

# Stamp-collecting or Increasing Understanding? : The Dilemma of Historical Archaeology

GRAHAM CONNAH

*The following is the text of a paper that was presented at the Australian Society for Historical Archaeology First Conference on Historical Archaeology, held in Sydney on 29–30 October 1981. In this paper Graham Connah of the Department of Prehistory and Archaeology, University of New England, identifies what he regards as a dilemma presently facing Australian historical archaeology. On the one hand, there is an urgent need for historical archaeologists to record rapidly vanishing data; and on the other hand, there is the necessity for historical archaeologists to problem-orient their research if it is really to increase our overall understanding of Australian history. In an attempt to come to terms with this problem, the writer reviews his own contributions to Australian historical archaeology and assesses the extent to which he has been able to compromise in the face of this dilemma.*

About 1903, when he was approximately 10 years of age, my father began collecting stamps. By 1976 when he died, well into his 80s, he had something like 8 large volumes full of stamps. That was a lot of stamps: but he did not collect rubbish, he was a discriminating collector and his collection was painstakingly organized. It was a fascinating collection of the intrinsically interesting, the unusual, the beautiful and even the valuable and it gave my father very great pleasure. Yet, as a brash young man, I frequently wondered what he had ever learnt from it, and, more to the point, what anyone else had ever learnt from it.

I should make it clear, perhaps, that I tell this family story without any wish to denigrate either my father's memory nor the formerly gentle art of philately. It would be dishonourable to do either. Instead, I present the story as an allegory of the present state of historical archaeology: particularly the present state of historical archaeology in Australia. It seems to me that Australian historical archaeology is in many ways tending to become a stamp-collecting exercise, painstakingly collecting and ordering information, simply because the relevant archaeological data contains so much that is intrinsically interesting, unusual, beautiful or even valuable. This process of data-collection may give very great pleasure to archaeologists and even, at times, to the general public but one is tempted to ask whether it is contributing very much to the overall sum of understanding? In spite of Spaulding's famous insistence that 'the only purpose of archaeology is to make archaeologists happy',<sup>1</sup> there are many of us who, perhaps naively, would insist that archaeology does have as its main purpose the increasing of our understanding of the human past. To be able to increase that understanding we need to be able to base our archaeological endeavours on problem-oriented research, not merely on the collection of data, however efficiently we carry out our collecting and whatever the pleasure that may result from it.

It is easy to say such things on paper. In the field, however, the situation is very much more complex. Australian historical archaeology is at the moment, in

my opinion, faced with a dilemma. I use this word with care: my trusty *Concise Oxford Dictionary*<sup>2</sup> states that one meaning of 'dilemma' is a 'position that leaves only a choice between equally unwelcome possibilities'. That describes the situation, as I see it, to a nicety. Scattered almost all over Australia there are material remains, dating from one time or another within the last 200 years, that document the expansion of Europeans into this continent. Abandoned mines, deserted settlements, forgotten roads, failed railway lines, traces of former land divisions, vestiges of early ploughing, remnants of factories, all these and many other sorts of evidence abound. Plentiful though such evidence is, however, the question is how much longer will it survive? Its existence is threatened by modern development of all sorts, its existence is even threatened by those who purport to take some sort of interest in it: the metal detector enthusiasts and bottle collectors at one end of the scale and the do-good local historical societies who do not actually know any history at the other. The Australian landscape is scrawled over with our history, is it not reasonable that we should strive to read it before the writing is erased and that we should perhaps try to preserve some of that record for posterity? Follow this line of reasoning and there is obviously a need for 'stamp-collecting', that is to say for the painstaking recording of data. Indeed, it is clear that both government agencies and independent bodies have begun to recognize the existence of this need and to produce substantial sums of money to pay for such data-collection. An increasing amount of work of this sort is being done: sometimes involving excavation, sometimes not. Yet it is not unreasonable to ask what some of this work is adding to our overall understanding of Australia's historical past, particularly if the results of much of this work remain unpublished and tucked away in files to which the general public do not have ready access. Such is the nature of the dilemma: on the one hand there is an urgent need for detailed recording but on the other hand there is the clear necessity to problem-orient what we do, if the results of our labours are really to

tell us anything that we do not already know. It is indeed a position that leaves only a choice between equally unwelcome possibilities: if we collect data for no other reason than because it is there but may not be there next year, then to some degree we waste our time and perhaps a lot of money; if we research only what will answer the historical problems that happen to occur to us now, then we will have to stand by and watch evidence whose significance we may not yet appreciate be destroyed.

The dilemma which I have been discussing is already showing signs of becoming formalized. Problem-oriented historical archaeology is being seen by some as a luxury for academics, while the practically-minded public archaeologists have to face up to the realities of data-recording: notice for instance how much discussion there has been of site registers during the last few years. Some academics, however, would emphasize that even data-collection should be problem-oriented. Thus John Clegg, writing of the methodology of recording prehistoric rock art in Australia, where a dilemma comparable with that in historical archaeology may be said to exist, has the following to say:

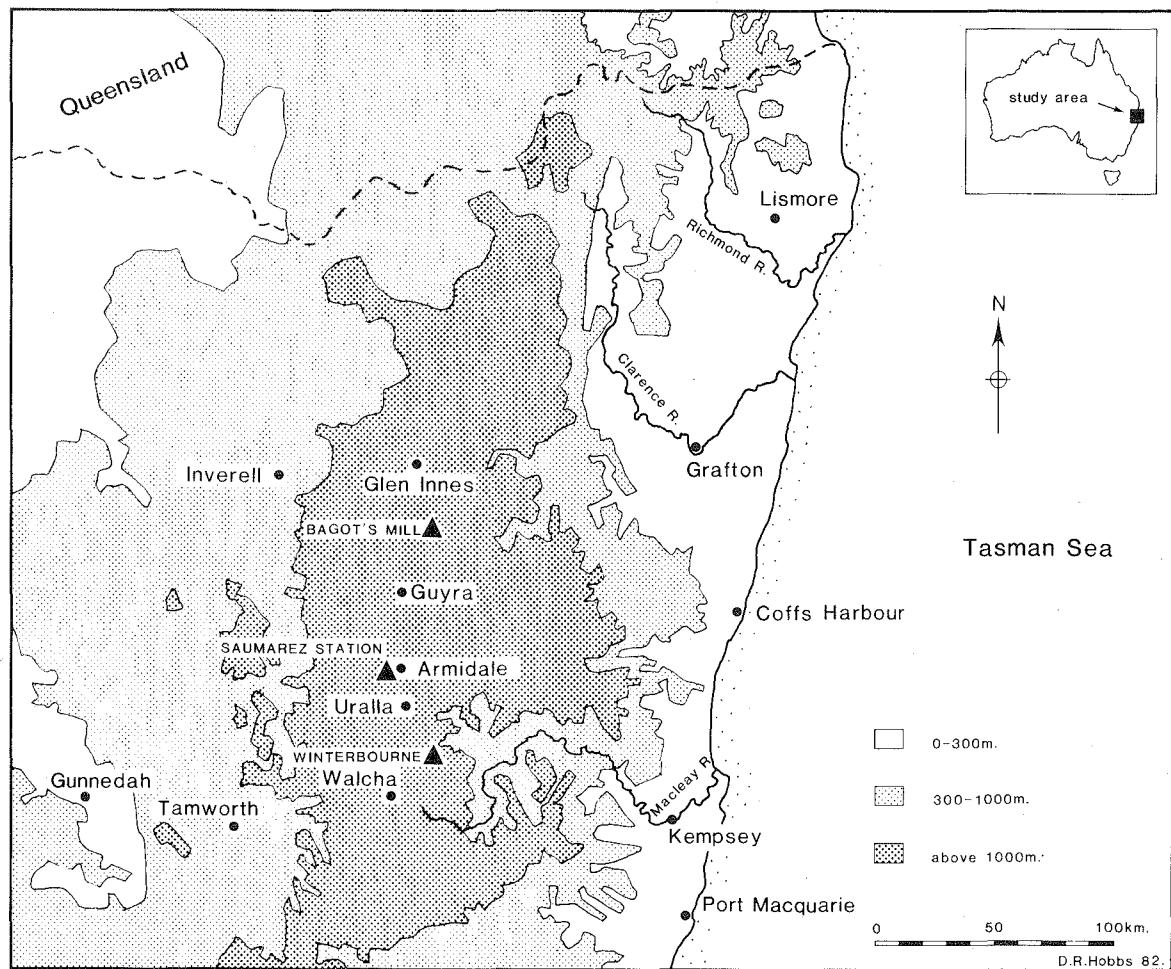
'The first great difficulty about recording rock art is to determine what you are trying to do. If you know—precisely and in detail—*why* you are trying to do it, that is, what you are trying to do *it for*, then it will be quite possible to draw up specifications of what is required of your recording.'<sup>3</sup>

Yet although my own sympathies do lie with those who espouse the cause of problem-oriented research, I am very much aware of the reality of the dilemma that I have described. Instead of adopting the posture of some archaeologists in recent times of preaching rather than practising, I would like to discuss briefly three pieces of my own field research from the last few years and to examine how in my own case I have attempted to resolve the conflict between stamp-collecting and increasing understanding. Two of these pieces of work are already completed and published, the third is still being carried out and as yet is only published in brief.

## 1. THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL LANDSCAPE AT SAUMAREZ STATION<sup>4</sup>

All three of the archaeological projects that will be discussed here have attempted to throw light on various aspects of the nineteenth-century settlement of the New England Tablelands of New South Wales (Fig. 1). A central factor in that settlement was wool production and so it was to that subject that I first turned my attention. It was wool that had first driven European settlement onto the Tablelands, the earliest arrival being H. C. Semphill who in 1832 had established Wolka Station presumably where the town of Walcha now stands. He was soon followed by others,

*Fig. 1: Location of the three archaeological field research projects discussed in this paper.*



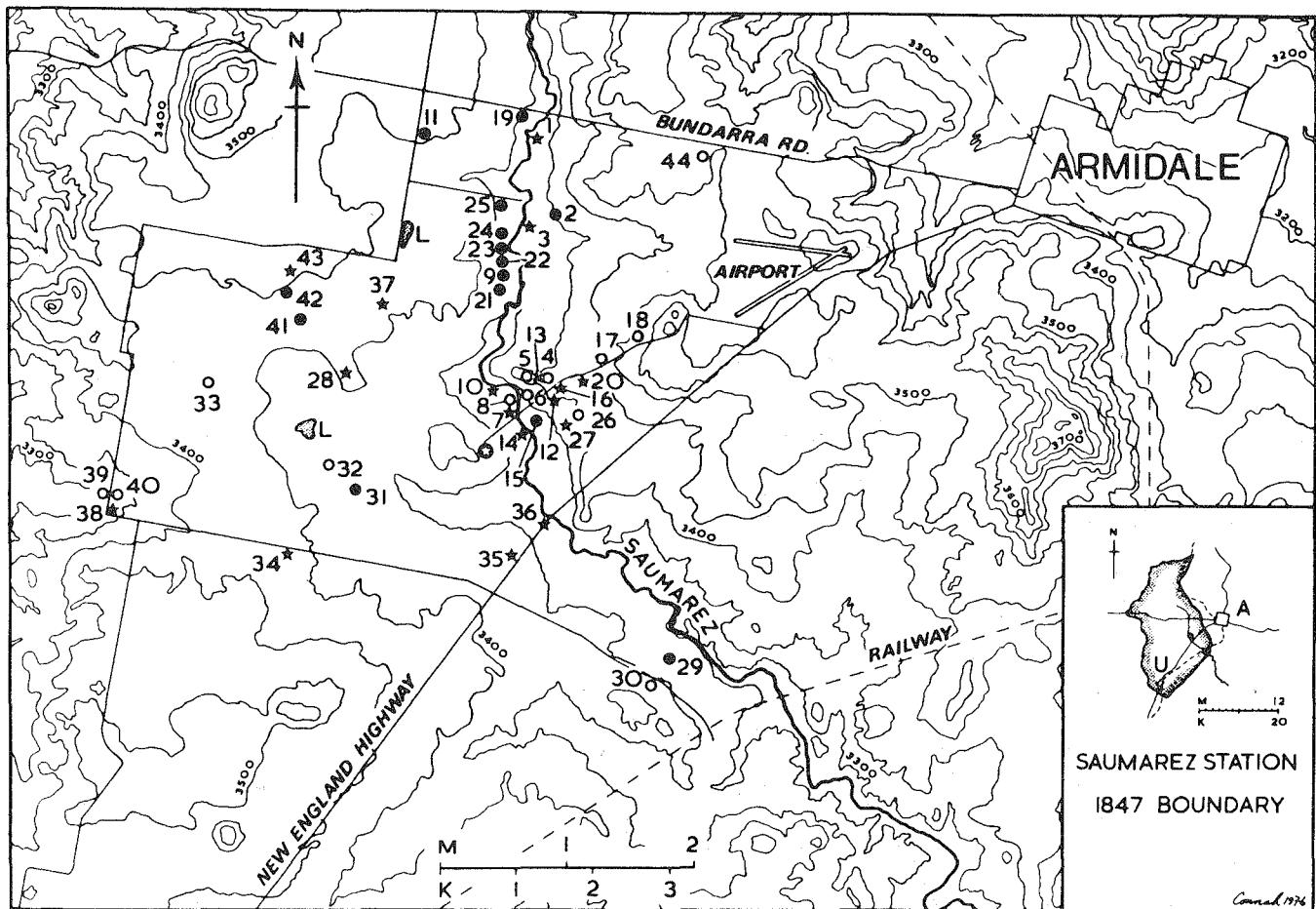
however, amongst whom were the agents of Lieutenant-Colonel Henry Dumaresq who, in 1834, set up Saumarez Station near the site of the future city of Armidale, the origins of which date from 1839. Saumarez Station still exists and is still in the business of producing wool, although by the mid 1970s it was of about 8000 acres not the 100,000 acres of which it had consisted in 1848. In 1975 it seemed to me that here was an excellent opportunity to see what the landscape could reveal about the history of a New England sheep station for which little documentation had survived. My strategy was essentially that pioneered by O. G. S. Crawford in Britain many years ago. I aimed to conduct a 'field archaeology' survey without any excavation. Thus I recorded in detail the entire 'archaeological landscape' of Saumarez Station and then attempted to read that landscape much as one would read a document.

My tactics were simple and inexpensive. First I studied the available topographical maps and aerial photographic cover. Then I flew my own aerial photographic survey which was easy and cheap to do as the area was very close to Armidale airport. After this I got out on foot into the paddocks themselves, taking care to select mid-winter which in New England is usually cold and dry, meaning that the pastures are

sheep-bitten down to the ground surface. The winter of 1975 was very good from that point of view: good from the field archaeologist's point of view that is to say, not from the grazier's. Systematic searching of the surface was reasonably successful in producing evidence of former activity but the heavy dependence in the past on wood as a structural material, and the cultivation of extensive areas of the property for pasture improvement since the Second World War, made it doubtful that I was finding anything more than a small proportion of the sites that were present. For this reason I then turned to oral tradition and was fortunate indeed to have the help of Mr. Bob Betts who had lived on the Saumarez Station from 1920 or so. He and I spent many cold winter days tramping the paddocks while he pointed out the locations of various installations or houses which had in many cases left minimal traces.

The result of my endeavours was the archaeological site distribution map shown in Fig. 2. It seems to indicate two things. First, wool production facilities and support services were originally located on the valley floor adjacent to the creek, in an area that is now deserted. In contrast, there are now two centres of activity: the homestead, with other buildings and yards, on the spur to the east of the creek; and the woolshed and shearers' quarters on the hill across the valley. This change reflects changes in the wool industry: in particular, changes in water requirements and availability. Thus, for example, it ceased to be the practice to wash sheep before shearing, so that the washpool was no longer needed. Also the advent of corrugated iron roofs and tanks removed the necessity

*Fig. 2: Historical archaeological sites on Saumarez Station. Solid circles: stone houses. Open circles: timber houses. Black stars: other sites. Note particularly: 7: woolshed; 8: blacksmith's shop and house; 10: washpool; 14: sheep dip. White star: present woolshed. L: lagoon. A ford is situated between Sites 6 and 8. Contours at 50 feet (15m) intervals.*



to concentrate activity near the creek, on ground subject to flooding. Smailes and Molyneux<sup>5</sup> have, indeed, claimed that it was such roofs and tanks that allowed a general movement of rural homesteads in southern New England from creekside to roadside locations since 1900.

The second thing indicated by Fig. 2 is that there is a surprising number of house sites. What were they doing on a sheep station? One answer is that wool production was formerly much more labour-intensive than it is now. Before the arrival of wire fences in the 1870s and 1880s, for instance, it would have been necessary to employ numerous shepherds, who would probably have lived on the Station. The more important answer, however, is that the house sites are a sad record of free selection and its fate. It seems that during the second half of the nineteenth century numerous small farms were established on parts of the former pastoral estate which are now once more sheep paddocks. Only under intensive cultivation could such small areas have been economically viable, and traces of former ploughing, stone clearance heaps and hollows probably resulting from stump-grubbing show that a substantial effort was made in that direction. It failed and the archaeological landscape is witness to that failure.

Now, seven years after the Saumarez survey, it is possible to see how it might have been improved. Nevertheless, the results of that survey did *throw a little more light* on the history of the New England wool industry but also, and this is the important point, it *recorded* the archaeological data while there was still something to record and local memories to assist in that recording.

## 2. CAPTAIN RICHARDS' HOUSE AT WINTERBOURNE<sup>6</sup>

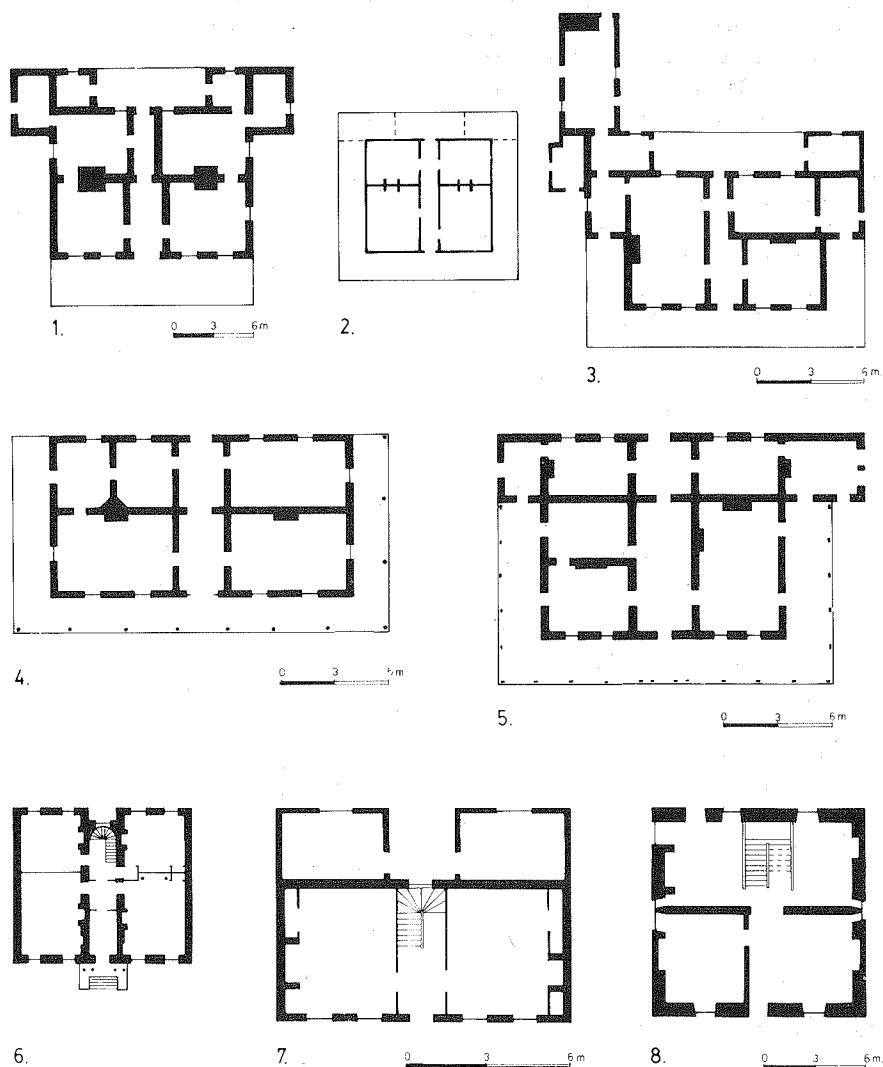
The second archaeological project that I undertook was also motivated by a desire to learn more about the development of the New England wool industry but it grew into something rather different. The physical remains at Saumarez had been individually slight, even if their overall distribution had been impressive. I searched, therefore, for a more substantial single site that would tell me something more about early sheep farming in the area. I found it in the form of the stone ruin of a house built by one of the earliest New England squatters, William Richards, a retired British merchant navy captain who had invested his savings in pastoral speculation in 1838, at the height of the so-called 'squatting' boom. I wanted a site where I could combine information from a wide range of sources: documentary records, oral tradition, surface archaeological observation, excavated archaeological stratigraphy, loose artefacts recovered during excavation. The Winterbourne house provided all these sources. Furthermore, the house provided something of a time capsule: it had to have been built a few years before 1851, because Richards died in that year; it was abandoned in about 1922 when the then owner built a new house some distance away and partly demolished the old one. Unlike so many other sites, one could study the evidence from one of the earliest homesteads in New England with reasonable certainty that it had not been unduly affected by modern interference. This aspect was accentuated by the relative

isolation of Winterbourne during recent times.

Archaeological fieldwork at Winterbourne was carried out in May 1976 and took two main forms. First, a detailed survey was made of the standing remains: painstakingly drawing a plan, external elevations and some of the main features; taking many photographs; making detailed notes; and removing a small number of structural samples for further analysis. The aim was to extract the maximum amount of information from the visible remains. Second, while the survey was proceeding, very limited excavations were carried out to elucidate uncertain details of the plan, to discover what light the stratigraphy of the site could throw on its history and to recover a sample of the loose artefacts at the site. In addition oral traditions about the site were also collected, as far as possible interviewing the people concerned at the site itself. Meanwhile, Jillian Oppenheimer, who in recent years has done extensive research into the history of New England, undertook an archival search for relevant documentation. Also, after the fieldwork had been completed, Michael Rowland set about trying to get as much evidence as possible from the excavated objects.

What was all this work for and what was learnt from it? I had been drawn to the site by my continuing interest in the growth of the wool industry but I soon found myself asking questions about rather different matters. Papers by Allen<sup>7</sup> and Birmingham<sup>8</sup> made me look at the Winterbourne evidence as an example of cultural adaptation to a new environment. William Richards and his wife had both been born and brought up in Britain. To what extent had they brought their culture with them to Winterbourne and to what extent had it been modified to suit their new environment and the requirements of their livelihood? Could one see, at Winterbourne, the beginnings of the emergence of a different culture? In short, could such a site be used as a case-study of how British and other people had begun to become Australians? These were outrageously ambitious questions to ask but I became fascinated by them and I attempted to answer them by looking closely at the material evidence at Winterbourne. First, the plan of the house was relevant and I attempted to show how its origins were firmly grounded in British domestic architecture but how it was also modified, in the light of previous experience in New South Wales, to suit the local conditions (Fig. 3). Second, the constructional techniques that had been employed showed similar origins in Britain but comparable adaptations to the Australian environment. Third, in contrast, the excavated loose artefacts suggested some marked cultural dependence on imported British manufactures. Clearly the tentative beginnings of Australian manufacturing had difficulty competing with the cheap and readily available products of the Industrial Revolution in Britain.

The work at Winterbourne had other purposes also. In particular it was an exercise in drawing together evidence of very different sorts in order to try to construct a coherent whole. It was largely with this in mind that the eventual publication was subtitled 'A study in historical archaeology'. Looking back on this attempt, I think that the integration of the different forms of data was not as successful as could have been wished. Nevertheless, the reader may still learn something about that process by carefully examining our efforts.



*Fig. 3: The Winterbourne house plan and some of its relations.* 1: Winterbourne, 1845-1851. 2: Boyd's Australian 'Bungalow' type. 3: The Grange, Bathurst, N.S.W., 1840. 4: Roseneath, Parramatta, N.S.W., before 1837. 5: Kelvin, Bringelly, N.S.W., c.1819. 6: Typical villa plan, England, c.1823. 7: Cambridgeshire, England, 1725. 8: The Priory, Brant Broughton, Lincolnshire, England, 1658.

It should by now be clear that the Winterbourne project was a piece of problem-oriented research: it did have as its overall aim the *increasing of understanding* about important aspects of the past. Nevertheless, it also fulfilled a very important *recording* role. The stone walls of the Winterbourne house are clay-bonded and the roof of the building has been missing since about 1922. Every storm of rain, every night of frost, every bit of windy weather advances its decay. Even by 1976 the investigation and recording of the ruin had become urgent and since then it has continued to deteriorate. As a result of my research project, however, there is now a full and detailed account on paper and in a published form. On paper, at least, the site has been preserved.

### 3. BAGOT'S MILL AT BEN LOMOND<sup>9</sup>

My main interest in the Winterbourne project had centred around the question of cultural adaptation to the Australian environment. After the Winterbourne work had been fully published in 1978, I therefore looked for another site in the Armidale area that might throw light on this subject. To my surprise I found the remains of a water-mill at Ben Lomond Station, on the New England Tablelands, north of Guyra. Who could have been so unwise as to build a water-mill in

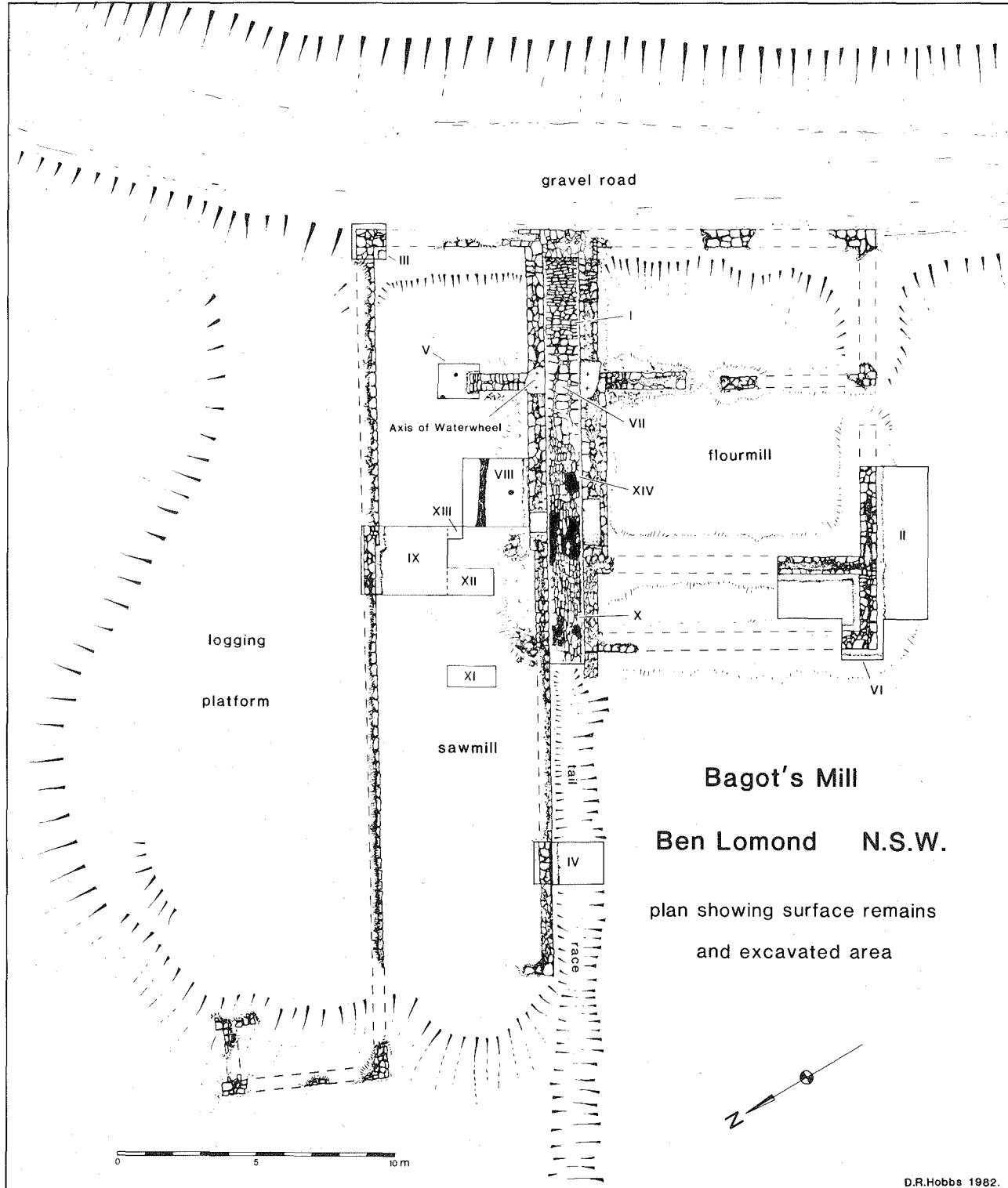
an area hardly noteworthy for heavy rainfall and clearly subject to periodic drought? A little research quickly revealed, however, that at one time there had been other water-mills in the district and that elsewhere in Australia, especially in Victoria and Tasmania, water-wheels had been used for a variety of purposes including mining and corn-milling. Could it be that this was just a supreme example of cultural learning: an imported technology that proved of little use due to the alternating floods and droughts of much of the Australian environment?<sup>10</sup>

Further investigation revealed that the Ben Lomond mill had been built by an extraordinary Irishman, Christopher Thomas Bagot,<sup>11</sup> in 1877. Bagot was what might be called 'an improving land-holder', although it is probable that some who knew him called him ruder things. Supposedly, he had been trained in an agricultural college in Britain and had travelled in America before coming to Australia. Certainly, his mind was overflowing with ideas for the betterment

of the Llangothlin Station of which he had a half share from 1865 and full possession from 1873 and which subsequently became known as Ben Lomond Station. He cleared and fenced land, designed and built automatic gates, imported cattle for breeding purposes, set up a dairy on American principles and imported American agricultural machinery. He bombarded his local newspaper with letters full of suggestions, which they did not always publish. Then he built his water-mill, attracting the attention of the *Sydney Mail*<sup>12</sup> whose correspondent described its water-wheel as more than 9 metres in diameter, carrying 93 buckets and fed with water from a flume about 49 metres long. The flume was at the end of a nearly 3-kilometre-long

mill-race that came from Llangothlin Lagoon, that Bagot had dammed. The water-wheel, which was apparently overshot, was designed to power a sawmill at one side and a flour-mill at the other and, according to the *Glen Innes Examiner*,<sup>13</sup> Bagot intended to use it to power a textile mill also. As if all this was not enough Bagot further planned to use the spent water from the tail-race to irrigate the land on the adjacent valley floor. It is uncertain how much of all this was

Fig. 4: Progress to date in reconstructing the plan of Bagot's Mill (further work is planned for 1982). The gravel road dates from just after the First World War. The water powering the mill ran from top to bottom of this plan.



achieved, certainly the sawmill functioned and it is on record that in 1877 one James McCann was killed by the water-wheel while he was carrying out repairs on it.<sup>14</sup> The Bank of New South Wales had their own opinion of the matter, it seems, because in 1879 Bagot was declared insolvent. Subsequently, he and his family successfully ran a sawmill further north, at Ballina, but that was steam-powered. Perhaps he had learnt his lesson.

The archaeological evidence at Bagot's Mill is limited to the two stone walls that carried the water-wheel and formed the sides of the wheelchamber, and to traces of stone wall foundations that are level with the ground. In addition there are the remains of the mill-race and tail-race and of the Llangothlin Lagoon dam, which was eventually breached by a local grazier about the middle of the present century. Far more than Winterbourne this is a site that necessitates archaeological excavation if we are going to find out much about it. Nevertheless, archaeological fieldwork commenced with a detailed surface examination and with my own aerial photographic survey. These efforts were successful in tracing the mill-race and tail-race which were subsequently mapped. The dam was also examined, although it still awaits detailed survey. Excavations have since been carried out on the mill building itself in both 1979 and 1980. Further work is intended for the present year (1982). The immediate purpose of the excavations has been twofold: to enable the structural details to be planned (Fig. 4 shows the progress to date) and to throw light on the way in which the mill functioned. The wheel-chamber has been completely excavated to reveal a most impressive example of the stone mason's art, and excavation within the sawmill has recovered copper rivets, with traces of leather belting adhering to them, that strongly indicate that at least this part of Bagot's dreams did come to fruition. Much remains to be done, however, and it is still unclear how long the necessary fieldwork will take. In addition there is a lot of archival work still to be carried out.

In the end, what might it tell us? The most important question surely must concern the viability of the water-mill. Was it just a mad idea? Was it bound to fail? Was Bagot just unlucky with his water flow or with his cash flow? Given the very limited sources of mechanical power in the New England of the 1870s, his idea may not have been as crazy as it sounds. Yet, could he not have just bought a steam-engine: there was plenty of wood about to use as fuel and even the heavy transportation costs of getting a steam-engine to Ben Lomond could hardly have exceeded what he probably poured into his mill? As I have stated, Bagot's Mill is highly relevant to the question of cultural adaptation and it is also a timely reminder that we must not forget the contribution that remarkable personalities have made to that process.

As with the Saumarez and Winterbourne projects, so with that at Bagot's Mill: here is a fieldwork project that is concerned to *explain* past events. Equally, however, it has a vital *recording* role, as Fig. 4 demonstrates.

## CONCLUSION

'Dead archaeology is the driest dust that blows'; so wrote Sir Mortimer Wheeler thirty years ago.<sup>15</sup> Much

historical archaeological data is intrinsically interesting and yet if merely catalogued and described and registered it can become very dead indeed. Page upon page of information about pots, or buttons, or steam-engines, or verandah posts, or bottles, or mine shafts, or nails, eventually numbs the mind. To be of any use these things must tell us something, they must help us to understand—and they must help us to understand something of significance. Yet, as I see it, there is a dilemma: in many places sites and artefacts do need urgent recording before they are wiped off the face of the earth. They will not wait for university academics to decide that they might (perhaps) be relevant to the latest research project. I do not pretend to know how to resolve this dilemma but the examples of my own work that I have discussed show how I have attempted to find a solution. In the end, I suspect, we must all become efficient collectors of stamps but we must also all endeavour to use those stamps to increase our understanding (and the understanding of society as a whole) of the history of Australia.

## NOTES

1. Spaulding, A. C. 1953. Review of *Measurements of some prehistoric design developments in the south-eastern states*, by James A. Ford, *American Anthropologist*, 55: 590.
2. Sykes, J. B. 1976. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 6th ed., Oxford.
3. Clegg, J. 1982. Recording prehistoric art. In G. Connah (ed.), *Australian field archaeology: a guide to techniques*, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra.
4. Connah, G. 1977. Wool, water and settlement: the archaeological landscape of Saumarez Station, *Armidale and District Historical Society Journal*, 20: 117–127.
5. Smailes, P. J. & Molyneux, J. K. 1965. The evolution of an Australian rural settlement pattern: southern New England, N.S.W., *Transactions and papers of the Institute of British Geographers*, 36: 49.
6. Connah, G., Rowland, M., Oppenheimer, J. 1978. *Captain Richards' House at Winterbourne*, Department of Prehistory & Archaeology, University of New England, Armidale.
7. Allen, J. 1973. The archaeology of nineteenth century British imperialism: an Australian case-study, *World Archaeology*, 5 (1): 44–60.
8. Birmingham, J. 1976. The archaeological contribution to nineteenth-century history: some Australian case studies, *World Archaeology* 7 (3): 306–317.
9. Connah, G. 1980. An experiment that failed? Water-power in 19th century New England, *Australian Society for Historical Archaeology Newsletter*, 10 (2): 18–21.
10. Birmingham, J. M. & Jeans, D. N. 1982. The Swiss Family Robinson and the archaeology of colonisations, this volume.
11. Walker, R. B. 1963. C. T. Bagot and Ben Lomond Station, *Armidale and District Historical Society Journal*, 6: 1–8.
12. *Sydney Mail*, 27 January, 1877.
13. *Glen Innes Examiner*, 28 March, 1877.
14. *Glen Innes Examiner*, 15 August, 1877.
15. Wheeler, Sir M. 1954. *Archaeology from the earth*, Oxford: v.