

GAMARAGAL

What place is this? – Gam or Cam or Kam?

“To the victor go the spoils?”

It is common practice to acknowledge the Aboriginal people who have been associated with a particular area of Country.



Map of Aboriginal clans ¹

On the lower north shore there were three clans: The Gamaragal, the Wallumedegal and the Borogegal.² The Borogegal inhabited the area near Bradley’s Head (Booragy). The Wallumedegal were on the ‘opposite shore’ of Port Jackson across from Sydney Cove (Warran).³ The Gamaragal were mainly along the ridge where the railway line is located. This was on a *Songline* ⁴ (trade route) from the coast towards Hornsby and beyond

There were nine (9) Officers with the First Fleet who kept and published their Journals.⁵ These are the main resources available about the spoken Aboriginal language at the time of settlement. Recent research ⁶ on the spelling of the Gamaragal clan unearthed that at least fifteen (15) different spellings ⁷ have been used. Nine (9) date to the period immediately following the landing at Warran (Sydney Cove). The other six were ‘coined’ by predominantly non-Aboriginal researchers between 1993 to 2005. Why the discrepancies?

¹ After Attenbrow (2010) p.23

² Attenbrow (2010) p. 24-25.

³ Attenbrow (2010) p.23

⁴ An ancient Aboriginal pathway and practice of committing key waypoints to a song to assist in navigation.

⁵ Clarke; Collins; Dawes; Hunter; King; Phillip; Tench; Bradley, Worgan

⁶ Fogarty (2024)

⁷ ‘Kamarigal; Cammerraygal; Camaraigal; Cameeragal; Cammerogal; Cammerragal; Cameragal; Cammeray; Cameraygal; Gamragal; Gammerigal; Gamaraga; Gamaragal; Gamaraigal.

It must be remembered that the Aboriginal language was not written. It was spoken. current spellings of a word reflect how the listener interpreted what they heard. This varied widely. One of the main factors to the different interpretations is the fact that there was not an Aboriginal equivalent for the English ‘C’ or ‘K’ sounds. The most authoritative linguistic findings⁸ on this issue is that the sound they were hearing would have been the equivalent of a “G’ sound.

The highly respected researchers Troy (1993) and Attenbrow (2010) suggest the use of the County name as ‘Gamaragal’. Not everyone agrees with the linguistic experts. Willoughby Council has adopted the use of the local name of Cammeraygal with Gamaragal or Cammeragal as optional spellings.⁹ No rationale is provided in the plan for the choice of names. The north shore Aboriginal Heritage Office¹⁰ and the Australian Museum have adopted Attenbrow’s clan name of Gamaragal’. However, Dr. Ian Hoskins, North Sydney Council’s Historian, is suggesting Cammeraygal be used instead of Gamaragal. His arguments are that the name Cammeraygal: *“is now familiar to North Sydney residents through the suburb of Cammeray, the Cammeraygal High School and the Cammeraygal Ward of the North Sydney LGA”*. He further argues that *“the spelling of the Aboriginal words recorded here is somewhat optional as the indigenous languages were spoken not written (Ed. No evidence to support contention. It appears that they were incorrectly written by the colonists interpreting the spoken words of the Aboriginals) meaning that the sound is all important. The use of ‘G’, or ‘C’ or ‘K’ Is also optional (Ed. Not so. ‘G’ was the only sound of the three used)”*. Given that ‘Truth Telling’ is a key precept in the Uluru Statement of the Heart that local Council’s support, Hoskin’s suggestion seems somewhat ingenious.

The Willoughby District Historical Society & Museum adopted **Gamaragal** as the name of one of the local clans of Aboriginals in the area at the time of European settlement. Based on Attenbrow’s and others authoritative research, the other two clans in the general vicinity¹¹ were the **Wallumedegal** and the **Borogegal**.

⁸ Troy (1993); Steele (2005); Attenbrow (2010); Smith (2005)

⁹ Willoughby Council Reconciliation Action Plan (2024).

¹⁰ A joint venture between the Councils of the north shore.

¹¹ Aboriginal clans did not have definitive boundaries for the Country.

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