

## A nineteenth-century hay rope from Hobart, Tasmania

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*Rope made of hay rarely survives to be described in the archaeological literature. However, an example preserved under the floorboards of a nineteenth-century Hobart house is reported here.*

In 1858, a slate-roofed, sandstone house was built at 68 Warwick Street in Hobart, Tasmania. During renovations in 2004, lengths of hay rope were recovered by the owners from under the floorboards of the building's upper landing. As underfloor electrical and gas services had not been laid through this part of the house, it is likely that the boards had never been disturbed. The rope was loosely deposited along with wood shavings but otherwise was not associated with any other artefacts.

Except for one 55 cm fragment (Figure 1), the rope was too fragile to remove from the container it was stored in. It is estimated to be 3 metres long. The rope is single ply and comprises plant fibres laid clockwise. This suggests it was made by a right-handed person. Where it remains under tension it is approximately 16 mm in diameter. The plant fibres were identified by Dr Miguel de Salas and Mr Matthew Baker of the Tasmanian Herbarium as the leaves and culms of *Agrostis capillaris*, commonly known as bent grass, a European pasture grass. Bent seeds are known to have been sown in Tasmania to establish pasture for cattle (*Colonial Times* 22 August 1828:1a). Flowering material incorporated in the material suggests that it was cut as hay in mid to late summer (Figure 2).



Figure 1: A portion of the hay rope showing the right hand twist of culms and leaves.

Since hay would have been brought to Hobart as fodder for animals, especially horses, hay rope could have been made in town. It is more likely, however, to have been made by

agricultural labourers as a seasonal rural occupation after harvest. This craft (and the related craft of straw rope making) was probably brought out by settlers from Ireland and Scotland where its use was then common. Indeed hay rope has been made in Ireland within living memory (An Snag Breac Beo nd; Mac Eoin 2007). Hay ropes were made by hand, machines not being introduced until the 1880s, when hay rope began to be made in quantity for use as cores in foundry work (*Scientific American Supplement* 1884). Handmade hay rope was manufactured simply by continuously pulling handfuls of hay from a stook and twisting, until the required length was made (An Snag Breac Beo nd). A stick might also be employed to facilitate twisting (Mac Eoin 2007). Hay rope had many uses, such as securing hay ricks, sacks, bales and loose stuff; forming halters for animals; weaving chair seats and backs; padding for saddles and animal collars; and cushioning the human head when carrying heavy loads.

Tasmanian Aborigines also made rope. For this they used 'wire or wiry grass', possibly the leaves of *Ehrharta juncea* now *Tetrarrhena juncea* or *Gahnia sp* (Gott 1992) as well as kangaroo skin (Backhouse 1843:172). They used the rope to facilitate tree climbing in search of possums (Lloyd 1862:46; Royal Society of Tasmania 1873). Aborigines were also noted using grass rope for dog leads (*Hobart Town Courier* 13 Nov. 1830:2, 3). 68 Warwick Street has an indirect link to traditional Aborigines, as it was built on the plot originally granted to George Augustus Robinson. Robinson was responsible for bringing numerous individuals in from the bush and some were housed close by during 1829 and 1830 (Plomley 2008:111, 127 note 65).

Despite the relationship between the house site and Aboriginal Tasmanians, this rope is probably directly associated with the construction of the house in 1858. Material was sometimes deliberately placed in building cavities within or close to chimney, door and window surrounds as folk magic items to ward off evil spirits (Evans 2010). This might include



Figure 2: The flowering material of *Agrostis capillaris* (centre adjacent to scale) intertwined with the culms and leaves suggests a mid to late summer harvesting.

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items such as shoes, clothes or cats, as well as domestic artefacts and children's toys. Rope appears to have been rarely used, though a so-called 'witch's ladder', a rope with feathers inserted, is held by the Pitt Rivers Museum (Wingfield 2010). Given its length and diameter, however, as well as its place of deposition, the rope from Warwick Street was most likely used for carrying loose building material, perhaps laths for walling, to the top floor. It may then have been thrown under the floor as the boards were being laid as a convenient means of disposing of building debris. Similarly, two pieces of looped hay rope were found discarded in the roof cavity of the Falls of Clyde inn built in 1830s in Bothwell, Tasmania by the Scot Alexander Denholm. In this case, the rope may have bound the bundles of straw used for insulating the roof space (Evans pers. comm.).

This sample of hay rope is a fascinating example of a very rare surviving ephemeron created and used by members of the nineteenth-century working class.

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