

ARCHAEOLOGY FACT SHEET

Heritage Places Act 1993



Fact Sheet No. 1

Historical archaeology and sites

Evidence of the exploration, occupation and settlement of South Australia by European and other non-Aboriginal cultural groups can be found almost anywhere in the landscape, as well as off the coast. The rural areas of the state are littered with the picturesque ruins of past attempts to tame the land. But these aren't the only places where 'archaeology' can be found.

Historical archaeology—what is it?

Historical archaeology is the field of study that investigates the past exploration, occupation and settlement of South Australia using a combination of physical material remains along with a range of historical sources, such as settler's journals, maps and charts, newspapers or any other historical documents.

Historical archaeology records and analyses the objects people used in the past and the places where they lived and worked. It can tell us about how people lived their daily lives and the way they made the tools, furniture, buildings and other objects that they used. It can provide insights into social and economic status and the changing fortunes of early residents. It also can reveal linkages between sites in the broader landscape.

Historical archaeology also encompasses a range of focused sub-disciplines, including:

- urban archaeology – the archaeological evidence of our early towns and cities
- buildings archaeology – the archaeological examination of above-ground buildings and structures to obtain information about the past
- industrial archaeology – the archaeological examination of the physical remains of early industries
- maritime archaeology – the archaeological examination of human interactions with the sea, rivers and lakes, encompassing a range of land-based and underwater sites, including shipwrecks.¹



Image courtesy: Independent Heritage Consultants

Excavation of the New Queens Theatre in Waymouth Street, Adelaide in 2017

1. Historic shipwrecks in South Australia are excluded from the *Heritage Places Act 1993*. Instead, they are administered under the state's *Historic Shipwrecks Act 1981* and the Commonwealth's *Underwater Cultural Heritage Act 2018*. See Heritage South Australia's maritime heritage webpages for further information.

South Australia's historical archaeology dates from the early 19th century, when mariners explored the state's coastline and whaling and sealing parties began exploiting the state's marine resources.

Why is historical archaeology important?

Archaeology and history are both concerned with the past, but investigate the past using different tools and different principal sources of information. Archaeologists examine the material remains of the past, evidence that then must be interpreted and put into historical context using written or other sources of information. Historical research, on the other hand, relies primarily on written documents, supplemented with oral and sometimes physical evidence. These two approaches to uncovering and interpreting the past are complimentary, but each brings its own unique skill set and perspective. Together, they can provide us with a much fuller and more complete understanding of our past.

Archaeological research helps reveal how the full swath of society, from the rich and powerful to the poor and marginalised, lived and worked, through identification and interpretation of the material remains of their lives. However, the archaeological artefacts, deposits and sites that comprise these remains are a precious and finite resource, one that is under continuous threat from both human and natural impacts.

Development can mean the destruction of archaeological artefacts and sites. Since oftentimes these may be the only contemporary source of information about a particular object or place, it is critical that the information they contain is recorded and preserved, even if the physical remains themselves are not. The data recovered through recording, sampling and analysis will then be available for researchers to study and interpret into the future.

Types of historical archaeological sites

Historical archaeological sites in South Australia include the material remains that human activity leaves behind: objects, features, remnant structures or ruins and sometimes organic substances. If undisturbed, that survive in their original location and context as when originally deposited.

These remains can exist above grade, such as buildings and

building ruins, or buried in the ground, either partially or completely. Sites may be located on land, in water or along the margins of our coasts and waterways.

Residential sites

The homes that people built, whether the mansions of the wealthy, the comfortable homes of the middle-class or the small, basic cottages and tenements of workers and the poor, provide fascinating insight into the living habits and conditions of all levels of society.



Excavation of the McKay family and Farrow family cottages on Jane Street, Port Adelaide, in 2003

Even extant houses can be archaeologically informing. Older dwellings often were built with earthen floors, with solid floors only added much later. These buildings can still yield substantial archaeological deposits, even if occupied or otherwise still in use. Solid floors often were poorly built, allowing objects to fall through the gaps and to eventually become part of the archaeological record.

Alternately, just because a house has been demolished does not mean that the site is archaeologically sterile. In the past, demolition typically meant razing the building only to grade, leaving subsurface structures, such as foundations and cellars, along with everyday items people used, still buried in the ground. Other structures, such as outbuildings, wells, water tanks, cesspits and rubbish 'dumps', also may survive intact underground. These often can be gold mines of archaeological information.

Examples include: houses, tenements, worker's cottages and other occupation structures, in both rural and township settings.

Industrial and commercial facilities

Study of industrial and commercial sites tells us about past manufacturing and production methodologies and the changes in technology and materials over time. This can provide information about industrial continuity, improvements and adaptations, as well as working arrangements and conditions. Studies of imported versus locally produced goods and early industries can tell us about the process of independence and self-sufficiency as the colony's European settlements grew.



Excavation of a calcining furnace at the Callington Smelting Works (1860–75) in 2015–18

An industrial site may overlie an earlier phase of occupation with which it has no association and which is unknown even from documentary sources. Chronological change and phasing are critical to any archaeological investigation, as they can help build a more complete picture, not only of the site itself, but also of the broader picture of development in the State.

Examples include: factories, breweries, brickworks and kilns, entertainment venues, hotels, shipbuilding yards, retail premises and markets.

Pastoral and farming sites

Pastoralism was one of the earliest economic activities in South Australia, with pastoral properties occupying huge tracts of land before their eventual breakup to allow for closer settlement and smaller-scale farming. Pastoral sites and, to a lesser extent, rural farm sites are a microcosm of early settlement, offering glimpses into the way of life of the squatters and their dependent workers, as well as the production and transport mechanisms that connected the remote stations with the markets they served.



Ruins of the office at Kanyaka Station complex, Quorn (SHP 10192), established 1852

The hundreds of ruins littering the landscape are often testament to failed pastoral and agricultural ventures and can contain significant buried archaeological deposits that inform on the settlers' daily lives. The ruins themselves provide information about how people sheltered, sometimes bringing examples of vernacular architecture from their homelands.

Examples include: homesteads, shearing sheds, shepherd's huts, boundary walling/fencing, stone walls or mounds, rubbish 'dumps', outstations, cultivation areas and gardens, artificially levelled terraces, artificial drainage and irrigation.

Resource extraction sites

These are industrial sites that have a particular focus on exploitation of the colony's natural resources. Before the establishment of locally based commercial production



Excavation of the try works at the Fishery Bay Whaling Station (SHP 10223), south of Port Lincoln, in 1997

industries, the earliest economic activities focused on whaling and sealing, fishing, mining and, to a lesser extent, forestry.

Examples include: mines and mine shafts, shore-based whaling and sealing stations, forestry camps and fishing settlements.

Municipal and civic sites

Municipal sites include the buildings that were built for the administration of the cities, towns and district areas where they were built. A large proportion are still in use today, often with a completely different function than their original purpose. Like dwellings and other buildings, there is still archaeological potential for these sites to shed light on administrative and religious practices in the area.

Examples include: town halls, community halls, chambers of commerce, houses of worship, police stations, gaols, cemeteries and crematoriums.



Image courtesy: Australian Heritage Services

Archaeological monitoring of the intact basement structure of the former Magill Orphanage, established 1869 and demolished in 1968. It was then overbuilt by the Magill Youth Training Centre, which was demolished in 2014

Infrastructure sites

The provision of infrastructure was a key element in the development of South Australia. Infrastructure sites can inform on the extent to which the government of the day provided the necessary services for the expansion of settlement and the growth of the State. They indicate construction methodologies and standards, and can even provide insights into how different segments of society were 'valued' by the quality of infrastructure with which they were provided.



Image courtesy: Independent Heritage Consultants

The top of the 19th-century brick arch from the former Watts Bridge, buried under South Road and excavated during the Darlington Upgrade Project in 2018

Study of these sites in different areas and across different times can show how attitudes changed as the State developed. They can also show the pattern of official development across the broader landscape, as settlement expanded into more remote regions of the State, either for the establishment of towns or to provide the necessary infrastructure to bring the products of outlying industries, such as pastoralism, fisheries and mineral extraction, to markets in Adelaide and elsewhere.

Examples include: roads, railways, bridges, harbour facilities such as wharves and docks, utilities such as drainage, sewerage and water provision.

How is it regulated?

The *Heritage Places Act 1993* regulates the protection and management of historical archaeology in South Australia. It protects significant objects, including archaeological artefacts, from disturbance, damage, destruction and alteration without a permit. You can find more about how sites are protected by downloading [Fact Sheet 2: Protection of Archaeological Objects](#) and [Fact Sheet 5: When Do I Need a Permit?](#)

More information

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