Surveyor and explorer John Oxley is the first European known to have passed through and examined some features of what is now the Centenary Suburbs area. Three geographic features of the area were first noted and/or named by John Oxley.

In 1823 John Oxley, then Surveyor-General for New South Wales, explored Moreton Bay and the Brisbane River. He had been directed by Governor Brisbane to find a suitable place for a penal settlement. Leaving the Government cutter ‘Mermaid’ in Moreton Bay, he entered the Brisbane River in a whaleboat in early December 1823, having been told of its existence by shipwrecked cedar getters Thomas Pamphlett and John Finnegan. Finnegan accompanied John Oxley, Lieutenant Stirling and some crew on the upriver journey.

Oxley explored the river as far as Goodna. While passing through the Centenary Suburbs area, he noted the reef of rocks that was later known as the Seventeen-mile Rocks. He noted in his Field Book ‘crossing a reef of rocks, having two fathoms on them, then deepened to five fathoms, the tide rushing over them like a bore’. These were later described by Oxley in his report on the journey as ‘for the extent of about 30 yards, a ridge of detached rocks extending across the river, having no more than 12 feet on them at high water’. See [http://cshsoc.files.wordpress.com/2012/08/the-seventeen-mile-rocks.pdf](http://cshsoc.files.wordpress.com/2012/08/the-seventeen-mile-rocks.pdf)

Oxley named the relatively straight stretch of the river from there to the next bend Mermaid Reach in honour of his sailing vessel. Alan Cunningham the following year described this Reach as ‘another exceedingly fine length of river’.

As he continued upriver, John Oxley also noted a rise that he named ‘Green Hills’ (now known as Mt Ommaney). Returning from Goodna – where he had noted and named Termination Hill - on Dec. 3rd, he landed near the base of Mt Ommaney. Oxley and his party camped there overnight. The next morning, Oxley climbed Mt Ommaney, examined the surrounding countryside and took compass bearings. He later commented in his report ‘the view from it more extensive than I anticipated’.

In September the following year, John Oxley, accompanied by the Government botanist Alan Cunningham and others, made another exploratory trip up the Brisbane River, advancing further than the previous year. On the upriver journey, the party camped near the base of Mt Ommaney ‘where the water, though drinkable, was still brackish’.

The name Green Hills was later changed to Mt Ommaney: read more about the history of Mt Ommaney at the link on the Natural and Historical Features page.
Commemorating John Oxley’s role in our local history

On the 3rd December 2011, the anniversary of Oxley’s landing at Mt Ommaney, a monument was unveiled at the entrance to the Mt. Ommaney Bushland Reserve, Summit Place, Mt Ommaney, to commemorate Oxley’s activities in the area.

Four generations of Oxley’s descendants were present, including Noela Joyce his great-great-great-granddaughter, her own mother, Noela’s daughter and son and three grandsons. Comparing Oxley’s profile on the plaque with Noela’s grandson, there seems to be an uncanny resemblance.
On 26th May 2012 a seat with plaque nearby was installed in the riverside parkland at Windermere Estate, overlooking the river: this commemorates John Oxley’s passage along and naming of Mermaid Reach. The date, nominated by his family, was significant - the anniversary of Oxley’s death in 1828.

The seat and plaque are on the upriver side of Magee Park, also upriver of Seventeen Mile Creek. They can be accessed from a path that commences at Magee Park at the bottom of Counihan Road.

Oxley’s descendants, those of some of the early settlers’ families, MP Tarnya Smith, Councillor Matthew Bourke and members of the Centenary Suburbs Historical Society and of neighbouring local history societies braved the cold and blustery morning by the river, to watch the unveiling of the seat and plaque.

A highlight of the event was a surprise visit by the “ghost” of John Oxley (Mal Lancaster of the Historical Society). ‘John Oxley’ gave a speech to the assembled guests and assisted his descendant with the unveiling of the plaque.

Further information about John Oxley in the Brisbane area

There are several printed works that provide further information about John Oxley’s explorations of Moreton Bay and the Brisbane River. The following work reproduces extracts from the journals and reports of John Oxley and others who explored the area. It also identifies places mentioned in the journals and reports:

J. G. Steele (1983) *Explorers of the Moreton Bay District 1770-1830.* It is available in Brisbane City Council libraries.

Various websites provide additional information about John Oxley and in some cases, other early explorers of the Brisbane River. For example –

Chapter 1.1 describes the role of several people including John Oxley in the discovery and mapping of the Brisbane River.

http://www.chapelhill.homeip.net/FamilyHistory/Other/QueenslandHistory/TheDiscoverersoftheBrisbaneRiverthewritingsofThomasWelsby.htm

(the above link is to an online presentation of Thomas Welsby’s work The Discoverers of the Brisbane River)


(the above links to the History section of the Save Our Riverfront Bushland website. The activities of several early explorers in the western suburban reaches of the Brisbane River are described and a bibliography is provided)

www.seqhistory.com

(this website aims to produce online, “a collection of journals, field books, and historical documents written by the explorers and pioneers of South East Queensland. The need for such a site derives from their inaccessibility online.”)

www.ourindooroopilly.com

The history section of this website contains some information about both John Oxley’s and Alan Cunningham’s explorations of the Brisbane River.