



Yarra Point has a long and interesting history. For thousands of years Aboriginal people camped here, enjoying the abundant seafood and bush tucker as evidenced by the midden which makes up much of the Point adjoining Frenchman's and Yarra Bay.

In 1895, this small Aboriginal camp on Botany Bay's northern peninsula, then known as Kurewol and in the twentieth century as Guriwal, was formally gazetted for the - exclusive use of Aborigines - and became known as the La Perouse Aboriginal Mission.

The making of wooden boomerangs and other cultural artefacts and their decoration by burning in the designs is a feature of the La Perouse community.

Sadly, as a consequence of the changes to our culture over the last 200 years, much of the knowledge of the traditional uses for plants has been lost and many plants have disappeared.

The redevelopment of the bush tucker track around Yarra Point began in 2008 by Guriwal Aboriginal Corporation in collaboration with Randwick City Council to collect knowledge and information about local plants used for bush tucker, medicines and crafts and to present local artwork.

We were keen to involve younger people in the community, as traditionally, our elders would have passed information down by talking and showing the young people new skills so Aboriginal students

from Matraville Sports High came to the community to work with elders and an Aboriginal teacher from EORA Tafe College and you can see their work on the track today.

Although there are many more elders with traditional knowledge, we have recorded oral histories from four people who helped with the project. We hope this contributes in a small way to preventing the loss of this knowledge.

Thanks to local elder, Auntie Barbara Keeley, who was generous enough to share her knowledge of traditional plants and how they were used.

Also to Keith Stewart, Christopher Lyons and Timmy Ella who produced the beautiful sculptures along the track. Finally to the Commonwealth Government who funded this project through the Envirofund program.



Guriwal Aboriginal Corporation - 2009

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conversations with aborigines



**Auntie
Barbara Keeley**
(Bush plant expert)

‘My exposure to bush tucker came through my mother.

My knowledge is

Liverpool, Campbelltown,

the South Coast and La Perouse. I couldn’t tell you about other areas as they are not my country. Not my exposure.

Plants provided a ‘supermarket’ of nutritious foods which were collected by the women who knew the seasonal cycles of the plants within their area. Foods included berries such as Geebung and Pigeon Berry. Native cherry and grape is lovely to eat. Lillies were used for their tuber. Lemon Myrtle was used as a drink and a powder to use in cooking.

The bush also has a hardware, butcher, sweets, chemist, bakery and fruit shop as well. The Hardware shop would have the Tea Tree in it. When it was green it was used for indoor brooms and when it was dry it was used as a yard broom. It was also part of our calendar, as when it was in flower it would tell you when the fish were running.

In our chemist you’d find the Inkweed which you’d use instead of Conti’s Crystals. You can only work with the inkweed when the berries are purple. My mother would put it in the bath tub if you had scabies, ringworm or any itches.

If you had gout you’d boil it up and put your feet in it. You would never drink or eat it though. Other medicines included Sarsaparilla, which a lot of Kooris use for cancer treatment and cleansing the stomach. Bracken fern was used for stings.

The bush also provided a sweet-shop. If you were down the beach and hungry you’d go to the hill and have a feed of Pigface. The Apple Dumpling (Mylong Berry) you’d get when it was ripe and fell off the branch. The fruit market included fivies and ten corners and the bakery would have bread made from the wattle seeds. The yellow Lomandra pods were used for damper and Johnny cakes. You also made bread from the Burrawang but it is highly toxic. You’d have to leech it in water to get the poison out. The old people used to know exactly how long you’d need to rinse it for before you’d be able to use it for a feed.’

Uncle Keith Sewart (sculptor)

‘I’ll be eighty at Christmas and I’ve been up here for 75 years, living in La Pa. My father was a whaler. His brother was also a whaler.

There’s a certain whale, the Killer whale, that shouldn’t be touched by Aboriginal people. The old blackfellas say that the Killer whale is an Aboriginal come back in reincarnation because he has the markings of the boomerang under his gut. My grandfather didn’t like killing the whale so he got into timber cutting.

I learnt the carving from watching the old fella’s around the Mission. There was Bob Simms, old George ‘Tum’ Longbottom, the Timbery’s and my uncles, Cot, Harry and Willy Cooley. The old fella’s burnt the wood the hard way from the wood fire and then they got educated and used the primus but we use gas and electricity.

My mother’s side of the family were all fishermen, and used to fish at Frenchmans Bay, Congwong Bay and Yarra Beach. They used to net the fish. My uncle, Henry Cooley, was a good sailor. I’ve been out to sea with him a lot. There was no compass and he used to tell by the stars. The weather and the stars was the Aboriginal’s main way of dealing with life. I’ve done a lot of travel with traditional Aboriginals and they can tell

you what was going to grow next according to the weather. Though I think now that climate change has come there’s too much to do with atmospheric climate and this has all changed.

When I was about twelve years old I was on the look-out with old Pop Cooley and Ma Walker, and Ma Walker called me away and she said ‘see those fella’s there’ and I said ‘what fella’s?’ She was pointing at these big black ants. She said when those ants come out of that tree with the white lily and travel north that’s when the mullet is swimming north also. You can bet your life though, that what I’m telling you about the ants, means it’s time to get your wet gear on and go get the mullet.’



original people of La Perouse



Yvonne Simms

The boomerang that came back

'I am from the La Perouse community and a member of the Bidjigal people whose descendants include the warrior,

Pemulwuy who led the Eora and surrounding nations in the first major response to the invading British. The boomerang story is about my grandfather, John Henry Simms and how he used to make the boomerangs out of the mangrove tree.

He would only pick certain parts of the mangrove tree called the knees. He used to make killer boomerangs. They were huge, and this was how he made his living to support his nine girls and one boy. His mother's name was Jane Timberly and this was our link to the people here before Cook sailed.

One day down at the Loop he was selling his boomerangs, and this young man bought one off my grandfather and took it all around Australia returning twenty five years later. The next time we saw it was when it was sitting above the manager's office at the mission at La Perouse. We used to stare at this boomerang, not knowing it was my grandfathers. But the young man who bought the boomerang all those years ago turned out to be the mission manager, Mr. Jeffries. And he knew it had been done by my grandfather.

Back in the 1920's and 30's there was a big tourism boom at La Perouse and the celebrities would come out here and our women would make the shell work. Grandfather's sister, Auntie Jane Simms would do shell work and a lot of grandfather's boomerangs went to America and I am hoping one day we find one of the boomerangs so we can see it, as it is our only link to John Henry Simms. While the boomerang came back to La Perouse, it did not come back to the family.

Christopher Lyons (sculptor)

'I was born and raised on the La Perouse mission. My father was from Narrandera and my mother from La Perouse.

We lived off the sea when we were younger. We dived and what we caught we cooked. We'd catch blue swimmer crabs, flathead, octopus, a bit of bull mullet, lobster and abalone. The mussels were pretty big back then. There was plenty of seafood for the mission to live off. They knew where the feed was and they left it alone till they needed more food.

I trained myself in carving by watching people. I started off doing boomerangs first. There was a handful of men around here doing it but they never passed it down the line and taught anyone.



It's a shame, especially around here, with the crime and that. People need to sit down and do things.

It's important to get the young ones to get to know their culture. When I was growing up we were never taught our cultural ways. A lot of people should know the history of La Perouse.

I do my carving by eye. What's in my head, and what I picture I draw. It's been an honour to watch the school kids learn as when I was going to high school we never had anyone to bring us out to the community and teach us about culture.

It's good to see teachers are doing this nowadays and the kids doing artwork for the community. I try and teach my son, Jade, for when I am not around so he will know what to do. He's been working on some of this artwork with me. I like doing art. There's something there to achieve, there's a goal at the end.'





1. Tussock (*Lomandra longifolia*)

The tough leaves were used for weaving by cutting or stripping the leaf down to different thicknesses. It was then woven into mats and baskets. The base of the grass stalk holds a liquid that can be sucked for moisture.



4. Pigface (*Caprobrotus glaucescens*)

Pigface is very common on the beach dunes. Although its leaves contain a lot of water the most succulent part of this plant is the swollen fruit. This appears below the pretty pink flower after it has shriveled and the flower base had turned a reddish colour.



7. Paperbark (*Melaleuca quinquervia*)

The bark is known to have anti-bacterial qualities and can be used to dress wounds. The leaves can be boiled and drunk to relieve sore throats. Food was wrapped and cooked in it's bark in an underground oven.

2. Coastal Wattle (*Acacia longifolia* var *sophorae*)

There are many species of wattle and every group of Aboriginal people had their different uses. Seeds were ground to flour and used to make bread. The sally wattle was used for boomerangs. Wattle sap or resin of some species was used as a medicine. Another has sweet sap that was sucked as a toffee.



5. Old Man Banksia and the Coast Banksia (*Banksia serrata* and *Banksia integrifolia*)

are common to Sydney's bushland. They both produce nectar-rich flowers. These flowers can be sucked or soaked in water to make a sweet drink. The cones were often burnt in camp-fires.



8. Sweet sarsaparilla (*Smilax glyciphylla*)

This little vine has prominent veins. Its leaves were boiled and used for cleansing and for treating cancer. Tea made from leaves is drunk for stomach ache.



3. Coral Tree (*Erythrina x sykesii*)

Although this is an introduced species, the Coral tree was used by the locals for Illamans, Nulla Nullas and shields and occasionally clap-sticks. Because its wood is soft it was never used for boomerangs.



6. Bracken fern (*Pteridium esculentum*)

The soft ends of the bracken fern stem will relieve the sting of stinging nettles, blue bottles or caterpillars by crushing it and rubbing it on the skin.



9. Blue Flax Lily (*Dianella congesta*)

the berries are used for their blue dye. Its tough leaves were also used to make a strong fibre for string and to weave into baskets.





10.

10. Fivies or Five Corners and Ten Corners

(*Styphelia tubiflora* or *S. viridis* and *Astroloma pinifolium*)

were eaten for their fruit. They are hard to propagate from seed. In summer the brown snake is often seen around the Fivies so maybe snakes like them as well!

11. Geebung

(*Persoonia lanceolata*)

These plants are scarce nowadays but their fruits are tasty. String and fishing lines were soaked in an infusion of Geebung bark to help prevent fraying.



11.

12. Myrtle berry

(*Acmena smithii* & *Syzygium paniculatum*)

These common trees have succulent berries varying in colour from cream to bright pink.

Joseph Banks and recorded Aborigines eating the berries at Botany Bay in 1770 and they were also harvested by early colonists and made into jam.



12.



13.

13. Coastal ti-tree

(*Leptospermum laevigatum*)

The leaves of this common coastal species release a pleasant-smelling oil when crushed. The antibacterial qualities of ti-tree oil have long been recognised by Aboriginal people.

14. Inkweed (*Phytolacca octandra*)

Inkweed is used for a variety of medicinal purposes. It was introduced from South America, however Aboriginal People observed and tested plants introduced by Europeans from other continents, demonstrating that Aboriginal culture is, and always has been, a living, constantly changing one able to adapt to new circumstances and opportunities.



14.

15. Port Jackson fig

(*Ficus rubiginosa*)

The fruits of all species of native figs are edible and are ripe to eat when it yields to soft pressure. Its milky sap was used as a natural latex to cover wounds and also for warts. The inner bark of many fig species was used to make twine for dilly bags and fishing nets.



15.