

**DOCUMENTATION AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL
INVESTIGATION OF AN ABORIGINAL 'VILLAGE'
SITE IN SOUTH WESTERN VICTORIA***

Elizabeth Williams

The route to a richer archaeology must not be through either the *data* or *theory* of anthropology but via the *archaeology* of ethnography-rich regions.

Les Groube 1977:69

During the first few years of contact between Aborigines and Europeans a number of European explorers, overlanders, and settlers observed, in certain parts of Australia, Aboriginal campsites which consisted of substantially constructed huts.¹ Some observers termed these settlements 'villages'. In order to find out more about Aboriginal settlements, especially 'villages', we can follow Groube's advice quoted above, use the historical record as a guide, and attempt to find an archaeological example of a settlement complex.

Aboriginal society changed greatly as a result of contact with Europeans and while the construction of substantial huts persisted in certain areas until well into the contact period² the use of 'villages' as a settlement form seems to have disappeared soon after first contact.³ Despite this we have a detailed account, which dates to the early contact period, of one such settlement. The site was situated near Caramut in south western Victoria, a region in which apparently such settlements were especially common.⁴ For over a century this settlement has been cited in the literature;⁵ the primary documentation is listed below. It consists of descriptions, drawings and crudely-drawn maps showing the location of the site in relation to settlers' huts. Also listed is an extract from one of these descriptions, together with a brief comment on hut forms of the south western region.

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* My thanks to Isabel McBryde and anonymous referees for comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

¹ Coleman 1982:6-7; Grey 1841, II:19-20; Lourandos 1970:104-116 and 1980:156a & b; Mitchell 1839, I:225, 240, 263; Mulligan cited in Jack 1921:444, 454; Roth 1899:107-110; Sturt 1833, I:89, II:100.

² See Massola 1971:138.

³ Bonwick 1870:50; Smyth 1878, I:128 footnote; Lang 1847:402.

⁴ See Lourandos 1980.

⁵ Smyth 1878, I:125-126 footnote; Thomas 1906:72; Corris 1968:26; Christie 1979:8; Lourandos 1980:156b.

DOCUMENTATION

1. Journal of William Thomas for the period 1st December 1843-1st March 1844, footnote. A copy is in the papers of William Thomas, Item 1.
2. Papers of William Thomas. Item 24, Number 11. 16pp. 'Aborigines: Superior Races' 13th July 1858. A copy is in Item 25.
3. Notebook of William Thomas, in the papers of R. Brough Smyth. Box 1176/6(b), pp. 80, 113.
4. Papers of R. Brough Smyth. Box 1176/7 folder (c) (see Plate 1).
5. Papers of William Thomas Item 22, p. 537 (see Plate 2).

Reference 2

. . . by Mustons and the Scrubby Creek to the westward . . . first settlers found a regular aboriginal settlement. This settlement was about 50 miles NE of Port Fairy. There was on the banks of the creek between 20 and 30 huts of the form of a beehive or sugar loaf, some of them capable of holding a dozen people. These huts were about 6' high or [a] little more, about 10' in diameter, an opening about 3'6" high for a door which they closed at night if they required with a sheet of bark, an aperture at the top 8 or 9" to let out the smoke which in wet weather they covered with a sod. These buildings were all made of a circular form, closely worked and then covered with mud, they would bear the weight of a man on them without injury. These blacks made various well constructed dams in the creek, which by certain heights acted as sluice gates at the flooding season . . . In 1840 a sheep station was formed on the opposite banks of the creek to this Aboriginal village or town. My informant who was a well educated man and a nephew to the Recorder of the City of London, though a shepherd at the time gave me a drawing he had taken of the village . . . These blacks used to live almost on fish, grubs and small animals and were perfectly harmless and stationary in 1841 or the end of 1840. My informant stated that the grass got bare or scarce on the side of the creek where the sheep station was, and one day while the Blacks were from their village, up the creek, seeking their daily fare, the white people set fire to and demolished the aboriginal settlement and it afterwards became the sheep farmers [?] . . . What became of the blacks he would not tell but at the close of 1841 when he again went shepherding in that locality he could not trace a single hut along the whole creek. Construction of this 'beehive'-shaped hut type seems to have been restricted to the south western region of Victoria.⁶ It appears to have been associated with a lengthy stay and was also used during periods of wet weather.⁷ We can contrast this form with that of a documented less-substantial structure, which consisted of a framework of boughs set into a dome shape (see Plate 3). The less substantial form was not waterproof and was used in fine weather or whilst travelling.⁸ When wet weather

⁶ Griffith 1845:152; Darlott in the Kenyon papers; Gisbourne 29 December 1839.

⁷ Dawson 1881:10-11.

⁸ Dawson 1881:10-11.

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Plate 1 – Drawing of the Aboriginal 'village'.
Photograph courtesy of the Trustees of the La Trobe Library, Melbourne.

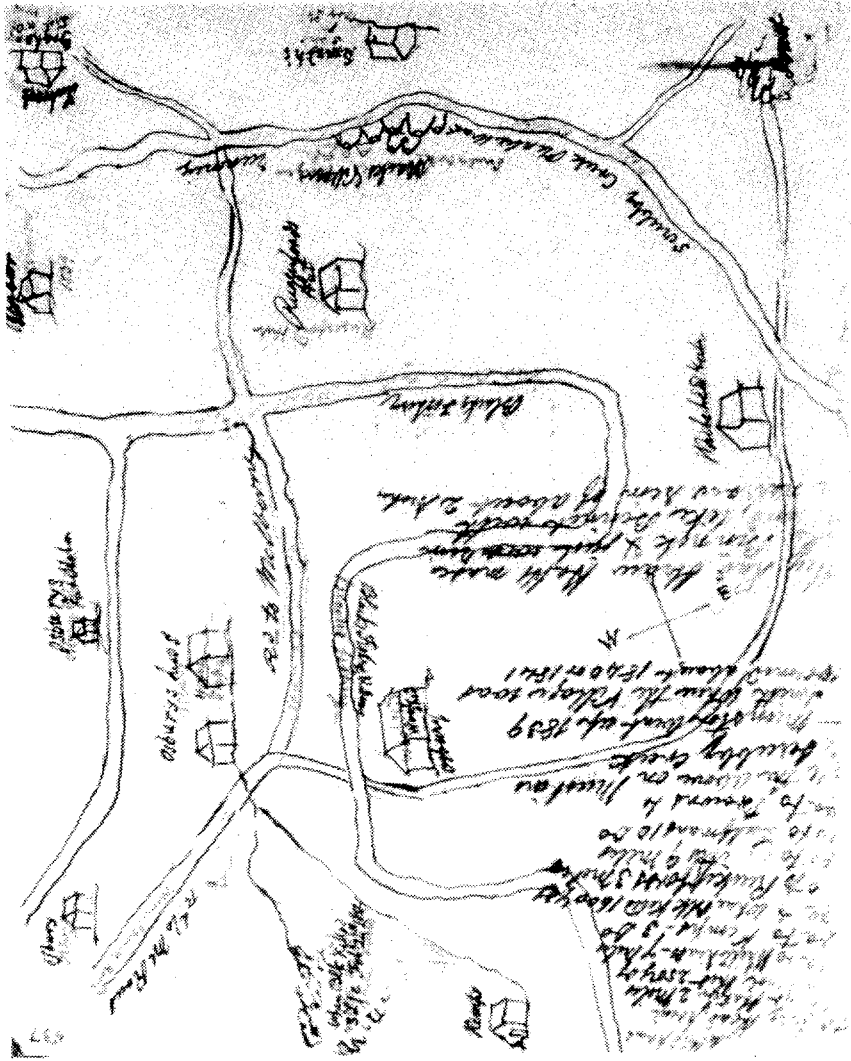


Plate 2 — Map dating to 1841-2, showing the location of an Aboriginal 'village' in relation to settlers' huts. Photograph courtesy of the Trustees of the Mitchell Library, Sydney.

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seemed imminent, the domed form could be converted into the more substantial beehive form by heaping earth and turf over the framework of boughs.⁹

We can determine whether this account is likely to be accurate by establishing the identity of the informant. This is difficult as none of the accounts names him. We can attempt to resolve the problem by determining who collected the accounts and seeing whether this leads us to the informant's identify.

Most accounts come from the papers of William Thomas; the remainder (now in the papers of R. Brough Smyth) can be traced to Thomas.¹⁰ As all the documents are in Thomas' handwriting,¹¹ we may conclude that Thomas was the collector. William Thomas was the Assistant Protector of Aborigines in Victoria from 1839 to 1849 and his particular responsibility was the Melbourne and Western Port district.

The fact that Thomas collected reports of a settlement situated in the south western region seems strange given his responsibility for the south eastern districts. Since we know that Thomas never travelled as far westwards as Caramut¹² then how did he come to collect this information?

The answer lies with Thomas' informant and clues to his identity are in Reference 2. Thomas states that he obtained his information from an 'informant who was a well educated man and a nephew to the Recorder of the City of London, though a shepherd at the time'.¹³ No further clues are found in the other accounts and Thomas' personal journal cannot be consulted as it was lost last century.¹⁴ One clue lies however in *another* document contained in folder (c), Papers of R. Brough Smyth (see Reference 4). This is an account in Thomas' handwriting of a massacre of Aborigines. The document shows the location of the massacre relative to 'Osbery's home station'. Historical sources¹⁵ state that a Thomas Osbrey and a Sidney Smith leased the 'Caramut' run. They took over this run situated near the present township of Caramut from the original leaseholder, John Muston, in 1841.¹⁶ Christie¹⁷ states that a massacre took place at Mustons Creek on Osbrey's 'Caramut' run, on the 24th February 1842. This incident became known as the 'Lubra Creek Massacre',¹⁸ and we can conclude that the item in folder (c) is a representation of it. Unusually for the times, three Europeans were charged with murder and their trial received much publicity in the newspapers of the day.¹⁹

⁹ Presland 1977:32; Griffith 1845:152.

¹⁰ At the end of Reference 2 Thomas has added 'Send copy to Mister Smyth, 18th July 1864'.

¹¹ Carol Cooper pers.comm.

¹² Diane Barwick pers.comm.

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ Carol Cooper pers.comm.

¹⁵ Billis and Kenyon 1974; Duff n.d.

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ 1979:50.

¹⁸ 'Garryowen' 1888:360.

¹⁹ *Portland Guardian*, 10 June 1843; *Port Phillip Gazette*, 2 August 1843.

Let us now consider how this incident is linked with the identify of the informer and the documentation of the 'village'. A number of people gave evidence for the Crown at the trial. The two main witnesses were a Christopher McGuinness who at the time of the massacre was a carpenter on the 'Caramut' run,²⁰ and a George Arabin who was also employed there²¹ (the newspaper reports do not state his occupation). The accused were tried in June 1843 but despite a seemingly strong case for the Crown, were acquitted. The newspaper report of the trial²² states that Arabin and McGuinness were, at the time of publication (August 2, 1843), in the employ of Assistant Protector Thomas at the Western Port Protectorate Station. Why had these people moved from 'Caramut' to Western Port? In answer to this we can cite a report written by Thomas to G.A. Robinson.²³ Thomas states, in a review of his activities for June 1843:

I had [? . . .] to my charge also two witnesses for the Crown in the case of the Queen vs Hill, Beswick and Betts, on the 9th per your (Robinson) orders. I take them to the Central Station at Nerree Nerre [sic] Warren.

We may infer that after the acquittal 'Caramut' was no longer a safe residence for the two Crown witnesses. It appears that the Protectorate system took responsibility for them and moved them as far away from 'Caramut' as possible, to Thomas' Western Port station.

The link between Thomas and 'Caramut' is thus established. Who then was the informant – was it Arabin or McGuinness? We can again refer to Reference 2. Thomas states that his informant was a 'well educated man'. McGuinness can be excluded as he was illiterate.²⁴ Arabin however was literate²⁵ and we can conclude that George Arabin was Thomas' informant. Because Arabin had actually *resided* in the Caramut area then we may hope that his observations of Aborigines are likely to be accurate.

Since we have established the identity of the informant, we can attempt to determine the location of the settlement. This is no easy task when we compare Arabin's crudely-drawn maps, (which could be more accurately termed 'mud maps') with a present day map of the same area. There is little obvious correspondence; but this problem can be overcome by determining the position of settlers' huts and named creeks *independently*. We may then determine the location of the settlement *relative* to these features and transpose this information on to a present-day base map. To determine the position of huts and the names of creeks, we must first establish when the original map was drawn. Referring back to the historical accounts²⁶ we can conclude that Arabin's map dates to the period 1841-2. Since this is the initial contact

²⁰ *Port Phillip Gazette*, 2 August 1843.

²¹ *ibid.*

²² *ibid.*

²³ Thomas to Robinson 5th September 1843.

²⁴ In the transcript of the trial – see N.C.R. Criminal Trial Briefs, June 1843. He does not sign his name and only gives his mark.

²⁵ He does sign his name in the transcript of the trial.

²⁶ See Reference 2.

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period, it is difficult to obtain much detailed information on the location of settlers' huts and the names of creeks.

Some information does exist. This includes: maps held in the Historic Plans Section, Victorian Lands Department, Melbourne; Itineraries of Foster Fyans, the Commissioner for Crown Lands for the Portland Bay District; contemporary Directories;²⁷ manuscript material held by the descendants of the original settlers; information used by Kenyon in compiling his book *Pastoral pioneers of Port Phillip*;²⁸ observations made by George Augustus Robinson, whilst on a series of trips to the Western District²⁹ and sources such as the Clyde Company Papers.³⁰

Figure 1 presents historical information compiled from these sources on the location of settlers huts and the names of creeks and swamps and it can be compared with Arabin's map (Plate 1). There are some minor problems involved with locating a number of features. The first concerns the identification of 'Scrubby Creek'. The creek so named in Figure 1 is known locally today as 'Scrubby Creek' and has carried this name since at least 1846.³¹ While I am unable to determine whether it bore the same name for the period 1841-2, it is not unreasonable to assume that is the creek which Arabin refers to, especially as it feeds into Muston's Creek.³² Secondly, it is not possible to determine the location of 'Ruggerford's' hut. Fyans³³ states that a 'Rutherford' was an overseer for Payne, who in 1842 took over part of Smith and Osbrey's 'Caramut' run.³⁴ This is possibly the 'Ruggerford' shown on the map. However there is no information available on where his hut may have been situated. Thirdly, it is difficult to determine the position of 'Smith's' hut. 'Smith' stands for a Charles and not Sidney Smith (who ran 'Caramut' with Osbrey). He seems to have been resident in the Caramut district for only a relatively short time.³⁵ Using both Fyans's *Itineraries*³⁶ and Sievwright's *Journal*³⁷ we may estimate the position of Smith's station (see Figure 2). This is also the area where the local landowner has ploughed up fragments of glass and pottery. The final problem concerns the position of the 'village' relative to the settlers' huts. Compared with a map contained within Reference 4, Figure 1 differs in the relative location of the settlement and Whitehead's and Smith's huts respectively.

²⁷ Kerr 1841; 1842.

²⁸ Kenyon Papers.

²⁹ Presland 1977; 1980.

³⁰ Clyde Company Papers (Brown 1958).

³¹ Lands Department Map Number 336, Historic Plans Section, Lands Department, Melbourne.

³² See Reference 2 and Figure 1.

³³ Fyans: Half Yearly Returns, 1st July-31st December 1842.

³⁴ Fyans: Itineraries, 26th-27th September 1842.

³⁵ Fyans, 'Itineraries of Foster Fyans 1st January to 31st December 1842'. Entry for 26-27th September 1842.

³⁶ *ibid.*

³⁷ 1842, pp.6-7.

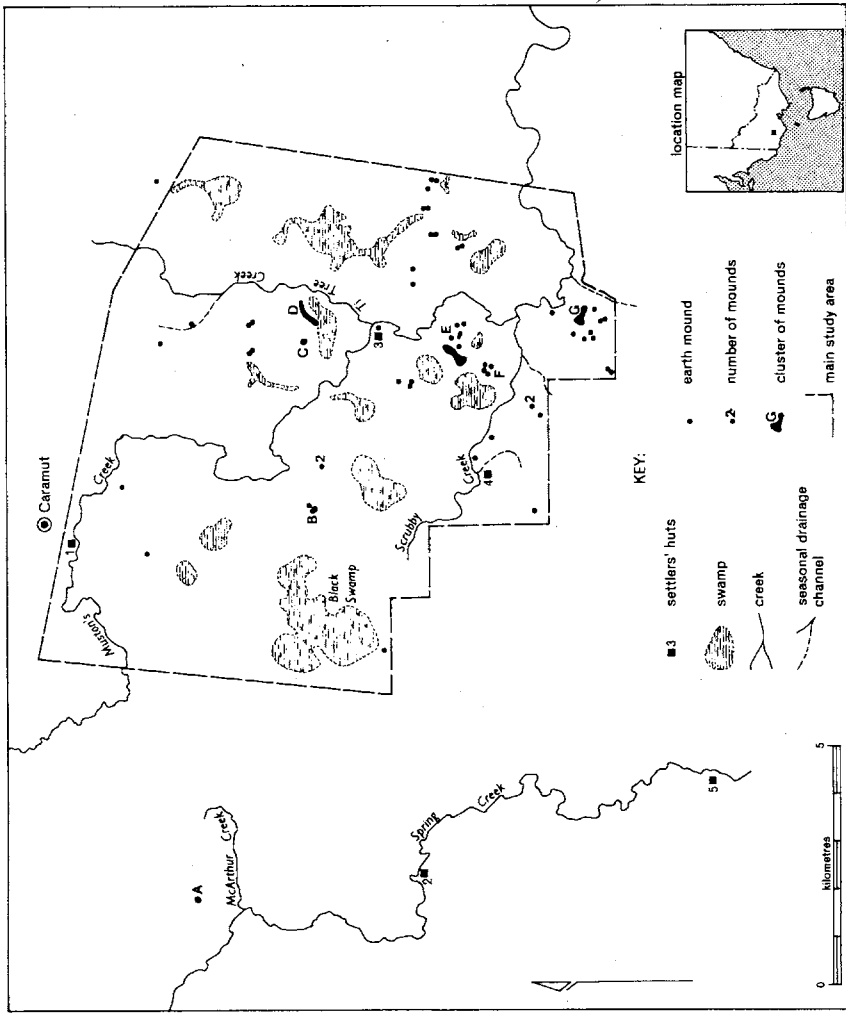


Figure 1 — Map of the Caramut area showing the location of settlers' huts and the names of creeks for the period 1841-2. The location of earth mound sites is also shown.

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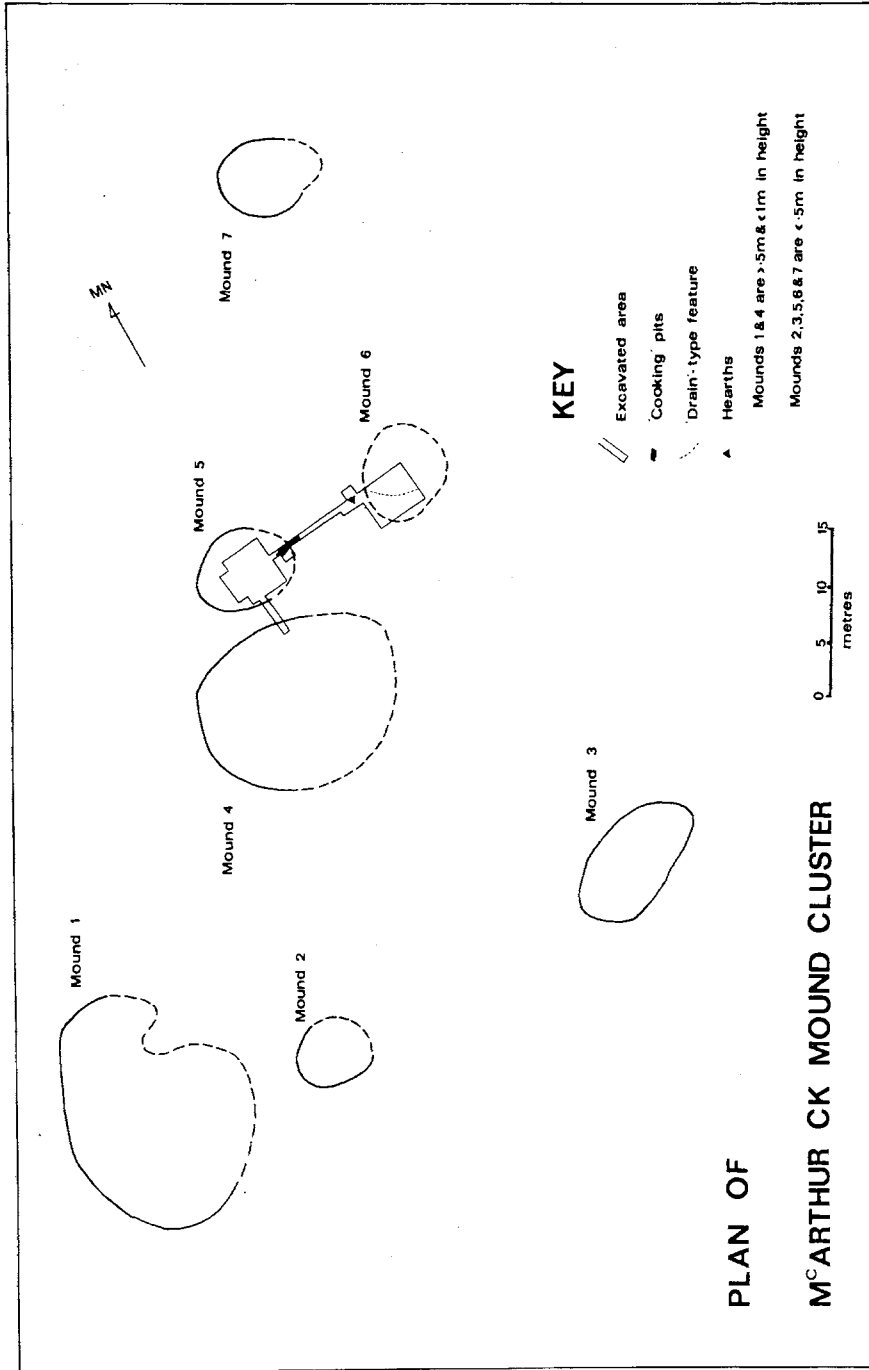


Figure 2 - Plan of the McArthur Creek mound cluster site showing position of excavated trenches.

Despite these difficulties, the weight of evidence suggests that the settlement was situated on the north side of Scrubby Creek, near its junction with Mustons Creek. This location is supported by another line of evidence contained within Reference 3, an account stating that:

(p.80) . . . They [the huts] were situated in a very extensive [?] flat country full of [?] reeds – much frequented by . . . [number of words missing] of the surrounding country, as a . . . [number of words missing and then the account continues on p.113] . . . abounding with supplies of food, roots and game . . .

If we infer that the missing words refer to a 'meeting place', then we may look to independent sources on meeting places. Dawson states that 'great meetings' were held at 'Mirraewuae, a large marsh celebrated for emus and other kinds of game'.³⁸ From information which he provides³⁹ Mirraewuae marsh can be identified as the 'Black Swamp' which is situated just south of Caramut (see Figure 1) and is drained by Scrubby Creek. Dawson also records another meeting place on Muston's Creek, 'a few miles from its junction with the River Hopkins'.⁴⁰ This places the second meeting place in the area where Mustons Creek is joined by Scrubby Creek. Given that the location for each of these meetings is virtually identical, it is likely that Dawson is referring here to the one 'great meeting'. That this meeting site was located near Scrubby Creek's junction with Mustons Creek suggests (citing Reference 3), that this is also the area where Arabin's 'village' was situated.

Knowing the approximate location of Arabin's site, are other sites of this type common here? George Augustus Robinson, while travelling past the area where McArthur Creek joins Spring Creek (see Figure 2), noted that '. . . the natives had their fixed residences or villages or homesteads'.⁴¹ Although Robinson did not describe these settlements in detail, we may assume that his use of the term 'village' implies that they consisted of substantial huts. We can therefore conclude that this type of settlement was reasonably common in the Caramut area.

To support the accuracy of Arabin's account we may note that when observers such as Robinson⁴² and Griffith⁴³ described substantial huts within the south western region of Victoria, these huts are virtually identical in form to those described by Arabin. We can conclude that Arabin's information is accurate and since we know the approximate location of the site we can attempt to investigate it archaeologically.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION OF ABORIGINAL SETTLEMENT SITES

The major problem involved in the archaeological study and interpretation of Aboriginal settlements is the relative lack of recognisable house structures. Our study is made easier if we are investigating a site which contains the remains of these

³⁸ Dawson 1881:3.

³⁹ Dawson 1881:2.

⁴⁰ Dawson 1881:79.

⁴¹ Presland 1977:73.

⁴² Presland 1977:36, 44, 84-85, 87; 1980:70 Fig. 23.

⁴³ 1845:152.

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structures, especially if it is documented as well. One problem remains — how do we identify these structures?

This is a difficult problem, although a number of researchers have been able to find such structures. Ranson⁴⁴ and Lourandos⁴⁵ have identified hut pits within shell midden sites while other workers such as Wesson⁴⁶ have identified stone hut foundations situated within areas of recent lava flows. A ground survey of the area outlined in Figure 1 found that neither shell midden sites or extensive areas of recent lava flows are present. It may therefore be difficult to identify the remains of huts. The survey *did* however find that earth mound sites and in particular clusters of such sites, were common. The largest series of clusters, that consisting of a total of 27 mounds, is located on the north side of Scrubby Creek, near to its junction with Mustons Creek.

We can therefore ask whether in the Caramut area, clusters of earth mounds represent at least in some instances the remains of clusters of substantial huts. This hypothesis is not a new one. Coutts,⁴⁷ Lourandos,⁴⁸ Williams and even Dawson⁴⁹ have all formed it independently. Historical accounts of mound function in Aboriginal society can be used to determine whether there is any support for this idea. In 1841 Robinson observed a hut constructed on the top of a mound,⁵⁰ noting also that a mound could result when a substantial hut burnt down.⁵¹ However he also observed that mounds could be used as baking ovens and as camping places.⁵² Archaeological excavation in south western Victoria has isolated examples of mounds used as 'general living sites'⁵³ but has not adequately resolved whether mounds were used as either hut foundations or as baking ovens as well. The Victoria Archaeological Survey's investigators documented features which they described as 'postmoulds', within a small mound near Chatsworth, about 20 kilometres north east of Caramut,⁵⁴ but it is difficult to assess this evidence as the site has not been published in detail. Clusters of mounds, therefore, may represent the remains of Aboriginal settlements which contained substantial huts, but the hypothesis has yet to be adequately tested using archaeological techniques.

To test this idea, I intended to excavate a section of the large cluster at the junction of Mustons and Scrubby Creeks. Before work commenced however, most of the site was ploughed up by the landowner. So another, smaller site consisting of a cluster of

⁴⁴ Ranson 1980:78.

⁴⁵ Lourandos 1970:82-113 and 1980:213-225.

⁴⁶ Wesson 1981.

⁴⁷ Coutts unpublished draft p.20.

⁴⁸ 1980:154.

⁴⁹ 1881:103-104.

⁵⁰ Presland 1977:91, Fig. 42.

⁵¹ Presland 1977:48.

⁵² Presland 1977:91, 124.

⁵³ Coutts et al 1976:1.

⁵⁴ Coutts et al 1977: Table 1.

seven mounds located at the junction of McArthur and Spring Creeks was instead chosen for analysis. This site is situated in the locality where Robinson had noted 'native homesteads';⁵⁵ for this reason I hoped that the site would represent the remains of a settlement which had contained house structures. This site, the McArthur Creek cluster, had never been ploughed.

A brief summary of the results of this excavation follows, illustrated by a plan of the site showing the position of the excavated trenches (Figure 2) and a more detailed plan of one of the excavated mounds (Figure 3). A detailed site report is presented elsewhere.⁵⁶ In accord with the wishes of the local Aboriginal community, no large mounds were disturbed. Instead, two smaller mounds (numbers 5 and 6) were partially excavated. The excavation technique used consisted of the removal of natural layers in units 5 centimetres in depth and 1.0 x 0.5 metres in extent.

The upper 5 centimetres of Mound 5 contained a series of large fragments of burnt wood up to 50 centimetres in length and 5 centimetres in width, which were located within an area traced out by a series of larger fragments of burnt wood situated within the 5-10 centimetre level. These larger fragments were plotted in Figure 3 and were found after removal to have been set into the surface of the mound. I have interpreted them as the foundations of a hut structure, where the upper level of burnt wood consists of the collapsed and burnt framework. The position of the foundations suggests that the hut was circular in plan and thus the upper framework consisted of boughs set into a domed shape. No remains of burnt earth were found plastered with mud as were those described by Arabin. The reconstructed form is thus similar to the less substantial type of structure pictured in Plate 3.

The stratigraphy of Mound 5 suggests that the hut is associated with a light-coloured gravelly deposit which seems to have been deliberately built-up to provide a well-drained foundation for the living area. The presence of the hut structure therefore demonstrates that huts were constructed on top of earth mounds. Thus ethno-historic information can be used as a guide to locating the remains of Aboriginal settlements and it can also be used as a means of investigating specific questions about these sites. While it is difficult to determine whether *this* site was the one observed by Robinson in 1841, the excavations have provided us with much information on earth mound sites as an example of settlement complexes. This information is briefly outlined below.

The different sediments which form the mound have been dated and these dates indicate that the mound began to be formed about 800 years ago.⁵⁷ Stone tools were found throughout the excavated profile, suggesting that occupation continued as the mound accumulated. The precision of present dating techniques is insufficient to enable us to determine whether this occupation was continuous or intermittent. It is also uncertain whether the mound accumulated naturally as a result of occupation or whether the inhabitants were deliberately adding to the mound over time. Preliminary analysis indicates that the latter was the case and this is discussed

⁵⁵ Presland 1977:73.

⁵⁶ Williams in prep b.

⁵⁷ 760±110 - (ANU 3585) and 870±150 - (ANU 3762).

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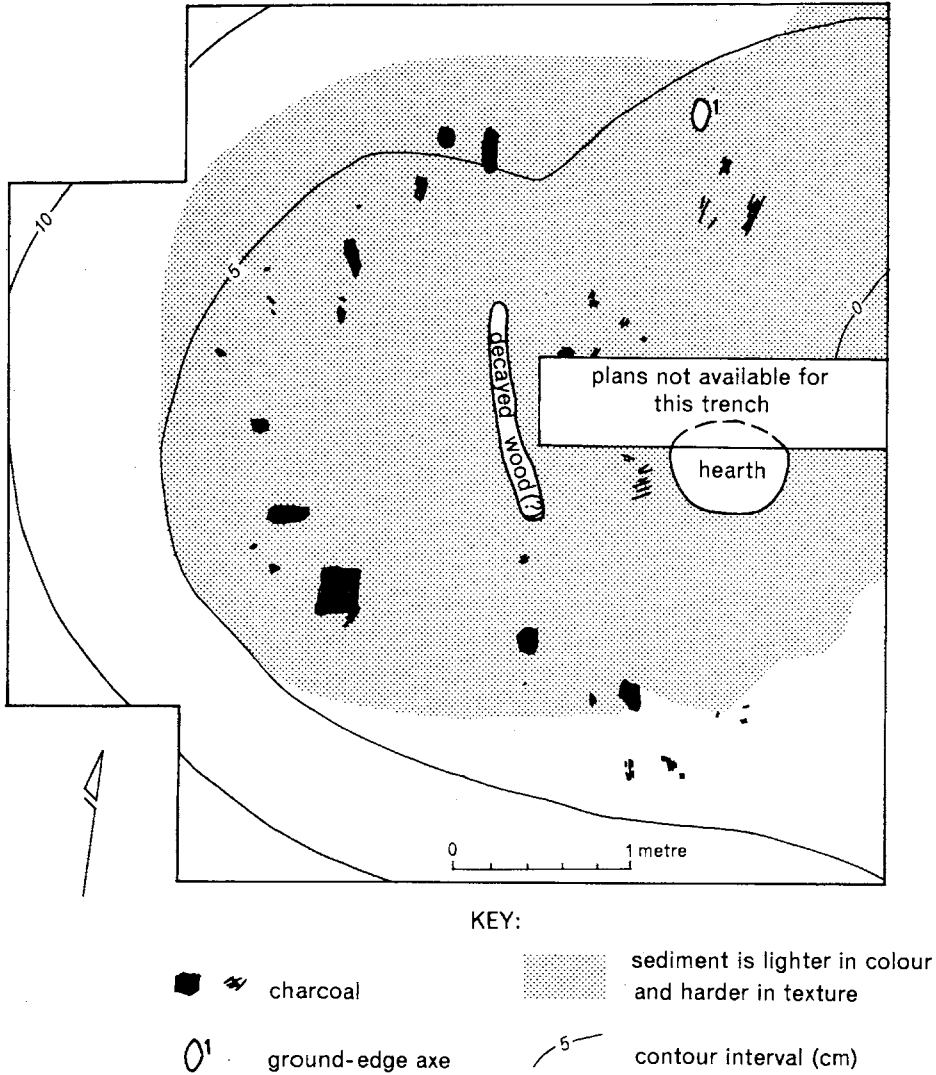


Figure 3 – Plan of the surface of mound 5, McArthur Creek cluster, after 10 cm of deposit had been removed.



Wilmont Strahan in his Mia Mia, Warrnambool, Vic.

Plate 3 – A copy of a postcard, showing 'Old Wilmont', (1834-1916), who lived at Allansford, near Warrnambool, South-west Victoria.

Photograph courtesy of Nicolas Peterson.

elsewhere.⁵⁸ The foundations of the hut date to 'modern',⁵⁹ a result to be interpreted as indicating occupation during the early to mid-nineteenth century.⁶⁰ The construction and later destruction of the hut marks the final period of occupation of the mound as no post-contact artefacts such as flaked bottle glass were found during excavation of either Mounds 5 or 6. No evidence of earlier hut structures within the mound was discerned during investigation.

Mound 6 contained no remains of any structure. The only feature found was a narrow ditch, about 30 centimetres wide ringing the central area of the mound. Its narrowness and placement near the upper section of the mound suggest that it was a drainage feature rather than a borrow trench for construction on the site. That stone tools were found throughout the profile of this site suggests that it was used as a living area but that these activities did not necessitate the construction of a house structure. The initial period of mound construction dates to c.2200 years ago⁶¹ and it appears that the site continued to accumulate during occupation. The upper layers of the mound, like those of Mound 5, are 'modern'.⁶² Again this date is best

⁵⁸ Williams in prep b.

⁵⁹ Modern (98.8.1.2%M) – (ANU 3583), Modern (102.5.2.9%M) – (ANU 3584).

⁶⁰ My thanks to John Head of the Australian National University's Radiocarbon Laboratory for advice on this matter.

⁶¹ 2170±200 (ANU 3833).

⁶² Modern (103.9.3.3%M) – (ANU 3881).

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interpreted as indicating occupation during the early to mid-nineteenth century.⁶³ As with Mound 5, it is difficult to determine whether occupation was continuous or intermittent.

Evidence for the occupation of the McArthur Creek site is not restricted to the mounds themselves. A number of pits containing many fragments of burnt rock, which have been interpreted as 'cooking pits', were found in association with Mound 5 and a small hearth was located close to Mound 6 (see Figure 2). Stone tools were also recovered from the area between the two mounds. It seems that the mounds at this site were primarily used for general living activities and that more specialised activities, such as the cooking of food, were carried out off the mounds.

A number of conclusions can be drawn from the excavation of the McArthur Creek cluster site. In the Caramut area the mounds were used as habitation sites and not as ovens. Not all mounds had the same function, as some sites were used as hut foundations whilst others were used as camping places, and the initial date of mound construction varies between mounds.

By using historical accounts of Aboriginal settlements as a guide to locating settlement sites, we have been able to increase our knowledge of both earth mound sites within south western Victoria, and of Aboriginal settlements. The success of this approach reinforces the usefulness of Groube's suggestion.⁶⁴ It should also encourage further work within Australia on the archaeology of such 'ethnography rich' areas.

⁶³ John Head pers.comm.

⁶⁴ Groube 1977:69.

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