Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

AUSTRALIA G58

Australia is the world's largest island. Most of its towns and big cities are on the country's coast. This is because much of the land is desert. It is known as the outback and is a dangerous place to be stranded without the correct survival knowledge or supplies.





In the late eighteenth century European settlers began to arrive in great numbers. The country had previously been solely inhabited for almost forty thousand years by Aborigines.

Above: Uluru, one of the sacred sites of the aboriginal people.



The Aboriginal spiritual belief has been loosely translated into English as being called Dreamtime. It explains the creation of people, animals and landscape.

The spirits of Aborigine ancestors took on human forms then moved through the land. They created the animals and plants, decreed laws, customs, rules of marriage, the rituals of initiation and the ceremonies of death. When finished they became part of the land by changing into trees, stars and rocks. These places are sacred to the Aborigine and they do not see the land as belonging to anyone. Instead, everyone respects the land they live on and so respect their ancestors too.

Aborigines have lived for thousands of years on dry and arid land. This means that water and food are scarce. They are experts at finding the resources to survive. By looking after the land, it has helped them flourish.



European settlers explored Australia in the nineteenth century but were unable to endure long journeys in the wilderness. It was only with the help of Aborigines that expeditions to cross the vast country were able to succeed.

Reading Borough Council
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Woomera



Woomera is the name given to this object by an Aborigine tribe that live near Sydney. Aboriginal groups are not all the same, they have their own cultures and language. The woomera is used by other tribes but may have a different name.

The woomera is used to throw spears. A spear is attached to the pointy end of the woomera and then the user swings their arm forward. It effectively makes the thrower's arm longer and gives greater leverage. This propels the spear with great pace and power. A light spear can be thrown up to 180m (600ft.), about the length of two football pitches.



On the tip of the woomera there is a hook. This is where the bottom of the spear is attached. You can see in the pictures how the spear is held before being thrown. On the handle is spinifex gum. This acts as a counterbalance, providing stability.

The spears are light and flexible so they move through the air faster. There are rows of sharpened pieces of stone making up the spearhead. These rip through the animal or enemies body. With so many sharpened pieces it maximises the amount of damage.



Look at the smaller, thinner woomera. Why do you think it has a hole? It would have been used to start a fire! The Aborigine would put a wooden stick in the hole. Rubbing both hands together with the sitck in the middle would create small embers. This could then be placed in the kindling and would start a fire.

The bigger, wider woomeras is also used as a shield. The hook can cut open dead animals for meat. It is a multi-purpose tool - an Aboriginal equivalent of the Swiss army knife!

The markings on the woomera are Aborigine decoration and would have been very important to the owner. The designs are very complicated. At first they might just appear to be lines, but look at how they continually swerve in patterns. They have been engraved with a possum-tooth.



In 1947 a town was created in the Australian outback. The outback is a barren area with little life. Look at the pictures. It is like a desert! The town was hundreds of miles from any of the major cities. Its isolation was very important because the military used it as a top secret test range by the military. The town was named Woomera after the Aboriginal spear thrower. This was appropriate as both the town, Woomera, and the Aboriginal woomera were used to propel missiles great distances.

During the Second World War missile technology advanced rapidly. Britain had suffered attacks from across the English Channel. Firing a weapon this far had been unheard of when the war started. After the Second World War there was a fear of attack from the Soviet Union. This period became known as the Cold War and a race developed between many countries to make missiles that travelled further and carried greater amounts of explosives. The British government wanted to investigate a way of improving their own missiles. Britain was too small and densely populated for any successful and accurate missile practice. The Australian government agreed to provide an area that could be used. A space the size of England was found and this became the site for Woomera.

