Excavations at Lake Condah Aboriginal Mission 1984-85
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This paper is a preliminary report on excavations conducted at the Lake Condah Aboriginal Mission dormitory building between December 1984 and April 1985. Although the excavations were designed to recover information about structural features of the building, our discussion will focus on its archaeological significance. This is related to the artifacts obtained during excavation and the cultural information they can provide.

The mission site is located in the Western District of Victoria between Portland and Hamilton (Figure 1). It was built on an area of high ground overlooking Darlots Creek and basalt stony rises, an area known locally as 'The Stones'. The site is about three kilometres from Lake Condah itself.

Recently, control of the mission site was returned to the local Gournditch-mara Aboriginal community, the traditional owners of the land, as part of a restoration project involving the Victorian Government, the Gournditch-mara and the Victorian 150th Committee. The Gournditch-mara plan to use the mission site as an Aboriginal community settlement and tourist centre. Part of the development plans for the site involve the reconstruction of several ruined mission buildings to their original condition of the 1870s-1880s. The dormitory building will be rebuilt for use as a museum.

In 1984 two consultants, Meredith Gould and Anne Bickford, surveyed the mission and compiled a history of the site (Gould and Bickford, 1984). To provide additional information on the design and construction of the dormitory, excavations were conducted by the Victoria Archaeological Survey (VAS) between December 1984 and April 1985. Aboriginal people from the Gournditch-mara community, other Victorian communities, the Victorian Museum and VAS participated extensively in the excavations and cataloguing of artifacts. Funding for field work was provided by the Victorian 150th Committee and VAS (Figure 2).

Figure 1  Lake Condah, showing the location of the mission site.
HISTORY

The Lake Condah Aboriginal Mission was funded in 1867 by the Church of England Mission to the Aborigines, on land acquired as an Aboriginal reserve in 1861. Condah was part of a system of central stations and outstations established by the Central Board for the Protection of Aborigines (1860-69), later the Board for Protection of Aborigines (BPA 1869-1957) (Christie, 1979:170). Outstations were areas across Victoria where supplies were distributed to the Aborigines. At the central stations established on reserves at Lake Tyers, Wellington, Hindmarsh and Condah, Aborigines were encouraged and, after 1869, forced to remain on the stations (Christie, 1979:177).

Aboriginal stations were developed as means of implementing the BPA's policy of 'protection'. This involved moving Aboriginal groups to secluded areas away from larger European settlements, where they could be taught the benefits of 'civilization'. Cole (1984:16), has pointed out that the BPA preferred these stations to be run by missionaries, notably because it relieved the BPA of responsibility for managing the stations and missionaries were seen as being able to carry civilization to the Aborigines through 'Christianisation'. Between 1867 and 1913, four missionaries were appointed as managers at Lake Condah; the Reverend Job Francis (1867-69), Joseph Shaw (1869-73), the Reverend Amos Brazier (1873-74) and the Reverend J H Stahle (1875-1913).

The official history of the Lake Condah Mission spans the period from 1867 to 1918, when the BPA decided to close the station. However, members of the Gournditch-mara community continued to
occupy the site until the 1950s. To some extent the development of the mission reflects the policies of the BPA outlined above. In 1869/70 Aborigines lived on the station in mia-mias and temporary huts and a missionary's house and stores building (Cole, 1984:19). By 1870, the layout of the mission had been formalised, resembling a quadrangle based on an English village green (Cole, 1984:18). This was an unusual design for the period and its use at the mission reflects the function of the station.

At the height of the mission's development in the 1880s there were about 26 houses and outbuildings built of sawn timber, weatherboard and bluestone (Massola, 1970:105). The Aborigines' houses were located on the east, west and southern sides of the quadrangle and the dormitory and missionary's house to the north. In the centre was the schoolroom/church, used solely as a schoolroom after the completion of St. Mary's Church to the north-west between 1883-85. To the north-east, behind the missionary's house, was an orchard of apple, plum and pear trees. The dormitory building was probably constructed around 1872 to 1874 and underwent several historically recorded modifications and additions.

While the mission was designed by Europeans to enforce their culture on the Aborigines, it provided a means by which the Gournditch-mara could both retain ties with their traditional culture and adapt to conditions produced by European settlement. Members from family groups of the Gournditch-mara settled together as a community and did not face the total dislocation suffered by Aboriginal groups in more densely settled
areas. The mission was sited close to land of traditional sacred and economic significance to the Gournditch-mara, providing opportunities for the retention of traditional knowledge. As late as 1893, Aborigines from the mission still followed some traditional hunting and food-gathering practices (see Massola, 1968).

At the same time, the Gournditch-mara adopted items of European material culture and developed a working knowledge of European law and institutions. The work of obtaining and manufacturing building materials, including brick making, building construction, farming and domestic activities was carried out by the Aborigines. Attempts were also made, using European law, to gain some degree of independence and defy missionary authorities and the BPA (Christine, 1979:182). These attempts were impeded by the Aborigines Protection Law Amendment Act, passed by the Victorian Government in 1886.

The Act prohibited any part-Aborigine under the age of 35 from residing on stations controlled by the BPA. Although it was later amended in 1910 to allow part Aborigines to return to the stations, its initial effects were damaging to the mission. In 1889 and 1890 the mission population fell from 117 to 20 as Aborigines were forced to move away. Families were also split apart in the process. BPA reports indicate that after 1890, the station was falling into a state of decay, due to a lack of able-bodied people to maintain it. J H Stahle, the last manager, retired in 1913 and in 1918, despite protests from the Aboriginal community, the BPA decided to close the station.

Figure 4: The dormitory after the January 1985 excavation season, facing east.
Despite the 1886 Act and the closure of the station, Aborigines continued to visit and live in the mission buildings. By 1891, the Gournditch-marra had formally begun to request land at the station, but this and subsequent requests were refused by the BPA (see Cole, 1984). In 1939 70 Aborigines were living in the dormitory, remaining houses and tents (Cole, 1984:38) (Figure 3). During the two world wars, a number of Aborigines from the mission served with distinction, including Reg Saunders who became the first commissioned Aboriginal officer in World War II.

There are people from the Mara community living today who grew up on the mission in this later period and lived there until the 1950s. Norris and Lloyd Clarke and Mrs Connie Hart, for example, provided invaluable information on different aspects of the dormitory building.

EXCAVATION RESULTS

Excavation exposed the footings and other structural features of the building which are discussed below (Figure 4). The building was found to be rectangular, measuring 12 metres east-west and 9.5 metres north-south (approximately 39 by 31 feet). External wall footings were made from dressed basalt blocks, smaller basalt stones and trimming flakes, with the latter mortared between gaps in the blocks to produce an even surface. Inside the building were three sleeper walls, built of rough basalt stones capped with mortar, which abutted the external footings. Both interior and exterior footings would have supported a wooden superstructure and floor.

The external walls were weatherboard and the interior walls were probably painted. There was some evidence of newspaper lining with a...
painted, plaster finish. In the centre of the building was a fireplace/bread oven structure. It consisted of a diagonal bread oven near the northern wall of the building (Figure 5) to which were joined two fireplaces facing east and west (Figure 6). The fireplaces and bread oven were built from dressed basalt blocks, but the flue and chimney were probably made from bricks. The east-facing fireplace serving the kitchen was modified by the installation of a cast iron fuel stove, pieces of which were found in situ and scattered across the site. At this time, the bread oven would have become redundant as its source of coals was eliminated and the stove was available for baking. Archaeological evidence suggests the possibility that the roof was originally shingled and later replaced with galvanised iron.

The front entrance was located at the western end of the building and a rough path leading up to a central door was exposed during excavation. At the eastern end were the rear entrance and basalt steps, the latter possibly augmented by a wooden stair. A flagged path led south and east from the back steps. One of two historically recorded water tanks was found to the south-east outside the rear wall of the building beside the remains of a wooden tank stand.

Post holes and a brick border were located east of the rear wall footings, suggesting the presence of a fence. The remains of a large fire pit were exposed to the east of the post holes and close to them, and beyond this were indications of a garden.

Other evidence for the interior structure of the building comes from written historical records and oral history from Aboriginal people who lived in the dormitory. In the western half of the building, the front entrance led into a central dining room with the western fireplace at the opposite end. Four small bedrooms adjoined each side of the dining room. A hallway led from the dining room, through the eastern half of the building to the rear door. South of the hall was a large main bedroom and to the north a kitchen with fireplace, bread oven and pantry. Norris Clarke remembers that the bread oven was walled in when he lived in the dormitory during the 1920s and 1930s. His son, Lloyd Clarke, remembers the floor of the main bedroom being burnt out at one stage.

Archaeological deposits lying in areas inside and outside the external wall footings had been extensively disturbed by rabbit burrowing and root growth, making it almost impossible to define stratigraphic features. Broadly, only one mixed occupation layer associated with the dormitory was defined. This contained ash, charcoal and artifacts and overlaid an orange-brown subsoil. The external wall footings were laid in deep construction trenches dug into the subsoil. Internal sleeper walls were laid in shallow trenches abutting the external footings, indicating that they were laid after the construction of the latter.
Artifacts were recovered from the subsoil and the mixed layer above. Significantly, there were scatters of microliths and waste flakes within the subsoil and below the layer containing historic artifacts. This suggests use of the site by Aborigines in the prehistoric or initial contact periods.

Both European and prehistoric Aboriginal artifacts were found in the disturbed upper layer. The latter are stone tools and waste flakes which had been redeposited by the burrowing activities of rabbits. An approximate dating range for material from this layer is provided by the excavated coins from Australia and overseas, which date from the 1870s to the 1950s. The majority of artifacts, however, date from the first quarter of this century to the 1950s. Aboriginal people who lived in the dormitory can remember some of these artifacts being used.

The artifacts from the historic period include domestic and personal items like ceramic sherds, bottles, broken bottles and mirror glass, beads, buckles, buttons, toys, broken combs and comb teeth. There were also building materials like window glass, nails, timber, mortar and plaster. Numerous pieces of school slate, some inscribed with lines and writing, were also recovered.

Some artifacts, like glass flakes and leather basket-weaving needles, demonstrate the way in which Aborigines utilised European materials to produce items of traditional technology. Others, such as the European items listed above and a pair of home-made football boots, show the extent of Aboriginal incorporation of some elements of European technology and culture.

The spatial distribution of artifacts in the site is related to a variety of site formation processes and disturbance following demolition of the building. Many of the smaller artifacts like beads, lead shot and comb teeth tend to be grouped together, indicating that they may have fallen through the same holes or gaps in the floorboards. It is likely that the floorboards were replaced at least once last century (see 22nd BPA report, 1886, App.8, p.11) and were probably replaced in different parts of the building at later stages.

Larger objects such as ceramic sherds and broken bottle glass may have been deposited when repairs to the building were being carried out or during demolition. They may also have fallen through the floor in the main bedroom after it was burnt out. Artifacts have also fallen into collapsed rabbit burrows and been thrown or dropped outside the building.

Concentrations of collapsed building materials occur on different parts of the site; for example, in the western half of the building concentrations of window glass near the external footings are associated with pieces of timber window frame. Over different areas of the building, pieces of timber floorboards and superstructure were found lying below fallen plaster, mortar, bricks and rubble.

These concentrations of building materials suggest the rapid collapse of the building. The ash and charcoal layer shows the collapse may have been at least partly due to a fire in the building. However, not all the timber and other materials exhibited signs of burning and it is probable that some part of the structure remained standing and was demolished or fell down later. The piles of bricks from the chimney lying below surface rubbish around the bread oven complex also suggest such a pattern of deposition.

Subsequently, basalt stones were removed from parts of the footings and bread oven area leading to further disturbance of the site. This activity, combined with rabbit burrowing and root growth, would have helped spread the demolition mound. At a later stage, material which initially may have been scattered in areas around the dormitory building appears to have been thrown back into the ruins, particularly at the eastern end. Examples of this are large pieces of iron from buggies and beds. Therefore, not all the recovered artifacts, particularly those on the surface, may have been used in the dormitory.
DISCUSSION

There are three facets of research into the dormitory building: historical records, the oral recollections of the Gournditch-mara and archaeological work. All reveal technical information on structural features of the building which can be used as an aid in its reconstruction. Currently this is one of the main rationales behind the excavation of historic structures (Stuart, 1985). However, the archaeological significance of the site is also related to the evidence which the excavated materials provide for Aborigines in the post-contact period.

The dormitory building in itself is symbolic of the way in which Europeans attempted to impose their values on Aboriginal society by separating children from parents or relatives (example, see Reynolds, 1980:191-192). However, because cooking amenities were available in the dormitory, it may also be the one area where considerable social interaction occurred amongst members of the Condah Aboriginal community, particularly women and children. In addition, excavated animal bone included both stock and native animals such as kangaroo, wallaby, possum and echidna. This supports the ethnographic evidence for use of traditional food resources, probably as a supplement to the mission rations.

The dormitory site is historically important to the Gournditch-mara as a link to their past, both in the prehistoric and post-contact periods. The presence of stone artifacts indicates that the site was occupied prior to the establishment of the mission. However, it is historic artifacts which provide information about individual descendants of the Gournditch-mara which are significant to Aboriginal people today. An example of this is a football medal, won in 1927, by the father of John King who is the present Aboriginal ranger.

The finds can also shed light on groups within the Aboriginal community who are often not represented in historical records. For example, numerous artifacts that relate to women and children were found at the dormitory. Artifacts like beads, copper and paste jewellery, toys and clothing, items like pins and buttons can provide evidence of the day-to-day life of the people.

The understanding gained of this aspect of Aboriginal society may be compared with evidence of the social status of non-Aboriginal women and children. These elements of society are often neglected in history and have been examined only rarely in relation to the Aboriginal community in the post-control period.

Artifacts can also indicate the way in which Aborigines adapted to European society and the extent to which they accepted the material symbols of European culture. For example, the large number of recent twentieth century artifacts may indicate increasing acceptance of European materials by the community, or their wider availability in the district. As mentioned earlier, the Aborigines also adapted items of European material culture for use in a traditional fashion.

CONCLUSION

Although excavations at Lake Condah Aboriginal Mission dormitory were designed primarily to retrieve information about the structure of the building, they can also provide a valuable insight into Aboriginal life during the post-contact period. Historical records, the artifacts and other features of the site indicate that while Aborigines adopted some aspects of European culture, it was a constructive response to conditions imposed upon them by European settlement.

The archaeological significance of the building, therefore, is not only related to its structural features, but also to the information which artifacts provide on aspects of the life of individuals and groups who used the building. The latter is often ignored in the historical records, and such an archaeological approach may help overcome the bias which exists in using historical sources. The involvement of Aboriginal people in research has not only provided an invaluable source of information on the mission and dormitory, but may also help prevent erroneous assumptions being made.
made about Aboriginal history and culture. At the same time, the artifacts may be seen as another means by which contemporary Aborigines identify with the past.

These aspects of research into Aboriginal life are rarely dealt with in the field of historical archaeology in Australia, and would not be dealt with in the standard conservation analysis and assessment of significance produced by architecturally oriented studies of sites (Stuart, 1985). Obviously, these social and cultural aspects are crucial in understanding the significance of the dormitory building and the mission as a whole.

Footnote:
(1) For a detailed history of Aboriginal reaction to European settlement in the Western Districts and the Lake Condah Mission see Christie (1979), Cole (1984) and Critchett (1980).

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