



# ABORIGINAL PEOPLE

Fact Sheet no.13

Aboriginal people believe that they have been living in Australia since the beginning of time. Their complex cultural and spiritual connections to the environment and their kinship system have developed through their belief in the Dreaming, which is a time of creation, passed on from generation to generation and still seen today through stories, songs, dances, ceremonies and art. Recent research has determined that Aboriginal people were part of the first wave of modern humans out of Africa. Aboriginal people are thought to have possibly first occupied the Australian continent 60,000 years ago. Radiometric carbon dating also indicates that they were likely to have occupied the Sydney region as early as 40 000 years ago during the time of the last Ice Age.

Prior to the European invasion, Aboriginal people in the Willoughby area relied on the marine environments of Sydney Harbour, Broken Bay and the many creeks, rivers and wetlands for much of their food. They also harvested and hunted for food from the surrounding bush. The bush was the supermarket, the hardware shop, the pharmacy and the church. Being self-sufficient, Sydney Aboriginal people had little need to travel far from their lands as the resources in the area were abundant and trade with other clans was well established. Moving throughout their country in accordance with the seasons, Aboriginal people spent only four to five hours per day working to ensure their survival. With such a large amount of leisure time available, they developed a rich and complex ritual life - language, customs, spirituality and the law - the heart of which is the connection between the people, Country and spiritual beliefs.

A large proportion of the North Shore of Sydney, including the City of Willoughby, was inhabited by the Cammeraygal clan. The Cammeraygal people lived in the Willoughby area until the 1820s and are recorded as being in the northern parts of the Sydney region for approximately 5,800 years. The Aboriginal people lived in tribes or clans, which were distinguished by the names of their chief, taking their name from their local area. Thus the district was called Cammerra and the male head was Cammerragal. A woman of this tribe was called Cammerragaleon or Cammerayleon.

The Wallumedegal clan may have also had a close association with the Willoughby area. It should be noted that our knowledge regarding the exact boundaries of the Sydney clans is limited. Such boundaries, and the clans who lived there, would have changed through the many generations of Aboriginal people who occupied the land so long ago. This was at a time when the harbour was dry land. The Willoughby local area is fortunate to have a rich history of Aboriginal culture and heritage and areas around Middle Harbour, Castlecrag and Lane Cove were significant areas to the locally based clans. The Cammeraygal clan roamed widely from the waters of Middle Cove to the reaches of Lane Cove but much of the physical evidence of their occupation has been destroyed.

Chatswood, itself, is situated high on the ridge near where Fullers Road commences and was a known source of fresh water springs, and would have contained many of the flowering heath plants, fruiting trees and wild flowers. Ridge tops are also known as areas for rock engravings.

In Aboriginal culture, there are anywhere up to six seasons with an eight phase, 11 year cycle and some areas outside of Sydney having as few as two. Generally, Sydney is seen as having six but is complex in its matrix of environmental factors and how each effect climate every year. This knowledge was handed down by the Elders and other knowledgeable members of each clan. Elders are not necessarily older but have gained greater knowledge and have developed skills and thus gained esteem and respect.

Of the two clans, we know more about the Cammeraygal than Wallumedegal as the former were recorded by the first Europeans as being most numerous. One of the well-known recorded observations about the Cammeraygals was that they conducted the tooth removal ceremonies for members of other clans inhabiting the Sydney area.



Whilst David Collins, an officer from the First Fleet wrote in 1788; “the exercise of this privilege places these people in a particular point of view, and there is no doubt of their decided superiority,” it is doubtful that the Cammeraygal were any more powerful than other clans at that point in history.

The European arrival brought armed conflict and a serious lack of cross-cultural understanding. This heralded the decimation of the Sydney clans. The growing white population denied local clans access to their own Country and its resources. Over a short period of time the Europeans depleted fish stocks by netting huge catches, reduced the kangaroo population with unsustainable hunting, cleared the land and polluted the water. As a result, the Aboriginal people throughout the Sydney Basin were soon close to starvation. Introduced European diseases, the battle for Sydney and the practice of genocide reduced the Sydney population by 80–90%. Aboriginal people were disarmed and separated from Country and families. The remnants of clans lived on reserves and missions.

By 1830 many Sydney Aboriginal communities had integrated elements of European culture into their traditional lifestyles. There is evidence of the Cammeraygal people still living in the Willoughby area in 1820 however, disease, displacement and further massacres meant that by the 1860s, Aboriginal people were only occasional visitors to the north shore area.

Today, few if any of the Aboriginal people living in the northern suburbs can trace their ancestry to the Cammeraygal or Wallumedegal clans. However, there are many Aboriginal people residing in the area who maintain strong spiritual and cultural links in contemporary ways. Throughout Sydney’s north shore there are over 1,000 sites that provide important evidence of the richness of Aboriginal culture. These sites include overhangs with stencilled hands and ochre paintings on their walls, engravings of animals and weapons on rock outcrops and middens of the whitened remains of shellfish meals.

In 2000 the Aboriginal Heritage Office (AHO) was formed and now the joint initiative by Willoughby, Lane Cove, North Sydney, Manly, Warringah, Ku-ring-gai, Ryde and Pittwater councils, work together in a progressive move to protect Aboriginal Heritage in these areas. The Aboriginal Heritage Office’s main role is to regularly monitor and manage Aboriginal sites to ensure their preservation and protection. The AHO develops and implements community education programs and events aimed at increasing the collective knowledge of Aboriginal cultural heritage.

On the 13th of February 2008, the Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, tabled a motion in parliament apologising to Australia's Indigenous peoples, particularly the Stolen Generations and their families and communities, for laws and policies which had 'inflicted profound grief, suffering and loss on these our fellow Australians.' Reconciliation is about unity and respect between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and non-Indigenous Australians. It is about respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage and valuing justice and equity for all Australians. At the 2011 Census, the number of these Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people made up 0.2% of the population in the Willoughby local government area.

In the Willoughby area and surrounds, there is a strong network of people, organisations and volunteers addressing Aboriginal issues through reconciliation groups, support groups, heritage site protection, festivals and community education. Willoughby Council actively supports initiatives such as the Guringai Festival (since 2003) which includes the Festival Writing Competition, stalls, exhibitions, workshops, walking tours and culminates in NAIDOC Week.

**Further information:**  
**Aboriginal Heritage Office at [www.aboriginalheritage.org](http://www.aboriginalheritage.org)**

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January 2014



**Willoughby City Library Services**