

Peace Hall, Sydney Town Hall

Results of Archaeological Program

(Interim Report)

Background

The proposed excavation of a services basement in the western half of the Peace Hall led to the archaeological investigation of the space in 2007. The area was extended to the east in January 2008 and a total of 66 graves were recorded out of 70 possible graves (Fig. 1).

The area was part of the Old Sydney Burial Ground, Sydney's first permanent cemetery, set out by Governor Phillip and Reverend Cowper in September 1792. It remained in use until January 1820, during which time some 2240 burials were made according to research undertaken by the City of Sydney historians.

Results of Archaeological Program

The majority of graves were found to have been exhumed at the time of the construction of the halls in the late 1880s. The original ground levels had been cut down at that time, in most cases to coffin depth. Nearly all the graves had coffins (Fig. 2), which would have made the identification of the graves at that time much easier. The assumption that the original ground level would slope abruptly down to the west was not borne out by the graves which were cut to a uniform depth from east to west, although they were deeper to the north.

It had also been assumed that the area was likely to contain several brick vaults, after evidence of one had been found in the southern section of the study area during monitoring of drainage works in 1991. In the event, no other built tombs were present in the area.

The main result of the program was the finding that nearly all the graves had been either exhumed or substantially disturbed. Only one grave (Grave 37) had a complete skeleton, representing a burial that had not been exhumed. A summary of results is:

- 66 graves
- 27 with remnant human bone
- 1 grave certainly unexhumed
- All except 2 graves with coffins
- All coffins shouldered except 2 adult and 2 children in rectangular boxes.
- Where orientation of the coffins could be determined, 27 were orientated with head in the west and 25 with the head in the east.
- Only one of the skeletons could be sexed (female in Grave 9) in the field. Sex of others may be able to be determined during the post-excavation analysis.
- Burials include 8 juveniles.
- No evidence for buttons or other clothing, so therefore probably all were buried in shrouds.
- Some evidence for family or other groupings, in that some graves were immediately adjacent to one or more other graves, and for rows, adding to information on the cemetery's layout (Fig. 3).
- Evidence for coffin manufacture including nails (Fig. 4, 5).
- Some timber samples from the coffins may be able to be identified.
- Analysis of soil samples will shed light on the poor condition of the bone recovered from the site.
- An Open Day attracted over 3000 people.



Figure 1: Revised plan of main Peace Hall basement area indicating locations of all graves.

Archaeological Work still to be completed

New services will be introduced into the corridors on the southern and northern sides of the Peace Hall. This is likely to require new excavation. The western side of the storeroom at the western end of the Peace Hall is currently covered by electrical cables (to the north of graves 68 and 69) – this area will need to be examined once it is accessible. Similarly, the new north and south access routes from this room will need to be examined once extant flooring has been removed. New stairs at the northeastern corner of the Peace Hall may involve new subsurface excavation but this is unknown at present.



Figure 2: General view of graves to west.



Figure 3: Excavating and recording graves 41 and 42.



Figure 4: Pattern of nails in Grave 14.



Figure 5: Impressions in the clay at the base of the grave give details of coffin's manufacture.

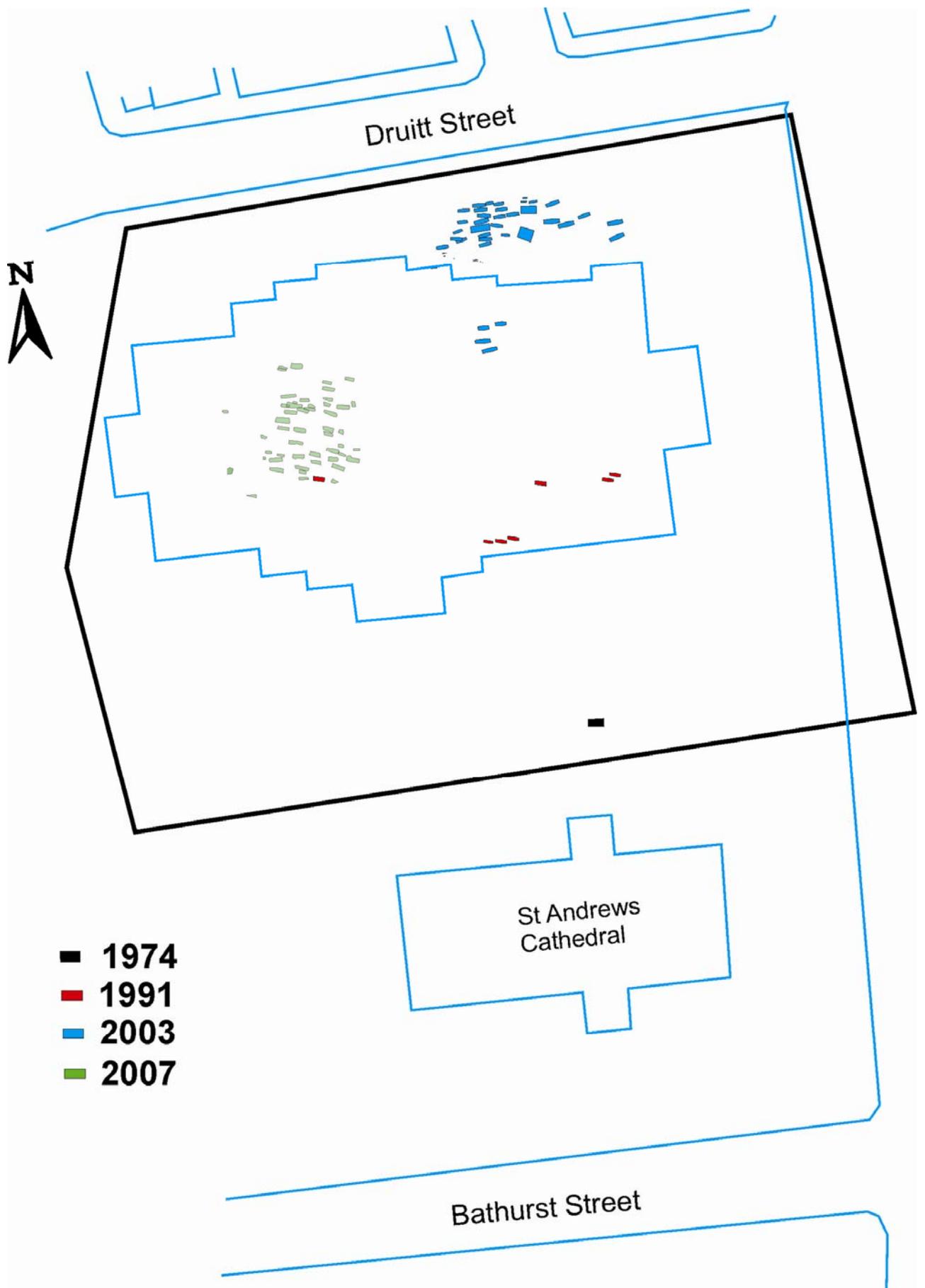


Figure 6: Plan of graves recorded to December 2007.