ARCHAEOLOGICAL REPORT

EXCAVATIONS IN HICKSON ROAD AT THE ASN Co. BUILDING

THE ROCKS, SYDNEY

A Report Prepared for the Sydney Cove Authority

March 1991
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SECTION 1.0
PRECIS TO THE REPORT

This report details an investigation and recording programme undertaken in the footpath of Hickson Road, adjacent to the north-western corner of the ASN Co. Building in The Rocks. It is one of a series of briefs for work designed to investigate and record changing surfaces, levels and features in the George Street North area of The Rocks.

The principle objectives of the work were to monitor the excavation and installation of power lines to the ASN CO. Building for the purpose of recording remnant archaeological evidence and, secondly, to define, where possible, the changing levels of the footpath in relation to stairs and other features of the building.

Hickson Road was preceded during the c. 1840s by a private path to Robert Campbell’s house. This was certainly in existence by 1849 and had been formalised with a gate at its entrance by 1865. During the 1870s the Campbell family sold their business interests to the Australian Steam Navigation Company. This company redeveloped this stretch of the foreshores establishing the Flemish style warehouses and, subsequently, Hickson Road as a means of access to the Horse Ferry Docks. During the early part of the twentieth century the Sydney Harbour Trust reconstructed and extended portions of Hickson Road on a number of occasions.

Preliminary test pits for the archaeological investigation were supervised by Ms J. Lydon. The major excavation for the cables was undertaken both manually and by machine under archaeological supervision. Features revealed by this work, primarily blue stone cobbles, were the subject of a second, more careful manual excavation, to attempt to define their relationship to the building and to the street.

The excavation area had been greatly disturbed through earlier excavations for the provision of gas, electrical and Telecom services as well as tree root activity. On this basis conclusions which could be drawn with respect to the original and subsequent ground surfaces must be, at best, tentative.

It was found that the original topsoil had been removed suggesting either a period of use which had eroded this surface, deliberate removal or an eroded slope. The latter seems the most likely explanation. The earliest deposit reached in the excavation revealed quantities of fill which appear to have been introduced to level this slope. One small section of cobbles found under this fill may have been introduced for the same purpose.
Set into and above this fill were quantities of bluestone "cobbles", in a single course in the northern and southern sections of the trench and in three courses in the centre. These may have been used as fill, as seen at other sites in the Rocks streets and footpaths, but appear, more likely, to represent a deliberately laid surface. Associated with these cobbles were three sandstone blocks that appear to have been used to form an entrance to the ASN Co. Building. Services (water or gas) also appear to have been laid at this time. The evidence suggests a later nineteenth century or early twentieth century date for the introduction of this feature.

The bluestone setts were superseded by a bitumen path but the evidence in the sequence from this point onwards was very confused. This was caused by the excavation for, initially, electricity and later Telecom lines. A later phase of building activity associated with the ASN Co. Building, possibly the construction of the retaining wall, is also evidenced in the archaeological record as the introduction of a concrete slab. It has been impossible to define the relationship between the bluestone surface and the building.
SECTION 2.0
PREFACE TO THE REPORT

2.1 Location

The excavation occurred in the footpath of Hickson Road adjacent to the north-western corner of the ASN Co. Building in The Rocks, Sydney.

Figures 1, 2

2.2 Initiative for Investigation

The investigation was undertaken at the request of the Sydney Cove Authority. It is one of a series of briefs designed to investigate and record the changing levels, surfaces and features of George Street North. Specific objectives were also defined for this excavation in terms of the relationship of the features and levels of the footpath to observable features on the ASN Co. Building.

2.3 Objectives

The primary objectives of this work were to investigate and record the underlying stratigraphy of the study area prior to and during the excavation for and installation of service lines to the ASN Co. Building. At the same time it was intended to use the archaeological evidence to determine, as far as possible, the changing level of the footpath in relation to the ASN Co. Building and the effect on features such as steps and retaining walls associated with that building.

2.4 Methodology

Preliminary test pits were supervised by J. Lydon of the Sydney Cove Authority (Appendix 1). The work reported herein acted as a sequel to this introductory phase and was carried out in two phases. The first stage monitored the installation of power lines to the ASN Co. Building. The excavation was generally performed by a bobcat with a twelve inch bucket supplemented by hand excavation.

The second phase of the work was designed to investigate more fully and carefully the location, nature and purpose of blue stone cobbles exposed in the earlier work.
Investigation into the relationship of these cobbles to the ASN Co. Building was also a feature of this stage of work. The excavation was undertaken manually and under supervision.

2.5 Constraints

The excavation revealed evidence of earlier surfaces and features but the extent of the disturbance caused by the installation of earlier surfaces generally precluded a clear and definite interpretation of most of these features and their relationship to the building.

2.6 Authorship and Acknowledgements

This report has been prepared by W. Thorp, principle for the George Street investigations. The author would like to thank Ms M. Rossi-Mazzer for her assistance during the site works, Mr D. Philpot, Mr G. Bailey and Ms J. Lydon of the Sydney Cove Authority for their help and advice and Mr J. Tomlijanovich, the site foreman. The majority of the historical detail in this report has been derived from Karskens, G. "George Street North The Rocks, Sydney An Historical and Archaeological Study" (Sydney Cove Authority 1989) unless otherwise stated.
Figure 2: Sketch Plan of Excavation

- Phase 1 excavation
- Phase II excavation

- Entry 3 stairs
- Window 6
- Window 5
- Window 4
- Entry 2
- Corner of building
- Window 3
- Window 2
- Window 1
- Entry 1

- Kerbing (009)
- Bluestone setts
- HICKSON ROAD
- Area of test trenching
- Retaining wall (017)
SECTION 3.0
HISTORICAL CONTEXT

3.1 The Development of Hickson Road

George Street North has always been the primary focus of development and means of communication through this area from the first days of settlement in 1788. The buildings which have been erected around it have given it form and definition and it has been extended once during the nineteenth century. Karskens notes that it

"reected Phillip's concern with naval defence; it also encompassed the colony's other basic concerns: the storage and supply of food, shelter and security, and places for the sick and dead." (1)

The deep bend of George Street towards the north-west was made to avoid a steep escarpment that ran to the harbour. This was the site of the later Hickson Road.

During the early years of the nineteenth century the eastern side of George Street became a focus for maritime activity, both public and private shipyards, docks and wharves. Robert Campbell established wharves, stores and his own house at the northern end of the road separated from the public thoroughfare by a stone wall. The site of the later Hickson Road traverses this property. Certainly, by 1849, a rough track had been cut down the escarpment to Campbell's House; the precursor to Hickson Road (2). By 1865 a gate and private road had been established here. However, this rocky stretch remained largely undeveloped until the 1880s.

The Campbell family sold their business to the Australian Steam Navigation Company in 1876 and the wharf area was redeveloped in the 1880s with a new head office and Flemish style warehouses. Hickson Road was later constructed and upgraded, in 1896, as the "Road to the Horse Ferry Dock" (3).

The Sydney Harbour Trust reconstructed and extended Hickson Road a number of times during the early twentieth century; between 1906 and 1926 the road was widened (4).
3.2 The Development of Paving and Surfacing

The earliest road formation in the colony consisted simply of clearing and filling in the more obvious holes. It is presumed that the earliest track on the later line of Hickson Road followed this dictum. George Street North is likely to have been improved during the period of Macquarie’s governorship to the extent that it was "elevated" and pavements of "lasting materials" were put in place (5) but these appear to have deteriorated by the 1820s. Footpaths, however, do appear to have been formed and paved and edged with stone kerbs. During the 1820s properly formed roads with gravel surfaces began to be constructed throughout the town.

By the 1850s the City Commissioners were seeking to regularize the road and path system. In George Street North plans were developed for upgrading the existing system. These included broadening and kerbing the track which ran down to Campbell’s house. This did not eventuate (6).

By the 1880s efforts and plans were being made to upgrade the old stone macadamised roads in line with the developing city needs. The first new material was tar which was successfully laid in lesser lanes and suburban streets. Wood block paving was the major and most important new material to be introduced to Sydney’s streets from the 1880s. By 1888 it had reached the Argyle Street intersection of George Street. The section of George Street from Argyle Street to Dawes Point was being used as a site for four different experimental sets of paving (7) at this time.

A technique introduced with the wood pavements was the paving of street intersections with bluestone cube setts to provide traction for horses and vehicles as they rounded corners. The stone was to be laid in courses on a bed of sand over a foundation of concrete. A photograph of the later 1890s shows such an intersection at the corner of Hickson Road and George Street North (8).

However, these were found to wear down too quickly and within four or five years they were being taken up and replaced with panels of woodblocks. Old stone setts were taken up and reused to pave laneways such as Mill Lane in 1891 and in 1899 four hundred pounds was set aside to replace the cube sett paving in George Street North (9).

Kerbing and guttering in this part of The Rocks was, originally, most likely of sandstone. This was later replaced with tar covered woodblocks. Bluestone was sometimes used in areas that had, at the time of the woodblocking, no kerbs. Trachyte became popular in the later nineteenth and early twentieth century (10).

Paved footpaths also emerged in the 1820s and for most of the nineteenth century were the responsibility of the openers of the buildings which fronted on to them. This led to the city footpaths becoming a patchwork of different types and styles including tarred, metalled, sandstone or bluestone flagged and asphalt. Tar paving was the most common; it was the least expensive.

By 1892 the Council had become responsible for the footpaths and it decreed that flagging was the desirable material. Flagging had a long life and could be disturbed more easily for the introduction of gas, water, sewer, telegraph and other services. By 1899,
however, tar paving was found to be the most suitable for economic reasons (II). This, as well as asphalting, continued into the twentieth century.
SECTION 4.0
ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

4.1 Excavation Strategy

Test Excavations

Two initial test pits were excavated with the intention of locating earlier services prior to the installation of the power lines to the ASN Co. Building. The pits were approximately 0.75 metres in length (north-south) and covered the width of the footpath, approximately 1.5 metres (east-west). They were bound on the east by the retaining wall for the ASN Co. Building and on the west by the dressed trachyte kerbing of Hickson Road. The excavation was carried out manually under supervision.

Figure 2

Phase I Excavations

This trench was excavated for the purpose of installing power lines to the ASN Co. Building. A single trench was excavated manually and by machine in the Hickson Road footpath. It measured 15 metres (north-south) and ran from a point approximately one metre past the northern entrance to the former Government Offices to the main entrance to the building.

The width of the trench was restricted to approximately 0.55 metres measured from the trachyte kerb with the exception of the final two metres of the trench at its southern end. Here it was widened to the full width of the footpath, c. 1.5 metres. The narrow dimension of the trench for most of its length was due to the presence of a Telecom line and power cables running along its’ eastern side adjacent to the retaining wall of the ASN Co. Building. Further disturbance was caused by the presence of tree roots.

The depth of the trench generally reached 1.0 metres.

Figure 2
Phase II Excavations

This excavation was carried out as the result of a recommendation made at the conclusion of the Phase I work. The earlier excavation had revealed the presence of bluestone cobbles at the base of the trench which were greatly obscured by the various services and the narrowness of the excavation. An additional 5 metre long and 0.5 metre wide strip was excavated further along the footpath in an area that was expected to provide the least disturbed context to examine the feature as well as its relationship to the ASN Co. Building retaining wall.

The excavation was carried out manually and under supervision.

*Figure 2*
4.2 Primary Evidence

The material recorded in this trench revealed evidence of filling, levelling, deliberately laid surfaces, the provision of services and construction activity associated with the ASN Co. Building. However, the disturbance caused by the excavations carried out for the services as well as tree root activity has meant that the interpretation of some of the features recovered is, at best, tentative.

The primary sequence of features located during this work is as follows although, it should be noted, all features and deposits were not consistently observed throughout the trench.

Bedrock was not reached in this excavation but it appears likely that it was not far beneath the lowest point of the excavation, approximately 1.5 metres below the current surface, and that it sloped downwards towards the north. Overlying, and the earliest and lowest deposit recovered in this excavation, was a layer of fill and rubble composed of sandstone rubble and clay. This was an introduced material and indicates that the original topsoil had been removed.

In one small area in the southern section of the trench a small layer of bluestone cobbles were located under this fill layer. They differed from the cobbles located above by having a sandy mortar-like substance between them.

Inset into this layer was one ferrous, possibly water or gas, pipe. In addition a number of blue stone cobbles were found throughout the length of the trench. These were deliberately laid and in places were preserved in up to three courses depth (single course to the north, three courses in the centre of the trench, single in the southern section). They had been interrupted by later works and removed in places but were located on both sides of the trench. They abutted the trachyte kerbing.

Near these cobbles was some evidence of building activity associated with the ASN Co. Building. Three sandstone blocks had been set into the ground fill, one on a north-south alignment the other two east-west. This construction appears to have formed some entry point to the building and may have been contemporary with the cobbles. Remnants of a bitumen path were located over these blocks.

Considerable disturbance had been caused by the excavation carried out for the installation of electrical cables throughout the length of the trench. These were bedded in sand and identifying bricks laid over the top. A concrete slab had been laid after the installation of these services. Pebble packing was found over at least a portion of this slab which supported the latest bitumen surface. However, further disturbance had been caused by the excavation for a Telecom cable.

(Appendix 2)
4.3 Interpretation

The removal of the original topsoil from the bedrock profile suggests either that the area had been in use, thereby eroding the surface, had been deliberately cleared prior to the activity evidenced by this excavation or was on a slope that allowed for the topsoil to erode down hill. On the basis of the historical evidence it seems likely that the latter may have been the principle cause for this absence although erosion through use is also likely to have played a role.

The filling material encountered at the base of this excavation appears to have been introduced for the purpose of leveling the slope. It is possible that the remnant cobbles with the sandy matrix located at the southern end of the trench were also introduced for this purpose. Bluestone setts used to fill and level gaps have been observed in Harrington Street. There was no evidence of any deliberately formed surface ad no artefact material to provide a chronological indicator. However, clearly this material preceded the laying of the bluestone cobbles. It seems most likely that it relates to the development of the area during the later nineteenth century possibly in association with the construction of the ASN Co. Building.

The function of the majority of the bluestone cobbles found during this programme set above the lowest level of fill is unclear. The multiple courses of the same located in some areas of the trench might suggest leveling activity, however, the deliberate and careful placement and coursing of the setts suggests that these cobbles represent a formed surface.

The date at which they were introduced to the footpath can only be surmised from circumstantial evidence. The setts appear to be associated with the introduction of piped services, water or gas, to the area. They may be contemporary with some construction activity associated with the ASN Co. building that was identified in this trench. This appears to be related to the formation of an entrance to the building. This evidence would suggest a later 1880s date for the work.

This may then represent the ASN Co.'s original street paving. However, equally it might represent the removal of the setts that were once located in the street at the end of the nineteenth century and their subsequent reuse to pave or level a stretch of this footpath. The available evidence is insufficient to further define the issue.

After the cobbles had gone out of use it is clear that a bitumen surface was laid over the former surface. This also suggests, on the basis of the historical evidence, a later 1890s or early 1900s development. The evidence for the development of the rest of the trench has been obscured by the provision of electricity and Telecom service lines and the associated filling material introduced for each disturbance. A large concrete slab laid across the area, predating the final bitumen laid surface, appears to have been associated with the construction of the retaining wall.

Because of the extent of disturbance caused by the excavation for services and the construction activity associated with the ASN Co. Building it has proven impossible to define the relationship of the cobbles to the major structural features of the retaining wall and the building. At best it may be said that they appear to be contemporary with...
or post-date the trachyte kerbing.
SECTION 5.0
GRAPHICS TO THE TEXT

Plate 1: View north during work

Plate 2: Northern section of trench prior to backfilling
Plate 3: 013 cobbles, southern end of trench at depth of 0.6 metres

Plate 4: Middle course of stone cobbles, central area of trench at depth of 0.7 metres
Plate 5: southern section of trench with services visible, tree roots and 010 concrete

Plate 6: northern section of trench, cobbles in section including one transverse
Plate 7: reinforced concrete, service lines and timber formwork

Plate 8: backfilling using bluestone setts for fill
SECTION 6.0
SUBSIDIARY DOCUMENTATION

6.1 Endnotes

1. Karskens, G. George Street North The Rocks., 4
2. Ibid., 11
4. Ibid., 13
5. Karskens, G. Op Cit., 8
6. Ibid., 11
7. Ibid., 18
8. Ibid, Figure 23
9. Ibid., 20
10. Ibid., 21
11. Ibid. 23-24

6.2 Bibliography

Karskens, G.
George Street North The Rocks An Historical and Archaeological Study

Thorp, W.
Campbells Cove Report on Watching Brief
CRI 1988
6.3 Appendices

APPENDIX 1

REPORT ON PRELIMINARY WATCHING BRIEF, HICKSON ROAD

M. ROSSI-MAZZER FROM J. LYDON

Two test pits were excavated by two workmen using spades and a jackhammer in the footpath of Hickson Road in order to determine where earlier services had been laid. This is as a preliminary to the installation of electrical cables under the footpath surface.

The holes were approximately 0.75m long (along Hickson Road) and covered the width of the footpath (approximately 1.5 metres). To the east, they were bounded by the sandstone retaining wall between the ASN Co. Building and Hickson Road. To the west it extended to the current dressed trachyte kerbing (eg 1m long x 0.2m wide x 0.6m high).

The following broad strata were exposed in the first, northern, pit. These were given unit numbers:

001 Bitumen approx. 4cm thick

002 Roadbase/fill. Composed of coarse mid to dark grey sand, fragments of sandstone, brick fragments (red-orange machine made), slag, large water worn stones, concrete lumps, coal and dirt. Depth was approximately 15cm. Roots at the bottom of the east side of retaining wall were evident.

003 Clean white-pale yellow medium fine sand against west side of area butting retaining wall.

004 Concrete bricks with "ELECTRIC" impressed on one side. More roots evident.

005 Two lead electrical cables bedded in more sand. Ran north-south, one against the east retaining wall, the other approximately 20cm to the west.

006 Fill, finer than 002 - more sand and mid-brown to orange dirt, fewer large items of brick etc.

007 Bitumen surface approximately 0.75m depth. Former surface. 6cm thickness

008 Roadbase/fill. Mixed sandstone, ash, etc.
APPENDIX 2

DESCRIPTION OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXTS

001 Bitumen forming the footpath surface along Hickson Road. It butts the trachyte kerb. Two trees cut into this surface.

002 Roadbase fill which included a terracotta roofing tile fragment and broken plastered brick.

003 Pale yellow sand. Not consistent over the entire area. Forms the bedding for the electrical cables.

004 "ELECTRIC" concrete bricks lie along east side only over the cables.

005 Two lead electrical cables extend the entire length of the trench.

006 Lowest level of fill/roadbase. Same as 008.

007 Earliest bitumen path above cobbles 013/018/019.

008 Roadbase/fill mainly of sandstone rubble, also includes some clay.

009 Trachyte kerbing.

010 Reinforced concrete. Same as 025.

011 Fill layer (same as 023, 012).

012 Fill layer (same as 023, 011).

013 Bluestone cobbles found in the southern section of the trench at a depth of c. 0.60cm with a bituminous matrix. Sample measures 24 x 13 x 19cm. These continue onto the southern baulk of the trench. These were bonded to a concrete slab 010.

014 Fill associated with Telecom cables.

015 Telecom fibro asbestos pipe in fill running north-south along the eastern side of the trench at varying depths. Appears to cut the road base for the last bitumen surface (002) towards the centre of the trench.

016 Fill, dark brown and sandy with charcoal inclusions.

017 Retaining wall.

018 Cobbles in the northern section of the trench at a depth ranging from 73-78cm below the current surface. Below the first bitumen surface (007) and above the road base (008). The cobbles were found in parallel lines of rectangular stone blocks mostly
running north-south. A sample cobbles measured 32 long x 17 wide x 10 cm deep. These had a bituminous matrix. The cobbles on the eastern side ran for 7 metres, those on the west for three metres.

019 Cobbles in the centre of the trench in three courses. Sample measured 34 x 20 x 17 cm. The lowest course was found at a depth of approximately 1.5 metres depth from the current surface. It was set into the roadbase (008) and in was found in the centre of the trench. It extended for a length of at least 1 metre to the south. These had a bituminous matrix. The top course was found at a depth of c. 0.50 metres from the current surface and was bonded to a large reinforced concrete slab (021).

020 Iron pipe, probably water or gas, between the two levels of cobbles (013 and 024) and within the roadbase 006 and the fill 014. Continues into the southern section.

021 Reinforced concrete slab (same as 025).

022 Pebble and stone packing below last bitumen surface and above concrete slab (010).

023 Fill layer with large proportion of rubble which lies above the cobbles (013, 018, 019).

024 Cobbles underlying the road base 008/006. Similar to later cobbles 013/018/019 but with a sandy matrix.

025 Reinforced concrete below the 002 fill and is bonded to the cobbles (013/018/019) below and the stone block 027. It cuts the 003 sand. It has been cut by the Telecom cable.

026 Three sandstone blocks located at a depth of 0.64 metres below the current surface. Located below the earlier bitumen path and set into the road base 006/008. The blocks were approximately 60 x 40 cm. The northernmost lay east-west, the other two north-south.

027 Stone block at a depth of c. 0.50 metres. This is located south of the three blocks of 026 and is bonded to the concrete 010/025 above it.

028 Timber, probably formwork for the concrete superstructure of the retaining wall 017.