Bottle Collectors on Archaeological Sites
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In Hackett Street Ultimo, demolishers moved in and levelled the major part of an inner Sydney block for low-rise housing. After the demolishers, the illicit diggers swarmed over the former bottle exchange. Soon a large number of pits had been dug in the south-east part of the block, as collectors marked out their patches and hoed in with forks and prods to recover specimens for their personal collections.

Tipped off to the digging, the Heritage Council of New South Wales sent the police to warn the diggers that they might be breaking the law in excavating without a permit. Activity slowed down markedly after the visit from the Highway Patrol car.

From the broken specimens lying on the surface, and as confirmed by a quick check of directories, this was a twentieth century site of a bottle exchange operated by the N.S.W. Bottle Company, conveniently near Tooth's Kent Brewery in Broadway. As a predominantly twentieth century site, there is no legislative protection for the site and its relics under the New South Wales Heritage Act 1977, which prohibits excavation to recover relics prior to 1900.

Several of the diggers subsequently met with archaeologists to talk about their activities. They felt they had a right to dig and collect, especially on sites which would never be scientifically excavated, and because they were not only collecting but preserving our history. The three collectors we met go to the Mitchell Library every week, checking all newspapers and directories to compile a complete list of soft drink manufacturers in Sydney, as part of a history of the industry for publication for the Bicentenary.

The bottle collectors felt that by digging they were preserving and collecting artifacts and thereby adding to knowledge about Australia's history. Normally their work was on old tips, collecting the detritus of colonial Australia. Because it was their effort and time that led to the recovery of the material from the ground, they believed that they had a right to keep it - notwithstanding the rights of the landowners.

Where a site was going to be destroyed, as this one was, a case could be made out for a system of 'rescue excavation permits' where diggers could be licensed, with the landowner's permission, to excavate those site. It was suggested that rescue permits be subject to applicants having some knowledge of archaeological digging and recording techniques, through more contact between the two groups. Licensed diggers might be required to keep records of fragments, so that the information recovered is available and so that bottle collectors generally might become aware of the value of this information for studying patterns of trade and social customs in the past.

Collectors point out that archaeologists are yet to excavate a bottle dump, rarely study adequately the finds from their excavations let alone analyse them in the terms they espouse, and certainly do not publish for a wider general audience.

On the other hand, some archaeologists believe firmly that all illicit digging should cease, and illicit diggers should be ruthlessly pursued so that ultimately the practice will be stamped out. It is claimed that the New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service has successfully stopped digging for Aboriginal artifacts on archaeological sites, by prosecuting illegal diggers. The National Parks and Wildlife Service however has a large force of trained rangers to police the regulations; the
Department of Environment and Planning, which is currently responsible for administering the Heritage Act, has no such resource in the field. It must rely on the police, and how are they to determine whether relics on a site date before or after 1900? In any case, the Department has shown little inclination to prosecute anyone over breaches of the Heritage Act.

An open market exists in bottles. Some have come from illegal digging, but others may be from other States where there is no heritage protection, still others may never have been buried. Regrettably, provenance is often suppressed, and rarely appreciated. Sadly, it is factors like condition and rarity which are given top marks by the bottle collecting fraternity.

The current legislation drives the collectors underground, and helps to promote rumors such as the common one that officers of the Heritage Council, like the man from the Environment Protection Authority in the film Ghostbusters, can march in at midnight and impound private collections!

Old council rubbish tips and urban building sites are probably the main sources of bottles. Bottle collectors chase up old records in search of the former, and keep their eyes open for the latter. As bottles are worth money, workers on both kinds of sites indulge in the bottle trade.

A new twist to the problem is in the looting of archaeological sites under excavation. At Parramatta, holes appeared one night on a development site being investigated by Ted Higginbotham for the Department of Housing and Construction.

The apparent lack of serious interest in bottles by the state museums helps foster the conception of bottle collecting as a harmless, insignificant exercise. If bottles were historically important, surely museums would be more active in preserving and displaying them? The hobby has a strong following throughout the country. There are thousands of practitioners, a national magazine with a circulation of around 2,000 and numerous bottle clubs.

The current New South Wales law is not enforceable in the vast majority of cases. There is merit in the suggestion by collectors of a 'rescue archaeology permit' for sites threatened with destruction; it

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might be available to responsible collectors who would record information on the 'digs' they conduct, negotiate with the landowner over ownership of the artifacts found, and have digging rights to the nominated site. Policing such a system would still be a problem without field officers.

It does seem ridiculous to prevent collectors gathering the artifacts from a site like Hackett Street, while permitting the developers to strip completely the overburden from the site. This has now happened and the artifacts will have been dumped on another tip.

However most countries with heritage legislation, have moved increasingly to a position where the state owns all the buried artifacts, and the state has an archaeological service responsible for recovering those artifacts on threatened sites. That seems a long way off in Australia, when some states have no heritage legislation at all, and few governments are prepared consistently to defend heritage or environmental legislation.

There may well be an easy solution to this matter, such as prohibiting all excavation in legislation, but unless this is communicated to the public and the collectors, it is an empty gesture. The immediate need is to start a dialogue between the collectors, who have the information, and the archaeologists, who have the theories and techniques. That way, we might get somewhere towards voluntary regulation of the digging, which at present seems the only viable course.