Mortlake

Gregory Blaxell

It is generally argued that the Aborigines who occupied the lands in what is now Mortlake and Breakfast Point were members of the Wangal clan. Their territory extended from Sydney Cove to Rosehill along the southern shore of the Parramatta River. [1]

The Parramatta River flows through several clan areas. Starting at the coast, the Cameragal (sometimes spelt Gamaragal or Cammeraygal) clan occupied the northern shores of the Harbour west to about the Hunters Hill region. From here, occupying the northern bank and extending as far as Parramatta, was the Wallumedegal (sometimes spelt Wallumattagal) clan. On the southern shore of the harbour from the coast to around Sydney Cove was the Cadigal clan while the clan occupying the southern bank from Sydney Cove to Rosehill, was the Wangal clan. Bennelong is thought to be a member of that clan. He claimed ownership of Goat Island (*Me-mel*) because he said that he had inherited it from his father.

There is still considerable argument about whether the Wangal clan was part of the Eora or the Darug group. It is now widely accepted that the Aboriginal people living along the southern side of the Parramatta River were part of the Darug language group (coastal dialect). Their designated language could have been called the Eora language. [2] This is an attempt to explain the implied confusion about how many groups occupied the Sydney basin.

While a total of 19 tangible Aboriginal cultural heritage sites have been documented in the Canada Bay area (mainly close to the river), there are no confirmed and recorded sites located in Mortlake or Breakfast Point. [3]

Mortlake has one area of parkland that has been specifically dedicated to Aboriginal heritage. At the end of Hilly Street is a reserve called the Wangal Reserve. The name was assigned on 26 October 1984. [4] Wangal Reserve was to be the centre of celebrations for the Aboriginal heritage of the area, then part of the Municipality of Concord. The flagstaff was to fly the Aboriginal flag and the reserve was to be the focal point of celebrations commemorating Aboriginal heritage. Today, no flag flies and no ceremonies are held. Wangal Reserve is just another picnic area with electric barbecues.

Early grant holders

Mortlake was originally 30 hectares of land granted to John Miller, John Robertson and Benjamin Butcher in July 1795. This land was subsequently acquired by John Ward and then by his adopted heir, Alexander MacDonald. The area was originally called Bottle Point, [5] the name used to designate the point at the head of the peninsula. In 1837 the name Mortlake Point was in use, but this had changed by 1857 when it had become Bachelors Point and by 1890 was known as either Bachelors or Green Point. Today it has resumed its name of Mortlake Point and the suburb is known as Mortlake.

In 1884, the Australian Gas Light Company purchased 32 hectares of land at Mortlake and gas was produced there in 1886. By 1890, Mortlake was the largest and most densely populated area in the municipality. Here is how one commentator saw Mortlake.[6]

> Around these works a township has grown up within the past four years. There are Mr Sturt's hotel, several large stores, an eating-house with the sign 'all meals 6d' in large letters; the Concord Working Men's Club, ... an Anglican and a Congregational church, a large number of working men's cottages, and other evidences of progress and civilization. There are the village of Concord, the village of Longbottom, the village of Beaconsfield, and several other smaller clusters of houses in various parts of the municipality, but by far the largest is that of Mortlake. The remainder of the municipality consists of large paddocks, fine residences with gardens and extensive grounds and waste land (sic), much of which is covered with a healthy growth of eucalyptus, wattles and other trees. Round Hen and Chicken Bay, at the head of Major's Bay, and along the course of Powell's Creek, there are extensive flats covered with mangrove, and more or less swampy, but the greater part of the district is high ground, with rich soil, and many beautiful and picturesque drives. Soon after the gasworks were opened, the municipal council made an arrangement whereby the Gas Company supplied tarred metal, and the council formed and made a roadway from the works to the Parramatta Road. Since then, other roads have been made by the council in a similar way, and these are the best and cleanest roads to be found in the metropolitan districts, except those roads which are wood paved. The asphalting is, however, only laid down in the centre, and the sides are still in the most primitive condition. The council has also laid down strips of asphalting about 2 ft [0.6 m] wide along the footpaths, so that pedestrians may go from one end of the extensive municipality to the other without dirtying their boots.[7]

The land once occupied by the Mortlake Gasworks has been redeveloped and has become the new suburb of Breakfast Point.

Transport

In 1874, Mortlake was connected by horse-drawn bus with the main trunk railway at Burwood. However, with the opening of the gasworks and the need to transport labour to the facility, a steam tramway between Burwood and Mortlake was opened on 16 September 1901.[8] This line linked up with the Ashfield to Burwood tramline and made a direct trip from Ashfield to Mortlake possible. The line was extended to Cabarita on 13 July 1907. The electrified tramway was opened on 4 February 1912.[9] The tram service continued until 1948 when the line was closed and the trams were replaced with buses.

During the 1880s, probably coinciding with the building of the gasworks, Parramatta River ferries ran a service to Mortlake. A subdivision plan for Mortlake, prepared in 1884, shows a steamer wharf at the end of Burwood Road (now Tennyson Road).[10] This is the present site of the River Quays facility. Parramatta River ferries stopped running in 1928.

Still running is the Mortlake ferry (also known as the Putney punt), a vehicular cable ferry that crosses between Hilly Street, Mortlake, and Pellisier Road, Putney. It is the last remaining vehicular ferry operating in Sydney.

The Mortlake ferry began operations 16 May 1928 when the service was opened by Robert Ball, the Minister for Main Roads. The ferry enabled employees at the gasworks who lived on the northern bank of the river to reach their workplace. The alternative was to make the journey via the Meadowbank punt or be rowed to work.[11]

Recreation

Ashton's Baths were established in 1886. They were the first non-tidal baths built in metropolitan Sydney. They were excavated from solid rock and measured 30 metres by 12 metres. They were located in Majors Bay behind what is now a factory complex in Hilly Street.[12] The baths depended partly on the tide but the water level was maintained by the use of electric pumps bringing in water from the river. It is recorded that 21,000 school children attended the baths each week during the swimming season.[13]

The original Palace Hotel was opened in 1886, the same year as the gasworks. It was built on the river at the end of Tennyson Road where the River Quays marina now stands. The first licensee was John Stuart. The hotel, known as Montgomery's Palace, was a distinctive building with verandas and a tower and was a popular vantage point for the viewing of rowing events.[14] This hotel was demolished in the mid-1920s and a new hotel, still named the Palace, was built further up Tennyson Road, nearly opposite the entrance to the gasworks. The gasworks entrance was also the Mortlake tram terminus.

The hotel became a very popular watering hole for the thirsty workers and was one of Sydney's early-opener hotels. This variation to the normal hotel opening hours was to accommodate workers coming off night shift. The hotel still serves excellent beer and has incorporated a bistro. The Palace's most striking feature is the size of its men's toilet. 'Big enough to hold a dance in', quote the locals. This feature is a constant reminder that while the gasworks operated, the Palace dispensed huge volumes of beer to its many thirsty patrons.

Industries

The Mortlake Gasworks of the Australian Gas Light Company (AGL) opened 23 May 1886. AGL's earlier gasworks at Darling Harbour had opened in 1837.[15] The new works were modelled on the Beckton Works in East London, and AGL's engineer, Thomas Bush had previously been employed at Beckton.[16]

The Darling Harbour works were supplemented by smaller works at Balmain and Five Dock.[17] In 1890, AGL purchased the Parramatta Gas Company but by that time, gas mains had been planned for the north shore using the newly constructed railway bridge at Rhodes for the crossing. Balmain, Five Dock and Parramatta works were soon closed, although the Darling Harbour works continued to operate until 1922, when the company's entire gas-making operation was transferred to Mortlake.

Mortlake was a very suitable site for the works. The river provided a cheap and efficient means of obtaining its raw material, coal. Land in the area was cheap and the railway bridge, opened in 1886, provided access to many new customers by extending the gas mains to the north shore. The first coal wharf was built at the end of Breakfast Point. It was T-shaped and projected into the Parramatta River. Here is a description of the gas-making operation beginning at the Breakfast Point jetty.

> ... [the wharf] had two landing stages for high and low tides. It was equipped with steam cranes of the latest design. Railway tracks carried by a viaduct from the jetty into the upper storey of the coal stores bore locomotives which delivered the coal to high bins to supply

fuel for the charging of the retorts. Looping around to return at ground level, the railway then collected the coke produced by carbonisation. To make gas, the coal was loaded into the retorts, sealed from the air and heated to 1100 degrees centigrade. Gas was taken off all through the five or six hours required to yield the maximum amount. These had to be cleaned of built up tar every time the door was opened. Gas was stored in tanks after it was cooled, cleaned and purified. Mortlake's first gasometer was the largest in the southern hemisphere rising to a height of 110 feet [33.5m] when filled and contained 2,750, 000 cubic feet [78,066 cubic metres] of gas. Gas was kept in the tank by a water seal provided by a tank excavated from the solid rock.[18]

When AGL's Mortlake plant was in full operation it used nearly 460,000 tonnes of coal per year. This was brought from Hexham on the Hunter River, north of Sydney, by colliers known as the 'Sixty Milers'. The colliers used were the SS *Felton Bank* and the SS *Mortlake Bank*, each of 1400 tonnes, and the MV *Hexham Bank* of 1650 tonnes. The *Hexham Bank* was built in Brisbane in 1953. The last collier brought coal to Mortlake in late 1971.[19]

The process of carbonisation to obtain gas from coal was discontinued on 31 December 1971. After that time, natural gas from the interior of Australia was piped to Mortlake where it was given an odour for safety reasons and distributed to consumers throughout the Sydney area. The gasworks finally closed in 1990. Here is how one commentator saw the closure.

> At the Mortlake works only 200 of the former 2000 employees are left. The old wharf where the ships used to dock lies empty and weeds grow among the abandoned machinery and trees are starting to grow inside the old buildings. On Friday 15 June, the Minister for Minerals and Energy, Mr Pickard, turned off all the controls to silence the plant – ending 104 years of history.[20]

Located at the western end of Wangal reserve near Mortlake Point is a plaque commemorating the site of the Green Point Naval Dockyard, established during World War II for the building of wooden motor launches for the armed services.[21]

Another local industrial product was the Victa mower. The first Victa mowers were made at Mortlake by local resident Mervyn Victor Richardson. He made the first out of scrap in his garage and then moved to a shed behind St Mary's Church of England, where the first Victa mowers were manufactured and went on sale on 20 September 1952. The new company, Victa Lawnmowers Pty Ltd, was incorporated on 13 February 1953. The venture was so successful that by 1958 the company moved to much larger premises in Parramatta Road, Concord and then to Milperra.[22]

Mortlake today

Mortlake today is only a fraction of its original area, a tiny pocket of land, at present mainly industrial, and squeezed between two rapidly developing residential areas. The former Mortlake gasworks is now the suburb of Breakfast Point. Originally, it abutted Cabarita and Concord and was within the municipality of Concord. The former gasworks area has undergone remediation and significant redevelopment, including a landform change, to accommodate the Breakfast Point residential development. The 'new' suburb of Mortlake, located to the west of Breakfast Point, was assigned on 16 April 1993, the same date as Breakfast Point.[23] Both suburbs are now within the City of Canada Bay.

Much of was what was formally known as Mortlake is now part of Concord – for example, Mortlake Public School is in Brays Avenue, Concord.

Mortlake is changing. Much of the suburb, especially in Hilly Street and Tennyson Road, is industrial. Several businesses have closed down and the next wave of development may well be medium to high-density residential dwellings, perhaps of the same genre as those constructed or under construction at Breakfast Point.

Gregory Blaxell is a former university lecturer, author of The River: Sydney Cove to Parramatta*, (Halstead Press 2009), and a member of the Hunters Hill Historical Society*

Endnotes

1 Keith Vincent Smith, *The Aboriginal History of Ryde*, City of Ryde, Ryde NSW, 2005, p 2

2 Gondwana Consulting, 'Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Study and Management Plan – City of Canada Bay', draft February 2006, City of Canada Bay, 2006, p 42

3 Gondwana Consulting, 'Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Study and Management Plan – City of Canada Bay', draft February 2006, City of Canada Bay, 2006, p 14

4 Geographical Names Board of NSW website, Geographical names register extract, http://www.gnb.nsw.gov.au/name_search/extract?id=KWQlvqsyGH, viewed 20 January 2009

5 Geographical Names Board of NSW website, Geographical names register extract, http://www.gnb.nsw.gov.au/name_search/extract?id=MnjLZxxO, viewed 20 January 2009

6 Sheena Coupe, *Concord – A Centenary History*, Council of the Municipality of Concord, Concord NSW, 1983, p 119

7 GM Shaw, *Concord Jubilee 1883–1933*, Canberra Press, Sydney, 1933, p 39

8 David R Keenan, *The Rockdale and Enfield Lines of the Sydney Tramway System*, Transit Press, Sydney, 1994, p 28

9 *Nurungi, Newsletter of the Concord Heritage Society*, 35, July/August 1998, p 6

10 Frances Pollon, *The Book of Sydney Suburbs*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1988, pp 179–180

11 Gregory Blaxell, 'A Century of Caring for Boats', *Afloat*, November 2006, pp 19–20

12 Telephone conversation with Keith Brown, long time resident, conducted by Greg Blaxell, 5 April 2002

13 GM Shaw, *Concord Jubilee 1883–1933*, Canberra Press, Sydney, 1933, p 173

14 GM Shaw, *Concord Jubilee 1883–1933*, Canberra Press, Sydney, 1933, p 266

15 Sheena Coupe, *Concord – A Centenary History*, Council of the Municipality of Concord, Concord NSW, 1983, p 230

16 Michael Tesoriero, *Mortlake 1886–1986*, Australian Gas Light Company, Sydney, 1986, p 2

17 Sheena Coupe, *Concord – A Centenary History*, Council of the Municipality of Concord, Concord NSW, 1983, p 230

18 Michael Tesoriero, *Mortlake 1886–1986*, Australian Gas Light Company, Sydney, 1986, p 2

19 PR Stephensen, *The History and Description of Sydney Harbour*, Rigby, Adelaide, 1966, p 274

20 *Nurungi, Newsletter of the Concord Heritage Society*, 108, July, 1990, p 6

21 Gregory Blaxell, 'Fairmiles: the mini-gunboats of the Australian Navy', *Afloat*, February 2006, pp 26–27

Endnotes

22 'How do you sell a million mowers?', http://hawkey.id.au/Victa%20History.php, viewed 20 January 2009

23 Geographical Names Board of NSW website, Geographical names register extract, http://www.gnb.nsw.gov.au/name_search/extract?id=anwGBKKmIt, viewed 20 January 2009