

ACT Heritage Unit Store
Archaeological Objects Curation Project

Report and inventory

Canberra Archaeological Society

for the National Trust of Australia (ACT)

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Curation of archaeological items in the ACT Heritage Store

Project summary

Items in the ACT Heritage Store were sorted, identified and suitably boxed and labelled. An inventory was prepared of the material recorded.

Project objectives

- To rationalise items in the store and at other locations as advised;
- to complete an inventory of all current items within a system suitable for future use;
- to box or pack items in suitable conservation standard materials to be supplied by the ACT Heritage Unit; and
- to make a report including additional relevant information and recommendations for conservation, dispersal and promotion of all items.

Background

In late 2006 the Canberra Archaeological Society (CAS) was approached by the then manager of the ACT Heritage Unit to apply for funding for a project to identify and begin conservation of items in the Unit's store.

An application submitted by the National Trust (ACT) was successful and CAS undertook work on the Store throughout 2007.

CAS members had been involved in some of the excavations and collections of items which were in the store and the Unit manager hoped that this knowledge would help with identification of the items and connection with reports or files in the Unit.

The scope of the project originally included matching the results of the inventory with files and reports in the Unit's records. The condition of the items was worse than first thought, requiring more time and effort than anticipated. It was not possible to extend resources to search the Unit's records and access to the Unit's premises out of hours was just too difficult to contemplate.

It was agreed with Ms Norma Richardson of the Unit that Ms Lodie Webster would undertake the necessary research in the Unit under a separate grant under the auspices of CAS but supervised by Ms Richardson. The results of this project have not been sighted by CAS but Ms Richardson vouches for the standard and completion of the project.

Constraints

Access to the collections the subject of the grant proved problematic. The items were stored at Lyneham in an ACT government compound and access through the security system had not been determined by the Unit. After many weeks a member of

the ACT Heritage Unit staff arranged a visit during work hours so the material could be assessed and the size of the project scoped.

It was essential for weekend access to the compound to be arranged as many of the CAS members are full-time workers and their time can only be given voluntarily after work hours. There was resistance to this need from the Unit staff, although from the time of applying for the grant it had been understood that CAS could only work after standard hours. Various other locations were considered but the material would have had to be moved elsewhere and the condition of packaging was far from robust.

Several more weeks passed while Karie Wilson pleaded the case for weekend access until finally she was successful. This delay in achieving access put the CAS work program back by about 3 months from the time of receipt of the grant.

The lack of any facilities at the site also delayed and constrained the results. CAS members had no tables to work on or equipment to help move heavy objects. There were no seats although Miss Curley's dining chairs were cautiously appropriated. There being no electricity there was no light so an abandoned work bench was appropriated and items laid out in the sunshine.

It was also not possible to use a computer given the lack of power and the dirty conditions of the site. The conditions at the site did not attract many members to help so it was not possible to pair a recorder with an explorer. There was so much detective work to be done to work out what the items were and where they had come from that paper sheets proved to be the easiest recording method.

ACT Heritage Unit contact

The method of undertaking the project was confirmed at a meeting on site on Monday 26 February 2007, attended by Helen Cooke, CAS; Peter Dowling (National Trust, ACT); with Karie Wilson and Mark Nizette from the Heritage Unit.

Karie Wilson continued as the main Heritage Unit contact for the project, sorting out any difficulties with good humour. Advice was sought from the archaeologists in the Unit on the suitability of the spreadsheet designed by CAS for the inventory. No response was forthcoming so it is assumed that the design is adequate, and being a spreadsheet it can easily be expanded or adapted later by the Unit.

All items thought to belong to the Heritage Unit were moved from a larger shed into the 'Boat Shed', a colourbond shed from which the boat was removed. Two shipping containers on site were locked and the keys could not be found. It was thought that some heritage material could be inside these, but this could not be confirmed until they were opened at a later date.

Methodology

CAS members commenced work in late March when a security pass was provided and approximately 2 sessions per month were organised, with the last session on December 1, 2007.

Between two and six members attended each work day, braving cold, heat, lack of light in the shed and no furniture or facilities to carry out this labour of love.

Boxes of material that appeared to be from the same collections were dragged beside each other and a systematic recording program began. Items were re-bagged as necessary and placed into clean archive boxes. Members wore gardening gloves

when moving decaying boxes and surface insect spray was used to minimise the risk of bites.

CAS also provided pump bottles of hand wash (there were no taps, sinks or washing facilities) to attempt to maintain clean conditions. Members were encouraged to wear dust masks when moving dirty, mouldy items. All members washed their hands before eating to minimise exposure to dangerous pathogens in historic material.

Some items known to have been in the Heritage Unit's store in the early nineties were missing. It was possible that these were in the shipping containers, so Karie was asked if these could be opened. As the keys could not be found, the padlocks were finally cut off and the members opened the containers on their next visit.

None of the telegraph poles, post and rail fence parts or the dunny from Gungahlin collected in the early 1990s were found. It was later revealed by a former staff member that these and other items were disposed of years ago as they were 'unsuitable' to store near the ACT Museums Unit's material.

What was in the containers was a huge shock to the heritage professionals who entered them. The roofs of the containers had leaked, one far more than the other due to the number of rusty holes in it. The other container was also quite damp inside due to sweating of the material.

A large prop box from the Skylark Theatre had remained weatherproof but the other items were wet and sodden. Plastic boxes contained glass carafes and porcelain fruit bowls from the Federal Capital Commission, fortunately were impervious to water.

Furniture tagged as belonging to Miss Evelyn Curley was variously damaged by water. CAS members retrieved the items they could move and placed them into the dry shed in which they were working. Sadly large quantities of publications and posters were completely sodden and were removed from the containers to reduce the further development of mould.

A number of board-mounted photographs of early Canberra and posters were also moved to the sound 'boat' shed. These belong to the Heritage Unit, having been prepared in the early 1990s for ACT Heritage Week displays and were duly recorded.

The Heritage Unit staff were advised of the fate of the contents of the shipping containers and asked to advise Museums Unit of the need to take action to save the items. The response was disturbing. Museums staff were piqued that CAS members had moved their items and demanded that everything be returned to the containers.

The President of CAS, a responsible cultural heritage professional, did not want to return the items to an unsuitable environment. Fortunately she was known to past staff members of Museums who confirmed that the best option for the heritage items was to leave them in the comparative safety of the boat shed. In the time that CAS was working in the store, no action was taken by the Museums Unit to rescue any of the remaining items in the containers.

All the Heritage Unit's items had been moved several times in the last 10 years to and from various locations and the packaging had not survived well. Many of the larger plastic bags had perished or split, especially where some marker pens had been used to record the contents. This has been noticed before with other archaeological material stored in plastic bags and must be due to some decomposition of the plastic caused by chemical bonding with particular inks.

Artefacts from several collections had been pushed into the same box and the boxes stacked out of order. Prior knowledge of the excavations helped to collate the material and identify each collection with a degree of certainty.

- Each artefact or group of artefacts was noted on paper sheets and some individual components identified. There proved to be too many artefacts to describe each in detail or even to count all of them, so general records were completed for all collections.
- Most of the items had been stored in plastic bags in cardboard boxes; most of the boxes were beer boxes which raises an interesting question on whether this was due to suitability of size or ease of availability due to the drinking habits of the archaeologists who stored the material.
- The boxes were damp and infested with a range of insects. All grotty packaging was disposed of to minimise re-colonisation. Before removal however, all information recorded on the boxes or bags was recorded on the record sheets and the new bags and boxes.

Results

The items are identified by collection and some individually in the spreadsheet at Appendix B, which also includes an explanation of the numbering series used for the inventory.

The major collections included:

- electronic components from the former Bruce College, which became the Canberra College of Technology and finally the University of Canberra;
- items from an archaeological investigation of Duntroon dairy;
- light fittings salvaged from a heritage house at Kingston prior to demolition;
- gate fittings from premises at Fyshwick;
- excavated material from historic sites in Gungahlin, including Malton, Site B, Gn 2 and 3; GnH17;
- some items retrieved from the kitchen of Orroral Valley Homestead prior to reconstruction of the building;
- Items from Namadgi National Park and Brayshaws Homestead; and
- some bags of deposit from an excavation at London Bridge, but many more that were stored originally are now missing.

Summary of findings

The experience of opening the shipping containers on the site and finding artefacts, furniture, publications and promotional material in various stages of decay and saturation was shocking for the heritage professionals and lay members present.

CAS cannot state strongly enough that the ACT Government must meet its custodial responsibilities for the heritage items in its care. The endorsement of this project to begin with the archaeological collections is a commendable step in the right direction.

ACT is not alone in Australia in failing to commit adequate resources to the curation and storage of its heritage collections. This is partly due to a failure by governments to value historic heritage material very highly nor to give any priority to the maintenance of heritage items in the list of services to the community.

The ACT Heritage Act gives the Crown's representatives the responsibility for preserving the heritage items in its care.

Past generations have trusted their memorabilia to the ACT Government to protect and promote for posterity. There is a responsibility to this trust. Understanding and respecting the past is essential in the development of healthy community spirit and individual pride in self and place.

CAS committee members canvassed alternative authorities for any interest in taking on the responsibility for these collections. Sadly no one was keen to take on any of the material at this stage. The National Museum of Australia and the Canberra Museum and Gallery may be interested in specific collections in the future but further studies would have to be completed for the package of information and items to be more attractive to them.

Legal implications

Section 115 of the ***Error! Reference source not found.*** (the Act) refer to the Minister's responsibilities to provide a suitable repository for Aboriginal objects owned by the Territory..

Section 107 explains that a 'heritage object' includes those objects vested in or owned by the authority. It also includes objects already registered or those that meet one or more heritage criteria.

Although the Act does not require the authority to afford the same storage protection to these non-Aboriginal objects, the section 108 describes the requirement for an annual report from the public authority to council 'that includes details of each heritage place and object for which it was responsible at any time during the year'.

Section 109 requires a heritage audit to commence and be reported on by the public authority to the council. All the objects in the ACT Heritage Store are vested in or owned by the authority, therefore should be included in these reports and audits.

Under Section 110 of the Act the council may 'direct a public authority to prepare a conservation management plan for a heritage place or object for which the authority is responsible'.

These requirements can be taken to include the objects in the ACT Heritage Store. The larger collections at least could be considered for preparation of conservation management plans; or the whole collection considered as one and a conservation management plan prepared which would cover the details of storage, access and record keeping (see specific recommendations below).

Specific recommendations

- 1 The ACT must find suitable accommodation for the safe storage of the items under the care of the Heritage authority;
- 2 The storage must be climate controlled and weather proof;
- 3 All material that has been stored in the current facility should be treated to prevent continuing insect infestation before storage in a new facility;
- 4 All incoming items must be catalogued on receipt and any accompanying research materials cross-referenced and safely maintained;
- 5 Suitable space and furniture for researchers is essential to allow work on the collections. This space must include access to toilet and washing facilities, which are essential OHS&W requirements;

- 6 When research facilities are available, CAS would be happy to help the ACT Heritage Unit to promote the study of these collections to the local tertiary institutions;
- 7 Other collections of artefacts held by heritage professionals and those with interests in local history were mentioned to CAS as the progress of this project was shared with members. A program to seek information from holders of items to develop basic catalogues, without seeking ownership, would add to the knowledge of significant items in the ACT and allow the brokering of relationships between researchers and the holders of the collections;
- 8 The ACT Museums Section should be strongly urged to salvage what they can from the shipping containers (which are not weatherproof) and store the items safely.

Appendix A: Inventory of archaeological material in the ACT Heritage Store

Excel spreadsheet attached separately to facilitate use by ACT Heritage Unit officers.