

**SETTLEMENT OF SOLITUDE:
AN ASSESSMENT OF THE SITE
OF FORT WELLINGTON, RAFFLES BAY**

by

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Introduction

In the early 1820s the British Empire had yet to firmly stake its claim to the Australian continent. Outside settlements in the colonies of New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania), the British presence was at best ephemeral and in many cases non-existent. The northern region of the continent was one area where a British presence was absent. This land was in the international legal framework of the time a place outside the jurisdiction of Great Britain. This posed a potential threat for Britain. The Dutch had long had a presence in the region to the north of Australia and, although by this time a waning power, the Netherlands were viewed as economic rivals who might very well stake a territorial claim to northern Australia. France and the Union states of America were also possible territorial claimants, with the British Government especially alive with paranoia of post-Napoleonic French intentions.

In this climate, Great Britain made its first territorial claim to northern Australia in 1824. In that year a small fleet of ships under Gordon Bremer sailed from Sydney with instructions to establish a military presence on at least one and possibly two sites along the north coast. Following Philip Parker King's voyages of discovery and survey in 1818, the northern Australian coastline was relatively well mapped. Bremer's orders were to establish a settlement on Apsley Strait, if there were no prior European claimants. If he had the resources, he was to set up a second settlement on Cobourg Peninsula. (Earl Bathurst to the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty; 17th February 1824, in *Historical Records of Australia*, Series III, Vol. V, pp. 758-760).

As his course took him along the north coast from Torres Strait, he examined Port Essington on the way to the Tiwi Islands. However, on failing to discover potable water, he continued west to make landfall on the western side of Melville Island, on the shore of the narrow passage named Apsley Strait, the preferred choice of Earl Bathurst of the Colonial Office. Drinkable water was soon discovered and, with what appeared to be an ideal location from which to project British naval power, Bremer opted to there establish a military outpost that he named Fort Dundas.

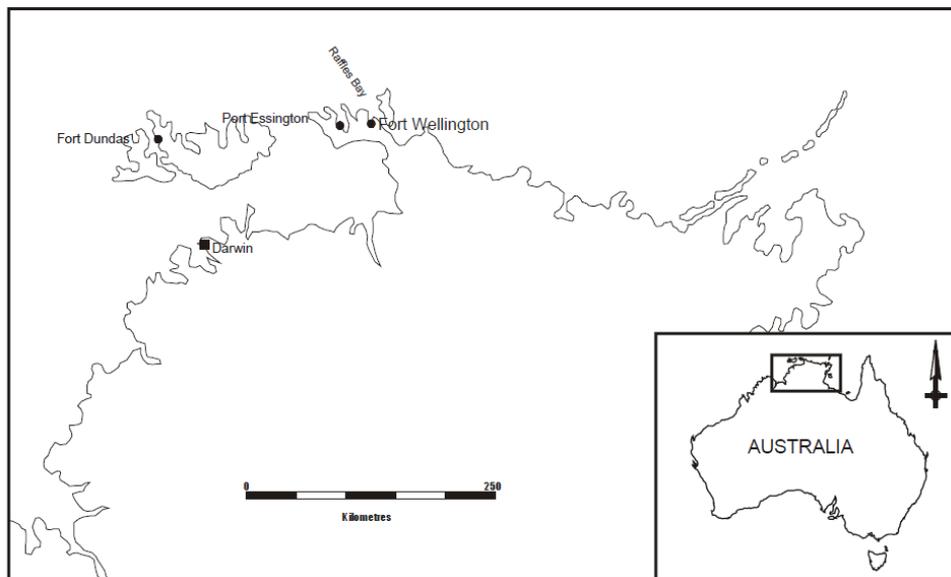


Figure 1. Location of Fort Wellington and other British military settlements

Fort Dundas proved to be short-lived, for economic and political reasons that have been discussed elsewhere (Cameron 1985, 1989). Within the context of this paper, the significance of Fort Dundas lies with its association with the second military settlement – Fort Wellington (Figure 1). By 1826, when it became clear Fort Dundas had little chance of succeeding in its anticipated role of providing the foundation for a future trade and military port, the British Admiralty ordered the establishment of a new station at Raffles Bay. The transfer of personnel, livestock and all transportable buildings from Fort Dundas to the new site, named Fort Wellington, began in June 1827 and was completed in 1829. The site of Fort Wellington, unlike Fort Dundas, was situated in an easily navigable anchorage and, importantly, was known to lie upon the route of Macassan trepang fishers. Every year these sailors travelled in hundreds of small craft to northern Australia to collect the prized trepang, a culinary delight in parts of Asia. The British knew full well of these annual migrations and saw in them an opportunity to tap into the Asian market, providing an outlet for British textiles and other commodities long shut out by the regional Dutch trade monopoly. However, despite its apparently strategic location, Fort Wellington received little support from the British or New South Wales governments. In August 1829, the same year that the last members of the garrison left Fort Dundas, Fort Wellington was evacuated. It was to be another nine years before Great Britain made another attempt to establish a base in this part of northern

Australia, Victoria at Port Essington, and another 40 were to pass before the permanent settlement of Palmerston (subsequently renamed Darwin).

Little is known of the history of the site of Fort Wellington after abandonment. Captain Collett Barker, the last commandant, intended to return and left the place in the care of local Aboriginal inhabitants, with whom he had established good relations (in stark contrast to his two predecessors). Indigenous people of the region still retain memory of the events of the British settlement, but these have yet to be researched and recorded. The isolation of Raffles Bay has meant that there have been few other attempts at European settlement. One notable exception was use of the land by Dewar, Munro Leslie and Marshall, who leased an extensive area between Raffles Bay and Mountnorris Bay in the mid-1870s for the purpose of buffalo hunting (Bauer 1964: 108; Duncan 1967: 33). In recent times a cultured pearl farm was established across the bay from the Fort Wellington site, and closed after the 2005 cyclone. Today the remains of Fort Wellington lie in Garig Gunak Barlu National Park. The Parks and Wildlife Commission of the Northern Territory and Traditional Owners of the land, through the Cobourg Peninsula Sanctuary and Marine Park Board, control access to the site.

Physical Fabric

The Fort Wellington settlement was not large. In late 1829 the settlement's population consisted of the Commandant, Captain Collett Barker; an Assistant Surgeon; a commissariat official; 29 soldiers of the 39th Regiment; seven soldiers of the 57th Regiment who had been evacuated from Fort Dundas; perhaps nine Royal Marines; 42 convicts, including some from Fort Dundas; six women and children related to the convicts and soldiers; and an Aboriginal woman named Rivala who had been earlier captured and incorporated into the settlement's small population (Mulvaney and Green 1992: 44). At the time of Fort Wellington's evacuation in August 1829 the entire population stood at 96 people (*ibid*). The military settlement was among the most isolated of the mainland Australian colonies at that time. The inhabitants were forced to cope with an unfamiliar tropical climate, disease, and the privations wrought by infrequent shipment of foodstuffs and other commodities from the New South Wales colony. Mortality was high and the psychological stress of the situation caused at least one soldier to slip into madness and, despite an extensive search involving soldiers and prisoners (Street 2012: 253), disappear forever into the surrounding bush.

Official descriptions of the layout and architecture of the settlement provided the background to the drama of everyday life presented in Collett Barker's journal. Historical records provide a good account of the settlement, and particularly the stockade:

The Fort is a Hexagonal Stockade formed of Solid Timber buried four feet in the ground and raised seven feet above it being composed of Trees in an upright position having at four of the angles 18 pounder Carronades mounted on platforms to fire over the Stockade. In the middle of the enclosed space, whose sides average forty five feet in length, there is a Cavalier or tower, twenty feet Square and twenty feet high, built of solid log work and impervious to musketry, except in the points which were left for Loopholes. Over the solid part of this Building there is raised a house for the Commandant, the under Apartments containing in safety almost all the Stores in the Settlement. Around the Fort at proper distances and in condition to flank and protect the sides of the Stockade and to be protected, are four Houses or barracks for the Troops, Marines and Prisoners, built of strong uprights and all comfortably thatched. Surrounding the whole camp there is a rough paling to prevent any body of Men from rushing in on the Sentinels [Despatch No. 100 from General Darling Governor of NSW to Lord Bathurst, Public Records Office, Kew, CO 201/193 #88355, p563].

The stockade was distinctive in being a quite dissimilar design to the ditch and earthen bank redoubt at Fort Dundas, which was probably constructed to withstand naval bombardment (De La Rue 2006: 143). Evidently land, rather than naval attack was considered the most likely threat to the Fort Wellington outpost.

Dispersed around the Fort Wellington stockade was the settlement itself. This is represented in a plan recently discovered by Dr Ruth Kerr in the NSW State Archives and published for the first time by Dr Brian Reid (Reid 2011: Figure 12). It is published here as Figure 2 and depicts a hexagonal fort (stockade) immediately behind the coast in close association with six other numbered structures. A return of buildings of August 1829 identifies these as (from left to right) saw pits (14); long hut for Crown prisoners (18); boat sheds (15); long hut for Crown prisoners (7); Commissariat issuing store & storekeeper's quarters and commandant's office (4); and a barrack for the 39th Regiment

(2). Behind the fort are depicted gardens and a paddock and scattered other structures. These are identified as follows: hospital and surgery with attendant's dwelling (5); a barrack for the Royal Marines with a detached cookhouse (3); guard house (6); six small huts for married soldiers (8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13); a shed for cattle (16); and sheds and styes for pigs (17). A well is depicted near the cattle shed and garden.

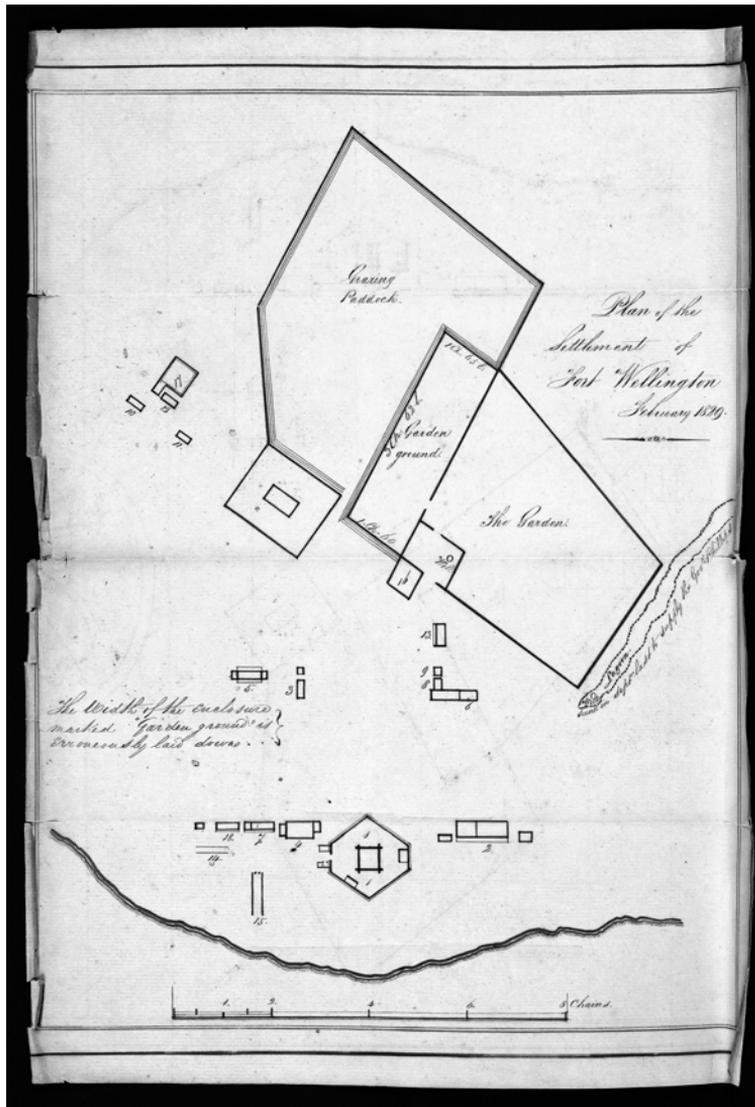


Figure 2. 1829 plan of settlement (NSW State Archives NRS906 [4/2060.2])

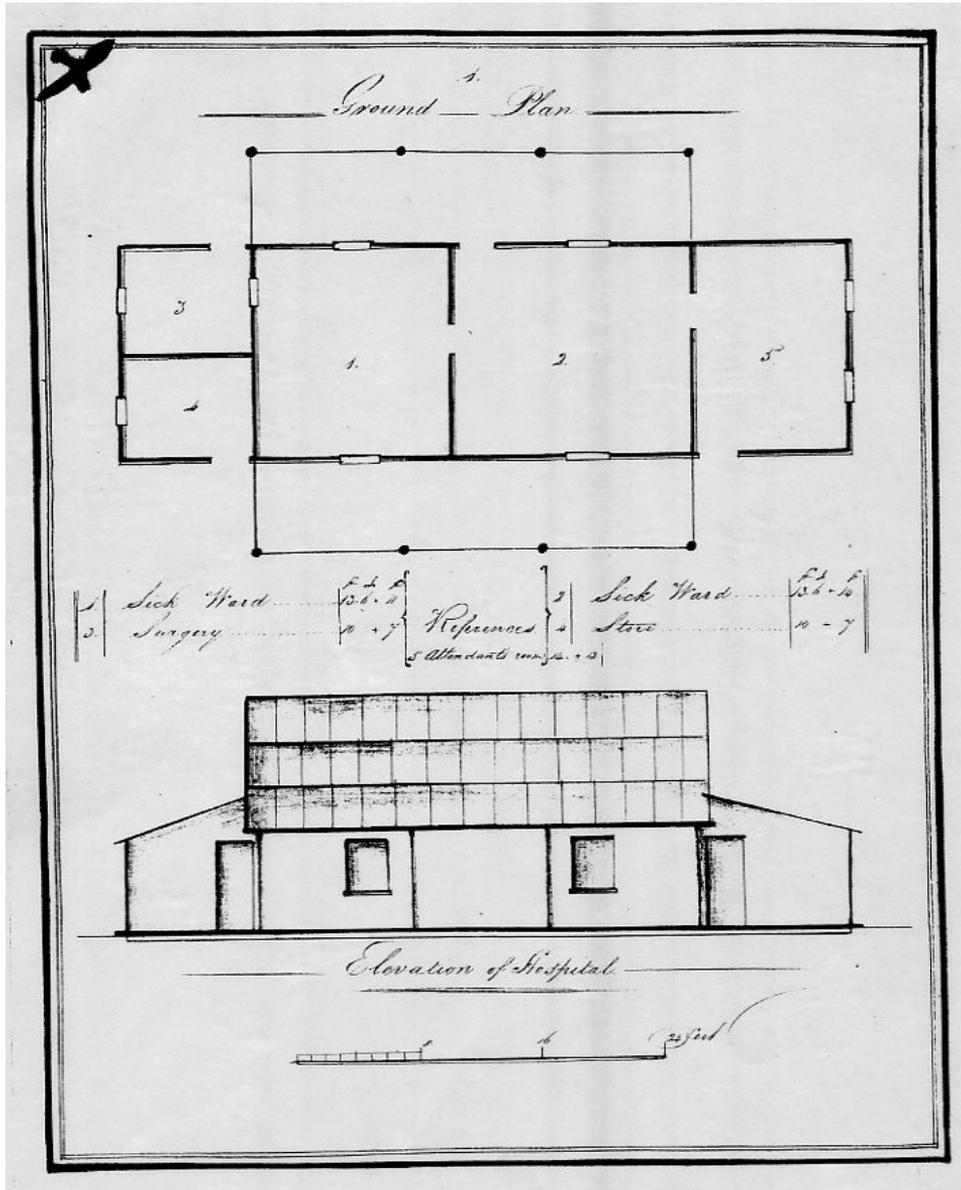


Figure 3. Plan and elevation of the Hospital, 1827 (NSW State Archives NRS906 [4/2059.1])

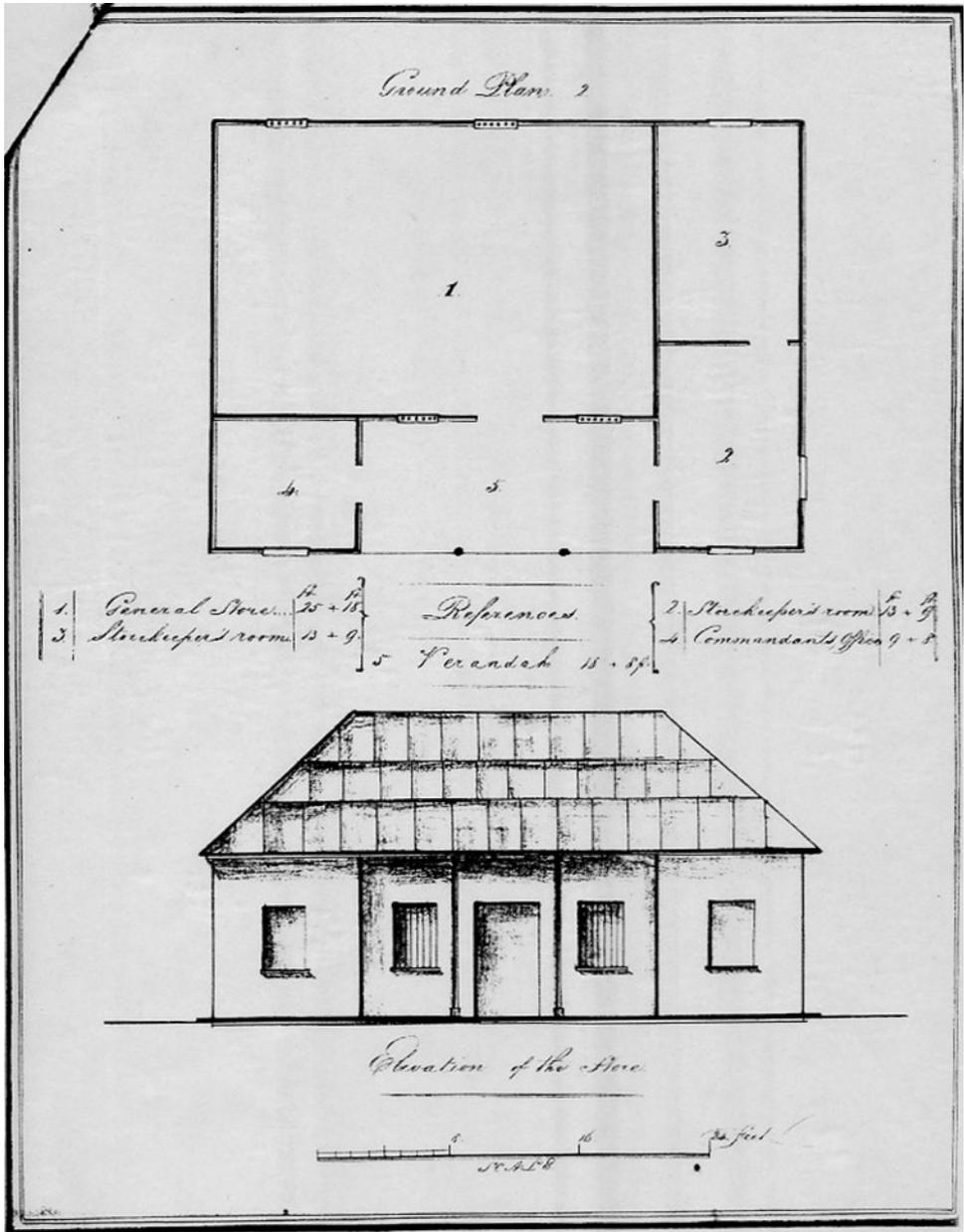


Figure 4. Plan and elevation of the Store, 1827 (NSW State Archives NRS906 [4/2059.1])

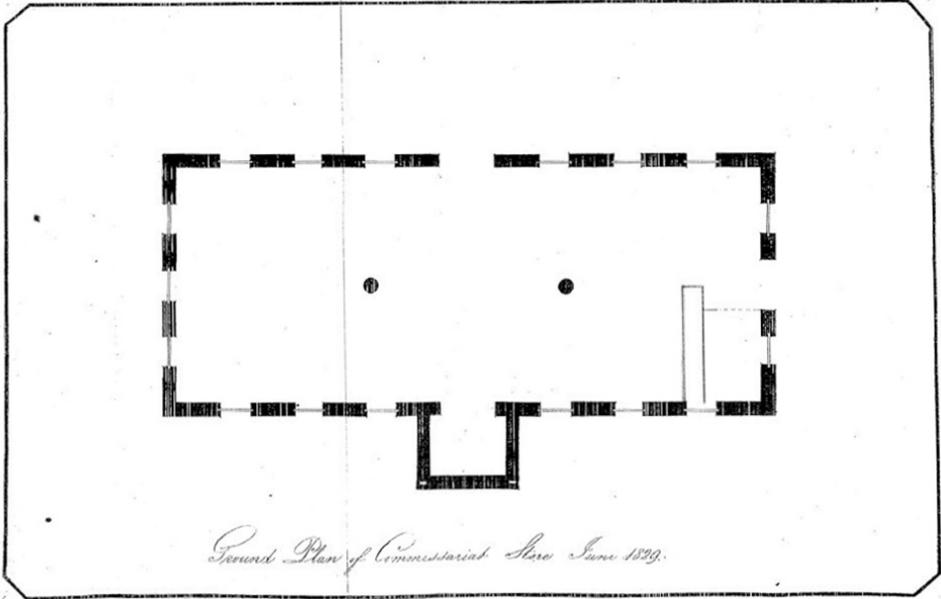
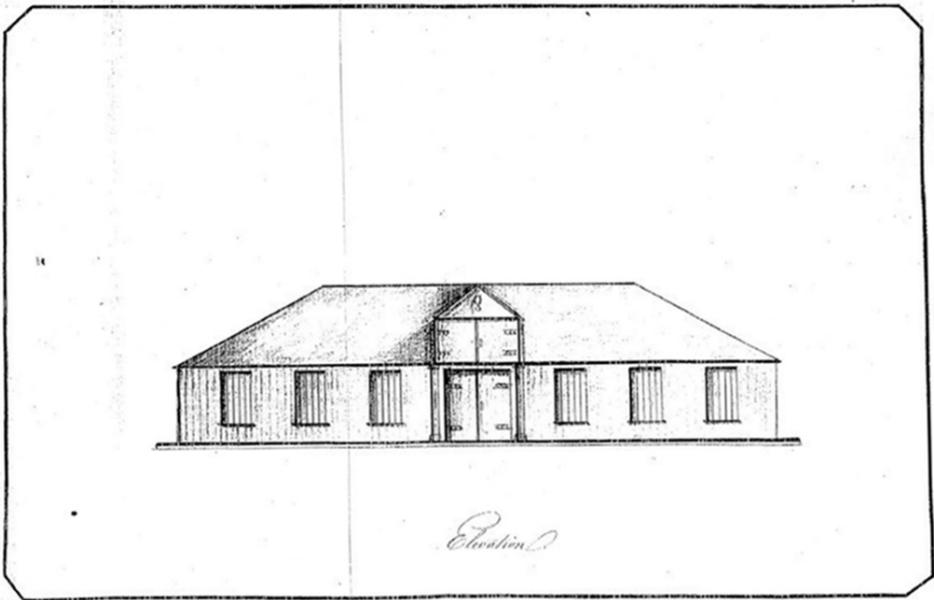


Figure 5. Plan and elevation of the Commissariat Store, 1829 (NSW State Archives NRS906 [4/2060.2])

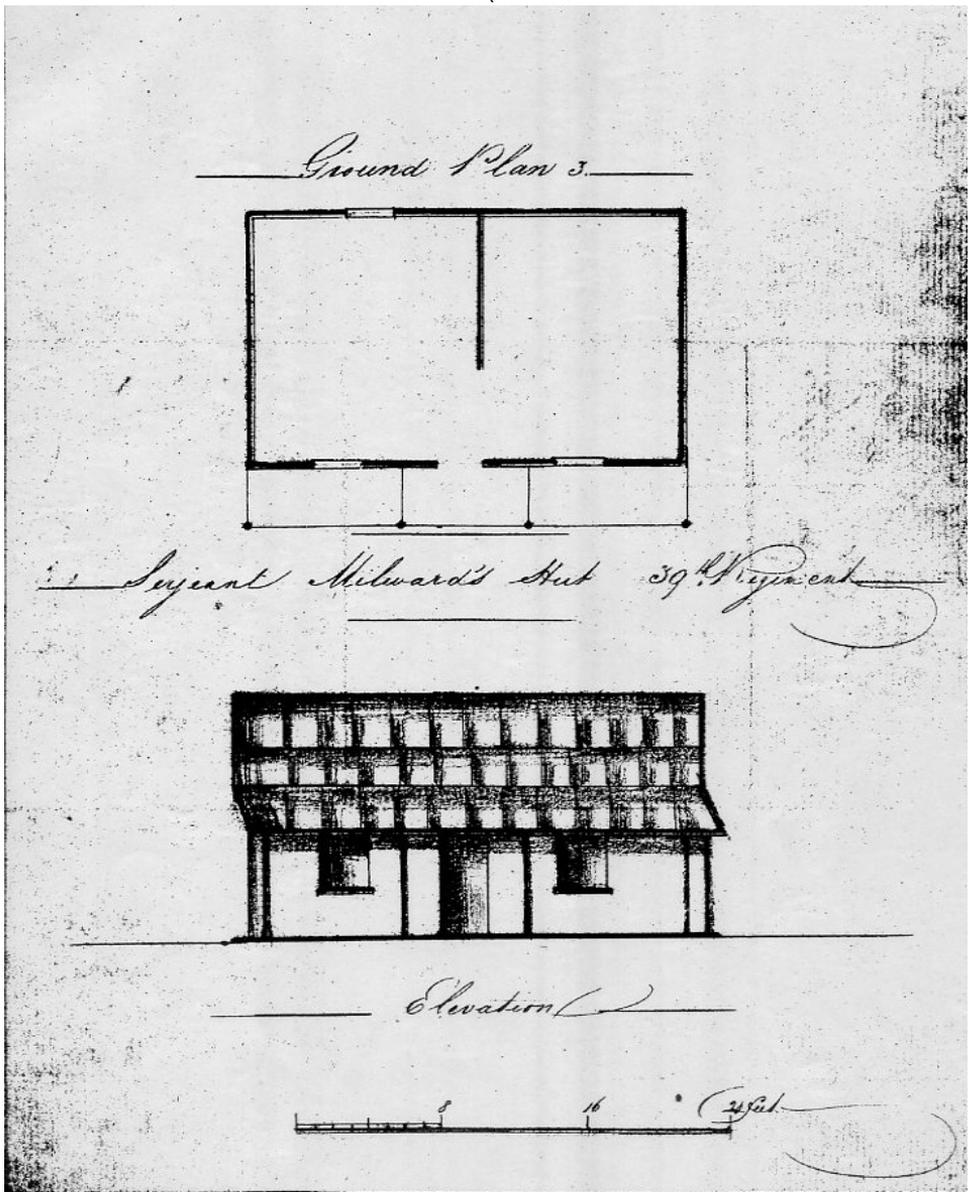


Figure 6. Plan and elevation of Sergeant Milward's Hut, 1827 (NSW State Archives NRS906 [4/2059.1])

Most buildings were of timber, with the framework of some originating from the dismantled buildings of Fort Dundas. Collett Barker's journal contains frequent mention of the settlement's buildings, from which Mulvaney and Green (1992: 45) have published the following passages:

Soldiers were quartered in a large barrack, 54 by 18 feet, with its own detached cookhouse; married men occupied four small huts. The convicts were housed in two barracks: one measured 26 by 18 feet and the smaller building, constructed of perpendicular logs covered with bark, was 18 by 14 feet. These buildings were watched over by a guard house, 20 by 12 feet.

The commandant's office, the storekeeper's area and quarters for the first overseer shared a structure 36 by 24 feet. The hospital claimed ample space for thirteen patients, a surgery and attendant's quarters, within an area of 26 by 18 feet. The Royal Marines shared another hut with detached cookhouse. Two huts accommodated the second overseer, stockman, gardener and the married convict couple (Moxham and Rycroft).

Barker planned to build more substantial buildings, and completed a solid cell block with walls of squared vertical posts. A storehouse 30 feet long was virtually completed and an engineer's store under construction when news arrived of the settlement's demise...The area was dotted with a few other bark sheds, serving variously as sawpit, pig sties, cattle shed and boat shed. Some wells had been sunk, up to 45 feet in depth. There was a small output of bricks, but basically this was a shanty town....

The "shanty town" description is apt as many of the buildings were rudimentary and poorly constructed affairs. In his journal, Collett Barker remarks on complaints received from members of the 39th Regiment that their barracks were cold and poorly insulated, owing to gaps which had formed between the logs of the walls (Mulvaney and Green 19992: 174). The NSW State Archives possesses floor plans and elevation drawings of a number of the settlement's buildings and these provide a more favourable perspective on at least the formal structures erected. An 1827 plan of the hospital (Figure 3) matches the description given above, with the added detail of verandahs on two sides and what appears to be a shingle roof. The store is recorded as possessing four rooms – a large general storeroom, two smaller storekeeper's rooms and a small Commandant's office – and a front verandah 8 foot long by 8 foot wide. It is probably the building depicted in a plan and elevation drafted in 1827 (Figure 4). The building mentioned above as the 30 foot long storehouse that was almost completed when the order came for the

settlement's evacuation is probably the commissariat store, depicted in an 1829 plan and elevation (Figure 5). The hut occupied by Sergeant Milward of the 39th Regiment in 1827 (Figure 6) was a basic affair of only two rooms, but still approximately 24 feet long by 12 feet wide and possessing a front verandah. The roof of this dwelling appears to have been made of a different material to the roofs of the hospital and store, and was perhaps thatched.

Upon the order for evacuation many of the substantial buildings were dismantled for transshipment to Swan River colony (Mulvaney and Green 1992: 220ff). Others were destroyed. Nevertheless, some physical fabric survived and exists today as testimony of the settlement and its inhabitants.

Summary of Site Investigations

Over more than 50 years various groups have visited the settlement site to gradually piece together an understanding of the settlement's composition and layout, with a view to recording the evidence and making recommendations on management strategies.

1966 investigation

The Historical Society of the Northern Territory carried out the first detailed investigation of the surviving fabric of the settlement in 1966 (Historical Society of the Northern Territory 1971). A dispersed settlement was identified, with two main concentrations of features (Figure 7). On the headland at the northwest end of Raffles Bay an extensive coral rock floor was discovered, measuring 27 by 19 feet, along with the remains of two chimneys/fireplaces of coral rock and fire bricks. This high headland provides a commanding view out to the entrance to Raffles Bay, as well as back down the bay. Here, the investigators concluded, was the site of the hexagonal stockade and Commandant's house.

Most of the remaining fabric was found in the southeast part of the site, distributed along a ridge behind the beach. Here remaining fabric included floors of rubble, coral and brick; brick chimney remains; a walled structure made of coral; wells; cisterns or pits; excavations; and a passage formed through the coral reef to allow small craft to be drawn up onto the beach. The investigators gave the following description of the most intact features in this part of the site:

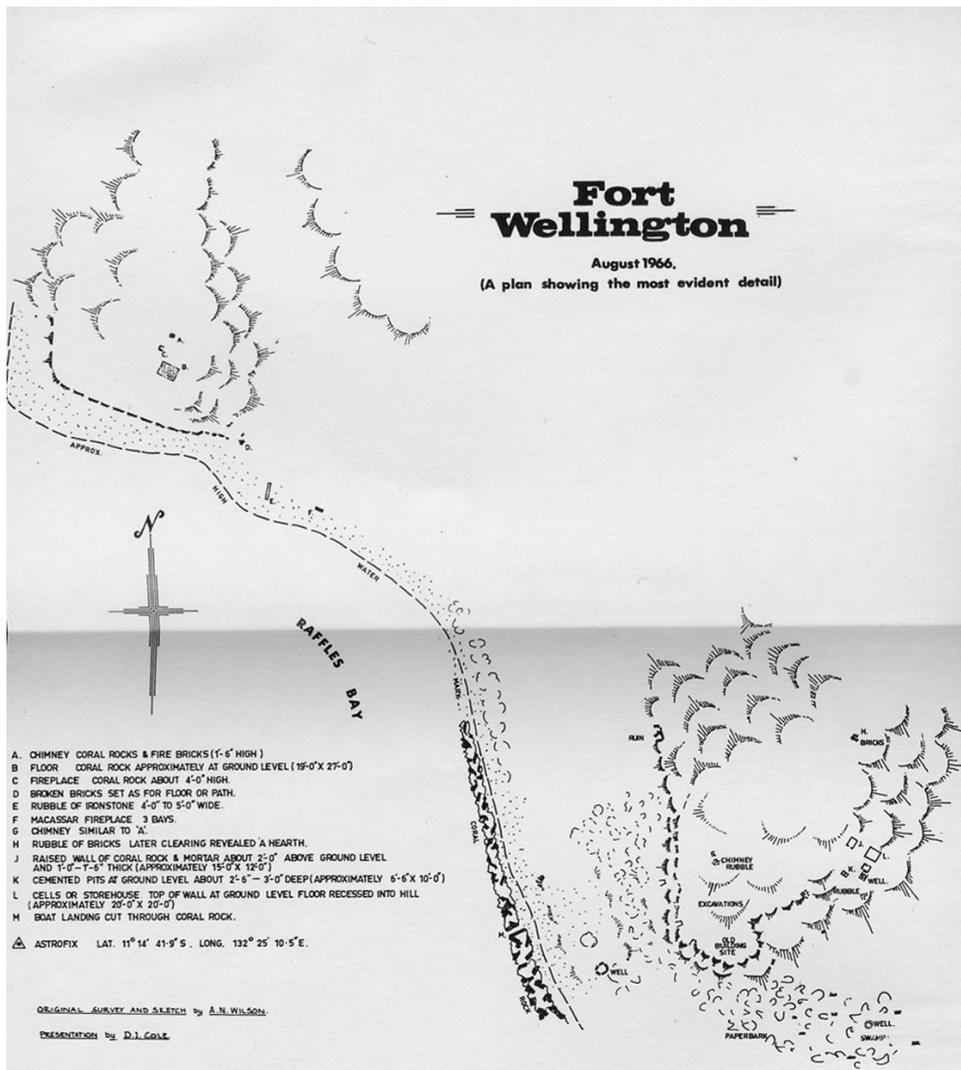


Figure 7. Plan produced by the 1966 Northern Territory Historical Society expedition (HSNT)

The best preserved of these buildings was a wall 15' x 12' and about 2' to 2 ½' above ground level, and approximately 20" thick. It was made of coral rock slabs with mortar lining and coping. The floor was made of coral lime and was possibly used as a storehouse or armoury...25' away the foundations of a building in all probability the cells or a storehouse, 20' x 20' with 16" walls, the top at ground level and recessed into the side

of the hill. The area is divided into three bays by 15" ironstone rubble partitions, and like the other buildings the walls are of coral rock slabs covered with mortar ½" thick...

In the vicinity was a pair of water tanks 10' x 6 ½' overall with the top of the walls at ground level 2 ½' to 3' deep made of coral rock slabs and lined with mortar...The well was 20' away. (Historical Society of the Northern Territory 1971: 11).

Artefacts - including glass and pottery sherds, willow pattern china, glass bottles, clay pipe stems and nails – were discovered in this part of the settlement site, particularly in the vicinity of a well near the beach. Also recorded were flaked glass implements manufactured by Aboriginal inhabitants of the area, probably after the British had abandoned the settlement.

Investigations 1979-2010

Other expeditions to assess the fabric of the settlement have been undertaken over the 45 years since the 1966 visit. In 1979 a team from the National Trust and the Northern Territory Conservation Commission made a day visit to the site as part of a survey of historical sites on the Cobourg Peninsula. The potential for the deterioration of remaining features through natural degradation and vandalism and fossicking was noted (National Trust of Australia (NT) 1981: 25-26). In the realisation that the 1966 survey contained inaccuracies, a recommendation was made for a full survey to accurately record the position of remaining features (*ibid*: 42). Further brief assessments were made of the remains of the Fort Wellington settlement site in the late 1980s and 1990s (Tacon 1988; Gregory 1996). Some degradation of fabric was observed, including the removal of artefacts by occasional visitors to the site.

In 1999 a more thorough assessment of the surviving fabric was made as a component of a conservation management plan for historical sites on the Cobourg Peninsula (The Architects Studio 2000). The plan relocated historical features identified by the 1966 survey. Additional features/areas were recorded, including the possible location of the Raffles Bay Gardens where the British grew their crops. In all, 19 features/areas were included in the management plan (The Architects Studio 2000: 11) and recommendations were made for ways to mitigate the deterioration of features and fossicking of surface artefacts. Again, a recommendation was made for detailed archaeological

survey to accurately record surviving fabric and determine their function by reference to historical records of the settlement.

The obvious need for a detailed survey of the settlement site galvanised further investigations. Between 6 and 14 June 2003 staff and students of Northern Territory University (now Charles Darwin University) carried out an inspection and survey to locate previously recorded fabric; search for the remains of buildings identified in historical accounts but not located by earlier investigations; undertaking a detailed survey using a total station; and compiling accurate plans of individual features, using level, compass, tape and plane table.

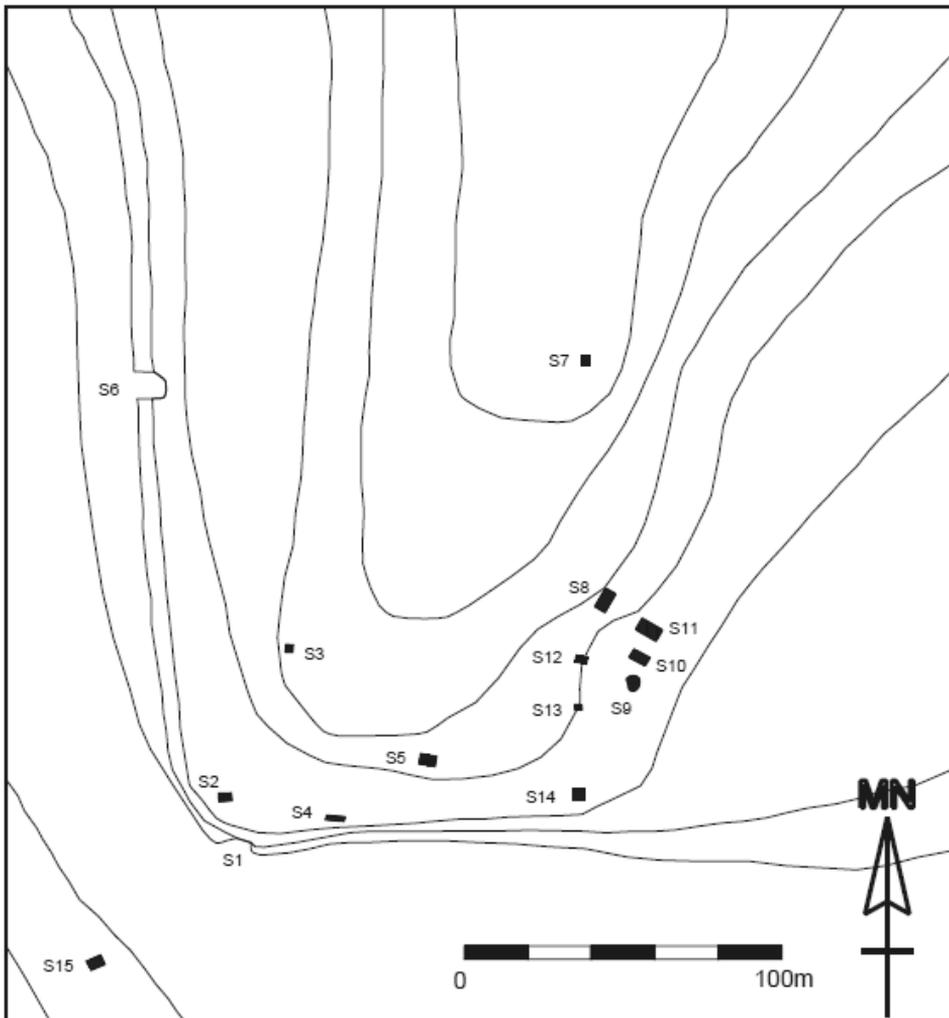


Figure 8. Previously unrecorded remains identified by the 2003 investigation (area shown is limited to the southeast part of Figure 7)

Twenty locations of surviving physical fabric were identified and assigned an individual Structure Number (S1 to S20), recorded on steel star pickets that were implanted as permanent markers. Not all features identified by the 1966 investigation could be relocated, including a Macassan fireplace and ironstone rubble arrangement identified in the northwest part of the site (Features E and F in the 1966 survey plan; Figure 7). However, five previously unrecorded locations of surviving fabric were identified and recorded (Figure 8). Table 1 presents a comparison of the results of the 2003 investigation with investigations in 1966 and 1999.

These 20 localities, including five unidentified by previous surveys, are unlikely to represent all that has survived the ravages of time. Further evidence was probably overlooked as limited time precluded investigating far inland and a dense cover of pre-burn off vegetation placed limitations on ground surface visibility.

Three further investigations were carried out in 2008, 2009 and 2010, all organised by the Historical Society of the Northern Territory. The objectives of these are presented in Reid (2011: 42ff) and were largely focused on answering three questions: (1) whether further surviving fabric of the settlement exists further inland; (2) the temporal relationship between the settlement, a coral-walled structure (S8, refer Table 1 above) and concrete cisterns (S10, S11 and S12); and (3) the question of the location of the stockade. Mixed results were achieved. An expanded survey inland found no further evidence of the settlement, or the historically-recorded gravestone of Dr Cornelius Wood which was a major objective of the survey. The age of the construction of S8 and S10-12 was unable to be conclusively discerned, a question that may be resolved after analysis of samples taken from the structures (Reid 2011: 45). More success has been claimed for the identification of the settlement's stockade. Participants in the 2009 and 2010 investigations, aided by the 1829 site plan, found artefacts and other fabric on a low dune immediately behind the beach. This was claimed to provide strong evidence of the site of the stockade (*ibid*). The posited location is in the vicinity of the cutting through the fringing coral reef, identified as a 'boat landing' in the 1966 investigation (M in Figure 7).

Table 1: Comparison of Investigation Results

2003 Investigation	1999 Investigation	1966 Investigation
S1: 4m x 5m cutting near base of ridge; possibly a sawpit or a borrow pit for building material	-	Shown on plan as a U, but no identifying label
S2: Regular 1.3m x 2.3m cutting in top of ridge scarp; possibly a sawpit	-	Shown on plan as a U, but no identifying label
S3: 5.0m x 5.5m pile of ironstone (90%) and coral rubble (10%) in southeast part of site; possible collapsed structure	-	-
S4: 5.0m x 6.5m terrace on southern aspect of ridge; 2m west of this feature is a surface scatter of ceramic sherds and clay pipe stem	-	“Excavations”
S5: Compacted pile of ironstone (50%), coral (45%) and brick (5%) rubble on coral slab foundation; likely fireplace/chimney	Site 7 - “Chimney”	Feature G - “Chimney”
S6: Large cutting cut back into the base of the ridge slope; possibly a sawpit or a borrow pit for building material		Shown on plan as a U, but no identifying label
S7: U-shaped outline of double row of bricks enclosing flat coral slabs; bricks range from well to poorly fired and are probably a chimney base	Site 8 - “Brick rubble hearth”	Feature H - “Rubble of bricks; hearth”
S8: Walled structure of slabs of coral rock mortared together; interior consists of a compacted and crushed coral floor	Site 9 - “Raised wall of coral rock and mortar”	Feature J - “Raised wall of coral rock and mortar”
S9: Partially collapsed well	Site 13 - “Well”	“Well”
S10: Rectangular excavation; possibly an uncompleted version of S11	-	Shown on plan, but no identifying label
S11: Rectangular excavation supported by placed coral rock and concrete lined	Site 11 - “Cells (or possible storehouse)”	Feature L - “Cells or Storehouse”

2003 Investigation	1999 Investigation	1966 Investigation
S12: Rectangular semi-subterranean two compartment 'tank' made of coral rock and lined with concrete	Site 10 - "Cemented pits located at ground level"	Feature K - "Cemented pits at ground level"
S13: Pile of coral slabs and rocks in southeast part of site; probably a pile of unused building material	-	-
S14: An artificially levelled area immediately downslope of S13 in southeast part of site	-	-
S15: Disturbed platform of ironstone and coral rock on crest of foredune behind beach in southeast part of site	-	-
S16: Disturbed platform of ironstone and coral rock on crest of foredune behind beach in southeast part of site	-	-
S17: Scatter of brick and ironstone near the foot of the knoll	Site 4 - "Broken bricks (or path)"	Feature D - "Broken bricks set as for floor or path"
S18: Large rectangular platform approximately 6m x 8m of coral paving 'stones' set at ground level; in the northwest corner is a large post mortared in place at the base	Site 2 "Floor"	Feature B "Floor - Coral Rock approximately at ground level"
S19: Collapsed fireplace of mortared coral rock with some brick	Site 3 "Fireplace"	Feature A "Fireplace- Coral Rock"
S20: Structure of mortared coral and brick approximately one metre high, but with no opening as for a chimney	Site 1 "Chimney"	Feature C "Chimney - Coral Rocks and Fire Bricks"

Issues of Identification

The site of Fort Wellington has now been investigated to a level enabling the recording of at least the major elements of surviving surface fabric. The issue now is one of placing those elements into their correct historical context to assist in the development of appropriate management and research strategies. In this, the historical documents play an important role by providing a framework for interpreting the remaining fabric.

As summarised above, historical records provide detailed descriptions of individual buildings and the stockade at particular points in time. The 1829 plan contributes a spatial element to this information. However, upon interrogating written accounts and the plan, a number of discrepancies become apparent. The first of these concerns the size of the stockade. The stockade was described by contemporary observers as possessing sides averaging 45 feet in length encompassing a tower measuring 20 feet on each side (refer above). However, the 1829 plan shows the sides of the stockade as approximately 65 to 70 feet long (one chain = 66 feet) and the tower more than 10 feet wider than described. Other buildings appear to be represented at the correct scale. Interestingly, a similar discrepancy exists on an 1827 plan of the Fort Dundas settlement (De La Rue 2007: 43), in which the size of the fort itself is considerably greater than was the case. It seems the size of fortifications may have been deliberately exaggerated in British military plans of this period. Uncritically using such plans as a basis for determining the location of the remains of fortifications and other structures is likely to be problematic.

The second discrepancy concerns what the 1829 settlement plan does not show. There is no depiction of the headland and its attendant buildings; the coral-walled structure (S8) and the concrete cisterns (S10, S11 and S12) are missing; and the 'boat landing' cutting in the coral reef is not shown. Concerning the headland, records show that buildings of the Fort Wellington period were erected on this high ground. Lieutenant George Sleeman had intended to rebuild the fort and other buildings on the headland but had only completed three cottages and a new government building by the time he was replaced by Captain Collett Barker, who had orders to construct only temporary quarters (Historical Society of the Northern Territory 1971: 27). The absence of these buildings from the 1829 plan probably shows that Barker undertook no further construction in this part of the site.

Turning to the cutting in the coral reef, this is unlikely to be represented by the boat sheds tagged as '15' on the 1829 plan. The size of the boat sheds (36 feet by 12 feet) and inland location do not support this thesis. Commentators have assumed that the cutting was used to facilitate boat landing but the opening is only six feet wide, very narrow for this purpose and it appears an illogical use of resources to excavate through the reef when perfectly adequate beach landings are available in the near vicinity. A perhaps more plausible function is that of a chute for

winching logs from the sea to the settlement's sawpits. The British are known to have floated felled logs down the harbour to the settlement for milling.

Putting aside discussion of function, no firm evidence is present in the available historical sources to suggest that the British at Fort Wellington excavated the cutting. One area of interesting research would involve determining whether the rock from the cutting was used to construct the coral-walled structure (S8), thereby linking these two features in relative time.



Figure 9. Coral-walled structure (S8) (Photo: Sheryl Oxford, 2003)

The absence of the coral-walled structure and cisterns from the 1829 plan and historical descriptions is puzzling as their construction must have entailed considerable use of resources. The coral-walled structure was built using rough cut coral rock cemented with lime mortar, which fits with building techniques of the 1820s (Figures 9 and 10). Various interpretations have been given to its use, including as a storehouse or armoury (Historical Society of the Northern Territory 1971: 11). The substantial nature of the construction may also indicate use as a prison. Documents relate the construction of cells under Barker's command, which were demolished upon abandonment of the settlement. However, an 1829 plan of prison cells depicts a configuration quite unlike the coral-walled structure (Figure 11). Barker's description of prison cells with two rooms with separate entrances (Mulvaney and Green 1992: 189) is also not reflected in

the architecture of the coral-walled structure. The simple answer is that we do not know when this structure was built or what it was used for.

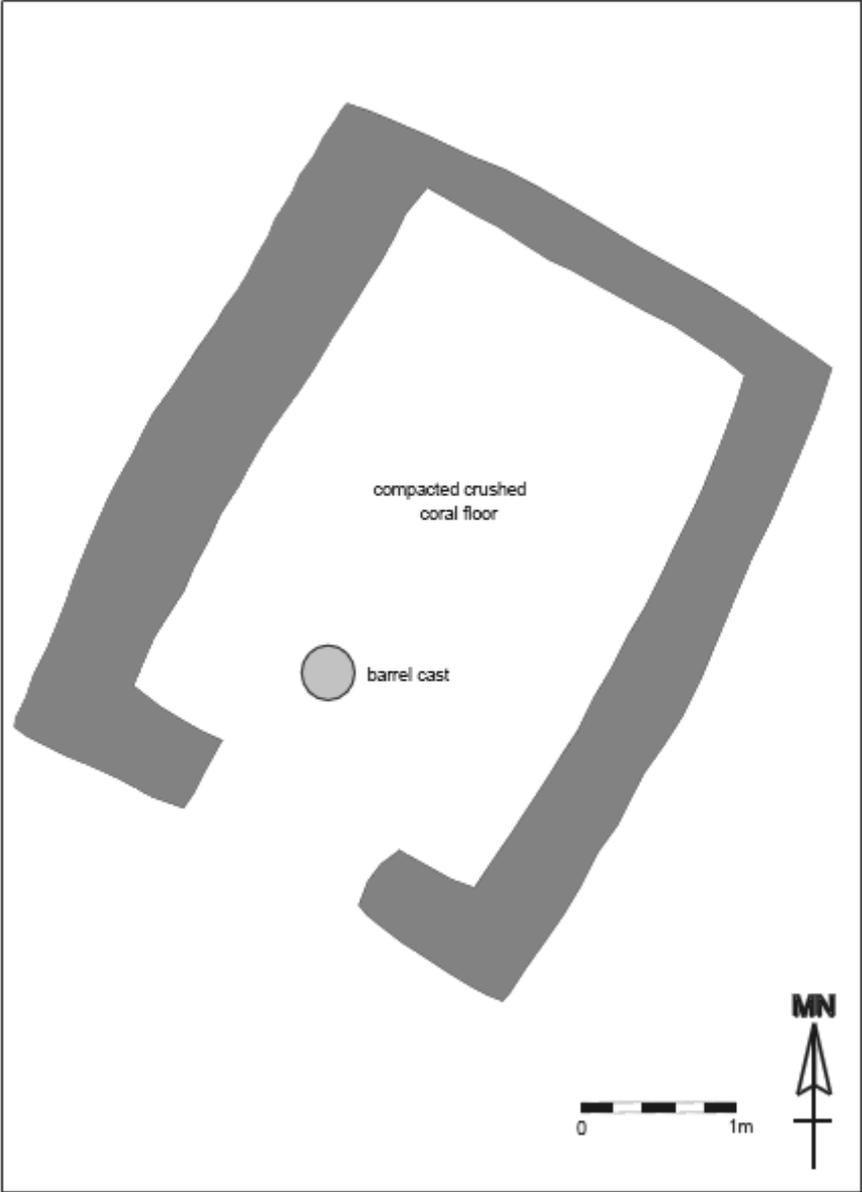


Figure 10. Plan of coral-walled structure (S8)

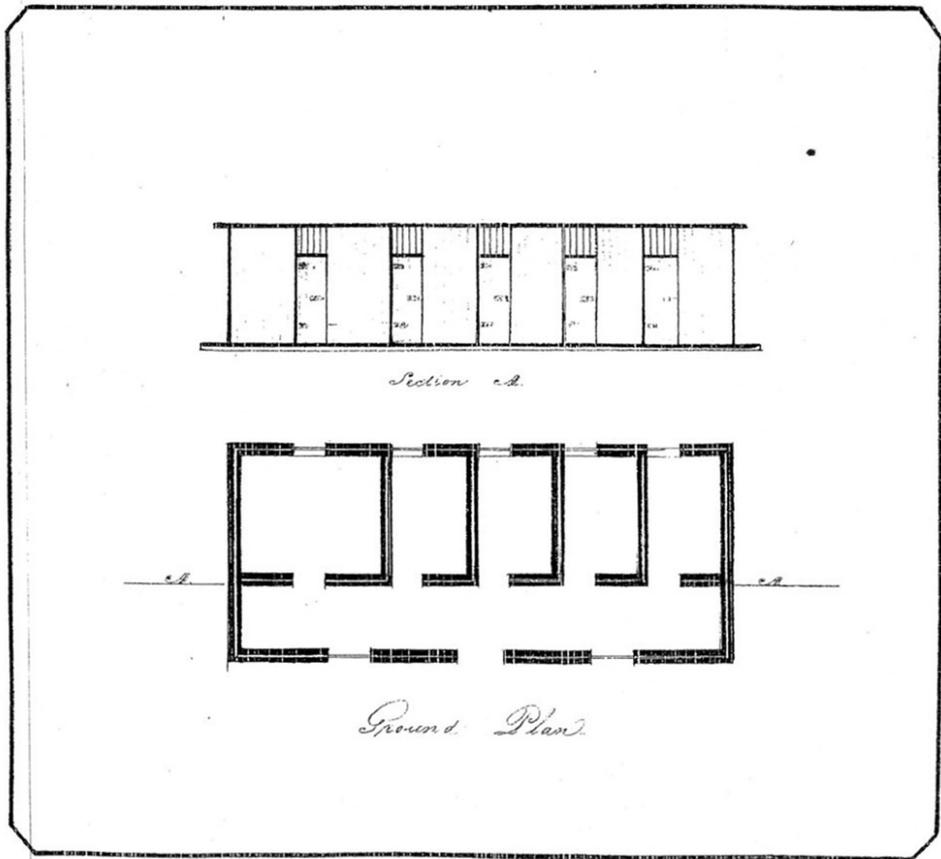


Figure 11. Plan and elevation of the Cells, 1829 (NSW State Archives NRS906 [4/2060.2])

The 'cisterns' - S10, S11 and S12 - are even more architecturally significant structures, consisting of semi-subterranean structures lined with coral rock and cement render (Figures 12 and 13). The presence of cement render suggests an age no earlier than the 1870s, when the use of cement became common. The possibility that cement was applied during a later period of re-use cannot be altogether discounted. Nevertheless, the absence of the cisterns from the 1829 plan can be persuasively explained by construction after the abandonment of Fort Wellington. As recounted above, historical records show that during the mid-1870s Fred Dewar and partners were active in this area. They are known to have shot approximately 1000 buffalo between Raffles and Mountnorris Bays and tanned the hides in vats at the site of Fort Wellington (Calaby 1975: 16). The physical remains of this activity are likely to survive at the site.



Figure 12. Double compartment cement-lined ‘cistern’ (S12) (Photo: Colin De La Rue, 2003)

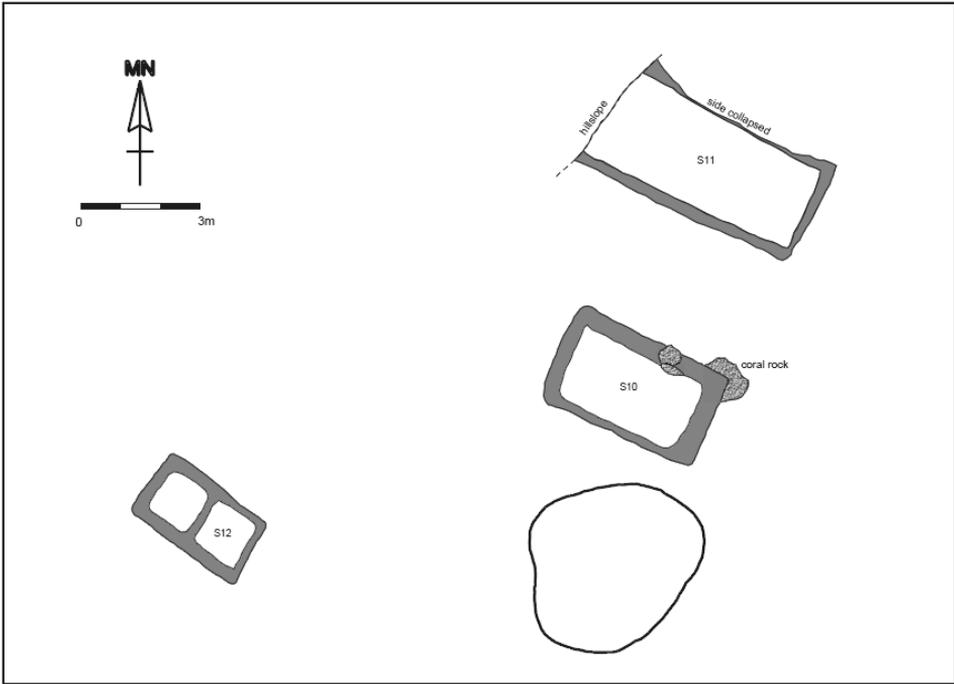


Figure 13. Plan of cistern complex (S10, 11 and 12)

An argument can therefore be mounted that the cisterns are Dewar's tanning vats, with the smaller of the three structures (Figure 12) perhaps a pickling tub for meat. A nearby well (S9) and other less distinct features in this area (e.g. S13 and S14 – Figure 8) may also relate to the buffalo hunting period. A hearth (S7) is outlined with a twin row of quite well-made bricks and may have been the base for a sheet iron chimney of the type common in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It may indicate the position of the 'homestead' of Dewar and partners; references to a homestead and substantial camp are present in the *Northern Territory Times & Gazette* for 1876 and 1917. The strong likelihood that there is an overlay of early 1870s re-use over the mid 1820s occupation introduces a complicating factor in identifying the date and purpose of several elements of the site's remaining physical fabric.

Conclusion

Reid (2011) has recently suggested that sufficient historical documentation has been assembled to allow researchers to now have confidence that the buildings and structures identified in the written record can be associated with the physical fabric surviving at the site of Fort Wellington. We consider however that major deficiencies still remain in our understanding and that 'ground-truthed' locations for the stockade and many other historical features have yet to be determined with any degree of certainty. As outlined in this paper, gaps in the written and material evidence, inaccuracies in the 1829 plan, and a lack of understanding of construction that probably occurred at the site after the British left, all impose limitations on what can and cannot be said about the surviving fabric of the 1820s settlement. These are exciting challenges that wait to be addressed by further research on Fort Wellington.

In conclusion, Fort Wellington, along with its sister settlements of Fort Dundas and Port Essington, represents a conscious, if half-hearted, attempt by the British Empire to establish a presence in far northern Australia. These three settlements together represent a major phase in British military expansion into northern Australia, as well as the first attempts to establish trade with populations to the north of the continent. The settlements also represent the time when Indigenous peoples of northern Australia were confronted with outsiders whose objective was to colonise rather than merely visit. These are significant events in Australia's history. It is time consideration was given to advancing a serial nomination to the National Heritage List for Fort Wellington, Fort Dundas and Port Essington.

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Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 16 Sept 1876, p2, “Dewar and Munro’s party at Raffles Bay have spent a large amount of time and money in an extensive tanyard and homestead, and will be in full swing tanning hides by the end of September”.

Northern Territory Times & Gazette, 25 January 1917, p 12, “It is now 40 years since a party of four enthusiasts formed a camp there and after shooting 1000 they set to work and tanned them on the spot at the abandoned Raffles Bay settlement”.

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