

REPORT ON FINDINGS – OEH INSPECTION OF REPORTED ABORIGINAL ART FEATURES IN BEN BULLEN STATE FOREST

July 2014

1. BACKGROUND

On 16th July 2014, officers from Office of Environment and Heritage (OEH) undertook an inspection of a reported Aboriginal hand stencil in a cave in Ben Bullen State Forest. Details of the location are provided in Figure 1.

The officers spent 2.5 hours inspecting the reported image as well as performing a limited search for other cultural materials in the vicinity of the cave. Conditions were overcast and the light mostly poor.

An attempt was made to locate a grinding groove also reported to be in the vicinity of the rock overhang, but the officers were unable to find it in the time available.

The purpose of the visit was to ascertain the likelihood of the reported hand stencil being an Aboriginal object as defined by the *National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974*. The visit was not intended as a full archaeological assessment nor was it to establish the value or significance of any heritage items found.

Since its reporting to OEH, the site has been recorded as an Aboriginal site on the NSW Aboriginal Heritage Information Management System (AHIMS) by an independent archaeologist.

2. FINDINGS

2.1 Reported grey/ white hand stencil

Observations

Selection of material used for pigment

The pigment is off-white grey and distinctly duller than the white pigments commonly seen on stencilled art. Its source is likely the eroded sediments of the sandstone shelter. There is an abundance of the eroded sediment laying in and outside of the shelter dripline. This material would provide a readily prepared substance that can be wetted without the need to ground ochre and prepare a pigment.

An initial search of the AHIMS register reveals 1 registered site with images of greyish white stencils within the in the Lithgow area. However this is based on a photograph and not visiting the site. The data base does show that white stencilled and painted art is common throughout the broader Sydney region which includes the mountains, Hunter Valley and Newcastle regions.

Application of the pigment

Application of the pigment was difficult to assess in the time available. There is a difference in thickness and some exfoliation of the pigment towards the edges of the applied pigment. It is more thickly applied closer to the subject (hand) however this is

not uncommon with many traditional stencils. It was not possible on the day to distinguish with the naked eye any splattering or spotting on the outside edges as is common with pigment blown by mouth or flicked with the hand or brush/implement. It may be that the pigment was applied by brush. Brush application does not necessarily infer that the stencil is recent as brushes were used traditionally as well (chewed end of a stick).

Differing tones of the pigment

There is a distinct difference in colour tone of the pigment associated with the hand stencil. To the left of the hand but forming the hand's left margin is a dull grey/brown pigment which is in contrast to the grey white pigment that shadows the middle index fingers and thumb areas. The two colours that envelop the stencil suggest two different preparations and applications of the same material.

OEH opinion of the pigment and stencil

The structure and make-up of the grey/white and brown/grey pigments that encompass the stencil is in contrast to the red pigment stencils (discussed further). A review of images of other stencils in the region and in the officers' experience show that white based pigments are whiter than that observed in the Ben Bullen shelter. Further the grey/white pigment that encompasses the middle right parts of the hand has a dry and uneven (sort of crusty) appearance. This may be a result of application method for example uneven application of brush or poor preparation of pigment. Either way the impression is that the artist has a limited knowledge of pigment preparation and used the sediments available at the shelter.

The slightly more brown/grey pigment may in fact be a 'test' sample or was applied as a touch-up. The grey/white stencil definitely post-dates the red stencils and has circumspect aspects to it. However it also presents consistent features with traditional hand stencils, the obvious one being it is a stencil of a hand and it shows a process of decay.

Officers of OEH are of the view that, based on the information considered to date, the status of the grey/white hand stencil is inconclusive.

2.2 Red stencil features

Either side of the grey/white stencil is a series of red features that, when closely examined, show portions of hands and fingers. These features resemble very faded red hand stencils. The pigment is red ochre and is smooth and evenly applied with consistency in thickness. The pigment is however very thin due to water action running over it from seepage points in the shelter. This explains the faded 'washed' appearance of the red stencils. In contrast the grey/white stencil appears to be more affected by a weaker pigment adhering to the rock surface.

The red stencils however are not clear to the naked eye and it was only after photographs were taken and viewed on-site through the camera that the hand and finger shapes became clear. The red stencils appear old and subject to erosion from the rock surface peeling off and from water wear. The shape of the stencils does not appear to show all the fingers although some are affected by erosion making identification difficult. Hand stencils minus a number of fingers or fingers arranged in various shapes is commonly reported for the broader Sydney Basin and several interpretations include initiations involving finger amputations, and/ or hand signals.

There are examples of both on AHIMS for the Lithgow LGA. The red stencils at the Ben Bullen shelter remain very difficult to portray in a report with the photographs taken on the day. DStretch technology would demonstrate the red stencils more clearly for the purposes of interpretation and report presentation.

OEH opinion of the red stencil features

Based on the information available, OEH considers that the red ochre features are traditional Aboriginal hand stencils.

2.3 Other cultural material

No confirmed artefact material was sighted during the inspection. Three quartz fragments were closely examined. Of these, one exhibited 'flake-like' attributes and possible use wear however its edges showed signs of water wear which has smoothed its edges in an even pattern. It was also located directly in line with the drip zone with other water worn gravels. Two other quartz fragments exhibit negative scars but both are within the 10mm or smaller size range and therefore difficult to assess in isolation as flaked pieces created during a knapping episode. Quartz is present in the softer sandstone matrix and because quartz is significantly harder than sandstone, its presence among the gravels is not unexpected, that is, it should not be assumed it was transported into the area. One was located 50m further down the scree slope.

The location of the reported nearby axe grinding groove was not located in the time available. Based on the photographs seen, and without an in-situ observation, OEH is unconvinced that it is a groove. The picture presented appears to show that it is more likely a natural weak point in the sandstone that has eroded to its present shape. There is another weak point just above it which reveals an early example of how it may have appeared before eroding to its present shape. It is therefore a likely result of how the sandstone erodes. However, it is noted that the photograph was not clearly executed and the feature was filled with water obscuring the true shape.

3. OTHER STUDIES OF THE SITE

OEH is in receipt of a report and site cards which have opposing views on the grey/whitish/brown stencil's authenticity. The report has been commissioned by the mine proponent and the site cards as a result of surveys arranged by a local environment group.

The archaeologist representing the environmental group has since registered the site onto AHIMS. The AHIMS listing reports a hearth and 9 stone artefacts associated with the shelter. One of the stone artefacts is a grey coloured backed tool. Similar tools were described by McCarthy in 1968 at the nearby Black Fellow Rock site. This artefact and many of the others described were not sighted by OEH during the site visit.

It is also possible that a test pit was dug by someone recently in the shelter floor to look for subsurface artefacts. A test pit was sighted during the OEH visit. OEH did not observe a hearth or charcoal sediments being present at the site.