

# Aborigines of the Hurstville District

## Part 1 - Up to 1810

The history/story of the Aborigines of the Sydney area abounds with possibilities and inferences. No-one is certain of what was the situation pre-1788. Terms used today to describe pre-1788 culture, such as *Darug*, are later 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century impositions. Further complications abound with the post-1788 Aboriginal diaspora leading to a further blurring of the situation. Below is the latest understanding of the Sydney Aboriginal society prior to the European invasion.

### Part 1 Pre-1788.

The earliest confirmed date for Aboriginal habitation that has been discovered is 15,000 years before the present (notated as BP thus 15,000 years BP) at a site on the Hawkesbury/Nepean River, (although a site on the Hawkesbury near Penrith has an unconfirmed date of 42,000 years BP). Global warming following the last Ice Age also started around 15,000 years BP. The inference is that there were people prior to this date in the greater Sydney region, probably up to about 30,000 years BP. As the coastline was between six and 20km further east, it would be hard to verify.

As the ice capes melted the Aborigines were rapidly forced to the west by the rising waters. This probably led to either conflict between the rapidly retreating coastal groups and the in-land groups or, most likely, a peaceful re-aligning of relationships. The archaeological evidence apparently does not show a rapid change which would be indicative of conflict. The flooding of the plains would have also led to a change in the food gathering habits such as a move towards marine food.

The present coastline stabilised about 6,500 years BP. There apparently was uniformity in the Aboriginal communities across the entire Sydney basin because of the similarity of the archaeological remains. This indicated movement and social intercourse between the various groups. This situation changes about 1,600 years BP when the archaeological records drastically changes possibly indicating either changes in clan boundaries or restriction in movement. Another speculative interpretation could be a change in the method of food gathering from kangaroo to possum led to the “drastic” change.

About 900 years BP there occurred a technological innovation that change Aboriginal life – the fishing hook and line. It is believed that this innovation led to some Aborigines moving from a subsistence life based on the collection of plants and small animals to a life centred around rivers with the adoption of canoes.

A casual look at a map showing Aboriginal sites in the greater Sydney area shows several interesting factors. First, the groups living near the coast were based around waterways. The coastal groups mainly lived in shelters and, finally, the vast majority of artwork is on the coastal fringe. The in-land groups, that is, from Liverpool and Parramatta westward, were completely different. Their habitats were in the open and appeared to be centred

around water holes. This is reflected in the absence of art work. Whilst on artwork, it appears the majority of artwork south of the Sydney CBD is in shelters whilst artwork in the Ku-ring-gai/Hawkesbury area is in the open.

Which Aboriginal group occupied what location has been a problem for years. The information that is available is scarce and based on in-complete observations from the early Europeans. The present opinion has five language groups in the greater Sydney region. Of the five, three concern the Hurstville area, the Darug, Dharawal and, to a lesser extent, Gundungurra. The Darug was the main group, occupying the area from Broken Bay in the north to the northern and western area of Botany Bay and the north shore of the Georges River and stretching westward to Appin in the south, and along the Nepean/Hawkesbury catchment to the north. It may have existed in the lower Blue Mountains. The Darug were further split into two – the hinterland and coastal. The Dharawal went from the south side of Botany Bay (the Sutherland Shire) to the Shoalhaven area, along the southern shore of the Georges River to the Camden area. Finally, the Gundungurra existed in the Camden area southwards towards Goulbourn and westwards through the Blue Mountains. Finally, within these larger languages groups existed smaller units or clans.

It is now believed that the clan within the St George area was called the Gameygal or Kameygal – the people of Kamay (Botany Bay). Originally it was believed that there was another clan called the Bidjigal in the Hurstville area which was slightly inland from the Gameygal. However, it is now thought the Bidjigal or Bediagal was based around the Castle Hill area of Sydney – that is, north of Parramatta. The reasoning for this is twofold – firstly, the resistance leader Pemulwy was a Bidjigal and he was from the Castle Hill area. Secondly, although elements of the Bidjigal were noticed in the Botany Bay area in the 1790s, it is now thought that this clan either followed Pemulwy to his area of operation or moved towards the coast following the tragic smallpox epidemic. Finally, it is now thought that the language groups that were present in 1788 had been only in existence for the last 1,500 years or even less.

## Part 2 1788

The year 1788 drastically changed the Aboriginal society. It must be said that the Aboriginal society had undergone earlier radical changes and survived – changes such as the rising sea levels and the major change that happened 1,500 years BP. Time will tell if the change in 1788 was far more drastic.

One of the first aspects of Aboriginal society noticed by the Europeans was the formal interaction between the various language groups. This interaction ranged from ritual warfare to large inter-language group corroborees during initiation ceremonies. Within a few years this formal system of interaction was to help the Aboriginal resistance leaders Pemulwy and his son Tedbury in their movements around the greater Sydney area.

At first, it appears the Aboriginal groups treated the Europeans with disdain. They quickly took up the “class” distinction between the free and the convicts, having only dialogue with the free and treating the convicts, (whom the Aborigines, following the English practice, called “croppies”), with contempt. The convicts, in turn, resorted to stealing Aboriginal equipment and violence towards the Aborigines.

Phillip commented upon the reluctance of the Aborigines to come into the Sydney Cove camp. This led to the kidnapping of several Aboriginals, including Bennelong, in order to gather information and to foster communication. Unfortunately, events between September, 1790, (the spearing of Phillip himself) and December of that year, (the killing of the gamekeeper, McEntire by Pemulwy) led to warfare.

### Part 3 Pemulwy, Tedbury and the St George District 1790 - 1810

A Bidjigal man, Pemulwy, described as a tall, athletic man in his 30s, fought the Europeans who he considered were taking Aboriginal land. He started burning crops and buildings as well as killing settlers. Although his main area of operation was in the Parramatta area, Pemulwy was known to move to the Georges River area to attack settlers and burn crops. It was in the St George area that the first organised, albeit half-hearted and farcical, expeditions against the Aborigines occurred.

Upon hearing of the death of McEntire, (a man universally disliked by both the Europeans and Aborigines), Phillip announced that an armed party would “go to the head of Botany Bay” to bring in six Aboriginals “or, if that should be found impracticable, to put that number to death”. Phillip originally wanted to shoot ten Aboriginals but was talked out of it by Captain Watkin Tench. It should be noted that these Aborigines at the “head of Botany Bay” lived in a “village”, which was situated near the present-day airport.

Tench, who was by all accounts a pleasant and friendly person, led this party. His heart was not in the expedition as he thought McEntire deserved his fate. This plus the fact he told several Aborigines in town the purpose of the expeditions led to their failure.

Tench set out early, about 4am, on the 14<sup>th</sup> December, 1790 to Botany Bay. He reached the “peninsular at the head of Botany Bay” about 9am. The party searched but couldn’t find any “natives”. The next morning Tench led the party towards the Georges River, hoping to hit the River in the Oatley area before proceeding east to the Bay and then up to the Cooks River.

However, whilst in the Hurstville/Carlton area they became lost and the party went east ending up in the Monterey area, crossing through the Scarborough Swamps. By this time all sense of secrecy had disappeared so Tench rapidly went north back to the “village” but failed to find anyone because they went across Cooks River to the north.

The troops then returned to the Monterey area and rested. Here they found one of the Aborigines, by the name of Colbee, to whom Tench had previously talked in town. Colbee told Tench that Pemulwy had fled to the south. After spending a painful night being attacked by mosquitoes Tench returned to Sydney. But this was not the end of the affair.

Phillip “resolved to try the fate of a second [expedition]; and the ‘painful pre-eminence’ again devolved on me [Tench]”. This time a different tactic was decided. The party again crossed into the St George area around the Undercliffe area but this time resolved to march along the southern bank of the Cooks River towards the “village”. Things went well until they reached Muddy Creek. The creek is not called Muddy for nothing! The tide being out, it was resolved to cross. It was not long before the party became stuck in the mud and it started sinking. Fortunately for Tench and his troops, some had not yet entered the Creek. This smaller party found an easier place to cross, (in the vicinity of Bestic Street), and ultimately rescued the stricken men. Again the attack on the “village” ended without result. So ended the first organised expeditions against the Aborigines.

In passing, it is interesting to note Tench’s description of the St George area. “We had passed through the country, which the discoverers of Botany Bay [Cook] extol as ‘*some of the finest meadows in the world*’. These meadows, instead of grass, are covered with high coarse rushes, growing in a rotten spongy bog, into which we were plunged knee-deep at every step”.

The original target of these expeditions, Pemulwy, had escaped and ended up causing problems for the British for the next twelve years, including an attack on the Brickfields area (now Broadway in the City) on the then outskirts of Sydney Town in 1795.

In 1797, Pemulwy attacked Toongabbie where he captured arms and ammunition. This was quickly followed by what some historians call the Battle of Parramatta where Pemulwy and about a hundred followers attacked Parramatta itself. Here he was wounded and captured but he escaped to continue his war until his death in 1802. The interesting point is that his followers were not only Aborigines but also escaped convicts.

Pemulwy is considered to be a resistance fighter because he deliberately attacked the European’s food source. It appears he was guided by the escaped Irish convicts using their own experiences of the war in Ireland against the British. The settlers responded by sending troops to guard crops along the Georges River with orders “to fire on any native or natives they see...”.

His son Tedbury continued the fight. It was Tedbury that brought the war in earnest to the Georges River area. Between 1804 and 1809 he attacked several farms in the St George area burning buildings and crops, and stealing sheep. The farms included those owned by Gilbert, Strode, and Bond. Tedbury's activities were considered more to be bushranging rather than organised resistance. He faded from the scene in 1810 after being shot by a settler, an E Luttrill, Jnr. The amazing thing was that Luttrill was charged with the assault on Tedbury which indicates that Tedbury may have been under the protection of the Government – he had helped the settlers previously in tracking down wanted people.

In passing, one of Pemulwy's associates, Mosquito, was captured in 1805 and sent to Van Diemens Land in 1813. Here he escaped in 1819 and led a local tribe of Aborigines in an organised resistance against the settlers. The interesting thing about Mosquito was that he used British military tactics against the Europeans. He was captured and hung in 1824.

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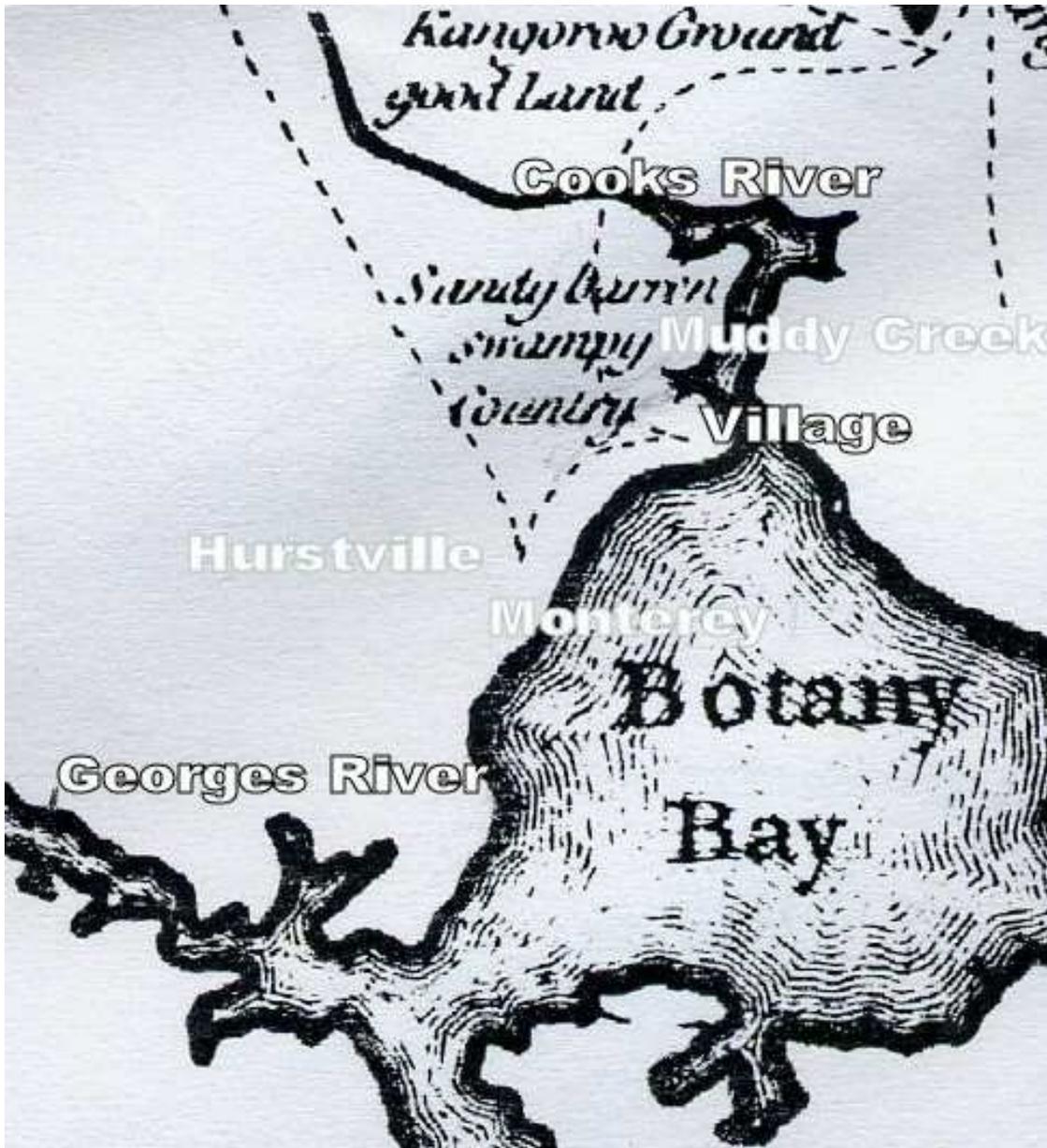
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Section of map from Tench showing the areas concerned with the 1790 expeditions