

The Last Days of Burke and Wills – the discoveries

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Recent archaeological fieldwork recovered a number of artefacts from a remote Queensland site. Is this evidence from the last days of Burke and Wills?

This video complements an exhibition called The Last Days of Burke and Wills and is part of a talk presented in the Our Story Your Story series at Queensland Museum South Bank.

Transcript

These are some other things that we've found. This is a rifle bullet. You can see it's a little over an inch long. Obviously with these types of weapons we have to talk in inches. This belongs to a particular weapon called a Calisher and Terry's rifle. This one here is a 0.45 calibre bullet. It's a little bit smaller, you can see the measurements. You can just make out there was actually twine, cotton, some kind of tie in there. What would happen is that this bullet would be tied into a paper cartridge. So the cartridge would extend down here, it was full of gun powder and it was waxed, and then these would be levered and put into the revolver. And the reason I mention this wax is because it was wax with animal grease and this particular bullet down here we believe has been chewed by a small animal, most likely because it smelt good because of the animal grease that was used to wax the paper.

This here is called a percussion cap. A percussion cap is a technology used in firing these weapons. It would have had a little explosive charge in it and when a hammer hit the top of it the charge would pass through into the chamber and fire the bullet. So a lot of the artefacts we found were munitions related.

These are the twenty seven percussion caps that we found at the bottom of the pit, all clumped together. These are rifle ones. Because we were excavating by hand we also found glass, we found eight pieces of glass in total. A lot of them are very small fine pieces of glass. But this one here in particular is very interesting. It's got a clearly bevelled edge and when you shine a light through it, it's a ruby red. We think it's a sun filter from a sextant. The way that the sextants operated was that they had shades that you could put over so that you didn't damage your eyes from looking directly at the sun. And the shades were generally red, green, and blue. And we think that that is one of those.

So this is the kind of diagnostic kind of stuff that we pulled out of the ground. The two pen nibs that I spoke about we could read the company name Joseph Gillott and also the pen type, it's a Public Pen and it's F. The issue with this particular pen is that the company started in 1827 so it doesn't give us a real lot of information in terms of dating. What we do know is that the Public Pen F, the F stands for fine and they were used for fine penmanship, but also for map makers and surveyors those kind of people who needed fine lines in their work.

The second pen nib was by a company called T.J. and J. Smith of London. They started in 1839 again the date range isn't so great. Again I've been in contact with that company and they're going through their historical records because initially when they started manufacturing they manufactured pencils, mechanical pencils. So if we can get a date from them as to when they started manufacturing pen nibs it would help to fine tune our dating.

The brass button we found is fantastic. We can clearly read the company name Hardman and Illiffe they were partners in this particular company and they started in 1855 and they went their separate way in 1860. So again this one gives us a really great date range.

The glass sun filter fragment suggests that a sextant was used at the site. The three 0.45 calibre pistol bullets relate directly to the weapons that we know were taken on the expedition, through the historical records. Again the rifle bullet matches the weapons that were taken on the expedition as well.

Now this is a close up of the two pen nibs. It will be difficult to see. As you can see they are quite badly rusted. This one here it's got Smith written up the top, 'ITH' and this is 'LONDON'. I had our professional photographers upstairs take excellent close up images. And using those images I was actually able to read the information on the pen nibs. This one here may be a little easier to see, there is a 'JOES' and it kind of peters out but there is an 'H' there. And then this is Gillotts 'GILLOTTS' and that's a big F and that's a '2' and a '9' and a '2' and down here it says 'PUBLIC PEN' with 'PEN'. So this information is really useful in determining exactly what we are working with on the site.

We've got some more close ups of the other things. The two bullets that you have already seen. This is a back lit image of that particular piece of glass, the fragment from the sextant sun filter. You can see the really bevelled edge. It's a beautiful piece of work, and it's red. And then the brass button. Here we've got 'H' starting Hardman, and then there is the '&' ampersand, 'Illiffe' and it says patented. So it's a two piece brass button. It's a decorative button basically.

Now we found stuff in June 2006, but other people had been visiting the site prior to that, and this is some of the more amazing things that they found. In particular this glass artificial horizon at the top here. There are images of it in the media. I haven't seen it myself but it's basically a hand calibrated cylinder of glass that's filled with clear water and it was found by a metal detectorist who picked up the metal alloy case that it was in. That one is down in Melbourne at the moment in the State Library of Victoria. We've got the brass button. I will be doing some more work on trying to work out if we can date that particular button. That one is on loan to us at the moment. Also a pair of scissors and a key winder – really odd things to find in the middle of nowhere. Not something that your average drover would throw away.

In total when I look at the artefacts across the site and across the collections. The vast majority, one hundred and ten percussion caps, lots of bullets, the screws are really interesting they're ferrous screws, they're very tiny. They're the kind of screws that you would find in scientific instruments or hinges associated with those boxes for the instruments. The hinges as well, non ferrous, they don't rust, so they may be brass or copper, copper alloy. The chronometers were taken on ocean going vessels so it may be that obviously they would need brass fittings as well, so it may be that we can tie a little bit more together with that. And the buckles we've found, there have been four buckles that we have found on the site. None of them are decorative, they're all D shaped buckles, very ordinary. And the thing about the buckles is that the historical records tell us that a lot of the equipment was buckled onto the animals.

So again we're trying to find links with what we found to historical information. So ultimately what does it all mean? Well at this point when we look at the artefacts and when we link these back to the history and we look at the assemblage of everything that we've found from the site; It demonstrates a very strong link with the Burke and Wills expedition. And in my mind when we add the pit into that it gives us evidence that it is the Plant Camp that we found.

This collection, there is a number of collections down south, our collection feeds in with that and gives us a really good overview of what was recovered from the site. And as you can see by going out and having a close up look at all the artefacts it gives you a direct link with the things that we've found. You can see them and come up with your own opinion about them. The thing that amazes me is that when you see them in the cases they seem so tiny and yet we are trying to draw all this information from those. And basically at the bottom here it gives us an opportunity to tell our story, the Queensland story, which is the part of that story that fits in with Burke and Wills.

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