

Front cover photo: In the Tank Stream today.
Photograph: Sydney Water.

The Tank Stream

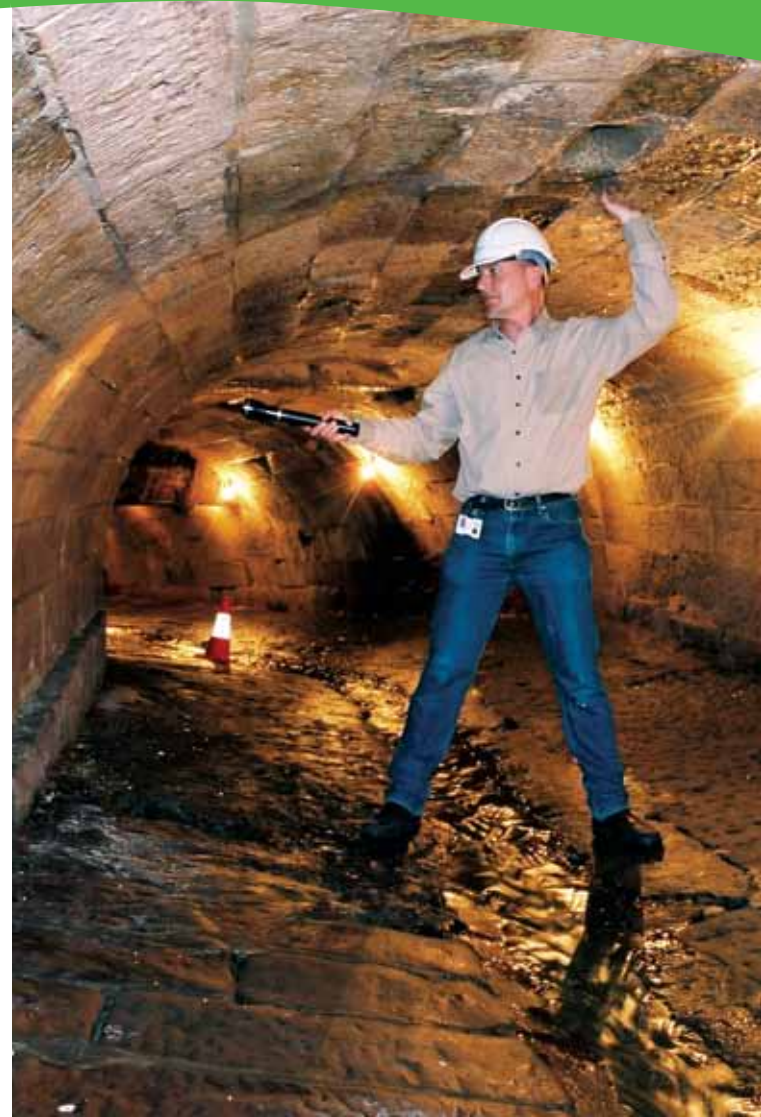
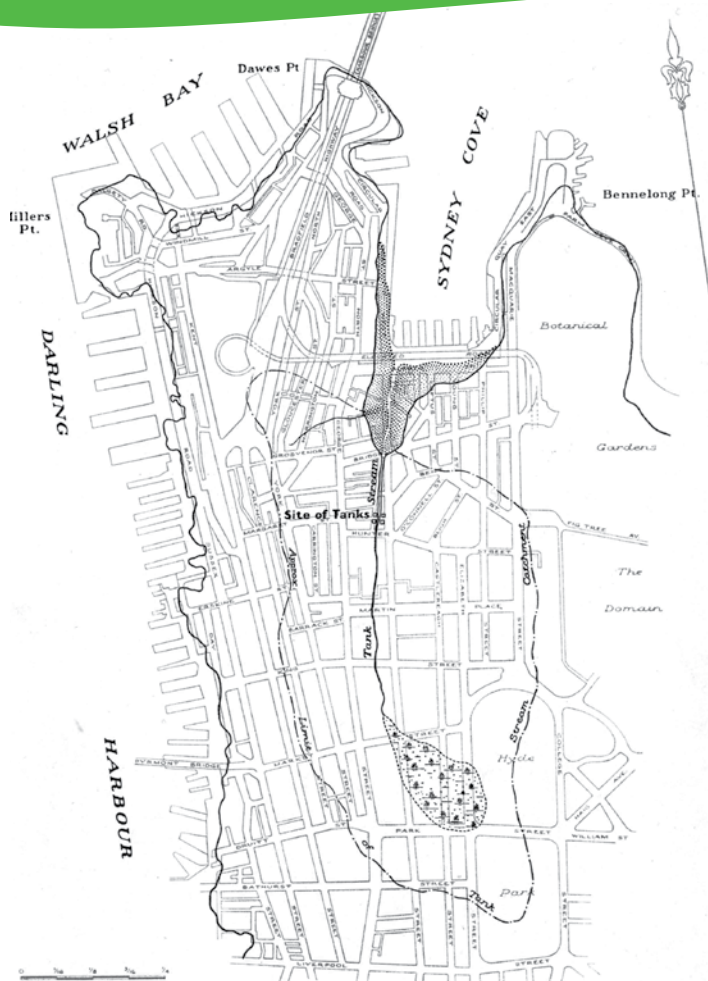
Mason's marks in the block work inside the Tank Stream tunnel.

In recognition of the importance of the Tank Stream to the people of Sydney and New South Wales, it was protected by a Permanent Conservation Order in 1989 and entered on the NSW State Heritage Register in 1999. The Tank Stream is recognised as being of national importance to the European settlement of Australia.

Aboriginal occupation

Due to the almost immediate impact of European colonists, our knowledge of Sydney's Aboriginal people is limited. Early settlers casual and systematic observations provide some insight, but basic information is missing or ambiguous. Even the names of the Aboriginal landscape with the names of the stream and the other features in the catchment have been lost.

Recently researchers favour Gadigal (often spelt Cadigal) as the name of the group that had some rights and obligations for the land around Sydney Cove. The Gadigal spoke the coastal dialect of Dharug, which makes them part of a larger group within the Sydney region.

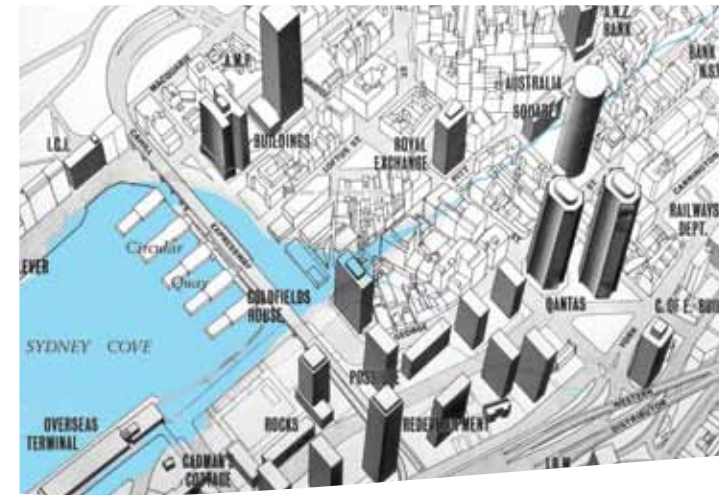




John Skinner Prout, The Tank Stream, Sydney, circa 1842.
pencil, watercolour, opaque white highlights, 25.5 x 37.5cm
Purchased 1913 Collection: Art Gallery of NSW
Photograph: Brenton McGeachie of AGNSW



A tour group inspects the Tank Stream.



The Tank Stream runs underground from near Hyde Park to Circular Quay.

Sydney's first water supply

When Captain Arthur Phillip sailed into Sydney Harbour in January 1788, searching for a new settlement site, one of his main requirements was a reliable fresh water supply.

As he sailed around Bennelong Point, now the site of the Sydney Opera House, he saw a wide-mouthed stream running into Sydney Harbour. At high tide, the water was deep enough for schooners to go as far as present-day Bridge Street.

Here Phillip established the new colony, the new city and the beginnings of European Australia. Sydney Water manages this stream as part of our water supply heritage, although it is no longer part of the water supply.

On exploring the stream, Phillip discovered its beginnings in a swampy area between today's Hyde Park and Sydney Town Hall. The stream dropped about 30 metres through a series of waterfalls to Bridge Street, where it met the harbour. Draining about 82 hectares, it was supplemented by springs in what are now King and Spring Streets.

As the water source for both humans and their livestock, it was essential to maintain water quality in the stream. So Phillip declared the first catchment and environment protection act of the European occupation. He created a green belt 15 metres wide either side of the stream. Polluting activities, cutting trees and grazing stock were prohibited.

By August of 1788, heavy rains changed the gentle stream into a raging torrent, washing away brick kilns, huts and making the roads impassable. Drought followed the floods, warning settlers that the regular rainfall patterns they were used to in Britain, were not part of this strange new land.

Phillip, with limited resources at his disposal and an increasingly desperate need for water, set his convicts to deepen the stream. They excavated the sandstone river banks in three or four places to create storage tanks. Each tank was five metres deep and held nearly 20,000 litres of water. These tanks gave the stream its name – the Tank Stream.

Governor Phillip returned to England in 1792, due to ill health and for a time the military ran the colony. Although more famous for using rum as the colony's major currency, commanding officer

Major Grose made a significant environmental decision. He allowed the military to build houses and pigsties in the Tank Stream's green belt, causing pollution and illness.

In wet weather, the tanks would fill with sand and silt and in dry weather, the Tank Stream would dwindle to a brook. As the population grew, the quality of the water became as much of a problem as the quantity.

New governors passed increasingly severe, but unsuccessful laws in an attempt to prevent pollution. In 1800, Governor King even tried flogging offenders and demolishing their houses, but by 1828 all attempts to save the Tank Stream for drinking were abandoned. It became an open sewer and a source of water-borne disease.

So in 1858, the Tank Stream was diverted under Pitt Street and 150 metres of stone culvert was built over it from Circular Quay. The stream was eventually fully buried beneath the growing city.

Today the Tank Stream still functions as a stormwater drain. The stormwater flows from the lower CBD to the harbour, through what was once a vital water supply for the city.