A short History of Swansea Heads

 Aboriginal History

The rich Aboriginal cultural heritage of Lake Macquarie almost certainly dates back tens of thousands of years. An archaeological dig of state significance was conducted by Dr. Leonard K. Dyall in 1972 at Swansea Heads and radio carbon dating put the earliest samples at about 8000 years old. A large midden was exposed by the beginnings of a housing development, and Dr. Dyall and volunteers from the Newcastle University conducted a hasty salvage dig over 6 weeks, uncovering thousands of artefacts, shells, animal bones and even many graves.

The remains of fifteen people were discovered, including young and old. Artefacts included 1736 stone implements, such as knives, hammerstones, anvils and two edge-ground axes of a stone material most closely available at either New England or in The Blue Mountains. The remains of the people found during the dig have since been reburied at Swansea Heads overlooking the ocean and a memorial placed there.

The area itself was resource rich and provided a variety of food and materials to fashion into useful or decorative items such as shelter, weapons, bowls, and jewellery. The Dyall dig showed that the local diet included many shellfish, fish, birds, eggs, lizards, over a dozen different species of marsupial and even some seals.

The people who lived around Lake Macquarie and Newcastle were known as the Awabakal - which means “the people of the flat surface” presumably referring to the Lake and its flat surrounds. It is also evident that although of the same tribe, “Awabakal,” there were two separate clans that existed here.

The Heads area was known to the tribes as “Nikkeenba” meaning place of black stone, or coal, which was found in abundance in the region. Swansea Heads was also called “Yirriteeba,” meaning a sacred place. One of the significant sacred sites there was known as Mullung-bula, or to the Europeans, “The Sisters.” Two large vertical rocks that were situated above Reids Reserve, just before the curvature of the headland, were described
in the local culture as being two sisters that had been turned to stone after their deaths. There are no known drawings or photos of these great rocks, nor is it known how, why or where they were removed to. They still appeared on maps as late as 1887.

**European Discovery**

The headland by the entrance to Lake Macquarie, is known as Reid’s Mistake after Captain William Reid who, in 1800, became the first European to make his way into the lake.

Aboard the ship Martha, a small schooner of 30 tonnes, he came from Sydney to collect coal from the mouth of the Hunter River and mistook the channel for the river estuary. He ventured inside what was then a lagoon, not the Channel we know today, and there encountered some members of the Awabakal tribe, who directed him to a seam embedded in the headland. It was only upon his return to Sydney that he realised he had got the wrong coal and the wrong harbour.

The same mistake was again made a year later by another ship, the Lady Nelson, who sent ashore a Dr. Harris to explore. He met there, upon the shore, an Aborigine who named himself as Budgeree Dick (trans. – “Good Dick”) and jumped aboard their dingy with a load of fish, shouting “Whaleboat! Whaleboat!” and left with the party when the Lady Nelson departed.

**European Settlement and Early Industry**

One of the first settlers in Lake Macquarie was Reverend Lancelot Threlkeld. In 1824 he established a Mission to protect and study the Awabakal Aborigines on 10,000 acres of land stretching from Pelican to Valentine. He wrote many books about the local people and made a very detailed study of their language. He says in his writings that only 11 Aborigines lived around the Swansea Heads area at that time, as opposed to the large number described by Captain Reid and Dr Harris.

In 1841 he began mining at what is now Coal Point and a depot was constructed at Reids Reserve to store coal to be picked up there by larger ships heading to Sydney. It is believed that a jetty was constructed there at this time.
Aerial photo of Salts Bay Swansea 9 August 1961 looking west across Black Neds Bay. Photographer Keith (Dalkeith Lwellyn) Hilder

In 1947 coal mining commenced at the Reids Mistake headland. The pit entrance to the Swansea Channel Colliery was situated where the last couple of houses are at the end of Lambton Parade today. The mine itself spread out to the south and in areas where it sloped down towards Salt’s Bay, former miners report that it was so wet, that the water coming from the roof of the cave was like a constant rain. The mine apparently paid very well compared to others operating at the time. The operation ceased in 1953.\(^7\)

Other industry in the area included a lot of forestry. When the first settlers moved into the area it was described as “thickly timbered.”\(^4\) For boat building red cedar, beech and rosewood were cut. Tea tree and cabbage tree palm were also cut for other uses. The last red cedar from the whole area was cut from the Swansea Heads littoral rainforest area, according to local legend.\(^5\)
Aerial photo of Swansea Heads, 5 August 1961. Photographer Keith (Dalkeith Llwyelyn) Hilder

References:
1. Clouten, Keith, (1967) Reid’s Mistake, Lake Macquarie Shire Council, Speers Point, NSW.