

A painting of a black swan in a pond. The swan is the central focus, with its long neck curved elegantly. It has a dark body with some white feathers on its wings. The pond is surrounded by tall reeds and a tree branch is visible in the upper right corner. The background shows a hazy landscape with mountains and a cloudy sky.

# **Why Dee Why?**

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## **Thankyou To**

Shelagh and George Champion for reviewing the draft and making many helpful suggestions, corrections and clarifications.

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Earlier local historians, many unacknowledged, who researched and helped to preserve what little information we have about our past.

Tina Graham and Judy Childs of Warringah Library Local Studies Department for reviewing the draft and alerting me to the report of Oscar Weight's comments (Section 9.1).

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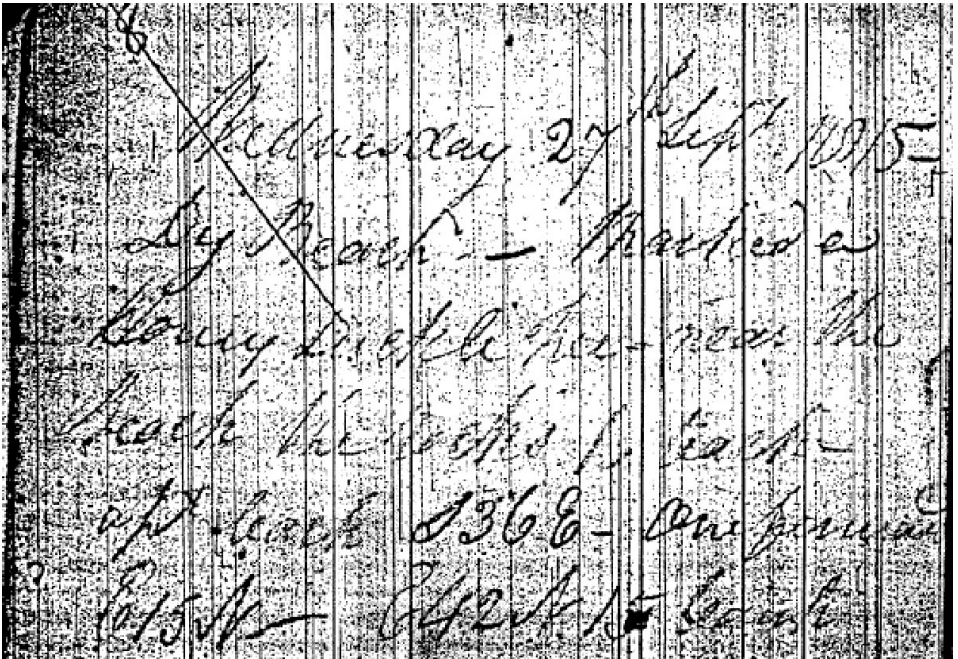
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## 0. Introduction

There is currently underway an official Australian National Placenames Survey. The researchers involved are based at Macquarie University and, in their promotional and educational literature, they often quote Dee Why as an example of a place name that has a great number of interpretations of its source, with none of the interpretations being certain or even favoured (1). (Note: References are listed at the end of each section).

The first known written reference to Dee Why occurs in Field Book No. 86 of the colonial surveyor James Meehan. On Wednesday 27<sup>th</sup> September 1815, he commenced his survey notes for the day by writing “*Dy Beach – Marked a Honey Suckle Tree - ...*”. Wittingly or not, Meehan had named a future suburb and created a mystery for its future inhabitants.



Page from Meehan's Fieldbook 86

Who was James Meehan and what was he doing when he made the entry in his field book? He was an Irishman, transported in August 1799 at the age of 25 for his involvement - relatively passive though it was - with the Society of United Irishmen, a group formed in 1791 with the objective of bringing democratic and social reform to Ireland. He was a Roman Catholic but, unlike most of his fellow-believers in Ireland at that time, he apparently received a good education. When arrested, he was working as a schoolteacher and a surveyor. Reference 2 is an excellent, in depth study of Meehan.

The value of Meehan's background was recognised immediately on his arrival in Sydney in February 1800 and he was assigned by Governor Hunter to the Deputy Surveyor-General, Charles Grimes. The arrival was a godsend for Grimes as Meehan rapidly proved his ability and his worth. Within months he was running surveys and working unsupervised. This worth was recognised by three further Governors – King, Bligh and Macquarie – but, in spite of their recommendations, he was never granted the position of Surveyor-General. Presumably his convict origins counted against him.

Meehan was amazingly productive. In 1820 he could make the statement to Commissioner Bigge that, since 1803, he had surveyed every measured land grant in the colony. Once you realise that the colony he was talking about stretched from Port Macquarie in the north to Van Diemen's Land in the south and to Bathurst in the west, you can recognise just how hard he had worked.

The visit to the Northern Beaches in 1815 - when he wrote the *Dy* entry in his field book - is a typical example of Meehan's productivity. On Monday 25<sup>th</sup> September, he surveyed 500 acres for William Cossar, immediately to the north of Dee Why Lagoon. The next day he surveyed 100

acres for Alexander MacDonald, this time immediately north of the entrance of Narrabeen Lagoon. However he commenced the day's surveying near the northern boundary of Cossar's grant (today's Collaroy Beach) and mapped the edge of Narrabeen Lagoon as he headed north to MacDonald's location.

On the following day, Wednesday 27<sup>th</sup> September, he surveyed 50 acres for Thomas Bruin, immediately adjacent to today's Freshwater Beach. This is the beach that he was on when he wrote the *Dy* entry. On the same day he also surveyed the section of coast from Freshwater to today's Queenscliff, and then along Manly Beach to Manly Cove. Still not finished, the next day Thursday 28<sup>th</sup> September, he surveyed 380 acres for D'Arcy Wentworth at today's Manly Vale. When you consider the terrain that he was working in, the relative remoteness and isolation of the locations, and the limited tools and instruments available to him, Meehan's output is to be marvelled at.

Meehan gives no explanation in his field book for his use of the word or abbreviation *Dy* to describe the beach that he was on. Tony Dawson, the author of Reference 2, has researched Meehan closely. He claims that Meehan very seldom if ever named new locations (in marked contrast to one of his supporters, Governor Macquarie). Also, if a name that he were applying to a location or feature was new to him or his Department – for example, if he learnt it from a local Aborigine during the course of a survey – he would record this fact and its meaning, if known. If this logic is accepted, then Meehan's failure to give any explanation for his apparent labelling of the beach that he was standing on as *Dy Beach*, and his labelling of the ocean immediately off that beach, between the headlands at each end, as *Dy Bay* (see p.32), would indicate that *Dy* was a known name for that locality at that time. If it was, then the knowledge has been lost most comprehensively since 1815, leading to the situation where today we can count at least a dozen theories as to the source.

I have lived in Dee Why for most of my life, having moved here in 1952 as a six year old. I am not an historian but simply someone who is interested in my local area. In 1989 I joined a group called the Friends of Dee Why Lagoon (I am still a member). Although the group was working very much in the present - their main activity being bush regeneration in the Wildlife Refuge that surrounds Dee Why Lagoon - they did have an interest in the past, particularly past uses of the land that they worked on. They had a small archive of relevant historical press clippings and reports.

A few years prior to joining the Friends I had seen an article by Charles McDonald, a local historian who had a regular column in the local newspaper, the *Manly Daily*, in the 1970s. It explained that the source of Dee Why's name was Meehan's notebook and it contained a copy of the relevant page, which it stated was from his Field Book No. 99. According to McDonald, the form in which Meehan had written the letters *Dy* - namely as initial capital *D* followed by lower case *y* - was critical to understanding its origin. This form was clear in his reproduction of the page (see Page 1).

For reasons that no longer seem obvious, I decided that it would be nice for the Friends of Dee Why Lagoon to have a copy of this page in their archives. As a complete novice, I headed off to the NSW Archives Office at the lower end of George Street in the city and requested the microfilm that contained Meehan's Field Book 99. By following the dates in it (which were fairly sequential) I had no trouble finding the relevant page. However, I was immediately non-plussed. There was the famous or infamous entry. But, instead of seeing *Dy* as I had expected, I was looking at *D.Y.* Both of the letters were capitals and they had full stops between them (see Page 5).

I was hooked. I now had to get to the bottom of this mystery. It turned



Wednesday 27<sup>th</sup> Sept<sup>r</sup> 1815 -  
D.Y. beach - 91 marked a Honey Suckle  
tree - near the beach the Rocky 1-back  
a pond back S 36 E - one forward  
E 15 N - E 42 N 15 bank - Rocky

Page from Meehan's Fieldbook 99

out to be fairly simple. Meehan (or an assistant) had at some stage transcribed his original fieldbook (Number 86) into a new one (Number 99). In doing this he changed the notation from *Dy* to *D.Y.* In his article, McDonald had included a copy of the relevant page from Fieldbook 86 but he had described it as being from Fieldbook 99.

I presume that, when transcribing his fieldbook, Meehan changed the notation in order to make its pronunciation clearer – that is, “Dee Why”. This is certainly the pronunciation that has come down to us and it is also the way that surveyors after Meehan wrote it in the fieldbooks and on maps – as the word Deewhy or Deewy, or as two words, Dee Why.

Having solved the notation mystery I now took a new but still entirely amateur interest in both James Meehan and the origin of Dee Why’s name,

and I have done so ever since. This article is one of the results of that innocent visit to the Rocks some eighteen years ago.

Returning now to the dozen or so theories for the origin of Dee Why's name (including McDonald's) I believe that all of them except one can be shown either to be definitely not true or to be only so remotely plausible as to be able to be reasonably dismissed. Unfortunately I cannot take the next and critical step and replace the dismissed theories by one that is definitely correct. I can only offer a plausible alternative.

I will begin with the dismissals.

### Notes

Note 1: The Honeysuckle Tree that Meehan marked near the beach would have been a Coastal Banksia (*Banksia integrifolia*). Honeysuckle was the common name used by the early European settlers for these trees.

Note 2: Although I have recorded Meehan as measuring 100 acres near Narrabeen Lagoon for Alexander MacDonald, subsequent measurements revealed that it was more like 80 acres.

### References

1. Australian National Placenames Survey, Macquarie University, Sydney
2. Dawson T., *James Meehan – a most excellent surveyor*, Crossing Press, Sydney 2004



Honeysuckle tree (Coastal Banksia) near Dee Why Lagoon, 2008

## 1. The Spanish Theory

If you do a Google internet search using the keywords “Dee Why” and “surf” you will come across several links to web sites that, as well as extolling the virtues of Dee Why Point as a surfing location, state that *“the name of Dee Why is shrouded in mystery, with some suggesting it relates back to a DY-like rock inscription supposedly of early Spanish origin”*.

I first came across this suggestion in a book by Charles McDonald and Clive Henderson (1), that was published in 1975. They wrote:

*“Probably some twenty reasons have been put forward for the name, but the most colourful one is that claimed by Lawrence Hargrave of aviation fame. Hargrave was an outstanding engineer and is considered by many as the ‘father of aviation’. He was also a keen student of Spanish sea-lore and he claimed that a Spanish ship, one of Mendano’s fleet which left Calao, South America, in 1595 and was conveniently named Donna Ysabel became lost. It arrived safely at this point on our coast and the Captain cut the name of the ship into the rocks, while his men went seeking gold.*

*A part of this story is true. A ship, the Santa Ysabel, under the command of Captain de Vegas was lost in dense fog five days out from Calao, and has not been heard of since. Another version of the story is that de Vegas was trying to cut his own initials into the rock but the knife slipped, so making the intended V into a Y. To add strength to this remarkable story, some claimed that the ship had been wrecked on the treacherous Long Reef and sections of her hull could still be seen even at low tide. An examination of this wreck proved it to be the remains of the gallant little coastal steamer Euroka lost in 1913.”*

McDonald and Henderson go some way to debunking this possible source

of the name Dee Why but their facts are neither completely correct nor complete. Critically perhaps, they do not mention that Mendaña, the leader of the fleet of which the *Santa Ysabel* was part, was accompanied by his wife. Her name was Doña Ysabel and her presence (and initials) are probably the source of the “Hargrave” story. That is, the woman Doña Ysabel has been confused with the ship *Santa Ysabel*.

The voyage in which Doña Ysabel (or Isabel) and the *Santa Ysabel* (or *Isabel*) were involved is, fortunately for us, very well documented. Luis de Belmonte Bermudez, the secretary to the Chief Pilot, Pedro Fernandez de Quiros, wrote a long prose poem describing it in detail. Most of what follows is taken from References 2 and 3.

On 9 April, 1595 a fleet of four ships set out from Callao, Peru. The ships were the flagship, the *San Jeronimo*, the *Santa Ysabel*, a smaller frigate the *Santa Catalina* and a galiot - a small galley powered by sails and oars - the *San Felipe*. On board was a total company of 378, made up of soldiers and sailors, their wives and children and six clerics. They were led by Alvaro de Mendaña de Nehra (McDonald and Henderson’s Mendano).

The prime purpose of the expedition, at least in Mendaña’s mind, was to establish a Christian colony in the Solomon Islands. He wanted to create a base for missions to convert the indigenous inhabitants to Christianity and also for exploration for gold and other valuable items. He had discovered these islands and their inhabitants on a previous voyage 27 years earlier, in 1568. On his new voyage Mendaña was accompanied by his wife – Doña Ysabel de Barreto – who also brought her three brothers along. These latter were far more interested in the prospect of advancing their fortunes in the unexplored lands they were heading for than in the creation of a Christian outpost.

In July, after sailing for three months, the Marquesas Islands were discovered. Mendaña named them in honour of his sponsor, Garcia Hurtado de Mendoza, the Marquis of Cañete and viceroy of Peru. Here the voyagers anchored and refreshed themselves, before sailing westward again on 5 August. A month later, on 7 September, the ships ran into a thick fog. The fog was actually a mixture of dust and steam, generated by the volcano of Tinakula which was in active eruption as they approached. This volcano is in the Santa Cruz group of islands which are the most easterly islands in the Solomon group. During the night the *Santa Ysabel*, with Lopez de Vega in command, disappeared. The rest of the ships came to anchor in what they called Graciosa Bay on Ndende Island, one of the Santa Cruz group.



Spanish stamp for 1992 Barcelona Olympics depicting Graciosa Bay

As was often the case with pioneering European explorers in the Pacific, their first encounter with the natives resulted in bloodshed. Initially, the natives appeared to be friendly. The chief, Malope, was paddled out and gifts were exchanged. However, soon, an oft-repeated scenario unfolded. A watering party was ambushed and three men wounded. Mendaña promptly dispatched a punishment party to burn huts, kill islanders and

steal pigs.

The rest of his men set up a camp on shore but, by this time, Mendaña was sick with malaria and fast losing control of the situation. He was not helped by the constant nagging of his wife and her brothers. On their suggestion Mendaña ordered that the party's camp master, Manrique - a quarrelsome and difficult old soldier - be assassinated. He was stabbed to death. This action led to an orgy of killing within the group as supporters of the two factions fell upon one another. Quiros watched and recorded these horrors with growing alarm and despair.

As a strained calm descended again, malaria took up where the antagonists had left off. It killed many of the remaining party and, on 18 October 1595, Mendaña himself died. Before he succumbed he handed leadership responsibility and authority to his wife and her brother Don Lorenzo. However, on the latter's death soon after, Quiros took charge.

On 18 November - two months after arrival and with disease still raging - he and the remainder of the party sailed for the Philippines. The wooden ships were rotting, supplies were almost exhausted and corpses were tossed overboard daily. Quiros had to consult Doña Ysabel on all matters. She refused to permit him to jettison the other ships so as to combine the crews, and she would not allow the little fresh water that still remained to be distributed to the dying men, women and children. Instead, she used it to wash her clothes

By December, the ships were near the equator. The days were stifling, the nights freezing. The *Santa Catalina* disappeared and the ship and those on board her were never seen again. The *San Felipe* also vanished for a time but later reached the Philippines. Quiros, in a remarkable feat of navigation, brought the flagship, the *San Jeronimo*, to port at Guam on New Year's Day 1596. Then, at last, in February 1596, Manila was sighted.

The horrendous expedition and voyage was finally over. In Manila, Doña Ysabel - ever the opportunist - married the young cousin of the Governor of the Phillipines. With her ship repaired and re-equipped, she sailed back to Callao.

Thanks to Quiros and Bermudez, the voyage is well-documented. At no stage did Doña Ysabel approach to closer than about 2000 kilometres from what is today Dee Why. Hence it is simply not possible that she carved her initials in the rocks there. This leaves the lost *Santa Ysabel* as a possibility. Did it sail on through the volcanic cloud, to eventually land or be wrecked on the east coast of Australia, a member of its crew carving the initials DY in the rocks there in memory of Doña Ysabel, before presumably perishing? (The possibility that the commander de Vega, was trying to carve DV when his knife slipped and converted the V to a Y would, I believe, be summarily dismissed by anyone who has ever tried carving in Hawkesbury sandstone. A single slip would make, at most, a scratch. De Vega would simply have erased the slip mark and gone on with the task of carving the correct V).

However, we probably do not need to indulge in these speculations as it is most unlikely that the *Santa Ysabel* reached Australia. In 1970, excavations at Pamua on the north coast of San Cristobal - an island in the main Solomon group that is the closest to the Santa Cruz group where the *Santa Ysabel* was last seen - found Spanish colonial pottery in quantities that indicated a long stay, longer than could be accounted for from Mendaña's earlier (1568) voyage when he had discovered this part of the Solomons. Most authorities now believe that the source of the pottery was the lost *Santa Ysabel*. Apparently, at least some of the people on board made it to shore and lived there for some time. Whether they were ultimately killed by the Solomon Islanders, died from starvation or inter bred with the locals we do not know. However, we can be almost certain that the Spanish expedition of 1595 from Peru is not the source for the name Dee



Why.

### Notes

Note 1: Some sources refer to the ship as the *San Ysabel*, others as the *Santa Ysabel*. As I understand it, *Santa* means saint in Spanish. It can be shortened to the masculine form *San* when used in front of masculine names (e.g. *San Francisco* but *Santa Barbara*), except when the masculine name begins with either D or T. Hence the correct name of the ship is presumably the *Santa Ysabel*.

Note 2: Doña is not a name but a respectful form of address (the masculine form is Don, e.g. Don Juan). Hence it is a moot point as to whether Doña Ysabel de Barreto would have used the initials DY in any case.

Note 3: The story does have a definite Australian connection. In 1964 the well-known Australian poet James McAuley published a long poem called *Captain Quiros*. It is in three parts and the first part, titled *Where Solomon was Wanting*, is about the voyage of Mendaña. McAuley's interest in Quiros was probably aroused primarily by Quiros' subsequent and final voyage, a voyage from South America in search of Terra Australis, the Great South Land.

### References

1. McDonald CE and Henderson CWT, "*The Manly-Warringah Story*", Paul Hamlyn Pty Ltd, 1975
2. Rayment L, Article on the Discoverer's Web
3. Spate OHK, *The Spanish Lake - The Pacific since Magellan Vol. 1 Ch. 5, The Southland II: Mendaña and the Holy Cross, Quiros and Doña Isabel*, Canberra 1977

## 2. The Dysprosium Theory

This theory was formulated by Charles McDonald in the late 1960s/early 1970s and is the one that I mentioned in the introduction as being dependent on the letters recorded by Meehan being in the form *Dy*. It first appeared in an article in the *Manly Daily* and subsequently, in 1979, was published in a collection of McDonald's articles (1). In McDonald's words:

*“Jemmy Meehan has often been mentioned with reference to the .....naming of Dee Why Beach, however unintentionally, when he made the entry “Dy Beach” in his field book. Dy, I believe, was an abbreviation for the Greek word Dysprosium, “difficult to reach”.”*

It may seem a little far fetched that James Meehan, although a reasonably educated Irishman, would use an obscure abbreviation of a Greek word in his fieldbook. Also, although McDonald thought that Meehan was on today's Dee Why Beach when he wrote his fieldbook entry - a beach that would have been hard to reach from some directions in 1815 because of the adjacent lagoon and its surrounding wetlands - he was actually on today's Freshwater Beach, surveying 50 acres behind the beach for a grant to Thomas Bruin. This location was not difficult to reach, even in 1815. However I believe that the Dysprosium theory can be disproven far more directly.

If you look in any good dictionary you will find *Dy* listed. It will be stated to be a symbol – not an abbreviation – for dysprosium. The listing may or may not go on to explain that the dysprosium that *Dy* is a symbol for is the chemical element dysprosium, not the Greek word. *Dy* is a chemical symbol, just as *He* is the symbol for helium and *Na* the symbol for sodium.

	19		80
	Mercury	Thallium	Lead
158.924	66 2000 1407	162.50 2000 1407	67 2000 1461
	Tb	Dy	Ho
Num	Dysprosium	holmium	
(247)	98 (251)	99 (23)	
Rf	= Cf	= F	

Periodic Table



de Boisbaudran

The chemical element dysprosium is one of the so-called rare earth elements. It was discovered in 1886 by Paul-Émile Lecoq de Boisbaudran, a French chemist, as an impurity in erbia, the oxide of erbium. The element was isolated by Georges Urbain, another French chemist, in 1906 but pure samples were not produced until the 1950s. If you wish to find it on the Periodic Table of chemical elements its atomic number is 66.

Erbium contains holmium and thulium. According to Reference 2, Boisbaudran worked on the holmium portion, dissolving the oxide in acid and then adding ammonia to precipitate the hydroxide. He repeated this step 32 times and then followed it with 26 sequential precipitations of the insoluble oxalate salt from solution. The long and tedious operation, which he carried out on the marble slab in front of his fire place, finally yielded a previously unknown rare earth material which, given the difficulty that he had had in separating it from the holmium, Boisbaudran understandably called dysprosium - from the Greek word *dysprositos*, which means "hard to get at."

The term "Rare Earth" arises from the minerals from which these materials were first isolated. They were uncommon, oxide-type minerals (earths) which, at the time - the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century - were

found only in a single mineral, Gadolinite, obtained from just a single mine in the village of Ytterby in Sweden. The rare earth elements are very difficult to separate from each other by chemical means because, as we now know, their atoms all have the same outer structure of electrons. Hence the necessity for Boisbaudran's many dissolution/precipitation repetitions to obtain a chemical separation.

Returning to Dee Why, given that the symbol *Dy* and its connection to the Greek word *dysprositos* did not come into existence until at least 1886, James Meehan could not possibly have been using it in this context in his field book in 1815. The Dysprosium theory as the basis of Dee Why's name can be dismissed.

### Notes

Note 1: I called on Charles McDonald at his home in North Manly in about 1990, after I had stumbled across the "problem" with the *Dy* and the *D.Y.* in Meehan's notebook(s). I was aware of his dysprosium theory and, given that it turned in part on *Dy* rather than *D.Y.*, I wanted to find out what Charles might know about what I had found. I did not achieve this objective but, during the visit, he pulled out his dictionary and showed me the entry for *Dy*. It was an oldish Chambers's dictionary (I had one at school myself and hence I know that that is how it spelt its name) and I noted that it did describe *Dy* as a symbol, not an abbreviation. I did not have the heart to take this up further with Charles as, after many years of interest in Warringah's history in general and Dee Why's in particular, he was pleased that he had "solved" the mystery of the name.

Note 2: Charles McDonald presumed that *Dy* was a direct abbreviation for the Greek word *dysprosium*. This possibility can also be dismissed. The prefix *dys* appears on many Greek words and many of them have come down to us in English. Examples are *dyspepsia*, *dyslexia*, *dysentery* and *dysfunction*. The prefix *dys* simply means "bad" or "disordered" – hence

the examples listed mean bad pepsia (tummy), bad lexia (writing), bad entery (entrails) and bad function. It would make no sense to abbreviate any such word, including *dysprositos* (bad approach), as *Dy*. The more appropriate abbreviation would be *Dys* but this would be a useless abbreviation because it is the “word” that follows the *dys* portion that is critical to the meaning.

### References

1. McDonald CE, “*Manly-Warringah, Stories of the Peninsula*”, Murray Child and Co., 1979
2. Emsley J., “*Nature's Building Blocks: An A-Z Guide to the Elements*”, Oxford University Press, 2003

### **3. Theories Related to Dee Why Lagoon**

A number of the theories proposed for the source of the name Dee Why relate it to some aspect of Dee Why Lagoon, or to a close association with the Lagoon. The ones that I am aware of are listed below. They come from a variety of sources but they are all listed in Reference 1.

- The Shape of Dee Why Lagoon
- The Sound made by a Bird that inhabited Dee Why Lagoon
- The Aboriginal word for Stingrays that inhabited Dee Why Lagoon

The last two theories also involve the Aboriginal language and they are covered more fully in Section 9. However, to the extent that they are tied to Dee Why Lagoon, the discussion in this section is also relevant.

I believe that all theories that are based directly on a connection to Dee Why Lagoon can be ruled out by a combination of chronology and geography. Taking chronology first, to the best of my knowledge James Meehan first sighted Dee Why Lagoon in 1814. After surveying 700 acres at Bongin Bongin (today's Mona Vale) for a farm for Robert Campbell Junior, Meehan took the opportunity to make a fairly detailed survey of the coast, working south from Mona Vale to as far as the mouth of Dee Why Lagoon, on today's Long Reef Beach. On Friday 6<sup>th</sup> May 1814, as he approaches the end of this survey, he refers to the Lagoon a number of times in his field book. However he does not give it a name. He simply calls it a Lagoon or the Lagoon.

It is on his next visit to the area, 16 months later in September 1815, that he writes the now almost mythical "*Dy Beach*" in his field book. If the name came from an association with the lagoon then Meehan must have learnt of this association some time between 1814 and 1815.

This is obviously possible. What is less explicable is why he would have

applied that name, if it came from a direct association with the lagoon, to a beach and a bay several kilometres away. For the beach that he was standing on on Wednesday 27<sup>th</sup> September 1815 when he wrote “*Dy Beach, marked a Honey Suckle Tree...*” was not today’s Dee Why Beach. It was Freshwater. He also drew a sketch on which he clearly marked the ocean adjacent to Freshwater Beach as *Dy Bay* (see p.32).

If this is difficult to explain then what is completely inexplicable is that just two days earlier - on Monday 25<sup>th</sup> September 1815 - when he had surveyed 500 acres for William Cossar on the northern side of Dee Why Lagoon, he did not name it. In his fieldbook he simply called it the Lagoon, just as he had a year earlier. To compound the difficulty, Meehan returned again only 10 months later – on Friday 8<sup>th</sup> July 1816 – to complete the survey of the coast from where he had left off in 1814. He commenced at the lagoon entrance, on today’s Long Reef Beach. He does not use the word or abbreviation *Dy*. Again he again simply calls it the Lagoon, as he had in 1814.

The geography, combined with the chronology, seems to rule out a close association with the lagoon as being the source of the name. Hence all theories for the origin of the name that depend on such an association can, I believe, be discounted. There are some further specific chronological difficulties associated with theories based on the shape of the Lagoon and I outline these in Section 3.1 following.

However, although there is this apparently insurmountable problem of timing, there certainly was some association of the name *Dy* with the Lagoon, or one developed rapidly. Six years later, on the 12<sup>th</sup> April 1821, when Meehan returned to survey the remaining 200 acres of the Cossar grant, this time on the southern side of the lagoon, he now called it *Dy Lagoon* in his fieldbook.

### 3.1 The Shape of Dee Why Lagoon Theory

As described in Reference 1, some people saw the shapes of the letter *D* and the letter *y* in the outline of Dee Why Lagoon. The spine of the *D* is the ocean beach (eastern) side of the Lagoon and the curved portion is the other shores. That is, the *D* lies south to north. The tail of the *y* is Dee Why Creek, the creek that enters from the west. The *D* and the *y* are at 90 degrees to each other.

It takes a good imagination to see the two letters in the shape of the Lagoon, even with an aerial photo or a map. At minimum, other creeks that enter the Lagoon have to be ignored and one of them - today's Dee Why Main Drain - was at least as substantial as Dee Why Creek in the early 1800s. Without a map it would be most improbable that anyone would imagine that the shape of Dee Why Lagoon conjures up the letters *D* and *y*.

Prior to 1815, when James Meehan surveyed the northern end of the Lagoon as part of the 500 acre Cossar grant, no map existed. Meehan made this Lagoon survey just two days prior to writing *Dy Beach* in his fieldbook. However, when he wrote it, he was standing on today's Freshwater Beach. If the name came from the shape of Dee Why Lagoon then Meehan would have been the first person to see that its shape was suggestive. However, apparently, instead of recording this in his fieldbook in relation to the Lagoon, he assigned the name two days later to a beach a few kilometres to the south. The facts do not stack up and, in my opinion, neither does the theory.

#### Notes

Note 1: I have used an aerial photograph from 1951 because the Lagoon at that time still had much the same shape as it had in 1815. In the period 1970 to the present day, the Lagoon has been reduced significantly in area



and has changed in shape because of inflow of sediment, mainly from building activities in the catchment area.

However the shape in 1951 was not identical to that of 1815. In 1876, huge waves flattened the sand dunes and washed a lot of sand into the eastern edge of the Lagoon. However, in the aerial photo your eye tends to follow the line of the sand dunes and not the dark area to their west. The change of the eastern shore is disguised.

### References

1. Swancott C., *Dee Why to Barranjoey*, 1967 (self-published)



Aerial photo of Dee Why Lagoon, 1951

## 4. The Deey Theory

This theory is probably the most recent one. It was proposed in the 1990s by George and Shelagh Champion, Manly Warringah's most rigorous and productive historians over the past twenty years or so (Reference 1).

D'Arcy Wentworth - father of the better-known William Charles - had significant landholdings in Manly Warringah in the early 1800s. A key one - from the perspective of the name Dee Why - was the 50 acres at Freshwater Beach originally granted to Thomas Bruin. It was in the surveying of this land in 1815 that Meehan wrote the fateful *Dy Beach* in his field book. This land passed to Wentworth's ownership in 1818, immediately the grant was registered. Wentworth also had other land interests in the area at various times. He was granted 380 acres at today's Manly Vale - which Meehan in fact surveyed the day after the Thomas Bruin grant and the *Dy* notation. In 1825 he also briefly owned all the land around Dee Why Lagoon, but onsold it within a few weeks to James Jenkins.

White Australia's early history is, in general, far more interesting and colourful than we were ever taught in school. D'Arcy Wentworth was from the Irish branch of a family that, although relatively impoverished, traced itself back some twenty generations to Robert of Wentworth Woodhouse in Yorkshire in the thirteenth century. His ancestors had served both Charles II and William III.

Born in about 1762, he was related to Thomas Wentworth, Earl of Strafford, and several other influential figures in Great Britain at that time. However he got himself into strife as a young man in London and was tried a total of four times for highway robbery. On each occasion he was acquitted but, perhaps realizing that his luck and/or family influence was running out, immediately after the verdict of not guilty was announced in his last trial the prosecutor informed the court that Wentworth had taken

the position of Assistant Surgeon on the second fleet, bound for Sydney Cove.

Wentworth took little time to adapt to his new life. He had taken up with at least one of the convict women as his mistress before the fleet had even weighed anchor off the Isle of Wight. The famous William Charles - founder of Australian democracy - was in fact the bastard son of D'Arcy Wentworth and Catherine Crowley.



She was transported in the *Neptune*, Miniature painting of D'Arcy Wentworth the same ship that Wentworth was on. Catherine died young and D'Arcy Wentworth never married, but he fathered and cared for at least nine other children by various mistresses in his 27 years in the Colony.

One of Wentworth's daughters, Katherine, married Captain Benjamin Darley (the source of the Darley Roads in both Manly and Mona Vale today). George and Shelagh Champion uncovered the fact that Darley's mother came from an old Dublin family named Deey (Reference 2) and have suggested that this connection could be the source of the famous *Dy* in Meehan's notebook.

There have to be some doubts about this theory because of the dates involved. Katherine was not born until 1825, ten years after the Meehan note. She married Darley in 1847 and Wentworth had died 20 years earlier, in 1827. For the theory to hold, Wentworth had to have known the Deey family prior to coming to Australia in 1790 and to have had some reason for honouring their name in a land grant.

This is obviously possible given Wentworth's background. However, it is also obvious from Meehan's later re-writing of his original fieldbook that his abbreviation *Dy* was based on the sound of the name. It was phonetic. He re-wrote it as *D.Y.* and it is as "Dee Why" - the sounds of the two letters - that it has come down to us.

Judging by the Dublin telephone book, Deey is not a common name in present-day Ireland although it certainly is an old Irish surname (there is a Deey Bridge over the old Royal Canal, just outside Dublin). I asked a friend who was visiting Ireland in early 2008 to clarify the pronunciation of Deey. He asked four different people, in four geographically-spread parts of Ireland, and they all gave the same answer - "Dee Eee". The "ey" ending of Deey is apparently pronounced in the same way as the "ey" ending of Sydney. Obviously this is not a comprehensive dismantling of the Deey theory as the source of *Dy* but, when coupled with the dates and the question as to why Meehan would bother abbreviating a name that is as short as Deey, I believe that the theory can be dismissed.

### References

1. Champion S and G., *Manly Warringah and Pittwater, 1788-1850*, Fast Books, Glebe 1997
2. Australian Dictionary of Biography 1851-1890, Darley, Benjamin (1811-1864)

## 5. Theories based on Abbreviations

If you consult a good dictionary you will find that *Dy* is listed as an abbreviation for a number of words. It is therefore not surprising that there are several theories for the naming of Dee Why that are founded on abbreviations. The ones that I know of are covered in the following. For good measure I have added one that, to my knowledge, has not been proposed previously.

### 5.1 The Abbreviation for End of an Unfinished Survey Theory

Before he adopted the Dysprosium theory, Charles McDonald promulgated the surveyor's shorthand theory for the origin of Dee Why's name. He claimed that he had been told by a surveyor that *Dy* was shorthand for "unfinished line" or "unfinished survey". He acknowledged that he had not been able to obtain corroboration of this from other surveyors or from their professional bodies (Reference 1).

McDonald suggested that Meehan used the shorthand in 1815 because he was starting off his new survey at the point where he had left off his previous one in the area. This previous survey was his traverse of the coast in 1814 from Mona Vale, south to the entrance of today's Dee Why Lagoon.

Apart from the lack of corroboration for *Dy* as being surveyor's shorthand, this theory breaks down on the fact that, in 1815, when he wrote *Dy* in his notebook, Meehan was not positioned at the end of that previous survey. McDonald had presumed - as apparently had most historians - that Meehan was standing on today's Dee Why/Long Reef Beach when he wrote "*Dy Beach, marked a Honey Suckle Tree...*". But, as explained earlier, he was in fact standing at the southern end of today's Freshwater Beach. He was not at the end of his previous unfinished survey line. He was quite a few kilometres away from it. Hence Meehan would have had no

reason to use the shorthand for “unfinished line” or “unfinished survey”, even if such a shorthand notation did exist. Accordingly, this theory for Dee Why’s origin can be dismissed.

## 5.2 The Abbreviation for Deputy Theory

At the time that Meehan wrote *Dy* in his fieldbook, this pair of letters - in upper case followed by lower case form - was a common abbreviation for the word Deputy. A very pertinent example of its use appears in a document signed by the Sheriff of NSW on 18 August, 1825 to confirm receipt from D’Arcy Wentworth of payment for Mathew Bacon’s land at Dee Why Lagoon/Long Reef. The document was witnessed by both James Meehan and John James. James was the Deputy Sheriff and he wrote his title after his signature, in abbreviated form, as *Dy Shf*.

Given that Meehan held the position of Deputy Surveyor (or Deputy Surveyor-General) at the time that he surveyed Thomas Bruin’s 50 acres at Freshwater Beach and wrote *Dy Beach* in his fieldbook, some people have speculated that he was using the letters in the accepted way, as an abbreviation for Deputy (for example, Reference 2). To me there seems no compelling reason for Meehan to do this. As mentioned previously, he was not a man who was prone to name landmarks after himself and, if he were doing so on this occasion, there would seem to be no obvious reason not to write the full name – presumably, *Deputy Beach*.

It could be argued that, given his title and his quite regular need to sign documents in his official capacity, Meehan would have been so used to abbreviating *Deputy* to *Dy* that it would have become instinctive for him. However, if this explanation is accepted, the theory founders ultimately on the fact that, when Meehan rewrote his notebook, he changed *Dy* to *D.Y*. The latter is not a known abbreviation for Deputy.

Received the Day and Year last above written, of and from the  
 above-named *Darcy Wentworth Esquire*  
 the full Sum of  
*Three hundred & Seventy Six Pounds in full*  
*Dollars at four Shillings each* £ 376  
 being the Consideration above-mentioned to be paid  
 said *Darcy Wentworth*  
 to me.

Witness,  
*John James Dy*  
*James Meekam*

Use of the abbreviation *Dy* by Deputy Sheriff John James

### 5.3 The Abbreviation for D'Arcy Wentworth Theory

I am not sure who first made this proposal - that *Dy* was an abbreviation for D'Arcy Wentworth's first name. Ray Hawkins wrote a letter to the *Manly Daily* in January 2003 which made the suggestion (Reference 3). Others may have proposed it earlier.

Personally, about 15 years ago, I noticed the use of *Dy* for this purpose in a note written on a legal document dating from 1825 (References 4 and 5). It was an Indenture signed by Wentworth to confirm to James Jenkins that he had the legal right to sell to Jenkins the land, around Dee Why Lagoon, that had been originally granted to Cossar. This land had been seized from Mathew Bacon by the Sheriff (see 5.2 earlier).

The hand that wrote *Dy Wentworth* in the note on this document is



Use of the abbreviation *Dy* for D'Arcy Wentworth's first name

probably not Wentworth's and I am not certain whether Wentworth used this abbreviation himself.

Wentworth's connection to the land at today's Freshwater, where Meehan first wrote *Dy Beach*, was outlined in Section 4. In fact, the day after writing it in his fieldbook he surveyed 380 acres for Wentworth a couple of kilometres inland from the beach. Thus Wentworth may well have been in Meehan's mind at the time. He also may have known that Wentworth was to take over the 50 acres that he was surveying for Thomas Bruin immediately it was formally granted, presumably to settle a debt. He may have envisaged that eventually Wentworth would own all of the land from the coast, inland to his 380 acres and hence he may have seen the beach and the bay as leading to Wentworth's land.

If all of this is true, the puzzles are: first, why did he not simply write D'Arcy; second, why would he be so familiar (*Wentworth Beach* would surely be a more likely memorial); third, when he re-wrote the fieldbook why did he write it as *D.Y.*; fourth, and finally, why was the name subsequently pronounced as "Dee Why" and not as "D'Arcy"? On balance, I do not believe that this theory holds together.



## Notes

Note 1: In reading handwriting one must be careful. There is another note on the Indenture (Reference 5) that I have referred to which also could be construed as writing Wentworth's name as *Dy Wentworth*. However, careful examination shows that the author has actually written *Dr Wentworth*. Wentworth came to the colony in the role of an Assistant Surgeon. He had picked up some surgical knowledge while in the Army in Ireland and he moved to London to further this training. It was there, while attempting to move in the social circles appropriate to his family's history, that he got into the financial difficulties that led him into highway robbery.

## 5.4 The Abbreviation for Dockyard Theory

If people are going to propose theories based on abbreviations then I feel free to offer one myself. *Dy* or *DY* is a standard abbreviation for Dockyard. The usage is common in the British Navy and dates back to at least the early 1800s.

Dry docks have a distinctive shape. They are a three sided, narrow rectangle with high sides. A good local example is the now defunct Woolwich Dock near the mouth of the Lane Cove River. It could be claimed that the natural form of Freshwater Beach, with its two long straight sandstone headlands which run a distance inland, and with a relatively narrow distance between them, is reminiscent of a very large dry dock.

In this theory, the first use of *Dy* would have been for the bay that contains Freshwater Beach. The name Dockyard Bay would have been applied - formally or informally - by sailors or by naval surveyors as they sailed or plotted the coast around Sydney. Its natural abbreviation would

have been *Dy Bay* or *DY Bay*. Meehan, in naming Freshwater Beach as *Dy Beach*, would simply have been doing the obvious thing. The beach lay within *Dy Bay*.

We know that the bay was called *Dy Bay*. This is shown clearly on a map catalogued in the NSW Archives Office as Map 1316 (see Page 32). The standard interpretation of this map is that Meehan named both the bay and the beach, and did so simultaneously. The Dockyard theory proposes that the actual sequence was that the Bay was named first, some time prior to 1815, and not by Meehan. Possibly it was named quite early in the European settlement.

A fundamental problem with the theory is the lack of any corroborating evidence. If the bay were named *Dy Bay* early in the European settlement then some other reference to it would be expected to exist. To



Woolwich Dock, Sydney

my knowledge, none does. Also, it could be argued that *Dy* should not have been pronounced as "Dee Why". It should have been "Dockyard". However the outcome could simply be the result of land-based surveyors picking up a notation originated by Naval personnel and not being aware that it was an abbreviation.

On balance, even though the theory has the virtue of being my own, I believe that it must be dismissed as implausible.

### 5.5 Other Abbreviations

One can speculate almost without limit on possible abbreviations that *Dy* or *D.Y.* could stand for. I recently came across a road in Victoria called Deewy Road. It is in the suburb of Narre Warren South, about 35 kilometres south east of Melbourne. It is pronounced as "Dee Why". Could this be the missing link?

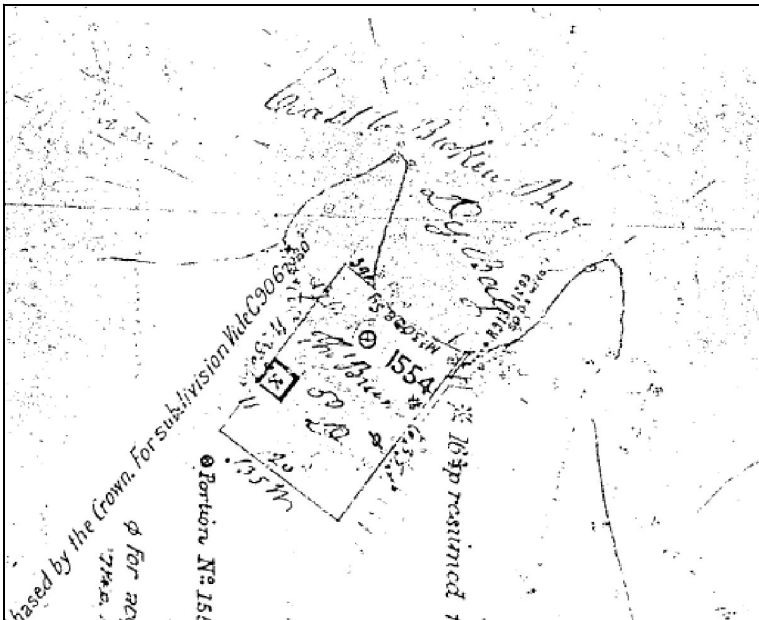


Freshwater Beach ex Google Earth

Fortunately Narre Warren has a local library with a community studies section. On initial contact, they had no idea of the origin of Deewy Road but, very kindly, they did a little research. The subdivision of which the road is part only came into being in about 1973. The land owners involved were Leslie and Dorothy Young. The presumption is that Dorothy Young's initials gave the road its name.

References

1. McDonald CE and Henderson CWT, “*The Manly-Warringah Story*”, Paul Hamlyn Pty Ltd, 1975
2. Pinson S., Letter to the *Manly Daily*, 18 Feb. 2003
3. Hawkins R., Letter to the *Manly Daily*, 23 Jan. 2003
4. Michell R., Letter to the *Manly Daily*, 1 Feb. 2003
5. Indenture made as Deed of Release by D'Arcy Wentworth to James Jenkins, 30th September, 1825



Dy Bay, NSW Archives Office Map 1316

## 6. The Grid Reference Theory

Over the years, various people have suggested that *Dy* was simply a grid reference on a map or plan (Reference 1). Just as the indexes in today's street directories locate streets by a combination of a number and a letter, exactly the same thing can be done by dividing and then labelling one axis of the map in capital letters and the other in lower case letters. Each point on the map can be located by a pair of letters – one uppercase and one lower case.

	<b>t</b>	<b>u</b>	<b>v</b>	<b>w</b>	<b>x</b>	<b>y</b>	<b>z</b>
<b>A</b>							
<b>B</b>							
<b>C</b>							
<b>D</b>						Dy	

If such a set of grid references did exist it would be conventional for them to be labelled from north to south and from west to east (as they are in street directories). It can be concluded that a location labelled *Dy* would lie either at the south west extremity of the grid or at the north east

extremity. Dee Why could qualify as lying in the north east sector of the colony as it existed in 1815 and so the theory passes first muster.

However there are several difficulties. First, no such map or plan dating from 1815 or earlier has ever been found. Second, neither Meehan nor any other surveyor around Sydney in that period (or soon after), apparently used such a grid reference system for any other location. However perhaps the fatal blow is again Meehan's rewriting of his fieldbook. He converted *Dy* to *D.Y.* A grid reference system with both letters written in capitals would be a recipe for never ending confusion. I believe that this is another theory that can reasonably be dismissed.

### References

1. McDonald CE and Henderson CWT, "*The Manly-Warringah Story*", Paul Hamlyn Pty Ltd, 1975

## 7. The Welsh River Names Theory

Again I don't know who was the first to postulate that the name Dee Why had its origin in the names of the rivers Dee and Wye in the United Kingdom. An H. Crisp proposed it in a letter to the *Manly Daily* in 2003 (Reference 1). Phonetically it is an obvious suggestion. But what, if anything, is the connection of the two rivers to each other and to Dee Why?

There are three Rivers Dee in Great Britain – one in Aberdeenshire, Scotland, one in Galloway, Scotland and one in Wales. The old Celtic name for the one in Wales is Afon Dyfrdwy.

Similarly, there are three Rivers Wye in Great Britain – one in Derbyshire, England, one in Buckinghamshire, England and the major one, which is in Wales. The old Celtic name for the one in Wales is Afon Gwy.

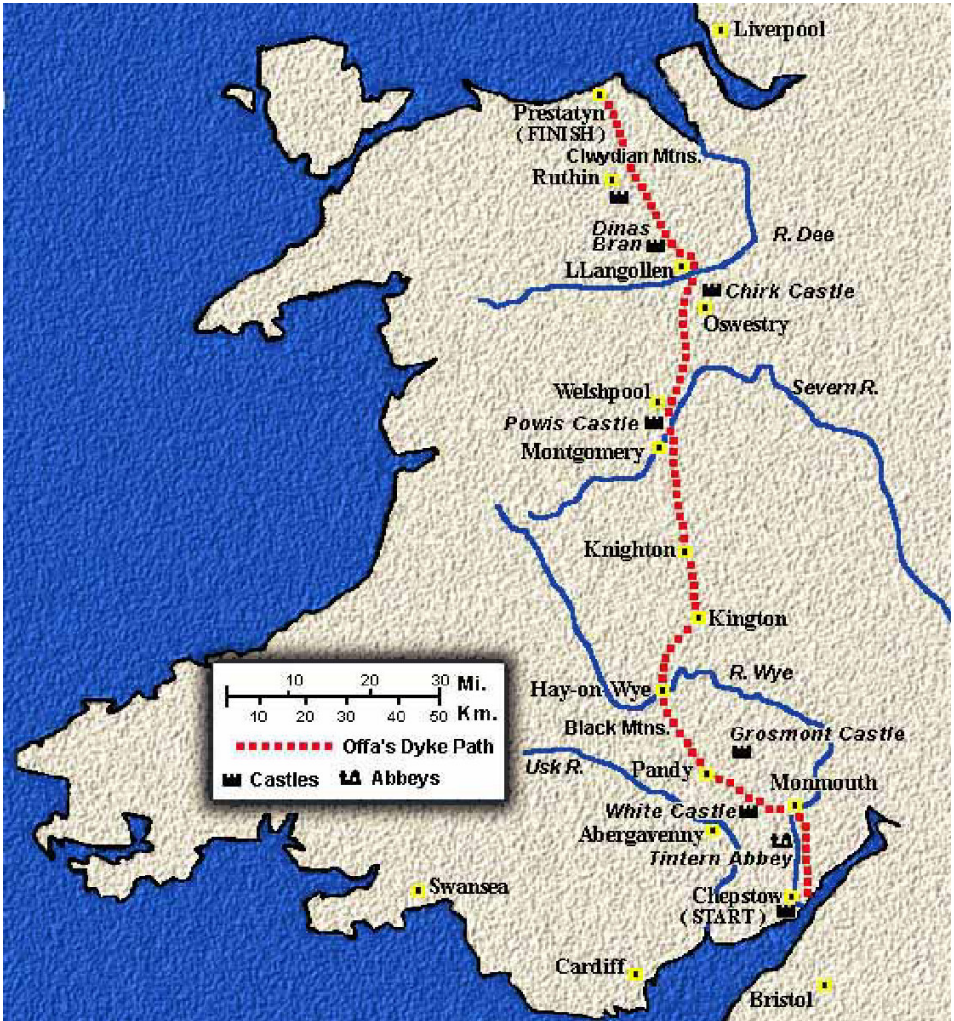
One known connection between the two Welsh rivers is the ancient Offa's Dyke. This is a major ditch/mound fortification structure that runs along much of the border between England and Wales. Its construction is attributed to the Anglo-Saxon king Offa in the eighth century. He built it to protect and defend his kingdom of Mercia from marauders from the Welsh kingdom of Powys.

The late ninth- and early tenth-century writer Asser recorded that *“there was in Mercia in fairly recent time a certain vigorous king called Offa, who terrified all the neighbouring kings and provinces around him, and who had a great dyke built between Wales and Mercia, from sea to sea”*. Although there are some gaps in the line today, it is certain that the two seas that the dyke stretched between were the estuary of the River Dee in the north and the estuary of the River Wye in the south. Hence Offa's Dyke can provide a reason for connecting the words Dee and Wye. Can

we get from there to Dee Why, Australia?

I cannot see any plausible route. What some state is that a Welsh surveyor – obviously not the Irishman James Meehan –

*"saw Collaroy Plateau (a ridge overlooking Dee Why Lagoon and yet un-named) and thought it resembled Offa's Dyke, in Southern Wales"*





*between the River Dee and the River Wye. Two miles south of Dee Why Lagoon is Curl Curl Lagoon, which resembles the River Wye. Thus he annotated a map by marking the initials d.y.” (Ref. 2).*

In a variation of this story, H. Crisp wrote to the *Manly Daily* in January 2003 in part as follows (1):

*"Captain Cook found his way blocked by the lagoon which, being English, reminded him of the dyke built by King Offa of Mercia between his country's Dee Wye to keep Welsh raiders out of England."*

(Note - it is Captain Cook who was English, not the Lagoon!)

I believe that we can safely ignore Captain Cook - he never set foot on the Northern Beaches. So sticking with the surveyor-based version, first we have to find this Welsh surveyor. Fortunately the early surveyors of the Northern Beaches have been studied in some detail (Reference 3). None of them was Welsh. The first Welsh surveyor in the colony was Samuel Perry but he did not arrive until 1829, fourteen years after Meehan's *Dy Beach* notation.

Second, Collaroy Plateau certainly does overlook Dee Why Lagoon but it is located immediately to its north. It “connects” Dee Why Lagoon and Narrabeen Lagoon, not Dee Why Lagoon and Curl Curl Lagoon which, as the reference states, is to the south. It would have to have been Narrabeen Lagoon, not Curl Curl Lagoon, that was thought to resemble the River Wye. Given that by 1815 Narrabeen Lagoon had already been named - by Lieutenant Grant in 1801, having learnt it from the local Aborigines (Reference 4) - and that Meehan knew it by this name, it seems most unlikely that he or any other surveyor would suddenly revert to a name based on a not-obvious resemblance to the River Wye.

It would also appear to be far more likely that, if one of the two lagoons were considered to be similar to the estuary of the River Dee and the other to the River Wye, then one of them would have been named Dee Lagoon

and the other Wye Lagoon. There is no obvious reason to combine the two names and then to apply the combination to just one of the pair.

Finally, it would be an unusually vivid imagination that found the 100 metre high ridge of Collaroy Plateau to be reminiscent of the 2.5 metre high Offa's Dyke. Overall, I believe that the Welsh rivers theory can reasonably be dismissed.



Offa's Dyke today

### Notes

Note 1: Notwithstanding this conclusion, the potential connection to the rivers does appear to have had some impact on Dee Why. A group of streets adjacent to the south west shore of the Lagoon were all given river names when the area involved was subdivided in 1915. The streets concerned are Hawkesbury Avenue, Clarence Avenue, Richmond Avenue, Avon Road and Clyde Road. The subdividers – the Salvation Army – presumably had the river theory in their minds, although this does not

necessarily mean that they believed it. Also, wittingly or otherwise, they lost the direct UK geographical connection. There is no Hawkesbury or Clarence River in the UK. The names chosen for the streets are all Australian rivers, two of them named to honour British colonial administrators while the other three were named after their Great British river counterparts.

Note 2: In his fieldbooks, Meehan wrote the name of today's Narrabeen Lagoon as Narrabang Lagoon.

### References

1. Crisp H., Letter to the *Manly Daily* 7 January, 2003
2. NationMaster Web-based Encyclopedia
3. Champion S and G., *The Work of Early Surveyors in Manly, Warringah and Pittwater*, 1992
4. Champion S and G., *Lieutenant James Grant's Journey to Manly, Warringah and Pittwater*, 1992

## 8. The Surveyors' Method of Calculating Gradient Theory

This theory was brought to my attention very recently by Shelagh Champion. It was apparently postulated by a cadet reporter with the *Manly Daily* newspaper in 2007. I am recording it at third hand and have no other details. Shelagh further advises that she has been unable to find any surveyor who knows of any calculation method, current in 1815, involving  $Dy$ .

Although working at third hand, I believe that I can explain why such a theory could be postulated. Unfortunately, it is a somewhat technical explanation and I apologise to the non-mathematical. It is founded in differential calculus.

It is common mathematical practice, when dealing with two dimensions or directions, to label one of them  $x$  and one of them  $y$ . Thus in dealing with slope or gradient, it is common to label the vertical dimension or axis as  $y$  and the horizontal one as  $x$ . As one proceeds forward a distance  $\Delta x$  one rises a distance  $\Delta y$ . The definition of gradient is the amount of vertical rise per unit of forward horizontal travel. That is,

$$\text{Gradient} = \frac{\Delta y}{\Delta x}$$

This is the average gradient over the distance  $\Delta x$ . The gradient at a particular point along  $x$  is obtained by allowing  $\Delta x$  to become infinitesimally small. Mathematically, this process is known as differentiation and the outcome is written as

$$\text{Gradient} = \text{Differential coefficient of } y \text{ with respect to } x = \frac{dy}{dx}$$

Finally, it is standard mathematical shorthand to write  $\frac{dy}{dx}$  as  $Dy$ .

That is,  $D$  is used to represent the differential operator  $d/dx$ .

I trust that you have been able to follow this. An extract from a Maths text book may or may not help (Reference 1).

The operation of finding the differential coefficient of a given function is called 'differentiating.' If  $x$  be the independent variable, we may look upon  $d/dx$  as a symbol denoting this operation. It is often convenient to replace this by the single letter  $D$ ; thus we may write, indifferently,

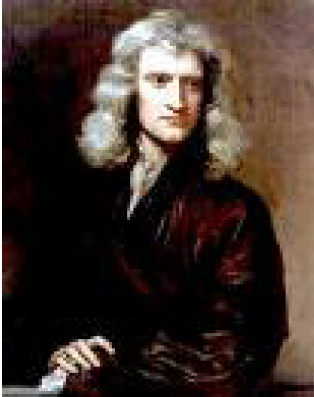
$$\frac{dy}{dx}, \quad \frac{d}{dx}y, \quad Dy,$$

for the differential coefficient of  $y$  with respect to  $x$ .

Differential calculus was invented - apparently almost simultaneously and independently - by Isaac Newton and Gotfreid Leibnitz in the period 1665-1675. However, it was not systematised and expressed in the  $\Delta x$ ,  $\Delta y$  format that gives us the shorthand  $Dy$  until the publication of a book of Karl Weierstrass' lectures in 1884, two hundred years later. Accordingly, it is impossible to imagine that surveyors, irrespective of their training, would have been using it in 1815. At that time, differential calculus was known only to the mathematical elite.

Also  $Dy$ , as used in calculus, is not expressed verbally as "Dee Why". It is expressed either as "Dee Why Dee Exx" or as "Dee by Dee Exx of Why". It would not be transposed as  $D.Y.$  in rewriting a fieldbook.

Provided my third hand interpretation is correct, I put the gradient theory for the origin of Dee Why's name into the class of "grasping at straws". I believe that it can be dismissed.



Isaac Newton



Gottfried Leibniz

### References

1. Lamb H., *An Elementary Course of Infinitesimal Calculus*, Cambridge University Press, 1956.

## 9. Theories based on Aboriginal Sources

This is where the plausible and difficult to disprove theory that I mentioned in the Introduction arises. As explained there, Meehan's use of *Dy* or *D.Y.* for the locality - without explaining its origin - may mean that it was a name that was already known for the locality in 1815. If this is the case then a likely source is the local Aborigines.

Three specific theories - one based on the Aboriginal name for a bird, a second on the name for stingray and a third on the name for wood - have been proposed in the past. All three appear to be dismissable although one has quite an impressive pedigree. However, the possibility of an Aboriginal source still remains. I will deal with the three specific theories first.

### 9.1 The Sound made by a Bird that inhabited Dee Why Lagoon Theory

This theory is outlined in References 1 and 2. As described in (1), it is claimed that *Dee Why* was the word used by local Aborigines for a swamp bird – the grebe – the word being a phonetic mimicry of the noise that it makes in flight. Reference 2 describes the the bird as "*an almost tailless bird of the swamps*". Although described as a swamp bird, grebes actually live on fresh and brackish lakes and lagoons and nest in the surrounding vegetation. They dive for fish and other food and are excellent underwater swimmers.

However the most complete source for this theory is probably an item that appeared in the *Manly Daily* of 22 November, 1936. It is a report of a ceremony held to commemorate the 100th year of residence of the Wheeler family in Warringah Shire (3). In opening proceedings, Mr. Oscar Weight - original founder of today's Dee Why real estate company Weight and Co. - summarised some of the history of the Wheelers. In his

talk he covered the origin of Dee Why's name. As quoted in the *Daily* he said:

*"The origin, according to Mr. Meston who was noted for his works on the aboriginal life and customs, was a little bird, the grebe, which frequented the (Dee Why) lagoon and emitted the plaintive notes "Deewhee". This origin has been confirmed by a black servant in the Wheeler family".*

This appears to be a well-credentialled theory. The Mr. Meston referred to was one of the most knowledgeable white authorities on Aboriginal languages around the turn of last century. He grew up on the Clarence River in the 1860s and learnt the local aboriginal language. In 1889 he led an extensive survey of the remaining Aboriginal tribes in Queensland and documented their languages, to the extent that this was possible during such a visit.

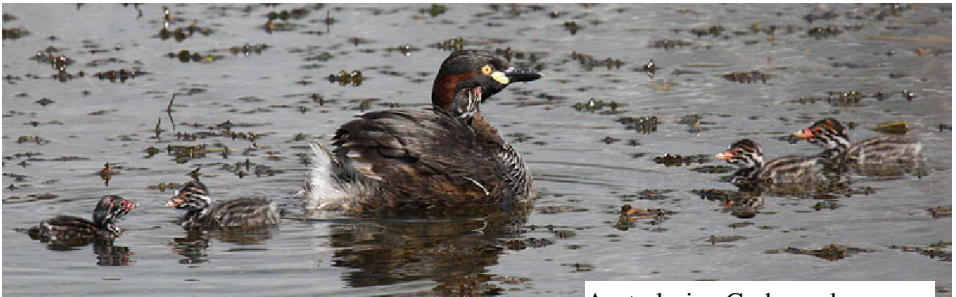
Given that Meston died in 1924, his comments on Dee Why must have been made before that date. Oscar Weight was talking in 1936 so he was presumably reporting a contact made with Meston by someone else. Plausibly this could have been James Wheeler (Jnr.), the father of George (who was the guest of honour on the night) and a keen local historian. He had lived in the district since 1878.

A difficulty with Australian Aboriginal languages is that they differed from place to place. An Aborigine from the Sydney region could not converse readily with one from west of the Nepean River. Meston's knowledge was from northern New South Wales and Queensland. The Sydney language had disappeared well before he was born. However, fortunately for us, something that has been constant since 1815 is the grebe itself. Its call can still be heard and hopefully it can help to resolve this theory.



There are three different species of grebes in Australia – the Great Crested, the Hoary-headed and the Australasian. Each of the species is found at times on the east coast around Sydney, the Australasian being the most common, the Great Crested less so and the Hoary-headed being rare. Oscar Weight described it as a little bird. This probably rules out the Great Crested for, at about 50 cms, it would not qualify. The Australasian and the Hoary-headed are both small - at about 25 and 27 cms respectively. When in the water (which is where they are most commonly observed) the Australasian Grebes - with their petite heads - are invariably referred to as little. Little Grebe is in fact a commonly-used alternative name to Australasian Grebe.

Grebes are gregarious and often form groups. They tend to prefer fresh water and hence they are far more common inland than on the coast. The Australasian is sometimes seen on Dee Why Lagoon today ( I saw one in early 2008) and it is possible that they would have used it more in the past. This is partly because the water in the Lagoon would, on average, have been less brackish then. Today the Lagoon's opening is managed artificially to avoid flooding of residential properties in the low lying areas of its catchment. In the past it would have spent much longer periods with its entrance closed. In the closed periods the water flowing in is fresh. Saltwater enters only when the Lagoon is open. The other reason for potentially greater numbers in the past is that there was a lot more of the wetland-style vegetation around the Lagoon that is favoured by



Australasian Grebe and young

Grebes. They also may have used the other lagoons in the area.

With this background, the obviously critical question is "What sound does an Australasian Grebe make?". Reference 4 describes its call as "*vociferous chittering*", going on to state that it is "*a very noisy bird, calling day and night*". So the theory has a chance. Grebes do make their presence felt and their call is readily heard. Potentially their call could be the source of their Aboriginal name.

To make up my own mind, I obtained a recording of the call. Regrettably I must convey the unfortunate news is that it does not sound anything like Dee Why. Nor is it plaintive in any sense of the word. I agree wholeheartedly with the description of "*vociferous chittering*". If you would like to hear the recording yourself, log on to the Friends of Dee Why Lagoon web site that is listed inside the front cover of this booklet.

To wrap up this theory, I have also looked at the lists of Aboriginal words that Meston recorded during his lifetime. No word for grebe is recorded. Unfortunately, my conclusion is that the theory has an impressive pedigree but, ultimately, not a sound foundation (no pun intended!).

## 9.2 The Aboriginal word for Stingray Theory

This theory (Reference 2) claims that *Dee Why* was an Aboriginal word for stingray and that Dee Why Lagoon used to contain large numbers of these creatures.

The theory would seem to have two flaws. First, Dee Why Lagoon spends much of its time in a closed state, separated from the sea. Stingrays in general do not like this sort of environment. They prefer bays or estuaries that are permanently open to the sea. It is true that there are freshwater stingrays. However these would have the opposite difficulty

with Dee Why Lagoon, namely, the periods - which can be quite long - when the Lagoon is open to the sea and is tidal

There are no stingrays in the Lagoon today although they are quite plentiful on the coast close by. There is a significant population in the bay off Fisherman's Beach, on the northern side of Long Reef, about a kilometre from the Lagoon. However it seems most unlikely that stingrays ever existed in any significant numbers in Dee Why Lagoon.

The second flaw is that the local Aboriginal word for stingray was apparently *darinyan*. This word obviously does not sound like "Dee Why". Again it is a fact that there is more than one stingray species around Sydney and perhaps there was another Aboriginal name. If there was, there is no apparent record of it.

On balance, I believe that the stingray theory can be dismissed.

### 9.3 The Pidgin English and/or Aboriginal word for Wood Theory

This theory was proposed by Christina Heath in a letter to the *Manly Daily* on 5 February, 2003 (Reference 5). She wrote in part:

*"...It occurred to me a long time ago that the words "dee why" - in both an Aboriginal language dictionary I had, plus a dictionary of New Guinea pidgin English - meant "wood". ...*

*Could it be that the area was well known originally for its resource of wood for settlers and they attached the name to the area?"*

It certainly is the case that the New Guinean or, probably more correctly, the Melanesian Pidgin English word for wood is *diwai*. I understand that "dee why" is a good approximation of the pronunciation and hence the phonetics are reasonably correct.



Flag of East New Britain

Melanesian Pidgin English was not developed until 1860 or later, some 50 years after 1815 when Meehan wrote his *Dy*. Hence Pidgin can be ruled out as the source. However, unlike many Pidgin words, *diwai* is not derived from a European word.

(An example of such a derivation is the Pidgin word for timber. It is *timba*.) Rather, it is thought that *diwai* is derived from the language used by the Tolai people in the East New Britain portion of Papua New Guinea. Their word for wood is *dawai*. An alternative is another regional language where the same word is *diwaai*.

So it is a fact that the words *dawai* and *diwaai* both existed in parts of Papua New Guinea in 1815 and that they meant wood, logs or trees. However, by 1815, no European had interacted significantly with any of these people at even a casual level, let alone in a manner that would have allowed the language to be learnt. Accordingly, there seems to be no way that either of these New Guinean words could be the source of "dee why". The conclusions are that the Pidgin English theory can definitely be dismissed because of timing and that the New Guinea indigenous language possibility seems, at best, very remote. This leaves the Aboriginal theory.

I have not been able to find a record of the local Aboriginal word for wood, if one did exist. Relatively little of the Sydney language was recorded before it was virtually wiped out or corrupted. However, the Aboriginal word for dry timber or dead logs in at least parts of Queensland

was *dauwah*. The names of the Sunshine Coast towns of Teewah and Tewantin derive from it.

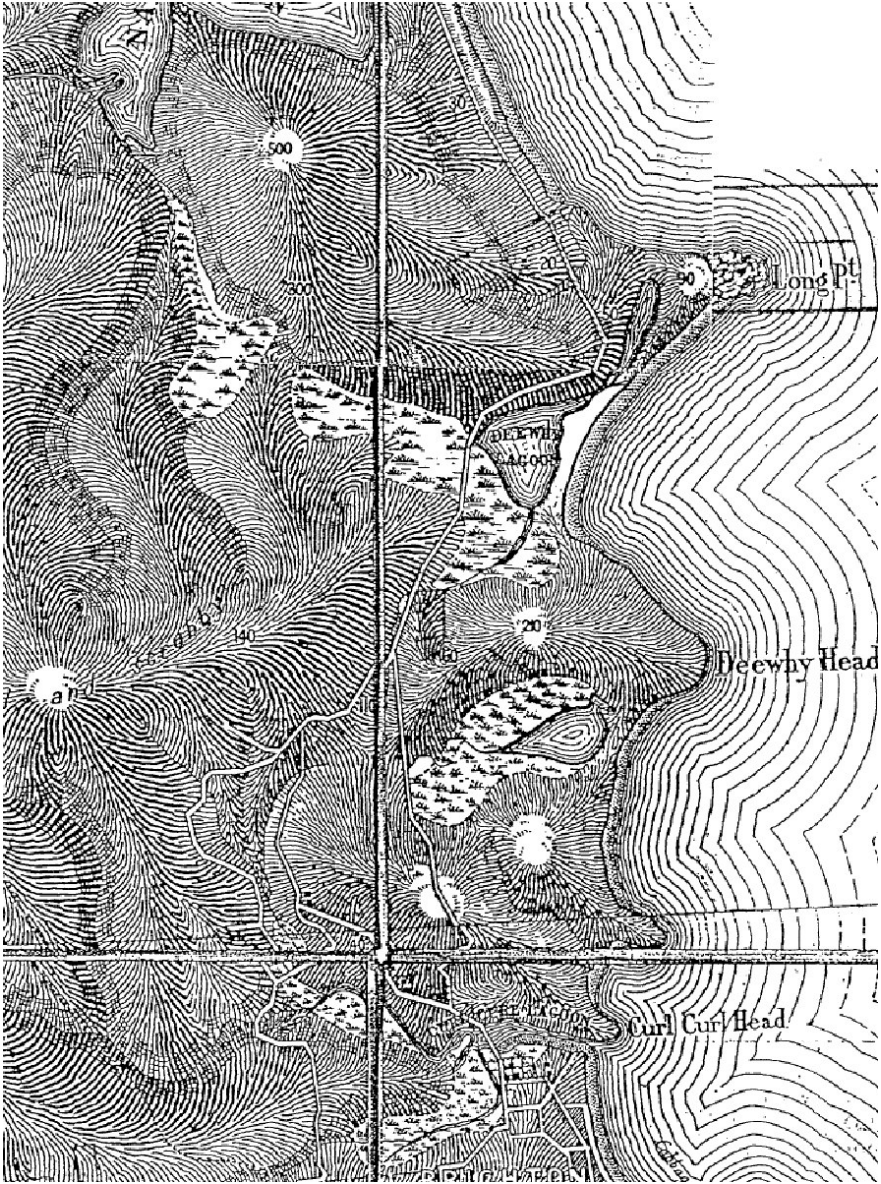
The Queensland coastal Aboriginal word *dauwah* is not that far removed from the the Eastern New Guinean one of *dawai*. They may conceivably have a common origin. I know of no evidence that a similar word was used in the Sydney region, although it is possible. However, even if it were, we still have to find a connection of the word to the region which Meehan recorded as *Dy*. Personally, I cannot see any. It is not a region noted for its trees, alive or dead. Hence I conclude that, while it is true that there is or was an Eastern New Guinean word, a coastal Queensland Aboriginal word and, potentially, a Sydney Aboriginal word for wood - alive or dead - that sounded a little like "dee why", this word is unlikely to be the source of Dee Why's name. It is more probably just a phonetic coincidence.

#### 9.4 The Unknown Aboriginal Source Theory

Although the three, specific theories of Aboriginal origins that have been proposed in the past have problems, it is a fact that the sounds *Dee* and *Why* were apparently both quite common in Aboriginal languages in the vicinity of Sydney. Some examples of place names containing them include:

- Deeban (Port Hacking)
- Deerubbin (Hawkesbury River)
- Wyee – place of bush fires
- Wyong – running water or place of yams
- Wyuna – clear water

Hence it remains a potentially plausible theory that the name Deewhy (this



Map showing local wetlands, c. 1876 (Ref. 8)

is the way that it was generally written up until the 1960s) is of Aboriginal origin.

My own suggestion is that the name perhaps applied to the entire coastal area north of Manly, stretching as far as Long Reef. Prior to 1788 this entire area was a series of extensive wetlands, based around the three lagoons – today’s Manly, Curl Curl and Dee Why Lagoons. With its waterbirds and its fish, it would have been a rich source of food for the local Aborigines, particularly when coupled with the Long Reef rock platform with its shellfish. It would not be surprising if this food-rich area had a name. It may not have been a place name as we know them but a descriptive name for the region. This would explain why Meehan, the most knowledgeable European regarding the local geography, could give the name to a beach and bay at the southern end of the area and to a lagoon at the northern end.

I acknowledge that this theory has no proof – it is simply plausible. Ultimately, perhaps, its only advantage over the other dozen or so theories is that it is unlikely to be disproven!

### Notes

Note 1: I should acknowledge that at least one other theory for an Aboriginal source for the name Dee Why has been postulated. In a letter to the *Manly Daily* (Reference 6), Jim Outred suggested that it was an Aboriginal word meaning “*home unit*”. However there is no evidence that the Aborigines around Sydney built even multi-roomed, let alone multi-level, gunyas. It is doubtful that they would have received the necessary planning permission. Their elders were perhaps wiser than those of their European counterparts 150 years later.

Note 2: Further to the call of the Grebe theory, it has been suggested that the bird call that the name Dee Why was based on was that of the Little

Grassbird, not the Little Grebe. Little Grassbirds are found around Dee Why Lagoon and, again, would have been more common in the past when the wetlands were more extensive. Their call certainly qualifies as plaintive and it contains the sound "eee". However it does not contain a distinctive "why". Also the call actually consists of three sounds, not two, although the first sound is short and is sometimes missed. Common descriptions are "tu-pee-pee" and "t-thee-thee".

It seems unlikely that the Aborigines, with their intimate contact with native wildlife, would have missed the first part of the Grassbird's call and reproduced it as just two sounds, "dee why". My view is that, although it does take less of a leap of imagination to get from the call of the Little Grassbird to the sound "dee why" than it does from the call of the Australasian Grebe, it does still require a leap. Again for those interested, a recording of the call is on the Friends of Dee Why Lagoon website.

Note 3: Graphic confirmation of the historical value of Dee Why Lagoon as a food source for Aborigines is given in a study (Reference 7) by Robert Etheridge in 1891 of some large caves on the southern side of the valley that contains the Lagoon (in the vicinity of today's Sturdee Parade). He found that the floors of the caves were covered with "hearth-earth" - a mixture of ash from fires, animal bones and shells. The depth of this hearth-earth was an amazing 5 feet 6 inches (1.7 metres). It may have represented hundreds or even thousands of years of Aboriginal use of the Lagoon, the wetlands and the rock platforms as a food source.

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7. Etheridge R., *Notes on Rock Shelters or Gibba-Gunyas at Dee Why Lagoon*, Records of the Aust Museum, 1(8) July 1891
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## 10. Recapitulation

James Meehan presumably had absolutely no idea what difficulty he would create for subsequent generations when he wrote the simple phrase "*Dy Beach Marked a Honey Suckle Tree...*" in his fieldbook almost 200 years ago. To him, at the time, there was apparently no mystery involved. He presumed that his colleagues and contemporaries would understand the entry and its origin.

Given this, I believe that we can safely rule out all theories for the origin of the name that rely on obscure English language abbreviations or meanings. I further believe that the most likely source is the one that had provided most of the other place names that European settlers had applied to the Northern Beaches by 1815. That source was the local Aborigines.

In 1815, a map of the Northern Beaches coastline would or could have shown the following place names, albeit with some variation in the spelling:

Barrenjoey  
Bilgola (Belgoula)  
Bongin Bongin  
Narrabeen  
Long Reef  
Deewhy  
Curl Curl (perhaps)  
Cabbage Tree Bay

Leaving Deewhy out of the discussion for the moment, the only coastal features with European-sourced names are Long Reef and Cabbage Tree Bay (today's Manly ocean beach). Other European names in the area were Broken Bay, Pittwater and Manly Cove (in the harbour).

A common characteristic of all of the European names is that their sources are transparent and obvious. This is a natural outcome when naming geographic features of a new area. Names tend to either relate to the appearance of obvious or important landmarks (e.g. Long Reef), or to honour a person whose patronage the namer covets (Pittwater). Once settlement occurs, names often come from that source (the settlers).

By 1815 there were very few European settlers on the Northern Beaches and they had not as yet given their names to natural features. For example, Meehan refers to a "*Head in Campbell's farm*" and a "*point on Cheers' farm*" but he does not call them Campbell's Head or Cheers' Point. This outcome would develop a little later as settlement became more established.

How could Meehan have learnt of the name *Deewhy* if it is Aboriginal? Obviously, he may have talked directly with local Aborigines but, if the argument advanced in the Introduction holds, he would then have explained his source. However, there was at least one European farmer living in the Collaroy/Narrabeen area in 1815. He was John Ramsay. On Tuesday 26 September, 1815 - the day immediately before he wrote the fateful *Dy* phrase - Meehan commenced the entry in his field book with the words "*Long Reef - from the Tree .... near Ramsay's House ...*". It is almost certain that he would have talked with Ramsay during his visit to the area and he may well have stayed with him. Ramsay may have been the indirect source.

Hence my own conclusion, based on both its phonetics and its obscurity, is that *Deewhy* is of Aboriginal origin. However, I acknowledge that the evidence is entirely circumstantial. We can only live with the hope that, at some time in the future, a document will be uncovered that allows the definitive conclusion to be drawn and the argument to happily end.

