A third year of archaeological fieldwork was undertaken in 2006 at the historic Mill Point site, situated on the shores of Lake Cootharaba in the Cooloola Section of Great Sandy National Park. Mill Point is the site of one of the earliest timber settlements in Queensland, operating between 1869 and 1892.

The Mill Point Archaeological Project was initiated in 2003 as a collaboration between the Environmental Protection Agency, Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service, University of Queensland and Noosa Shire Council primarily in response to community concerns about the long-term future of the site. Other partners have joined the project, including the Queensland Museum and Cooroora Historical Society. The project aims to inform ongoing management and preservation issues as well as enhancing our understanding of colonial life in a rural setting. The site became the focus for two PhD students from the University of Queensland in 2005, with the majority of their fieldwork being undertaken during the 2006 season. Archaeological excavation of the site began for the first time in July 2005 following intensive surface survey of the area in February 2004 and February 2005. Excavations concentrated on the area of the site where the mill workers and their families resided and continued throughout the three sessions of fieldwork undertaken in 2006. The involvement of the public and the local community in archaeology at the site was also a focus during the 2006 season with guided tours for visitors, school excursions and the participation of community volunteers.

The 2006 field season was coordinated by Karen Murphy and Steve Nichols (University of Queensland PhD candidates), Sean Ulm and Jon Prangnell (University of Queensland) and Judy Powell (Queensland Museum). The 2006 fieldwork was conducted with the assistance of 65 archaeology students and community volunteers. The Mill Point Archaeological Project continues to attract a high level of local community interest and support and the project was featured in both local and state media.

This report details excavations conducted in July 2005 and the three periods of excavation conducted in February, June-July and November 2006.

### 2006 PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS

- 65 archaeology students and community volunteers
- local primary and secondary school visits
- 171 visitors to the National Park toured the excavations
- TV, radio, newspaper and magazine media coverage
- project website updated
- 148m² of domestic area of the settlement excavated
- structural remains of workers’ housing revealed
- wide range of domestic artefacts recovered
- projects implemented with local community groups
- detailed recording of grave markers
- sorting completed of 2976kg of excavated material

Volunteers wet sieve excavated sediments by the lake.

Location of Mill Point on Lake Cootharaba.
SITE HISTORY

The Cootharaba sawmill opened at Mill Point in 1869. The sawmill was established by four partners, who had made their money on the Gympie goldfields, to exploit the extensive timber resources of the hinterland and supply the booming Gympie and Brisbane markets. During its peak the settlement employed approximately 200 men. They and their families made up a thriving community. A school, hotel, shops and other businesses supported the community. An extensive tramway system was constructed to bring timber to the mill, and boats carried the sawn timber down the lake and river system to Tewantin for shipment to the company’s sawmill in South Brisbane.

A cemetery was established at the settlement and 43 burials were recorded between 1873 and 1891, including nine men, four women and 30 children. The first burials included four of the five men who were killed in a boiler explosion on 29 July 1873, namely Charles Long, Patrick Tierney, Joseph White and Phelim Molloy. The fifth man, Patrick Molloy, was buried in the Gympie Cemetery after transport to Gympie Hospital. Children buried in the cemetery died of causes such as lung problems, wasting, thrush, convulsions and drowning.

From the mid-1880s, a series of events contributed to the decline of the sawmill. By the early 1890s the softwood resources near the Cootharaba sawmill were nearing economic exhaustion, having been exploited for 20 years. In addition, in May 1891 the company’s steamer, the Culgoa, sunk on the Noosa bar and in July 1891 the Brisbane to Gympie railway line opened, both events impacting on transport of timber. The sawmill finally closed in 1892.

Dairy farmers moved into the area in the early twentieth century, but dairy farming was never really successful owing to the poor pasture available. The property changed ownership a number of times until it was transferred to the Queensland Government in 1983. The Mill Point area was gazetted as part of Cooloola National Park in 1985.

PROJECT HISTORY

The Mill Point Archaeological Project began in 2003 to better identify and understand the site and allow for improved visitor access and experience. Following the February 2004 field season which identified the main components of the site, the Mill Point Settlement Site was officially recognised as being of State significance, and permanently entered on the Queensland Heritage Register. In mid-2004 the collaborative effort of the project partners saw the installation of six interpretive signs along the walking trail to Mill Point.

Additional survey of the site was undertaken in the February 2005 field season which focused on the domestic areas of the settlement and further mapping of the tramway. The first archaeological excavations at the site were undertaken in July 2005, targeting the domestic areas that had been surveyed in detail. Two University of Queensland PhD projects were also initiated in 2005. Karen Murphy’s research explores the way in which the community members at the sawmill lived their daily lives. Research by Steve Nichols centres on the importance of understanding the role of archaeology in the contemporary community. Research was also undertaken during 2005 by University of Queensland Honours student Emma Rae, examining concepts of space and sawmill layout at historic Australian sawmills. The project progressed in 2006, driven by these new research initiatives.

“Any one who has not seen Australian scrub can have no idea of its grandeur; the timber seems endless.” John Callagan, mill employee, in a letter to England, 7 June 1883

Mill Point Archaeological Project 2006
The team continued the project with a two week season of excavations from 3-15 July 2005, assisted by a group of 17 student volunteers from universities in Queensland. This season focused on gaining an understanding of the archaeology of the domestic area of the site, where the workers and their families lived. Excavations commenced by opening 5m x 5m squares to a depth of 10cm at a time in the area that was surveyed in detail in the February 2005 season. A broad area was opened up in order to find any evidence of the structures visible in the 1880s panoramic photograph of the settlement and to assess the integrity of the archaeology below the surface.

All of the excavated sediments were wet sieved through 3mm sieves in order to recover even very small artefacts. Sieving was set up using a fire-fighting pump and hoses and the nearby swamp, which was full of water for the very first time since the project began. Owing to the nature of the sediments there was a lot of gravel larger than 3mm mixed with the artefacts, which was unexpected. Logistically the project was not set up to sort the artefacts from the gravel in the field. To overcome this, over 700 bags of sieved gravel were returned to Brisbane for later processing in the laboratory at the University of Queensland. Despite not sorting the artefacts from the gravel in the field, the nature of the artefacts being recovered was clear. A wide range of signature domestic artefacts were found including ceramic dinnerware, ink bottles and ointment jars; glass bottles for sauces, oils, beverages and medicines; pieces of writing slates and slate pencils; buttons, glass beads and the heel of a shoe; and evidence of children including the lid from a miniature tea set, and fragments of doll’s limbs.

A total of four 5m x 5m squares were excavated to a depth of 20cm during the two-week season, with an additional 1m pit excavated down to 60cm where the water table was encountered. Although a wide range of domestic artefacts was recovered, there was no evidence of the buildings that the workers lived in. Owing to the sand and gravel present, indicating a long history of flooding, and the nature of the buildings themselves, the structural evidence for the workers’ housing in the archaeological record is likely to be minimal. The timber residences were likely dismantled or destroyed after the closure of the mill. However, it would still be expected to find stumps or evidence of postholes. Mill Point was holding onto its secrets.
The search for evidence of the workers’ housing drove the 2006 field season with 8 weeks of excavations undertaken over the course of the year. The focus of fieldwork was to collect data for Karen Murphy’s and Steve Nichols’ PhD research projects.

The first field session was undertaken for two weeks from 5-17 February 2006 with a crew of 24 archaeology student volunteers from Queensland, New South Wales and South Australia. A different excavation strategy was adopted this time, with a total of 15 x 1m x 1m pits excavated, spread out across a ridged area between two low-lying swamps, closer to the lake. Although there were few artefacts on the surface, the raised ridge appeared a likely location for houses and the topography matched historical photographs of the settlement.

Each pit was excavated in 10cm layers and the sediment was wet-sieved using a pump set up on the lake shore. An in-field sorting station was used to recover artefacts from the excavated gravel and categorise them by material type. Each pit was excavated to around 30-40cm depending on the sediments and artefacts found. The stratigraphic layers found across the site generally consisted of a fine sandy layer at the top, with a coarse gravel layer below. Most of the artefacts were found at the bottom of the sand and on top of the gravel. Below the gravel more sandy deposits were found. A wide range of domestic items was found including glass beads, hooks and eyes from clothing, glass bottles, handles from cutlery, a range of buttons, and glass bottle-stoppers.

By the end of the two week session clear evidence of the houses, which would help to tie all the artefacts into the locations of the buildings, still had not been found. On the second last day of the February excavations an area with greater concentrations of bricks and other artefacts was revealed, which promised to be the remains of a building.

This find provided the focus for further excavations over a four week period from 25 June-21 July. Karen and Steve were assisted by 24 volunteers including students and community members from interstate and overseas. Excavations continued with the same strategy of excavating in 1m x 1m squares but focused on following concentrations of bricks by opening up adjacent squares. Twenty-four 1m x 1m squares were excavated to an average depth of 30cm. The bricks provide possible evidence for structural remains from the mill period. This was supported by the recovery of a timber stump with a metal spike driven through the centre of the wood. With only one stump found during the 4 week session, however, it is still difficult to determine exactly what the bricks and stump represent. More analysis of the evidence will be required, but based on the artefacts it does appear to be the location of a house belonging to a family.

A final two weeks of excavation were undertaken from 19 November-1 December. A team of 17 students and community members worked to expand the excavations towards the swamp. Concentrations of butchered bone found at the end of the July 2006 season indicated a possible change in the types of artefacts closer to the swamp. A total of 9 x 1m x 1m squares was excavated, to a depth of 40cm. Excavations in this area revealed more bone, and a large scatter of oyster and pipi shell, which may indicate the discard of food remains by the mill residents. The sieving and sorting teams also recovered a range of other domestic artefacts including buttons, ceramics, glass, nails, sewing pins and beads. With the fieldwork for Karen’s PhD research now complete, the hard work of analysis and interpretation of all that has been found begins.
Public Archaeology

Public education and community involvement have always been key goals of the Mill Point Archaeological Project. During the 2005 and 2006 field seasons, hundreds of people visited the site and various projects have now been implemented with local organisations including the Cooroorba Historical Society, Noosa Shire Museum, Noosa Library and Noosa Regional Gallery. Presentations about Mill Point have been made to public audiences in the Noosa Shire, in other regions of the Sunshine Coast, and in Brisbane. Media interest in the project has remained strong, with coverage on local television, radio interviews and a variety of articles in magazines and newspapers, including a front page story in the Noosa News.

The public archaeology programme at Mill Point received a major boost in 2005 through the instigation of a PhD research project by Steve Nichols. Steve’s research is aimed at investigating public attitudes towards archaeology, heritage, and the relevance of Australia’s past in contemporary Australian society. As part of this project, he surveyed more than 170 visitors to the site during the 2006 June-July field season and has conducted in-depth interviews with a variety of people in the local community.

Visitors to the site have included many local residents and holiday makers as well as numerous interstate and international tourists. Most people were amazed to find archaeologists working in the Noosa Shire and were eager to learn more about Australian archaeology and the work of Australian archaeologists. All of the visitors were welcomed, given a comprehensive tour of the excavations, and encouraged to ask whatever questions they liked. Some groups spent upwards of an hour on-site and described their experience as ‘better than Time Team’!

We have also had several school groups visit the site and participate in some real-life archaeological fieldwork. The on-site experience designed for the students was directly relevant to various areas of the school curriculum, including History, Science and Social Studies. They undertook excavation and survey work, conducted soil tests and sorted artefacts. The feedback from both teachers and students has been extremely positive. We are hoping to explore the significant educational potential of Mill Point further in the coming year and are working to develop partnerships with teachers and educators in this regard.

As well as archaeology students from universities around Australia, our field crew volunteers have included a number of interested members of the public. Such volunteers have come from both the local Noosa community as well as interstate. They all enjoyed their fieldwork experience and gained some valuable insights into the science and methods of archaeology and the perspectives it provides about Australia’s past. Mill Point is one of the few ongoing archaeological projects in Australia where interested members of the public can undertake archaeological fieldwork under the supervision of professional archaeologists.

Enthusiastic community support for the Mill Point Archaeological Project has provided a strong base upon which to further develop our public archaeology programme. We look forward to meeting many more visitors, volunteers and local residents during our next field season which is planned for July 2007. In the meantime, if you have not already done so, visit the Mill Point website where you can learn more about this important heritage-listed place and read a day-by-day account of the archaeological fieldwork carried out to date.
“It's great to know someone is taking an interest in this place, it's a really important part of our history” Local resident, 2006

IN THE COMMUNITY

A number of local community organisations have become involved with the Mill Point site and its interpretation. Some of the projects undertaken with these organisations during 2006 include:

- Heritage Week and National Archaeology Week display and activities at the Noosa Library. Attended by more than 200 local Noosa school students. Covered by local television news and ABC Radio.

- Laboratory artefact sorting project at the Noosa Shire Museum with volunteers from the Cooroora Historical Society and local school students.

- Noosa Long Weekend Heritage Walk.

- Display of children’s artefacts at Noosa Regional Gallery as part of ‘Toys Tell Tales’ exhibition. Covered by local television news.

- Mill Point cemetery headstone recording. For the Noosa heritage community one of the most significant parts of the Mill Point site is its cemetery. Over the years all of the grave markers from the cemetery have been removed or destroyed and only one headstone base remains in situ today. Some of the headstones are currently held at the Elanda Point base of QPWS and one at the Gympie Museum. In October 2006 we worked with members of the Cooroora Historical Society to document the surviving grave markers. Three individuals were identified: Elizabeth McQuaide, Robert Dunn and Alfred Watts. The recording will help to inform planning for management and conservation of the cemetery and its grave markers.

IN THE PUBLIC EYE

A number of presentations were made to audiences throughout southeast Queensland, including:

- Gympie National Trust Branch, May 2005
- Australasian Society for Historical Archaeology National Conference, Melbourne, September 2005
- University of Queensland, Brisbane, October 2005, 2006
- Noosa Community Cultural Board, April 2006
- National Archaeology Week, Maleny Library, May 2006
- Noosa Shire Museum, Pomona, August 2006
- Queensland Museum, Brisbane, November 2006
- Queensland Women’s Historical Association, Brisbane, November 2006
- Glen Elmes MP, November 2006
- Australasian Society for Historical Archaeology National Conference, Darwin, September 2006

... and we had a range of reporting in the media, including:

- UQ News, May 2005, p.10
- Gympie Times, 3 September 2005, p.14
- SpringHillVoice.com, April 2006
- Salt Magazine, Autumn 2006, p.6
- Cooroora Connect, August 2006, p.7
- ABC Radio, Brisbane, 30 October 2006
- ABC Radio, Sunshine Coast, 1 November 2006
- Channel 7 News, Sunshine Coast, 3 December 2006
- ReadersVoice.com, December 2006
Archaeology doesn’t stop when the fieldwork is over. There are always plenty of tasks to be done. Following the July 2005 field season, an extended programme of processing the excavated and sieved gravel sediments to recover artefacts was put in place. Over 50 student and community volunteers assisted in sorting artefacts by material type, and recording the counts and weights of the artefacts. This took place in the laboratory spaces at the University of Queensland St Lucia campus on a weekly basis over 18 months.

Volunteers also assisted in the laboratory with the checking, counting and weighing of artefacts recovered in all of the 2006 field seasons. Now the processing is completed, the data about the artefacts will be entered into the artefact database, and will be used to generate maps of the artefact distributions and other features using a Geographic Information System (GIS).

**Future Project Aims**

A bright future is promised for the project with more and more organisations and individuals joining the Mill Point family every year. The project partners are looking forward to another field season planned for July 2007 and future years. For 2007 the project has two major objectives. Fieldwork will focus on surveys of the broader landscape to help understand the place of the mill and its settlement. In particular, we are interested in recording sites in the resource hinterland where timber was extracted during the mill period as well as the later twentieth century farming heritage of the area. A second focus will be on developing further interpretive material to promote the site and enhance visitor experience. A self-guided walking tour flyer is in preparation and will help visitors get the most out of their visit to Mill Point. In addition we will continue to update and expand the project website. Work will also continue on artefact and data analysis for the PhD research project as well as ongoing collection and archiving of oral and documentary histories.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS