

brochure

LAKE MACQUARIE ABORIGINAL HISTORY

This brochure is intended primarily to give a brief outline of Aboriginal history within the boundaries of Lake Macquarie City Council.

But this history is also interwoven, sometimes intimately, with that of penal presence and pioneering settler development.

The history of Lake Macquarie and environs really begins with its first habitation by Aborigines, and this could have been 20,000 to 40,000 years ago. The tribe residing in the area when first intruded by Europeans was the Awabakal (pronounced Ah-wah-bar-kal) meaning the people of the even, plain surface-- Lake Macquarie. This is undoubtedly a word from the ritual portion of the language, since the Awabakal word for Lake Macquarie District was Nick-Keen-ba, the place of the black stone that burns coal.

As the language and mythology show, these Aborigines had a rare knowledge of the properties of coal; that from the mineral there could be produced tar (nikkeen-ta-garoonda: coal -it - is - fluid), as well as medicine and an insect repellent that could also be used as a mild disinfectant.

It should always be understood that many Aboriginal tribes had more than one tier of their mother tongue. The primary one was the language of ordinary communication learned by every member of the tribe; the second was the ritual, or sacred language learned by the youths during their initiation rites; and the third was acquired by young females when passing through their ceremonies. The top tier was the spirit language learned only by the Karakals (medicine men or sorcerers) to enable them to speak direct to the spirits.

Lake Macquarie has a lasting place in Aboriginal History in that on its shores was established in 1825 the first land-granted and sponsored mission to Australian Aborigines. The mission was initiated by London Missionary Society, which arranged for an English cleric, Rev Lancelot Threlkeld, to be the first missionary. Rev Threlkeld, who arrived in Sydney towards the end of 1824, had spent several years in South Seas Islands as a missionary.

Not only did Threlkeld become the first missionary in the Colony of New South Wales in such a setting, but he was also the first white resident to settle in Lake Macquarie.

The mission was established at Bahtahbah (Hillside-by-the lake), now called Belmont. The mission buildings were located where the Gunyah Hotel now stands on the Pacific Highway, and where Belmont Infants School is located. The area granted to the mission station was 10,000 acres in round figures.

It was not the first site investigated for the mission. Earlier, a low, swampy area near Warners' Bay was examined, but the soil was regarded as unsuitable. But this mission was doomed to eventual failure because of the missionary's constant conflicts with Rev Samuel Marsden, a power in the colony so far as religious matters were concerned, and the Society itself over funding. Threlkeld was a man of mixed character: stubborn, dedicated, controversial and, above all, very humane. He was a man of principle, particularly where human values were concerned.

Threlkeld refused to desert his missionary work. He appealed to Dr Broughton (Late Bishop) and to the new Governor (Sir Ralph Darling), who granted him 1280 acres on the western side of the Lake: from Derah-bambah to Poontee-Toronto to Coal Point). The missionary began to leave Belmont and move to his new abode at the end of 1830. Of strange coincidence, the second mission building in the Lake district was built on a site now occupied by a hotel - Hotel Toronto.

Threlkeld was voted an annual salary of £50 a year, plus £36 for his then four convict servants.

By the end of the 1830's the need for a Christian mission was disappearing, since the Aborigines were dwindling in numbers. Many had suffered from the effects of white-introduced diseases (even those considered mild for Europeans were fatal for pure-blooded Aborigines), liquor and the fragmentation of age-long society

In 1840, Threlkeld opened a small coal mine at Coal Point, successfully appealing against the monopoly and authority of

of the Australian Agricultural Company to mine coal. His interest in this enterprise - called Ebenezer Mine did not last long. By the end of 1841, he had moved his growing family to Sydney, where he accepted the pastorate of Watson's Bay Congregational Church. He later sold the mine, but the tunnel mouth into an opening on the hillside still exists.

Threlkeld persevered with his language reser^arch until his death on October 10, 1859 aged 71. On the previous morning and evening he had preached at the Mariners' Church.

Threlkeld's understanding and defence of Aborigines made enemies, he was much too human and progressive for the period in which he lived, marked by the stigma of penal presence (and all it meant to the degradation and misery of many men and women) ; and it should be recognised that all convicts sent from Britain were not the dregs of the human race).

He was the first man to appreciate that when attempting to translate the language of an indigenous race, English could be applied to such a language not the mother tongue to the English. This was a valuable lesson he had learned while a missionary in the South Seas.

Thus the Awabakal language became the first Aboriginal mother tongue to be translated by this method, in fact, it can surely be said it was the first Aboriginal language to be fully and accurately translated in Australia.

Believing that Christian Gospel could only be properly presented to native people by using their language, Threlkeld devoted most of his life learning and recording the Awabakal language, and in the process he was in regular contact with learned societies and promiⁿent people throughout the English-speaking world.

Lake Macquarie, of course, had known the presence of Europeans before the missionary settled there. They were escaped convicts, some came from road gangs, Sydney and the barracks at Newcastle. Some designated as assigned servants, were allocated to settlers and farmers in the region, such as

Lieutenant Jonathan Warner, who had a substantial grant of land at Biddabah (the silent resting place) at the suburb that now carries his name. In that area there is a large Aboriginal burial ground.

It is an odd quirk of fate that where Warner had his whipping post became the principal's study of Warners Bay Primary School.

The flat land along the foreshore was an Awabakal corroboree ground for sacred ceremonial dances.

The convivial corroboree ground was Milla-ba, the singing place, now Speers Point Park, also known as Lake Macquarie Park.

In tribal days the Aborigines had fish traps on one side of Cockle Creek where it enters Lake Macquarie.

It is difficult to determine the origin and age of the Awabakal people, but they certainly belonged to a group of coastal tribes noted for their advanced form of culture. Like some of their counterparts at Newcastle and Port Stephens, these people were tall, the men often reaching 7ft tall. They were dark chocolate in colour. Like their neighbouring tribes - the Wonarua of the Lower Hunter and Darkinoong of the Central Coast - they were great artists.

An ancient burial ground was located during excavation for building operations at Swansea Heads several years ago. Incidentally, this place was known in tribal days a Yirri-ta-ba, the sacred or Holy place. Radio carbon dating of relics found there gave an age span of some 8000 years.

But there was a more important (and fortunate) discovery by members of the Koe-inba Aboriginal Sites Protection Committee in 1984. (Koe-in is the Supreme Spirit of Aborigines at Newcastle Lake Macquarie, Part of Central Coast and Port Stephens and Dungog and district. He was also known in parts of the Lower Hunter Valley).

This Aboriginal team was under contract to the Council to undertake a site and history survey. In June of that year the Aborigines found tool-making sites (chert cores, flakes, grinding tools and scrapers) along beaches. Sections of the beach front

had suffered surface disturbance due to a very wet rainy period. In one spot, Mr Tommy Sales, a Darkinoong Elder of the Central Coast, found a cluster of five stone double-headed hammers or pounders used to break tough surfaces, such as an oyster shell, and coal that still exists along the beaches. These tools were worn smoothly by effluxion of time. Two months later, the same team found in thick bushland two miles south of Swansea a heap of cleaned abalone shells dredged illegally several miles off shore. Alongside these shells was a heap of well-rounded and broken pieces of stone, including one double-headed hammer.

Had the stones not been separated from shells, this rich historical legacy from the sea would probably not have been discovered!

The significance of this find is that it sharply increases the age presence of the First Australians, since such tools would have been used when this part of the area of the sea once formed part of the land mass before the end of the ice age more than 120,000 years ago, when sea levels were caused to rise and submerge a section of the then coastline. Furthermore, coal deposits are known to exist under the sea farther west than where the abalone deposits are.

Threkeld was able to record the history, language and mythology of the Awabakal people because of the friendship and help of a great chief, Biraban (eaglehawk), who spoke English very well, as well as many Aboriginal dialects, as indicated by his appearances at court hearings in Newcastle and Sydney as an interpreter. Biraban gave tremendous validity to Threkeld's language work. It is fitting that where he and his family once roamed his name is remembered - Biraban Primary School, formerly Toronto West School. A large sketch of this outstanding Aboriginal is featured at the school entrance.

Biraban had known famous explorers who visited the Lake, Ludvig ^{Le}schhardt, whom he guided through the bush around present-day Kahibah, Charles Wilkes, of the United States Navy, who visited Lake Macquarie in 1839. He described Biraban (or McGill) as a "reputed highly intelligent native." Notwithstanding his

attachment to Threlkeld, Biraban, a man of high initiation degree, always retained his tribal identity. It is perhaps that he understood more about the white man's religion than the white man understood about Aboriginal spirituality.

It was with Biraban's help that Threlkeld was able to translate into Awabakal some of the Gospels and scriptures. There are indications that some of the well protected ritual language was made available to Threlkeld for this purpose. Thus the history of Lake Macquarie Aborigines has a quality rarely equalled elsewhere in Australia.

Lake Macquarie had another famous person in Aboriginal history. She was Queen or ^{" "}Old, Margaret, of Swansea, who was originally a member of the Brisbane Water Clan of the Awabakal Tribe.

She married a man who became well known as Old Black Ned, an Aboriginal who clung close to his Aboriginal tradition. A bay is named after him, as is also a small inlet not far away - Margaret's Bay.

Margaret was a highly intelligent and moral woman. In her youth she had known Threlkeld, and it is likely that she met Threlkeld's close friend and adviser, Biraban (Eaglehawk), chief of the Lake Macquarie Clan.

Margaret had her struggles, particularly in retaining land on which she had lived for so many years. On two occasions she was threatened with removal - one by a reported coal-mining acquisition but each time prominent white people came to her aid to ensure continued occupation on a part of her former tribal territory without interference.

She was a proud and noble Aboriginal and independent, though, contrary to the stance of her sister, Ni, she moved in the European community of Swansea-Belmont.

Ni was a strange person indeed. She refused to live other than by traditional means. She lived a lonely but surely independent life around Swansea Heads.

It was she who told a net fisherman, who had objected to

her taking fish from his haul, "This Lake has been part of my people's patrimony for thousands of moons".

It should be explained that many white people in parts of Lake Macquarie could speak Awabakal fluently until the 1890's. Margaret, who spoke English rather well, she once wrote a letter of thanks to the Editor of the "Newcastle Morning Herald and Miner's Advocate" -was a willing teacher.

In addition, Awabakal-speaking Aborigines often found employment with timber cutters and fishermen. A few became involved in farming pursuits, particularly with animals.

Research indicates that some Coastal Aborigines resisted moves by State Authorities to transfer them from their traditional tribal places to inland missions. This is suggested by the fragmentary groups who could be found in outer and mountain areas of Lake Macquarie and Wyong. There was most probably inter-marriage among the Awabakal, Wonarua, Gringhai and Darkin~~g~~oong Tribes.

While these courageous Aborigines had been forced to discard some facets of traditional tribal life to enable them to have limited association (often kept at a low key), they still adhered to some basic principles and practices of established Aboriginal society.

These included retention of the mother tongue and spirit belief, and occasional modified initiation ceremony and other ceremonial rites (such as that of personal purification by smoke), and the observance of and respect for the totemic structure to govern marriage and tribal status.

They were still to be seen in small numbers until the early 1920's in isolated spots. Then these small family groups entered into a process of gradual fragmentation. Their ultimate fate is another story still being researched.

But the Awabakal people and their history are not forgotten. Their language is still the subject of academic research.

These Aborigines left behind physical evidence of a long past in various forms. Most accessible and visible is the extensive midden structure along the foreshores of Lake Macquarie itself.

These heaps of whitened shells that once contained sustaining marine food could be from 300 to 1500 years old. Their age will never be accurately determined, unless by accidental radio carbon-dating.

It is a matter of much regret that significant and sacred sites, such a Bora (initiation) circles and corroboree rings have vanished under the onslaught of modern development.

Most ceremonial and utility cuts on bark have disappeared. Even many of those that remain have suffered the ravages of bushfire and white ant infestation. But a few trees with bark scars, caused by removal to provide a weapon or artefact, have been identified by the Koe-inba Aboriginal Sites Protection Committee.

The area is, however, rich in the survival of weapon sites (manufacture of stone axes and other weapons) and women's kitchens (grinding holes and basins). Generally, these are found in the rocky platform structure of the many watercourses draining the hills and mountain spurs around Lake Macquarie.

Ochre paintings have also survived, particularly in the mountain areas once controlled by the Awabakal Tribe.

The Aboriginal Sites Committee, sometimes with the aid of descendants of pioneer settlers, located some major burial grounds. Aborigines feel that such sites should be given assured protection.

Songs and poetry, myths and legends, and other stores of this ancient race have been collected after many years of research a painstaking task for those involved. All are listed for eventual publication.

There is little doubt that Lake Macquarie Aborigines, as also those of elsewhere, suffered from the depredations of escaped convicts. Those who freed themselves from road gangs and the Great North Road passed through Awabakal territory treated Aborigines, and particularly their females, with the same sense of indignity and harshness as they themselves had suffered at the hands of free people.

Some atrocities were inflicted by convicts and settlers on Aborigines in the Lake District. But they were few. In turn, Awabakal men often assisted the the police in the capture of escaped convicts and other lawless people.

Black and white relationships in the Lake Macquarie region, apart from a few isolated clashes and disturbances in the worst period of detribalisation, were reasonably good. From the 1860's to the 1920's Aborigines were treated with respect.

Thus the Aboriginal history of Lake Macquarie is unique and sustaining. The historical influence of the Threlkeld missions lingers.

Lake Macquarie region is an example of tolerance and understanding that could well be emulated in other parts that have known and still know Aboriginal presence.

The name of Awabakal and its people will be perpetuated in name-places and continuation of rich and colourful oral tradition associated with the meaningful history of an ancient race.
