

ARCHAEOLOGY AT PORT ARTHUR

Port Arthur fieldwork illuminates Australia's convict past

In July 2012 the Port Arthur Historic Site Management Authority (PAHSMA) hosted and co-delivered a University of Sydney Advanced Archaeology workshop in archaeological artefact analysis. Seven students led by Dr Martin Gibbs spent two weeks at Port Arthur sorting, cataloguing and quantifying the artefact recoveries from the 1977 excavations at the First Prisoner Barracks site.

PAHSMA's Jeanne Harris provided professional advice and support for the duration of the period. The course participants undertook the first structured assessment of this material since its initial recovery some 35 years ago. At least two Honours level projects have been developed from the course; these will take place in the 2013 academic year.

This report on the project is courtesy of the University of Sydney.



Rising archaeology star Maureen Byrne tragically died in 1977 aged 24 after unearthing the rare artefacts in Port Arthur.

examined. Byrne's untimely death at the age of twenty-four from a severe asthma attack left a planned second excavation of the site unfulfilled; her collection unscrutinised and stowed away for safe-keeping at the site.

But following a new collaboration forged between the Port Arthur Historic Site Management Authority (PAHSMA) and the University of Sydney's Department of Archaeology, Maureen Byrne's legacy is now one step closer to completion.

Eight current University of Sydney archaeology students recently visited the Port Arthur Historic site as part of their advanced archaeology practicum, undertaking fieldwork and analysis of Byrne's impeccably kept collection.

Students also conducted ground penetrating radar surveys to discern the location of the original prisoner's barracks; also known as the 'Lunatics and Paupers' barracks, that housed these namesake inmates until the prison's closure in the 1880s.



A miniature collectable A toy brass cannon found in Byrne's collection suggests the Port Arthur barracks was the unlikely home of military families.

After nearly four decades on the shelf, the collection of pioneering University of Sydney archaeology student Maureen Byrne has finally been analysed, opening an extraordinary window into the daily lives of Australia's most hardened convicts.

Though 35 years have passed since Byrne unearthed the rare artefacts from Australia's first prisoners' barracks at Port Arthur, her findings had never been

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Through this meticulous process of re-bagging and cataloguing Byrne's collection, noting the function and context of each item, a more nuanced picture of the Port Arthur convict story emerged.

With surprisingly incongruous items like lace-making bobbins and dollies tea sets appearing in the collection, researchers were able to gain unprecedented insight into the lives of Australia's convict forbearers at the barracks.

Such items indicate the infamous Port Arthur site may have been the unlikely home of some of the region's first military families, according to Senior Archaeology Lecturer and leader of the University of Sydney practicum, Dr Martin Gibb.

"The interesting thing which has arisen from us going through Maureen's 1977 collection is that despite the site she excavated being the Prisoners' Barracks, we identified lots of women's and children's items," he explained.

"My current feeling is that there was a period of time when the barracks were occupied by military families, as there are also military buttons and even a toy brass cannon in those particular deposits. This makes for a very different take on Port Arthur as the 'convict prison' when you have women and kids living in the heart of the settlement," Gibbs said.

"It really highlighted the value of us re-examining these old collections, proving that you can make significant discoveries on what is often thought of as a very well researched site."



Workshop participants are guided by PAHSMA's Jeanne Harris



A hand-painted child's cup, dating from the late 19th century to early 20th century

David Roe, Archaeology Manager of PAHSMA, agreed that the long overdue investigation into Byrne's collection marks a significant turning point in contemporary understandings of the historically important convict site.

"Byrne's work was the first structured archaeological excavation undertaken at Port Arthur and is important both for the potential of the material recovered to tell us more about the early phases of the settlement and because Byrne's work marked a number of methodological advances in historical archaeology in Australia generally," he said.

The World Heritage-listed Port Arthur historic site remains a key fixture in Australia's colonial history, established as a secondary place of punishment for convicts who had reoffended upon their arrival in Australia from the 1830s. The infamously brutal prison earned a reputation for terror 'worse than death' among inmates, who were subject to both hard labour and cruel punishment.

Timber felling, flogging and solitary confinement were among the unremitting torments these early convicts faced; facts acknowledged by Lieutenant-Governor Arthur in his assessment of the "absolute weariness of life" at the barracks. Against this backdrop of suffering, little escaped into the historical record to indicate how individual convicts dealt with the daily drudgery of their horrific surroundings.

Yet Roe noted the recent fieldwork at Port Arthur speaks directly of the convict experience, allowing

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insights into Australia's incarceration history that are "reasonably uncommon".

"While there may be a limited amount of material culture that survives from the convicts themselves what does survive can inform us about how individuals and groups responded to the challenges of the strictly controlled convict lifestyle and the changes to those responses over time," Roe said.

"As the original records and illustrations of the settlement are lacking in critical detail and are often ambiguous the evidence of archaeology is the only method by which we can access details of the facility in its 'as-built' configurations."

For the University of Sydney's Ian Jack, the fresh inquiry at Port Arthur marked the end of decades of caretaking duties over Byrne's collection. The former Dean of the Faculty of Arts, who was also engaged to Maureen Byrne at the time of her death, was thrilled at the renewed interest in her work at the site.

"I felt I was trustee for these things for many years and I rather despaired of anything ever happening at Port Arthur that would allow the collection to be used in the way that Maureen would have wanted," Associate Professor Jack said.

"There's no point in archaeology unless you analyse what you find and publish it; otherwise it's just a wasted exercise. It's exciting that after such a long period it has emerged as something really worthwhile, and has been a very useful collaboration between a major world site and the University, which is still a leader in Historical Archaeology."

He believed the belated analysis of Byrne's collection also helps combat some of the touristic misnomers surrounding popular perceptions of Port Arthur.

"Nobody doubts the transcendent importance of Port Arthur but there has been a sort of convictism, which is rather more spectacular and sensational than true," Jack said.

"This is a very good antidote, showing how these people lived and how they were housed, in conjunction with the historic materials."

Jack pointed to the existence of slate fragments in Byrne's collection as evidence of the illiterate prisoners started a school for themselves within the



Examples of buttons recovered from several structures with the First Prisoners' Barracks complex, including military uniform and convict-made buttons

rigid confines of their incarceration. Other clues into the complexities of these prisoner's lives were gleaned from remnants of clay pipes and animal bones, illuminating the convicts' diets and butchering techniques.

"Archaeology is very good at giving information about people who are not individually very well documented," said Jack.

"One occasionally has letters and things but we don't know many of the convicts as people; just as statistics and what their crimes were. This comes a little bit closer to seeing them as people and humanising them."

Caitlin Dircks, one of the newest generations of University of Sydney archaeology students to visit the Port Arthur site, said the practicum provided invaluable experience into archaeological analysis methods.

"It wasn't like a practical lesson at Uni [sic] when we deal with teaching materials," Dircks explained.

"The artefact cataloguing and analysis was real - we were contributing in a genuine way. It was really inspiring to be learning about issues of conservation, research and heritage in a real environment on a current and active site."

The poignancy of completing the work of her University of Sydney predecessor was not lost on Dircks, who plans to embark on an archaeological career of her own by starting an Honours degree on the convict era of Port Arthur.

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“Opening boxes of beautiful or unidentified artefacts from over 30 years ago was so exciting,” she said.

“But it was also quite sad to see this collection; to read Maureen's notes and see the artefacts that would have been just as exciting for her, who was a similar age to us when she excavated the site in 1977. These would have been her interests and research if she hadn't passed away. It was nice to know we could follow on from what she started so long ago.”

Dr Martin Gibbs was hopeful that the Department's recent examinations at Port Arthur could lead to further projects as researchers continue to piece together knowledge of this archaeologically rich site.

“PAHSMA and The University of Sydney consider this fieldwork as the start of a series of collaborations of this type, working out new research trajectories for the World Heritage properties under their control,” he said.



Bone needle working tools

Report courtesy of the University of Sydney