

# A Retrospective Introduction

It is more than 40 years since I began work at Port Essington and 38 years since the doctoral thesis that forms the basis of this monograph was completed. I was thus reticent when Susan Lawrence approached me with the proposal that ASHA publish the thesis. My hesitancy was multi-faceted. The work was 40 years out of date; at least one long history of Port Essington (Spillett 1972) had appeared that suggested that my documentary search, exhaustive as it might have been, was not complete. I was also aware that other important documents had surfaced in the meantime, foremost among them a notebook kept by the commandant, John McArthur and his son John Junior at the settlement (McArthur 1843-49). As well, immediately I completed my thesis I took up a lectureship in prehistoric archaeology that took me away from historical archaeology; I can no longer claim particular expertise in a subject that has in the last decade claimed a firm place in Australian academic studies. Perhaps overriding these considerations was the notion that notwithstanding the fact that the thesis gained me a doctorate, a 'licence to practise', I have continued to carry a sense that the thesis did not work – that it failed to demonstrate the success or utility of attempting to integrate archaeological and documentary evidence in a situation like Port Essington where the documents were so extensive. Of course the thesis had its own justifications – it was a first attempt in the Australian field, it was a test case, it was exploring methodological issues in archaeology – but the ultimate question was (and perhaps still is) whether historical archaeology is sufficiently robust intellectually to survive as an academic discipline, rather than a tool to classify monuments or implement 'heritage' management. This introduction revisits some of these issues.

My acquiescence to Susan's request had less to do with overcoming these qualms and much more to do with guilt. Like others, when teaching graduate students I have emphasised the need to publish the data; as Roger Green says, the only 20-year-old papers of his that get cited these days are the data papers. Here are the data.

There had to be some ground rules. The first was recognising that the primary purpose was publishing what, for good or ill, is now an historical document. This meant that nothing substantive in the thesis would alter and that nothing, including the references, would be brought up to date. At the same time the thesis had been produced under the tyranny of the typewriter; then, unless gross errors demanded the retyping of a complete page, a blind eye was turned to the odd typo and the prolix excesses of student prose. Here, while trying to avoid improving on history, I have chosen to write out obscurities, modify convolutions of style and otherwise do a general sub-edit. A large part of this modification has been converting the footnote referencing system universally favoured by historians in the 1960s to the Harvard system. While this saved space, it meant that many publication details not required in the footnote system had to be pursued. While most were located, some gaps remain in the bibliography. As well, in trying to minimise in text disruptions by long correspondence references, I have employed a system of abbreviations that are listed before the text. Very occasionally there are in text references to published sources that were published after the thesis and that were originally referred to as theses or manuscripts. Mostly both references are now given. Most of the original illustrations have been retained and a few new ones added. Finally, the original title *Archaeology, and the History of Port Essington* was succinct but grammatically challenged. Since the text has been altered here, so has the title been replaced.

In 1966 I moved to Canberra and the Australian National University intent on working prehistoric sites in Papua New Guinea for my doctorate. A plan to examine the northern edge of the Torres Strait Pleistocene land bridge for evidence of its use as an initial human entry point into Australia, an idea that held currency then and later (e.g. Flood 1983:79-80), fell through. Casting about for an alternative, John Mulvaney raised the possibility of Port Essington, pointing out that my formal training in classical archaeology at the University of Sydney suited me to the task, and that Campbell Macknight was about to begin a doctorate on the Macassans, so that the two subjects were related in time and space. A few weeks later, after working the libraries for the most readily available sources, John and I visited the site, carried out preliminary testing and the die was cast.

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At my *viva* (*viva voce* – oral examination, now frequently thesis defence where it still exists) one examiner (a historian) thought such lengthy archaeological analysis interrupted the narrative. Another (a prehistorian) thought more could have been done with the Aboriginal material. Taken together, these comments reflected my own disquiet about the integration of the two data sources. Academic history, especially in the 1960s, had prescribed themes and prescribed ways of dealing with them. I recall attending a seminar by Sir Keith Hancock at the ANU where he discussed his current history project. When published, the fly leaf of *Discovering Monaro* (Hancock 1972) referred to it as a 'local history'. In fact it is an elegant, opinioned and entertaining social history of the Monaro that bounces from Plato to the CSIRO, taking its sources from a swell of natural and unnatural sciences (including archaeology). At the seminar, in question time, another eminent historian berated Hancock for wasting his time and skills on a 'municipal history'.

What sort of history does historical archaeology produce? Should it produce history that is recognisable in conventional terms at all? My view, initially expressed in this thesis, has not changed very much. It is not sufficient merely to do historical archaeology behind the cover of heritage management. After all, what is the significance of another drain or another footing or another descriptive catalogue of finds? The clear answer to this is in the context that the footing is found and this in turn means both its archaeological context and its historical context. This seems to me to offer a way forward. Over the years my students got sick of hearing me say 'The question is what is the question?' But by considering what we are trying to find out we can more clearly determine the ways in which we might contextualise the data to produce results that isolate us from thinking of archaeological and historical data as separate entities that merely confirm or deny each other. Archaeological data of any sort do not readily lend themselves to the seamless narrative. Archaeological and historical evidence operate within different frames and scales of reference.

I was, and remain, dissatisfied at my attempts to integrate the two data sets in this thesis which to me lacked sufficient mid-range theory to link data to behaviour. Like Murray and Mayne (2001:92) at 'Little Lon' I attempted to match site-units at Port Essington with the historical records for those buildings, but also like Mayne and Murray, making those interconnections in order to transform the data into a new understanding of past behaviour was never easy. Some attempts, as with the analysis of the married quarters and their round chimneys, came closer to success than others. But this might have been because the archaeology had more to reveal.

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Larger scale and more abstract integrations sometimes required greater imagination that was founded on less persuasive data.

In part some of the limits to overcoming this problem had to do with the practicalities of finishing a thesis within time constraints and not having the space to see the wood for the trees. But even being laid aside for a time brought little reconciliation between my thesis and me. Instead I excised the archaeology and published the history in a history journal (Allen 1972) and then retackled the archaeology in a more synthetic fashion (Allen 1973). This paper focussed on a more explicit theme, the archaeology of British imperialism, and came closer to demonstrating the utility of historical archaeology at Port Essington than anything else I wrote.

I note in passing that such a thematic approach has taken on a life of its own in more recent historical archaeology. By aiming enquiries at historical themes that archaeological data reflect, even indirectly (slavery, urban landscapes, communication, nineteenth century imperialism), historical archaeology is carving out its patch and staking claims to a sociological or humanistic past that it certainly is uniquely placed to investigate, at least on occasion, and utilising not only documentary data but also the data from whatever other disciplines are relevant to any particular project. At least superficially such themes appear to offer an entrée to the mid-range theory that this thesis lacked.

So if I was re-writing it now, would I organise the thesis so that it addressed such themes more directly? An archaeology of contact chapter might better satisfy my prehistorian examiner; the archaeology of isolation might better exemplify the exigencies of frontier life controlled by a disinterested bureaucracy on the other side of the world; the archaeology of failure could address the economics of the settlement and the inroads of termites and malaria. The whole could be presented as the archaeology of tropical colonisation. Why does this prospect leave me uneasy? I think perhaps because themes frequently remain a well disguised substitute for theory rather than a focus for investigating and developing better thought-out and expressed theoretical positions. A confident discipline doesn't need bling.

I have much less to say on the methodology produced here. As I recount, I had few examples to follow, although in North America the papers of the newly formed Conference on Historic Site Archaeology were beginning to be published. These contained many seminal papers that influenced and clarified my own views. Re-reading the data chapters, they now strike me as clumsy and I wonder if I was up with the subject how I might approach it today. I watch with envy as the Time Team expert glances at the Willow Pattern sherd and says '1828 to 1830'. Yeah, right.

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Within a few weeks of submitting this thesis I had begun teaching and researching prehistoric archaeology at the University of Papua New Guinea. But for another 17 years I flirted with historical archaeology. In 1971 Roger Green coaxed me into excavating the sixteenth century Mendaña site in the eastern Solomon Islands (Green and Allen 1972; Allen 1976) and I published a smattering of papers on Port Essington (Allen 1970, 1972, 1973, 1980) that added to the two published during my doctoral research (Allen 1967a, 1967b). Back in Canberra I was the chair of the Project Coordinating Committee on Historical Archaeology for the Australian Heritage Commission between 1975 and 1978 and a member of Tasmanian Research Advisory Committee set up to advise the Tasmanian National Parks and Wildlife Service on the management of Tasmanian historic sites in 1976 and 1977. In 1975 I reported on a conference on historical archaeology and the National Estate (Allen 1975) and with

Tim Murray (Murray and Allen 1986) I made my last foray into historical archaeology prior to this comeback. Additionally, Tim likes to portray his appointment at La Trobe as my soft spot for historical archaeology (Murray 2000:145) but he was really brought in to add the theoretical warp to the very practical weave of a research-active department. His historical archaeology was a bonus, but one that suited the catholic reach of La Trobe archaeology's curriculum.

Meanwhile, my 'mainstream' career, first in Papua New Guinea and subsequently in Australia gradually took me back from near contact prehistoric sites to the Pleistocene. As I conclude this monograph I am about to return to an article on a Pleistocene site in Victoria. I feel like Janus.

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In the late 1960s Port Essington was a flora and fauna reserve, superintended by Dave Lindner, an Animal Industries Branch ranger living at Black Point with his wife and baby boy. At that time access to the settlement was extremely difficult. Today, with a permit, Black Point can be reached by road, air or sea with little fuss.

The area is now known as Gurig Ganuk Barlu National Park. It lies within the clan estates of the Iwaidja speaking peoples of western Arnhem Land. Custodianship is shared between five Aboriginal clan groups, the Agalda, Ngaindjagar, Madjunbalmi, Minaga and Muran. The park is managed jointly by the traditional land owners and the Parks and Wildlife Service and is administered by the Cobourg Peninsula Sanctuary and Marine Park Board. There is a caravan park and holiday cottages. Across the harbour is an exclusive resort. A large Ranger station is maintained, still at Black Point. Where Lindner's aluminium office and caravan once stood there is now a public telephone.

There is also a cultural centre there that has Aboriginal, Macassan and historical displays including a number of artefacts originally excavated at the Victoria settlement during this project. In 1995 my wife Jill and I visited the Northern Territory Museum and Art Gallery to inspect the tiny display case that encapsulated my three years of doctoral research. I had seen it a year or two earlier while at a conference in Darwin, but neither it nor any other Northern Territory history was now on display, except for an interactive exhibit about Cyclone Tracy that was more suited to Luna Park. A new directorial broom had swept clean. We flew to Port Essington and I was delighted to be re-united with parts of the collection in the cultural centre. But documentation was thin and nowadays I get occasional requests about the gunflints or the bottle seals and their present whereabouts that I cannot answer. The collection has become a classic C-transform in Schiffer's (1972) terms.

Whatever this dispersal of the collection says about the value of historical archaeology in Australia, it is one of the reasons that prompted me to publish this work. Even so, I might still not have been sufficiently motivated had not John Mulvaney raised the issue of publication with me every time we have met since 1969. It is for this reason that it gives me pleasure to dedicate this monograph to him. I need also to thank various additional people who helped this time around: Martin Gibbs, Susan Lawrence, Wei Ming, Mary Casey, Natalie Cleary, Jill Allen, Trish Scanlan, Peter Corris, Christophe Sand and finally Tim Murray for his generous introduction. I have benefited from the efficient assistance of staff at the National Library of Australia and the Mitchell Library in Sydney and here publish historical drawings from the archives of both establishments with their permission. In particular, having access to the resources of the Department of Archaeology at La Trobe University made this all possible, and the staff of Sydney University Press brought it to fruition.

I am particularly grateful to the Australasian Society for Historical Archaeology for undertaking this publication and giving me an opportunity to revisit my past at such a distance. It is an indulgence bestowed on few of us.

JIM ALLEN  
Mossy Point June 2007

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**Abbreviations used in text**

ADB	Australian Dictionary of Biography
Adm.	Public Records Office, London: Admiralty
AONSW	Archives Office of New South Wales
CO	Public Records Office, London: Colonial Office – NSW
HDL	Hydrographic Department, London
HRA	Historical Records of Australia
ML	Mitchell Library, Sydney
NLA	National Library of Australia, Canberra
NMMA	National Maritime Museum Archives, Greenwich
PLV	Public Library of Victoria
PPGB	Parliamentary Papers of Great Britain
PPNSW	Parliamentary Papers of New South Wales
RBGK	Royal Botanic Gardens Archives, Kew
RGSA	Royal Geographical Society Archives, London
RMAP	Royal Marines Archives, Portsmouth

# Chapter 1

## Introduction: The Problem Defined

Prior to 1966 no professional enquiry had been made into the potential of archaeology as a technique for historical research in Australia. In that year the possibilities of excavating the remains of the British settlement of Victoria, in Port Essington in tropical northern Australia (Figures 1 and 2) were investigated by me and my supervisor, D.J. Mulvaney. This thesis presents the results of the project which grew from those investigations.

The work was begun in total ignorance of the amount of historical archaeology which had been carried on in the United States of America and also in Canada and with only the vaguest ideas about industrial archaeology in Britain. The latter discipline proved to have less relevance to the Australian situation than the former, and many aspects of the organisation and analysis of the present work reflect the influence of American historical archaeologists. The cultural affinities of the materials recovered were British, however, and research into these was necessarily directed towards Britain. Terminologies in use have been maintained wherever possible and reflect both American and British influences.

### RESEARCH QUESTIONS

A number of themes presented themselves as potential lines of enquiry. The first and major objective was to assess the degree to which archaeology, both in fieldwork and laboratory analysis, might be of value in providing new insights and evidence for Australian colonial history. In the immediate situation this meant demonstrating that archaeology might be able to say something beyond the available documents for the history of Port Essington. These documents were known to be available, although in what quantities was still to be

ascertained, and documentary research was assumed to be an integral part of the project from the beginning. This led to a further consideration, the degree to which two vastly different kinds of evidence might interact and be integrated into history. From the vantage point of hindsight this has emerged as the major problem confronting not only this project but historical archaeology in general.

The second aim of the thesis – to begin compiling a well-dated reference collection of mid-nineteenth century artefacts – both influenced and was influenced by the selection of the site. The settlement at Port Essington was made in 1838 and abandoned in 1849. From that time the area has remained almost totally free from contamination by later European occupation. The exception was in the 1870s when cattle ranchers occupied the area for a brief time, but as reference to the site map (Figure 3) shows, this was not in the settlement proper, nor was it of sufficient intensity to disturb the original occupation debris to any noticeable degree. Today the area is a flora and fauna reserve, superintended by a ranger living at Black Point, 24 km from the settlement. Access to the settlement by land requires a major expedition (see below) and the attendant difficulties of sea or air access limit visitors to the settlement to one or two per year.

Thus the site presented an almost unique opportunity to test the potential for the future analysis of historic sites elsewhere in Australia – the excavation of an uncontaminated site of single phase occupation whose occupation dates were known historically, and which was of sufficient duration to provide a meaningful collection of artefacts and architectural information. At the same time the duration of the settlement was not of an extended time range, and it was expected that the artefacts recovered might therefore constitute a type collection for this period of Australian history. This could then be used in the same manner as types anywhere in archaeology, for working from the known to the unknown. Following the first season's excavations an immediate example of this process was at hand. The Chinese porcelain excavated in the settlement showed similarities with that being excavated in historically undated Macassan (Malayan) trepanning campsites on the Arnhem Land coast, and a comparison of these wares is at present being conducted (Macknight 1969).

Two further areas of consideration presented themselves. The first of these was the possibility of exploring archaeologically for the first time in Australia the culture contact situation between Europeans and Aborigines, not only within the settlement itself, but also in Aboriginal sites in the general area.

The second consideration was that because of the unique possibilities of cross-checking archaeological evidence with historical documents it was thought that archaeology in the recent historical past might be well suited for examining concepts and techniques of fieldwork, analysis and interpretation current in prehistoric archaeological research.

Faced with no knowledge of any theoretical writing in the particular field of historical archaeology, the work was begun with a single basic premise: that the final objective of the fieldwork and analysis was to produce history. In the particular and practical aspect this meant the history of Port Essington constructed from all the available sources. In a more general aspect this meant contributing to the general history of nineteenth century technology and colonial expansion, again using both archaeological and historical data.

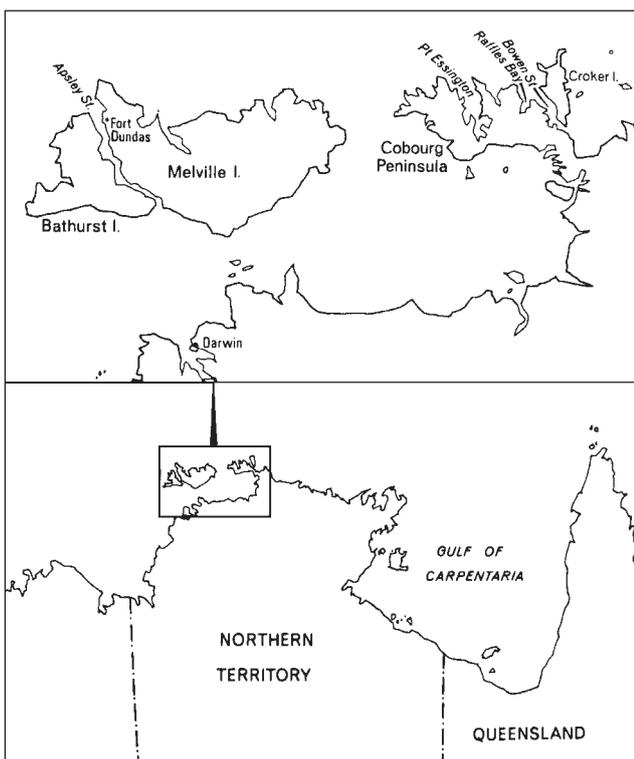


Figure 1. Location map showing Port Essington and other places mentioned in the text.

## FIELDWORK

In June 1966 I carried out a preliminary survey, including some exploratory excavation, with the help of John Mulvaney. This had followed three months initial documentary research which yielded contemporary descriptions of the settlement, a large number of contemporary sketches and paintings and the descriptions of a few later visitors to the site. The survey confirmed the wealth of deposit and architectural remains and altogether more than 40 site-units (structures or contained areas within the site) were located, the majority of which could be identified as to function from the illustrations and descriptions available.

I returned to the site for six weeks in August and September of 1966 with a small team. We spent the time mapping, recording architecture and excavating various site-units. Of the six members who comprised the excavation team five were experienced excavators and all were efficient workers. This field season was so productive that the follow-up season in 1967 was limited to three weeks extending the excavations and checking results obtained in the previous year. In addition, short visits were made to two slightly earlier sites in the vicinity, Fort Dundas on Melville Island and Raffles Bay on the Cobourg Peninsula (see Chapter 6). Trial excavations at both these sites proved disappointing and given also the paucity of architectural remains at both, in comparison with Port Essington, it was decided to concentrate efforts on the latter.

A final visit to the site took place in August–September 1968. This was conducted in conjunction with a field exercise controlled by the Northern Command of the Australian Army and the primary purpose of the visit was to carry out conservation of the site. In addition, however, it afforded the opportunity of locating several convalescent stations which had been occupied by the original garrison in various parts of Port Essington. As an example of the difficulty of land access, it took the seven vehicles in the unit six days to reach the settlement from Oenpelli Mission, a distance of less than 160 km.

## THE SITE

The Cobourg Peninsula is a small peninsula (approximately 1,500 square km in area) jutting into the Arafura Sea at the western end of Arnhem Land (Figures 1 and 2). It is a relatively flat piece of land whose outstanding topographical feature is the number of harbours and inlets which indent its coastline. The largest of these is Port Essington, which has a mouth c. 11 km wide and which extends approximately 32 km to its head. The harbour is divided naturally into inner and outer harbours by a narrow spit of land, Record Point. The shoreline consists for the most part of dunes screened by mangrove mudflats or sandy beaches. In places a low red cliff line reveals the hinterland as open sclerophyll forest with pockets of monsoonal jungle. Being well into the tropical zone the climate of the area is hot and humid. It receives c. 1,250 mm of rain each year, all of which falls in the wet season, October to April.

The site of the settlement, which was named Victoria (but universally referred to here and elsewhere as Port Essington), was situated on the western shore of the inner harbour where the white cliff of Adam Head forms a conspicuous landmark, rising about 15 m above the sea, and being possibly the highest point on the harbour shoreline (Figure 3). The settlement was placed on the plateau which extends from Adam Head to Minto Head and covered an area of some 36 hectares. Since its abandonment, the forest has regenerated strongly which made the location and mapping of site-units a

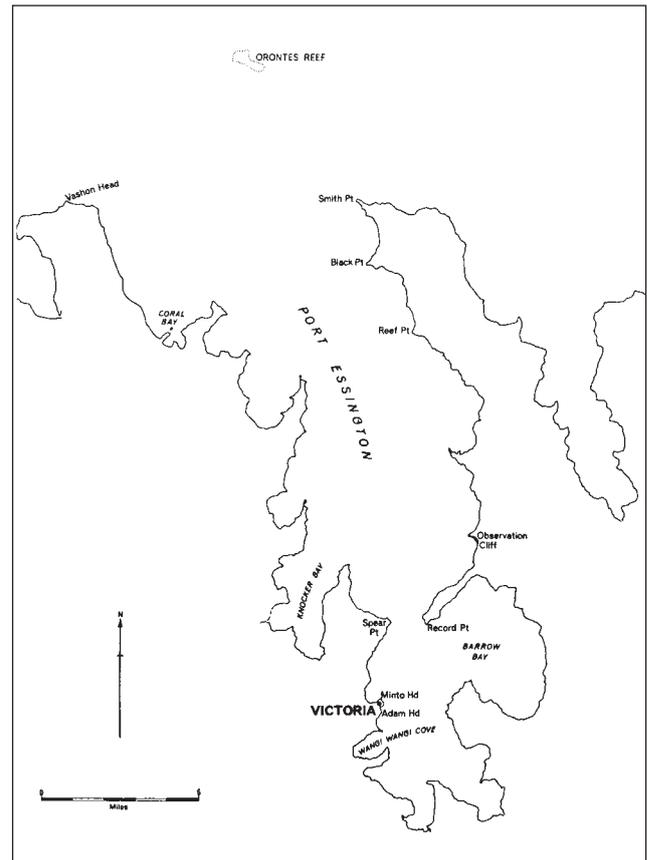


Figure 2. Map of Port Essington showing Victoria and other places mentioned in the text.

difficult process. Between the initial survey and the first season of excavation Peter Spillett (Historical Society of the Northern Territory) supplied me with a contemporary sketch map of the settlement (HRA I xxvi:373), which in general verified the identifications made during the initial survey. This map (Figure 4) showed that the town square was in fact hatchet-shaped and conformed to the similarly shaped patch of monsoonal forest located west of the jetty. There appeared to be no reason why this area should have regenerated in monsoonal growth unless it had been similar vegetation originally, but this proved not to be the case. Excavations under house floors in two separate site-units within this vegetation zone revealed a thin charcoal layer (see Figure 25) containing pieces of charcoal identified as eucalypt (Stocker 1968) that demonstrated that the area contained these trees prior to clearing by fire. The regeneration of monsoonal rather than eucalypt forest is seen as a result of the introduction of shell used as flooring in the huts which bordered the square. Section 4 of Stocker's report reads: 'the broken shell material used for the flooring of the houses may be important. Perhaps after the abandonment of the settlement the ring of broken shell floors around the square prevented fire penetration and enabled the monsoon forest to become established. Another possibility which cannot be discounted is that the broken shell material inhibited growth of eucalypt forest species without affecting those of the monsoon forest. Monsoon forest is often on soils derived from shell material but eucalypt forests rarely, if ever, occur on these soils'.

The area of the settlement proper is an undulating plateau with the highest points being Adam Head and Minto Head. To the west beyond the square the ground falls gently, terminating in a paperbark (*Melaleuca* sp.) swamp some 400 m from the settlement, immediately beyond the cemetery. The ground to the south of Adam Head falls sharply to a fine sandy beach where the 1870s cattle ranch was located.

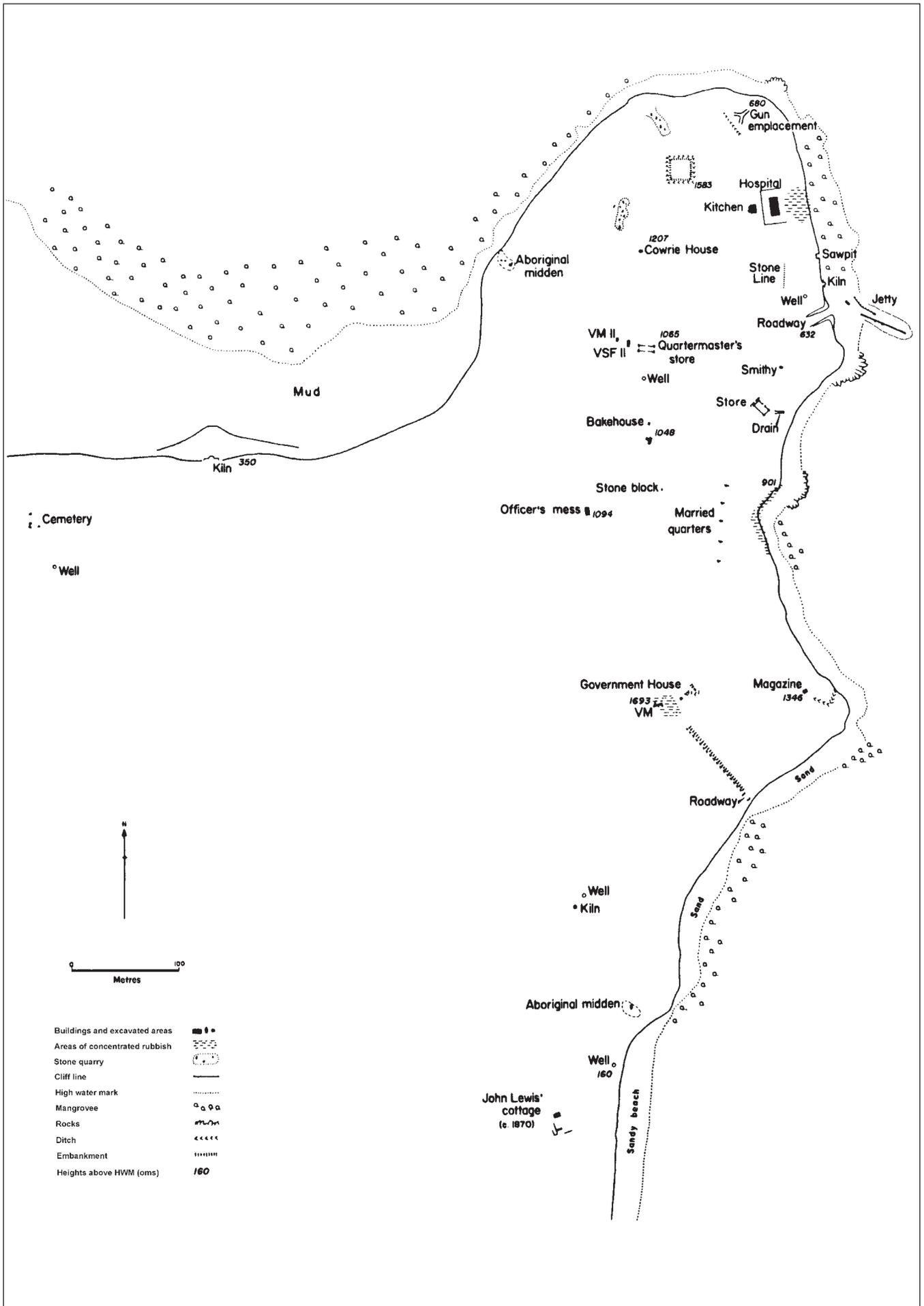


Figure 3. Map of Victoria settlement showing archaeological locations discussed in the text.

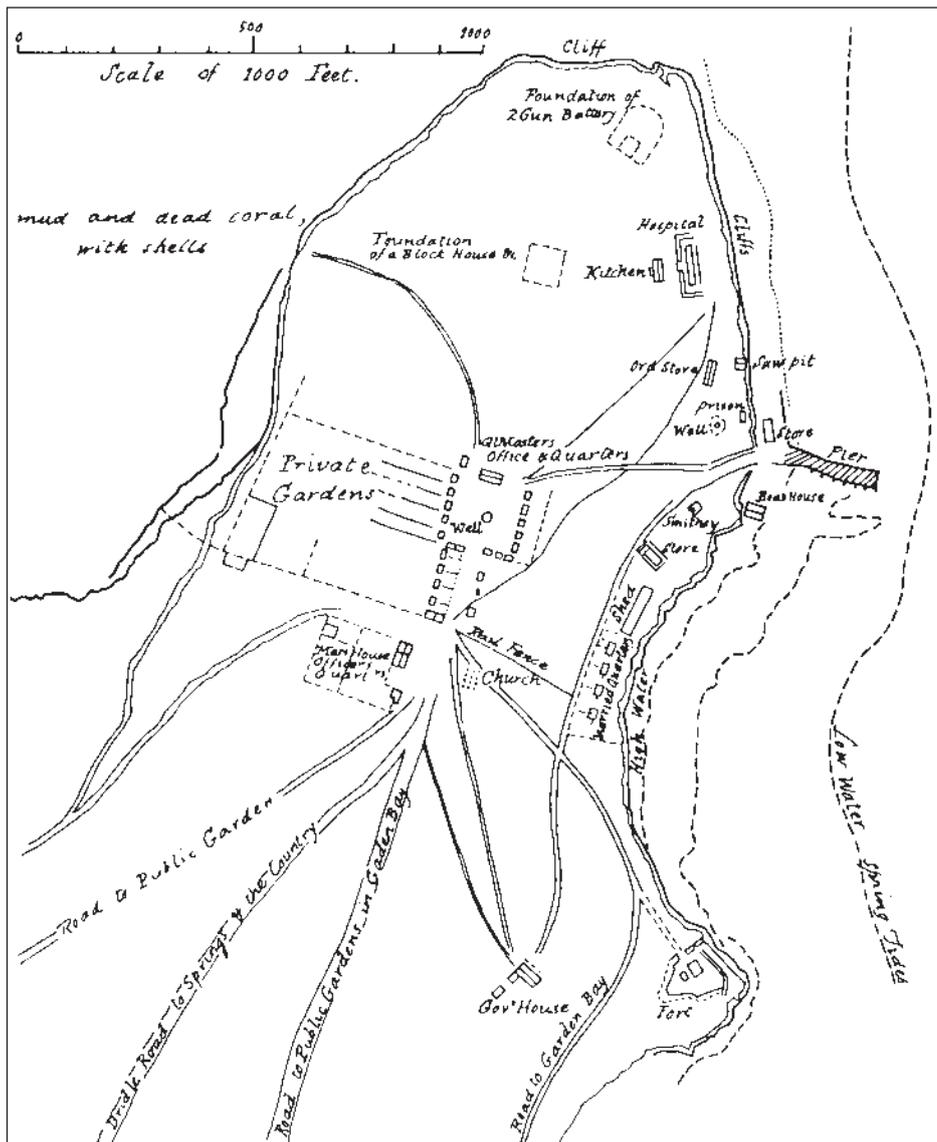


Figure 4. Contemporary map of Victoria settlement drawn in 1847 (HRA I xxvi:373), sometimes referred to as the McArthur map.

units were reduced. The standard technique was to excavate these squares with trowels until whatever stratigraphy present was recognised. In most site-units stratigraphy was of little importance, being single-phase occupation, but wherever an apparent stratigraphic division occurred, the material was excavated separately, to be integrated or kept distinct at a later date in the laboratory. Once the general nature of deposition was understood, small spades were employed to hasten the excavations. In general excavations were made at right-angles to wall lines, so as to be able to identify builders' trenches and other architectural features.

## EXCAVATIONS

Given the time and resources at my disposal it was not possible to excavate the settlement completely, nor was this desirable, since we were conscious of preserving as much of the archaeological record there as possible. It was felt that since the potential importance of the site was so great, sections of original deposit of all site units should be maintained for future work when theoretical constructs of the discipline and techniques for exploring them were better understood.

It was thus decided not to excavate any site-unit totally, but rather to sample as many site-units as possible, despite deficiencies in this approach. The excavations become, as Dollar (1967:8) pointed out, a statistical sample of a statistical sample, with the attendant problems of generalising from misleading evidence. However, given the potential different nature of these deposits from the prehistoric sites with which we were familiar, we also had to develop appropriate excavation techniques in the field, building on our own immediate experience. More pragmatically we also wished to compare site-units to explore whether concepts as diverse as social class distinctions and technological functions could be determined from the archaeological evidence alone.

A standard pattern of excavations was developed. The site-units were excavated in metre squares except where a closer horizontal check was thought necessary, in which case the

All material was passed through 5 mm mesh sieves and immediately bagged for transportation to the laboratory where it was washed and labelled. All architectural sections were drawn in the field and measurements were independently taken for later cross-checking. The site map was drawn with less than a 2% error.

## DOCUMENTARY RESOURCES

The major difficulty of my documentary research has been my inability to locate in Australia reliable literature dealing specifically with the technology and products of nineteenth century England. By corresponding with a number of museums and libraries in Britain some information was gained and this correspondence also introduced me to historical archaeology in North America from whence I was able to acquire a number of site reports and other methodological and theoretical papers. Many site reports did not contain sufficient detail for comparisons with my excavations, nor were the methodologies employed sufficiently useful for my work. However they were of great assistance in clarifying my own approach. In the latter part of 1967 I was fortunate in being able to spend four months in Britain, Canada and the United States, examining museum collections and talking to archaeologists interested in historical archaeology. This proved highly beneficial, not the least in that it enabled me to tap a number of documentary sources unavailable in Australia.