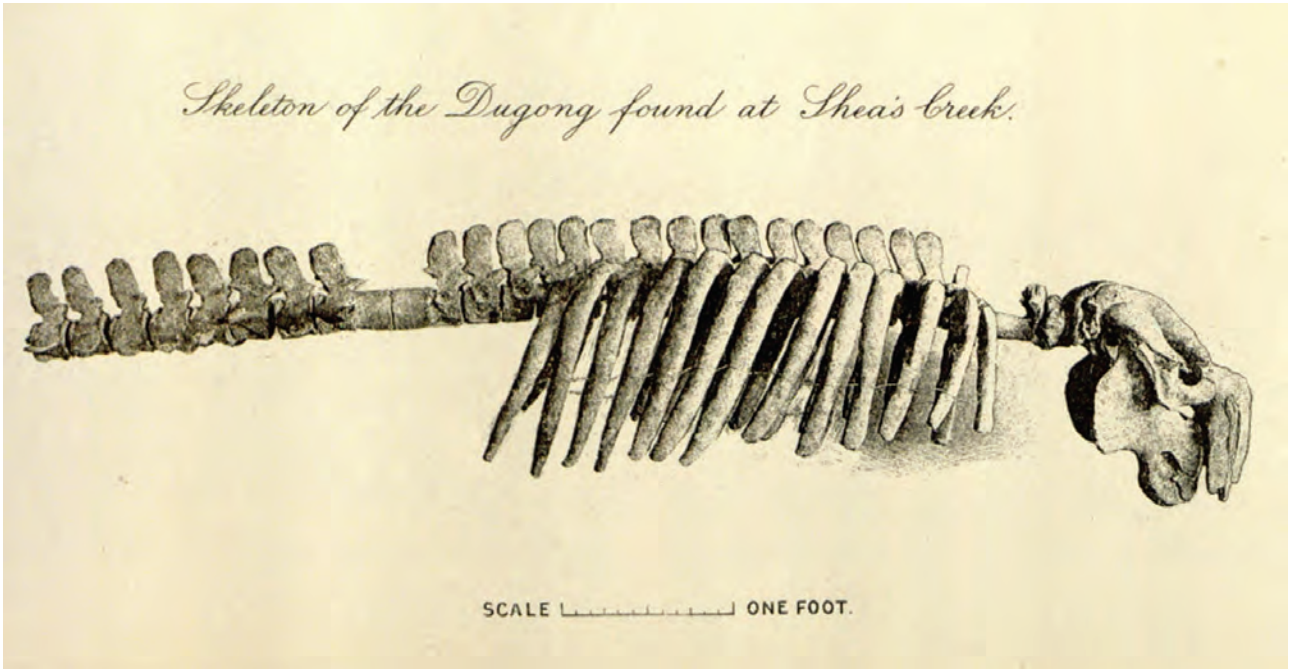
than they are currently found. At least one entered Botany Bay around 6,000 years ago and was either stranded on the edge of Botany Bay or was killed by Aboriginal people. The bones exposed during the construction of Alexandra Canal contained cut marks showing that Aboriginal people had butchered the dugong, taking advantage of a new food source (**Figure 2**). [8]



We have only these brief glimpses of the first fishers along the Cooks River, and we should be careful not to add in too many other details based on what we know from much later. For example, we often talk of Aboriginal groups as being either freshwater (inland) or saltwater (coastal) people. But did these divisions exist in the ancient past, and how did they change? After all, the river at Wolli Creek was freshwater 10,000 years ago, but had become saltwater by 6,000 years ago. More archaeological evidence is likely to be found as time goes on, but even now we can wonder at the remarkable adaptability of Aboriginal people along the early Cooks River.

Figure 2. The dugong skeleton from Shea's Creek and some of the butchered bones.

[Source: Etheridge *et al.* 1896: Plate XI & XIA]



By this time Aboriginal people were using stone axes along the Cooks River to remove bark and to cut and climb trees.

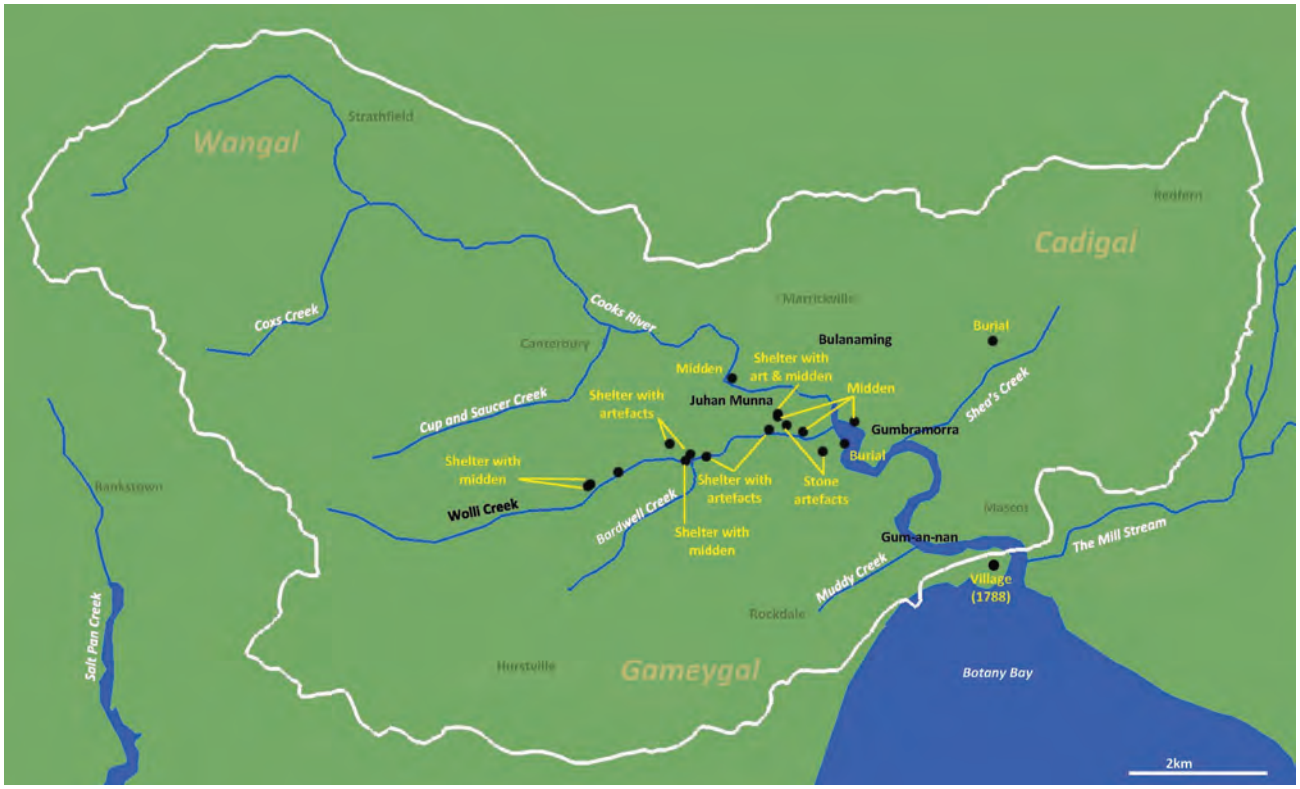


Figure 3. Aboriginal uses of the Cooks River catchment before the arrival of Europeans.

[This map is based on recorded Aboriginal sites and does not represent a complete picture of the pre-contact Aboriginal use of the catchment how used. Not all of these places were in use at the same time and many places are undocumented. The Aboriginal names (black) are shown as Europeans applied them, which may not be their original meaning or location. Clan locations are approximate and based on Attenbrow 2010:23].

The river finds its course

About 4,500 years ago a group of Aboriginal people sat by the river at Tempe and cooked a meal of shellfish gathered from the mudflats nearby. [9] We know this from the remains of the meal and many others like it for hundreds of years afterwards, which have survived in Kendrick Park (**Figure 4**). These remains are known as a shell midden, and the Kendrick Park midden would once have been much larger than the small portion of it that now remains after urban development, sandstone quarrying and riverbank modifications. When the midden first started being created by Aboriginal people, this part of the river and areas upstream had probably reached their current form, but further downstream towards Botany Bay the Cooks River was still changing. Although the sea had more or less risen to its current level by this time, it varied by up to a metre at different times, which would have shifted the mouth of the river and varied its tidal limits. [10]

Aboriginal people along the river begin to make more tools of locally available stone rather than trading it from further inland.

1,500 years ago



Figure 4. White shells on the surface of the Kendrick Park midden.

[This photo was taken before the recent stabilisation and protection works. You can see the quarried face of the sandstone below the midden. Source: AHIMS Aboriginal Site Card record for AHIMS #45-6-2198].

Around the time the Kendrick Park midden starting being created, Aboriginal people began to add a new range of implements to their toolkit. By around 4,000 years ago ground stone axes (hatchets) were first used and small stone points became very common. [11] As the first Europeans recorded, hafted axes were used to remove bark from trees to make canoes, shields and containers. They were also used to cut toe-holds to climb trees in search of honey or to catch possums (**Figure 6** & **Figure 9**). Stone points were used to deadly effect as spear barbs, and also served as hafted cutting, incising and drilling tools. The stone used to make these tools is not found locally, so we know that by 4,000 years ago the Aboriginal people using the Cooks River were connected by trade to areas such as western Sydney and the Illawarra, and even further afield for their axes. [12]

These trade networks lasted for thousands of years, but around 1,500 years ago something changed. Aboriginal people along the coast began to use more local stone (quartz pebbles found in sandstone) for their tools and also began to produce more implements from bone and shell. By the time the first Europeans arrived in Sydney, coastal hunters and fishers drew a clear distinction between themselves and the woodland people who lived further inland in western Sydney. [13] Around 1,000 years ago, shell fish hooks began to be used in Sydney, mainly by women (**Figure 8**). [14] These were one of the last and most important additions to the Aboriginal toolkit along the coast. By this time, the river had reached its final course and the Aboriginal way of life around the Cooks River and Botany Bay first glimpsed by the crew of Cook's Endeavour in 1770 had developed.

It is important that we recognise these environmental and technological changes, because it is often assumed that the first Europeans in Sydney saw a timeless people with an unchanging culture. There are aspects of Aboriginal life which are indeed very ancient, but most of what we know about traditional Aboriginal culture along the Cooks River and elsewhere is based on the last couple of hundred years. With the exception of the Kendrick Park midden, the Shea's Creek dugong and the Tempe House campsite, we do not know the age of any other Aboriginal sites across the Cooks River catchment area. This means we need to be careful not to assume that we know how these places were used by Aboriginal people - sites near to one another may have been used many generations apart; they may not have been used regularly or constantly; and perhaps the Aboriginal people who used some sites were living quite differently to their descendants in the late 1700s. Bearing this in mind, let's look at how Aboriginal people were living along the river over the last few hundred years.

Using the land

The Aboriginal people of Sydney were divided into clan groups of twenty-five to sixty people, who traced their lineage through their fathers back to a common ancestor. They shared totems and had primary rights to their clan estate. From its headwaters around Strathfield the river passed through the estates of *Wann, Cadi* and *Gamey*. The clans with rights to these estates were known as the *Wangal, Cadigal* and *Gameygal*, 'gal' meaning the people of each clan estate. [15] We do not know exactly where the boundaries between these clan estates were, but the social and cultural world of each clan reached far beyond its individual estate. Women married outside the clan, binding each clan to its neighbours and perhaps to groups much further afield.

The language or languages spoken by Aboriginal people across the Cooks River valley is debated, but was not the primary way that Aboriginal people identified with the land. This was through their clan, and could be physically displayed through body adornments (such as necklaces, pendants and

Shell fish hooks begin to be used in Sydney, changing the way Aboriginal people fished. They are mainly used by women, often from bark canoes.

1,000 years ago

belts), hair styles and body decoration (painting and scarification, see **Figure 5**). [16] While clans represented ancestral identity, on a daily basis Aboriginal people lived in what we call bands, comprising the men and unmarried women from each clan and the women married in from other clans. Sometimes they lived as a large group, while at other times they fragmented into smaller family units. Aboriginal people were custodians of their clan lands, but also had links to other areas through the clans of their spouse, parents, grandparents and through life events that occurred in different places (such as birth, death and marriage). In this way, the Aboriginal people who lived across the Cooks River valley were linked to other areas around the coastal part of Sydney, and perhaps even to coastal areas further to the north or south. [17]

Figure 5. Wangal man Bennelong around 1791.

[Source: Port Jackson Painter, c.1791, *Native name Ben-nel-long, as painted when angry after Botany Bay Colebee was wounded,* The Trustees of the Natural History Museum, London, Watling Drawing No. 41].



A large foreign ship enters Botany Bay for 8 days and leaves again.

Aboriginal people travelled to maintain their family connections and cultural obligations, but we know little about how they specifically used the Cooks River valley – where did they go, and what routes did they use? They would have been intimately familiar with every bend and tributary, but only a handful of place names were recorded in the nineteenth century to give us a sense of this (see **Figure 3**). We do not even know the traditional Aboriginal name for the Cooks River, though it undoubtedly had one. [18] Wolli Creek appears to be the only name that has survived in popular usage through to today, but all of the historically documented names show us that Aboriginal knowledge was still being retained and shared with Europeans in the nineteenth century.



Figure 6. Bark hut of the inland type, and a stone axe in action.

[The axe has been used to cut toe-holds in the tree trunk to allow rapid climbing to catch the possum. Source: Port Jackson Painter, c.1791, *A Native climbing a Tree near his Bark Hut and Fire*, The Trustees of the Natural History Museum, London, Watling Drawing No. 76].



Figure 7. Hut of the coastal bough and bark type.

[This small example was built for an individual, but others using the same construction were larger. Source: Augustus Earle, 1826 (?), *Australian native in his bark hut*, National Library of Australia nla.obj-134501291].

Bark canoes would have been the main way that Aboriginal people moved along the river, fishing as they went (**Figure 8**). They were made of large slabs of bark removed from trees, warmed on a fire to open them flat and then formed into the desired shape and tied strongly at the ends. [19] Canoes were used for fishing and transport all over Sydney by men and women. The canoes were shallow in the water so they would have been able to get a long way up the river and its tributaries.

Aboriginal people also moved through the landscape on foot. There would have been many walking tracks through the Cooks River valley, often following ridges and spurs but also crossing creeks and the river. It is often stated that many early colonial roads were based on existing Aboriginal tracks or used routes shown by Aboriginal guides. This has been said for example about Old Canterbury Road, Georges River Road and Beamish Street. [20] There is probably some basis for these claims even though there is rarely any direct evidence, but it is also true that Europeans were just trying to find something that Aboriginal people had long before discovered; the most direct and easy path through the landscape. Aboriginal people are also said to have crossed the river at Fatima Island near Tempe and at the tidal limit of the river at Belfield (known historically as the Punch Bowl).[22]

More ships arrive in Botany Bay. As they explore the bay an Aboriginal fishing village of more than a dozen huts is seen at the mouth of the Cooks River.

1788

Europeans set up camp at Sydney Cove and begin to explore their surroundings.

1788

Again, there is no direct evidence of this and it distracts from the fact that Aboriginal people would have been able to cross the river at many points with their canoes.

Across most of the Cooks River valley, Aboriginal people would have camped in huts or slept in the open. Further inland, their huts took the form of slabs of bark folded or bent over a central wooden pole (**Figure 6**). Closer to the coast, they were often more substantial, with boughs forming the frame and bark as well as cabbage tree leaves forming the roof (**Figure 7**). [22] Sandstone overhangs were also used, but these were only found in a relatively small area along the middle section of the river and its tributaries between about Belfield and Tempe. Overhangs that were some distance from the river banks may have been less frequently used then those closer to the water.

Aboriginal people set up camp at a number of points across the Cooks River valley for food gathering, ceremony or in transit to other places. The archaeological evidence we have of these camps is very slim and makes it difficult to draw any conclusions (see **Figure 3**), though it is also true that more lies undiscovered, especially along the broad banks of the river. Until the last forty years or so very few people were recording Aboriginal sites and since then, they have tended to be recorded only when a building development is proposed. Even adding information from the Australian Museum collections and newspaper and archival records about accidental discoveries of burials, stone axes and other remains, there is not enough to build a reliable picture. For example there are no recorded sites upstream of Marrickville, and the camps that existed on the flatter, elevated ground were built over long before any archaeological recording was undertaken. We are also unsure whether any of the recorded sites were used at the same time. We do know though from extensive work in other parts of Sydney, that Aboriginal people were more likely to live close to freshwater streams or springs and to the rich marine resources of the river. The junctions of creeks with the river and its main tributaries were often good fishing spots. Aboriginal people were more likely to bury their dead in the softer soil along the river or in sandstone overhangs.

Fishing the river

Archaeological remains might reveal relatively little about patterns of camping and movement through the Cooks River valley, but they can show us what Aboriginal people were doing. In particular, both archaeological and historical evidence indicate that fishing was a central part of Aboriginal life along the river. Aboriginal people would have fished along the river and its tributaries, as well as out into the bay. Women mainly used hook and line, whereas men used pronged fishing spears. Both men and women fished from the shore and in flotillas of bark canoes. They fished all day and sometimes into the night by torchlight. Their canoes often contained a small fire burning on a clay pad, which women used to cook fish and shellfish as they fished (**Figure 8**). They also spat chewed up shellfish into the water as burley to lure fish onto their hooks.

Aboriginal people often set up camp next to the best fishing grounds. The lower river and its estuaries would have been places of plenty. When the first fleet nosed into Kamay (Botany Bay) in 1788, marine Watkin Tench noted a settlement of more than a dozen huts, housing more than 50 people at the mouth of the river. [23] Like other settlements seen around Kamay it was probably full of fishing equipment such as spears, hooks, lines and net bags (**Figure 8**). Each hut would have had its own fire on which meals of fish, shellfish and other foods were cooked. Fishing would have taken place all along the river, including the freshwater sections. The mudflats which once lined the lower river and its tributaries were important breeding grounds for fish, and also sources of shellfish. In particular cockles, rock oyster, mud whelks, mussels and mud oysters were regularly gathered. [24]

A smallpox epidemic claims the lives of many Aboriginal people around the harbour and Botany Bay.

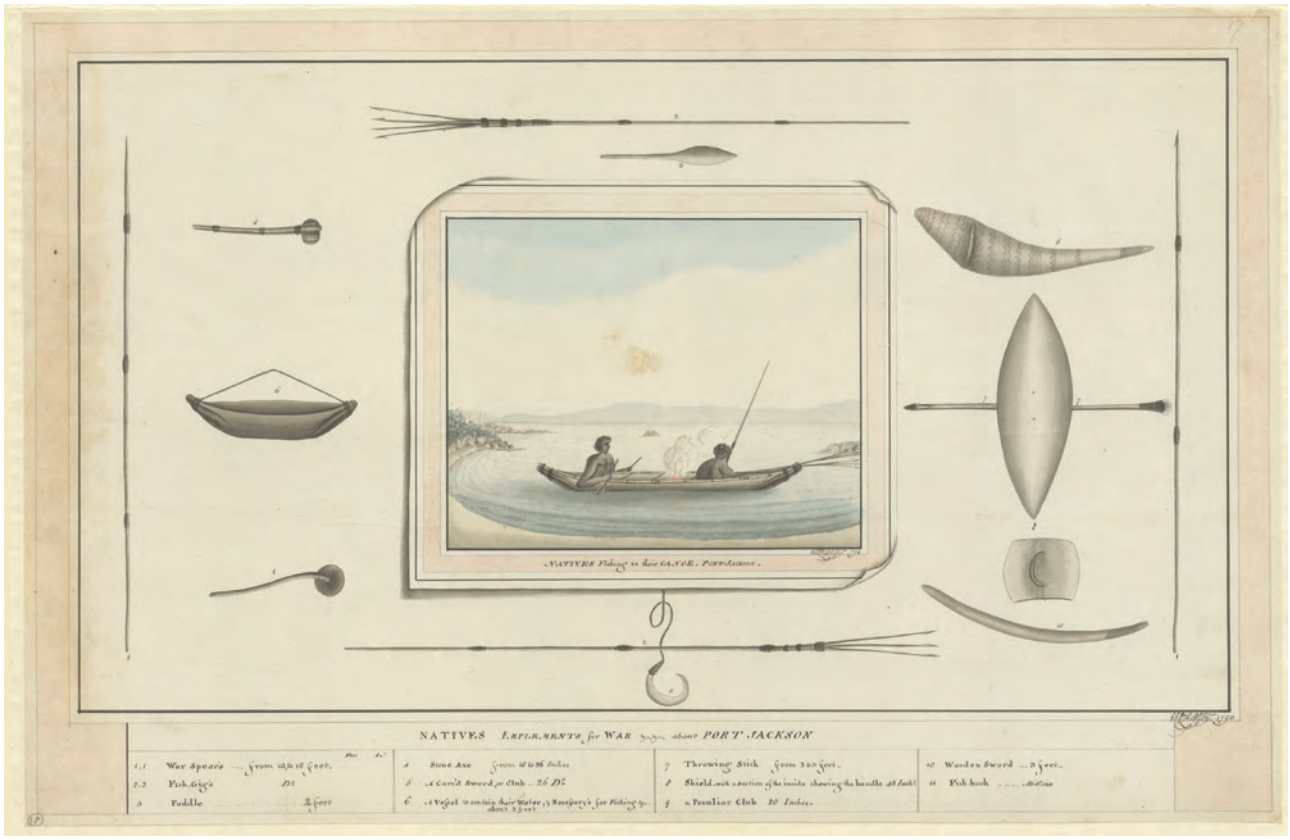


Figure 8. Some of the fishing and hunting equipment used by Aboriginal people in Sydney.

[Includes fish hook (#11), fishing spear (#2), stone axe (#4), clubs (#5 & #9) and container (#6). Source: George Raper, 1790, *Natives fishing in their canoe, Port Jackson, and native implements of war*, The Trustees of the Natural History Museum, London, Raper Drawing No. 18].

The remains of some of these meals have survived in middens at Kendrick Park, Undercliffe, Marrickville and along Wolli Creek (see **Figure 4**). Many other middens probably also once lined the lower river, and were sealed in by the airport tarmac or destroyed by extensive land reclamation and river channelization works. [25] Most of these middens were open sites that would have extended right down to the edge of the river. One midden at Undercliffe though is several hundred metres up the hill from the river in a sandstone overhang. It gives us a clue that Aboriginal people's lives were guided by other factors than food gathering. This shelter, and a more recently discovered midden above its roof, sit in a strategic location with views across the Cooks River and Wolli Creek valleys. [26] The shelter is also filled with hand stencils, suggesting that it was also a place of ceremony (**Figure 10**).

The river banks and the vast forests behind them would have provided Aboriginal people with a wide range of other foods to supplement their fish and shellfish. Although we have little archaeological or historical evidence of these specifically from the Cooks River valley, we know a lot about what Aboriginal people ate from other records around Sydney. [27] The area north of the river around Newtown and St Peters was known to early Europeans as the Kangaroo Ground, indicating an important local food source. Groups of Aboriginal hunters used fire to herd and encircle kangaroos and wallabies. Possums and gliders were also hunted by smoking them out of trees and racing up the trunks using axe cut toe-holds to club them (**Figure 6**). Other animals that were most likely hunted around the Cooks River valley included bandicoots, echidnas, fruit bats, goannas, blue tongue lizards and long-necked tortoise. Aboriginal people also hunted birds and gathered bird eggs from the wetlands and forests along the river. The forests also provided a variety of plants and trees which were used as foods, medicines and raw materials for making items such as twine, shelters, containers, and woven baskets.

Wangal man Bennelong is kidnapped by the English but later chooses to stay and becomes an important cultural go-between in the early colony.

Aboriginal people gathered these foods using a range of implements of wood, stone, bone and shell. In many archaeological sites, it is only the stone tools that have survived, but we know of the organic materials from historical descriptions and examples sometimes preserved in middens.

A number of different types of spear were used by Aboriginal people, including multi-pronged fishing spears and barbed hunting spears (see **Figure 8**). The spear-throwers used to launch these sometimes had a sharp shell fragment attached at one end for use as a chisel. They appear always to have been wielded by men, and would have been an essential part of the Aboriginal toolkit. Wooden clubs and shields were used for fighting and the shields were often painted with clan or individual markings. Clubs were also beaten on shields as percussion during ceremonies. [28] The classic returning boomerang, considered such an icon of Aboriginal culture, does not appear to have been used traditionally in Sydney. [29] Instead, a variety of less angular non-returning boomerangs were used. Some of these had handles and were used as weapons as well as for hunting. Aboriginal people used a range of containers for carrying and storing food and other items. These included vessels made from wood and bark, woven net bags and natural containers such as large shells.

Several ground stone axes have been found around the Cooks River valley over the years and have been handed to the Australian Museum (**Figure 9**). They were prized possessions because they were so useful for making tools, shelters, canoes and containers, and because the raw materials had to be obtained from a long way away. The axes were hafted onto a wooden handle so that they could be wielded by hand. Their cutting edge was sharpened on sandstone leaving 'axe-grinding grooves' next to creeks and rock pools. No grinding grooves have yet been recorded within the Cooks River valley but they are highly likely to have once been there, and some perhaps survive under vegetation or under water. Stone cobbles for making much smaller 'flaked' stone tools – spear points, chisels, knives and so on, were also obtained through trade with areas to the west and south of the Cooks River Valley. Outcrops of one commonly used type of stone called silcrete have been found within Wangal lands at Homebush and within Cadigal lands at Newtown, but it is not certain that these were ever exposed or quarried by Aboriginal people, and they certainly obtained some stone by trade. [30]



Figure 9. Stone axes (hatchets) from the Cooks River catchment.

[The hatchet on the left is from Shea's Creek and was found near the 6,000 year old dugong but is probably considerably younger. The hatchet on the right was found at Petersham and was donated to the Australian Museum in the 1920s. The scales are in centimetres. Source: Australian Museum Archaeological Collection #iE005571+05, #iE028965+10].

A party of soldiers is sent to Botany Bay to capture and kill Aboriginal people in retaliation for McIntyre's death. Aboriginal people stay well clear and they return to Sydney empty handed.

1791

Pemulwuy leads a campaign of Aboriginal resistance across Sydney, though largely outside of the Cooks River valley.

1790s

Ceremony

The hand stencils covering the rear wall of the sandstone overhang at Undercliffe remind us of the central importance of ceremony in Aboriginal life (**Figure 10**). Hand prints of many different Aboriginal people were placed there over time, for reasons we do not fully understand, but the shelter would have been recognised as a significant place in the Cooks River landscape. Sydney's Aboriginal people believed in an 'All Father' ancestral being called Biaime or Daramulan, the creator of the land. [31] We know from other parts of Sydney and surrounds that representations of Biaime or Daramulan were carved into rocks and featured in initiation ceremonies. Ceremonies of different kinds would have echoed along the rivers and creeks of the catchment and through the forests on their banks. In the first half of the nineteenth century, ceremonies were held within the Cooks River catchment at Kingsgrove, and ritual 'payback' combats took place at Surry Hills and Redfern, but we don't know whether these locations were ancient or whether they were influenced by the activities of Europeans.[32] What we do know though, is that any ceremonies which took place within the Cooks River catchment would have involved Aboriginal people from many different clans, drawn from a wide area.

The Cooks River valley would have been bursting with meaning and spirituality to Aboriginal people. Creation stories from the Dreaming taught Aboriginal people how the lands and waters were fashioned, and many places would have had spiritual significance. It appears that knowledge of these places has faded but we can be sure that they influenced how and when Aboriginal people used parts of the catchment as much as the availability of particular foods. On a more everyday level, the deaths of loved ones also influenced movement. Camps were temporarily abandoned when people died, and burial ceremonies were very important in ensuring that the dead person's spirit would be laid to rest. [33] Aboriginal people were either cremated or buried with personal items. Graves were often dug in the soft sandy soils along rivers or within sandstone overhangs, as shown by several burials unearthed over the years within the Cooks River catchment during construction works. These burial places would have been important markers in the landscape for extended families probably over several generations. They were respected and tended as part of the broad and deep relationship that existed between Aboriginal people and land. That relationship of belonging to the land was felt and lived by all Aboriginal people, but it was totally ignored by the Europeans who arrived on the shores of Kamay in 1788, with disastrous consequences.

Figure 10. Hand stencils in the Undercliffe rockshelter.

[Source: MDCA 2012].



Botany Bay man Mahroot is born on the Cooks River. His parents lived around Botany Bay. At this time there are few Europeans in the area.

1790s

Pemulwuy is killed, but raids and spearings are continued by other Aboriginal people, including Pemulwuy's son Tedbury.

1802



Figure 11. Aboriginal uses of the Cooks River catchment in the early decades of the Colony.

A tragic beginning

In January 1788, around 1,500 convicts, soldiers and others stepped ashore at Warrane (Sydney Cove) in the centre of Cadigal land. This was a momentous and unprecedented event for Aboriginal people, and a gross breach of the protocols about entering another's land, but there was little sense on either side of what would unfold in the coming years. Both Aboriginal people and Europeans eyed each other warily in those first months, trying to work out what the other wanted. Soon Europeans began to explore and gather food and other resources beyond their tent town at Sydney Cove. There were violent clashes as convicts stole Aboriginal tools and unknowingly breached protocols about the taking of food from the lands of another, but far worse was to come.

Just over a year after the first fleet arrived, a deadly smallpox epidemic struck the Aboriginal people around the harbour. Many people died and as others fled, they spread the disease further. It is likely that well over half of the Cadigal, Wangal and Gameygal died. Whole families were lost, and the full and rich world of Aboriginal ceremony and kinship never fully recovered. There were survivors though, and they regrouped by drawing people together from clans across a broader area of the coast than before. [34] It was these people and their descendants who continued to use the Cooks River valley throughout the nineteenth century.

For several decades after the arrival of the first fleet, there was little European use of the Cooks River Valley. While a number of land grants were made, very few Europeans came to live there, and most of the area remained uncleared forest. The surviving Aboriginal people continued to use this area relatively freely. Botany Bay man Mahroot for example was born along the lower river in the 1790s. His parents lived at different places around the Bay, and in 1798 they met the crew of an American ship anchored near Kurnell. [35] One of the passengers, Benjamin Carter described the meeting. It gives a good sense of how Aboriginal people were living at the time, and of their surroundings.

Tedbury's group attacks William Bond's farm at Bankstown.

Mahroot's family were living in a camp at Kurnell made up of several family groups. They were still using traditional canoes, but they were also familiar with European goods. Some of their traditional spears now had barbs of broken glass instead of stone. Carter and several others wanted to head into Sydney and set across Botany Bay in a small sailing boat. Soon they met a European man (Mr Smith) and his Aboriginal companion Terribelong on one of the bay beaches. Terribelong got in their boat to help them navigate the swampy lower reaches of the Cooks River. Carter saw mangroves in the mudflats and vast forests along the river banks with trees up to a couple of metres in diameter. He continued into town and a few days later was witness to a payback ritual combat at Surry Hills involving Mahroot's father as well as Cadigal and Wangal men.

Fighting back

One of the participants in the ritual combat at Surry Hills in 1798 was Bennelong (c.1764-1813). Bennelong was a Wangal man whose clan lands included the middle and upper reaches of the Cooks River (**Figure 5**). A decade earlier in 1789 he had been abducted from Manly by order of Governor Phillip in an attempt to establish communications with local Aboriginal people. Bennelong developed a relationship with Phillip, who built him a hut on the eastern point of Sydney Cove. [36] After living at Sydney Cove and voyaging to England with Phillip, Bennelong returned to Sydney. From the early 1800s he lived at Kissing Point and when he died in 1813 he was buried in the orchard of sympathetic local landowner James Squires. Bennelong was typical of many of his contemporaries in getting to know Europeans and trying to build a new life within the reality of the expanding colony of Sydney. As we will also see later, the relationship between Bennelong and Squires has contributed to the custodial sense that Aboriginal people today have for the river.

These attempts to work things out did not always go to plan. A contemporary of Bennelong's called Balloderry was also familiar with Europeans, having lived with Governor Phillip in 1790/1791 and acted as a guide on an overland trip to western Sydney in April 1791. He was probably from the north side of the Parramatta River but was linked to the Wangal through his brother, who was married to Bennelong's sister. [37] In the winter of 1791, Balloderry and some other Aboriginal men began to trade fish caught in the Parramatta River with Europeans in exchange for bread or salt meat. [38] But after just a few days, the business came to an abrupt end when six convicts destroyed Balloderry's canoe whilst he was in Parramatta trading his wares. [39] He angrily confronted Governor Phillip in Parramatta demanding justice and vowing revenge. Despite Phillip's assurances that the perpetrators would be punished, Balloderry obtained his own justice about a week later by spearing a convict on the mudflats of Homebush Bay. [40]

As this example shows, violent incidents usually had a clear cause. In many cases, the frontier violence that raged across parts of Sydney between the 1790s and 1810s involved people who already knew each other. [41] This was the case with Aboriginal warrior Pemulwuy (c.1850-1802) who initiated a war of resistance across Sydney in the early 1790s (**Figure 12**). Pemulwuy was said to have come from around Botany Bay, though the records of his clan affiliation are not clear. [42] The event that started his campaign was his spearing of colonial gamekeeper John McIntyre at the Cooks River in December 1790.[43] McIntyre was loathed and feared by Aboriginal people. He roamed the bush around Sydney town shooting animals with his musket, and had killed at least one Aboriginal person too. Pemulwuy decided to avenge his people and confronted McIntyre's party with several warriors at the Cooks River, fatally spearing the gamekeeper.

The spearing at the Cooks River turned Pemulwuy into an outlaw. In retaliation, Phillip sent a party of fifty men south from Sydney to the Cooks River to bring back two Botany Bay men for execution in town and the heads of ten others. [44] The party fought their way through the mudflats of the Cooks River but Aboriginal people kept well clear of the group, and the only person they saw was one of their friends Coleby. Pemulwuy spent the next decade waging guerrilla warfare across the north-west of Sydney and around the Georges River. He and his group burnt crops and attacked farms in these areas and kept Europeans fearful of where they would strike next. The escalating violence also had a longer term impact that affected the shape of the whole colony. Phillip's colonial commission stated that each portion of granted land should retain a government owned block in between, but by 1791 he changed this to allow grants to be made side by side, making it easier for settlers to assist each other in the event of attacks from Aboriginal people and escaped convicts. [45]

Tedbury begins bailing up the customers of the Halfway House hotel at Homebush when the new owner Edward Powell (a convicted killer of Aboriginal children on the Hawkesbury) takes over. They later steal 43 of Powell's sheep and take them to the Cooks River where they camp for several days and cook them up.



Figure 12. Aboriginal warrior Pemulwuy around 1801.

[Source: Samuel John Neele 1804, *Pimbloy: Native of New Holland in a canoe of that country*, State Library of Victoria 30328102131553/7. Extract of original image].

Pemulwuy and his group do not appear to have been active within the Cooks River area after the spearing of McIntyre, but attacks from his or other Aboriginal groups were relatively common throughout the 1790s in surrounding areas, including the spearing of Jane Rose at Liberty Plains (Homebush) and the burning of government surveyor Augustus Alt's home at Ashfield to the ground. [46] After Pemulwuy was killed in 1802, his son Tedbury (? – 1810) continued his father's campaign of guerrilla warfare. During one raid in early October 1809, Tedbury's group attacked William Bond's farm at Bankstown with spears, one of which grazed his neighbour's cheek. [47] We don't know if Tedbury and Bond knew each other before this incident, but there was most likely a background to his next series of attacks.

Edward Powell was a free settler who came to live at Liberty Plains (Homebush) in 1793. In 1799 he moved to the Hawkesbury River as a police constable, where he was one of several implicated in the torture and murder of two Aboriginal boys.[48] They were unanimously found guilty at their court martial, but it was decided to defer sentencing to the Secretary of State for Colonies in England and Powell was released on bail, never to serve any sentence for the horrific crimes. He returned to Homebush in 1809 where he received a grant of land and took over the licence to the Half-Way House pub at Homebush. Within a month of his return to Liberty Plains, a string of attacks by Tedbury's group were carried out and it is likely that they were specifically targeted at Powell, just as Pemulwuy had targeted the violent John McIntyre nearly 20 years before.

The first attack came on Sunday 8 October 1809 near Powell's Half-Way House Pub, when a woman was robbed of food and other supplies. [49] Two days later the group bailed up three passengers travelling on a coach along the Parramatta Road in the same area, but they were able to escape. Later the same day Tedbury group struck Powell's farm, driving 43 sheep from his paddocks towards the Cooks River. A posse of Europeans set out after them but lost the trail at the Cooks River in heavy rain. Several days later Powell and others returned and found Aboriginal people near the river tending a fire tended with two sheep roasting on it. They ran to give the alarm at the main camp, where Powell found the carcasses of another 23 roasted sheep. [50] Tedbury and his group escaped, along with eleven more sheep, which Powell never recovered. The following year however Tedbury was shot and killed at Parramatta, effectively ending armed Aboriginal resistance to European settlement around the Cooks River valley and the coastal parts of Sydney.

This was not the end of Aboriginal life along the river though. A new generation was born during the early colonial years, including Mahroot (1790s-1850) on the Cooks River. Mahroot and others would create a new way of life in the new colonial world; one that embraced new opportunities while retaining a strong sense of connection to Sydney, allowing them to live as much as possible on their own terms.

Tedbury is killed at Parramatta, and armed Aboriginal resistance in the Cooks River valley ends.	Pictures and references show that Aboriginal people are continuing to fish and camp along the river.	Visiting missionaries describe a group of five Aboriginal people fishing with spear and line from bark canoes near present day Marrickville Golf Course.
1810	**1820s**	**1835**



Figure 13. Aboriginal uses of the Cooks River catchment from the 1820s to the 1870s.

A changing environment

Many of the first grants of land along the Cooks River in the decade or so from the 1790s were relatively large (several hundred hectares), and were added to and interspersed over the next few decades by smaller grants. [51] Some grants contained houses with small clearings of sown fields or orchards, but most land was initially used for grazing and timber cutting and remained unoccupied. By the 1830s and 1840s many of these properties had changed hands at least once. Some had been consolidated into larger land holdings while other larger properties had been subdivided. Importantly though, in the 1830s, the Cooks River catchment was essentially still a natural river interspersed with cleared patches, houses and small wharves, linked by the river and a network of cart tracks and walking trails (**Figure 14**). The swampy lower reaches of the river were even less used by Europeans, containing the occasional hut and the newly established Booralee fishing village near its mouth (**Figure 17**). [52]

An Aboriginal apprentice lives at Joshua Thorp's Juhan Munna house at Undercliffe.

1830s

Mahroot acquires 10 acres of land at Banksmeadow and starts a commercial fishing business using his own boat, probably including the lower Cooks River.

1830s



Figure 14. Looking south across the river to Tempe House in 1838.

[Source: C Martens 1838. 'Tempe - Cooks River, Jan 22 1838', in *Sketches in Australia,* 1835-1865, State Library of NSW, PXC 295, f.14. Extract of original image].



Figure 15. The conical furnace of the Tempe limekiln next to the dam around the 1870s.

[Source: '[Limekiln, Cooks River Dam, N.S.W., c.1870s]', State Library of NSW, SPF/634].

1840s	1840s	1850s
The Cooks River is dammed at Tempe and makes it harder for Aboriginal people to fish the river as fish migrations cease and pollution from industry upstream accumulates.	Mahroot works as a guide for fishing and hunting tours from the Banks Hotel at Botany until his death in 1850.	Aboriginal ceremonies continue several times a year at Kingsgrove

From the 1840s the pace of change increased. A dam was constructed at Tempe next to Alexander Spark's Tempe House at what is now Wolli Creek (**Figure 15**). [53] Its aim of creating a reliable supply of freshwater to Sydney was unsuccessful, as the water above the dam remained brackish. It proved an environmental disaster for the river. The dam interrupted the tidal flushing of the river, killing some fish species and trapping silt and pollution above its walls. The dam also led to more intense European use of the river catchment by providing a major river crossing. Immediately north of the river, the village of Tempe developed in the 1840s, while the construction of a limekiln next to the dam by the 1850s brought industry to this part of the river (**Figure 15**).

Industry was also coming to other parts of the catchment. After highly polluting industries such as tanneries were banned from the city by law in 1849, they shifted to places like Shea's Creek (now Alexandra Canal) and toxic waste began to flow down to the Cooks River below the dam. Further upstream, the opening of the Canterbury Sugarworks in the early 1840s led to the establishment of the village of Canterbury and the clearing of large areas of forest (**Figure 16**). [54] Soon after, wool washing works were established on nearby Cup and Saucer Creek, pouring greasy pollution into the river, where it accumulated behind the Tempe Dam. By the 1860s the pollution had killed off fish and prawns from this part of the river. [55] It is also likely that shellfish were less prolific and probably inedible by this time. [56] The construction of the dam, sugar works and other buildings also used sandstone carved out of the outcrops flanking the river, forever changing the river.



Figure 16. Looking downstream to the large Canterbury sugar works building in 1859.

[Note the extensive land clearing and roads. The houses are the start of the village of Canterbury. Source: HG Lloyd 1859, 'Canterbury & Prout's Bridge on Cook' River, H.G.LL. July 2, 1859', in *Sketches of N. S. [New South] Wales*, 1857-1888, State Library of NSW, DLPX42 and DLPX43].

1850s

A kiln is built on the river at Tempe to burn shells for lime. Aboriginal people live at the various shell getters camps around the bay and probably work in the industry.

1856

William Rowley is born in a shell getters camp at Kurnell to an Aboriginal mother and European father and is baptised the following year at St Peters Church at Tempe.

Fishing to live

Was there a place for Aboriginal people along this changing river? Until recently, histories of Sydney usually mentioned Aboriginal people in the earliest pages (if at all), and then ignored them as irrelevant to the story of Sydney's development. It's not that Aboriginal people weren't 'there', but the survivors of smallpox and colonial dispossession were regarded as having lost their authentic Aboriginal way of life, and to be eking out a life of dependence on the outskirts of European settlement. They were of no interest to historians wanting to chart the progress of parts of Sydney. If they featured at all in local histories, it was usually to mention one or two individuals from the mid-nineteenth century who were documented in newspapers or local reminiscences. In the last decade, historians have begun to turn these stories inside out and trace the history of Aboriginal people in different parts of Sydney throughout the nineteenth century. [57]

The short answer to the question about whether Aboriginal people continued to use the Cooks River is yes. Throughout the nineteenth century there were consistently between 50 and 100 Aboriginal people living around Sydney Harbour and south across Botany Bay to Port Hacking. [58] They lived in settlements housing anything from a couple of people to several dozen at a time, living in traditional shelters, sandstone overhangs, huts, tents or other structures. Many settlements were located on the water near good fishing spots. Aboriginal people were able to remain because few Europeans used these areas until later in the nineteenth century, and because they formed relationships with those who were sympathetic to their ongoing access. We do not have much information about specific settlements around the Cooks River valley, but we know that the Aboriginal people using this area were linked in to this broader story of ongoing connection around Botany Bay, Sydney Harbour and the Georges River.

Aboriginal people continued to fish the Cooks River for many decades after the arrival of Europeans. Several illustrations from the 1820s and 1830s show Aboriginal people living along parts of the river, and fishing is a key activity. **Figure 17** for example shows a group of Aboriginal people cooking their catch at



Figure 17. View of across Botany Bay from the mouth of the Cooks River in 1825.

[Source: J Lycett, 1825. *Botany Bay, New South Wales*, National Library of Australia, nla.obj-135701715. Extract of original image].

Botany Bay man Johnny Malone continues Mahroot's tour guiding business out of the Sir Joseph Banks Hotel at Botany, most likely including the nearby Cooks River.

1860s

An Aboriginal woman named Maria works on the Holt family property known as The Warren along the Cooks River at Marrickville.

1860s



Figure 18. Scene along the lower Cooks River in 1830.

[Source: J Thompson, 1830. From *Mud Bank Botany Bay – mouth of Cook's River,* State Library of NSW, DL PXX 31 image 2a. Extract of original image].

the river entrance in 1825, nearly forty years after the arrival of Europeans in Sydney. We can see their traditional bark canoes and fishing spears, as they cook their catch on an open fire. It is also interesting to note how few signs there are of European habitation at this time. A few years later, another image from further upstream shows a small group of Aboriginal people on the riverbank, again with fishing spears by their side (**Figure 18**). These pictures are not photographs and may not be exact depictions, but they are not made up either. We know from written sources that Aboriginal people were still fishing the river at this time.

In the winter of 1835, visiting English missionaries James Backhouse and George Walker met a group of five Aboriginal people fishing along the Cooks River near today's Marrickville Golf Course. [59]

The group included a married couple and an older man and woman. One of the younger men had been to a colonial school and spoke fluent English, and the group had come from Sydney that morning. [60] The fishing techniques they observed show strong continuity with pre-European times, and it is worth quoting Backhouse's published version of the encounter at length.

> The man and his wife were seated on their knees in the canoe, in which they had a fire, on a flat stone. The man propelled the canoe by means of a paddle, that he applied first on one side and then on the other. He used a spear in fishing, made of a long stick, with four, long, wooden prongs, attached to it, by means of string and Grass-tree Gum. This he brought slowly, almost into contact with the fish, before striking. While fishing, he kept up a noise like the blowing of a Porpoise, and accompanied it by showers of saliva, that disturbed the surface of the water, like small rain. He seldom failed in transfixing his finny prey. Another man, who stood on a log that extended into the river, was equally successful, by a similar process. [61]

1860s Aboriginal people are recorded passing through Bexley and stopping off to visit local European families.

1867 A fishing boat was issued to the 'Aboriginal tribe at Cook's River', which was probably Johnny Malone's group.

1870s Fish, prawns and shellfish have largely been killed off along the river above the dam at Tempe.

Just a few years later, the river was dammed at Tempe, and scenes like this may have become rarer upstream. Aboriginal people were still present, as we will see, but their fishing was focussed on the lower river. By the 1840s too, traditional bark canoes were more or less replaced by wooden rowing boats or small sailing boats. These boats gave Aboriginal people a way of making money in the colonial economy. Botany Bay man Mahroot (1790s–1850, also known as Boatswain, **Figure 19**) had worked on whaling and sealing ships in the early 1800s but by the 1830s had established himself in a hut on a 10 acre block of land on the eastern shore of Botany Bay, about five kilometres from his place of birth near the entrance to the river. He started up a commercial fishing business with his wife, and sold his catch to pay for food and supplies for himself and other Aboriginal people in the area. [62]



Figure 19. Mahroot pictured as a young man in 1820.

[Source: P Mikhailov, 1820. *Movat & Salamander*, © State Russian Museum, St Petersburg, Inv # P-29209. Extract of original image].



Figure 20. Botany Bay man Johnny Malone, date unknown.

[Source: *[Johnny Malone]*, NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service collection, Kurnell. Extract of original image].

When the Banks Hotel (later the Sir Joseph Banks Hotel) opened at Botany in the 1840s, Mahroot used his fishing boat to work as a boatman and hunting and fishing guide for the hotel's patrons. He even set up a hut in the hotel's grounds at times. His local expertise and steady-hand saw him remembered as one who 'guided and watched the white young native'. [63] Mahroot was familiar with all of the bay and almost certainly used the rich fishing grounds of the Cooks River estuary on his tours and for his fishing business. He was sometimes accompanied by young Aboriginal men on these trips, and it may have been one of them who took over his role as guide after his death in 1850.

Johnny Malone (1820s–1880s) was born around Botany Bay and lived most of his life there in settlements at Sans Souci and Botany (**Figure 20**). In 1862 the new owner of the Sir Joseph Banks Hotel engaged Johnny and his group to run 'make arrangements for boat excursions and fishing parties' for hotel patrons. [64] Johnny and his group lived on the nearby public reserve at Botany, which

became known as a place where Aboriginal guides could be hired. [65] As with Mahroot, it is highly likely that Johnny Malone's fishing tours took in the Cooks River estuary, which many European fishermen also acknowledged as a rich fishing ground. [66] We have one letter that shows that Aboriginal people were still using and identifying with the Cooks River at this time. It suggests that a fishing boat was purchased in 1868 for the 'Aboriginal tribe at Cook's River by which they are enabled to get a living by catching fish.' [67] Although the letter does not name any individuals, it is likely that it was referring to Johnny Malone's group.

The lower Cooks River was linked into the economy of Botany Bay by more than just fishing. Since the early nineteenth century shells had been collected from around the Cooks River and Botany Bay and burned to make for lime mortar for buildings. It has often been assumed that Aboriginal middens were a major source of these shells, but it is unlikely that their mix of shell, soil, bone and stone was favoured over vast natural beds of shells that were found along the river and around the bay. By the 1850s, the construction of a lime kiln at Tempe placed the Cooks River at the centre of the shell lime industry of Botany Bay (see **Figure 15**). Shell-getters established camps around the bay and rowed to Tempe to empty their boats at the lime kiln, and to obtain supplies. One of the biggest camps was at Weeney Bay on the Kurnell Peninsula and it comprised a mixed population of Aboriginal people and Europeans.

In 1856 a local Aboriginal woman Sarah had a son William to a European shellgetter named Ned Rowley at Weeney Bay. Seven months later, Ned and Sarah rowed William across the bay to Tempe, and then took him up the road to St Peters Church, where he was baptised (**Figure 21**). [68] The records of St Peters show that a number of shellgetters visited the church to marry or baptise children, and many were also buried there after drowning in the bay. It is likely that other Aboriginal people are among these records, but their Aboriginality was rarely recorded and can often only be identified by knowing other things about them. [69] William grew up around Botany Bay, working as a fisherman in the later nineteenth century, and was also employed to look after the Holt family's oyster leases at Weeney Bay.[70]



Figure 21. St Peters Church in 1863, several years after William Rowley's baptism.

[Source: HG Lloyd, 1863. 'Saint Peter's Church Cooks River', in *Sketches of N. S. [New South] Wales*, 1857-1888, State Library of NSW, DLPX42, f. 66].

Walking the land

We only have fragments of information about the Aboriginal people who continued to use the upper reaches of the Cooks River valley throughout the nineteenth century. The people are often unnamed, but it is clear that they were still present. Around the time that Backhouse and Walker encountered a group of Aboriginal people fishing near Joshua Thorp's house (around the present day Marrickville Golf Course) in the 1830s, Thorp was said to have had an Aboriginal servant living with him. [71] We don't know anything more about this person yet, but they may have been the source for the name Juhan Munna (or Juang-Munna) that Thorp gave his house. [72] In the 1860s, an Aboriginal woman named Maria was living on Thomas Holt's Marrickville property called The Warren, together with her European husband who was Holt's bullock driver. [73]

These brief snippets could be dismissed as local legend, but we know from elsewhere around coastal Sydney that it was not unusual for Aboriginal people to live on the properties of sympathetic Europeans, or to work for them in various capacities. [74] This was definitely true of the Holt family, who had a number of Aboriginal people working for them in later years when they owned most of the Kurnell Peninsula (called the Holt Sutherland Estate). William Rowley tended their oyster leases at Weeney Bay in the 1890s, and he was permitted to live on their property with his family. Other Aboriginal people are said to have worked for the family at times, and in the 1880s the Holts employed a European man named William Fussell who lived with his Aboriginal wife and children at Sans Souci. [75]

The Holts were not the only family around the Cooks River who did not mind Aboriginal people passing through and staying on their properties. In the 1850s, Aboriginal ceremonies were still being conducted in the forests to the south of the river. One early Kingsgrove resident recalled that they took place twice a year and lasted for a week at a time. [76] The participants may have been the same group who passed through nearby Bexley in the 1860s, when local resident Frances Carey was a young girl. Later in life she recalled the group of Aboriginal men, women and children who 'used to pass through on their way from the South Coast.... camping under a big red-gum tree on one of Preddy's paddocks'. She remembered an old man named Kooma asking her mother for 'a cup of tea and something to eat', and by way of thanks rocking her little sister to sleep with an Aboriginal lullaby. [77] Kooma may have been the Georges River man of that name who died in 1865, but there were also others with that name to the south of Sydney and down to the south coast. Many coastal Sydney people were linked through family to the Illawarra and Shoalhaven, and travelled to and fro to maintain these connections, like this group appears to have been doing.

In time, we will learn more to flesh out these tantalising glimpses of how Aboriginal people walked the land and interacted with Europeans. But even these brief stories show us that it was not unusual for Aboriginal people to be encountered across parts of the Cooks River valley in the 1860s and 1870s. For most of the nineteenth century, Aboriginal people had been able to move relatively freely through coastal Sydney, setting up camp around Botany Bay and probably some of these other places further inland. By the end of the century though, this way of life was coming to a close.

Hundreds of Aboriginal domestic servants are working across Sydney, including within the Cooks River area.

1920s

Local Aboriginal people Ellen Anderson and William Rowley purchase land along Salt Pan Creek at Peakhurst to live independently of the Protection Board. They are linked to others at La Perouse and regularly travel through the Cooks River valley on their way between these two places.

1920s



Figure 22. Aboriginal uses of the Cooks River catchment from the 1880s to the 1930s.

Protection and intervention

For most of the nineteenth century, the colonial government had little interest in Aboriginal affairs beyond handing out blankets and occasionally purchasing fishing boats and other supplies. In the late 1870s though, Christian missionaries in western New South Wales began to put pressure on the government through their Sydney supporters to do something about the desperate plight of many Aboriginal people. [78] George Thornton, a Sydneysider, parliamentarian and unofficial advisor to the government on Aboriginal matters opposed the generalised welfare that missionaries were advocated. He believed that Aboriginal people should only be given assistance in their home district, and he considered all of those living in Sydney to be 'from' somewhere else and therefore with no reason to be in the city. At Thornton's repeated urging, the government eventually, and reluctantly, took action in response to a group of Aboriginal people camped at Circular Quay. Thornton was made the state's first administrator (or 'Protector') of Aboriginal welfare in 1881, and this role was expanded to the Aborigines Protection Board in 1883. From then on, government assistance in the coastal part of Sydney was almost exclusively available at a fishing settlement established by Aboriginal people at La Perouse in the late 1870s. [79]

In the 1890s, members of the Petersham Congregational Church, who were part of an evangelical movement called the Christian Endeavour Union, started working with Aboriginal people at La Perouse. By the mid-1890s they had established the La Perouse Aborigines Mission Committee and had built a mission church, and advocated on behalf of La Perouse residents. The combined effect of these government and religious interventions, and the fact that Aboriginal people could still freely travel to and from the settlement, was that La Perouse grew in size at the expense of the other Aboriginal settlements around

One of Ellen Anderson's sons William lives at Canterbury with other Aboriginal people.

The Salt Pan Creek settlement closes and there are few records after this time of locally connected Aboriginal people travelling through or living within the Cooks River valley.

1929 1939

Botany Bay and Sydney Harbour. By the turn of the century, it was virtually the only one that remained in this area. La Perouse residents maintained a fleet of fishing boats which they used to ply the fishing grounds of the bay, and probably the lower reaches of the Cooks River, but it does not appear that Aboriginal people lived along its banks any longer.

Another reason why Aboriginal people used the Cooks River valley less from the end of the nineteenth century were massive environmental changes. The isolated lower reaches of the river were almost completely cleared of trees and housed market gardens and a sewage farm (**Figure 24**). Further up the river some pockets of forest remained but much of the catchment was covered in suburban housing, spurred on by the construction of a railway line to the south in the 1880s. The river mudflats began to be reclaimed, and sections of the river were dredged. This was far from the landscape pictured half a century earlier river when Aboriginal people fished their way along the river.

In the early twentieth century, the Aborigines Protection Board gained its first legal powers over Aboriginal people, and began to enforce a policy of segregation and child removal. From the early 1910s, Aboriginal girls were taken from their families and sent to the Cootamundra Girls Home to train as domestic servants, before being sent to work across Sydney. We have records of a Myra at Ashfield in the early 1910s and a May at Strathfield in 1916 working as domestic servants, though it is not known whether they had come via the girl's home.[80] By the 1920s there were hundreds of Aboriginal girls and young women working across Sydney, and some were undoubtedly living within in the Cooks River area. [81]

Independence

The increasing government surveillance of reserves and missions like La Perouse prompted some Aboriginal people to attempt to live more independently, most notably along Salt Pan Creek at Peakhurst. Aboriginal people may have been living there before the 1920s, but at this time William Rowley and his wife, as well as local woman Ellen Anderson (nee Davis) and her family, purchased two adjacent blocks of land along Salt Pan Creek. [82] Some residents worked in local businesses and their children attended local schools, but they still maintained close connections with their extended families at La Perouse. One of the ways that Salt Pan Creek residents travelled around the edge of the bay to La Perouse was through the Cooks Rive area.

A resident of 'St Elmo' along Stoney Creek Road at Kingsgrove recalled Aboriginal people passing by on their way from Salt Pan Creek to La Perouse (**Figure 23**). [83] They asked her and her neighbours for donations, and sat in the shade of the roadside trees to eat some of the food they had been given.



Figure 23. St Elmo, along Stoney Creek Road at Kingsgrove, date unknown.

[Source: Hill and Madden 2004: 93].

This was typical of how Aboriginal people used the Cooks River area by this time – as a place of transit rather than settlement. While many Salt Pan Creek residents had strong ties to La Perouse and the coast, some were also linked to other parts of New South Wales through the interventions of the Protection Board and missionaries from the late nineteenth century. Ellen Anderson for example had gone to the Maloga Aboriginal Mission on the Murray River in the early 1880s and had married a Victorian Aboriginal man named Hugh Anderson, before returning to the coast. These wider connections brought a number of Aboriginal people from across the state to the hearths of Salt Pan Creek, particularly when it became a hub of Aboriginal civil rights activity in the 1920s and 1930s. Similarly, the expansion of the La Perouse Aborigines mission from 1899 into other Aboriginal centres in western Sydney created new connections. One of Ellen's sons William (1897-1950) formed a relationship with a woman he had met at the Sackville Aboriginal reserve on the Hawkesbury River. After living together at Salt Pan Creek, they moved to a house at Canterbury in 1929, where they lived for a time with a number of other Aboriginal people. [84] Another of Ellen's sons George (c.1885-

Aboriginal men from La Perouse fish their way along the shore of Botany Bay near the lower entrance of the river on their way to and from work in the city.

1940s

Aboriginal people begin moving from country New South Wales to the inner suburbs of Sydney, including areas such as Marrickville.

1950s



Figure 24. View in the 1920s south from the site of today's airport to Kyeemagh and Brighton.

[The foreground area to the north of the river was largely a sewerage farm and market gardens, and no original forests survived. Source: *[Photo-Barton Park and Riverine Park prior to Cooks River diversion and Muddy Creek forming, c1920s]*, Rockdale Local Studies, Vertical File - Cooks River].

1930) passed through Punchbowl on his way from Salt Pan Creek to meet some other Aboriginal people at Waterloo the following year, but tragically died enroute. [85]

After the closure of the Salt Pan Creek settlement in the late 1930s, there are few records of coastal Sydney people living in or moving through the Cooks River valley. The accumulating pollution along the river also acted to keep local people away. Fishing continued to be a key activity for Aboriginal people at the La Perouse settlement, but these activities were focussed on Botany Bay. Family histories tell of Aboriginal men fishing their way along the eastern shore of the bay from La Perouse in the 1930s and 1940s on their way to and from work in the city, using traditional pronged fishing spears. [86] The river was avoided though in these activities, as it had become far too polluted by industry (**Figure 24**). As well as pollutants in the water, large sections of the river were dredged once again in the 1930s, bends and wetlands were drained and filled, and in the 1940s and 1950s the entire lower river was buried in the reclamation of land for Sydney airport. [87]

Even if coastal Sydney people had continued to frequent the Cooks River area, their local connections had long since ceased to be recognised by Europeans in Sydney. There was a widespread belief that only Aboriginal people with full Aboriginal ancestry who still practiced their traditional culture were 'authentic', and that this way of life had disappeared from Sydney in the previous century. [88] In the 1930s, some felt moved to commemorate this assumed demise with memorials to 'the Aborigines' at Camperdown Cemetery and Hurlstone Park. [89] Ironically, at the very time when these memorials to Aboriginal absence were being dedicated in the Cooks River valley, Aboriginal people were moving into the area in increasing numbers from country New South Wales, sowing the seeds of the communities that exist along the river today.

Interior scenes from the movie Jedda (the first film to feature Aboriginal people in lead roles) are shot at Avondale Studios at Henderson St Turrella, involving Ngarla Kunoth (Rosalie Kunoth Monks) and Robert Tudawali. A birthday party thrown for Ngarla during shooting is attended by painter Albert Namatjira.

Moving to the river

From the late nineteenth century an increasing number of Aboriginal people came to live in suburban Sydney from rural New South Wales; seeking work as well as respite from the increasing scrutiny of the Aborigines Protection Board. Most Aboriginal migrants came to live closer to the city than the Cooks River in inner suburbs like Redfern, Balmain, Waterloo, Darlinghurst and Woolloomooloo, but we can also pick up a few traces of individual Aboriginal people living across the Cooks River catchment. The 1891 New South Wales census for example, lists Aboriginal women living at Stanmore, Marrickville, Kogarah and Arncliffe, and men living at Canterbury and Punchbowl, some of whom were probably Aboriginal migrants rather than those with local ancestry. [90]

From the 1920s a distinct Aboriginal community began to form around several streets in Redfern. It was close to several industrial sites which offered employment, and provided a place for new arrivals to find relatives and a place to stay. Long-time Dulwich Hill resident and Wiradjuri woman Ann Weldon explained how this unfolded for her family from Eurambie Mission in Cowra. When Uncle Major Murray and his wife Mary left the mission without official permission to come to Sydney in search of work, they were not allowed back. They lived in Redfern and their house then became a hub for visiting relatives and those moving to the city themselves over many years. [91]

While the focus of Aboriginal life in the mid-twentieth century was the inner city, some were coming to live further south along the Cooks River, mainly because of work opportunities. Early residents included Harry Huddleston, who moved to Marrickville with his wife Ida and their children after the bombing of Darwin in the Second World War and worked for the Water Board at Warragamba Dam throughout the 1950s. [92] Twins Jennifer and Alison Bush were brought up in Sydney and Darwin in the 1940s and 1950s, and both came to work at Marrickville Hospital as nurses in the early 1960s, while Michael Bryant from Nambucca became a teacher at Marrickville Public School in the same period. [93] The monthly Aborigines Welfare Board magazine *Dawn* also records Aboriginal people living elsewhere in the Cooks River Valley at Arncliffe, Chullora and Eastwood in the 1950s and 1960s. [94]

These were among the people who were living along the river when many more Aboriginal migrants began to arrive in the 1960s and 1970s. Despite the presence of these earlier residents, new arrivals often encountered entrenched racism. Ann Weldon recalled that when she and her husband bought a house at Dulwich Hill in the 1970s, one of people on the street organised a petition to try to stop them. [95] She also relates however, that both of her immediate neighbours strongly argued in their defence. Other Aboriginal people have also commented on the multicultural nature of Marrickville creating a more welcoming space. [96]

Creating communities

For the descendants of coastal Sydney people at La Perouse, a sense of community has always been present. As La Perouse community member Michael Ingrey put it - 'whenever we see Lapa beach or the bay it's home for us', as previous generations have also felt. [97] For others who came to live in the Cooks River valley though, home was somewhere else (often western New South Wales), and a sense of community had to evolve. The basic building blocks of community were different families and their interactions based on either shared tribal origins or a broader sense of shared Aboriginality.

Roy Carroll moved from Cowra to Sydney in the 1950s to train and fight as a boxer, and later became a trainer himself, owned his own gym and promoted boxing tournaments. He worked for a number of years in the 1960s and 1970s at Marrickville RSL, where he organised boxing matches, and also worked as a taxi driver. [98] Roy and his wife Esther (nee Ingram, whose family was also originally from Cowra), became very active in the Foundation for Aboriginal Affairs, established in 1964 to assist the growing number of Aboriginal people arriving in Sydney with education, employment, housing and other issues. The Foundation helped to create a sense of community among the Aboriginal people living in the inner city, and included a regional committee based in Marrickville. [99] Roy and Esther's

An increasing number of Aboriginal people move into the Marrickville area, working in local schools, hospitals and other businesses. Some are involved in the Foundation for Aboriginal Affairs in Sydney, the first Aboriginal community organisation set up in 1964.

activities also drew in their extended families, and after Roy passed away Esther and her sister Sylvie's house at Enmore became a hub for family gatherings. [100] Gatherings like this in private homes and elsewhere brought Aboriginal people together to talk and share stories. Both Suzanne Ingram and Ann Weldon recall women gathering to play cards in this way. [101] Sporting events, and in particular the annual NSW Aboriginal Rugby League Knockout, are also important gatherings that help to foster a sense of community, as former Redfern All Blacks player Ray Davison described. [102] Since the first Koori knockout at Camdenville Oval St Peters in 1971, it has been held several times at Henson Park in Marrickville, and functions a 'contemporary corroborree' as much as a sporting event (**Figure 25**). [103]



Figure 25. A knockout game in progress at Henson Park, Marrickville in 2004.

[Source: MDCA].

The Foundation for Aboriginal Affairs paved the way for a number of other Aboriginal organisations set up to assist Aboriginal people in various ways, and the Marrickville area was home to several of these. In 1974, Val Bryant OAM and Jim Carroll (a non-Aboriginal man and no relation to the Aboriginal Carrolls, whom Val later married), set up Benelong's Haven at Langton House in Marrickville as a halfway house for recovering alcoholics, as well as a men's house the following year. [104] In 1977, the Aboriginal Education Consultative Group was established on Cavendish Street at Stanmore (where it still operates) as a not-for-profit organisation which provides advice representing Aboriginal community perspectives on educational and training matters.

The passage of the NSW Land Rights Act through parliament in 1983 established a network of Local Aboriginal Land Councils (LALCs) across the state, each with the responsibility to 'promote the protection of Aboriginal culture and the heritage of Aboriginal persons' within their boundaries. [105] The Metropolitan Local Aboriginal Land Council was subsequently established at Redfern, and includes most of the Cooks River catchment within its administrative boundary. As we will see, the Metropolitan LALC has come to play a major role in the protection and promotion of Aboriginal heritage along the Cooks River.

More closely along the river, the large community of Aboriginal people that had come to live in the Marrickville area by the 1990s sought a voice in local Council affairs, initially through the engagement of Yvonne Weldon as a trainee Aboriginal community worker at Council in the early 1990s. The gaps Yvonne identified in Council's engagement with Aboriginal people led to the formation of the Marrickville Aboriginal Consultative Committee (MACC) in 1994 to give Aboriginal community members a forum to provide advice to the (then) Marrickville Council. With respected community members such as Ann Weldon and Lester Bostock as committee chairs in its early years, and with community members engaged to work for Council on Aboriginal community matters, the MACC developed employment strategies, cultural plans and promoted the recognition of Aboriginal people with Council. The work of the MACC also led to the formation of the Inner West Aboriginal Community Company in 2000, initially as a support service for older community members, but later including tenancy services and youth programs. [106] Although the Marrickville Aboriginal community was the largest and most active along the Cooks River, Aboriginal advisory committees were also established in the 2000s at the former Canterbury and Bankstown Councils. Together these groups have provided a voice for Aboriginal people along the river, and have given organisations such as the Cooks River Alliance an effective means of consulting with local Aboriginal communities about river issues.

1971 The first NSW Aboriginal Rugby League Knockout is held at Camdenville Oval at St Peters. It becomes an annual event, sometimes held at Henson Park in Marrickville.

1974 Val Bryant establishes a half-way house for recovering alcoholics at Marrickville called Benelong's Haven.



Figure 26. Precious green space along the Cooks River at Marrickville.

[Source: MDCA].

Connecting with the river

The Cooks River and its various creeks form such a large and obvious swathe of nature through an otherwise urban and industrial environment. Despite its history of polluted waters, the river has always attracted local residents to its grassy banks to exercise, play and relax. Aboriginal people also came to connect with the river in this way. Many Aboriginal people interviewed for this project and the previous Marrickville Aboriginal Oral History Project in the late 1990s and early 2000s, talk about walking and riding along the river, playing there as children or watching their children play (**Figure 26**). As Metropolitan Local Aboriginal Land Council CEO Nathan Moran expresses it, being near the river 'you feel a beautiful power and spirit and flow to it'. [107] In a similar vein, local resident Lucy Simpson recently described the river as a 'little sanctuary within the midst of our urban landscape to escape to for a bit of a retreat – a place to think and reflect for a sense of grounding.' [108]

Others have gotten to know the river through its unnatural side. When growing up in Redfern in the 1950s, Allen Madden recalled jumping into the constructed canals after heavy rains and riding them down to the Cooks River. [109] Much further upstream where the river is confined to a concrete drain, Jenny Thomsen recalled playing in the drain when visiting an old uncle who lived nearby. [110] The industrial nature of parts of the Cooks River valley also led to a little-known but significant Aboriginal connection in the 1950s. A film studio was established in the 1940s in an industrial area along Wolli Creek at Turrella, and by the 1950s was being used by renowned Australian film director Charles Chauvel **(Figure 27**). Chauvel used the studio to shoot the interior scenes of his seminal 1955 film Jedda, the first Australian film to feature Aboriginal people in the lead roles. During the months of filming in 1953 and 1954, one of the film leads Robert Tudawali and other cast members lived with 'sympathetic white families close to the studio', while the other lead Ngarla Kunoth (now Rosalie Kunoth-Monks) stayed with the Chauvels in their house at Vaucluse. [111] During filming Ngarla turned sixteen and the Chauvels held a party for her at the studio. The party was attended by

The New South Wales Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG) is established at Cavendish Street in Stanmore to provide Aboriginal community perspectives on educational and training matters.



celebrated Aboriginal painter Albert Namatjira, who was visiting Sydney at the time. [112] While the studio continued to be used for film for several more decades, no further Aboriginal connections to the place are known after the completion of Jedda.

Figure 27. Avondale Studios at Turrella in its later incarnation as Fontana Films.

[Source: Rockdale Library Local History Collection].

Overwhelmingly though, it is the presence of the river as a rare place of nature in the city that is its main attraction. Like other residents, Aboriginal people value the pelicans and other birds, the flow of the water and the peace it offers in often busy lives. The river also touches part of their identity as Aboriginal people, in several different but related ways. At one level, the river is a constant reminder of the enduring importance of nature and traditional land; the need to be connected to the history and culture of the places in which you live; and a reminder of the ancestral importance of 'home'. For those who come themselves from river communities in western New South Wales, this has an added significance. The Cooks River plays the role of a kind of link to their ancestral lands. Jenny Newman for example, who grew up with 'muddy toes' on the Macquarie River at Narromine, described the Cooks River as reviving her sense of 'belonging' to her ancestral river country. [113] For Lucy Simpson, a 'freshwater woman' from north-western New South Wales, rivers are 'a central part of identity, informing the ways we interpret, relate and connect to the land.' [114]

In getting to know the river, many Aboriginal people have also come to appreciate it as a culturally important place in its own right. In 1986 an Aboriginal site survey was conducted along Wolli Creek by Aboriginal students from the Tranby Aboriginal Co-operative College in Glebe, and resulted in the recording of a number of shelter sites, middens and art sites. [115] As Aboriginal people became aware of these and other ancient sites along the river, the cultural significance of the river became apparent, despite its long history of degradation and pollution. As Ann Weldon stated in a 1998 interview, 'it is a significant area...as an Aboriginal person if you go walk down there you can feel the spirituality of the place.' [116]

Custodians of the river

Over the last half century, Aboriginal people from many different areas have come to call the Cooks River valley home. They have come to value the river for all of the reasons already outlined, and many keenly feel a responsibility to look after the river on behalf of its traditional Aboriginal people. For Jenny Newman, the responsibility she feels as an Aboriginal resident along the river is heightened by an interesting personal connection. On the European side of her family, she is descended from James Squires, who lived along the Parramatta River at Kissing Point in the early 1800s and had a close relationship with local Aboriginal people. Among them was Bennelong, a Wangal man whose clan were closely affiliated with the Cooks River. When Bennelong died, Squires allowed him to be buried on his property and continued to look after his extended family. Jenny's personal connection to this important story makes her 'feel quite a special relationship to this country now, to look after Bennelong's Country, because I am descended from people who have looked after Bennelong and his Country back over time.' [117]

Over the last decade or so, the varied but deepening connections of Aboriginal people to the Cooks River have given rise to a palpable sense of custodianship and responsibility for its natural and cultural heritage. At the same time, there has been a growing capacity to act on this, through Council advisory committees and the Metropolitan Local Aboriginal Land Council. This has resulted in a number of initiatives which have served to protect and preserve the heritage of the river, and educate the public about its Aboriginal history and significance.

The NSW Aboriginal Land Rights Act is passed, and soon after the Metropolitan Local Aboriginal Land Council is established in Redfern with a responsibility to care for Aboriginal heritage within its boundaries, which covers most of the Cooks River valley.



Figure 28. Memorial seat installed in front of the Kendrick Park midden at Tempe.

[Source: MDCA].



Figure 29. Interpretation sign recently installed along Alexandra Canal.

[Source: Paul Irish].

The most visible of these was a project in the mid-2000s to preserve a midden that was eroding out of a formerly quarried bank of the river at Kendrick Park in Tempe (**Figure 4**). The Marrickville Local Aboriginal Land Council worked together with the Marrickville Aboriginal Consultative Committee, archaeologists and the National Parks & Wildlife Service to stabilise and cover the midden, in the process learning more about its age and contents. [118] Following this, a memorial seat and a set of painted poles interpreting the Aboriginal use of the river was installed near the midden, and at several other locations along the river (**Figure 28**). Projects like these have helped to raise the profile of Aboriginal heritage across the Cooks River catchment, such that it now features in a range of projects. An example is recent restoration works undertaken by Sydney Water along the banks of Alexandra Canal at Tempe, which includes an interpretive sign about the 6,000 year old dugong found along the canal in the 1890s, and involved local Aboriginal people at the opening (**Figure 29**). The Cooks River Alliance also features Aboriginal culture and history in its annual Cooks River Day Out at Steel Park in Marrickville.

The Aboriginal sense of custodianship along the river has also inspired research into the Aboriginal history and heritage of the river. The Marrickville Aboriginal Consultative Committee supported Council to commission an Aboriginal site survey and heritage study in the early 2000s, which identified significant Aboriginal places from both ancient and more recent times. [119] The results of this study formed some of the content of the Cadigal Wangal website, which was developed to educate the public about the Aboriginal history and heritage of the Marrickville area. Between the late 1990s and mid-2000s, archival and oral history research was undertaken by Marrickville community members as part of the Marrickville Aboriginal History Project. This culminated in a community history exhibition featuring a wealth of images and information, and the materials are now stored in the Marrickville Library local history collection.

1986

An Aboriginal sites survey is conducted along Wolli Creek by students from the Tranby Aboriginal Co-operative College in Glebe, locating a number of middens, rockshelters and art sites.

1994

The Marrickville Aboriginal Consultative Committee (MACC) is formed to advise Marrickville Council.

These and many more initiatives are just the beginning. The sense of custodial responsibility for the Cooks River among the Aboriginal people who live along it is only getting deeper with time. Many Aboriginal people interviewed for this project have expressed a keen desire to commemorate, celebrate and promote the long history of Aboriginal connections to the Cooks River valley. The capacity to do this has been growing for a number of years through the dedicated work of local Aboriginal people to research the river's history, and to garner support among local councils and other government agencies. Local Aboriginal artists are continuing to create public art works to promote awareness of the river's Aboriginal history, and will keep pushing for more; and there is a desire to see Aboriginal names reinstated along the river and perhaps with the name of the river itself, to make plain the area's historical and enduring Aboriginal connections. [120] Although much has been lost, more connections are being created, and the river continues to have meaning for Aboriginal people. When local resident and singer Nardi Simpson looks forward to a time when Aboriginal people can 'sing the river again', she is not yearning for something lost, but celebrating what has survived and what could be. [121] With such a passionate community of Aboriginal people caring for the river, the future holds many possibilities, and many more river stories are yet to be written.

The MACC helps Council develop Aboriginal employment and cultural plans and forms the Inner West Aboriginal Community Company in 1999 to look after local Aboriginal needs.

A series of oral histories of local Aboriginal people is recorded as part of the Marrickville Aboriginal History Project. The project also involves archival research and photography of local people and significant places.

8 NOTES

See bibliography section for full references.

1 Sobott (ed). 2013

2 Haworth *et al.* 2004:57; Attenbrow 2010:38-9.

3 Albani *et al.* 1997.

4 Attenbrow 2012:63, Jo McDonald CHM 2005:28, 56.

5 The excavators conclude that stone artefacts of a particular stone type (silicified tuff) represent an older and separate use of the place by Aboriginal people than the artefacts made from other stone types (Jo McDonald CHM 2005:56, 64). While they present a number of arguments to support this two phase occupation, there is no archaeological evidence to link the tuff artefacts to the early date from the charcoal feature, and the number of silicified tuff artefacts recovered is too small to draw firm conclusions. They are in any case also found in supposedly 'younger' layers, just as other stone types are also found in supposedly 'older' layers (e.g. Table 19, p51).

6 Dallas *et al.* 1995:63.

7 Haworth *et al.* 2004.

8 Etheridge *et al.* 1896; Haworth *et al.* 2004.

9 AMBS 2003; and see Attenbrow 2012:62 for calibration of date.

10 Attenbrow 2010:38.

11 Attenbrow 2010:102-3.

12 Attenbrow 2010:122-124; Attenbrow *et al.* 2012.

13 Attenbrow 2010:156-7.

14 Attenbrow 2010:87.

15 Attenbrow 2010:22-30, 57-58. As Attenbrow discusses, there are debates about clan boundaries. The suffix –'gal' in Cadigal refers to the men of the clan and 'galleon' refers to the women, but the term Cadigal is commonly used to represent the clan as a whole.

16 Attenbrow 2010:137. We have little understanding of the differences in these styles, and no evidence of which styles were used by the Cadigal, Wanngal or Gameygal to differentiate themselves from other clans. Unfortunately depictions of body painting by European artists are not necessarily accurate.

17 Irish 2017:17-19.

18 It has been suggested that the name of the river is Goolay'yari meaning Pelican (Bodkin nd). However further information is needed. The sources referred to in this document do not contain this information and the name is not referred to by other Aboriginal people. Unless it can be independently corroborated it should not be used.

19 Attenbrow 2010:113-115.

20 Nolan 2003.

21 Muir 2007:3, Wheatley nd.

22 Attenbrow 2010:105.

23 Tench 1789:90 [1979:52].

24 Sydney cockle (*Anadara trapezia*), Sydney rock oyster (*Saccostrea commercialis*), Hercules mud whelk (*Pyrazus ebeninus*), hairy mussel (*Trichomya hirsuta*) and mud oyster (*Ostrea angasi*).

25 Old shell beds are sometimes exposed in the river banks and natural shell washed ashore has sometimes been mistaken for midden.

26 http://earlwoodfarm.com/unearthing-a-midden/

27 For a good summary see Attenbrow 2010: Chapter 7.

28 Attenbrow 2010:138.

29 Attenbrow 2010:95-6.

30 Corkill 1999.

31 Attenbrow 2010:127-8.

32 Carter 1798, Hill & Madden 2004:39, Marriott 1988:45-6.

33 Attenbrow 2010:139-141.

34 Irish 2017: 20-21.

35 Carter 1798.

36 Karskens 2009:389, 424; Smith 2009.

37 Flynn 1995:12-13.

38 Collins 1798 [1910]:118-9.

39 Hunter 1793 [1968]:352-3.

40 Collins 1798 [1910]:118-9.

41 Karskens 2009:449.

42 Attenbrow 2010:27.

43 Smith 2010.

44 Karskens 2009:393-394.

45 Governor Phillip in Historical Records of NSW 1(2), 1892:307-8.

46 Henderson 1923:358; Dowd 1962: 365.

47 *Sydney Gazette* 1/10/1809:2.

48 Reece 1974:105-6.

49 *Sydney Gazette* 15/10/1809:1.

50 *Sydney Gazette* 15/10/1809:1.

51 Muir 2013.

52 Sippel 2013.

53 Witton 2013.

54 Madden & Muir 2013.

55 Muir 2007:16-17.

56 Oysters were completely gone from the river by the 1870s according to a government investigation – quoted in Orlovich 1972:6.

57 Karskens 2009, Goodall & Cadzow 2009, Nugent 2005, Irish 2017.

58 Irish 2017.

59 Backhouse 1831-1841:79-80.

60 Walker 1831-1841:28.

61 Backhouse 1843:288

62 Irish 2017:24, 38-9.

63 'Botany Bay', *Sydney Morning Herald* 28/1/1861: 5. 'Native' in this context meant a European born in Australia. See also Irish 2017:75.

64 'Circular - Sir Joseph Banks Hotel', *Sydney Morning Herald* 18/4/1862: 1.

65 'Wallaby Shooting at Port Hacking', *Australian Town & Country Journal* 30/7/1870: 27.

66 Sippel 2013.

67 Currigan 1868.

68 Baptism Record James William Rowley, 23 June 1857 (Society of Australian Genealogists, Church of England in Australia - Parish registers, 1839-1970, SAG Reel 001, frame 1090).

69 See register in note 68. See also Horton & Halls 1988: Burial Register.

70 Irish 2017:130-1.

71 Madden & Muir 1996:4.

72 Muir, nd.

73 Holt 1972:125.

74 Irish 2017.

75 E.g. Jimmy Lowndes, 'Sans Souci Celebrities', *The St George Call* 14/5/1904: 1. For the Fussells see Irish 2017:122.

76 Hill & Madden 2004:39.

77 Kinsella 1976.

78 Curthoys 1982.

79 Irish 2017:112-117. For a time the Board also provided assistance to a small group living at Sans Souci.

80 'Minutes of Aborigines Protectorate Board Meeting 5/5/1910 & 12/5/1910', SRNSW, Aborigines Welfare Board Archives; NRS 2, Minute Books 17/3/1910 - 2/3/1911 [4/7119], 'Minutes of Aborigines Protectorate Board Meeting 27/3/1913', SRNSW, Aborigines Welfare Board Archives; NRS 2, Minute Books 22/8/1912 - 5/6/1913 [4/7122]. Note that first names only have been used.

81 Goodall 1995:75–80; Walden 1995.

82 Goodall & Cadzow 2009: Chapters 5 & 6.

83 Hill & Madden 2004:93-4.

84 'Taxis, beer. Spent endowment money. Aboriginal Woman', Sun 23/07/1929:19; 'News Summary', *Macleay Chronicle* 24/07/1929:6

85 'Aboriginal Found Dead', *Sydney Morning Herald* 24/5/1930:17.

86 Interview with Michael Ingrey, Cooks River Catchment Aboriginal History Project, 2017.

87 Muir 2007:21-22.

88 Irish 2017:87-93.

89 'Boy Scouts' Tribute to Aborigines', *Sydney Morning Herald* 3/5/1932:10, Gledhill 1946, Photo of Rangers League memorial to local Aboriginal people at Camperdown Cemetery.

90 New South Wales Government, 'Household Returns for Census District no.94, 98 & 99', SRNSW: NRS683, Collector's books, 1891 Census, [2/8428].

91 Interview with Ann Weldon, Cooks River Catchment Aboriginal History Project, 2017.

The MACC and the Metropolitan Local Aboriginal Land Council work with archaeologists and the National Parks & Wildlife Service to protect an eroding midden at Kendrick Park at Tempe, learning more about the site in the process.

[92] 'Re: Ida Huddleston', *The Argus* 1952.

[93] 'The Patients See Double when they're treated by the nursing twins', *Dawn* January 1962:12; 'Aboriginal Teacher Appointed', *New Dawn* March 1964:10.

[94] 'Monument to Aborigines - Sackville Ceremony', Dawn September 1952:7, 'Pete's Page', *Dawn* February 1954:24, 'Pete's Page', *New Dawn* October 1961:21.

[95] Interview with Ann Weldon, Cooks River Catchment Aboriginal History Project, 2017.

[96] Interview with Jenny Thomsen, Marrickville Council Aboriginal Oral History Project, 2005, Interview with Shiralee Ann Carroll, Marrickville Council Aboriginal Oral History Project, 1998.

[97] Interview with Michael Ingrey, Cooks River Catchment Aboriginal History Project, 2017.

[98] Interview with Roy Carroll, Marrickville Council Aboriginal Oral History Project, 1998, Interview with Shiralee Ann Carroll, Marrickville Council Aboriginal Oral History Project, 1998, 'Roy Carroll – Trainer', *New Dawn* May 1972:9.

[99] MACC 2005.

[100] Interview with Suzanne Ingram, Cooks River Catchment Aboriginal History Project, 2017. Interview with Ann Weldon, Cooks River Catchment Aboriginal History Project, 2017.

[101] Interview with Suzanne Ingram, Cooks River Catchment Aboriginal History Project, 2017,

[102] Interview with Ray Davison, Cooks River Catchment Aboriginal History Project, 2017.

[103] Interview with Ray Davison, Cooks River Catchment Aboriginal History Project, 2017, Interview with Shiralee Ann Carroll, Marrickville Council Aboriginal Oral History Project, 1998, and see Norman 2006.

[104] Chenall 2002:41-47.

[105] *Aboriginal Land Rights Act* 1983, s52(1)(m).

[106] Interview with Ann Weldon, Cooks River Catchment Aboriginal History Project, 2017.

[107] Interview with Nathan Moran, Cooks River Catchment Aboriginal History Project, 2017.

[108] Transcript of Lucy Simpson speaking at IPART meeting in November 2015, Cooks River Alliance files.

[109] Interview with Allen Madden, Cooks River Catchment Aboriginal History Project, 2017.

[110] Interview with Jenny Thomsen, Cooks River Catchment Aboriginal History Project, 2017.

[111] Chauvel 1973:137-8.

[112] 'Namatjira to paint impressions', *Sydney Morning Herald* 13/02/1954:6.

[113] Interview with Jenny Newman, Cooks River Catchment Aboriginal History Project, 2017.

[114] Transcript of Lucy Simpson speaking at IPART meeting in November 2015, Cooks River Alliance files.

[115] Tranby 1986.

[116] Interview with Ann Weldon, Marrickville Council Aboriginal Oral History Project, 1998

[117] Interview with Jenny Newman, Cooks River Catchment Aboriginal History Project, 2017.

[118] AMBS 2003

[119] AMBS 2001a-d.

[120] Interview with Jason Wing, Cooks River Catchment Aboriginal History Project, 2017, Interview with Nathan Moran, Cooks River Catchment Aboriginal History Project, 2017.

[121] Interview with Nardi Simpson, Cooks River Catchment Aboriginal History Project, 2017.

An exhibition of over 200 photos, maps and posters developed by the MACC as part of the Marrickville Aboriginal History Project is launched at Petersham Town Hall by MACC Chairman Lester Bostock.

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Many Aboriginal people live along the river and continue to work to protect its nature and heritage.