ARCHAEOLOGICAL WATCHING BRIEF DURING THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE LAW COURTS BUILDING, GEORGE AND O'CONNELL STREETS, PARRAMATTA.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Department of Housing and Construction (now the Department of Administrative Services, Construction Branch) commissioned E. Higginbotham in April 1986 to undertake a watching brief during the construction of the Law Courts at the corner of George and O'Connell Streets, Parramatta (figure 1.1).

This watching brief was the final stage of the archaeological investigation of the site prior to development, an archaeological excavation of buildings dating from 1790 to c.1820 having already taken place. Because thorough historical research and excavation had taken place, it was not expected that any items of importance would be exposed by the watching brief.

Notes

1. Reports relating to the historical and archaeological investigation of this site include:


Figure 1.1. Location plan of the Law Courts Building, George and O'Connell Streets, Parramatta.
2. WATCHING BRIEF

Archaeological inspections of the bulk excavation were made on several occasions at the request of the Department or the contractors. Unlike the watching brief on the adjacent site of the Commonwealth Office Block which required a full time presence, the previous historical research and extensive archaeological excavation on this site only demanded part time attendance on site.

The full results of the watching brief are recorded in Appendix 1. The inspection of a cellar associated with the Park Gate Hotel, and an earlier well are described. The cellar may be dated to the late nineteenth century with a brick type consistent with an 1880s date (figure 2.1). The well was also datable on the evidence of brick type to the 1820s or 1830s. Unfortunately the well contained no other artifacts (figure 2.1).
Figure 2.1. Plan of Parramatta, sheet 21, detail, 1890, showing location of cellar (a) and well (b).
3. CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

The cellar associated with the Park Gate Hotel is of minimal cultural significance. It had also been damaged by the construction of the service station on the site in the twentieth century.

On the other hand the brick lined well is a good example of its type, and indicates to a certain extent the development of the town of Parramatta. Clearly the capital cost of sinking a well outweighed the long term costs of obtaining water from the dam on Parramatta River. Alternatively the purity of the water supply may have been of more importance.

Unfortunately the well was slightly damaged during bulk excavation. Upon further investigation it was also found to be in an unstable or unsafe condition. It therefore required partial dismantling prior to archaeological excavation.

The cultural significance of the well was considered insufficient to warrant conservation in situ. This would have demanded expensive design changes at a late stage in the development process.
APPENDIX 1. WATCHING BRIEF DURING BULK EXCAVATION FOR THE LAW COURTS BUILDING, GEORGE AND O'CONNELL STREETS, PARRAMATTA.

14 June 1986

Bulk excavation to c.1 metre in depth revealed a partially infilled cellar at 31.4 metres south from the boundary fronting George Street, and 20 metres east from that fronting O'Connell Street (figure 1).

Only the vaulted brick roof of the cellar and the top of the side walls was visible (1.9 metres wide, 2 metres length, depth unknown).

The bricks in the cellar walls are sandstocks, with cinder added, but are of such a density as to suggest that they were machine pressed into the stock. Similar bricks are found on the Vallacks Brewery site, which was constructed between 1880 and 1883. A similar date is suggested for the cellar.

The cellar may be identified as an outbuilding to the Park Gate Hotel erected on the corner of George and O'Connell Streets (figure 1).

The cellar was cut through by the rear wall of the service station, which was the last building on the site prior to the present development. The concrete slab of the service station overlay the cellar.

17 July 1986

The top of a well shaft was exposed in section at a point 31 metres south from the boundary fronting George Street, and 8 metres east of that fronting O'Connell Street. (See sketch section).
The well shaft was lined with sandstock bricks made from a cream to red clay, but having no frog. In Parramatta such bricks were in use from the earliest period to about 1830.

The well lay adjacent to sandstone footings, probably belonging to the Park Gate Hotel.

31 July 1986

The well shaft was completely excavated with a view to more closely defining its date from the artifacts found in it. However no artifacts were recovered apart from the above mentioned brick type.

Details of the well construction were noted.

The sequence of events or procedure for sinking the well indicated by the archaeological evidence is as follows:

1. a shaft was excavated into natural sand down to the grey clay layer, approximately 4.6 metres in depth. Water seeped into the shaft at this depth. The well shaft measured 1.6 metres in diameter, just over 5 feet 3 inches.

2. the base of the shaft was lined with wooden boards upon which the brick lining was built up.

3. a brick lined shaft was constructed and packed in with sand and clay behind. There was no bonding material.

4. at some later date the well was backfilled with sandstone rubble and brick.

The absence of artifacts in the fill of the well, and indeed the absence of more recent materials tend to suggest that the well was constructed and backfilled in the 1820s or 1830s.
The top of the well shaft as first exposed on 17 July 1986.

The top of the well shaft prior to further excavation on 31 July 1986.
The completely excavated well shaft on 31 July 1986.

Detail of the wooden planks forming the base of the well.