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Aboriginal Cultural Heritage recommendations for a Development Control Plan - Millfield.

This report has been written at the request of Hunter development Brokerage for the purpose of incorporating Aboriginal Heritage considerations in a Development Control Plan over residential land at Millfield.

The land is adjacent to Congewai Creek which has been identified as of Aboriginal Cultural Significance. An Aboriginal Archaeological Assessment was undertaken on adjacent property (Rosehill) which found several Aboriginal Objects and identified Congewai creek as a Potential Archaeological Deposit (PAD).

SITE CONTEXT

The main catchment of the study area is Congewai Creek that flows directly through neighbouring property some 20 metres to the south. The billabongs and wetlands associated with Congewai Creek are a significant catchment for the local area.

According to Horton (1994), the Band that would be of interest to this survey, would be the family groupings of the Darkinjung. The boundary distinction between the Darkinjung and Awabakal is not clear, as they had a very close relationship. The historical record links the Wollombi Aboriginals with those of Millfield and shows that the Darkinjung were the Band around Wollombi. They probably had various base camps along Congewai Creek. The camps would have been near reliable watercourses on high ground away from mosquitoes and for safety. The watercourses on the subject site are smaller creeks and lagoons associated with Congewai Creek, the main watercourse on the site. Congewai Creek commences in the hills to the west, flows through Ellalong Lagoon and wetlands, where it is joined by the Quorrabolong Creek and eventually flows directly into Wollombi Brook to the west.

• Past Land Use

European

The area around Millfield was initially part of the Wollombi district and generally used for agricultural and mining pursuits as well as timber getting. The subject site was part of a rural holding since Europeans first settled the area. Millfield was established as a corn and wheat area changing over time to fruit, wine, dairying and grazing.

It is believed that Millfield received its name from the flourmill established in the area to take advantage of the abundant crops.

Millfield was subjected to a catastrophic flood in 1893 which affected virtually the whole town and in 1943 a devastating tornado.

The subject site was once part of a larger holding known as, 'Rosehill', which was an integral part of the early establishment of Millfield. In 1845 Rosehill was an established 320-acre farm that was sold to a John McDougall. Over the years the size and development of Rosehill changed with the economic conditions. Rosehill has a long history of experimental agricultural pursuits. In the 1870's the wheat crops were no longer viable (due to rust) and many farmers subdivided their land into smaller lots, sold them and moved to the Clarence River area. The average size of the farm was 40 to 100 acres. In the 1920's Rosehill as well as other farms were subdivided for residential development as it was believed, that with the development of coalmining, Millfield was to be the next big city. By 1938 Rosehill once again was consolidated from smaller portions and was heavily pasture improved and well renowned for its mixed farming pursuits. Tung oil trees were also grown. Since then, Rosehill has been subdivided from time to time.

The current study area is not part of Rosehill and is zoned for residential purposes.

The current land use has changed from very recent pastoral to residential building blocks with associated infrastructure.

Aboriginal

The known archaeological evidence tends to suggest that base camps were probably along the ridgeline following Congewai Creek, probably up to 12k (8 miles) apart and close to freshwater sources. It would appear that the subject site was used for hunting and gathering.

By 1836 a smallpox epidemic and other introduced diseases had decimated the Aboriginal population. Many of the Local Aboriginals had moved to Sydney Town or into Newcastle for labouring work. Being Aboriginal was not a barrier for labouring work. Others found employment as timber getters, or worked in local mills or on the farms.

Implications

Past Aboriginal activities are not well manifested by archaeological record because many activities did not leave material evidence or because the material evidence was not durable. Many of the implements were organic material, such as wood and bone and readily decayed when exposed to the elements. Even burials, are subject to the acidic condition of the soil.

Durable evidence, such as stone and rock implements, is affected by European landuse. Easily recognisable implements such as stone axes, have found their way into many private collections, well before it became illegal to do so, with no record of the location of the find. Cultivation, with the associated stick raking and stone gathering also tended to destroy surface evidence. However cultivation and pastoral landuse also helped preserve the archaeological record. In some cases cultivation would expose evidence in others, cover the evidence.

In general, the archaeological record is dependent on the exposure of sites through erosion, weathering, fire, drought and anthropogenic activities.

The land in the study area has been disturbed by European activities for approximately 200 years. This disturbance plus extensive pastoral activities, lessens the possibility for an archaeological field survey being productive in obtaining above ground evidence of Aboriginal occupation.

Apart from Congewai Creek which is discussed in greater detail later in the report, only 4 sites are within 5-kilometre radius of the subject site.

1. A rockshelter with art on a small hill of 146 metres in height, north of the subject site, but still within the Congewai Creek Valley. The artwork is hand stencils in white ochre and also a potential archaeological deposit (PAD).
2. Ellalong Lagoon, is a mythical site known as "Catch-a-boy Swamp", some 3km to the east. A bunyip is said to have lived in the lagoon and taken a young boy who was swimming or playing in the lagoon. Parents to reinforce the danger to their children of playing in the lagoon used the story.
3. An isolated find also 3km to the east at Paxton in a road cutting at the junction of the Main Road and Millfield Road. The artefact was a flaked piece of yellow-cream metamorphosed sedimentary rock, probably used as a scraper.
4. Open campsite and artifact scatter at Paxton recorded by Besant in 1999, at Paxton.

It is probable that the Darkinjung who frequented the ranges and slopes to the west and towards Wollombi utilised this area as a resource zone as their primary food source. Resource availability is a major if not the main factor in the location of base or main campsites and resource location is the major factor in the location of transitory activity or open campsites. From the research and in particular the work by Besant it is obvious the study site was used as a transient area, with campsites on the less exposed ridges and hills offsite a little to the north.

Given, the nature of the floodplain of Congewai Creek, its changing nature over time and the deposition of soil, the Congewai floodplain would probably contain substantial archaeological deposits. Given the landscape, vegetation and previous landuse, the subsurface would not have been greatly disturbed, but as the area is a floodplain / wetland with a continuing deposition of silt, it is not possible to accurately predict subsurface disturbance and archaeological potential. This is because rate of deposition, water flow and frequency of flooding needs to be taken into account. The lack of pebbles and rock tends to suggest that the velocity of flow in flood times is quite great. It was observed that the current in the creek on the days of inspection was quite fast.

Congewai Creek and the lagoons would have been significant to Aboriginal people in the past

The potential for subsurface deposits is always a possibility near watercourses, which change over time. The major creekline has significant potential for substantial deposits given it's proximity to and flow into Wollombi Brook. It also is a major source of bush tucker and would have been easy access for foraging parties. It is believed that the creekline in particular is an area of Potential Archaeological Deposit (PAD).

The Aboriginal Objects located along Congewai Creek indicated strong significance of the area. The scattered artefacts were not observed on the first examination, but were observed on a subsequent occasion. This was because the area containing the scatter was covered in water and was only observable 3 weeks later when the water cover had retreated and eroded the lagoon margin to some degree. The scatter was longitudinal and at a consistent height, indicating either a 'bathtub ring' effect or a stratum exposure. The scatter is in the floodplain and the location is shown on the map of archaeological finds in the appendix.

The scatter was located on the northern edge of a small rise sloping north towards the lagoon, approximately on the same level, scattered longitudinally east to west, for some 60 metres. There were 5 distinct pieces and a close scatter of 6 pieces. As the artefacts were sitting on top of the exposed soil rather than in situ it was more probable that they were deposited rather than exposed by the water.

However, the landscape would tend to suggest the possibility of the slight rise being used as a knapping floor. A strong possibility exists that the artefacts are indicative of a subsurface knapping floor. Only the one conjoined artefact, which had only recently been separated by natural or animal means, was from the same piece.

Technically, as each artefact was different, the scatter could not be considered a knapping floor, but none-the-less a subsurface knapping floor could not be ruled out, nor could the possibility of exposure through erosion.

The report made several recommendations, where it was agreed, by Mindaribba Local Aboriginal Land Council and the Lower Wannaruah Tribal Council and the applicant, that the wetland/floodplain area is a Potential Archaeological Deposit, and the best way to conserve the significance was to allow the wetland area to remain undisturbed from development. This was achieved by not allowing development in the floodplain area.

The subdivision of the land does not disturb or impact on the archaeological heritage as building and development were confined to designated building envelopes.

Further it was recommended that Cessnock Council should indicate to the Community and the Aboriginal people in particular, through some form of planning instrument, that, the Congewai Creek floodplain (onsite and offsite) from Ellalong Lagoon (Catch-a-boy swamp) through to Wollombi Brook is of Aboriginal heritage significance.

Hence the requirement for such consideration to be undertaken in the Development control Plan for the study area.

This archaeologist in conjunction with Gordon Griffiths representing MLALC and Kim Smailes representing LWTC visited the study area on 13th August 2004.

The study area was not on the same parcel of land as Congewai Creek and in private ownership and therefore limited the potential protection of Aboriginal cultural significance. If Congewai creek was in public ownership other recommendations would be suggested. If Council has the opportunity, Congewai Creek should be in public ownership under the care control of the Aboriginal Community or under Aboriginal community ownership.

Given that the study area is adjacent to Congewai Creek it is agreed and recommended that:

1. Houses be sited as far back from the Congewai Creek as is possible.
2. No access from the residential blocks be allowed to Congewai Creek.
3. Fencing, landscaping should be in such manner as to enhance the Congewai Creek area and deter rubbish dumping.
4. When and if possible access to Congewai creek should be made available to the aboriginal community to enhance the Cultural significance of the Creek

Len Roberts 3/9/04