Archaeologist Jody Steele (right) with a young volunteer, digging at the site of the Penitentiary Parade Ground fountain, Port Arthur.





Archaeology and Education

We are keen to share the unique experience of archaeological discovery with visitors. Our Public Archaeology Program is now the longest-running in Australia. Each year we run a dig for children, as well as special archaeological tours and exhibitions showcasing our recent archaeological discoveries. The former sawpit beneath the oval is our current focus. After the settlement was closed, the pit became Carnarvon township's rubbish dump. Its many layers can tell us a lot about convict sawmilling and about life in a small rural community from the 1880s to the 1940s.

Students from universities all over Australia come to Port Arthur for our annual Summer Archaeology Program. They work with our archaeologists to learn skills in digging and recording sites, and cataloguing and analysing artefacts. *The Port Arthur Archaeological Procedures Manual*, first published in 1987, was based on new techniques developed here; it has played a key role in standardising Australian archaeological methods.

Preserving Our Collections

After thirty years of archaeological research we now have thousands of artefacts. It is important to care for this collection and associated records so that archaeologists can study them in the future. We are currently undertaking a major project to update the housing and records of our collections.

Please Don't Pick Up

Archaeologists study artefacts in context. Where an artefact is found is just as important as what it is. As you walk around you may see bricks and fragments of old bottles or pottery lying in the dirt. These are pieces of Port Arthur's archaeological record and it is most important that they stay where they are. Please don't pick them up.

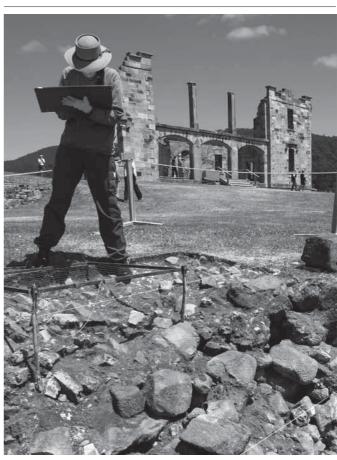
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Archaeology at the Port Arthur and Coal Mines Historic Sites



Recording a collapsed wall on the site of the Chaplain's House, in front of the Hospital at Port Arthur.

Our Approach

Archaeology uses the evidence of human activities to learn about people and places in the past. Through digging we can look at the things people have left behind – perhaps in a rubbish dump or a house site – to understand how they lived. But while digging is an important way of uncovering evidence it is also destructive. So to minimise the need for digging we also use other sources of information that can tell us about what lies under the surface. We study historical records, map and photographs of our buildings and landscapes to help identify physical changes. We also use the latest surveying technologies to try to find buried features like the foundations of a building.

Prisoners' Barracks

The first dig at Port Arthur was in 1977 at the site of the Prisoners' Barracks. These were huts built in 1830 to house the first groups of convicts. From the late 1850s they housed invalid convicts and paupers. Because the site had been occupied for a long time and then left undisturbed, it was an opportunity to test how much remained below the surface. Foundations, yard surfaces, drains and extensive artefact deposits were found that confirmed that Port Arthur was very rich archeologically. This changed the way in which the Historic Site was managed and now archaeologists monitor any activity that involves disturbing the ground, to protect subsurface remains.

Clerk of Works' House

When the Clerk of Works' house at the Dockyard was converted into staff accommodation we needed to understand the building's history before we began to make any changes to it. We excavated under the floors and found evidence of the building's two main periods of use – woodchips from an early Dockyard's sawpit; a fireplace base, clay floors, footing trenches and metalworking waste from its later use by a blacksmith.

Commandant's House

Excavations at the Commandant's House began in 1982. With dozens of trenches inside and outside the house, every detail of the building was studied – paint finishes, alterations, and landscape changes. Archaeologists developed a new approach to recording the archaeological evidence and combining it with

other sources of information about the building. As a result, today we can present the Commandant's House to visitors in a way that reveals its many layers of change and use.

Government Gardens

Archaeologists don't always focus on buildings – open spaces also have important stories to tell. The Government Gardens was the site of our first major project to bring back a now-vanished landscape. Established in the 1840s as a pleasure garden for prison officers and their families, by the 1890s the garden had become an overgrown paddock, with only the fountain base showing.

Our excavations located original pathways, garden beds and irrigation and drainage systems. Soil and pollen studies yielded information about plants that had once grown there. As a result the paths and borders of historic plantings were re-established, and the fountain was restored.

Maritime Archaeology

The sea around the Tasman Peninsula also contains important evidence of the importance of water transport in the convict system. Maritime archaeologists use technology such as side-scan sonar to gain information on historic moorings, wharves and jetties, and convict shipbuilding. With historic sites on the coast and under water increasingly being threatened by the effects of climate change, we must look after them as carefully as we do sites on land.

Archaeologist Richard Tuffin gives a trenchside talk to visitors on the site of the Commissariat Officer's Quarters, behind the Law Courts at Port Arthur.

