

The Adelaide Hills Face Zone as a Cultural Landscape

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As early as 1836 the first Surveyor-General to the new colony of South Australia, Colonel William Light, referred to the Mount Lofty Ranges as ‘these enchanted hills’ and since this time the symbiotic relationship between the Mount Lofty Ranges and the city of Adelaide has been highly valued by the people of Adelaide. One aim of the recently completed Adelaide Hills Face Zone Cultural Heritage Project was to document and map cultural changes to the landscape of the western face of the Mount Lofty Ranges following European colonisation in the late 1830s.

Landscape archaeology is a recent approach employed in historical and indigenous archaeology that addresses the interaction of cultural and environmental variables associated with human landscape use (Yamin and Bescherer 1996; David and Lourandos 1999). This theoretical paradigm was derived from earlier systems-based approaches to human landscape use developed in relation to settlement pattern and human ecology studies (Clark 1952; Willey 1953, 1956; Steward 1955). Whereas many earlier approaches to human landscape use emphasised the natural environment as a prime mover, landscape archaeology focuses on the strong interactions between culture (i.e. learned behaviour, norms) and natural environments. In relation to historical archaeology, the cultural “baggage” that colonists bring with them has a major impact on how they view, interpret, and use new territories.

After three years of archaeological and historical studies it is argued that Adelaide’s Hills Face Zone is one of the best preserved relict landscapes representing the era of European/English expansion and colonisation during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. There are two reasons for this, first, the central western face of the Mount Lofty Ranges is close to Adelaide and, at the time of colonisation, the natural springs in the hills were the major sources of permanent water in the early decades of the colony before reticulated water became available. Second, the western face of the ranges has been protected from subdivision and intensive agriculture and horticulture since the passing of the Hills Face Zone legislation under the 1962 Development Act. The main objective of the legislation was to protect the natural heritage values of the zone, however, a second and until now unsuspected outcome has been the protection of the zone’s cultural heritage values.

The archaeological evidence of colonial settlement patterns and the many ways in which people utilized the land during the first one hundred years of the colony will be presented in this paper. The dichotomy between nature and culture and changing public perceptions of the hills landscape over time also need to be considered. The perception that much of the landscape within the Hills Face Zone represents a ‘natural’ environment is a construction of the later half of the twentieth century, particularly since the enactment of the Hills Face Zone legislation. The first people to modify the natural landscape were the ancestors of the Traditional Owners, the Kurna, Ramandjeri and Permangk people; their impacts on the environment were,

however, subtle and the landscape appeared as a natural environment to the first colonists.

The colonists perceived the ranges as a wild landscape, or as an unproductive wasteland, waiting to be cultivated and civilised into their 'ideal', the cultivated and productive landscapes of their English or European homelands. Encouraged by the South Australian Company's Wastelands Act almost all the steep slopes behind the Adelaide plains were cleared of trees and native vegetation to make way for farms, orchards and market gardens. The colonists adapted and applied European agricultural techniques to this unfamiliar landscape and prospered during the early decades. By the early twentieth century, however, they were beginning to understand the extent to which the land clearances and their deep ploughs had destroyed the top soil and the fertility of the land. Public perception has now shifted and only faint evidence remains of most of the small and economically unviable market gardens and orchards in the narrow valleys. At the beginning of the twenty-first century the natural vegetation has regenerated and the backdrop to the city has resumed its 'natural' status, despite a significant loss of biodiversity.

The archaeological evidence supports the historical record, that these transformations in the landscape of the Hills Face Zone are linked to the shifting demands of the local economy. Much of the initial wealth of the colony came from the hills and in particular from its natural resources: stone, minerals, water and fertile soil – all essential for establishing a new colony. Archaeological evidence of each of the early industries has been documented and the following are a few examples:

The slate quarries of the Willunga hills provided slate for the floors and roofs of city buildings and houses in Adelaide, Sydney and Melbourne at a time before galvanised roofing iron was readily available. Today the red pisè ruins of the former Cornish village on the steep hillsides of the Delabole quarry site are a stark reminder of mid-nineteenth century life in the colony. The ruins of the Delabole village and quarry provide an extraordinary example of a colonial Cornish landscape in an Australian environment.

The common theme across all of the Hills Face Zone was the use of stone to construct retaining walls and to channel and control water. The natural streams in most valleys had been straightened and confined to narrow stone channels, thus freeing up the fertile floor of each valley for crop production. Irrigation systems that used stone or timber water races were recorded, together with terraced hillsides supported by stone retaining walls. Two terraced hillside and stone water races have been reconstructed using a Geographic Information Systems (GIS) model. One is adjacent to the Eagle Quarry and the other is the old Newman's Nursery site in the Anstey's Hill Recreation Park. Both examples will be used to illustrate how colonial market gardeners and horticulturalists controlled the valuable water supplies prior to the availability of iron pipes.

The steep Mount Lofty Ranges presented challenges to both road and railway engineers during the mid-nineteenth century. Historic evidence from the time when both transport corridors were constructed was identified and provides fascinating examples of linear cultural landscapes. Archaeological evidence of a camp site used by the men who spent over two years constructing the tunnels through the Adelaide

Hills provided insights into the lives of the men living in these camps. A man was murdered at this particular camp and from the subsequent inquest we obtained a sketch of the camp and information about the men living at the site.

Approximately 900 cultural impacts or features have been documented and recorded on the Hills Face Zone Cultural Heritage GIS database. From this information we have been able to interpret the temporal and spatial changes in land use patterns. Most nineteenth century house sites were inappropriately located too close to streams and have been abandoned. Several sites, including the Mitcham Water Works, had been completely covered by sediment eroding from the cleared hillsides. Other sites, such as the massive Newman's Nursery, had been completely destroyed by the 25-30 year flood cycle that the colonists had not been able to predict.

Ultimately, however, it was the changing economic environment that allowed the Hills Face Zone to regenerate as a natural environment. The opening of large market gardens on the plains facilitated by modern transport and the ability to pump water from underground aquifers, caused the collapse of the small market gardens and orchards in the narrow valleys. Today, few buildings are built of stone and the small quarries have also closed with only a few very large companies continuing to operate, and they quarry only for crushed stone to manufacture concrete or for road metal. Following the decline of these industries the timely introduction of the Hills Face Zone legislation served to protect elements of each major colonial economic activity together with the many domestic environments. When the archaeological record of each individual site was entered into the Hills Face Zone Cultural Heritage GIS Database and interpreted using GIS technology, these relict landscapes provided an extraordinary archaeological record of colonial life in South Australia.

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