And you’ll all be relived to know it is not my own. It’s my father’s. But as his name is also Joseph Davis, it’s probably not going to matter much anyway.

His belief is that the word ‘Pommy’ has nothing to do with Pomegranates and is actually of maritime origin. My father is a retired merchant seaman and wharf labourer of primarily English landlubbing stock, but his maternal grandfather was a Swedish seaman.

On my mother’s side I am descended from Peter Hibbs, a seaman on the ‘Sirius’ and reputedly the only first fleeter who’d sailed with Cook on the Endeavour.

Hibbs does not appear in the records of any of Cook’s voyages, so unless he was the unnamed cabin boy on the Endeavour (and this is not impossible) both this and his claim to be the second crew member (after Banks) to set foot on Australian soil at Botany Bay are probably fabrications.

More certainly, Hibbs was Master of the ‘Norfolk’ during Bass and Flinders famous circumnavigation of Tasmania. Bass and Flinders named Point Hibbs on Tasmania’s West Coast in his honour. So seafaring is in my parent’s blood.

None of this background can do much to support my father’s etymological theories but they do indicate that my family has had some experience of the sea and the language of sailors.

THE THEORY

According to my father, Portsmouth (England) was regularly referred to by sailors as ‘Pompey’ both this and last century. As the English settlers in Australia had often arrived directly from Portsmouth my father’s theory is that they were referred to as ‘Pompeys’. This, he feels, was eventually corrupted to ‘Pommies’ and gained a wider parlance in the Australian colonies once these English settlers disembarked and, having heard themselves referred to as such by the sailors, took the word into the wider community.

I make no claims as to the accuracy of my father’s theory but am virtually certain that it is a derivation that has not been canvassed previously.

The first recorded use of the word ‘Pommy’ by the Australian National Dictionary is in the Sydney Bulletin for November 14, 1912.

Joseph Davis Snr and Jnr.

LAST MEETING

A Change of venue and meeting time resulted in a very enjoyable July meeting. Thirty two members gathered at the Museum to her Penny Ferguson speak about author and illustrator May Gibbs.

Penny kept her audience enthralled as she spoke about May’s life and work. Born in
England, May came from a family not always constrained by the conventions of the 19th century. May's father wanted to regain his rural past so the family emigrated to South Australia. They later lived in Western Australia before May returned to England to attend art school.

Her love and appreciation of Australian flora and fauna developed during her early years in Australia. Although she earned her living for many years working as an illustrator for newspapers, May was best known for her children's stories. Generations of children thrilled to the adventures of Bib and Bub as well as to the antics of the Banksia men.

So beloved are May's works that they are regarded as essential parts of the national heritage. When May dies, developers planned to demolish her house at Neutral Bay. It was at Nutcote that May created the books, cartoons and other works that charmed so many.

Dismayed that such a significant historical site should be destroyed, a 'Save Nutcote' group was formed. Among those who campaigned for Nutcote was Penny Ferguson. The efforts of the group led to the purchase of the house by North Sydney Council. The house is now open to the public and provides a focus for the promotion of children's literature.

Penny's enthusiasm for May Gibbs and for Nutcote was infectious. Everyone present at the meeting remembered reading the adventures of the Gum Nut children and other bush dwellers of May's invention. Several members expressed a desire to visit Nutcote and an excursion will be considered later in the year.

John Shipp

HISTORY OF COALCLIFF - DARKE'S FOREST

The speaker at our last meeting Penny Ferguson is keen to collect anecdotes and photographs on many aspects of this area's history - the Coalcliff boatsheds, two tennis courts, Allen's Dairy, Coalcliff House, camping areas, miner's cottages etc. If you can assist phone Penny on 942423.

RICE PADDIES IN PRIMBEE REMEMBERED

David Milnes, editor of the Illawarra Family History Journal, rang to point out that the rice paddies at Primbee mentioned in the last Bulletin were undertaken by Eugene Dominic Nicholle rather than Chinese market gardeners. Recollections of the rice growing experiment are detailed in a book entitled Reflections of Primbee published in 1987. David recalls seeing the remnants of the jetty Nicholle had constructed in the vicinity of Korungulla swamp as a boy.

Michael Organ was able to provide some references from his files of mentions of Nicholle's rice-growing experiments in the Illawarra Mercury - some of which we will publish at a later date.