

SUMMARY OF EXCAVATION
RESULTS.
TRENCH 3 AND TOPSOIL SURVEY,
MAY 2009.
THE "SMALL MISERABLE HUT",
NEAR BELGENNY FARM,
ELIZABETH MACARTHUR AVENUE,
CAMDEN,
N.S.W.



Conrad Martens, 1836 (Private Collection).

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June 2009

CONTENTS.

SUMMARY OF EXCAVATION RESULTS.....	1
Stage 1 archaeological investigation - Test-excavation, September 2008.	1
Stage 2 archaeological investigation - Area excavation and topsoil survey, May 2009.	1
Purpose of excavation.....	2
Extent of archaeological investigation.	2
Results of archaeological investigation.	3
The “small miserable hut” (Trench 3).	3
Dating of the “small miserable hut”.....	4
Part of the adjacent rectangular building (Trench 3).	4
Part of the topsoil survey within the surveyed area.	5
The identification of the building in Trench 3.	6
Conclusions.	7
Education and community programme.....	8
Photographs and plans.....	9

SUMMARY OF EXCAVATION RESULTS.

The archaeological investigation of the “small miserable hut” is in its second season. The first section summarises the reporting on Stage 1 to date. The remainder of the report describes the results of the second season of excavation.

Stage 1 archaeological investigation - Test-excavation, September 2008.

An assessment report was completed in September 2006.¹ The research design and permit application for test-excavation was prepared in December 2007.² An excavation permit was approved on 11 February 2008, under s60 of the NSW Heritage Act. Test-excavation was completed in September 2008. A summary report was prepared in October 2008.³

Stage 2 archaeological investigation - Area excavation and topsoil survey, May 2009.

The research design and permit application for area-excavation and the topsoil survey was prepared in January 2009.⁴ An excavation permit was approved on 19 March 2009, under s60 of the NSW Heritage Act. The excavation of Trench 3 and the first stage of the topsoil survey were completed in May 2009.

The following summary report for Stage 2 of the archaeological investigation is required as Condition 9 of the excavation permit, approved on 13 March 2009.

¹ Edward Higginbotham & Associates Pty Ltd. Historical and archaeological assessment of the site of the "small miserable hut", near Belgenny Farm, Elizabeth Macarthur Avenue, Camden, NSW. Belgenny Farm Trust. September 2006.

² Edward Higginbotham & Associates Pty Ltd. Excavation permit application and research design. The "small miserable hut", near Belgenny Farm, Elizabeth Macarthur Avenue, Camden, NSW. Belgenny Farm Trust. December 2007.

³ Edward Higginbotham & Associates Pty Ltd. Summary of excavation results. Test-Excavation of the site of the “Small Miserable Hut”, Belgenny Farm, Camden, NSW. Belgenny Farm Trust.. October 2008.

⁴ Edward Higginbotham & Associates Pty Ltd. Excavation permit application and research design for the archaeological investigation (Stage 2) of the “Small Miserable Hut”, Belgenny Farm, Camden, NSW. Belgenny Farm Trust. 6 January 2009.

Purpose of excavation.

At its meeting on 17 October 2007, the Belgenny Farm Trust instructed Dr. Edward Higginbotham to prepare for the investigation of the following items:

1. The whole of the “small miserable hut”.
2. The whole of the adjacent rectangular building.
3. The whole of one of the 1840s houses.
4. The topsoil survey within the surveyed area.⁵

The following summary of the research design provides the reasons for the proposed excavations.

A number of research questions were proposed:

1. Confirmation of the site of the “small miserable hut”.
2. What is the second building adjacent to the “small miserable hut”?
3. What are the other buildings in the adjacent paddocks?
4. When did the centre of farming activity move to the current Belgenny Farm?
5. How long did the buildings near the “small miserable hut” survive and what were they used for?
6. What was the social and economic standing of the occupants of the buildings?⁶

Extent of archaeological investigation.

In the one week available for archaeological investigation, 25-29 May 2009, the following tasks have been completed:

1. The whole of the “small miserable hut” (Trench 3)
2. Part of the adjacent rectangular building (Trench 3).
3. Part of the topsoil survey within the surveyed area.

⁵ Four options for the archaeological investigation were presented by Dr. Edward Higginbotham at this meeting. The proposed works were outlined as Option 3a. See Edward Higginbotham & Associates Pty Ltd. Excavation permit application and research design for the archaeological investigation (Stage 2) of the “Small Miserable Hut”, Belgenny Farm, Camden, NSW. Belgenny Farm Trust. 6 January 2009.

⁶ Edward Higginbotham & Associates Pty Ltd. Excavation permit application and research design for the archaeological investigation (Stage 2) of the “Small Miserable Hut”, Belgenny Farm, Camden, NSW. Belgenny Farm Trust. 6 January 2009.

Results of archaeological investigation.

The “small miserable hut” (Trench 3).

The whole of the “small miserable hut” was excavated in this second season of excavation. In the previous season of excavation, it was suggested that the overall dimensions of the hut would be 4 by 8 metres, assuming the length of the building would be twice as long as its width, a standard measurement for typical two roomed huts in the early colony.

The excavation revealed that the hut dimensions were 4 by 6 metres, or 13 feet by 19 feet 8 inches. Although not a typical or standard measurement, the building was still divided into two rooms, as indicated by a post-hole in the middle of the building and variation in the depth of deposits between the rooms (Figure 1)

The excavation confirmed the construction of the hut as a timber framed building, with interesting variations.

Alternative 1 - It is possible that corner posts and posts mid way along each side formed the frame of the building, Base plates would have been laid directly on the ground and top plates used to tie the posts together, the wall infilled with slabs.

Alternative 2 - The building was originally a timber framed slab building, with base plates laid directly on the ground. The post-holes, which are only clear along its south wall and one in the middle of the hut, represent later repairs, since at least the post-hole in the middle of the hut is cut through occupation layers. A wall slot has been dug only at the south-west corner of the hut and again this may be a later repair on the south or damper side of the hut.

The dating of the artifacts recovered from the site will enable the resolution of these two alternative interpretations. Alternative 2 is preferred at this point, simply on the basis of stratigraphy and the limited number of posts.

No matter which of the two above alternatives is eventually accepted, the excavation of this building has proved highly instructive. Once the fireplace rubble was removed during excavation, the remains of the building are particularly ephemeral. Without the stone of the fireplace, it is unlikely that it would have been recognised as the site of a building.

Similar buildings of slab construction have been excavated in Central Western NSW. They too proved extremely ephemeral in their archaeological footprint, even though historical photographs were available, pinpointing their precise location.

It may be concluded that timber framed slab buildings may leave very little archaeological trace, unless marked by stone rubble from a fireplace. Some buildings of this type would be archaeological invisible – a salutary lesson.

Dating of the “small miserable hut”.

At least two of the three buildings on the 1840 Estate Plan continued in use until the late 19th century (Figure 2). The artifacts in the topsoil around all these buildings therefore include those that date throughout the period from the 1800s to the 1890s.

In order to precisely date the “small miserable hut”, it is necessary to recover artifacts from sealed contexts, i.e., those not exposed to later occupation. For this reason it was necessary to remove the rubble of the fireplace to recover the artifacts sealed beneath the collapsed structure. These artifacts should only date from the occupation of the “small miserable hut”. Likewise the artifacts from the post-holes and wall slots should help define the date range for occupation.

Part of the adjacent rectangular building (Trench 3).

Trench 3 was also extended to include the sub-rectangular depression, adjacent to the “small miserable hut” on its south side.

In spite of the evidence revealed by Test-Trench 3 in the first season, in the form of brick and stone rubble fill layers, this building proved extremely hard to define. The trench revealed a distinct line for the north wall of this structure, but no other structural evidence, like wall slots or post-holes.

The Topsoil Survey, to be described below, revealed that the south wall line may be located up to 3 metres outside the southern side of the trench, while the west wall may be up to 5 metres beyond the western side of the trench (Figure 3, deep topsoil Area 2). This would be a large structure, measuring 10 by 14 metres (32 feet 9 inches by 46 feet), certainly a large farm building, if it had been roofed, or perhaps a stockyard or fenced garden.

(The excavated area could not be extended further south at this stage, because it would require a variation on the permit. The excavation was not extended further west, because of time constraints).

The ephemeral nature of this structure should possibly be no surprise, given the findings from the “small miserable hut”.

Part of the topsoil survey within the surveyed area.

Within the five days available for archaeological investigation a substantial part of the Topsoil Survey was completed (Figure 3).

During the test-excavations (Season 1 – Stage 1), it was found that the depth of topsoil varied inside and outside the buildings. Outside the sites of buildings the depth of topsoil had been eroded to such an extent that the turf rested directly on subsoil clay (5 cms depth average). Within the buildings topsoil depth was much greater (10-20 cms).

A number of possible interpretations were considered during the test-excavation.⁷ Mr. Roy Laurie, formerly of the Elizabeth Macarthur Agricultural Institute, has suggested that horses may be a primary cause of soil erosion.⁸ This interpretation has assisted in understanding the topsoil variation across the site.

The depth of topsoil to subsoil clay was measured and the soil described every 2 metres along the existing survey grid.

The Topsoil Survey has identified 9 areas of deeper topsoil, as follows:

1. Site of building indicated by charcoal in the soil profile and a slight terrace in the hill slope.
2. Full extent of structure indicated by sub-rectangular depression (see Trench 3 above).
3. Site of third building on 1840 Estate Plan. The other two buildings were located in Test-Trenches 1 and 2. The Topsoil Survey located a number of brick walls, similar to those in Trench 2, so confirming this identification.

⁷ Edward Higginbotham & Associates Pty Ltd. Excavation permit application and research design for the archaeological investigation (Stage 2) of the “Small Miserable Hut”, Belgenny Farm, Camden, NSW. Belgenny Farm Trust. 6 January 2009.

⁸ Personal communication. Mr. Roy Laurie. Elizabeth Macarthur Agricultural Institute, May 2009.

4. Demarcation between shallow topsoil to east and deeper topsoil to west. A possible fenceline, confining horse traffic to the east. This alignment is also marked by a distinct change of slope.
5. Small area of deep topsoil, not identified at this stage.
6. Small area of deep topsoil, not identified at this stage.
7. Small area of deep topsoil, not identified at this stage.
8. Large area of deeper topsoil, also associated with a concentration of artifacts, including recent items. The eastern side of this deeper topsoil area has not been defined. The extension of this area to the west is associated with a linear trench.
9. Area of deeper topsoil, near sandstone monument. This area has not been defined on its west and south sides. Part of this area is associated with a linear trench.

Areas 1, 2, 3, 8 and 9 have been identified as buildings or have the potential to be buildings.

The identification of the building in Trench 3.

The archaeological investigation has shown that the building in Trench 3 is *not* the third building on the 1840 Estate Plan. The third building is Area 3 of deeper topsoil (Figure 3, deep topsoil Area 3).

This finding leads to a number of possibilities for the building in Trench 3, namely:

1. The 1840 Estate Plan does not show outbuildings, hence does not indicate the additional buildings located by the archaeological investigation, namely in Trench 3 and by the Topsoil Survey.
2. The building in Trench 3, the “small miserable hut” was not standing by 1840.
3. The building in Trench 3, the “small miserable hut” was not built by 1840.

Of these three alternatives, the second appears most likely. The artifact dating already confirms occupation of the building in Trench 3 during the 1810s to early 1820s (eg. Chinese ceramics).

The building in Trench 3 is now the only building with the same orientation as the building shown in the Conrad Martens 1836 painting, with a fireplace on its west wall. The three buildings on the 1840 Estate Plan faced east, at right angles to the building in the painting.

Of those buildings identified in the north paddock, the one in Trench 3 is the best contender for the “small miserable hut”.

The previous evidence still stands, including:

1. The background topography in the 1836 Conrad Martens watercolour is shown in a form that is only visible from the current site and not the more recent Belgenny Farm buildings to the south. Other aspects of the watercolour, including the site of the hut and the fenceline on the right conform not only with the current site, but also the fencelines shown on the 1840 estate plan.
2. The building shown in the watercolour conforms with the archaeological evidence for a slab building with a bark roof.
3. Now that the building is not one of those shown on the 1840 Estate Plan, it does not need to survive up to 1840, although a timber framed slab building could do so, if maintained.

The archaeology and the Conrad Martens 1836 watercolour therefore provide consistent evidence in terms of topography and construction of the building. The identification is further confirmed by the following evidence:

4. Only in Test-Trench 3 has Chinese porcelain been recovered, which is the earliest dated material. Chinese porcelain (Canton or Nanking wares) was imported into NSW from 1792 to c.1820s.
5. The construction of the building in Trench 3 differs from the two others located in Test-Trenches 1 and 2, since it does not have stone footings. The more primitive building technique may suggest an earlier date.

In conclusion, all the available evidence points to the building in Trench 3 being the one shown in Conrad Martens 1836 watercolour. The final link in the chain of evidence is the family tradition that the watercolour represents the first residence at Belgenny, or in other words, the “small miserable hut”.

Some may consider that the buildings, newly identified in the Topsoil Survey, may be contenders for the “small miserable hut”. Archaeological investigation of these newly discovered sites should be completed to confirm or disconfirm the current interpretation of the “small miserable hut”.

Conclusions.

The second season of archaeological investigation and the completion of the excavation of Trench 3 have provided additional evidence to confirm the identification of the building as the “small miserable hut”.

The dating and functional analysis of the artifacts will be used to confirm the dating of the structure, but also assist in defining the social and economic standing of the occupants.

The excavations to date have identified 4 buildings or structures (Trenches 1, 2 and 3). The Topsoil Survey has identified four potential additional buildings (Areas 1, 3, 8 and 9).

There is now a total number of 8 potential buildings within the existing survey area, surely an indication that it was an important focus of early farm development.

While the investigation has not yet provided specific information relating to the use or date range of the newly discovered buildings, nonetheless future investigation, if undertaken, will provide information on the early development stages of the Camden Estate between 1805 and 1821, before the move to the existing Belgenny Farm buildings and cottage. It is this stage of formative development about which the history books are largely silent and to which archaeology may make the greatest contribution.

Education and community programme.

To facilitate the development of education and community programmes, the following tasks were completed during the excavation:

1. Students and teachers from Camden High School and other schools attended the site each day and conducted video recordings and interviews.

The web site developed by Camden High School is available – www.belgennydig.pbwiki.com

Edward Higginbotham.

Edward Higginbotham & Associates Pty Ltd.

4 June 2009

Photographs and plans



Figure 1. The ephemeral nature of the archaeological remains of the building in Trench 3 demonstrate how timber framed slab buildings can be almost archaeologically invisible.



Figure 2. Detail of an 1880s photograph showing 2 surviving cottages on the site (private collection).

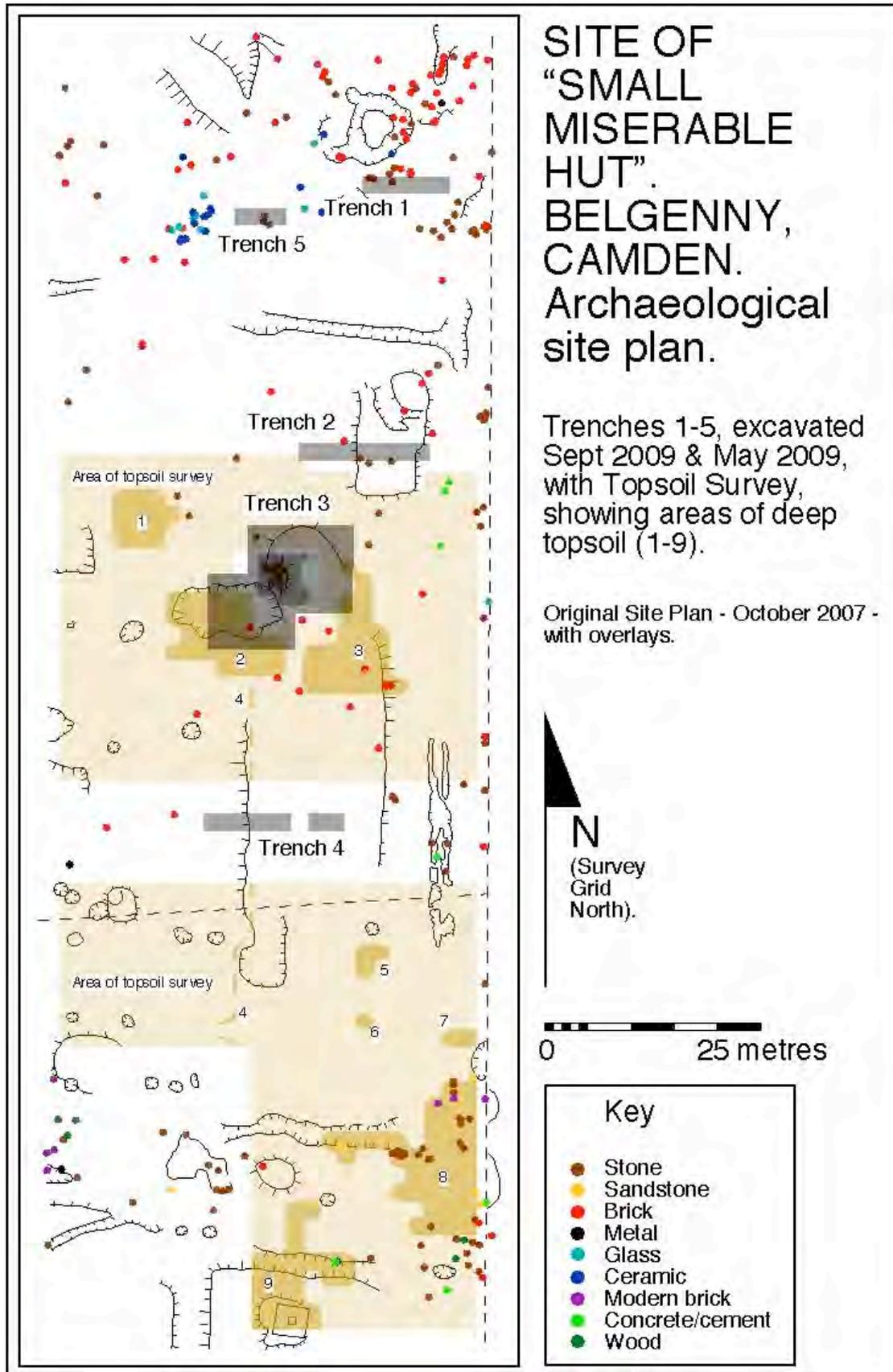


Figure 3. Plan showing the archaeological trenches and the area covered by the Topsoil Survey.