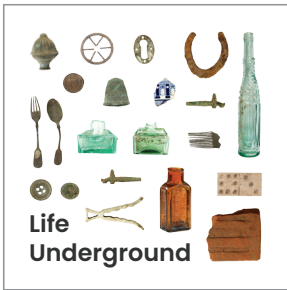




Walls that Talk

Life Underground

In 2020 sections of concrete and soil were lifted on the corner of High Street and Devonshire Street as part of an archaeological review before Maitland City Council began construction on its new administrative building. Historical records indicated that inns, houses and a mill had existed on the site from the beginning of the European colonisation along the Hunter River. While the layers of soil were carefully removed, small remnants of the people that had lived, worked and passed by this block of land came to light. Several objects, dating back over a century and a half, were recovered revealing how life on High Street was both an emerging cosmopolitan space and a home for the people of Maitland.



Introduction

Maitland is rich in history – we can see it when we walk down High Street and admire the buildings that line the path. Look down, and you’ll notice boutique shop names imprinted on our concrete paths; look up, and you’ll spot ghost signs and old bricks poking out from beneath new paint and modern signage. High Street runs along the banks of the Hunter River, once called Coquun. When archaeologists excavated the site of the current Maitland Administration Centre on High Street, they uncovered several layers of soil deposits, full of ancient tree pollen from trees that once lined the river, as well as evidence of alluvial deposits – signs of many past floods. Closer to the surface, they found evidence of the European occupation that would transform the riverbank into what we know today.



Bricks and frogs

The first documented building on the site was a wooden weatherboard lath and plaster house built around 1850. No physical evidence of the building remains, except for a backyard well and rubbish pit. These structures were made of brick and mortar. Several of these bricks display unique shapes and words stamped into their faces. These marks - known as “frogs”, - can help us identify where and when the bricks were made. The site held many Maitland-made bricks, brickmaking being an important local industry. One brick found during the dig features a shallow diamond-shaped frog on one side, while the other side shows remnants of the original mortar. Looking closely at the mortar, we can see small inclusions of ground-up oyster shells - an essential ingredient in lime mortar - a construction method commonly used in the 19th and early 20th centuries.



The house

Further excavation revealed evidence of structures that replaced the original wooden constructions. By 1858 the Royal Arch Inn was trading from the site, described as having “fifteen rooms...bar fixtures, a large cellar, well of good water...the house built of stone and brick, slated roof...” (John Adams 1863). Objects found in one area revealed a number of mundane construction materials such as glass, slate, iron nails, and fittings. There were also decorative elements typical of the ornate structures of the Victorian era, such as decorative coloured glass, a Corinthian column, and a moulded metal curtain finial. Of special interest were three pieces of Ravenswood sandstone featuring a carved leaf and vine design. It is thought that this is a repurposed headstone due to its material and the style of carving.



It's a man's world

The Inn at the corner of High and Devonshire Streets traded for a small number of years and was eventually replaced by the council chambers at Town Hall. This shift marked a transition from a place of recreation to one focused on the serious work of running a new and growing governing body. However, one thing remained unchanged: these spaces were still predominantly male domains. In these exclusive places, men made business deals and dealt with the relentless administration of Council. Here we have objects from both of these worlds: whiskey bottles, porter bottles, ink bottles, the spigot from a keg and several pennies. Also uncovered were some of the most ubiquitous archaeological finds from centuries past: clay pipes. These pipes were only usable once and then disposed, discarded by the hundreds by pipe smokers. While they were disposable, some were quite elaborately decorated with figures, animals, faces, and in this case – a coat of arms.



Neighbours

While the streets buzzed with shops and inns, there were also homes scattered between the commercial interests of High Street. There was at least one building used solely as a residence on the excavation site, with materials discovered from the early 1800s to the 1950s. Objects uncovered included toothpaste jars, combs, pegs, scissors, lamps, and toothbrushes – things we use in our home today - familiar to us today, though sometimes in slightly different forms. For example, toothpaste is no longer stored in ceramic lidded jars. Several medicinal bottles were also discovered, some for products that still exist today, like Hind's Honey and Almond Cream. Others were perhaps of dubious medicinal value but were very popular in times past – such as Morse's Indian Root Pools, now something of a symbol for Maitland.



Food and drink

Far from being a modern phenomenon, eating and drinking well has always been a human preoccupation. The archaeological record reveals a diversity of eating implements, crockery, glassware, along with hundreds of animal bones, fruit pits, and even two rabbit traps - indicating how prevalent hunting and home butchery were in the Victorian home. The excavation uncovered crystal stemware found alongside ceramic bottles of ginger beer and whiskey. There were also a number of sauce bottles and carbonated water bottles. Maitland boasted many carbonated and ginger beer companies, profiting from the boom in temperance-era alcohol-free flavoured drinks. Before local councils became responsible for the removal of waste from households, people would dispose of their own waste – using burn piles, old wells, and purpose-dug holes. These areas are a treasure trove to archaeologists – full of once discarded refuse, now a font of precious fragments of the past.



This Woman's Work

Like in Kate Bush's 'This Woman's Work', this story highlights the unseen labour of women through history. Maitland is lucky to have many notable historic women personalities, moving to the new frontier colony of New South Wales, finding opportunities for independence and success away from the usual structures of a hierarchical gendered society. But normally, women's work was literally invisible – they mended fallen buttons, pinned clothes, and raised children – literally keeping the home fires burning – things only noticed when they're not there, but taken for granted when they are. Yet, archaeology uncovers those otherwise forgotten stories through the lost and discarded objects of daily life. Here, we magnify the small and overlooked: record these usually forgotten stories are revealed: in the lost and discarded objects of a household. The small things are now oversize – a humble sewing thimble, a delicately decorated bodkin, and the metal fastenings of corsets and undergarments. No longer unseen, these objects now make up a large part of the archaeological record of the Maitland's High Street.



Games

How to pass the time in time's past? Much like today, children went through waves of fads and fashions in hobbies and toys. During the excavation, especially in the underfloor area of a previous residence, a large number of marbles were uncovered, illustrating the history of the game. The collection includes hand-rolled hand-painted porcelain marbles, glazed clay, machine-turned stone and finally spun glass marbles. It is not hard to imagine how these tiny treasures were lost, rolling under furniture and between floorboards, ready for an archaeologist to discover 100 years later. Other toys found at the site include wheels, dominos, and tiny figurines including Frozen Charlottes – popular and inexpensive porcelain dolls that were made between 1850 and 1920. While children of the past may have been asked to be "seen and not heard", the objects conjure the memory of play, and of a childhood well spent.



The road forward

While Maitland was a river town, long distance travel was primarily by horse and by foot. Horseshoes, being made of solid iron, are often found in the archaeological record. They were a common and necessary object for everyday living and moving in the days before mechanised transport. Metal protected the horse's hooves from wear and leather protected our human feet. Given Maitland's history of flooding, it is less common to discover surviving leather in the archaeological record. Luckily, some did survive at the High Street dig site. One pair of shoes appeared to have been made of fine leather with machine stitching. Another showed later signs of repair, with small iron nails holding down a newly repaired sole. Eventually, Maitland would introduce a steam-powered tram that would barrel up the main street, connecting East and West Maitland – no doubt spooking many a horse, but relieving the tired feet of many busy citizens of town.