

Aboriginal people of Macquarie Harbour

Tasmanian Aboriginal people have occupied Tasmania for at least 36 000 years. At the height of the last Ice Age, they crossed the plains of Bass Strait exposed by the lower sea levels to become the most southerly humans on Earth. With the end of the Ice Age and the accompanying increase in sea levels some 10 000 years ago, the Tasmanian Aborigines became separated from their mainland counterparts, resulting in a period of isolation longer than that experienced by any other human society.

Archaeological records

The Macquarie Harbour region and the rivers that flow into it are rich with Aboriginal sites. Investigations at Kuti Kina Cave, one of the richest archaeological sites in Australia, have unveiled an occupation spanning from 20 000 –15 000 years ago. Along the coast south of Macquarie Harbour, numerous sites can be found, including middens composed of discarded shells and scatters of stone artefacts. An interesting item which is frequently associated with Ice Age sites is Darwin Glass, a hard, black silicate glass formed by a

meteorite impact at the site of the Darwin Crater. As the distribution of Darwin Glass reveals, this much prized cutting material was carried considerable distances from its source.

All these archaeological sites are unique and non-renewable depositories of Tasmania's Aboriginal cultural heritage and are of great significance to the present day Aboriginal community. They are testimony to a people who have one of the longest and richest histories of any existing people in the world today. The sites have contributed to the internationally recognised cultural value of the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area.

Some sites, such as coastal middens, have accumulated over thousands of years and can reveal enormous amounts of information relating to how diet, tool technologies and other aspects of the Aboriginal lifestyle have changed through time. If a site is disturbed, such information is lost forever. For these reasons, it is important that these

unique features of the cultural landscape remain intact. To ensure this, all Aboriginal sites are protected under the *Aboriginal Relicts Act 1975*.

Aboriginal society

Much of what is known of Aboriginal society and culture is based on the historical accounts of early explorers, such as James Kelly and George Augustus Robinson, and the passing down of oral traditions to today's Aboriginal community.

Aboriginal society was organised around the hearth group, which comprised several related individuals who shared a common cooking fire. These were structured into bands which travelled and hunted within a given home territory, occasionally negotiating entry onto the territory of other bands. Bands within the same region were structured into tribes, united by language, customs and inter-marriage. The Macquarie Harbour region is the traditional territory of the Southwest, or Toogee tribe, composed of the Lowreenne and

Mimegin bands. The area was also visited by the Petermidic (Pieman River) band of the North-west tribe and the Ninene people (Port Davey) of the South-west tribe.

The tribes moved seasonally, following the coast as far north as Cape Grim. An early European visitor to the area described how the Aborigines crossed the mouth of the harbour 'on floats, in the form of a boat, made of bundles of the paper-like bark of the Swamp Tea-Tree, lashed side by side, by means of tough grass.'

The major food resources of the South-west people comprised shellfish, crayfish, seals, penguins and mutton-birds and their eggs. On the coastal plains, Bennetts wallabies were hunted, as were wombats and birds.

The tool kit of the Tasmanian Aborigines comprised implements of stone, wood and bone. Cutting and scraping tools were made from pieces of stone by striking flakes off a larger stone, while larger, waterworn stones were used as grinders and pounders. Other unworked stones were used with great effect to maim birds and small mammals. Barbless spears were made from the tea-tree (*Melaleuca sp.*) and heated over a fire to straighten the shaft. Plant fibres were used for a variety of purposes, ranging from the manufacture of ropes for climbing trees in quest of possums, to binding together rafts and

weaving baskets.

Aboriginal huts built from tea-tree branches and bark, often covered in feathers and lined with grass, provided their inhabitants with warm and comfortable protection from the strong winds and rain that lash the west coast. Huts were of durable construction, having an average lifespan comparable to that of a weatherboard house. The circular depressions over which these huts were built can still be found along the coast.

Early European contact

The first record of European contact with the tribes of the Macquarie Harbour region comes from the journals of the first European to visit the area, James Kelly. The following account reveals his misgivings about contact with the local people:

'The Whole face of the Coast
Was on Fire and Lucky it
Was for us it Was on fire,
for the Smoke was so thick
We could not See a Hundred
yards a Head of the Boat.
On pulling into the Narrows
at the Small Entrance Island
We Heard a Large Number of
Natives Shouting and Making
a Great Noise as if they Were
Hunting Kangaroos.

It was Lucky the Smoke was
So thick for Had the Natives
Seen the Boat passing
through the Narrow Entrance
it is possible they would have
Killed Every person on Board
by Volleys of Stones and
Spears in their usual way'.

There are few accounts of the interactions between the convicts of Macquarie Harbour and the indigenous people. Accounts by escaping convicts provide information that negates the idea that the South-west tribe did not venture inland. Goodwin and Connelly, during their escape from Macquarie Harbour, noted 'two parties of natives...consisting of about 10 persons in each, mostly women and children' on the banks of the upper Gordon River, while several surveyors recorded evidence of Aboriginal occupation of the inland regions.

The Aboriginal people of the Macquarie Harbour region were among the last to maintain an active resistance against the loss of their lands in the face of the European invasion; yet, following the 'conciliation' campaigns of George Augustus Robinson, few remained within the Macquarie Harbour region.

Further reading

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