

URGENT REPORT ON THE OFFICERS MESS, FORT SCRATCHLEY

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November 15th, 1978.

Urgent Archaeological Report and Survey of Restoration Proposals  
for the Officers Mess (Building 23), Fort Scratchley.

Judy Birmingham, Archaeological Consultant. November 14, 1978.

The following report has been prepared on the basis of one site visit and a number of documents made available by the Department of Construction, viz.

- \* site visit Tuesday October 31st, in company with Ian Shields Brown, Morris Herriott, Bruce Dawben
- \* Reports on Fort Scratchley to the Interim Committee of the National Estate assessing the importance and possible re-uses of the site (Attachments A-E) dated 1974
- \* Architectural Report, and drawings (NA/78/1154/A1 to NA/78/1162/A1) comprising Stage 1 of their commission, by Messrs. Lister Drew and Associates, Architectural Consultants
- \* Specification and Schedule of Works (Department of Construction and Messrs Lister Drew, Architectural Consultants.

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It should be noted that this report is written not only from the archaeological viewpoint in its restricted sense, i.e. that of the technician concerned essentially with the correct excavation and extraction of objects and associated information from the ground, but also from the broader interpretation of the archaeologist as an historian interested in the total past history of a site complex as it is recoverable by a wide range of analytical techniques of which excavation is but one.

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1. Given that the Department of Construction is required to carry out all works at the Fort Scratchley complex in accordance with the guiding principles of the International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites (UNESCO 1956), the following may be assumed without preamble:
  - .1 Agreed that the Officers Mess as part of the Barracks is a significant part of the Fort Scratchley complex (Article 1) and therefore a historic monument in its own right.
  - .2 Agreed that pending the formulation of a site management plan, and a site management committee competent to discuss and decide restoration, management and re-use policy for the Fort Scratchley complex as a whole, no final decision on the re-use of the Officers Mess can be made at this stage
  - .3 Agreed that nevertheless the available \$60,000 must be urgently spent on essential work to this building.
2. It then follows that the following broad policy outlines be set:
  - .1 Required that appropriate guidelines be set to ensure this money be spent in a way that neither prejudices nor predetermines the future use of the Officers Mess (and/or surrounding area)
  - .2 Required that guidelines be set to ensure that all immediate repair and restoration work on the Officers Mess be carried out in accord with the historic significance of the building and with the guiding principles of the ICOMOS Charter cited above.
  - .3 Recommended that at the same time steps be taken to form an Interim Management Committee for Fort Scratchley as soon as possible in order that essential restoration policy decisions certain to arise in relation to spending new funding (1979-80) can be made ahead of time on a rational basis. The Regional Working Party on the Heritage

with appropriate Heritage Commission in-put, with or without the presence of Local Government Authority representation, professional consultants and/or others would seem a possible nucleus for such an Interim Committee.

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3. Guidelines to ensure the immediate funds be spent in a way that neither prejudices nor predetermines the future use of the Officers Mess.
  - .1 Given that any final decision on the ultimate re-use of the Officers Mess should be made on the basis that as little of the original fabric as possible has been lost or destroyed since its last use, it is recommended that.
    - \* There should be no removal of any original fabric other than that which is necessary to prevent further deterioration from any cause e.g. vandals, weather, active processes of decay
  - .2 Given that in this instance the major sources of decay and damage are vandalism and weather damage through leaking roof and doorless, windowless walls, it is agreed that.
    - \* Repairs to roof, drainage from the roof, and replacment of doors and windows to ensure security are an appropriate and essential priority for immediate funding.
  - .3 Given this restricted work programme for the immediate \$60,000 funding, the following specific points arise from the Schedule of Works in respect of the 'instruction to the demplisher'
    - \* It is firstly recommended strongly that the terms 'demolisher' and 'demolition' have no real place in the context of repair and restoration of a historic monument, and should be replaced (except in very specific circumstances) by terms such as dismantling or removal
    - \* It is secondly recommended that no dismantling of any

structural fabric whatsoever take place until an initial cleaning programme has been carried out to remove bird droppings and recent garbage only as a wholly separate operation.

- \* It is thirdly recommended that only those aspects of dismantling then take place which are specifically related to the programme of work in hand i.e. that items 4 - 23 in Section 1.01 of the Schedule of Works be deferred for reconsideration when the restoration policy for the building has been rationalised.
- \* It is particularly recommended that at that time such items as 4 and 18 (involving removal and re-use of features in different positions) be re-considered also general restoration policy concerning total removal of damaged ceilings and floors as opposed to repair of existing parts (items 5,6,8,12,13 etc.)
- \* It is fifthly recommended in respect of items 1-3 (Section 1.01) that further rationalisation be sought for the removal of the old western verandah including its floor and ceiling. The only readily traceable reference (Architectural Report p. 25, A6) states 'this is a timber framed annex now in a considerable state of dilapidation which appears to have been constructed some time after the original officers mess building'. This would seem ill-supported evidence on which to base the total removal of existing fabric including wooden flooring pending the formulation of a total restoration policy for the building, especially in the light of Article 11 (International Charter, ICOMOS). If dismantling is to proceed, the record as available to me appears inadequate.
- \* It is sixthly recommended that further rationalisation be sought for the decision to replace the existing asbestos roof with corrugated iron i.e. some pertinent enquiry into Army records or photographic archive to ascertain what the earlier roof material was in the light of Article 16 (International Charter, ICOMOS)

N.B. It should be noted with reference to both these last recommendations that the proposed courses of action may well prove to be the most appropriate solutions to specific problems of the Officers Mess. Such decisions which would seem to run in conflict with ICOMOS principles should however be presented against a supporting background of information and reasoned argument.

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4. Guidelines to ensure that all immediate repair and restoration work on the Officers Mess be carried out in accord with the historic significance of the building and the guiding principles of ICOMOS

- .1 The most relevant aspect of the ICOMOS Charter to the immediate work programme on the Officers Mess, given its limited nature, is Article 16, on the need for precise documentation of every stage of the work.
- .2 A start in this direction has been made by Messrs. Lister Drew and Associates [Architectural] Report, drawings and Photographic Record (the latter of which I have not seen) although it would seem to need amplification particularly as regards details and samples of those features listed for dismantling. It is also disturbing to note that no provision appears to have been made by the consultants for the on-going recording of features likely to emerge during dismantling. It is also noticeable that there appears little evidence in the Specification of detailed in-pute.g.at the level of selection of nails, trim, joinery detail etc. from the Architectural Record of existing features. In fact, perhaps as a result of the extremely unpleasant conditions at present obtaining in the building at present, there is a noticeable lack of recording of small construction detail.

\* It is therefore recommended that if items 1-3 and 24 of the dismantling programme proceed (Section 1.01) specific attention be paid to the question of

detailed recording of construction details and materials, paint colours and finishes, and especially such features as may have a bearing on the date of construction either before, or during, dismantling, or both. The verandah annex A7 in particular is full of revealing detail from memory including standard paint colours that require simple listing and identification.

- .3 In any event, an On-going Site Record and Store is essential on any substantial historic restoration site. Such a Record and Store is required as a focus for the following:
- \* a place where items listed by the Consultant Architects for careful removal and re-use can be properly labelled, listed and stored
  - \* a place where items of archaeological interest, after they have been examined in situ, can be safely stored
  - \* a place where a daily written record can be kept of architectural details noted by the Works Supervisor or Leading Hands while on the job
  - \* a place where labelled samples of plaster finishes, bricks, mortars, paint colours, piping, electric fittings etc. can be stored for future reference in restoration detail

It is therefore recommended that on commencement of work at the Officers Mess an adjacent building (which can be locked) be designated as the location for the Site Record and Store, and be provided with a set of site drawings on which locations of listed items can be marked

- .4 The fact remains that on any historic site the amount of time during which professional consultants can be present is limited, and most of the responsibility for the on-going site record - the daily written record of work done and details observed - must devolve upon those permanently at work on site. It is above all the Works Supervisor and his tradesmen who

if working steadily, carefully and with alerted observation, are able to recover and record the fullest story of the building they are working on. The following recommendations are made as to practical ways in which this can, and should, be attempted, on this and any other historical site.

- \* Recommended that work on site be carried out by a small team of men retained as permanently as possible on site rather than large numbers of men employed for short periods at a time
- \* Recommended that such a team (and of course the Site Architect himself) be briefed as sympathetically as possible on the need to observe and note the following kinds of information:
  - Any evidence of earlier variant forms of construction or earlier structures now disappeared.
  - Evidence of earlier or variant building materials among debris
  - Evidence (with samples) of changing wall, floor or ceiling finishes (paints, papers, coats of plaster
  - Any named examples of building materials
  - Examples of earlier forms of public services, together with as many of their component parts as possible (early electric light or gas fittings, W.C. parts)
  - Details of construction of joints, fittings etc., perhaps now no longer used
  - Details of nails, screws and other fittings

Such a briefing should stress that the objective of the whole exercise is a fully rounded picture of the history of the building and its use from go to whoa, warts and all, rather than the slightly one-sided picture possibly implied by Messrs Lister Drew's concentration on the removal and careful storage only of items of some artistic merit.

- \* Recommended that a daily written record be kept to record such details as they are noted, to be the responsibility of the Works Supervisor in collaboration with the Site Architect and related to the site plan.

5. Guidelines on archaeological procedures.

.1 The final relevant aspect of the ICOMOS Charter to the immediate work programme in the Officers Mess is contained in Article 15 relating to archaeological excavation.

Given that any dismantling is done in accordance with the recommendations set out in 3.3 above (most notably that bird droppings be removed first as a separate operation, and that dismantling be limited to those items only where specific repair is to take place) the following programme of archaeological excavation is required in the near future:

- \* First, it is required that the under floor deposit in Room A2 be properly investigated after minimum scrape-off of bird droppings. This represents at present the major archaeological task, and should be done before construction debris and general activity ruins the deposit.
- \* Second, it is required that if the dismantling of the western verandah (A6-7.C5 floor) goes ahead, archaeological supervision, recording and possible excavation be available during dismantling.
- \* Third, it is required that archaeological supervision be available when investigation of the drainage system is carried out
- \* Fourth, it is required that archaeological investigation and minor excavation may well be necessary in relation to temporary or accidental activities elsewhere on the site (e.g. stray finds, minor excavation for temporary footings etc.)

.2 It should be noted also that the instruction (Schedule of Works 1.27, p.7) concerning the finding of objects of historic significance (if indeed this can be detected from above) should unquestionably be left in situ and the whole area left undisturbed until investigated by an archaeologist since it is frequently the context or association of the find, rather than the object itself, which yields useful information.

.3 Closely associated with the physical investigation by excavation of earlier stages of the building is the related historical investigation of its development from a wide range of sources which must include folk memory, personal photographs and the City Council and newspaper archives, as well as such official sources as Army records and Army personnel folk memory. The consolidation of a fuller history of the structure (and indeed of the complex) than the comparatively restricted architectural histories presented by Mssrs. Lister Drew appears an urgent task on three levels:

- first for the immediate work in hand on the Officers Mess
- secondly for presentation to the proposed Interim Management Committee to assist formulation of a restoration policy for next years funding on the Officers Mess
- thirdly as essential background for the formulation of a proper Management Plan for the total complex of Fort Scratchley

\* It is therefore recommended that a sum of \$1000 be set aside for archaeological investigation of the site, both by excavation and by collation of available historical material as outlined above, to be presented in the form of two reports:

- Archaeological survey and excavation at Fort Scratchley, Newcastle. Part 1: The Officers Mess.
- Historical background research to the buildings at Fort Scratchley, Newcastle

\* It is also recommended that, if this is acceptable, the decision be made immediately as resources for getting this work done competently are readily available only between December 16 and February 28, 1979.

*Judy Birmingham*

Judy Birmingham 14.11.78