**No 2. First Hawkesbury dwellers**

Aboriginal clans have lived a nomadic life in this district for around 100 generations. We know this from studies in the Sydney area, which securely date Aboriginal activity to almost 15,000 years. Some studies in the Nepean Gravels near Penrith suggest Aboriginal people were on the river banks more than 40,000 years before Europeans arrived.

Keen skills were needed to read the river’s moods, to feed the extended family groups, to keep them safe, and to ensure year by year that the river’s bounty grew. The Indigenous peoples called the river ‘Dee-rab-bun’ or ‘Venrubbin’, and fished from their bark canoes and hunted on land on both sides of the river. They set traps in deep holes for birds and small animals, and hunted larger prey. The lagoons and river provided ducks, and native yams and grubs found on the banks were valued for food, as were the Spring flowering native shrubs and berries.

The Hawkesbury Aboriginal hunting traditions and ceremonies were not written but passed to the children in songs and stories and by pictures drawn in caves and on flat rock faces well above flood-level. These sites, some of which were sacred to the tribes, were along the length of the river and in particular, downstream, where the banks are closed in by deep craggy cliffs in the lower reaches from Maroota to the Brooklyn area.

For example, a giant outline of the god-like figure ‘Baiami’ is to be found at Wheelbarrow Ridge and thought to be part of initiation ceremonies. Kangaroo, emu and other native fauna outlines and hand-prints and emu footprints are cut or stencilled into the rock around Laughtondale (upstream of Wisemans Ferry), and elsewhere. Above Yarramundi at Hawkesbury Heights, where today the river’s name Hawkesbury changes to the Nepean although it is the same waterway, is another ancient rock carving of a large kangaroo.

The age of the rock etchings is difficult to know, as they were re-cut many times and new carvings and wet dye stencils continued to be made by later Aborigines. This is shown by an etching of a European sailing vessel of c.1820s age among the more usual earlier drawings.

The writings of the Europeans around the late 1790s and early 1800s, tell that the local Indigenous groups usually contained up to about 30 people, several clans coming together to hunt kangaroo and for special occasions. They hunted for only as much as they needed, using mainly clubs and spears. Stone axes made from pebbles from the present Yarramundi area were used to cut notches in tree trunks to climb to reach possums and other tree dwelling animals. The silcrete stones or cores from which the flakes for tools were made came from creeks near Plumpton.

The Aboriginal names of some of the tribespeople who lived near today’s Windsor were Yél-lo-mun-dee, Yaragowby, Nabbin and Seribandy. Although the Aboriginal groups along the upper river had a different dialect to that spoken around Sydney, they had some words in common. Interestingly, it is not known what early Aborigines along the upper Hawkesbury River called their tribal area or the broader common language they spoke. The name we have given them today is the ‘Darug’ (or other similar spelling) and it continues to be generally accepted, as other names put forward have not been completely proven.

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