

## Chapter 4

# Marking their footsteps: Aboriginal people and places in nineteenth-century Sydney

Paul Irish

School of History, University of New South Wales

Michael Ingrey

La Perouse Aboriginal Community

**Abstract:** *Many Aboriginal people who lived in south-eastern Sydney during the nineteenth century appear to be remembered only as words on a page, as are the places they lived in. Knowing about these people and places is important to local Aboriginal communities and broader society, and is also essential to ensure that such places are protected and managed appropriately. This chapter describes the development of research to document historical Aboriginal people and places in south-eastern Sydney. Using a collaborative approach that utilises archaeological, historical and community knowledge, the authors are working towards a more rounded understanding of why and how Aboriginal people lived where they did at the times they did. It is also becoming apparent that these people's connections and movements are partly continuations of pre-contact social and cultural life and obligations, and that they were able to exert a degree of autonomy even during times of increasing government control and regulation.*

### Introduction

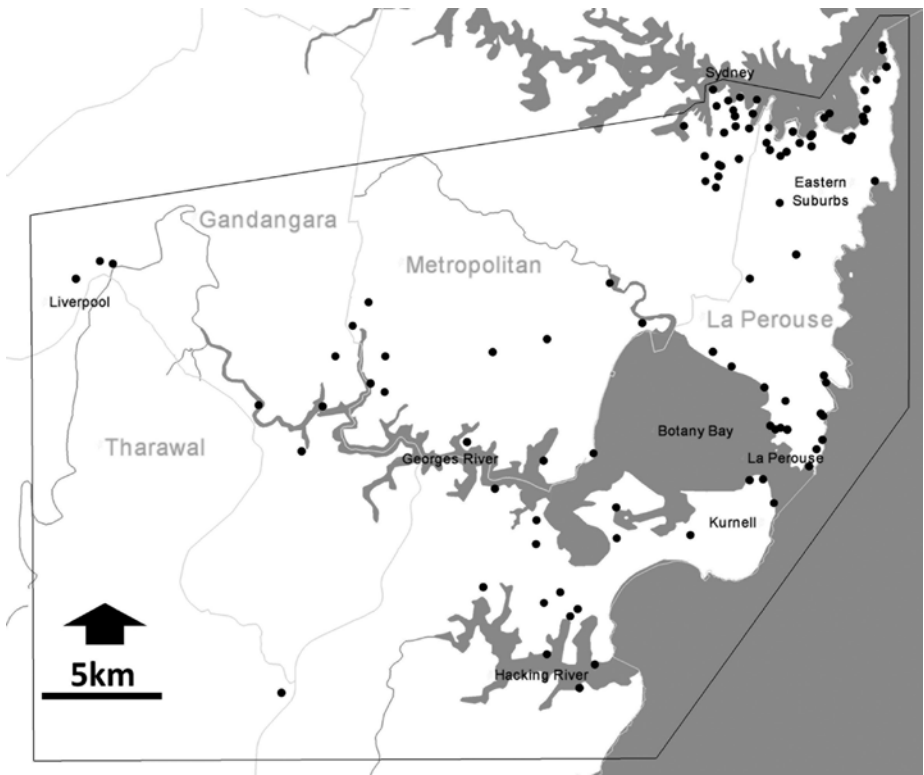
The knoll of high ground that looks over Double Bay and the Heads...was the last camping place of the natives. There old Wingle and his wife Kitty, and Bondi Charley took up contributions, from a copper to the occasional crown of the early globe-trotter, and in return demonstrated boomerang throwing.

Nearby is Seven Shillings Beach, and Miss Nesta Griffiths tells its story in her book. The aboriginal owner of the fishing rights to the beach was Gurrah, whose

lubra, Nancy, was a sister of Sophie, who lived near the spring at Vaucluse. (Jervis and Kelly 1960–65:44)<sup>1</sup>

European settler reminiscences such as these about the mid- to late nineteenth century are found across the Sydney region. They and others like them are routinely repeated in local histories and a range of specialist heritage or history reports to this day. They imply, given that they are quoted without any additional research being undertaken, that it is neither important to know more about these people nor considered likely that any further information exists.

Yet these particular quotes show that there was an Aboriginal ‘community’ of sorts in the 1870s in what is now the densely populated eastern suburbs area of Sydney (Figure 1). Their presence in the formative years of these suburbs is all but unknown to most residents, where ‘history’ is very much associated with the built environment largely created since that time. But has the tide of history really left only these scant traces of past Aboriginal lives on the shores of Sydney Harbour? Who were they,



**Figure 1:** The project study area (black outline) showing approximate location of Aboriginal places (dots); land council names and boundaries are shown in grey and relevant places/areas are named in black (adapted by Paul Irish from Google Earth image)

how and where did they live, and what became of them? Are they remembered by Aboriginal people today? What can their lives tell us?

This chapter describes research being undertaken to answer some of these questions in relation to the south-eastern portion of the Sydney region. It also describes this work from the different perspectives of the two researchers; Paul Irish, an archaeologist and (from 2011) history PhD candidate, and Michael Ingrey, a Dharawal man from the La Perouse Aboriginal community of south-eastern Sydney. Although such collaborative work is not new, it is less commonly applied in a largely archival research context (as opposed to community or oral history) and it is instructive to document how it has worked in practice and the mutual benefits it has brought. The result is a better understanding of the context of the people and places being investigated, and this can potentially inform a range of other questions about the pre- and post-European contact Aboriginal experience in Sydney.

## How and why did the research start?

Paul's longstanding interest in Sydney's post-contact Aboriginal history led to the creation of the Sydney Aboriginal Historical Places Project (SAHP Project) in 2006 (Irish 2011). The SAHP Project aims to historically and archaeologically document the places used by Aboriginal people in the Sydney region after European contact in 1788 and up until the early to mid-twentieth century, by which time most Aboriginal people in the Sydney region had ceased to live in separate or semi-autonomous camps. The focus is on places repeatedly used in that time, which may have created an 'archaeological signature' whether or not anything has survived (Irish and Goward 2012). The project also seeks to examine the people who used these places, their relationships with others, and the ways in which they lived within, and moved around, a growing city. Places used after this period are often, and more appropriately, documented through community histories (e.g. AIAS 1988; Museum of Sydney 1996), whereas those investigated for the SAHP Project are generally very poorly documented and have little, if any, *specific* accompanying oral information.

The scoping study for the project involved compiling a database of these places from previous research (largely published or easily accessible historical information and Aboriginal site databases). This database contains around 300 places drawn from a wide range of historical and archaeological sources (Irish 2009, 2011). The next stage of the project, with which this chapter is concerned, involves intensive historical research leading to archaeological recording of those places at which physical traces may have survived. A major feature of the project is to involve local Aboriginal communities in research, not only to foster experience and skills development, but in recognition of the important knowledge and perspectives held in communities of the places and people being investigated. Crucially, it puts the decisions on how best to manage these places in Aboriginal hands.

The first area of intensive historical research in 2009 was the Botany Bay area in south-eastern Sydney. Before establishing a more precise boundary for the research, Paul sought the involvement of an Aboriginal researcher from the La Perouse Aboriginal community. Michael had been interested from an early age in family history of places and people, especially within the Botany Bay area where he had grown up. During previous work together on Aboriginal archaeological projects, Paul had discussed his interest in post-contact Aboriginal places. Michael was also interested in these places, both generally and through family connections to specific areas. He offered a way of researching these people and places that would meet both the aims of the SAHP Project and Michael's own aims for benefiting the La Perouse Aboriginal community.

## **Making connections, setting boundaries**

Initially, research in 2009 focused on the Kurnell Peninsula in Gwea-gal country on the southern side of Botany Bay (Figure 1). The Gwea-gal and other Aboriginal people have maintained connections to Kurnell since the permanent movement of Europeans into the area. Some of these connections were already familiar to Michael through community knowledge (e.g. AIAS 1988:12–13); others were documented historically in a fragmented manner (e.g. Ashton et al. 2006:30–1; Curby 1998; Larkin 1998; Salt 2000) and even archaeologically (Dickson 1971; McIntyre 1984; Megaw 1969, 1972; Rolfe 1931). Despite this and recent detailed historical work (e.g. Goodall and Cadzow 2009; Nugent 2005a, 2005b, 2009; Smith 2004), there was a clear sense that research had only gone to a certain point (generally to large, daunting collections of personal papers). The Kurnell Peninsula therefore seemed a good place to test whether further information was available, and to try to document more closely where and how Aboriginal people had lived.

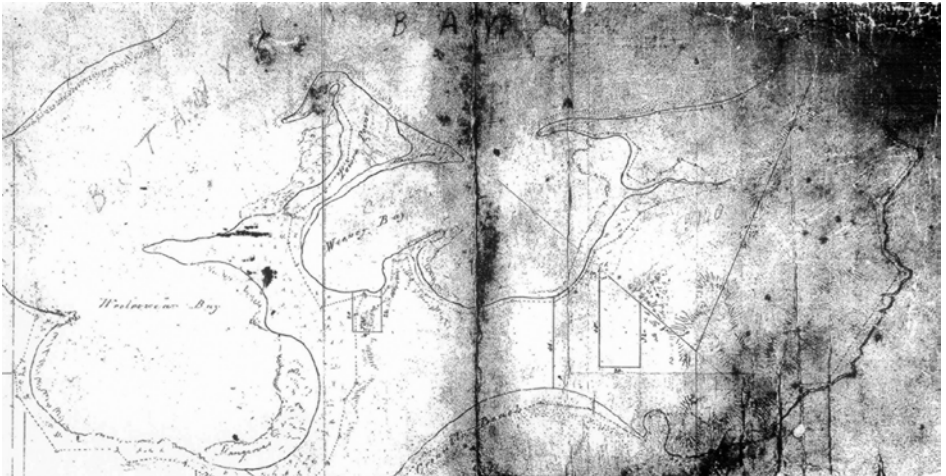
Research focused on the records of early surveyors, records of interviews with early European residents (e.g. Houston 1905; Labington 1906), and the extensive papers of the Holt family and others who, between them, virtually controlled the peninsula throughout the nineteenth century. Previous examinations of some of these documents (e.g. Larkin 1998) had generally been undertaken without a detailed knowledge of the Aboriginal people and historical context of the local area. This lack of historical context had also limited previous considerations of the post-contact archaeology of the area (Harrison 2003).

Based on this initial research, it was possible to compile a considerably long list of Aboriginal people historically associated with the Kurnell Peninsula. Although many were previously described, they had not been considered as a group or 'community', nor had the locations of the places in which they had lived been detailed (although see Goodall and Cadzow 2009). From this close reading of archival material, combined with community genealogical, historical and cultural knowledge, some past errors could be corrected, such as the conflation of the identities of Bidy Giles and

Biddy Coolman, two significant Aboriginal women (e.g. Illert 2003; Smith 2004:41, 2008a:15–16).

It was clear that Aboriginal connections to Kurnell had remained strong, with local people providing place names to early surveyors (Figure 2), retaining oral history of Cook's landing (MacDonald 1928:286; Nugent 2009), and continuing to live and work on country with local landowners and others (e.g. Connell n.d.; Delessert 1848:169–76; Holt Family Papers 1861–1933). It was also evident that Aboriginal people associated with Kurnell had lived at and used other parts of Botany Bay and beyond, and had family ties north, south and west of Kurnell. For this reason, a focus on just Kurnell or Botany Bay was too narrow to capture a sense of peoples' lives at this time.

In very broad terms, links between nineteenth-century Aboriginal people and places in the Botany Bay area extended north to the southern side of Sydney Harbour at least as far west as Cockle Bay, south to Port Hacking and beyond, and west up the Georges River to Bankstown and possibly Liverpool. This area comprises what may be called south-eastern Sydney and became the revised study area (Figure 1). The SAHP Project database contained records for around 90 places in this area, to which Michael immediately suggested several more from his own knowledge and research (Figure 1). As this area covered the boundaries of several local Aboriginal land councils, consultation was undertaken with these organisations in 2010 to make them aware of the research and to seek their endorsement.



**Figure 2:** Extract of the first map of the entire Kurnell Peninsula by Surveyor Dixon from around 1827 showing Aboriginal place names; all of these names are still in use today (source: R Dixon n.d. *Part of a map of Port Hacking*, NSW State Records Item NRS 13859, 4734/SG Map P256)

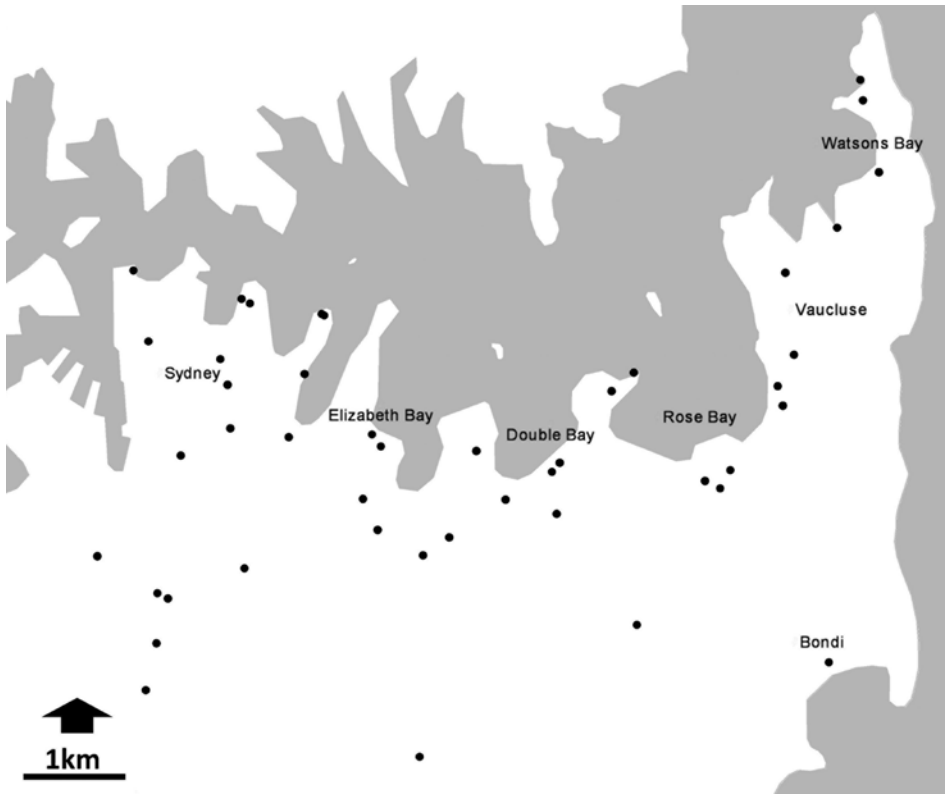
Although maintaining an overall focus on the entire south-east Sydney area, research was broken into a series of smaller areas (as with the initial Kurnell research) to allow intensive research to be undertaken. SAHP Project records indicated that a number of named Aboriginal people were resident in the eastern suburbs area of Sydney (Figure 3) in the mid- to late nineteenth century, some of whom appeared to link back to Botany Bay. It was intriguing to Michael that none of these names appeared to be well known in the La Perouse Aboriginal community by his generation and it was decided to focus next on this area. While Paul synthesised the existing SAHP Project documentation, Michael made enquiries among elders in the community (whose knowledge extends easily back to at least the late nineteenth century) and discovered some interesting information and potential leads for further investigation. This set the scene for the research and results, which are now described.

### **Hitting the library and hitting the phone**

Archival research involves targeted investigation of promising historical leads, as well as the systematic exhaustion of sources such as family papers. This methodology recognises that past investigations have often been undertaken without the same knowledge of, or focus on, the Aboriginal people and their connections available to the present authors and have generally been more time constrained than this current research. Both Paul and Michael are actively involved in reviewing archival texts, images and maps and methodically recording and cataloguing all these materials. This has also included compiling contextual databases of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people relevant to the south-eastern Sydney area in general. In this way, the information examined, and any possible connections between people and places, are discussed as they appear from both viewpoints.

Michael has found this archival aspect of research interesting, especially examining 150-year-old books and other documents in the Mitchell Library and being able to link the 'old people' to descendants today and locate some of their camping places. This 'linking' process highlights how crucial Michael's involvement has been to the success of the research. His perspective on personal identities, connections and the locations draws on a different way of thinking to Paul's, leading to some conclusions that probably would not have been made individually. Michael has also been able to telephone community elders from the library with queries about these matters, often clarifying issues instantly (or through follow-up questions later if more appropriate). This has helped make connections between people and places and has maximised the effectiveness of time spent in libraries and other archives.

Another important collaboration in this research is with local historians and researchers through local libraries and historical societies. Not only do these people have an excellent historical knowledge of local areas and environments (crucial context for research of this kind) but they have often also collated information on local



**Figure 3:** Historical Aboriginal places in the eastern suburbs of Sydney (adapted by Paul Irish from Google Earth image)

Aboriginal people. An aim of the project is to connect these people and organisations with the local Aboriginal community because much mutually beneficial and interesting research (beyond the current project) could be achieved in this manner.

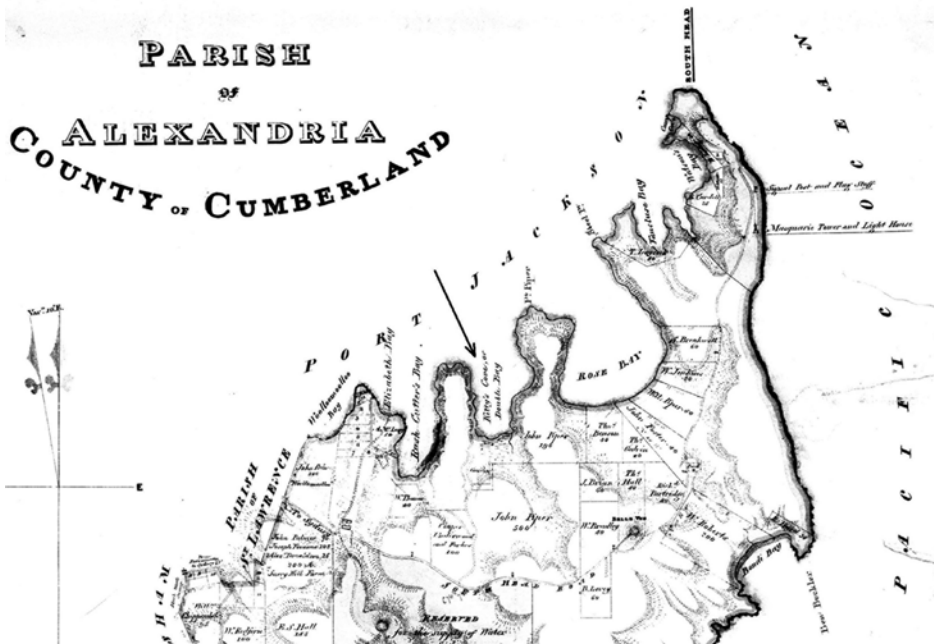
The products of this research are stored in several linked databases, and all relevant documentation (where possible) has been scanned and attached to the relevant records of places. Although stored presently in the format of the SAHP Project, this data will be made available to the local Aboriginal community (see below).

## Initial findings

Some interesting initial results from the research particularly concern the eastern suburbs area. Given the preponderance of large and ‘historic’ properties across this (now) generally affluent area, it is easy to forget that until the late 1800s this area was effectively a ‘remote’ rural part of Sydney, despite its relative proximity to the city. As with Botany Bay to the south, there appears to have been opportunities for Aboriginal

people to continue to live with a degree of autonomy in this area. This is reflected in the acknowledgment of Europeans living in the region in the mid- to late 1800s of the connections of Aboriginal people to specific areas. For example, the link of Aboriginal woman Kitty to the Double Bay area, described in the introductory quote from the 1870s, appears to have been recognised as far back as 1841, with a parish plan naming the bay ‘Kitty’s Cove or Double Bay’ (Figure 4). The Seven Shillings Beach story in the same quote also recognised the rights of a specific person (Gurrah) to an area and its resources. Similarly, a natural spring at Vacluse is named ‘Emma’s well’, supposedly after an Aboriginal woman named Emma Collins who lived nearby with her husband, Peter, and drew water from the spring (Figure 5). Locals placed a stone trough at the site in 1874 and the council later erected a tablet nearby giving that name, though there is some debate as to whether the couple were Aboriginal (Jervis and Kelly 1960–65:148–9; Rowland 1951:225).

Given that these people were all living in close proximity at the same time, they would obviously have known one another. Some were clearly related, as the introductory quote shows, though many connections are still unknown. It is also relevant to consider the traditional affiliations of these people. This is documented for people such as William Warrell<sup>2</sup> (also known as ‘Rickety Dick’), who lived at Rose Bay in the mid-nineteenth century. His mother was from Botany Bay and his father was

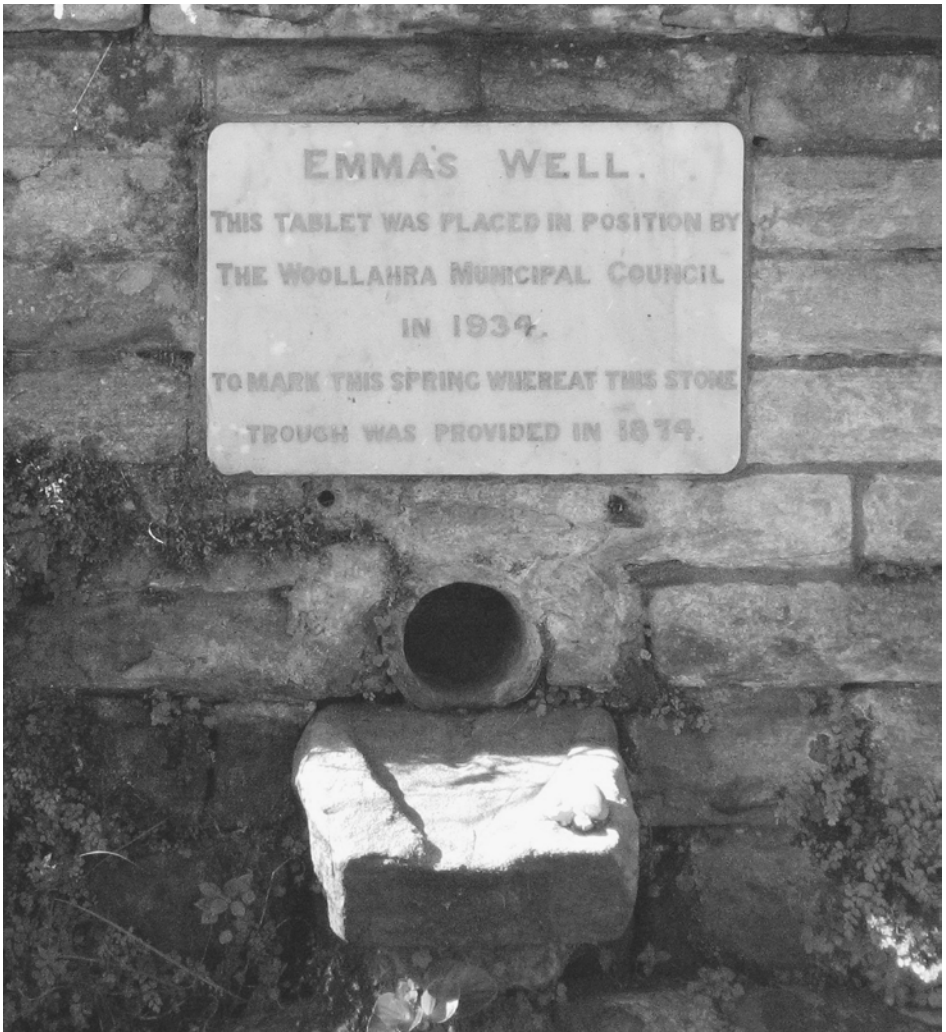


**Figure 4:** Extract of Alexandria Parish Map of 1841 showing ‘Kitty’s Cove’ (indicated with arrow) (source: PL Bemi 1841 *Plan of the Parish of Alexandria*, County of Cumberland, Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW #M2 811.181/1841/1)



from the Illawarra (Anon 1863). He was also a cousin to Cora Gooseberry, one of the wives of well-known early Sydney identity Bungaree (Flynn n.d.:Frame 14). A similar pattern of Sydney/Botany Bay/Illawarra parental origins is noted for a number of other people in the south-eastern Sydney area at this time, and there is no reason to assume that it does not represent a pre-contact trend or custom. These people may therefore have had obligations to country in several areas across a wide tract of land.

Interestingly, Bungaree, despite being 'from' north of Broken Bay (i.e. north of Sydney), was buried at Rose Bay with one of his wives (Smith 1992:144). Though his father may have been from the Broken Bay area, his mother's origins are not known,



**Figure 5:** Emma's well at Rose Bay (photograph: Paul Irish and Michael Ingrey)

and this raises the possibility that Bungaree had some traditional affiliation with Rose Bay or the Sydney Harbour area more generally. Rose Bay is historically documented as a ritual combat ground known as Pannerong (Collins 1975[1798]:489–90) and evidence of the burial of at least one other Aboriginal person from the post-contact period was unearthed there during recent construction works (Donlon 2008:102–04). If Wingle and Kitty were also from north of Sydney, as suggested by Smith (2008b:229), one or both of them may also have had familial connections to the eastern suburbs area, given that they lived most of their lives there.

Perhaps, as Michael suggests, Bungaree's famous statement to visitors entering Sydney Harbour — that the north side of the harbour was 'his shore' (Barratt 1981:34) — hints at more complex relationships to country than most researchers currently acknowledge. Aboriginal historical research in Sydney has an undeniable tendency to reduce the complex and numerous inherited and marriage obligations to country of Sydney's Aboriginal people to the 'clan' to which they belonged, as though that fully explains their identities (e.g. Smith 2004). It is fair to say that since the initial recording of clan affiliations by the early colonists, inadequate attention has been paid to these potentially complex relationships, despite what is known from other parts of Australia (Powell and Hesline 2010).

Beyond the broad affiliations discussed above, the research also maps the movement of individuals around smaller areas such as Botany Bay. For example, in the mid-nineteenth century Johnny Malone lived on western Botany Bay (Scherzer 1863:58), at Kurnell on the south side of the bay (Anon 1899; see also Goodall and Cadzow 2009) and north of La Perouse on the north-eastern bay (Anon 1862; Jervis and Flack 1938:304). At another time he is said to have lived in the Heathcote area to the south of Botany Bay in a rock shelter while working to clear timber (Midgely 1973:58). The general location of these camps is known and it does not appear that Malone was forced to move between them. The reasons are likely to be a combination of historical factors and cultural obligations. As per the trend noted above, Johnny married 'Lizzie', an Illawarra woman.

Similarly, Botany Bay man William Rowley was born and lived for many years at Kurnell, spent time in the Illawarra (Carter 1935:2) and was a founding member of the La Perouse Aboriginal community. He also later helped to establish the Salt Pan Creek Aboriginal camp further west on the Georges River, with the daughter of another Kurnell woman, Bidy Giles (who was also married to a man from the Illawarra). Bidy also lived at a range of places around the south and west of Botany Bay throughout the mid- to late nineteenth century (see Goodall and Cadzow 2009).

A degree of choice and freedom of movement is clearly evident here but is not generally recognised in the descriptions of nineteenth-century Aboriginal people in Sydney. Even today, these camps are often thought of as fringe camps, as if Aboriginal people had no choice over location and were left trapped and dependent on the outer edge of European settlements. The continued occupation of rich resource areas

and the likely maintenance of cultural obligations to country show that this was not the case.

This is well illustrated by Mahroot, a Botany Bay man known for his moving testimony at a government enquiry into Aboriginal people in 1845 (NSW Select Committee on the Aborigines 1845:1–5). He was born at Cooks River (north-western bay) and later lived on the eastern bay at the Sir Joseph Banks Hotel at Botany and on land leased to him at Bunnerong by Governor Bourke in 1832, where he earned a living from fishing. Mahroot told others that the latter location was ‘all my country... water all pretty — sun make it light’ (Miles 1854:5). It was clear to Michael and others in the community that it would have been a good fishing spot on the bay next to a creek. It may also have had cultural significance or affiliation.

In all these examples, it is essential to understand exactly where these places were in order to appreciate the choices people made, and the context of their lives. It is curious that while Mahroot’s testimony is a key and often-quoted source for the period, only a few have thought it relevant to know where the land grant was and how he came to choose it (e.g. Curby 2009:41–3; Karskens 2009:517; Smith 2004:128–30) and no one has related its recorded location precisely to the landscape today. Michael notes that it is precisely this that is important to the Aboriginal community, as many from the La Perouse Aboriginal community drive past Mahroot’s land and other historical Aboriginal places every day without knowing it (Figure 6). Michael believes it is important, especially for younger people, to be aware that all these places have an Aboriginal connection, as well as knowing more about each place and person. For example, Mahroot can be considered one of the first Aboriginal businessmen, leasing out his land to non-Aboriginal farmers (NSW Select Committee on the Aborigines 1845:3–4; Townsend 1849:120).

Knowing locations is also important in terms of heritage management. Despite huge alterations to the landscape in the area of Mahroot’s land with the creation of the Port Botany container terminal, part of his land grant is still undeveloped. Could anything physically remain of Mahroot’s life there, and should this remaining portion be physically spared any future impacts? Similarly, the Sir Joseph Banks Hotel is registered as an item of State Heritage Significance but only for its European heritage values, with no recognition (and hence consideration or protection) or interpretation of its Aboriginal historical connections.

These places are certainly as significant to the Aboriginal community as pre-contact middens, engravings and other places, but largely remain historical concepts rather than managed places. Only around a third of places in the south-eastern Sydney area have been listed on formal heritage registers, and the vast majority of these are ‘archaeological’ sites with some evidence of post-contact Aboriginal use. Only a handful of sites are registered for their historical Aboriginal associations, including rock engravings historically associated with the La Perouse Aboriginal community. This is partly explained by the separation of ‘Aboriginal’ and ‘historic/European’



**Figure 6:** An unassuming bend of Botany Road, familiar to many but few know they are driving over Mahroot's land (photograph: Paul Irish and Michael Ingrey)

heritage by statute and management in New South Wales, leading to uncertainty as to how and by whom Aboriginal historical places should be managed. A further factor is the time needed to research these places to a degree where their physical location can be pinpointed, which is beyond the scope of most development-driven heritage investigations or even academic studies. These are explanations, not excuses, and a key reason for the research outlined here is to seek to address this situation in a culturally appropriate way, backed by rigorous historical and archaeological research. It is also a key aspect of this work that the Aboriginal community decides how to manage the Aboriginal values of these places, as registration does not necessarily imply real protection. For example, the best management may be to leave the place as it is but to raise awareness of it in the Aboriginal community, or there may be a need for active conservation or management of the place, or interpretive signage.

## Future directions

The mixture of historical, archaeological and Aboriginal community information in this research is already generating new perspectives and uncovering previously

undocumented connections. The research is ongoing and interest and support in these historical connections have been shown through a project commissioned from the authors by the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales (Irish and Ingrey 2011). Paul has also commenced doctoral research focusing on the people and places of south-eastern Sydney from 1840 to 1900, while Michael has developed a brochure about historical Aboriginal connections to south-eastern Sydney (with funding from the New South Wales Heritage Branch) which is to be distributed to local schools and Aboriginal communities in the region (Garrara Cooperative 2012). Better documentation of the people and places being studied will lead to a much deeper understanding of who they were and why and how they lived where they did. The authors are also undertaking site visits to document remains of places and their environmental settings and have delivered several talks to raise professional and broader community awareness of the historical and heritage implications of their research.

From Michael's perspective, the main aim of the research is to make the Aboriginal community aware of these places generally, so people may be able to make personal connections with particular places. The information that is found belongs to the Aboriginal people of the communities as a whole and is being borrowed for this research. Decisions on management, and possibly promotion of some places through tours or publications, should flow organically from this awareness and should not be forced.

It is hoped that this research will lead to a better understanding by the Aboriginal and broader community of these people and places. If subsequent generations of Sydneysiders can grow up with an understanding of pre- and post-European contact and ongoing Aboriginal connections with their local areas, it will do much for the cause of mutual understanding and respect for Aboriginal people, past and present, in Sydney and beyond.

## **Acknowledgments**

Michael: I would like to thank my elders for their support through this research, especially my grandmother and my aunty for their knowledge and memory of the old people and places that contribute to the make-up of this study. This knowledge is now cemented into this study for the Aboriginal community of La Perouse and will become a foundation for future projects that will contribute to my community passing on our stories and interpreting our history in a culturally appropriate way.

Paul and Michael also wish to thank the Historic Houses Trust and New South Wales Heritage Branch for funding projects that have enabled us to further research in parts of south-eastern Sydney in 2010/11.

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## Notes

1. The outdated and offensive terms used to describe Aboriginal people in these quotes are retained to convey the nature of the historical record and do not represent the views of the authors.
2. There are historically documented variants on this spelling.