

The Aborigines of South Creek

The first inhabitants of the Sydney basin bounded by Port Jackson and Botany Bay in the east, the Blue Mountains to the west, north to the Hawkesbury River and south to Appin, had in common the Dharug language. Fourteen tribes or clans made up this language group and the people who inhabited both sides of South Creek were known as the Gomerrigal-Tongarra clan.

Unlike the Blue Mountains clans who used rock shelters, the Gomerrigal-Tongarra people lived in open camp sites along the creek in simple gunyahs. These were constructed from three leaning poles lashed together at the top and covered on two sides with bark. They had a habit of smearing mud on their skin to protect them from the effects of both weather and insects. In winter they wore animal skins to keep warm.

Very little is known of their cultural and ceremonial life. According to researcher and writer James L. Kohen, the Gomerrigal-Tongarra clan had rights to the ridges at Plumpton and the gravels of Eastern Creek. From these areas they used red silcrete rocks to make sharp flakes which were then fashioned into tools or used as barbs on spears. The MacLaurin family (who lived at Mamre) also asserted that the bodies of the dead were not buried, but wrapped in bark and placed on platforms elevated in the branches of trees.

There are no remaining rock carvings or marked trees in the area. Emily MacLaurin described a meeting place on South Creek at Mamre at a point where '...the Creek takes in a small stream from the west, the right bank of which reaches into the creek in a narrow finger'. It is thought that despite the arrival of the Rev. Samuel Marsden in 1804, ceremonies continued to be held at this spot for some time.

By 1816 however, the Gomerrigal-Tongarra, together with the rest of the Dharug clans, had been ravaged either by clashes with the settlers or by contracting European diseases. They became increasingly dependent on the settlers for their survival. Although they had always maintained a camp on or around the Mamre estate, the Rev. Samuel Marsden now sought to encourage them to work in exchange for food and clothing. He was obviously successful in this endeavour, as by 1835 the Quaker missionary James Backhouse wrote in his journal after a visit to Mamre that '...the South Creek Natives may be considered as half-domesticated, and they often assist in the agricultural operations of the settlers.' He was also impressed by the fact that the wife of their Aboriginal guide - supplied by Marsden - could read, having been 'educated in a school, formerly kept for the Natives, at Parramatta'. The next day, Backhouse travelled onto Penrith, his guide 'another South Creek Black, named Simeon. His wife was killed, about two years ago, by some of those whom he termed "Wild Natives"...We tried in vain to persuade this man to accompany us to Wellington Valley; he did not like to go...These people are afraid of other tribes of their own race'.

Another visitor, Charles Darwin, passing through Mamre in January 1836, was impressed by the '...good humour and superior hunting skills' of the Aborigines he encountered around Penrith.

History has given us sparse records indeed about the Gomerrigal-Tongarra people. As part of the Dharug-speaking Aborigines, their life-style was probably similar to others of the Dharug clans. They were hunter-gatherers over specifically defined territories, in this case, mainly the banks of South Creek; and they adhered to particular laws of kinship, marriage, sexual practice and burial which ensured the well-being of the clan. Men and women had particular roles in the clan which were clearly defined; children were given a totem name; traditional medicine was carried out by the 'koradji' or doctor; and, like all Aborigines they had a spiritual Dreaming.

The clash of European and Aboriginal cultures, despite original good intentions, meant that the Gomerrigal-Tongarra people and their culture was virtually destroyed within a century of white settlement.

Bibliography

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Origin of the place name - St Marys

Named after the parish church of St. Mary Magdalene, built between 1837- 40 and consecrated by Bishop Broughton in 1840. It is one of the few townships in the world actually named after a church. The

site was believed to have been chosen by Phillip Parker King's mother. The property had been acquired from John Oxley in 1828 by King, the original grant having been made in 1823. Other land grants in the area included those to Anna Josepha King in 1807 (Dunheved), Samuel Marsden (Mamre), and Mary Putland (Frogmore). The area was first called South Creek, because European settlement was originally centred along the banks of the creek. The land grants became working holdings because of the permanent water supply. The rich alluvial soil ensured an expanding agricultural community and its location on the Great Western Road meant that it became a convenient staging post. The name St. Marys was first used when the St. Marys Post Office was opened on the 1st October, 1840. The township formed part of a grant to Mary Putland (later married Sir Maurice O'Connell), the daughter of Governor William Bligh. Closer settlement of the area was made possible when in 1842 part of the O'Connell Estate was subdivided.

Origin of the place name – Dunheved

In 1806 Governor Philip Gidley King made several large land grants totalling 3780 acres to his son and three daughters, and the following year Governor William Bligh granted an additional 790 acres to Anna Josepha King, the ex-governor's wife. The latter property was named Thanks but the Kings returned to England soon after and Philip Gidley King died there in 1808. Meanwhile the estate was managed by Rowland Hassall with William Hayes as overseer.

While Phillip Parker King - the ex-governor's - son returned to Australia with his wife - the former Harriet Lethbridge - in 1817, he was more involved with naval matters than the land at this time. It wasn't until his mother returned to Australia in 1832 that the property was renamed Dunheved - which means 'hill-head' - after the 13th century keep of the old castle in Launceston Cornwall, the town of her late husband's birth. Dunheved House was built on the property by Phillip Parker King.

The estate of Dunheved was one of the largest in the Colony. Large numbers of cattle, sheep, pigs, and horses were bred here; grain was grown; and orchards developed. The cattle herd in particular was highly praised, and between 80 and 100 servants were employed to work the place.

When the property was sold in 1904 and it became a suburb, the name began to change, first of all to Dunhet and in the 1950s to Dunheved, the name it now bears. Sadly this once great property is no longer in existence. The house was demolished and a large munitions factory was built on the bulk of the estate in 1942, together with a railway station called Dunheved, to transport all the workers involved at the site.

After the Second World War, there was considerable expansion. The area immediately to the south of Dunheved House became mainly an industrial sub-division and housing estate. The western end, a heavily wooded area, later became the suburb of Kingswood, and the remaining open grasslands disappeared under housing estates in the rapid expansion of the 1960s and 1970s.