

Campbelltown's Aboriginal History

An insight into the first peoples of our region



Dharawal National Park

An Aboriginal History of Campbelltown

There is evidence that Aboriginal people have lived and cared for their traditional lands for more than 70,000 years, even up to 120,000 years. They have a complex society based on what is sometimes known as “The Dreamtime” and “The Dreaming”. The Dreamtime was when Aboriginal creators lived on the earth and formed the landforms, animals and plant life, as well as the time of laying down of the law.

The Dreaming is the continuation of the life cycle, living under the law, and continues even today. As the world changes, the Dreaming continues. Underpinning and strengthening Aboriginal culture is the strong spiritual and physical connection that Aboriginal people have with the land (sometimes known as “Country”).

Prior to colonisation, it is estimated there were between 500 and 700 different clans / nations of Aboriginal and / or Torres Strait Islander peoples, each with their own unique languages and cultures.

In what is now known as the Macarthur region, the Dharawal people continue to be acknowledged as the Traditional Custodians. Dharawal people cared for and inhabited land from Botany Bay to the Shoalhaven River and Nowra and inland to Camden. A traditional totem of the area is recognised as the lyrebird.

Dharawal people were able to move from area to area in safety and to maintain resources for many thousands of years before colonisation. They moved between the areas now known as Campbelltown, Liverpool, Camden and Picton, and occasionally as far as Parramatta.

Natural resources supplied all their material needs. The land of the Georges River and its tributaries provided water, food and shelter. The streams and swamplands offered a variety of food. The forest lands sheltered possums, lizards, kangaroos and wallabies and there were roots, berries and seeds to gather. Birds also provided meat and eggs.

Along the Georges River, sandstone eroded, forming rock overhangs which provided shelter. Those facing north, caught the sunlight and held warmth through the night. The walls of these shelters were often decorated with images and hand stencils outlined in red ochre, white clay or charcoal.

Evidence of the tracks, camps and significant sites are scattered across the region, even today.





Bull Cave

Initial contact with the Europeans

A short while after the Europeans landed in Sydney, a number of cattle were lost, having strayed from their herdsman. They wandered south and were found in the area now known as the Macarthur region. As a result, the area became known as the 'Cowpastures'.

Local Dharawal people saw these strange animals and sketched their characteristics on the walls of a sandstone shelter. The animals had no horns, having been polled to prevent injury during their long sea voyage, and the unknown artist clearly depicted their hooves. There is no doubt that the animal sketched in what is known as the 'Bull Cave', is one of the original herd which became lost, as it is depicted without its horns.

From the accounts of other tribes, the first encounter with cattle was a terrifying experience, and this fear is evident by the size of the Campbelltown drawings, where the bulls dominate the walls of the rock shelter. Governor King commented that the Aborigines climbed trees until the animals had passed.

As the colonial settlement expanded, some Europeans formed a close rapport with the local Aboriginal community. Charles Throsby of Glenfield was accompanied by Dharawal men when he explored the Southern Highlands area, and was a persistent critic of European treatment of local Aboriginals. Hamilton Hume and his brother John, made the first of a number of long exploratory trips southwards with a young Aboriginal friend named Duall. The Aboriginal knowledge of the land meant they were very resourceful exploring companions for the Europeans.

Aboriginal knowledge of the land and skills in tracking were integral in solving the murder of Fred Fisher, a local legend who is still remembered today. After the disappearance of Fred and subsequent sighting of his ghost by John Farley, an investigation was opened, and it was suggested Aboriginal trackers be brought in to help uncover his whereabouts. A tracker from Liverpool named Namut Gilbert was brought in. The ground was marshy around the area he was searching. He tasted the water in the puddles and announced 'white fellow's fat there'. The investigation team followed the puddles, prodding the ground until they discovered Fred's body.

However, as with most areas across the nation, the interaction between settlers and Aboriginal people wasn't always peaceful.

The Appin massacre

Relations between Europeans and the Aboriginal people began to deteriorate in 1814, with the first of a series of attacks and acts of aggression throughout the region. As these escalated in severity and frequency, so too did retaliation between the Aboriginal inhabitants of the area and the European settlers.

On 9 April 1816, Governor Macquarie ordered the military to apprehend all Aborigines in the southern districts because of their hostility in the previous two years and their recent attacks on settlers. The orders made no distinction between groups of friendly and aggressive Aborigines.

Charles Throsby of Glenfield was concerned that fear and ignorance on behalf of the Europeans would result in indiscriminate killings. He wrote to the Sydney Gazette in defence of a local Aboriginal man thought to be involved in an attack, stating that any violence perpetrated was in retaliation 'for the barbarity practised by our own countrymen'.

In April 1816, Macquarie ordered Lieutenant Charles Dawes to capture the Cowpastures Aboriginal people. A report submitted by a captain of soldiers sent to the Cowpastures detailed the considerable support the Europeans gave the Dharawal people who had become entangled in this war. Among those who showed their contempt for the way the local Aboriginal people were being treated were John Warby and Hamilton Hume. Hume is noted as lying to the soldiers in an attempt to protect the local people, and Warby is suspected of having set off to try and warn the Dharawal people.

On 17 April 1816, the soldiers attacked, which resulted in the loss of most of the local Dharawal people. This became known as the Appin Massacre. The massacre is remembered in April each year, when Winga Myamly Reconciliation Group and the local Aboriginal community meet to remember the loss of lives.



The Aboriginal community today

Today, Aboriginal people who live in the Macarthur area are of different Aboriginal nations. There is a large diversity of Aboriginal people, mainly from NSW, but also from other parts of Australia.

Some Aboriginal nations represented in Campbelltown include Wiradjuri, Gamileroi, Yorta Yorta, Gumbainggyr, Yuin and Ngunawal, all from the NSW region. There are also people from other states and the Torres Strait Islands.

The Aboriginal community in Macarthur is diverse, but through their unique cultures they hold shared values of respect, family and community, and continue to work together to build on community strengths.

There are currently almost 5000 Aboriginal people living in the region, sharing their unique knowledge and culture with the broader community. Several Aboriginal organisations provide services for the community, and there are a range of Aboriginal groups which support wellbeing and cultural activities.

We respectfully acknowledge the Aboriginal people of the region, and pay our respects to Elders, past and present.

References / acknowledgements

Tharawal Local Aboriginal Land Council
Campbelltown Aboriginal Community Reference Group
Campbelltown - The Bicentennial History, Carol Listen
Grist Mills - Massacre at Appin in 1816, Verlie Fowler
Campbelltown Aboriginal Strategy 2014 - 2018
Campbelltown City Council
www.reconciliation.org.au

This brochure was produced in consultation with the Tharawal Local Aboriginal Land Council and the Campbelltown Aboriginal Community Reference Group.

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