

The Archaeology of Rubbish or Rubbishing Archaeology: Backward Looks and Forward Glances

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In this paper, originally prepared as the concluding contribution to the Australian Society for Historical Archaeology's 1982 conference on 'Talking rubbish: or what does archaeology mean to the historian?', Vincent Megaw, the Society's first Vice-President, offered a semi-autobiographical and historical answer to the question posed by the conference title, citing examples from the United Kingdom, the United States of America and, of course, Australia.

I suppose history and I have been bed-fellows too long; I can never commence work on a new topic without first examining the documentary evidence. One thing at least I learnt—and have frequently quoted—from my teacher Stuart Piggott is that 'an understanding of the history of one's own subject is a great help in thinking clearly about its problems'.¹ After all, to borrow from Glyn Daniel's Cambridge Inaugural Lecture, we are, as archaeologists, concerned primarily with a back-looking curiosity² but one in which it seems many historians perceive nothing but fog. There is debate still amongst archaeologists and historians as to the nature of historical archaeology let alone historical archaeologists. Paradoxically in England at least it was largely historians—albeit unconventional ones such as W.G. Hoskins and Maurice Beresford—who built firmly the foundations for historical archaeology. And these foundations had already been laid by nineteenth-century antiquarians from the days when Augustus Lane Fox Pitt-Rivers in 1889 restored and partially excavated the thirteenth-century King John's House at Tollard Royal. Economic historians were behind the Deserted Medieval Village Research Group, which has recently celebrated its thirtieth birthday, and which included amongst its founder members those who significantly in later life were to make their mark on Antipodean prehistory.

Four years later in 1957 the Society of Medieval Archaeology was established, to be followed in turn ten years later still by the Society of Post-Medieval Archaeology. In the United States, John L. Cotter, who had early been associated with the now-much-criticised Jamestown project, introduced in 1960 the first course in what was termed 'Historical Sites Archaeology', at the University of Pennsylvania. As is largely the case today, historical archaeology in America developed out of the work of architects and others actively concerned with conservation of the man-made environment and such organisations as the various National Parks services and other governmental instrumentalities. In contrast, historical archaeology in Europe, at least in its most recent forms, has developed by and large out of the established bases of traditional prehistory and a long-standing amateur tradition relying on local societies and a network of further education facilities almost totally lacking in the United States. Be that as it may, it was not until 1968 that in America the first meeting of the Society for Historical Archaeology was held at Colonial Williamsburg, whose Director today as then is Ivor Noël Hume, who cut his archaeological teeth amidst the rubble of the blitzed City of London.

Here in Australia, the Australian Society for Historical Archaeology came into being in 1971 but already in 1968 I find I was setting such questions for History IV Methods students at the University of Sydney as 'If history is bunk, archaeology is trash; discuss'. Less pithily expressed, perhaps, was 'If the archaeologists' claim to "write history" can be conceded only if history is given the widest possible meaning, to what extent and in what areas of study can archaeological methodology assist the historian?' In this last I was following another inaugural lecture, that given at Cardiff in 1960 by my other teacher, R.J.C. Atkinson, under the title of *Archaeology, history and science*. Atkinson concluded that 'our aim should be no less than to permit archaeology to train upon the problem of man's history the full armament of his science'.³ The same lecture contains some telling comments about the way in which archaeological techniques can assist the economic historian, although Atkinson regards the archaeologist as having 'but little claim to be a *kind* of historian', which he defines as someone basically concerned with answering the questions 'who?' and 'when?'. Today this has a somewhat limiting sound in terms of the not-so-new archaeology—'new archaeology', a term first coined by Joseph R. Caldwell as long ago as 1959.⁴ Is it however simply chance that, whatever might be its nature, the 'new' archaeology spent its developmental childhood co-terminously with the growth of the embryonic formal study of historical archaeology? One cannot of course deny that archaeology, perhaps particularly in its historical context, has in the past had its opponents, including those who have maintained that if archaeology has been acclaimed as the science of rubbish, 'as fast as the rubbish was dug up it was written down' and that 'archaeological discussion is as often an indulgence as a discipline; where they might exchange hypotheses archaeologists are apt to demand adherence and to hurl polemics or even charges of corruption'.⁵ This may seem to take a literally historical position but to cite yet another product of the Edinburgh system, my contemporary Iain Walker in his 1967 essay on 'Historical archaeology—methods and principles', there is certainly evidence for a continuing division between a 'historicalist' view of archaeology as a source simply for raw data and the anthropological or processual interpretation of archaeology,⁶ a dichotomy discussed also by our Editor in the first volume of this *Journal*.⁷ Another term preferred by some is 'behavioural archaeology', as discussed for example by American historical archaeologists. As represented amongst others by Stanley South, there is a view of archaeology as

'the study of interactions of natural and cultural processes that create archaeological deposits'.⁸ It is just these historical archaeologists who forget the truism that 'in each area in a given period different kinds of history can be written. History is a Protean hydra'.⁹ The manner in which in the United States the Vietnam War may have influenced archaeology's course, at a time when it was turning to the study of cultural variation, is one interesting theory—though the rise of black power in the same period may have been even more significant.¹⁰ As Piggott commented in summing up a conference not on history and archaeology, but the history of archaeology, one needs continuously to be aware how vital is the 'concept of changing "truths" and "explanations" demanded in archaeology and prehistory'.¹¹

It may however still be instructive to pursue further some historical attitudes. Walker also cites Dame Joan Evans, delivering in 1961 the anniversary address to the Society of Antiquaries of London as its first (and so far only) woman president. Objecting to the use of archaeological techniques in 'historic and well-documented [*sic*] medieval studies', she clearly preferred the 'more subtle, more aesthetic and more civilised methods of approach' of the art-historian, alleging that the contemporary school of British medieval archaeologists were more interested in 'plans of cowsheds and a series of the sections of the rims of cooking pots'.¹² It seems almost like an unconscious rebuttal of such views, that James Deetz should have entitled his stimulating 1977 introduction to the archaeology of early colonial life in America: *In small things forgotten* . . .

In the same year as Joan Evans' address however, Evans-Pritchard, then Professor of Social Anthropology at Oxford, gave a lecture in Manchester entitled 'Anthropology and history'. In this he developed further an earlier attack on the functionalist school of anthropologists and argued that social anthropology was closer to certain kinds of history than to the natural sciences. In a piece which should be required reading for all archaeologists, new or old, Evans-Pritchard commented on how 'anthropologists have tended to be uncritical in the use of documentary sources'; they 'have seldom made very serious efforts to reconstruct from historical records and verbal traditions the past of the peoples they have studied' and it is a clear 'measure of the lack of interest anthropologists have shown in the past of the simpler societies that they [have] made little attempt . . . to make a clear differentiation between history, myth, legend, anecdote and folk lore'.¹³ Substitute 'archaeologists' for 'anthropologists' and the finger I think could point at many of us who have professed an interest in uniting history and archaeology. It is just as well that we have at least some model applications of the use of historical evidence—oral as well as written—in the service of regional archaeology, as represented by the work of Isabel McBryde and her students in the New England tablelands¹⁴, to contrast with the naive shot-gun approach or grab-bag of analogies offered by others.¹⁵ From the other side of the Pacific, Bruce Trigger's work on the Huron is a model of historical and ethnographic reconstruction.¹⁶ It may be significant to note that Trigger's background, as that of the doyen of the history of Australian archaeology in the service of all periods and all peoples, John Mulvaney, is as an ancient historian. The antecedents and genesis of historical archaeology in Australia will be reverted to in a later paragraph; first, however, briefly to return to the United States, since it is here in a very real sense that the science of rubbish has flourished.

I have earlier referred to an historicalist or 'object-based' archaeology. Noël Hume's work at Colonial Williamsburg, for example, has demonstrated the need for a thorough knowledge of the history and objects of the period of the site being dug, a precept one would expect from the author of *Guide to the artifacts of colonial America*.¹⁷ The same point lies at the roots of urban archaeology in all those areas of the globe where the sound of the bulldozer has been heard in the land. In American New England, the examination of

pottery inventories at the port of Salem demonstrates 'the persistence of taste for English wares scarcely diminished by the Revolution' and 'that the separation of the thirteen colonies from the mother country was for some time political rather than economic'.¹⁸ The importance of detailed ceramic study for medieval urban sites in southern England, for interpreting trading patterns with the Continent and the general economic history of the period, is no less significant.¹⁹ Here in Australia we ignore at our peril such basic data as those available for the products of the Lithgow pottery, so carefully documented by Ian Evans.²⁰ As a Celtic numismatist has put it in attempting yet another redefinition of history *versus* archaeology, 'historical documents may . . . provide invaluable evidence of the organisation of an industry and of the social status and activity of some of those engaged in it, but only archaeological evidence can demonstrate the scale of production and geographical distribution of the product'.²¹

Archaeology may fairly be claimed as literally a materialistic study in which history may be used as a form of experimental control; an almost romantic view of historical documents, as offering unbiased witnesses of the past, is a view given considerable emphasis by some of the keenest and most authoritative minds in contemporary archaeological thought. While it might be wondered whether, any more than with the camera, history never lies, Lewis Binford has written that 'we have the option of excavating those places and, walking through history, as it were, alongside an historical character, trying to relate what we find in the ground to what he reports as having occurred there'.²²

In the immediate post-World-War-II period the Cambridge school of environmental and economic prehistorians, under Grahame Clark and Eric Higgs, developed the meaningful science of rubbish and the messages transmitted down the line, in the peak period of archaeological colonisation of the Antipodes by Cambridge graduates, are perhaps only gradually being translated from the prehistoric to the historical context and on into the contemporary period.²³ In a collection of essays edited by Richard Gould and Michael Schiffer, under the title of *Modern material culture: the archaeology of us*, Rathje in his main contribution mentions A.V. Kidder's excavation of a town dump in Massachusetts, in the 1920s, as a pioneering example of the use of such sites as open-air laboratories for training in archaeological field principles, testing those principles and relating our society to those of the past. Rathje's emphasis on the importance of the training potential of the archaeology of rubbish is brilliantly demonstrated in his own Tucson 'project du garbage' established in 1972.²⁴ Rathje's research may have been related to studies on stress patterns but also it started as a training exercise for archaeology students. One is reminded of Mortimer Wheeler's 1930s' exercises in stratigraphical interpretation, during the daily re-excavation of the Maiden Castle spoil heaps. It is also significant to note, with reference to Rathje's work, the interest evinced in it by those concerned with consumer behaviour in the acquisition, use and disposal of food and other resources at the household level.²⁵ And of course Lewis Binford, 'the oldest new archaeologist in town' as Albert Spaulding has termed him, has himself of late been much concerned with bones.²⁶ A most interesting recent exercise in discerning pattern in material culture, as revealed in waste disposal, is the excavation of successive generations of refuse in the neighbourhood of Harvard Yard in Cambridge, Massachusetts; here it seems not only possible to detect temporal variations but also notable differences between student and domestic household discards.²⁷

The manner in which a study of the material cultural remains of the past may show significant variations in behaviour patterns amongst minority groups within larger social units, is something which should be of particular interest to us here in Australia. But it is a process not without

controversy, as witness Deetz' interpretation of his excavation of the small settlement of free blacks established at Parting Ways in Plymouth, Massachusetts, for about a generation from c.A.D. 1790. It is, to say the least, arguable whether such work has established the validity of archaeological techniques for supplementing the traditional historical sources for Afro-American culture.²⁸ Notwithstanding, one must note with approval the recognition which is given to archaeological approaches in the study of Aboriginal and Islander history, in a recently produced *Handbook*.²⁹

One clear area of continuing archaeological application is the study of cultural change; there is an almost unchanging adherence to an evolutionary model, as applicable to brand packaging as to Oscar Montelius' railway carriages.³⁰ The prime example continues, of course, to be the study of cemeteries. Edwin Dethlefsen's most recent excursion into the use of an archaeological perspective in the study of community—to use his own words—has been the examination of the last hundred years or so of a North Florida Protestant cemetery.³¹ The basic approach has altered little from preceding studies of the rubbish that is the dead in colonial New England—whether in North America or New South Wales—or medieval Old England. Graveyard archaeology is another perfect example of the potential for student participation, which may be extended to secondary educational levels as a 1982 winning Welsh submission in the schools section of the British Archaeological Awards demonstrated. Graveyards are also one of the most obvious examples of visible 'cultural baggage', a term first coined by Max Crawford in the early 1950s and appropriated in the '60s to describe materially observable aspects of evolving Australian society.³² The phrase has become recently much in vogue amongst Australian prehistorians, but then I entirely agree with Stan South's observation that 'historical archaeology is not different from other kinds of archaeology in its need to delineate patterns within past cultural systems',³³ while Binford has recently claimed that 'Archaeologists (and perhaps some historians) are the only researchers with facts of direct relevance to evolutionary episodes'.³⁴

The setting up of more and more specialist institutions would seem to endanger such a principle. This is not, of course, to decry the importance of such developments as the establishment of the Department of Archaeology at the University of York, with its clearly historical bias, the inter-Departmental Unit of Historical Archaeology at Sydney or, yet again, the more recent development of diploma courses offered by the Institute of Industrial Archaeology, based on the Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust and offered in cooperation with the University of Birmingham's Department of Economic and Social History. One should however note that in none of these institutions is the central need for a basic training in suitable field techniques ignored.

As one who has long ago been converted to Jesuistical educational principles, I have hinted several times in the previous paragraphs at the usefulness of varying aspects of the examination of historical material, as a methodological training ground for students. At primary and secondary school levels, the *Learning through the historical environment* project of the History Teachers' Association of Australia is one more welcome development.³⁵ Conversely, it is an interesting historical fact that many, nay most, central figures in the gradual and continuing growth of historical archaeology in Australia are or were prehistorians. As such they embrace Central Europe, the Eastern Mediterranean and Africa, all areas where once more the knowledge of those regions' more recent history is essential in understanding their distant past. In putting in a plug for the old archaeology as the broad view, broad temporally and geographically, one should not forget the importance of this precept. In this sense then, I believe that there is indeed no such readily identifiable species as an historical archaeologist.

One Australian example of material cultural baggage may suffice to emphasise this point. The external round chimney of the Cornish settlements of South Australia reflects an origin in West Penwith, where I first encountered the type when in the mid-fifties I was practising historical archaeology before I knew there was such a thing. The round chimney also occurs at Port Essington, in the short-lived military settlement of Victoria (A.D. 1838–1849).³⁶ The round chimney is an important indication of the source of the labour employed in its construction, even as the remains of Chateau Margaux burgundy bottles, here and at the site of First Government House in Sydney, are witnesses to actual confrontations during the Franco-British imperialist rivalries of the early nineteenth century. (Incidentally, the thorough study of Port Essington must rank with the examination of James King's Irrawang pottery of 1833–1855,³⁷ as amongst the most thoroughly investigated and least extensively published pioneering investigations into the potential value of archaeological techniques in furthering Australian historical knowledge.)

In the present context of specialisation *versus* generalisation, one may consider the following statement on the investigation by a prehistorian of a short-lived fort of the American War of Independence, regarded as 'an excellent example of the maxim that with a scientific paradigm and skilful use of method, explanation of archaeological phenomena in terms of the past cultural system can be accomplished without having to spend many years developing an expertise in handling data from the historic period . . .'.³⁸ Curiouser and curiouser and a prime example of what one might term the American-influenced 'look-after-the-theory-and-the-practice-will-look-after-itself' school. I hope it is unlikely that such a view would be expounded by an Australian historical archaeologist, let alone many if any of his or her British counterparts. Without specialist knowledge, what one may wonder would have been the value of the industrial archaeological surveys in South Australia by Dennis Cumming, without his engineering expertise,³⁹ or of the growing importance of maritime archaeology in several areas of Australia. This last has advanced greatly just through the establishment of the Western Australian Museum's Department of Maritime Archaeology, supported as it is by conservation facilities which must be the envy of many similar institutions in the Northern Hemisphere. There also, however, continue to be major contributions through the work of those who are technically amateur archaeologists, nowhere, to be once more the South Australian chauvinist, so well demonstrated than in the important and continuing work of the Society for Underwater Historical Research Inc. In the renovation of historic sites and buildings and their management use, the need for continuous watching briefs by those qualified to conduct them might seem a superfluous truism. But it has been recently brought home to those of us in Adelaide, who have evinced a concern as to the development of the historic North Terrace precinct right in the heart of the city. A public concern in maintaining a future for the past may seem to be exemplified by the South Australian Constitutional Museum, housed in the restored former Legislative Assembly building. However, in Sydney the Battle of Bridge Street continues to rage over the foundations of Governor Arthur Phillips' Government House, constructed in the year of the arrival of the first convict fleet in 1788. Again, the salvage excavations carried out on the site of Adelaide's Destitute Asylum, initially as much in spite of than because of state support, were the outcome—and the victims—of a view of the past which is still largely concerned to conserve only that which can be seen above ground, not what may be discovered below ground.⁴⁰ Lest one is dazzled by a view of historic conservation in the United States being above suspicion, the recent short shrift given to the need for detailed examination of Paul Revere's house, in historic downtown Boston, demonstrates that there too the price of preservation is more than eternal vigilance.⁴¹

And here I wish finally to comment on one area of historical archaeology which is totally outwith my own expertise but yet is one where perhaps the most urgent priorities for the immediate future for historical archaeology in Australia lie. This is what one might refer to as the adequate recording of the past as perceived in the present. At the seminar on Industrial and Historical Archaeology arranged at Goulbourn in 1979 by the New South Wales National Trust, John Mulvaney commented on the need for field archaeology in the sense of above-ground archaeology as developed in Britain by O.G.S. Crawford in the 1920s.⁴² It should be noted that in Europe, unlike Australia, selective excavation has always been regarded as necessary to elucidate certain aspects of structural history. For example, this has always been the case in the day-to-day workings of the U.K. Royal Commissions on Ancient and Historical Monuments (currently separate and unaffected by the 1979 Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act, which created the new umbrella organisation of the Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission). In the areas of industrial archaeology, however, it is a curious feature of a too rigid fixing of the analytical eye above ground, that the only thorough archaeological excavation that I know to have taken place before 1980 in the Ironbridge Gorge was the excavation of a rubbish dump at the Coalbrookdale potteries—and this by architectural students from Manchester. Again however things are changing.

It might be asked why it is necessary to labour a point made so often by David Dymond in his undeservedly largely ignored 1974 study, *Archaeology and History*, subtitled, significantly for our present purposes, 'A plea for reconciliation'. In referring to Carl Sauer's concept of the 'cultural landscape', Dymond comments that 'archaeology in its largest dimension is close to, and hardly distinguishable from, historical geography'.⁴³ Of late, in addition to valuable pioneering work by Australian geographers and architectural historians, some less welcome and pseudo-academic species may be identified amongst the already overcrowded government-sponsored bi- and sesquicentennial surveys. I refer here to such largely non-subjects as the study of 'environmental arts'. These compare ill with the thorough social, geographic, historic and architectural approach demonstrated by studies of the townships of the Adelaide hills and the Barossa Valley, being undertaken by the South Australian Centre for Settlement Studies under the direction of Gordon Young. These have properly found a place in the interim publications of the Australian Bicentennial History's *Australian Historical Geography Bulletin*, and it will not have escaped any who have studied the Centre's researches into the British and continental European antecedents of these settlements, as revealed in their organisation, construction, social life and material culture,⁴⁴ that Young is a Mancunian-trained architect. At the University of Manchester's School of Architecture is one of the centres of still-growing interest in vernacular architecture, of which R.W. Brunskill's work is simply the best known.⁴⁵ The social history of minority groups in Australia, be they the First Australians of all, German rural settlers or Chinese miners and market-gardeners in the goldfields of Queensland, can only be advanced through the addition of the examination of their social archaeology, that is, information which can only be recovered by archaeological methods. One must, however, guard against an artificial separation of public awareness of the varying intertwining strands of a multi-cultural society. The understanding of cultural institutions, the real effects of the assimilation of cultural baggage, will be meaningless if we do not realise the need, suitably guided, continually to cross inter-disciplinary boundaries. Once again, to study structures without artefacts—or *vice versa*—is to dissect the cadaver of the past by examining the skeleton and discarding the vital organs.

There is a yet more basic need—to build up and to correlate our total data bank of source materials, including

those of oral history. Such sources naturally include pictorial material, as was highlighted by the historic photographs project of the University of Sydney's Macleay Museum. If there is much to be done in terms of field archaeology *sensu* Crawford, there remains a fair amount of armchair or library-desk archaeology which is as yet underestimated. Certainly, there have been some notable attempts to prevent the degeneration into mere rubbish of two-dimensional no less than three-dimensional records, largely as the result of the work of architects, geographers and engineers. One may cite not only the work of Jeans and Cumming but also the two volumes of the *Manual of architectural history sources*, published in 1981 by the Department of Architecture at the University of Adelaide, under the editorship of David Saunders. Thinking not only of student projects but of the increasing output of contract research, there is a continually growing number of detailed studies. As has been discussed at recent meetings of the Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science, these contribute to what seems to be an increasing problem of access to and publication of such work. A time of shrinking resources in the educational field is hardly apposite for suggesting new university initiatives, but I seriously wonder (and not for the first time) if, with the cooperation of the Australian Heritage Commission, there could not be developed some such scheme as the University of Leicester's Graduate Certificate in Post-Excavation Studies, the aim of which is to offer training in the preparation for publication of already-existing data. Too often there seems to be an institutionalised view that look after the field work and the publication will look after itself. Private sponsorship, in an age (it would seem) of growing privatisation, is another area ripe for development and in an Australian context it is somewhat ironical to comment on the substantial contributions which in Britain historical archaeology has received from the major trading banks; in the Antipodes such institutions are hardly in the forefront of moves to conserve the historic heritage.

Nevertheless, in 1972 David Frankel wrote in the staff magazine of the Bank of New South Wales: 'The preservation and the growing awareness of the potential of properly collected material is to be seen as a first step in the development of an historical archaeology which can add significantly to our knowledge of the colonial past and so in various ways further our understanding of the present'.⁴⁶ I feel, for those who do not believe in the validity of historical archaeology, that this is not a bad statement to ponder on—or is that view now to be regarded as so much meaningless rubbish?⁴⁷

NOTES

1. Piggott 1959: 14.
2. Daniel 1976.
3. Atkinson 1960: 30.
4. Willey & Sabloff 1974: 186 ff.
5. McEvedy 1967: 9.
6. Walker 1967.
7. Connah 1983.
8. South 1977: see here especially, 'Research strategies in historical archaeology: the scientific paradigm', 1 ff.
9. Jack 1977: 24; see also Jack's useful survey currently in press.
10. I owe these interesting suggestions respectively to Dr Brian Egloff and Dr M. Ruth Megaw.
11. Piggott 1981: 187.
12. Evans 1961.
13. Evans-Pritchard 1961: 20–21.
14. McBryde 1978.
15. See for example Megaw 1967.

16. Trigger 1976.
17. Noël Hume 1970.
18. Cotter 1976.
19. Hodges 1982.
20. Evans 1980; see also Birmingham 1974 and *Lithgow Pottery: a source book I-II, Australian Society for Historical Archaeology, Occasional Papers*, 4-5 (1979).
21. Nash 1980: 45.
22. Binford 1983: 26.
23. Compare the partial (the word is the authors' own) view of the recent development of prehistoric studies in Australia given by Murray & White 1981.
24. See for example Rathje & McCarthy 1977; Rathje 1981.
25. Gould & Schiffer 1981: *passim*.
26. Binford 1981; 1983.
27. Graffam 1982.
28. Deetz 1976; 1977: 138 ff.
29. Barwick et al. 1980: section 10.
30. Soechting 1977.
31. Dethlefsen 1981.
32. I owe this reference to Professor D.J. Mulvaney; see also Yarwood 1964; 1968.
33. South 1977: 1 ff.
34. Binford 1983: 194.
35. Mackinolty 1983.
36. Allen 1967.
37. The most useful précis of both sites are to be found respectively in Allen 1973 and Birmingham 1976.
38. South 1977: 6 commenting on Ferguson 1977.
39. Cumming 1981.
40. Compare the picture of general awareness of the potential offered by urban archaeology given by Dickens 1982.
41. Elia 1983.
42. Mulvaney 1981.
43. Dymond 1974.
44. Young 1981; 1983.
45. Brunskill 1981; 1982.
46. Frankel 1972.
47. I acknowledge here the contributions of my old friends and former colleagues, Judy Birmingham and Ian Jack, and many years spent jointly in sifting through the rubbish of the past—and sometimes the rubbish of the present.

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