Australia’s First Clachan: identifying a traditional Irish settlement system in nineteenth century South Australia

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In the mid-nineteenth century, the Great Famine altered the Irish landscape forever, triggering mass migration and the creation of the Irish diaspora. Many Irish migrated to Australia, some to the new colony of South Australia. Here, historically, the Irish have tended to be invisible in the landscape, the predominant view being that, with the exception of religion, they were mainly indistinguishable from their British counterparts. Recent research, however, focusing on an Irish settlement near Kapunda known as Baker’s Flat, indicates that this particular community was distinctively Irish and operated as a clachan, a traditional Irish settlement system characterised by clusters of houses and co-operative farming methods. This article examines the history and archaeology of this Irish community, the first clachan settlement to be recognised so far in Australia.

A glance back at Irish history

Before examining the history and archaeology of the South Australian Irish, we need to look briefly back to the northern hemisphere, to the history of Ireland and its nearest neighbour, Britain. This is a long and complex story, with...
Britain attempting to conquer Ireland many times over the past 800 years, beginning with the arrival of the Anglo-Normans during the late twelfth century. Although these attempted colonisations achieved varying levels of success, the Battle of the Boyne in 1690 and subsequent treaty in 1691 ensured Britain’s political subjugation of Ireland. From then on, Ireland’s politics, religion, economics and society were deliberately shaped to meet British intentions. By the end of the seventeenth century, Catholic Ireland was completely Protestant-dominated, and by the end of the eighteenth century, the so-called Protestant Ascendancy controlled 95% of the land in a system of commercially-operated large estates sustained by the leases and rents of their tenants. Use of the Irish language declined, the native elite was destroyed, and political and economic power was no longer held by the native Irish.

As the power of the native Irish declined, the poor became increasingly dependent on the potato, a food which grew easily on marginal land, was nourishing and sustained health. By the mid-nineteenth century, the Irish poor relied almost totally on the potato for food. This ‘complete food’ facilitated a huge population increase, and by 1841 the population of Ireland was almost 8.2 million, more than double what it had been in 1790. Although there were frequently small or regional failures of the crop, and people were used to surviving the ‘hungry months’ (the period when the last of the potatoes had been eaten and the new crop was not yet harvested), between 1845 and 1852, disaster struck. The entire potato crop across the country failed totally, again and again. This period became known as the Great Famine, and has been described as ‘one of the largest and darkest areas of Irish history’ and ‘the greatest social disaster to occur in any one country in nineteenth-century Europe’.

Compounding the resulting widespread starvation and deaths, the political complexities of the Irish-British relationship and the dominant laissez-faire economic policies meant that assistance was delayed and inadequate. The British government was reluctant to interfere in the free market, grain continued to be exported, rents were still collected, huge numbers of evictions took place, and landlords took advantage of the turmoil to clear the land and implement more modern and improved farming systems. The accepted estimate of casualties from the Famine years is up to one and a half million deaths, and the further loss of one million people through emigration. It was the starting point of massive Irish emigration, and the beginning of the Irish diaspora. Although the majority of Irish emigrants went to the US and Canada, many came to Australia and some to South Australia.

**Bound for South Australia**

The Irish who came to South Australia in the mid-nineteenth century essentially moved from one colony to another – a colonial people in a new colony, the colonised becoming the colonisers. In many respects, things remained the same. South Australia was a place where the dominant British power continued, the colony was underpinned by British societal structures, and the system was structured to delay labourers from becoming land owners. The colony had been set up under the utopian principles of the Wakefield Plan and had neither convicts nor an established church, but it was later referred to by the Irish land rights activist, Michael Davitt, as a ‘landlord’s Utopia’, where workers were committed to inescapable serfdom.

At Kapunda, the Irish began to arrive in significant numbers from 1854, attracted by labouring work available at the copper mine. They settled on a vacant area of land known as Baker’s Flat, which was available rent-free and conveniently close to the mine site. There are estimates of about 500 people living on Baker’s Flat when the mine was prospering in the 1860s and early 1870s, and the 1861 Census shows that about one-third of the population
in the Kapunda region originated in Ireland, indicating that the Irish comprised a sizable minority in the district. However, there is limited documentary evidence about the Irish of Baker’s Flat. A very few historical accounts record a distinctively Irish community, characterised by their use of vernacular architecture (Figure 1), houses that were clustered together, a strong Catholic faith, and adherence to traditional recreational activities such as hurling and dancing. The notion of the Irish as a people prone to infighting, drunkenness and general contempt of the law is also chronicled in these accounts, and reflected in contemporary newspaper reports.

Note that the town of Kapunda was firmly founded on capitalist principles, driven by the discovery of copper in 1842 and the subsequent copper mine. But the historical accounts do not indicate that the Baker’s Flat Irish were perceived poorly as a labour force in the mines, and there is no evidence that they were seen as a threat to existing workers, such as the strong anti-foreign feeling experienced by the Irish in mid-nineteenth century New York.

Instead, the negativity and stereotypes for the Baker’s Flat Irish are directed at their rent-free occupation of the land, their active resistance to later eviction attempts, and the perceived disorder of their lifestyles. Even today, this is how the Irish are recalled in Kapunda, with the town mural depicting a group of spirited Irish women seeing off the bailiffs in one of several attempts at eviction dating from the
1870s (Figure 2). These eviction attempts were prompted by ownership disputes over Baker’s Flat between the legal landowners and the Irish occupants. They recurred over a thirty year period as the legal owners tried to assert their rights by periodically trying to fence the land, put stock on it, and either evict or collect rent from the Irish. Each attempt was met with strong resistance, and all were unsuccessful in achieving their aims.\(^7\)

One reason why the Irish were perceived primarily in a negative way could be because the Flatters – as they were sometimes known – were able to subvert the dominant capitalist system by settling in a place where they could live rent-free. Further, it appears that they were able to establish a community characterised by co-operative, communal labour, a direct contrast to the profit-driven, privately owned copper mine where many of them worked for wages. Even after the mine closed in 1879, the Flatters did not leave. They stayed because, by then, they had established a strong, vibrant and very Irish settlement.

Research into the historical records indicates that this settlement was even more Irish than it appears at first glance. Certainly, the images that survive of the houses on Baker’s Flat are consistent with the style of traditional Irish houses. But an 1893 survey plan (Figure 3), prepared for an ultimately unsuccessful sale of the land, hints at more. The plan, which records a cluster of structures in the north-west quadrant of Section 7598, is the only known map that provides evidence of the houses and their spatial organisation. And this cluster matches a uniquely Irish settlement style – the ‘clachan’.

**The Irish clachan, transported to South Australia?**

In nineteenth century Ireland, rural settlement patterns were essentially pre-industrial, and based around clustered communities known as clachans.\(^8\) A clachan was a cluster of farm dwellings and outbuildings, where the inhabitants were often related through kinship. Unlike a standard village or town, the clachan did not usually have services such as a church, shops, pub or school.\(^9\) Although individual houses might have vegetable gardens, the majority of the land was managed communally using the cultural practice of ‘rundale’, a system of open-field, co-operative farming methods.\(^20\) Clachans and the rundale farming method were widespread in Ireland from the late eighteenth through to the end of the nineteenth century; their disappearance was heavily influenced by the Famine and the resulting deaths, emigration, evictions and clearances.\(^21\)

At Baker’s Flat, the buildings shown on the 1893 survey are arranged in clusters. The remains of some of these buildings, now reduced to heaps of rubble, were recorded
during an archaeological survey in 2013. Together, these data suggest a tightly clustered clachan settlement pattern. Note that an 1846 account of a clachan in County Mayo, Ireland describes the cottages as built ‘in a cluster, without the slightest attempt at regularity, and without street or lane’, a description that is echoed in an account of the dwellings at Baker’s Flat as ‘little holdings clustered together haphazard without the slightest attempt at order or regularity’. Some evidence of the practice of rundale can be seen in the historical accounts that tell how families ran their pigs, goats and poultry communally without restraining fences. But it is even more striking in a series of affidavits collected during the Forster et al v Fisher court case that began in 1892.

This legal action was the culmination of many years’ attempts by various owners to rid Baker’s Flat of its Irish occupants, and highlights the expectation of mutual obligation at the settlement. Six affidavits taken in 1893 record how the ‘trespassers’ on Baker’s Flat worked co-operatively. On being offered the land ‘on reasonable terms’, each of the occupiers refused. The power of collective action is clear, with Thomas Jordan, who occupied a hut and 1½ acres, stating that ‘the occupiers … had already held two meetings to consider their position’ and that ‘unless they 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’. Michael O’Brien, who occupied a hut and one acre, appeared tempted but said ‘it is no use my buying the land because if I did the others would go against me’, and that any person who did buy the land ‘would not be allowed by the other occupants … to live there’.

Whilst it is possible to glean information about rundale from the historical records, and rundale is notoriously difficult to see archaeologically, one of the other distinctive features of a clachan is its adherence to vernacular Irish architecture, a factor that does lend itself well to archaeological research. 

**Figure 3:** Survey plan of Baker’s Flat, from 1893 (Source: State Records SA GRG 36/54/1892/47)

**Australia’s First Clachan**

**Clachans and the Irish vernacular tradition**

Clachan houses shared the distinctive features of the traditional nineteenth century Irish vernacular house. They were typically rectangular in design and one room in depth, usually of single-storey stone construction with a steeply sloped, narrow, thatched roof; rooms occupied the full width of the house and each opened into the next, not into a central hallway. Even the poor one-roomed cabins occupied by landless labourers followed the same general form, with the exception that mud rather than stone was the main construction material.

From 1841 to 1911, Irish houses were divided into four classes, a reflection of the social hierarchy; these were reported on in the Reports of the Censuses of Population. A fourth-class house was the lowest and poorest, generally made of mud or other perishable material, and having only one room and window; these were the cabins occupied by the landless labourers. Third-class houses were
a better type of mud cabin, with one to four rooms and windows, occupied by permanent workers and tradesmen. Second-class houses were farmhouses of five to nine rooms. First-class represented all houses that were better quality than second-class, generally gentlemen’s residences. In 1841, third- and fourth-class houses were the most common, comprising over two-thirds of the total housing stock. Across the Famine decade, from 1841 to 1851, whilst first- and second-class houses increased in number and third-class houses decreased a little, there were major changes in the numbers of fourth-class houses. Almost three-quarters (nearly 330,000) were lost in the Famine decade, and by 1911, fourth-class houses numbered just 5092, a drop of more than 98% of those existing in 1841. These houses were the homes of the very poorest people, many of whom either did not survive the Famine years or who emigrated.

A variation of the fourth-class home was what is termed in Ireland a ‘semi-underground dwelling’, and in South Australia a ‘dugout’. Descriptions of Irish semi-underground dwellings indicate that they were built or cut into the slope of a hill, with roofs that were often barely elevated above the surface, covered with thatch or sods gleaned from local materials. Floors could be from 4 to 6 feet (1.2 to 1.8 metres) below ground level. 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. Although many of these descriptions refer to dwellings cut into peat land or bogs, where it is relatively easy to excavate into the land, or where old turf cuttings can be adapted and re-used, it indicates that the poor of Ireland were familiar with the concept of digging into a hillside to create a shelter or dwelling.

References to other semi-underground dwellings indicate they varied between two type forms: a pit with vertical sides, roofed over; or a hollow area excavated into a slope with the front and end walls built up. One account describes how the men would dig into the side of a slope using spades and pickaxes until they had made a large wide space, single-roomed, about 18 feet (5.5 metres) long and 10 feet (3 metres) wide. After cutting into the hillside, the gables and front wall were completed using peat or sods. The fire was at one of the gable ends, at floor level, using a round smoke hole in the roof and lacking a chimney. Floors were made of whatever was available locally, often shingle or clay. One small window opening and a door completed the house.

Baker’s Flat – excavation of a dugout

From the photographs of houses on Baker’s Flat taken in 1906 (Figure 1), we know that there were dwellings on the site that adhered to the Irish vernacular tradition. These were noted in a contemporary newspaper report where Baker’s Flat was described as ‘… dotted with picturesque white-walled cottages …’. Also, in a series of oral histories conducted in 1975, four Kapunda residents recalled between 30 and 60 houses on Baker’s Flat, mostly thatched and constructed as two or three rooms in a row, made mainly of whitewashed clay or stone.

Recent archaeological work on the site, however, has revealed a dugout dwelling that provides more information about how the Irish of Baker’s Flat were using the site. In February 2016, a geophysical survey using a magnetometer and ground-penetrating radar showed up several large anomalies in the northwest section of Baker’s Flat. These anomalies were consistent with the size of a dwelling (approximately 6-9 metres x 4-6 metres), and clustered together. An archaeological excavation in April 2016 revealed the remains of a dugout, semi-underground structure. The physical layout of the structure as well as the presence of many domestic artefacts – including ceramic shards, glass bottles, buttons, butchered bone and leather shoes – indicates that this was a domestic dwelling rather than an agricultural structure.
The dugout wall, shown running north-south in Figure 4, is cut into calcrite, a type of limestone that is widespread in South Australia, occurring near the soil surface. It was widely used in South Australia in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a building material, and was also burned to make lime mortar. In the top surface of the wall, there are deliberate cuts which may have been added to hold the supports for a thatched roof, some remains of which were found tumbled into the structure. The main part of the floor is calcrite, with dividing channels running west-east and containing several postholes. A cobbled floor or path was uncovered to the east, which appears to be outside, since a rubbish dump was excavated close to and immediately south of the cobbles. Of great interest is the hearth at the southern boundary of the trench (Figure 5). In the basic form of the Irish vernacular house, hearths can either lie free near the centre of the house, or be placed against a wall, with or without a smoke hole in the roof. This is so distinctive in Ireland that it has led to the division of Irish traditional houses into two principal type forms: the house with the fireplace near the centre of the house, the ‘centre-hearth type’; and the house with the fireplace at the gable wall, the ‘gable-hearth type’.

In the Baker’s Flat dugout, the hearth appears to be the gable-hearth type, since the curving calcrite wall that edges around the southwestern side of the hearth appears to form the end wall of the dugout. Looking at the gable-hearth type in particular, Ó Danachair maintains that placing the fire against one of the gable walls with a smoke-hole above it in the roof was the first stage of development of the gable-hearth type. It overcame the disadvantage of the centre-hearth, whereby occupants and their accoutrements were in constant danger of coming in contact with the fire, and, provided the wall behind the fire was of a fire-resistant material the gable-hearth was quite safe. The fire usually lay at floor level, continuing a long Irish tradition of the open hearth on the floor level, also found in other parts of Western Europe.

No trace of a chimney structure was found during the excavation, indicating that this particular hearth may have followed a very early style, where the fire lay on the floor and one or two smoke-holes in the roof took the place of a chimney. One smoke-hole would have been placed directly over the fire and the other at the opposite end, enabling some of the smoke to escape, and also letting in some light. The absence of a chimney for directing the smoke was not unusual in Irish houses.
Chimneys in peasant houses were unknown in many places until the nineteenth century. Indeed, in 1843, travellers to Achill Island in the west of Ireland described a village of about forty cabins, with not a single chimney.

When considering all the features of the Baker’s Flat dugout, early indications are that it was lived in over a long period of time. The postholes in the channels may have been used to erect a temporary dwelling; here, branches would have been secured in the postholes and bent over to form a circular structure, over which was draped waterproof fabric, leafy branches or grass sods. This structure would have been superseded by a more robust dwelling on the same spot. It is likely to have been used for a significant period of time as the remains of a thatched roof were found on the floor, beneath a later corrugated iron roof. So how does this compare with other South Australian dwellings?

Baker’s Flat dugout compared with early South Australian vernacular houses

Berry and Gilbert, in discussing building techniques in colonial South Australia, concluded that building construction generally adhered to the techniques common in the British Isles, the main variation being choice of material for walls, which was dependent on local source material. They also noted that South Australian buildings differed from those in other Australian states, probably because South Australia was founded as a settler colony rather than a convict outpost, and that these settlers tended ‘to set up establishments as soon as possible, which emulated, in miniature, the design, dignity and permanence of the environment they had left’. Early settlers’ cottages were built using whatever materials were close to hand, and were often just huts made of reeds, turf, bark, logs, shingles, clay reinforced with straw (pisé), or wattle and daub. Generally, however, they adhered to a simple Georgian symmetrical design, with two main rooms under the main roof; further rooms were added as required either with a roof of the same design or a succession of lean-to roofs. Whilst verandahs are not a feature of this house style, they were often added later.

During the first years of European settlement in South Australia, common roofing materials for the less wealthy were thatch, timber shingles and bark. “Thatch was widely used in the early years, particularly since the materials of straw, reeds and native grasses were readily available, and thatching was both economic and offered good insulating properties. However, it was also highly flammable and attracted vermin; as a result, it decreased in popularity when other more economical materials, such as slate (1840s) and galvanised iron (1850s), became available.” Large stone chimneys served the living room and kitchen, and bricks, which were made in South Australia from 1837, were used for fireplaces and chimneys as well as for whole buildings, with almost all South Australian buildings having fireplaces and chimneys made of brick.

When examining the Baker’s Flat dugout particularly, a comparison can be made with the Cornish dugouts at Burra. The mining town of Burra, about 165 kilometres north of Adelaide, was established in response to a rich copper find, in a similar manner to Kapunda. From the late 1840s to the early 1850s, many of the miners and their families, predominantly Cornish, lived in dugouts burrowed into the banks of the Burra Creek. The Cornish were the majority ethnic group in Burra, and about 1800 people (40% of the Burra population) lived in the dugouts at their peak in 1851. Although conditions were overcrowded, many contemporary newspaper accounts emphasise their comfortable nature with accounts of the dugouts describing up to three rooms, glazed windows, clean whitewash, neat style, and even some that had wallpaper, carpet, paling verandahs and lean-tos. Interestingly, an article in the South Australian Register notes that all the dugouts had chimneys, mostly of barrels cemented in mud, but some of mud only, a few of wood, and a very few of brick.
An 1851 drawing is the only known visual record of the Burra dugouts, and the artist – William A Cawthorne – noted on the back that the banks of the creek were lined with dugout homes, and that the junks on top were the chimney stacks.\(^{54}\) An archaeological excavation in 2004 of the rear room of a Burra dugout clearly identified a fireplace and chimney in the north-western corner.\(^{55}\)

Whilst the use of thatch and locally available materials appear common to all South Australian buildings, the difference at Baker’s Flat is the strong adherence to Irish vernacular traditions such as the houses shown in the historical photos being rectangular, one room deep and single-storey. The archaeological evidence of the dugout points to the continuation of a very old Irish tradition of excavating a semi-underground dwelling into the slope of a hill, and having the hearth at the gable end, directly on the floor surface with a smoke hole above and no chimney. Berry and Gilbert note that early German settlers in South Australia brought their building traditions with them,\(^{56}\) and if this is the case, the same argument can be made for early Irish settlers continuing their own building customs. At Baker’s Flat though, it seems that it is not just building traditions that the Irish continued to follow, but the complete clachan settlement system.

**Conclusion**

It appears, though, that a series of fortunate events transpired at Baker’s Flat. Firstly, the land was essentially unoccupied by European settlers until the Irish arrived. As a result, the settlement practices on Baker’s Flat reflect the decisions and practices of that community only, and can be attributed as such. Secondly, unlike other Irish people who migrated to cities and urban areas, and became culturally invisible, the Baker’s Flat Irish had access to enough land and people to be able to manage the landscape and community in a way that was distinctively Irish, and maintain this for a significant period of time. Thirdly, sufficient clues remained in the historical records for an Irish archaeologist to recognise that Baker’s Flat could be a clachan.

The Baker’s Flat research is revealing an exciting and untold story about South Australia’s colonial past. Even in Ireland, little research has been carried out on the clachan system, and this South Australian settlement is an opportunity for further research in this area. It is also probable that other clachans would have been established in Australia and other parts of the world given the right conditions. Ongoing research will shed more light on the complexities of the clachan system, how Irish people conceptualised themselves in clachan communities outside of Ireland, and how people can adapt to new social and physical environments.

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This essay has been peer reviewed

End notes
13 Historical Census and Colonial Data Archive, HCCD Document ‘SA-1861-census’, Australian Data Archive, Canberra, pp154-156
Australia’s First Clachan


20 Ó Síocháin, ‘Rundale’, p1; Whelan, ‘Clachans’, p453


23 Tilbrook, *Memories of Kapunda*, p31. Note that Baker’s Flat is not the only mining community in South Australia to be described as having clusters of houses. At Moonta, miners’ cottages were described as ‘clustered together by hundreds’ (Yorkshire Peninsula Advertiser and Miners’ and Farmers’ Journal, 6 August 1875, p3) and ‘built in every direction’ (*South Australian Register*, 10 June 1873, p6). However, these are also generally described as neat, tidy and pleasing in appearance, unlike Baker’s Flat, and, in addition, are not associated with other elements associated with the clachan system such as co-operative farming.

24 Charlton, *History of Kapunda*; Nicol, ‘Racial minorities’; Tilbrook, *Memories of Kapunda*

25 Forster et al v Fisher, ‘Records of the Supreme Court of South Australia’, *GRG36/54 File 47/1892*, State Records SA


29 Orser, ‘Three 19th-century houses sites’, p91

30 General Register Office, *Census of Ireland, 1911*, pxx; Caoimhín Ó Danachair, ‘Semi-underground habitations’, *Journal of the Galway Archaeological and Historical Society*, vol 26, no 3/4, 1955/1956, pp75-76. Note that Kevin Danaher and Caoimhín Ó Danachair are the same person. ‘Ó Danachair’ is the Irish form of ‘Danaher’, and this author published under both forms.

31 Ó Danachair, ‘Semi-underground habitations’, pp76-78

32 A peat bog is a wetland. Traditionally in Ireland, peat has been cut and dried, then used as fuel for heating and cooking. It is known as turf.

33 Ó Danachair, ‘Semi-underground habitations’, pp78-80

34 *Chronicle*, ‘The copper revival: some resuscitated properties: no. 4 the Kapunda mine’, 7 October 1899, p18


37 Caoimhín Ó Danachair, ‘Hearth and chimney in the Irish house’, *Béaloideas*, vol 16, no 1/2, 1946, p92


39 Ó Danachair, ‘Hearth and chimney’, p93

40 Ó Danachair, ‘Hearth and chimney’, pp92-101


42 Mr & Mrs Samuel Carter Hall, *Ireland: Its Scenery, Character, etc.*, vol. III. Jeremiah How, London, 1843, p403


44 Berry & Gilbert, *Pioneer Building Techniques*, p3


48 Mark Butcher Architects, *Early Roofing and Roof Materials*, pp9-10
49 Berry & Gilbert, *Pioneer Building Techniques*, pp10-20
53 *South Australian Register*, ‘Sketches of the present state of South Australia: No. XXI: Kooringa’, 8 July 1851, p3
56 Berry & Gilbert, *Pioneer Building Techniques*, pp34-38
57 Whelan, ‘Clachans’, p472
58 Whelan, ‘Clachans’, p472