

Historical Archaeology, Heritage and the University of Sydney

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Using his own knowledge as a principal player, combined with documentary evidence, Ian Jack discusses the genesis of Historical Archaeology as an inter-departmental degree course at the University of Sydney in the early 1970s. This happened at a time when the University was critically examining its Faculty and departmental structures and the new initiative, outside the existing framework, played a significant role in establishing credentials for novel cross-disciplinary enterprises. The fieldwork and artefact study offered to the first students of Historical Archaeology gave them experiences intrinsically satisfying but also highly relevant for employment in the new areas opened up by heritage legislation, both in the Commonwealth and the state, during the later 1970s. Simultaneously, the creation of the Australian Society for Historical Archaeology at Sydney, and the national bodies, the Australian Archaeological Association and the Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Material, established new, essential forums for debate and change, within which the Sydney courses developed in their own way.

In the 1970s the University of Sydney was both a natural and an improbable place for the emergence of Historical Archaeology as a serious subject for tertiary study in Australia. The Faculties were still in 1970 very much federations of fiercely independent Departments, which however lacked legal standing: the Departments were still administered by professorial Heads and the professors still retained much of their traditional divinity. Despite the rapid recruitment of new academic staff in the 1960s after the Murray Report on universities, there were deeply rooted impediments to the introduction of inter-Departmental courses and there was careful scrutiny of all new courses offered by Departments to ensure that there was no intrusion on existing franchises. I very well remember how in a full Faculty meeting my Medieval History examination paper was challenged by the Professor of Early English Literature and Language because one question had dared to mention ‘Beowulf’, which was a literary text, not an historical source, and therefore out of bounds for historians. New courses themselves arose through an *ad hoc* process of consultation within the Department from the top down: the concept of a formal, quasi-democratic Departmental Meeting with some formal powers was not converted into reality in the Department of History until 1975 (Caine 1992:80–2). For the University as a whole, there was a lengthy period of adjustment to the report of the university’s Senate Committee on Membership and Functions of the Senate, Boards, Faculties and Departments, made public in 1973. This report and the by-laws based on it gave Departments the formal status which they had lacked and provided that Heads of Departments had in future a responsibility to consult the non-professorial academic staff though Departmental Meetings at least once each term (*University News*, 9 May 1973). But up to this time in the mid 1970s, it was natural for professors to argue that their terms of appointment obliged them to take responsibility for all substantial decisions and there was before 1973 no regular machinery for wide discussion of course structure and content.

Into this traditional framework, familiar to all the older universities in Australia in the 1960s, came an increasing number of new, young staff, many from overseas, confident enough to have ideas of their own. Among these new arrivals of the early 1960s were Judy Birmingham and Vincent Megaw in the Department of Archaeology, Dennis Jeans in the Department of Geography and myself in the Department of History. Although the role of Dennis as the leading historical geographer of New South Wales and my own experience as a

medieval historian who had been accustomed to work with archaeological evidence and with real live archaeologists in Britain were important in launching Historical Archaeology as an undergraduate course in 1974, the *fons et origo* of the innovation lay within the structure and staffing of the Department of Archaeology.

The interest in classical archaeology shown by Dale Trendall, Professor of Greek from 1939 to 1954, had created the environment in which archaeology, and the long-established Nicholson Museum, might flourish at the University of Sydney. As a result Trendall became also the first Professor of Archaeology and head of a new, small Department in 1948 and, with the assistance of Jim Stewart, a Cypriot specialist, degree courses in both classical and what was termed ‘prehistoric’ archaeology were offered, as well as ‘Art and Archaeology’ units within Greek IV and Latin IV in 1953. In 1953 a full honours degree program in Archaeology, beginning in second year, was instituted, but the offerings contracted sharply after Trendall left the University in 1954. Only the vacant Chair of Greek was advertised and filled by George Shipp who was a great linguist without Trendall’s special interest in archaeology, but Jim Stewart took charge of the Archaeology courses and kept the subject afloat until in 1960 the munificent Edwin Cuthbert Hall bequest created a chair specifically in Middle Eastern Archaeology. Stewart was appointed to this chair but died untimely in 1962. Before his death, however, Stewart made new appointments. In 1961 the young Vincent Megaw arrived as the first lecturer not to specialise in the eastern Mediterranean. In the same year, Judy Birmingham arrived to take up a senior lectureship in Near Eastern archaeology. With the death of Professor Stewart and the failure of the University to fill the Edwin Cuthbert Hall chair until 1973, Judy was the sole teacher of things middle eastern for over a decade. Alexander Cambitoglou, a specialist in Greek pottery who had arrived as Senior Lecturer in 1963, was appointed to a newly created chair in Archaeology in 1963 (*Calendar of the University of Sydney*, 1939 to 1974).

A corollary of the successful teaching of Mediterranean, Middle Eastern and European archaeology, albeit with a minimal number of staff, was that the best students would wish to join excavations and other projects overseas, and especially enterprises run by members of the Sydney staff, such as Alexander Cambitoglou’s Zagora on the island of Andros begun in 1967 and Basil Hennessy’s Telleilat Ghassul and Pella in the 1970s. There was no suitable local training available in the techniques of archaeological surveying, excavation and artefact analysis. Although a number of

excavations and surveys were regularly conducted on Aboriginal sites in Australia by members of Departments of Anthropology or major museums, the experience gained there was not entirely satisfactory for stratified sites in the ancient Mediterranean and many Archaeology students at Sydney were in any case not particularly interested in Aboriginal sites. Ron Lampert's Aboriginal midden at Ulladulla in 1967 or Vincent Megaw's rock shelter at Curracurrang in the Royal National Park in the same year did not have the long-term impact on the practice of historical archaeology at Sydney which came from the long series of seasons at Irrawang, also beginning in 1967 (*Union Recorder*, 6 and 27 April 1967).

Irrawang, Judy and the University of Sydney Archaeological Society constitute the vital beginnings of historical archaeology at the University. For 20 years after 1835, a commercial pottery at Irrawang, near Raymond Terrace where the Hunter River is joined by the Williams River, had been operated by James King. In 1967 the site was identified by Kevin Fahy, the expert on Australian colonial furniture. The student journalists of the *Union Recorder* enthusiastically reported how Judy, with her famed energy,

examined the site and realized its potential, not only for the information it could provide about the ceramic technology and the more normal aspects of life in Australia in the early nineteenth century, but also for the training of archaeological students in a country where the only other excavation is at Aboriginal sites, which, though rich in information for the prehistorian, lack the structures and pottery which are a feature of archaeology in other parts of the world (*Union Recorder*, 18 July 1968:188).

Judy Birmingham persuaded the Hunter District Water Board, which owned the site, to permit excavations. It was, however, the undergraduate Archaeological Society, and not the Department of Archaeology, which took ownership of the enterprise, with Judy as excavation director.

The University of Sydney Archaeological Society had been formed away back in 1949, with Professor Trendall and the future Professor Stewart as its patrons. It flourished up to 1953, but became moribund until 1967 when it revived under the presidency of David Frankel, the first of many office-holders in the Society who have later played a significant role in Australian archaeological, heritage and museum affairs. While John Wade, another key player in the revival, and Judy were overseas with Professor Cambitoglou later in 1967, Marilyn Truscott as the new undergraduate president was corresponding with both about progress over Irrawang.¹ Subsequently under the leadership of David Frankel again in 1968 and under Bronwyn Geering as president and Sandra Bowdler as secretary in 1969, the Society committed future generations of undergraduates to Irrawang as a long-term project.² In 1968, in its new journal grandiloquently called *Ausgrabungen Dipsios*, the editorial team, headed by David Frankel, summed up Irrawang as the 'home of the real swingers', offering 'a chance to learn excavation techniques and enjoy yourselves' (SUAS 1968, no.1). The continuing commitment to swinging at Irrawang was a percipient act of faith by an undergraduate Society and was as essential to Judy as Judy was to the Society.

The commencement of a decade of excavation seasons at Irrawang in 1967 mostly under Judy's direction, the creation of an Irrawang Committee by the Archaeological Society in 1969, the still unfinished work on the thousands of artefacts from the pottery and the thorough historical research on James King by Anne Bickford, Carol Liston and myself, constitute an essential part of the background to the establishment of the courses in Historical Archaeology at the University of Sydney and their immediate impact (Birmingham 1971; Bickford 1971; Jack and Liston 1982–83).



Fig. 1: Irrawang, 1968: members of University of Sydney Archaeological Society, with the first complete find, a ginger-beer bottle manufactured by James King. Photograph by Judy Birmingham



Fig. 2: Irrawang, February 1975: From left to right, Helen Temple, Judy Birmingham, Hamish and Ludu. Photograph by Maureen Byrne



Fig. 3: Irrawang, June 1975: the Aphrodite vase in process of excavation by Maureen Byrne. Photograph by Ian Jack

The other organisation which was in existence before the introduction of the undergraduate course in 1974 and which was part and parcel of the changing climate which made Historical Archaeology possible as a degree course, was the Australian (later the Australasian) Society for Historical Archaeology. Founded on 26 November 1970 at the University of Sydney, ASHA had as its founding president Ken Cable, the distinguished Australian historian, along with Judy as its founding secretary. The excavations by Judy both at Irrawang in December 1970 and at Wybalenna Aboriginal Settlement on Flinders Island, and Vincent Megaw's work at

Kurnell Peninsula straddling the New Year (the excavation immortalised by the discovery of what Vincent called ‘Captain Cook’s fly-button’), figured in the introductory issue of the *ASHA Newsletter* in November 1970 (published just before the formal creation of the Society). As the *Newsletter* settled to a regular stapled foolscap format, appearing twice or thrice a year from 1971 until it changed to A4 in 1976, it fulfilled a unique role in disseminating information about relevant activities all around Australia and about publications around the world. The increased awareness, especially in Sydney, of archaeology in medieval and post-medieval contexts helped to encourage background support for the introduction of Historical Archaeology as a degree course.

The notion of a course which transcended departmental boundaries was a lively one in the early 1970s and in 1973, while the University Senate Committee was examining structures at all levels of the teaching University, the Admissions and Curriculum Committee of Sydney’s Faculty of Arts established a sub-committee to examine ‘inter-departmental’ courses. When this sub-committee reported to the Faculty in September 1973, it noted that:

there is deeply rooted in the structure of the Faculty the assumption that courses of study are offered only by departments, Linguistics being the only example of a course offered by Faculty through the good offices of a number of departments. (Faculty of Arts Minute Books, G3/1/12, p. 213)

But the sub-committee went on to recognise that:

In recent years changes have been taking place in the organisation of knowledge; one aspect of these changes for example has been the exploration of peripheral areas between disciplines...

It would however be wrong if due recognition were not given to already existing co-operations between departments in this regard. The trouble with the present arrangements is that they enjoy only an *ad hoc* status and concern only a small number of students in limited areas of study, they do not affect the student body at large, creating an awareness of the inter-relationships between courses and fundamental changes which are taking place in the state of knowledge. (Faculty of Arts Minute Books, G3/1/12, p. 213)

The recommendations of the sub-committee, that Faculty set up a special committee to examine structures and to administer ‘extra-departmental’ courses ‘for which Departments will not accept responsibility’, were overtaken by events, since at the same meeting on 19 September 1973, Faculty adopted by 31 votes to 14 the recommendation of the Admissions and Curriculum Committee, moved by myself and seconded by Michael Nelson of the Department of German, that:

Faculty approve the introduction of Historical Archaeology in 1974 as a *non-departmental* course at Second Year level, on the understanding that:

- (a) this approval shall not set a precedent
- (b) Historical Archaeology shall be administered according to the guide-lines which Faculty will lay down following the report of the interdisciplinary sub-committee to the Admissions and Curriculum Committee, and
- (c) that until such general policies are formulated the course shall operate under a Committee of the Faculty to be chaired by the Dean. (Faculty of Arts Minute Books, G3/1/12, pp. 198–99)

Historical Archaeology was therefore introduced as a Second Year pass course available to all students who had passed three First Year courses, but most likely to attract students from History I and Archaeology I, with the expectation that the new course might be advantageously taken in conjunction with second year pass or honours courses in either or both of these disciplines. The course proposal above the signatures of Judy and myself had been before the Admissions and Curriculum Committee earlier in 1973 and the Committee’s recommendations of 17 July had already been debated at Faculty on 1 August. Alexander Cambitoglou, the professor and Head of the Department of Archaeology, and the other classical archaeologist, Dick Green, were overseas at that time and the impropriety of proceeding without their participation prompted Faculty by 26 votes to 13 to return the matter to the Admissions and Curriculum Committee (Faculty of Arts Minute Books, G3/1/12, pp. 169–70).

When the matter came back to Faculty on 19 September 1973, Alexander Cambitoglou had returned and made a long speech in opposition to the new course, questioning the expertise of the Committee, emphasising that all members of the Department of Archaeology had not considered the proposal, expressing concerns about the compulsory participation of students in vacation excavations in light both of work-load and finance and advising Faculty against ignoring ‘the opinion of administrative heads of departments’. He also made comments

on the number of excavations at Australian sites with which Miss Birmingham had already been involved and wondered whether it was appropriate for interests outside the terms of her appointment to consume so much of her time.

The head of the Department of History, Professor Pat Collinson, said that:

the Professors of History had discussed [the course proposal] but not the Department as a whole and that the Professors of History felt the course was more in the field of Archaeology than History.

The Professor of Latin, John Dunston, believed that the Faculty had jurisdiction because ‘departments had no legal existence in the By-laws’ (though this was soon to be adjusted by the Senate).

After discussion, the record of which takes up three tightly-packed foolscap pages of the Faculty minutes, maintained principally by members of the Departments of English, Anthropology, History and Geography, the course Historical Archaeology II was approved for 1974, under the jurisdiction of a Faculty committee. Earlier in the same meeting on 19 September, I had been elected Dean for 1974–75, so I became the chair of the committee supervising the new course in which I played a substantial teaching role (Faculty of Arts Minute Books, G3/1/12, pp. 193–99).

The inaugural course in 1974 fell into two fairly discrete parts. First term in this old three-term world was occupied by my contribution as a medieval Europeanist, exploring ‘the techniques of interpreting archaeological materials from the Anglo-Saxon and Frankish civilisations, in the context of written sources’. Alongside this, Judy gave a series of First Term lectures on theory and practice, ‘leading straight on to compulsory practical work in the May vacation’ (Faculty of Arts Minute Books, G3/1/12, p. 195).

This practical component was not at Irrawang: only the Irrawang artefacts were the subject of work in 1974. Instead, in partnership with National Parks and Wildlife, Judy led her troops to Hill End, where she saw to the first season of excavation at the Metropolitan, one of the many hotel sites in the town, while John Wade supervised the attack on the



Fig. 4: Hill End, Metropolitan Hotel site, May 1975: Judy, standing right back, supervising an early trench opened by Historical Archaeology II students. Photograph by Ian Jack

Roasting Pits some distance away on Alpha Station (*SUAS Newsletter* 1974, June, 2:1). My principal function was to ferry supplies and communications between the two sites in a fairly rugged vehicle, since the Roasting Pits were still in 1974 relatively hard of access.

Early in First Term, the new course had enjoyed unexpected publicity through the drama at Town Hall Square, where an underground shopping plaza was being constructed. When the Old Deanery of St Andrew's Cathedral was demolished in March 1974, a Caterpillar vehicle broke through the roof of a burial vault, part of Sydney's burial ground in use from 1793 until 1820, and the students in Historical Archaeology were hastily diverted downtown to conduct a highly public rescue excavation (Birmingham and Liston 1976:12-18). To students like Maureen Byrne, then secretary of the Archaeological Society, and Helen Temple, later the first archaeologist at the Heritage Branch, this chance



Fig. 5: Hill End, Metropolitan Hotel site, May 1975: Richard Morrison, now a senior heritage bureaucrat in the Department of Environment and Heritage in Canberra, then a student in Historical Archaeology II. Photograph by Ian Jack

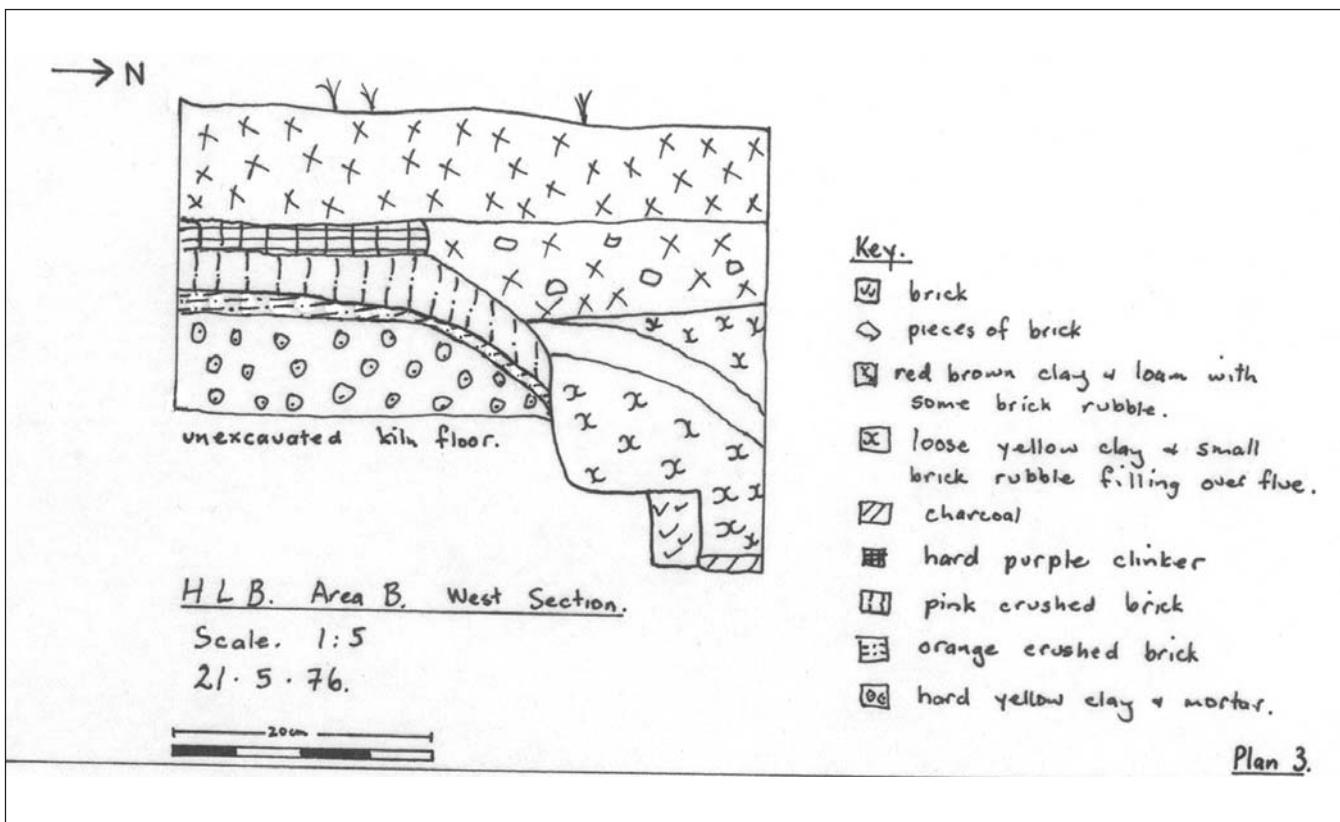


Fig. 6: Hill End, Brickworks site, May 1976: section of west section of excavation, Maureen Byrne

encounter with a real-life situation urgently requiring an archaeological presence made an impression and a learning experience of an order quite different from my sessions on the source material for the Anglo-Saxon world or even from Judy's lectures on theory and practice (*SUAS Newsletter* 1974, April, 1:2). The Old Burial Ground excavation early in the first term of the first year of Historical Archaeology II gave a remarkable drama and a cutting edge of relevance to the new course.

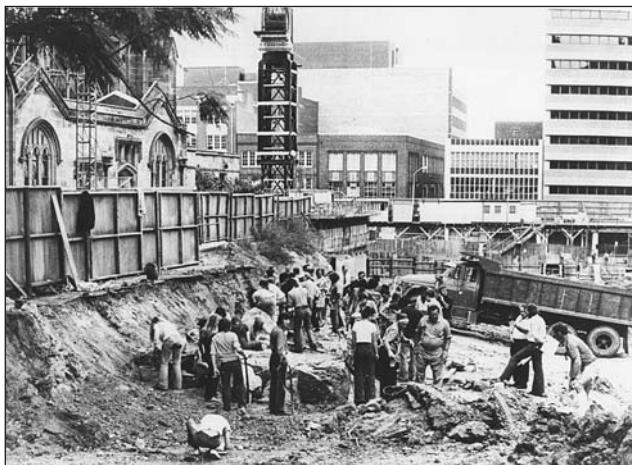


Fig. 7: Sydney Burial Ground rescue excavation, March 1974: the students of Historical Archaeology II at the beginning of the excavation. Photograph by Judy Birmingham



Fig. 8: Sydney Burial Ground rescue excavation, March 1974: Maureen Byrne in the burial vault, Helen Temple on the roof. Photograph by Judy Birmingham

The latter two terms of 1974 were devoted to things Australian, with sessions on economic and social history contributed by Ken Cable and by Dennis Jeans, the historical geographer who became the third of the triumvirate in Historical Archaeology and was later co-author with Judy and myself of the two brave volumes of synthesis, *Australian Pioneer Technology: Sites and Relics* in 1979 and *Industrial Archaeology in Australia: Rural Industry* in 1983. Also in a characteristic Birmingham *coup de foudre* the Department of Soil Science was recruited to teach the basics of soils for archaeologists, so that the Arts students had their first experiences of a science laboratory, the Hill End digs had soil scientists in attendance giving a valuable professional perspective and Brian Davey became another kenspeckle figure on Judy's team (*ASHA Newsletter* 1974, November, 4(2):1).

The aspect of the first course which was least in Judy's image was the segment on early medieval Europe. The

potential lack of synchronicity between Anglo-Saxon England and Anglo-Saxon Australia had been sardonically voiced by some members of the Faculty of Arts in 1973 and the shedding of the medieval component was an essential stage in creating the familiar course dominated by post-Conquest Australia though paying attention to European and American parallels and borrowings in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. I gave up the medieval section without many twinges of regret and incorporated some of the substance into my courses within the Department of History. But, inspired like Maureen Byrne, Richard Morrison, Jenny van Proctor or Helen Temple by the Australian content of Judy's original concept, I extended my own capacities into working as an historical interpreter of Australian sites and I have researched and taught ever since in the paddocks and industrial zones of the Australian countryside.

This period in the early and mid 1970s was critically important for the national development of such interplay of disciplines and cultural backgrounds which created a heritage profession well schooled in tertiary and practical study. In August 1973 I had attended the ANZAAS conference at Perth. Out of that conference emerged both the Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Material and the Australian Archaeological Association. Since I happened to be there and was the only historian who articulately shared the aspirations of the archaeologists, curators and conservators who conceived these bodies, I found myself on the founding Council of the ICCM and on the founding Committee of AAA. Both these positions, and particularly in the ICCM, were highly educative for me during the first year of Historical Archaeology at Sydney, although I had the good sense to bow out of first Committee and then Council membership after establishing the principle that historians were relevant members of both societies and essential contributors to the understanding, assessment and interpretation of most objects and sites (*ASHA Newsletter* 1973, September, 3(3):22–24; *Australian Archaeological Association Newsletter* 1974, November, 1:3–14, 44).

It was this close association of disciplines which gave Historical Archaeology at Sydney a lasting value. The heritage industry was imminent in 1974. The Editorial of the *Australian Society for Historical Archaeology Newsletter* in April 1974 addressed the move towards heritage legislation in New South Wales and Judy played an influential role in the discussions which led to the New South Wales *Heritage Act* 1977. Judy was clear-headed about the relationship between Historical Archaeology and developing heritage practice, unlike almost all the Australian historians in Sydney who displayed little interest. Despite Judy's influence, the students of Historical Archaeology did not immediately see the relevance to their future career possibilities and the *Archaeological Spasmodical*, the form taken by the Sydney University Archaeological Society's newsletter from 1976 onwards, did not mention heritage issues at all throughout the critical years 1976 and 1977, leading up to the *Heritage Act* at the end of 1977. But in 1978 the *Spasmodical*'s top-billing item was about Helen Temple, who had been appointed as the first historical archaeologist among the officers of the Heritage Branch working with the new Heritage Council (where Ken Cable was a founding member). Helen, who had dug at the graves in Town Hall Square, at Hill End, at Irrawang and with Maureen Byrne at Port Arthur, was now in a position to solicit help from a new generation of Judy's students, asking

anyone who might be interested in doing practical work for her, whether research, recording or excavating, to compile a dossier on themselves (*The Archaeological Spasmodical*, 1978, November:1).³

The far-sighted way in which Historical Archaeology developed at Sydney gave an invaluable training for would-be

professional archaeologists, specialising in nineteenth- and twentieth-century sites. Thirty-two years later, my recollections of this pioneering effort at putting Historical Archaeology on the academic map in Australia remain very warm. The enthusiasm of the students was unbounded and infectious, though healthily critical in a constructive way. The opportunities to contribute to significant explorations both in Sydney and at Hill End, coupled with the chance to work on the artefacts from Irawang pottery and from Wybalenna and to do unspeakable things to soil samples, were deeply satisfying. The massive quantity of Irawang material stored in the old Institute building on City Road was a focus for dedicated students, with regular weekly sessions devoted to sorting and classifying the sherds. The occasional tensions between Judy and the most articulate students over changes in the system of classification helped to hone the students' capacity for independent thought. All in all, from my standpoint as Dean as well as teacher in the early years, the achievements of the course, which was always under scrutiny from members of the Departments of Archaeology, Anthropology and History, were a stimulating adornment to the Faculty.



Fig. 9: Port Arthur, first Prisoners' Barracks, January 1977: footings and drainage excavated by Maureen Byrne's Sydney University team. Photograph by Maureen Byrne

As the first independent cross-disciplinary degree course at the University of Sydney, involving staff from Archaeology, History, Geography and Soil Science from the outset, and also Engineering as surveying Victoria Park became a routine part of the training, Historical Archaeology established credentials for inter-departmental enterprises within a university which was painfully loosening many of its structures. It provoked debate within the Faculty of Arts and far beyond the Faculty about fundamental issues and did so with less bitterness and animosity than comparable disputes about proposed new courses in Philosophy and in Economics. Most of all, however, Judy's concept of Historical Archaeology created opportunities, experiences and excitements for undergraduate students, new research possibilities for graduate students and new job opportunities for Australian archaeologists, all achieved within the most slender of budgets and with the maximum dependence on goodwill. Inevitably there were disagreements about priorities, methods and administration, and pungent comments came from both staff and students, but all of us who contributed to the first heady days retain an affection and respect for the achievement which is far more than nostalgia.

ENDNOTES

- 1 University of Sydney Archives, Archaeological Society, letter from John Wade to Marilyn Truscott, 26 June 1967, S58/box 1/1967 folder
- 2 University of Sydney Archives, Archaeological Society, S58/box 1/1967-1969 folders; *Union Recorder*, 18 July 1968, p.188
- 3 The *Spasmodical*, as an 'occasional publication', did not affect to have volume or issue numbers, nor did it regularly reveal the date of production. The University Archives does not have a set of the *Spasmodical* in S58, the records of the Archaeological Society. My own set seems to be complete from 1976 to 1984.

ABBREVIATIONS

- AAA *Australian Archaeological Association*
 ASHA *Newsletter Australian Society for Historical Archaeological Newsletter*
 SUAS *Newsletter Sydney University Archaeological Society Newsletter*

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