



Aboriginal Living Sites (middens)

There's an old saying in archaeology: *absence of evidence is not evidence of absence*. This is certainly the case when we're looking for evidence of the presence of Aboriginal people in the *kanamaluka*/Tamar River area. Just because we cannot see evidence of their presence today, doesn't mean Aboriginal people were never present in the area in the past or that they did not leave traces of their activities.

Aboriginal living sites



Example of a Tasmanian Aboriginal living site, or midden. (Photo: B.

colony.

Research by archaeologists and scientists has revealed that First Nations Peoples grew and harvested oysters sustainably in rivers and waterways around Australia for thousands of years before colonisation. It is likely that likely people managed and sometimes cultivated oysters, and these caretaking activities became part of their cultural, ritual, and social traditions.²

Using shells to make limestone

Not long after Colonel **William Paterson**³ arrived in Van Diemen's Land in 1804, he came across an Aboriginal living site at Redbill Point, located at the north end of Beauty Point. Paterson recorded that the deposit of used shells was a quarter mile long (about 400-500 m) and 3 to 4 feet (75-100cm) deep.

Paterson was pleased to find the enormous deposit of shells because when shells are burnt, they can be processed to produce **limestone**, the raw material used to make **mortar**. The colonists needed lime to make large amounts of mortar which they used to construct buildings.⁴

A **living site** is place where Aboriginal people undertook social activities, such as meetings, ceremonies, eating and sharing of food. During the course of these activities, they discarded items, such as shell and bone, botanical remains, ash and charcoal. Over time, the shells and bones built up into large mounds and many of these are still visible in the Tasmanian landscape today. Archaeologists call Aboriginal living sites **middens**.¹

A living site is an excellent example of how evidence of Aboriginal people's activities before colonisation were destroyed because the materials were later reused by colonists to build the

On 17 December 1804, Paterson wrote in his journal:

I landed near Red bill Point before I returned to the Cove, and discovered a very large Bank of Shells on the Beach, extending for near a quarter of a Mile [0.4 km], and from 3 to 4 feet [about 1 metre] deep; as the Limestone⁵ on burning has not turned out so good as was at first expected, and the Shells being much preferable in Quality and more convenient for our purpose, I have therefore give up the Idea of using any of the Stone while Shells are in such Abundance; there is likewise plenty convenient for buildings which may be erected at Outer Cove.⁶

Unfortunately, if you walk along the beaches around Beauty Point today, you will no longer be able to find the remains of Aboriginal living sites.

That's because the living site that Paterson found at Red Bill Point near York Town (and many others) were destroyed in the early years of the settlement. The shells were burnt to make mortars and renders for constructing buildings in the growing colony.

Where can we find evidence of Aboriginal living sites today?

In 1805, Paterson gave convict William Kelsall the task of finding a limestone deposit because Paterson knew they would quickly run out of their supply of shells from the middens.

Unfortunately, William Kelsall didn't find any limestone, but he did find a large new supply of shells in another midden at Kelso, just a short distance north of the York Town settlement.

Kelsall was permitted to live at the Kelso midden site he found. His job was to burn the new supply of shells and ship the lime it produced to George Town and York Town to be used to construct the new buildings.

By using all the middens in the area for lime, the colonists destroyed vital evidence that would show, without a doubt, that Aboriginal people were present and active in the *kanamaluka*/Tamar River area for thousands of years.

The evidence that survives today of Aboriginal people's presence in the past is in the written records of the colonists, like those of Lieutenant-Governor Paterson, and the oral histories of present day Tasmanian *palawa* people.

But evidence of Aboriginal people might also still be hidden today in the mortar of many buildings built in Launceston and George Town during the colonial period.

Notes and references

¹ You can find out more about living sites/middens at *Aboriginal Heritage Tasmania* <https://www.aboriginalheritage.tas.gov.au/cultural-heritage/aboriginal-shell-middens>, and *The Orb file:///C:/Users/lzarmati/Downloads/Foods Year 2 Science and Geography - Middens.pdf*

² See Reeder-Myers, L., Braje, T.J., Hofman, C.A. et al. "Indigenous oyster fisheries persisted for millennia and should inform future management". *Nature Communications* 13, 2383 (2022).

<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-022-29818-z> Evidence of enormous middens along waterways in *Iutruwita/Tasmania* suggest that First Nations People were also farming oysters, not just "gathering" them.

³ William Paterson was Lieutenant-Governor of the settlement of Port Dalrymple in northern Van Diemen's Land which was first located at George Town in 1804, then moved to York Town in 1805 and then later in 1805 Paterson decided to establish a farm at what was to become Launceston in 1806.

⁴ **Mortar** is made up of cement, fine sands, and lime; it is used as a binding material when building with brick, block, and stone. In colonial times, shells were burnt over wood to produce lime. Lime could then be used in mortar or mixed with sand, water and an aggregate of shells, gravel, or stone to produce 'tapia' a general-purpose masonry material.

⁵ **Limestone** is a sedimentary rock mostly made up of calcite, a yellow-white, calcium carbonate mineral that usually forms in clear, calm, warm, shallow marine waters. Lime is extracted from limestone either by burning shells or by crushing rock, such as granite, basalt and dolerite, which are plentiful in Tasmania. Lime is used as a binding mixture in building construction.

⁶ William Paterson in Macknight, C.C. 1998. *Low Head to Launceston: the earliest reports of Port Dalrymple and the Tamar*, p. 104.