



**ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT OF THE SUB-
FLOOR POTENTIAL, COMMISSARIAT BUILDING,
FREMANTLE PRISON, WESTERN AUSTRALIA**

for

Philip Griffiths Architects and
Building and Management Works

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INTRODUCTION

During the course of ongoing renovation work at Fremantle Prison, Western Australia, Eureka Archaeological Research and Consulting UWA (Eureka) was contracted by Philip Griffiths Architects to assess the archaeological potential of the sub-floor deposits in the Prison's commissariat building. This report details the methods and results of the archaeological assessment.

BACKGROUND

Fremantle Prison is located in the City of Fremantle, Western Australia and was constructed between 1852 and 1859. Upon its construction it was utilised as a public works prison, convict distribution depot, convict workshop and the main site of Imperial convict administration in Western Australia. In August 2010 Fremantle Prison became the first built-environment site in Western Australia to be included on the World Heritage list, along with ten other Australian convict sites. The Prison is a significant heritage site with multiple usages, including at present as a tourist destination, museum and function venue. Fremantle Prison is also listed on a number of local, State and federal heritage registers; including the Register of Heritage Places, National Heritage Register, Register of the National Estate, City of Fremantle – Municipal Heritage Inventory and the National Trust of Western Australia.

Previous archaeological work undertaken by Eureka at Fremantle Prison includes watching briefs and assessments of features exposed during development works (Sparkes-Santos and Stedman 2010), and archaeological excavations in the prison parade ground and visitor centre's café, in the context of proposed re-developments (Burke *et al.* 2009; Fleming *et al.* 2009). A detailed historical background of the Fremantle Prison complex is provided in Eureka's prison parade ground excavation report and is not repeated here (Burke *et al.* 2009).

Building development works are continuing within the Fremantle Prison heritage precinct, with the aim to improve the functionality of the space, at the same time as enhancing and conserving the site's historical integrity. As part of these developments, plans have been made to provide visitors with access to the steward's and clerk's offices in the prison's commissariat building, situated below the northern end of the main cellblock.

Significant archaeological deposits have been excavated from sub-floor contexts in historic Australian buildings, such as Hyde Park Barracks in Sydney (Betteridge 1981). Following review of historical drawings and recommendations made in the Fremantle Prison parade ground excavation report (Burke *et al.* 2009:47), and in view of the potential to impact upon sub-floor archaeological deposits, Philip Griffiths Architects, on behalf of Fremantle Prison, engaged Eureka to undertake an archaeological assessment of the sub-floor potential in the steward's and clerk's offices in the prison's commissariat building.

Recommendations are provided at the end of this report, in the event that archaeological features or deposits are encountered during future ground disturbance works within the prison complex.

THE PRISON COMMISSARIAT

Construction of the cellar or basement under the northern association wards at Fremantle Prison was completed in 1856 and the subterranean space became the steward's stores. The steward was responsible for distributing food and clothing to the prisoners. The building was surrounded by a sunken area providing light and air, about 11 feet below the prison forecourt, with access via a stepped ramp to the north. To the south a cool, ventilated room with a segmental barrel vault, was used as a prisoner property store, compositor's room and later as a morgue.

With the end of convict transportation in 1868, pressure on the prison steward diminished, but it is probable that the clerks continued to work in the commissariat's two basement rooms until 1906/7, when the ramp area outside the northern windows was backfilled to provide support for the entry into New Division. It was at this time that masonry stairs were built at the western side and doors installed to give access to the northern offices from the west. The open yard along the eastern wall was filled in by 1928.

During the Second World War the prison became a military establishment and in 1942 the area above the stairs from the old steward's office was covered with timber to make an air-raid shelter.

By 1992 the basement rooms were in a derelict state and surviving lath and plaster ceilings, plaster walls, fireplaces and floors were badly damaged and the spaces filled with rubbish and soaked by blocked drains. Since then the basement and adjoining areas have been cleared, repaired and additional access provided by a new stairway from what used to be the foreyard (later the special handling unit). The existing basement fabric closely matches the oldest prison drawing of this area dating to 1899 (Bodycoat 1993).

ARCHAEOLOGICAL TEAM

The following Eureka staff members undertook the archaeological assessment on 1st July 2010.

<i>Eureka Archaeological Research and Consulting</i>	
Jim Stedman	Project Manager, Archaeologist
Wendy Reynen	Archaeologist

METHODS

During an on-site meeting with representatives from Eureka, Philip Griffith Architects and Fremantle Prison, the methods of the archaeological assessment were discussed. The original 150mm wide butt-jointed jarrah floorboards in the steward's and clerk's offices were badly in need of repair prior to the installation of a visitor walkway and barrier (Plate 1). In order to preserve as much of the original floor as possible, the boards were only to be replaced where they were already broken, and replacement boards were to be of reclaimed timber 75mm wide and therefore distinguishable from the originals. It was agreed that Eureka investigate the sub-floor deposit for archaeological material by excavating keyhole slots through the holes between the intact floorboards. Two slots were excavated, one in the steward's office and a second in the clerk's office. The slots were excavated using hand trowels and all excavated spoil was sieved through 6mm and 3mm mesh screens. A record of the excavation was kept on stratigraphic context sheets, levels were recorded using a dumpy level and digital photographs were taken.

Plate 1. View east through the steward's office to the clerk's office (Scale = 1m)



RESULTS

STEWARD'S OFFICE (SLOT 1)

Slot 1 was excavated within a section of two broken floorboards at the southern end of the steward's office. The slot measured approximately 1.55m (north–south) by 0.40m (east–west) (Plate 2).

Excavation proceeded through a fine, grey, friable sandy silt layer approximately 120mm deep. As well as pieces of broken floorboards, artefactual material recovered from this layer comprised mixed rubbish including modern materials such as brick fragments, plastic conduit, fragments of asbestos and linoleum, lengths of electrical wire and small Styrofoam balls. Metal finds from this layer include lengths of threaded iron pipe, miscellaneous fragments of iron (some perhaps deriving from a broken fireplace), a complete aluminium safety razor and a range of modern screws, nails and tacks. Several possible late 19th century nails were also noted, and are likely to have derived from the broken floorboards. This deposit is essentially modern rubbish that has fallen or was swept into the hole in the steward's office floor after the jarrah floorboards collapsed.

Excavation continued through a barely discernable, dark grey silty interface. This layer was less than 5mm thick and was not visible in the friable, collapsing sections, but could possibly be an intact sub-floor deposit. Some timber fragments, which are likely to be pieces of broken floorboard were recovered, as well as corroded iron nail fragments and a Styrofoam ball (that may have fallen in from the overlying modern rubbish deposit). This deposit could derive from the construction of the jarrah floor, and also may have built up over time with dust falling through the butt-jointed floorboards.

Excavation continued onto a degraded limestone deposit, indicative of a man-made levelling layer. The depth of this was investigated using a small sondage (70cm x 40cm) at the centre of the slot. After digging through the degraded limestone for approximately 100mm, limestone bedrock was reached.

On inspection of the sub-floor construction, a joist-bearing jarrah beam (115mm x 50mm) was exposed that had been bedded into a lime mortar pad on top the limestone levelling layer (Plate 3). These timbers are of the same dimensions as the floor joists, but are used with their wider side facing downwards.

Plate 2. Slot 1, top of limestone levelling layer (Scale = 1m)

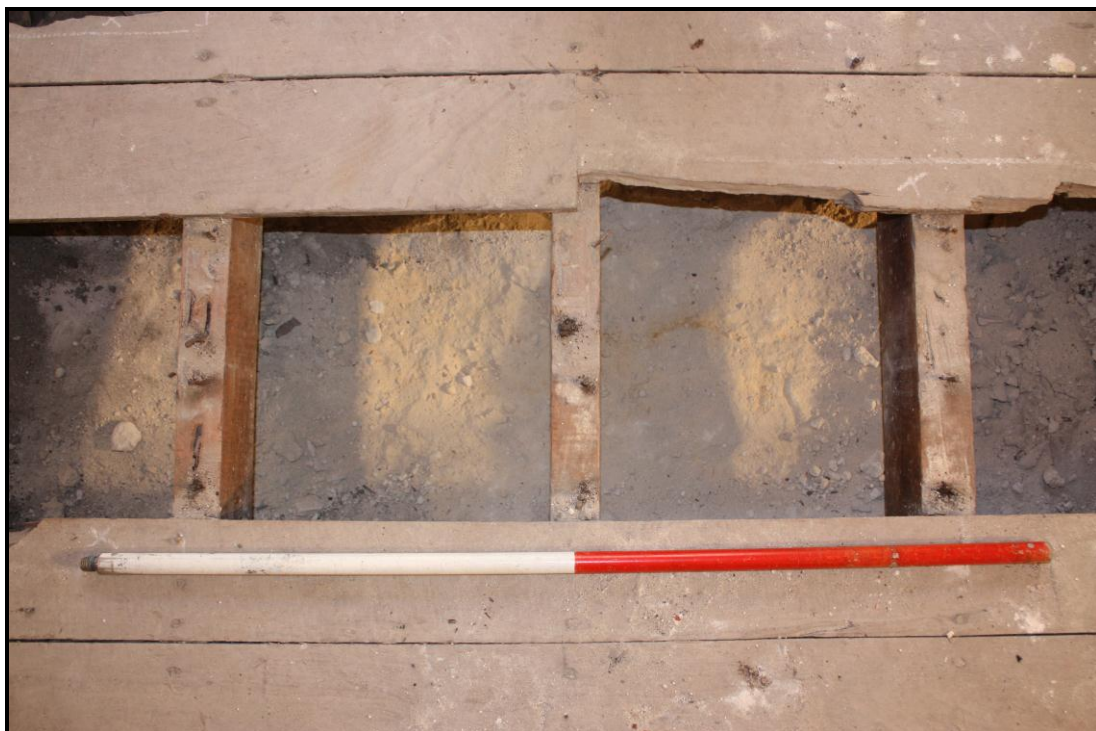


Plate 3. Slot 1, profile showing jarrah beam and lime mortar pad, view west (Scale = 10cm)



CLERK'S OFFICE (SLOT 2)

Slot 2 was excavated within a section of three broken floorboards against the southern wall of the clerk's office. The slot measured approximately 0.65m (north-south) by 0.50m (east-west) (Plate 4).

A modern rubbish deposit excavated here was almost identical to that described above from Slot 1. A similar range of artefactual material was also recovered.

Excavation proceeded directly onto a thin degraded limestone deposit (30mm), with no trace of the possible sub-floor deposit that was noted in Slot 1. Again, no sub-floor deposit was visible in the collapsing sections. A small sondage was excavated onto limestone bedrock at the centre of the slot.

Plate 4. Slot 2, view south pre-excitation (Scale = 1m)



Plate 5. Slot 2, top of degraded limestone layer (Scale = 1m)



RESULTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This report outlines a brief archaeological assessment undertaken of the sub-floor of the commissariat building (steward's and clerk's offices), Fremantle Prison. The archaeological excavations were conducted in areas where the jarrah floor had previously collapsed and modern rubbish subsequently filled the voids. The existence of a thin sub-floor deposit in the steward's office is a possibility, but it is notably unsubstantial and was not definite. No significant convict or colonial-era artefactual material was recovered by the excavations.

As such, Eureka's assessment determined that the proposed repairs to the jarrah floor will have no significant impact on the archaeological integrity of any sub-floor deposits that may survive in the steward's and clerk's offices.

However, it is **recommended** that:

- Care must be taken to ensure that development design does not have an adverse impact on the significant heritage values of the Fremantle Prison complex as a whole.
- Consultation with the Heritage Council of Western Australia must be undertaken as part of the planning process associated with the redevelopment of the Fremantle Prison complex, in accordance with the *Heritage Act of Western Australia* 1990.
- Monitoring of any ground disturbance works within the prison should be undertaken by a suitably qualified archaeologist.
- Where archaeological features or deposits are uncovered during monitoring or construction works, work must cease and an archaeologist must assess the significance of the findings and determine the best course of management.

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