

Bark canoe

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Sutherland Shire Historical Society commissioned this work as a way of honouring the Dharawal people of Sutherland Shire, in particular the Gweagal who practised the same canoe making tradition.

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In 1770 James Cook commented on the importance of canoes to the people of Kamay Botany Bay for fishing. He described these as, 'about 12 or 14 feet long made of one piece of the bark of a tree drawn or tied up at each end and the middle kept open by means of pieces of sticks by way of thwarts'. This experienced sailor from the world's foremost seafaring nation was initially unimpressed. However, after observing how the canoes were used, he wrote:

they [the canoes] do very well for the purpose they apply them to, better than if they were larger, for as they draw but little water they go in them upon the Mud banks, and pick up Shell fish, etc., without going out of the Canoe.

Although they seemed fragile to the outsiders, this was not the case. When the First Fleet arrived in 1788, William Bradley, first lieutenant of the *Sirius*, reported that at Kay-ye-my (Manly) he saw similar canoes being paddled through the surf when a heavy swell was running, without overturning or taking in water.

Surgeon of the *Sirius*, George Worgan, was generally dismissive of Aboriginal canoes but noted their use by women fishers:

they paddle (with two things like pudding stirrers) from one cove to another even up and down the coast, keeping as close to the rocks as possible. The women make much more use of them than the men do, for they get into them only when they want to cross from one cove to the other, which having reached, they land, leaving the women in them to fish with a hook and line while they walk along the rocks close to the water and strike the fish with their spears and at this they are very dexterous, seldom missing their aim, which indeed is not to be wondered at, for fish, being their chief subsistence and their hooks and lines not being very plenty, they are obliged to practise this art of taking them daily.

Worgan observed that when enough fish had been caught for a meal the men would call the women in, pull the canoes up on the beach, light a fire 'under a shelving rock' and cook the fish. Although this description refers to Aboriginal people around Port Jackson, it is not difficult to imagine a similar scene at Port Hacking or *Deeban*, the

original name later recorded by Matthew Flinders. At low tide the shoals and the spit would have been ideal places from which to fish.

The abundance of shell middens along shorelines, as well as direct observations at Kamay Botany Bay during the eight days in 1770, testify to the importance of shell animals as a major part of the local traditional diet. Archaeological investigations indicate that consumption of plant food and land mammals – often gathered and hunted out of sight of European observers – was also important. Early written accounts almost exclusively related to what was seen around the waterways. It was some time before the forests and plains of the Sydney basin were fully explored by the colonists.

References:

- Captain James Cook's *Journal*, 23 August 1770 [<https://poi-australia.com.au/the-australian-native-as-observed-by-captain-james-cook/>]
- George Bouchier Worgan, *Journal kept on a voyage to New South Wales with the first fleet* [https://www2.sl.nsw.gov.au/archive/discover_collections/history_nation/terra_australis/journals/worgan/]