

Aboriginal People

Pittwater and the Northern Beaches area was formerly known as Guringai country, the land of the Garigal or Caregal people. The Aboriginal Heritage Office issued a report in 2015 titled "Filling a void. A Review of the Historical context for the use of the word 'Guringai'. The report states "It is unfortunate that the term Guringai has become widely known in northern Sydney and it is understandable that people wish to use it as it is convenient to have a single word to cover the language, tribe/nation, identity and culture of a region. However, it is based on a nineteenth century fiction and the AHO would argue that the use of the term Guringai or any of its various spellings such as Kuringai is not warranted given its origin and previous use." In reference to the clan name Garigal or Caregal the report goes on to say "In the absence of a convenient single term for the whole of northern Sydney, the AHO would recommend the use of clan names for local areas, with the understanding that these too have their limitations and problems, and the acceptance of the truth of the lack of certainty as a feature of how Aboriginal history and heritage is portrayed here."

The Garigal or Caregal clans lived in family groups and moved around the area. The coast provided an abundant food supply. Fish was the staple diet, including shellfish such as oysters, whelks and mussels. Stranded whales were eaten, but not hunted directly. Men and women were highly skilled at fishing, both from the shore and from canoes using spears, lines with shell or bone hooks, and nets, with chewed shellfish or discarded fish for bait. Often a small fire was kept alight on a bed of seaweed in the canoe and the catch cooked on board. Other food sources were birds, reptiles, marsupials, as well as roots, fruits, berries and nuts.

Initially the Aboriginal community were hospitable towards European explorers, but misunderstanding and hostility developed. European settlement in 1788 brought disaster for the Aboriginal people. Between April 1789 and 1790 many died of diseases, to which they had no immunity, such as smallpox, and measles. Most of those who survived moved away from the coast as Europeans invaded their territory competing for food and territory.

It seems that there were many Aboriginal sites in the Pittwater area. Although much evidence has disappeared with European settlement, some traces of Aboriginal heritage remain. Throughout Pittwater, especially in Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park, there are Aboriginal sites, including middens, axe- grinding grooves, cave art sites and rock engravings. These illustrate the close relationship that Aboriginal people had with the land itself and with the creatures of the land and the sea. Aboriginal people have continued this tradition visiting camps in the Pittwater area during the twentieth century.

Today in Australia dispossession of Aboriginal Australians from their land has been recognised. In New South Wales the Aboriginal Land Rights Act was passed to enable Aboriginal people to reclaim land that is not needed as residential land, or required for some essential public purpose, or which is vacant Crown land (owned by the government)

Reading

"The natives, as in most everything else, seem to require little trouble and little time in making their canoes, which are seldom large enough to contain more than two, and of such peculiar construction that it would be difficult for even an expert European to make one. Indeed, they are made but for temporary use at their different places, and as they sojourn from one place to another, so they find means to procure canoes, if required. A sheet of bark is cut from a tree about twelve feet [4 metres] in length, and heated over a fire, until it warps, and becomes capable of being bent into the proper shape. The two extremities are then tapered off, bent upwards, and fastened by strong bandages. Two strong sticks are generally placed crossways at either end, to keep it in shape, and thus a boat is formed.

The native women as well as the men manage these simple canoes very dexterously, and their position when in them is kneeling, so that with a small piece of bark in either hand, or their wummerah, they are able to guide them, and glide along with silent facility. The edges of the canoes sometimes approach so near the surface of the water, that the natives in them are scarcely to be seen, especially at a little distance, and the people consequently often appear as if they were actually in the water. They never, that I have heard of, venture out to sea in these canoes, though they frequently cross the widest parts of rivers in them with security, and use them mostly in fishing excursions."

William Romain Govett, Saturday Magazine, 1836

Further reading

Aboriginal Heritage Office, Filling a void. A review of the historical context for the use of the word 'Guringai', 2015.

Aboriginal Support Group Manly Warringah Pittwater, A Story to tell... On a road toward reconciliation, 2002.

Val Attenbrow, Sydney's Aboriginal Past, 2002.
Investigation of archaeological and historical records.

Nan Bosler, The story of Bob Waterer and his family 1803-2010, 2011
Only recently Bob Waterer discovered he had Aboriginal ancestry and that his ancestors had lived in the Pittwater area.

Dennis Byrne, Aboriginal Sites on the Palm Beach Barrier, 1984.
Aboriginal sites

G & S Champion, Manly Warringah Pittwater 1788-1850, 1997.
G & S Champion, Manly Warringah Pittwater 1850 1880, 1998.
Accounts from early European documents and letters

Pauline Curby, Seven Miles From Sydney, 2000.
Ch 1 & 2 Aboriginal Lifestyle and customs.

Dennis Foley, Repossessing Our Spirit, 2001.
Traditions of Northern Sydney Region.

NORTHERN BEACHES COUNCIL

Margrit Koettig, Warriewood/Ingleside Release Area Assessment of Aboriginal Sites, 1993.
Aboriginal sites

Jim Kohen, Darug and their Neighbours, 1993.
General History

J McDonald, The Archaeology of the Angophora Reserve Rock Shelter, 1992.
Aboriginal site

McDonald, McPhee, Barrenjoey Peninsula and Pittwater Heritage Study Vol. 2. 1989

Nigel Parbury, Survival. A History of Aboriginal Life in New South Wales, 1986.
General NSW Aboriginal history

John Ogden, Saltwater people of the Broken Bays: a history of Sydney's northern beaches, 2011.

A history of the relationship between the people of the northern beaches and the ocean, from the time of the Saltwater people, the indigenous population to present day people who are inspired by the natural beauty of the area.

Peter Read Belonging, Australians, Place and Aboriginal Ownership, 2000.
Contemporary references to Northern Beaches areas

Peter Stanbury & John Clegg, A Field Guide to Aboriginal Rock Engravings, 1990.
Rock engravings in Northern Sydney, especially Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park

Peter Turbet, The Aborigines of the Sydney District before 1788, 2001.
Reconstruction of Aboriginal life before European settlement