

A PROPOSAL TO FOUND A SOCIETY FOR HISTORICAL ARCHAEOLOGY.

Australia's colonial past is nowadays attracting more and more attention. We see this in the current battles to preserve historic buildings and suburbs, in the growing interest in old bottles and earthenware, in the studies of tombstones and early shipwrecks and in the recording and excavation of actual nineteenth century sites.

Local Historical Societies under the guidance of the National Trust's Industrial Archaeology Committee are already pioneering the work of recording early sites and structures before their imminent destruction. This work is invaluable, but we now also need a forum for lectures and discussion, a journal, a newsletter, and a centre for inter-state and international exchange of ideas, progress and techniques. In other words, there seems to be a place for a new body to provide a focus for this interest -- and, incidentally, to promote responsible attitudes and standards among the public.

We therefore propose: The Australian Society for Historical Archaeology. Its aims: to encourage and support the whole concept of nineteenth century Australian archaeology, and to collect and exchange information about its structures, artefacts and their historical implications.

What is historical archaeology? Why excavate nineteenth century sites? Surely these are too recent, and the written record so full as to make digging unnecessary!

Historical archaeology is concerned with the works of man after his industrial revolution. It began in the nineteen fifties in England and America, developing from the feeling that fine old iron bridges, old blast furnaces and the early industrial machines are as much a part of our record of man as chipped flint hand-axes, bone sickles or Etruscan tomb paintings. And there is no doubt that the archaeological study of an old gold-mining town or the site of a former pottery or glass factory or brickworks gives us information about our grandparents' and great-grandparents' way of life quite outside what can be found in the most detailed diaries and histories of the period.

In America this study also grew from the natural interest of an affluent society in its own past -- from the collection of old curios, buckles, earthenware and especially glass bottles. The excavation of the 17th and 18th century frontier forts followed, with the spectacular -- and expensive -- reconstructions of show places like Williamsburg, Virginia, or the Plimouth Plantation; and serious-minded archaeologists began to be more and more interested in these situations where, from a combination of private

LIBRARY OF N.S.W.

23 NOV 1971

MITCHELL LIBRARY
LIBRARY DEPOSIT COPY

ML
Q913.06

AN 45221770

4

2

letters, official records, ethnography and the total discarded contents of some frontier outpost, the relations between an intrusive culture and the aboriginal Indians could be fully studied. As to the colonists themselves, the New England archaeologist Jim Deetz has studied (with the aid of a computer) some 400,000 tombstones of the 17th-19th centuries, to show how fashions in headstones changed and spread as new social and economic conditions brought changing views on death.

In England, the well-established studies of earthenware and porcelains, glass and furniture have in turn been followed by excavations of old country houses, potteries and brickworks in Staffordshire and London; and detailed studies of old mills, road systems, vernacular architecture and canals are beginning to take hold. Clay pipes and bottles are being subjected -- like most other classes of archaeological evidence -- to statistical analysis.

Several journals are now being published on both sides of the Atlantic -- "Historical Archaeology" in the U.S.A., "Post-Medieval Archaeology" and "Industrial Archaeology" in Britain. They contain excavation reports of industrial sites, often undertaken as emergency salvage work in the face of building development schemes. Or studies of Victorian or Georgian relics of the kind we all come across in junk shops and antique shops -- often carried out in a way that makes them surprisingly informative about old techniques of production, trade organization or social context.

In Australia too we have not been idle in the last few years. There have been excavations at James King's 1830-1850 pottery at Irrawang (Raymond Terrace), at the short-lived settlement of Port Essington in the Northern Territory and on Flinders Island. In progress are studies of tombstones, glass bottle manufacture and nineteenth century earthenware; and there are many thousands more sites awaiting systematic recording and possible protection in the face of encroaching suburbia...or just plain simple neglect.

If you are interested in participating in these activities, or would simply like to hear more details about the formation of the Society, fill in the form which is enclosed and return it to us.

.