



COVER STORY Dugald Jellie

What's in a name

Aborigines, Mother England and notable white men have left their mark on Sydney's suburbs.

When the Minister for Planning, Frank Sartor, asked the NSW public to suggest alternatives to East Darling Harbour as the name for the city's newest residential waterfront precinct, he didn't count on droll *Herald* readers.

"Name it Macquarie Bank," suggested Steve Goldberg from Dulwich Hill.

"The AB demographic would love living in Evian Waters," wrote John Kramer from Upper Norco. Wendy Crew from Lane Cove added: "My husband suggests Darling Harbour Heights."

Sartor opted instead for Barangaroo, commemorating an Aboriginal woman, who died in 1791 during childbirth. She was the wife of Bennelong, an Eora man who was an interlocutor between his people and the new arrivals in 1788, and after whom Bennelong Point, now the site of the Sydney Opera House, is named. "This major CBD precinct is thought to be the first significant place in Sydney to be named after an Aboriginal woman," Sartor said.

And so continues Sydney's great appropriation of indigenous placenames, a phonetic "foreignness" with Gynea (giant lily), Collaroy (long swamp reeds or junction of creeks), Toongabbie (meeting of the waters), Chullora (native flower), Warrawee (stop here), Cabarita (by the water), Killara (always there) and Woollahra (meeting ground) rolling off the tongue as sweetly as Cabramatta (home of white grub).

But languages, for all their euphonious syllables and all the "o"s in Woolloomooloo (see story right), contribute only a minor part of Sydney's placename lexicon. Look up a *Gregory's* and most suburb toponyms are English (Paddington,

Windsor, Stanmore, Kensington), eponymous (La Perouse, Leichhardt, Bankstown, Pagewood), descriptive of topography (The Rocks, Edgecliff, Double Bay, Five Dock) and mostly familiar.

But there are exceptions. Manly is Sydney's only suburb named after the physical attributes of its men. "Their confidence and manly behaviour made me give the name of Manly Cove," wrote Governor Phillip in January 1788, admiring local Aborigines. Captain John Hunter that same year moored a longboat on a February morning and stepped ashore at a spot known thereafter as Breakfast Point.

PLEASANTVILLE

"Placenames certainly grab the community's attention," says Paul Harcombe, deputy chairman of the Geographic Names Board of NSW. "It's about where people live, it's linked to their identity and it's perceived to have impacts on property values."

That's exactly why estate agents always put the best possible spin on suburb names. It's a commercial imperative. The realty firm Richardson & Wrench in 1876 offered lots on the newly subdivided Summer Hill Estate. Rosebery was laid out true and square in 1912 by the estate agent Richard Stanton, who had earlier put Haberfield on the map, developing a Federation garden suburb honouring his wife's maiden name.

Think also of Sylvania Waters, Beauty Point, Avalon. And Palm Beach, contrary to popular opinion, wasn't named after *Livistona australis* or cabbage tree palms. It was coined instead by the Barrenjoey Land Company in 1912 as a sales pitch, marketing this new seaside estate as Sydney's very



own Florida tip, with its own Palm Beach.

"A name does matter," says Cristine Castle, president of the Real Estate Institute of NSW. "I don't think anyone can really put a price on it but vendors and agents often use poetic licence... people get caught out fiddling suburb boundaries."

BUNDI, BUNDYE, BONDI

Warringah resident Helen Brown, in *Never Step on the Swan and Other Stories*, wrote of her childhood: "The swans would fly over in the form of a D and a Y and we were convinced that was how Dee Why got its name." In truth, the name's origin is unknown - thought to be from James Meehan's 1818 surveyor's mark when he mapped the coast.

Much of the northern beaches' nomenclature was set by the surveyor general Thomas Mitchell. In the 1820s, he directed the use of Aboriginal placenames "in all cases where they can be ascertained", thereby remembering the land's original custodians, the Guringai (Kuringgai) people, long after the colonists erased their culture. Barrenjoey was documented as an Aboriginal word for "young kangaroo"; Warringah is said to mean "sign of rain" or "middle harbour"; Bilgola "swirling water"; Narrabeena a "quiet place on the hills"; Narrabeen "narrow lagoon mouth"; and Curl Curl is thought to mean "lagoon".

"Each Aboriginal name had a story but most of the stories were lost," says historian Keith Smith, who has chronicled indigenous toponyms for the ongoing Dictionary of Sydney (www.dictionaryofsydney.org). "It was a spoken language and we only had about 1000 words to start with."

Many original meanings and correct spellings are uncertain. Sydney's most famous beach, for instance, has been known variously as Boondi, Bundi, Bundye and, until 1927, Boondye, when the present spelling was accepted. And not all are convinced it really means "sound of water breaking on rocks".

Cronulla, a corruption of the Aboriginal word kurranulla, meaning "place of pink shells", has more consensus, as does Coogee, meaning "stink of rotting seaweed". Not that estate agents will likely let on. "At times you get a heavy congestion of bluebottles and seaweed but it only lasts a day or two," says Jason Black from NJ Farah Coogee. "And since they've fixed the sewage works at Malabar there's definitely no stink anywhere."

MOTHER ENGLAND

Northbridge is Sydney's only suburb named after a civil engineering structure, the suspension bridge built for £100,000 by a firm of land developers. Ultimo commemorates colonial surgeon John Harris's court-martial acquittal on a technicality - ipso facto, the errant use of the Latin term *ultimo* (last month). John and Eliza Webster in the 1820s opened the New Town Store to distinguish it from old-town stores.

Up and down the Parramatta River you'd think you were in London. Of all borrowed toponyms, most come from Mother England and here - Greenwich, Woolwich, Henley, Putney, Chiswick,

Mortlake - they're transplanted from the Thames. Parramatta is an Aboriginal word. It means "place of eels".

Colonial landholders were also bestowed placenames. William Balmain, William Redfern, William Chippendale, Edward Wollstonecraft, James Milson, forester James French and Bank of NSW employee Joseph Potts all have a suburb.

As does Captain John Piper, "the great buck, prince of hosts, leader of the world of fashion", who in 1820 built an extravagant double-domed mansion on his eponymous point. Piper amassed his fortune collecting customs dues, spent it on lavish fetes and frippery, then lost his post for fiscal imprudence. He tried to drown himself in the harbour but failed.

"It's a great regret so many suburbs are named after pompous men who got land grabs," says

historian Shirley Fitzgerald. "It's very much a male-dominated nomenclature."

Elizabeth Bay is an exception, named by Lachlan Macquarie after his second wife. Harbord honours the wife of a former NSW governor but locals want it renamed. "Most people have never heard of Harbord," says Pam Collins from Richardson & Wrench. "Changing it to

Freshwater would enliven the suburb and increase property values."

Historian Richard White, author of *On Holidays*, says: "Most are named after dead white males but the colonists also scattered names as if they were on holidays." They still called England home and with Brighton-le-Sands, Cremorne, Pyrmont, Balmoral, Dover Heights, Rydalmere, Ramsgate, Como, Granville, Engadine and Clovelly, they reminisced on their melancholic distance from Europe and imagined they were tourists.

No doubt they also imagined a speculative profit in this new land of opportunity.



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QUEENS CROSS

Kings Cross straddles Darlinghurst Hill but estate agents rarely know of its whereabouts, calling it Potts Point instead. Understandable, maybe, considering this intersection was named Queens Cross in 1897 but then moved to the masculine to honour King Edward VII. Victoria still has Queenscliff, subdivided by the developer William Woolcott during her reign.

Rushes were cut at Rushcutters Bay; chaff and corn sold at Haymarket; Jack Leighton was the miller of Millers Point; and The Glebe is land bequeathed in 1789 by Governor Phillip to the Church of England. Centennial Park is Sydney's only suburb that suggests its location, date of enactment and land use.

Sydney's always been a real estate city, with gentlemen's estates lending their names to localities, as with Bronte, Waverley, Forest Lodge, Fairlight, Crows Nest, Waverton, Russell Lea, Tempe and the "closed vale" of Vaucluse.

A last word goes to Botany Bay and a spit of sandy land where the timber merchant Thomas Holt in 1853 built a grand home for his German wife. He called it Sans Souci, a French phrase meaning, literally, "without care". Estate agents and home owners prefer "no worries". A perfect name for a Sydney seaside suburb.

FOR THE RECORD

Rooty Hill does not mark an early colonial baby boom. It appeared on maps first in 1803, believed to derive from the Hindustani word "ruti" or "rooti", meaning bread or a bread feast. "We have no hesitation advertising Rooty Hill and have no problems selling there," says an L J Hooker Rooty Hill agent, who wishes to remain anonymous.



First name ... East Darling Harbour has been renamed Barangaroo. Photo: Mike Bowers



Woolloowhere? ... Michael Coleman and Charmaine Cardona on the finger wharf. Photo: Quentin Jones

THE SWEET SOUND OF A SUBURB

Michael Coleman knows how many "o"s there are in Woolloomooloo. "It took me 2½ months to learn how to spell it," says the 34-year-old first home buyer. "It's the great spelling bee suburb. When I tell people where I live they ask 'Woolloomooowhere?'"

Variant spellings of Sydney's distinct toponym included Walla-mool, Woollamoola, Walla Moola and Walloomoola, before its eight "o"s were settled on in the late 1830s. Pronounced slowly as "Woollooh-moollooh", it's thought to mean either "young male kangaroo" or more likely the name of a whirlpool, whirlwind or anything whirling about. Windmills marked the high ridge there during early colonial days.

Not that Coleman and his partner, Charmaine Cardona, 27, bought their Nicholson Street terrace at auction last October because of the assonance of their address but it does help.

"It's a great sounding name. Whenever you say Woolloomooloo you smile because it's so different. I like having it on my mail, seeing how people misspell it."

This one-time down-at-heel seamen's suburb is also full of muscular traditions. "I love that the suburb has a working-port legacy," Coleman says. "All sorts of people live here. One bloke walked down the street with no shoes on the other day, followed by a bloke driving a Bentley."

And to think, the suburb's name could well have been very different. "When Woolloomooloo was considered an unacceptable dive with razor gangs at the turn of the 20th century there was a submission to rename it St Kilda," says City of Sydney historian Shirley Fitzgerald. "Fortunately that didn't happen because Woolloomooloo is one of the most euphonious [sweet sounding] indigenous names that we've got and one of the earliest."