

Convict relics 'pale into insignificance' beside region's Koori culture

By **MIKE SCANLON**,
Staff Reporter

AT a time when Novocastrians are celebrating the discovery of rare convict relics which date back about 160 years, a far more ancient local culture is often neglected.

To Newcastle's Aboriginal population, the recent East End convict finds pale into insignificance beside their people's heritage which goes back thousands of years.

But even in the midst of this week's National Aboriginal Week, they're not making any fuss about it.

This is despite probably a dozen

'sacred' (burial) sites in the Lower Hunter and an acknowledged significant campsite find in a trench at the recent archaeological dig itself.

And the Aboriginal population is happy to keep its important sites secret if it means keeping them safe from souvenir hunters for another 1000 years.

They include:

- An unknown major Aboriginal burial ground, containing at least 20 bodies, beneath an East-lakes soccer field.

- Possibly 5000 priceless rock carvings and engravings in Hunter mountain ranges.

- Numerous Bora (initiation) places kept hidden away on Hunter farms by agreement with gener-

ation after generation of valley farmers.

The Raymond Terrace office of The National Parks and Wildlife Service, which records all local, known native sites, has four filing cabinets full of stored information. Typed up, its computer printout is about 6cm thick but is never available to the public.

Nor are any of the sites themselves signposted or 'publicised' although one Aboriginal sites tour was held as a highlight of this week's national Aboriginal celebrations.

Sadly, however, six old canoes, from which the bark was used to make boats, were destroyed, apparently by accident, by workers

at Nelson Bay recently who didn't realise their value.

The cultural officer with the Newcastle Awabakal Aboriginal Co-Op, Mr Paul Gordon, said he was amazed local tourists visited Kakadu National Park to see Aboriginal sites when their own backyard was twice as valuable.

'The coastal strip here is probably the richest in Australia for artefacts,' he said. 'More people lived here because of fresh water, shellfish, berries and native fruit. Most has gone now, under buildings, though and we don't tell people about the other sites. The only place left the closest to the old environment is our field study centre at Dudley.'

The most valuable sites were inland, however, at Wollombi or in the Upper Hunter, he said.

Mr Gordon said public appreciation of his people's pre-history to the white man was now growing more than ever before.

'There's a lot of people interested out there now. A big group are school teachers with Aboriginal studies courses who haven't a clue what to teach. I also lectured to 220 schools last year.'

Mr Gordon said tours to selected sites would be expanded soon from the week-long bush camps (three a year) to some day tours taking in carvings in the Wattagans and Cessnock.

'At schools as we grew up we were taught that Captain Cook discovered Australia. We weren't told any different. Some of our people ended up with identity problems, got in trouble and dropped out of school. That's why we started the bush camps to teach our youngsters about their our culture. Now, other people can come along, too. They're about 50/50 at present.'

The most common Aboriginal find made, including one in the East End convict trench, is shells and stone flakes made when sharpening tools. Middens (kitchen rubbish dumps) are found everywhere from Swansea Heads to under the 18th fairway at Stockton golf course.



The Newcastle Awabakal Aboriginal Co-op Cultural Officer, Mr Paul Gordon, at the midden site at East End with Bond St and the foreshore in the background.