Fort Scratchley.

Final report on Management Plan Advisory Committee

November 1978.
Fort Scratchley, Newcastle: Report on its significance, with recommendations for setting up a Management Advisory Committee.

Judy Birmingham, November 1978.
1. Significance of the Fort Scratchley complex on Signal Hill as part of the National Estate.

1.1 The historic significance of Ft. Scratchley is both local and national.

The fort complex, begun in 1882, is its outstanding feature, but the whole site of Signal Hill (known earlier as Captain Allen's Hill, and also Flagstaff Hill) was inseparably part of Newcastle's settlement from the moment when coal was discovered at its foot. Its dominating situation commanding entry to the harbour led to the installation of guns long before the building of Fort Scratchley, as well as to the use of the site for a series of navigational aids, and ultimately the harbour-master's residence.

The selection of the site for a fort by Sir Wm. Jervois and Lieut.-Col. Peter Scratchley in their survey of coastal defences in New South Wales (recommended in 1877) was in fact rather a continuation of its obvious signalling and defensive role up-graded to the later 19th century advances in artillery and naval warfare than a new departure.

1.2 The following four phases of the site can thus be distinguished for research purposes, all of which need to be recognised in the ultimate public interpretation of the site:

a. Coal-mining phase. In September 1979 Lieut. Shortland discovered coal outcropping at the base of Signal Hill, as a result of which the Colonial Government chose Newcastle in 1804 as a penal settlement.

A drift was started into the outcrop (probably the Dudley Seam) in the same year which continued to be worked until 1817 when a second shaft elsewhere reached the Yard Seam at a depth of 111 ft.

The location of the early tunnels at the base of Signal Hill is known to local historians, although they are now blocked.

b. Light-house and Signal Phase.

A beacon was placed on the site in 1843 to aid ships entering the harbour, and early views of Newcastle and King's Town of c. 1818-20 appear to show the construction of a tower lighthouse alongside the flagstaff and small hut. A ship's signalling station was erected there in 1822, and at that time the name was changed from Capt. Allen's Hill to Signal Hill.

The beacon or light continued in use until 1857, when it was moved to Nobbys Head instead. Later photographs show the Harbour Master's Residence added on the top of the Hill, from which the Harbour Master carried out a number of coast watch, light-tending and life-boat duties. Mr. Bert Lovett, local historian, and son and/or grandson of the Harbour Master, has a valuable collection of these early photographs.

All these structures (or what remained of them in 1882) were destroyed to make way for the Fort. Detailed topographical investigation would reveal whether any traces might have survived below ground level.

c. Early fortification Phase.

Gun emplacements were completed on the Hill soon after settlement, and by 1840 it is said that seven guns protected Newcastle and its coal-mines. The Army was granted use of the site in August 1843, and the 3rd Battery Volunteer Artillery, formed in 1855, began using the fort in the early 1860s. The first permanent troops of the Colony of N.S.W. arrived in 1878.

(Information supplied by Dr. J.W. Turner; more information about both this and the next phase should be forthcoming from contemporary newspaper reports)

d. Fort Scratchley Phase.

Signal Hill was recommended as a site for a Major coastal defensive work to protect Newcastle in 1878 in the Servois-Scratchley report on the defence of New South Wales.

This report was the result of a number of events in the 1870s, including the withdrawal of the British garrison in 1870 and the Naval and Military Act of 1871 empowering the colonial
government to raise and maintain permanent forces. The outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War, the 'Russian scare' of the 70s, the developing arms race in British and European naval fire-power during the same period, and probably German activities in New Guinea all contributed to the interest in coastal defence.

Major General Sir William Jervois and Lieut. Colonel Peter Scratchley both of the Royal Engineers sailed from England in 1877 to advise on a correlated scheme of seaport defence, and their survey spans the years 1877-1883. Their report on N.S.W. was an early one, and it is quoted at length in Appendix A since it clarifies, inter alia, the following points:

i. The importance of Newcastle and its coal supplies to both the colony and to any potential enemy.

ii. The well-favoured nature of the site at Signal Hill from the viewpoint of defence.

iii. The detailed description of how the Fort was planned to operate, i.e. in conjunction with torpedoes (probably mines) and an ironclad in the Harbour, and a garrison within but no field force, and also with no supporting outworks.

In terms of survival of historic structures nothing but the uncertain possibility of archaeological evidence remains of the second and third phases listed above, and as yet unexplored traces of the first.

It is the fourth phase, the Fort planned by Sir Peter Scratchley, together with some modifications which followed soon after, and then the major additions of World War II, which dominates the site today and for which it must be valued as a site of national significance.

In comparison to comparable defensive works on Port Jackson notably Middle Harbour and the Heads, the Fort Scratchley works have considerable integrity in the early powder magazine, shell hoists, light fittings and gun emplacements, as well as the Officers Mess and much of the lay-out. Appendix B is a detailed comparison of the remains on these various sites and those of Fort Scratchley to indicate the relative amount of later modification and additional building.

In conclusion it may be said that the site of Signal Hill is one worthy of preservation consideration for its early historic associations alone, as well as its landscape value. The Fort Scratchley complex adds a dimension of 19th century European and British military involvement which is yet specifically Australian.

It is an excellent example of Empire defensive strategy of the 1870s, reflecting the usual delicate balance between
the naval firepower of the enemy on the one hand, always less efficient than land-based artillery, together with an assessment of the thickness of his iron plating, and the need for a combination of both economy and foresight in the land-based ordnance.

Far-reaching changes had overtaken the early 19th century smooth-bore, low velocity, muzzle-loaded guns, and in the ultimate interpretation of Fort Scratchley to the public there is an excellent opportunity for a vivid illustration of what these changes meant.
2. Recommendation that a Management Advisory Panel be set up for Fort Scratchley.

2.1 Essential repair work on the Officers Mess, a part of the historic site, has already been started pending the formulation of long-term proposals and objectives for the site as a whole.

Moreover, budgeting estimates for 1979-80 are imminently required which must provide for further repair and restoration work for the site as a whole.

It is therefore urgently required that policy decisions be made in the near future on site re-use and management, based upon a proper assessment of all issues involved.

2.2 It is recommended therefore that a Management Advisory Panel be set up as soon as possible with the following brief:

i. To initiate and receive: professional input in the form of the following background papers or information

- military historical, local historical and archaeological information on the historical significance of the site, structures and supposed structures of all phases, and military installations and fittings

- submissions, both local and Australia-wide, on the future of the site and its possible re-use from as wide a range as possible of interested parties

- feasibility studies on selected re-use proposals

- specialist reports on specific technical conservation problems e.g. the decaying reinforced concrete of the World War II gun emplacements

ii. To assess and consider this material in order to formulate a number of firm recommendations in the form of Reports, as follows:

- Report and recommendations on the development and re-use of the Fort Scratchley complex, Signal Hill, including detailed management aspects of suggested development

- Report embodying historical and archaeological research to date, together with a forward programme of archaeological and historical investigation, if applicable.

- Submission prepared for the relevant authorities for appropriate heritage safeguards to the periphery of Signal Hill, perhaps by means of an Environmental Impact Plan for the whole area between it and the Custom House,

- Preparation of detailed Budget proposals for 1979-80 with respect to expenses involved in the preparation of the above Reports.

2.3 iii. To forward these Reports and recommendations to the Australian Heritage Commission, and the Regional Work Group, Department of Construction.
3. Membership of the Management Advisory Panel.

3.1 In view of the role of the Panel proposed above, i.e. assessment of a varied range of specialist and other information, it is recommended that the Panel consist of not more than five persons covering the following areas of expertise or interest:

- representative of the Department of Administrative Services involved in the site, forming a liaison with the Regional Works Committee

- representative of the Australian Heritage Commission to ensure that proposals formulated are in line with A.H.C. policy

- local resident of competence, knowledge and disinterest appropriate to advise on local issues involved.

- consultant or other authority competent to initiate, co-ordinate and assess appropriate research investigations in the fields of local history, military history, archaeology.

- consultant or other, professionally competent to advise on the management of historic sites

- adviser on technical matters concerning conservation of building materials

Given the discrepancy in numbers in the above list, it may be either that one individual may combine two of the roles listed, or that one member, perhaps the last, be co-opted specifically for technical expertise.

3.2 It is then evident that the professional input papers tabled for the Management Advisory Panel's assessment are mainly provided by the members of the Panel themselves (other than the quasi ex officio members).

The exception, or partial exception, concerns submissions by local interest groups and others for re-use of Fort Scratchley. Some suggestions are already contained within the 1973-4 Report of Mrs. J. Fox and Dr. Peter Proudfoot, where re-use as a military museum looms large.

The possibility of an Australia-wide newspaper advertisement inviting further and final submissions might well be seen as a proper device to ensure that all local groups have an equal opportunity in the first round (assuming that there is in fact widespread local interest in the site)

If a newspaper advertisement is agreed, it would appear essential it be inserted without delay, since February 26th 1979 would already seem to be the earliest realistic closing date.

- 6 -
3.4 In addition to local submissions (both from Newcastle and the rest of Australia) two further sources are seen as necessary for the Panel's consideration of the question of re-use and management of Fort Scratchley:

i. Experience and expertise from appropriate other bodies within Australia on re-use of comparable sites, e.g. National Parks and Wildlife Services, public and private museums and groups.

ii. Expertise overseas on re-use and management of similar sites, as for example similar forts on the Kent coast of Gt. Britain, or the frontier forts of Canada.
As usual the Panel will be faced with the difficulty of doing many things at once, and very quickly, in order to put forward profitable and productive proposals for the 1979-80 budget.

The need to reach a decision on the re-use and management details of Fort Scratchley is critical if restoration work is going to continue anyway; April 1979 would seem the latest possible date by which a decision in principle must be reached.

The timetable for meetings and preparation of background information for members of the Panel then emerges as follows:

1st meeting: 
Early January  
Placing of advertisement for re-use submissions, if agreed, preferably before this meeting. Guidelines for other background papers, especially historical, necessary for re-use assessment.

2nd meeting(s) 
Late March - April  
Assessment of re-use possibilities in the light of Australian and overseas experience, and provisional feasibility studies on management. Provisional estimates for 1979-80 Budget.

3rd meeting 
June  
Completion of formal Reports and background papers for forwarding to appropriate bodies. Consideration of on-going research and supervisory role of the M.A.P.
Appendix A.

Lectures on the Defence of New South Wales: Sir Peter Scratchley

"He (Sir William Jervois) then proceeds to show that an attack can only be made at certain points along the sea-board, two of which he selects for local defences, viz, Sydney, including Botany Bay, and Newcastle (See footnote below).

For the defences of these places he relies upon recognized elements of defence - torpedoes, guns, defensive works, with their garrisons and field forces; for the general defence of the seaboard, and as a support to the local fixed defences he recommends an ironclad."

Footnote: "As a general rule the small towns of the colony are situated at varying distances up the rivers; there are in fact no settlements of any importance close to the sea, and no ports where food supplies could be obtained in large quantities, excepting Sydney the capital, and Newcastle the flourishing port of the great coal district of N.S.W., where there is now a population of about 7500. It follows then that these are the only two places likely to be attacked, and consequently the only places for which special local defences need be provided. An enemy would probably first endeavour to obtain possession of Newcastle where the harbour and large supplies of coal would afford him a good coaling station."

"Next to Sydney and Port Jackson the most important place on the seaboard of New South Wales is Newcastle, on account of its being the outlet of the great coal district of the colony. For the defence of this port a fort is proposed on Signal Hill armed with three 9" and four 80 pounder rifled guns; the former becalming to seaward and the latter on the approach to the port and entrance to the harbour. Torpedoes laid across the channel complete the defensive measures. Detachments of artillary and naval brigades are also provided to garrison the fort.

The position on Signal Hill being very favourable for rendering the Fort completely self-defensible affords another illustration of the enormous gain to the defenders of a place in having their guns thoroughly secure. In the opinion of Sir William Jervois, the conditions of the case render it unnecessary that a field force should be provided for the defence of Newcastle. So long as the Fort on Signal Hill held out, an enemy could not occupy the port. Even if a landing were effected to the north, it would not be attended with a permanent result. In this manner the protection of one of the most important ports of Australia is provided for at a comparatively small cost."