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Rewriting early WA history – why settlers deserted Peel town

Researchers at Notre Dame University’s Fremantle Campus are rewriting the history of the early settlers in Western Australia, uncovering new information about the collapse of one of the Swan River’s first camps in 1830.

For more than 100 years, it has been accepted as fact that some of Western Australia’s first settlers abandoned Peel town because of the camp leader Thomas Peel and his inept leadership.

But new evidence suggests that the extent of the hardship – extreme conditions that drove the settlers to burn even their own furniture in an effort to stay warm – was the catalyst for the exodus from what has been widely accepted as the one of the largest initial settlements in the colony.

“Imagine, priceless antique furniture – shipped across from Britain by new arrivals as a sign of their wealth and status – was instead thrown into the fireplace to be used as fuel for cooking and heating,” said Dr Shane Burke, Archaeology Coordinator at Notre Dame’s Fremantle Campus.

“In a society where tasteful furnishings ‘made the person’, the destruction of tangible symbols of elite and middle-class British culture would have caused intense stress among the early settlers.”

The evidence for Dr Burke’s revelations was published on Wednesday 13 September 2017, in the internationally acclaimed journal *Historical Archaeology*, and is the first of its kind to explore the entrepreneurial behaviour of the Swan River’s British settlers.

As part of the study, Dr Burke analysed of 5762 charcoal fragments from hearths, fireplaces and ash pits associated with five dwellings from the Peel town camp that were uncovered recently as part of archaeological work at the site, located about 10km south of Fremantle.

Analysis of the charcoal suggests that once colonists exhausted local wood supplies (jarrah, tuart and candle banksia) as fuel for cooking and heating, they were forced to use timber containers, opulent imported British furniture and ship’s timbers.

Nails, spikes and ship sheathing discovered at the sites suggest that they were present in the wood when it was placed into hearths and fireplaces.

“The historical record gives the impression that settlers living in the Swan River camps sat around doing nothing.

“This new research suggests that WA’s new arrivals were continually looking for resources and trying to adapt to their radically changed circumstances,” Dr Burke said.



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“Until now, it has been suggested that low morale and disquiet towards leader, Thomas Peel, was the cause of the camp’s eventual collapse. But the new evidence clearly suggests that extreme hardship was the major factor in their decision to abandon the area.”

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History of Peel Town

In 1828, Englishman, Thomas Peel, a committed colonial promoter and landowner, joined a syndicate of financiers in proposing to the British government a plan to transfer 10,000 settlers within four years to a new free colony which was to be founded at Swan River, Western Australia.

Mr Peel’s priority site was a 250,000 acre allotment on the southern banks of the Swan and Canning Rivers. The government stipulated that the first British settlers needed to arrive in the colony prior to 1 November, 1829 in order for him to retain this site.

However, when the *Gilmore*, the partnership’s first vessel carrying approximately 179 migrants, arrived six weeks late Mr Peel was left without his priority site with limited money and supplies.

Two months after the *Gilmore*’s arrival, the second ship containing Peel’s colonists – the *Hooghly* – arrived with 176 people after a three-month voyage. This group formed their own enclave of Peel town and resided a short distance from the already established camp at a place called ‘Hooghly Town’.

Malnutrition and disease were rife amongst the settlers at the newly-proposed town site of Clarence, with the relationship between the migrants and Mr Peel turning sour shortly after the colonists arrived.



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