AN IRISH DIG DOWN UNDER

Susan Arthure describes investigations at a nineteenth-century clachan at Baker’s Flat, South Australia.

On an autumn day in 1880, three men set out to build a fence. They were headed for Baker’s Flat, a section of contested land comprising about 400 acres in rural South Australia. As they arrived on site, they encountered a group of women and children, numbering between 50 and 100. Described in contemporary newspaper reports as possessing a strong patriotic spirit, and equipped with brooms, shovels and sticks, the women urged the men not to do the legal landowners’ bidding, one of them proclaiming that she was prepared to lose the last drop of her blood before the fencers would sink a hole in the land (Fig. 1).

Undeterred, the men carried on. After digging the first hole, they attempted to drop in the first fence post, an act that would symbolise taking possession on behalf of the legal landowners. Immediately one of the women jumped into the post-hole, taking possession of it herself and declaring loudly that any further excavation would have to be through her body. After some deliberation, the fencers wisely retreated, prodded on their way with sticks by some of the women. The women listed in the resulting court case were Ann Slattery, Mary Callaghan, Mary Lacey, Mary Jose, Ann Hoare and Catherine Driscoll, and they were all Irish.

This skirmish was just one clash among many in the occupation of Baker’s Flat by the Irish. Baker’s Flat is located in the mid-north of South Australia, just outside the town of Kapunda and 75km north of the capital, Adelaide (Fig. 2). Kapunda was founded because of a copper discovery in 1842, which led to the development of a major copper mine and an influx of Cornish miners and associated workers. These workers included the Irish, who began to arrive at Kapunda in...
significant numbers from 1854, following the Famine. Rather than living in the town, they chose to squat on an area of vacant land near the mine, known as Baker’s Flat, which was both handy for commuting to work and available rent-free. There they quickly built homes, stocked the land with cattle, goats and poultry, and formed what was recognised locally as a close and distinctively Irish settlement.

While their occupation of the land appears to have been initially sanctioned by the absentee landowners, by 1875 things had changed. The landowners were keen to assert their legal title to Baker’s Flat, and the Irish were equally keen to demonstrate their rights to the same spot. Over the next 30 years the Irish worked together consistently and collaboratively to repel invasions by surveyors, fencers and bailiffs, and to fight their cause through the courts. The result was an Irish settlement that was seen as set apart from the broader Kapunda community, that was marked by social closure to anybody identified as an outsider and that was defended assertively. Baker’s Flat continued to operate as a distinct settlement until at least the 1920s, when only a handful of people remained on the site. The presumed last resident, Miss Annie O’Callahan, died in 1948. Within a few years, to facilitate cropping and farming, all the buildings on Baker’s Flat had been knocked down, and today it appears to be just an ordinary field (Fig. 3).

Historically, there has been little information published about the people of Baker’s Flat. A very few accounts (Charlton 1971; Nicol 1983; Tilbrook 1929) record a distinctively Irish community, characterised by traditional Irish-style houses (Fig. 4), the deliberate placement of those houses in a cluster (Fig. 5), a strong Catholic faith, and a continuation of traditional activities such as hurling and dancing. From newspaper reports of the time, the community is remembered for its squalid conditions, violent infighting and drunken behaviour, a narrative which feeds nicely into typical stereotypes of the Irish. Other accounts in the newspapers and court cases depict a commitment to non-conformity and an inclination to challenge the law; this is recalled in a section of the town mural showing the women of Baker’s Flat defending their right to occupy the land. Stories like these are all that are left in the histories, tales of positive resistance or disruptive lawlessness, depending on which side you take, but generally marked by chaos. And on the land’s surface there are only occasional heaps of rubble to indicate that Baker’s Flat was once home to a thriving community that numbered about 500 at its peak in the 1860s and 1870s.
The archaeology of Baker’s Flat

Recent archaeological work, however, is shedding more light on the Irish of Baker’s Flat. Work began in 2013 as part of master’s research by the author, under the auspices of Flinders University Archaeology Department. A walking transect survey (Fig. 6) that covered 38.4% of the site located the remains of thirteen buildings (now rubble heaps) and several scatters of stone, glass, ceramics and metal, mainly in the north-west quadrant. This archaeological survey covered much of the area that had been last surveyed in the nineteenth century for the Forster et al. v. Fisher court case in an unsuccessful attempt by the landowners to sell the land. That survey took place in 1893, following the initiation of court proceedings in 1892, and was carried out under arduous circumstances. The surveyor wrote that ‘the feeling of the trespassers was so strong that I was prevented from completing the exact survey and measurements of the trespassers’ holdings’ for fear of a breach of the peace (Forster et al. v. Fisher 1892). Although the difficulties encountered by the surveyor meant that his plan could not be completely accurate, this is the only historic map of the site and it aligns broadly with the material remains recorded in 2013.

This arrangement of clustered houses on Baker’s Flat (first identified in the 1893 survey and partially confirmed in 2013) is unusual in South Australia. Moreover, it is consistent with the pattern of a particularly Irish settlement type, the clachan. Clachans were widespread in rural Ireland until the Famine; they were characterised by clusters of farm dwellings and outbuildings, and the inhabitants were often related. Typically, a clachan did not have shops, pubs, church or school. Although individual households might maintain vegetable gardens, generally the majority of the land was managed communally using the ‘rundale’ system of open-field, co-operative farming.

Affidavits from the Forster et al. v. Fisher court case confirm that Baker’s Flat was run co-operatively. For example, one resident, Thomas Jordan, stated that ‘unless they [the occupiers] could run their cattle on the whole of the said section they could not live there and until they were forced to leave they had all determined to remain’. Another, Michael O’Brien, asserted that any outsider who bought the land ‘would not be allowed by the

Excavation of a dugout dwelling

Informed by the geophysical results, excavations took place at Baker’s Flat over two field seasons, in 2016 and 2017, using student volunteer teams. These excavations uncovered what is termed in Ireland a ‘semi-underground dwelling’ and in South Australia a ‘dugout’. Irish dwellings of this type were usually built or cut into the slope of a hill, with thatched or turf roofs often carried out in the north-west quadrant of the site, now as part of the author’s Ph.D research. Using ground-penetrating radar and a magnetic gradiometer, several large anomalies were found. These were clustered together and fit the pattern of rectangular structures approximately 6–9m long and 4–6m wide.

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Above: Fig. 5—Survey map of Baker’s Flat, 1893, showing houses clustered together (source: State Records SA GRG 36/54/1892/47).
barely above the surface. There were no chimneys; the smoke escaped through a hole in the roof. They were predominantly used by the very poor or by seasonal workers (Ó Danachair 1955–6).

On Baker's Flat, the excavation in 2016 uncovered a wall (Fig. 7) cut into calcrete, a type of limestone that is relatively soft and is widespread in South Australia, occurring near the soil surface. In the top surface of this wall, which forms a western edge to the structure, there are deliberate cuts that may have been added to hold the supports for a thatched roof, some remains of which were found tumbled into the structure. On the calcrete floor level, three dividing channels were uncovered running west–east and containing several post-holes and corrugated-iron ‘dividers’. A cobbled path was uncovered to the east, and a rubbish dump was excavated immediately south of the cobbles. At the southern boundary of the trench, where the western wall curves round to the south, there was a hearth but no evidence of a chimney.

The 2017 season focused on the northern and eastern sides of the dugout (Fig. 8). Here there are very clear, well-defined walls. In association with the walls, the remains of flattened kerosene (paraffin oil) cans were found, sometimes covered in hessian, alongside one area of window glass—the metal appears to have been used to create taller walls that sat on top of their calcrete counterparts. Interestingly, the doorway is not in the eastern wall, as might be expected. Instead it faces south, out of the prevailing winds. The cobblestones uncovered the previous year extend almost as far as the doorway. Next to the dugout is a small annexe, roughly constructed; its purpose is not yet clear.

The physical layout of the dugout and the presence of many domestic artefacts—including ceramic (Fig. 9) and glass fragments, buttons and jewellery, fabric, leather shoes and butchered bone—indicate that this was a domestic dwelling rather than an agricultural structure. Overall, it is clear that it forms a rectangular shape, one room deep, about 9m long and 4m wide, dug into the hillside. Along with the floor-level hearth and absent chimney, it conforms to the traditional Irish vernacular style.

This is quite different from the colonial South Australian tradition, where building styles were generally British. It has been suggested that this is because South Australia was a colony of free settlers rather than convicts, who aimed to emulate ‘the design, dignity and permanence of the environment they had left’ (Berry and Gilbert 1981). The typical South Australian settler’s cottage was built to a simple Georgian symmetrical design of two main rooms under the main roof; additional rooms were added using either a roof of the same design or a succession of skillion (mono-pitched or lean-to) roofs. This contrasts with the archaeological evidence of the dugout, which aligns much more closely with an Irish style. In common with the houses photographed on the site in 1906, the dugout was rectangular, one room deep and single-storey. The archival evidence confirms the clusters of houses and indicates that the Irish worked together over many years in a strong, self-contained community. In combination with the historical record, these build the picture that Baker's Flat operated as a clachan settlement.

Conclusion
This is the first clachan to be recognised so far in Australia, significant because it demonstrates how the Irish carried their culture with them as they migrated to a new world. As the men found when they set out to build that fence in 1880, there was a strong presence on Baker's Flat. The Irish may not have had fences but they had organised themselves into a cohesive clachan. The research continues on Baker's Flat to discover as much as possible about this particular element of Irishness in the colony of South Australia.
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References

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