

Wangal People of Canada Bay

Prior to European settlement the area now known as the City of Canada Bay was occupied by the Wangal clan (sometimes spelt Wann-gal) whose name was derived from the word for their country.

The Wangal were a clan of the Darug (sometimes spelt Dharug) tribe or language group. They called themselves the Eora, meaning 'the people'. The Wangal are believed to have occupied the area for over 20,000 years.

The Wangal clan's territory is thought to have originally extended from Darling Harbour, around the Balmain Peninsula almost to Parramatta in the west, the Parramatta River formed the northern boundary although it is uncertain how far south their land extended.

Goat Island (which they called Me-mel or Memill) opposite Balmain was also part of their land. It is believed that Iron Cove (or possibly Darling Harbour) was called Gomo-ra and Five Dock Point was Pa-rein-ma. Breakfast Point was Booridiow-o-gule. (from Dawes, William)

First contact was made with local Aboriginals of the Wangal Clan by Captain John Hunter who led an exploration of the Parramatta River. On the 5th of February 1788 while having breakfast he was met by Wangal at the location now referred to as Breakfast Point. The Wangal called the area Booridiow-o-gule.

During the summer months, the Wangal gathered much of their food from along the Parramatta River. The food consisted mainly of fish and shell fish and the remains of these meals, known as shell middens, may still be seen at Rodd Park (Rodd Point).

One of the best known members of the Wangal was Woollarawarre Bennelong who was initially captured in November 1788 along with Colby, of the Cadigal clan, under the instructions of Governor Arthur Phillip so he could learn more about the local Aboriginal people. Bennelong claimed Goat Island was his place, handed down to him by his father, who was born on the island.

Although some sources give the impression that Bennelong was a willing collaborator, more recent sources suggest that Bennelong was a far more complex person in his dealings with the British. While he and Phillip formed cordial relations it is nevertheless thought that he probably instigated the spearing of Phillip in 1790 at Manly as a payback for his earlier abduction.

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Bennelong was quick to learn English and adopted many British ways. A brick hut was built for him at Tubowgule (believed to mean 'white-clay headland') now known as Bennelong Point, the site of the Sydney Opera House.

In 1792 he and fellow Wangal man Yemmerrawanne travelled with Phillip to England where he met King George III. Yemmerrawanne died in May 1794 and Bennelong returned to his country in 1795. Bennelong however found himself at variance both with his own people and the British settlers. In 1813 he died as a result of a tribal fight.

Today few traces of Aboriginal occupation survive in the Canada Bay area other than a few cave painting sites, rock shelters and middens. It is believed that Parramatta Road was built upon an Aboriginal pathway which had been in use for centuries.

The Wangal today are remembered by the Wangal Bushland Reserve (Mortlake) and Wangal Place (Five Dock). Bennelong's name has been perpetuated in numerous street names throughout Sydney and is also the name of a Federal Electorate. In nearby Sydney Olympic Park an area has been named the Wangal Woodland.

Based on resources held in City of Canada Bay Local Studies Collection.

Further information

The Australian Encyclopaedia. Sydney, Australian Geographic, 1996 (Entry for Bennelong vol. 2 pp. 440-441)

Coupe, Sheena Concord, a centenary history. Concord, NSW: Council of the Municipality of Concord, 1983. (Contains useful information although it incorrectly identifies the local Aboriginals as being part of the Kuringai tribe instead of the Darug)

Dawes, William, Vocabulary of the language of N. S. Wales, in the neighbourhood of Sydney, Notebook C, 1790, pp 54-55

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Smith, Keith. Bennelong. Kangaroo Press, 2001

Turbet, Peter The Aborigines of the Sydney district before 1788. Kangaroo Press, 2001

Willey, Keith When the sky fell down. Collins, 1979