

“OCHRE”

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Because of respect and to minimise vandalism the exact location of sites is only approximate.

What is Ochre?

Ochres are earthy, pulverulent (reduced or crumbled to powder or dust) forms of Haematite and Limonite¹ or friable (easily crumbled), earthy iron ore.²

It is widely distributed in Tasmania, both as small pellets in gravels (Tamar Valley) or in reefs (Alum Cliffs). It takes the form of a natural pigment, browns, reds and yellow. Red in its most vivid state is most prized,³ yellow it seems is rarer.

At the most famous site, “Toolumbunner” in the Alum Cliffs near Mole Creek, it takes the form of a series of hard and soft beds, very brown (Ferruginous ie containing iron) and clay-like. Parts of the site are red brown ferruginous sandstones and grey mudstones.⁴

Ochre is Haematite (Fe_2O_3) plus small parts of Goethite (FeOH) and Limonite. Quartz content in the ochre is 50 to 60%.⁵

Ochre was known to the Aboriginal people as (**Bal-de-winny**) and were of three types:

“Ordovician Ferruginous Sandstone”

About 30% haematite (red ochre). The best-known site is “Toolumbunner” and was regarded as the best quality ochre.⁶

“Specular Haematite”

It has a crystalline, glittery appearance, dark grey but when powdered a dark reddish brown. It is very heavy.

The principal site was “Mt. Housetop”⁷ but the area was most likely Penguin Creek, about 25 km north-east of the mountain.

“Laterite / Gossan” (Ferricrete)”

Dull or earthy with some shiny red or brown.

All over Tasmania but not in the mountainous areas of west and south west Tasmania. Some 13 ochre mines are recorded but some are doubtful, and locations are confusing. Some have no Aboriginal evidence of usage.⁸

“Toolumbunner” is the largest, over some five hectares, and comprises several long, open irregularly cut trenches.

Ochre is “one of humanities most universal and persistent symbols”⁹ Its use – outside Australia – stretches back at least 300,000 years and in Europe some 70,000 years to the Neanderthal period.

Its use in Tasmania after being located, extracted and transported, was processed by grinding into fine dust, mixed with grease from animal fats like mutton birds, penguins and marsupials, (sometimes with fine charcoal dust), into a paste. That was then smeared or painted on the body as decoration, insulation or for mystical purposes.

Its use.

Sagona¹⁰ suggests Aboriginal use of ochre was ritual, social, physical/sexual, but also practical and for pleasure.

Apparently both sexes utilised ochre extensively and from Petit’s drawings even their infants had it smeared on their foreheads, cheeks and chin,¹¹ even their eyelids.¹² Petit also shows a woman with similar decorations on her cheekbones, chin and forehead.¹³ Women were also “fond of painting their devery” (pubic region) – at least those of the Big River people – with ochre.¹⁴

The whole of the body was generally smeared with a mixture of ochre, charcoal and grease, but this was mainly for protection against the elements. Tasmania’s generally wet conditions, especially in the western half, made it practical in their culture to go naked with a protective coating of fat insulation rather than be encumbered by skins.¹⁵

Mortimer recalled that a young man drew a circle around each eye and wavy lines down each arm, thigh and leg.¹⁶ Bligh encountered a “mob” of blackened Aborigines though one was covered in red ochre to distinguish himself¹⁷ while Bonwick refers to “dandies” who drew fancy streaks on themselves.¹⁸

The customs varied from group to group and possibly also acted as a distinguishing identifier, for instance:

The Big River and Oyster Bay people favoured blacklead.¹⁹ The West Coasters (including the West Point Band) never used red ochre about the face²⁰ and the “Tommaginny” (headwaters of the Arthur River) and “Larmairrener” both reddened

their hair in long ringlets²¹ whereas the Bruny people both male and female daubed their faces with red ochre and charcoal.²²

It seems that it was significant that an important male may have red ochre while others blackened themselves with charcoal as on Bruny Island. There is also reference to a black glittering material – a mineral – being used to draw lines on their “prominent parts” and above and below the eyes.²³ The mention of “prominent parts” are not explained but may mean genitals.

Interestingly, Robinson noted that the people constantly painted themselves and when asked “why?” they replied, “why do you wear fine clothes?”²⁴ It was obvious adornment, but it also had ceremonial purpose such as when mourning. On such occasions they would paint their bodies with charcoal and mark their faces with red ochre.²⁵

The importance of the material is obvious and is reflected in the affectionate way in which they treated it – they were always eager to get it and compared the quality of it from source to source, the best coming from near Mount Husetop and Gog Mountain near Mole Creek in the central north inland. This mine and quarry are now known as “Toolumbunner”.²⁶

This site was the main source of ochre for the north west people²⁷ and when they came across ochre, they patted it with their hands and kissed it.²⁸ It was such an important substance that they even enjoyed looking at the red top of the trees and comparing them with their own heads.²⁹

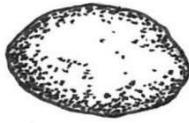
If ochre was not available post British Invasion they substituted with soft red bricks or even rust from metal bolts off old ships.³⁰

So ochre was used for many different purposes and with broad symbolic significance. There is the obvious connection with blood and also with fertility and new life. It was part of shamanistic and magical ritual and was regarded as a source of power.³¹ Ochre was not confined to body adornment as shown in the cave art of Tasmania’s south west. Hand stencils and nondescript use of red ochre in the dark inner chambers could possibly extend back 40,000 years with the oldest dated art at least 20,000 BP.³²

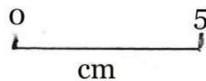
Obtaining Ochre

Robinson described a visit to the Gog Range, **Too.lum.bun.ner**, red ochre site which created great excitement among the people, especially the NE leader Mannalargenna – who loved to decorate himself especially his hair with it. His party covering 34 km in a day to get to it, Robinson had great trouble trying to persuade his Aborigines to by-pass it.³³

This site was so rich that underground mining was used, a dangerous pursuit as shown when one woman got stuck and had to be pulled free by her legs. The “mining” started, at least in one spot, with an extension of a two-metre-deep hole – big enough for one person – which ran for several metres underground.



Hammer-Stone



DIGGING STICK

(Artists Impression)

BB

The extractor tool was a short stick 30 to 45 cm long, acting as a chisel with a hammer-stone as a mallet. The chisel edge suggests a uniface that had been burnt to harden it. After laboriously extracting the ore lumps weighing 2.25 to 2.70 kilograms were collected and put on the prepared quantities of kangaroo skins for transportation to another site where the men were. The hammer-stone used with the digging/chisel stick doubled as a pounder when processing the ochre/grease into the usable paste.

The responsibility for mining and extraction, including diving for ochre at underwater locations, was assigned to the women. The men seldom participated except in processing the ochre/fat-grease into the desired paste.

Trade.

While travel to ochre sites occurred this would have involved careful negotiation and permission to enter the country of another and given the considerable desire for ochre there is no doubt it formed part of circulation and trade. Robinson noted, for instance that ochre sourced from the Toolumbunner site was found at other locations, indicating trade and exchange. The Band that had custodianship of such raw material obviously had significant clout and no doubt trade for access to other areas or barter for items like shell, raw stone, even tools, as well as anything else of value did take place. In a sense "red ochre" and especially of good quality ochre was like gold.



Photo 369

**Crushed Yellow Ochre Ore
(Experimental Archaeology by Nigel Burch)**



Photo 370

**Lump of Ore from Companies Site
(Courtesy Nigel Burch)**



Photo 371

**Reef of Ore from Company Site
(Courtesy Nigel Burch)**

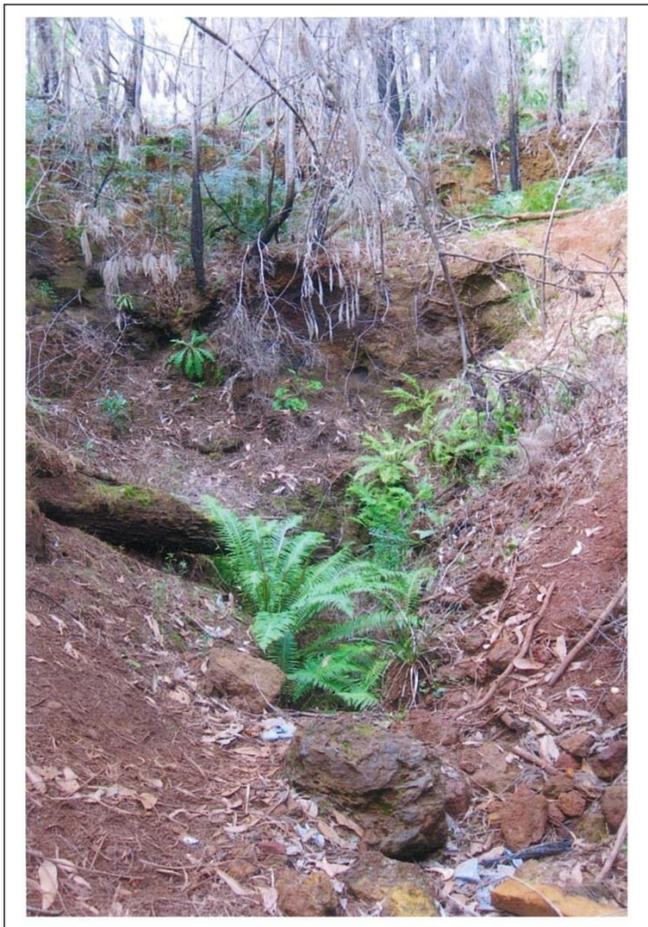


Photo 372

**Excavations by Company
(Courtesy Nigel Burch)**

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- ¹ Department of Mines, "A Deposit of Ochre Near Mowbray", 1917.
 - ² Sagona, Antonia "Bruising the Red Earth" (Ochre Mining & Ritual In Aboriginal Tasmania), 1994, Melbourne University Press. 10.
 - ³ Manchester, Peter S "Created from Chaos" (A Geological Trail of 100 Sites in Tasmania), Launceston, 2010.
 - ⁴ Manchester, 33.
 - ⁵ Manchester, 33.
 - ⁶ Manchester, 142-144.
 - ⁷ Manchester, 146
 - ⁸ Sagona, 142.
 - ⁹ Sagona, 10
 - ¹⁰ Sagona, 10-11
 - ¹¹ Plomley, N.J.B. "The Baudin Expedition and the Tasmanian Aborigines 1802". Hobart, Blubber Head Press, 1983.
 - ¹² H Ling Roth. "The Aborigines of Tasmania". Halifax, F. King & Sons 1899. 128.
 - ¹³ Ling Roth, 126.
 - ¹⁴ Plomley, N.J.B. ed. Friendly Mission: The Tasmanian Journals and Papers of George Augustus Robinson 1829 – 1834". Hobart Tasmanian Historical Research Association 1966. 491.
 - ¹⁵ Sagona, 13.
 - ¹⁶ Ling Roth, 127.
 - ¹⁷ Ling Roth 127.
 - ¹⁸ Bonwick, James "Daily Life & Origins of the Tasmanians", Sampson Low, Son & Marston, London 1870. 25.
 - ¹⁹ Plomley, N.J.B. ed. Friendly Mission: The Tasmanian Journals and Papers of George Augustus Robinson 1829 – 1834". Hobart Tasmanian Historical Research Association 1966.600, 688.
 - ²⁰ Plomley, Friendly Mission, 549.
 - ²¹ Plomley, Friendly Mission,855.
 - ²² Plomley, Friendly Mission, 103, N39.
 - ²³ Ellis, W.F. "The Lake Country of Tasmania", Paper of the Proceedings of the Royal Society of Tasmania 1973. 135-139.
 - ²⁴ Plomley, Friendly Mission, 594.
 - ²⁵ Plomley, Friendly Mission, 57.
 - ²⁶ Mulvaney, John & Kamminga, Johan, "Prehistory of Australia", 1999 Allen & Unwin Pty. Ltd.344.
 - ²⁷McFarlane, Ian. "Beyond Awakening: The Aboriginal Tribes of North West Tasmania: A History". (Fullers Bookshop, Riawunna & Community, Place & Heritage Research Unit, Univ. of Tas., 2008.) 9
 - ²⁸ Plomley, Friendly Mission, 600.
 - ²⁹ Plomley Friendly Mission, 559.
 - ³⁰ Ellis. V.R. "Truganina Queen or Traitor?" 6.
 - ³¹ Sagona, 2, 12, 13-14.
 - ³² Macfarlane, 11.
 - ³³ Plomley, Friendly Mission, 904.