

ARCHAEOLOGICAL PROGRAM 50-72 UNION STREET, PYRMONT

Why Undertake an Archaeological Excavation

The archaeological program at Union Street is undertaken as part of the redevelopment of the site. The developers, PDP Union Pty Ltd, are required under the NSW *Heritage Act 1977*, to gain approval from the NSW Heritage Council to disturb relics. As part of this process an Assessment report was written identifying the nature and extent of any potential archaeological remains that may survive on the site. We are now excavating those areas considered to contain archaeological remains. Our aim is to record these remains so as to have information about the nature of the 1840s and later nineteenth-century occupation of Pyrmont.

Historical Background

Aboriginal History

The original inhabitants of Pyrmont were part of the Gurangi people, the local band being the Cadigal. In 1789 approximately 50 percent of the Aboriginal population in and around Sydney Cove was killed by an epidemic, thought to be smallpox. This caused dislocation and eventually regrouping of the remnant bands of Aborigines. The Cadigal were the inhabitants of the Pyrmont and Ultimo peninsula and called it *Pirrama*. They appear to have remained living on the peninsula into the 1830s where 'Tinker's Well' provided a constant fresh water supply and food sources were available from the shoreline and harbour. It was not until Edward Macarthur began to subdivide and clear Pyrmont in 1836 that the Aborigines were forced further to the south into the area of Ultimo. The settlers' utilisation of Pyrmont has resulted in the destruction of most of the archaeological sites associated with Aboriginal occupation. The quarrying of rock faces, the burning of shell from middens for lime mortar, the clearing of the land and the levelling of ground for building have left little evidence of the Aboriginal occupation in either Pyrmont or Ultimo.

Pyrmont & The Macarthurs

The derivation of the name Pyrmont has been attributed to parallels with the spa town of Pyrmont in Germany although there has been some suggestion that it is similar to the Aboriginal name for the peninsula, *Pirrama*.

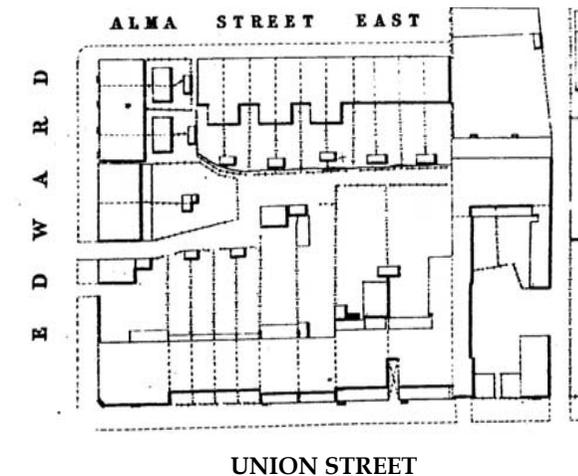
The Pyrmont Ultimo peninsula consisted of a rocky sandstone ridge forming a spine along the length of the peninsula with numerous freshwater streams running down off the ridge. The Pyrmont end of the ridge formed two separate headlands. Macarthur's grant was on the eastern headland. Following the granting of the peninsula there was limited use of the land. A drawing from 1832 showing the windmill, thought to have been erected by a member of Macarthur's family, depicts a hilly landscape with dense vegetation and swampy sandy shorelines. The drawing shows the eastern shore, the most accessible from Darling Harbour and Sydney Cove, was undeveloped by 1832.

Fitzgerald and Golder suggest that Macarthur's other interests, in association with politics, health and the slow economic development of Sydney, limited the potential growth of Pyrmont until the middle of the nineteenth century. While the northern part of the peninsula contained deep water anchorages and good supplies of sandstone for quarrying there was little economic need for these as similar resources existed in Millers Point which were easier to access from Sydney Cove. It was not until 1826 that wharfage facilities spread down into Darling Harbour, along the eastern side of Cockle Bay.

The exploitation of the Pyrmont sandstone started slowly. The northwestern point of Elizabeth Bay was known as Ballast Point, the source of much of Sydney's ballast for ships, roads and railway building. It was not until the 1850s that large quantities of Pyrmont sandstone were used for the construction of Sydney University. This led to the development of sandstone quarries on the peninsula and the recognition that this was the superior sandstone in Sydney. Quarrying became Pyrmont's major industry. The suburb attracted increasing numbers of stone artisans and workers in related industries.

The only early industrial activities on Macarthur's grant were the windmill, near the corner of Church and Mill St (now cleared down to bedrock), and a salt-boiling works. Macarthur went into exile in 1808 for his role in the Rum Rebellion and it was eight years before he returned to Sydney. Some time after Macarthur returned to Sydney he planned to build a large home in Pyrmont from local stone. While the stone was quarried no dwelling was erected. The stone was removed to Parramatta for extensions to Elizabeth Farm.

John Macarthur died in 1834 and left his estate to his wife and children. Edward Macarthur, who was living in England at the time of his father's death, purchased the Pyrmont lands from his mother and sister. He quickly made plans to subdivide Pyrmont and began constructing Harris Street in 1836. Edward Macarthur's original design for the estate was a well-to-do residential subdivision but this failed to attract interested purchasers who were more inclined to the eastern suburbs. The final plans resulted in a mixture of industrial wharfage and low-income housing as they catered to the people interested in investing in Pyrmont. The wharfage and ship-building areas were necessary for expansion beyond Darling Harbour and this attracted associated workers. Union Street formed the southern boundary of Macarthur's Pyrmont Estate.



1888 plan showing the houses on corner of Union & Edward Streets.

The Archaeological Site

The archaeological remains of houses 64 to 66 Union Street are the focus of the archaeological program. By the 1880s nos 50 to 72 Union Street contained ten houses, a shop and a hotel. The hotel still survives on the corner. Nos 64 to 66 were the earliest ones built in Union Street. They were built by the early 1840s. The other six houses were being built in 1859. The hotel was built by 1875. There were numerous occupants in these houses, very few of whom were in residence for longer than five years. Some of the larger eastern houses, nos 60 to 66, were used around 1900 as boarding houses, some of which were run by women. Where people were listed with occupations they appear to have been working in local industries, such as shipbuilding and sailing.



View to northwest at 58-66 Union Street, May 1919. Council Record Series 51, Demolition Books 1900-1949, NSCA CRS 51/765.

The boarding house at no. 64 was operated between 1880 to 1905 by two women, Elizabeth Fenwick then Anna Lamb.

The Gillespie Brothers' Anchor Flour Mill was situated at 52 Union Street and was commissioned in 1921. The mill complex covered the whole of the study area. The main flour mill building was a four-storey solid brick structure. The base walls were about three feet (one metre) thick and the adjoining

wheat cleaning and flour warehouse were of similar construction. Twenty silos were constructed on Edward Street and could hold 5,000 tons of wheat. The mill was demolished after 1982. The construction of the mill destroyed many of the houses within the study area.

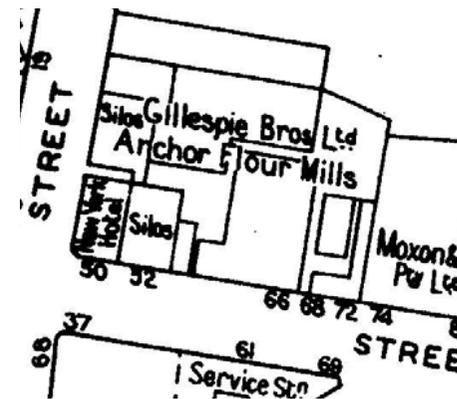
Research Questions

Archaeological investigations are guided by questions we want to be able to address using the archaeological evidence we have recorded and described. This is an important aspect of the project for archaeologists. The archaeological evidence must be able to help us rethink, question or reframe our views of the past. Through analysing the archaeological information we can add to historical knowledge.

The questions we have identified to assist in this archaeological program are:

- The material culture (the remains of houses, structures, deposits and artefacts) associated with the nineteenth-century occupation of the site has the ability to inform us about day-to-day issues associated with the lives of the residents of Pyrmont. These remains can provide information on living standards, consumer choices, construction of gender identity and the nature of childhood.
- The material culture of the site should add to our understanding about the social and economic influences on the residents of Pyrmont and how these influences affected their behaviour, as seen through their choices about:
 - where activities were undertaken within a house,
 - what type of activities were undertaken within a house,
 - what, how and where to eat,
 - what to wear,
 - what was typical recreation for adults and children within working-class homes?
 - what to buy.

- How does the nature of the urban environment – the streets and houses in which people live influence people's lives? Some recent work has suggested that the landscape of the urban environment as constraining and contested by the creators of the environment and by those who lived in the houses.



Plan of the Gillespie Bros. Anchor Flour Mill. 1949. This was a large complex of buildings covering the site after the demolition of the houses.

References

- Shirley Fitzgerald & Hilary Golder *Pyrmont and Ultimo Under Siege* (1994).
- Michael Matthews *Pyrmont & Ultimo, A History*, (1982).
- Anne Ross 'Tribal and linguistic boundaries: A reassessment of the evidence', in Graeme Aplin, (ed.) *Sydney Before Macquarie, A Difficult Infant* (1988).
- Peter Turbet *The Aborigines of the Sydney District Before 1788*, (1989).
- Photos and plans are from Mitchell Library, State Library NSW and City of Sydney Council Archives.