

Images in cultural psychiatry

Ararat's J Ward - A history cast in stone

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Abstract. *J Ward in Ararat housed some of Victoria's most notorious 'criminally insane' prisoners for nearly a century. The conditions were grim and the inmates' lives were extremely dull. Over the years a number of stone rubbings, scrapings and graffiti were created that are still visible on the walls of J Ward. These have established something of a pictorial record of inmate life and history of the gaol. The present work arose from a photographic study of the works and an attempt to classify them according to the times of their making. The earlier rubbings were probably created over considerable periods of time as the stone was worked slowly with fingers, attesting to the boredom and isolation of the prisoners. However, later graffiti were probably made when conditions improved and scraping tools were acquired. There are also initials and dates on some walls that were probably made by staff or workmen as the Ward was decommissioned. The history is of bored and frustrated inmates, over a long period, when there was little to occupy them, with changes as the Ward conditions were being improved over the 1960s and finally, with decommissioning in 1991 when the workmen and retired staff left their marks. The earlier works may be evidence of great frustration, voicelessness and boredom. Although the later-made graffiti show their part of the history of J Ward, it is the bluestone rubbings that are most worthy of note.*

Keywords: Ararat (Australia), J Ward, graffiti, history of psychiatric wards.

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INTRODUCTION The building of a county gaol in Ararat, Victoria was mooted in 1857. At this time there were active goldfields in the vicinity and criminal activity was rife. J Ward started its life as one of the three larger goldfields' prisons in 1859. The others were at Beechworth and Pentridge in Melbourne. The building was completed in 1862 and there were gallows added in 1863 (Burgin, 2002). When the gold ran out in the mid-1880s, the dwindling population of the goldfield caused the gaol to close in 1886.

The Ararat Lunatic Asylum (Aradale) was commenced in 1865 and was opened in 1867. By 1886 there was a need to house the 'criminally insane' and a progression of events and decisions led to the recently closed County gaol becoming the "J Ward" of the Aradale asylum (Brothers, 1962). The prison buildings were acquired by the Lunacy Department as housing for the 'criminally insane' and were designated as the place where the most depraved and most dangerous men in Victoria were committed. They were housed in horrific conditions under the highest security. J Ward was regarded as a temporary facility being "fit only to meet an emergency" (*ibid*). Its function as a gaol and facility for the criminally insane almost overlapped. There were renovations conducted in 1886 to prepare for incarceration of the criminally insane. At that time there may have been a wall that crossed the exercise yard, which was demolished (Area M in **Figure 1**).

J Ward was created for those persons who were detained in any gaol, reformatory or industrial schools, or other place of confinement and who appeared to be 'insane'. Before being transferred to J Ward, any such person had to be certified as mentally ill by two medical practitioners. The Chief Secretary was then responsible for directing the removal of the person from the gaol to the J Ward by a signed warrant. The ward was not a separate institution in its own right and continued to function as a division of the Ararat Mental Hospital.

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From 1887 to its closure in 1991, the J Ward housed only men. The J Ward was described as a “grim place” (Burgin, 2002). Much of the inmates’ time was penetratingly dull, even after the reforms made in the 1950s to 1960s (Burgin, 2002). Over much of that considerable time the inmates were not allowed books (except the Bible), arts and crafts materials or implements. The yards were for exercise but this was not organized. Out of this eternal boredom and possibly frustration, there arose a series of rubbings into the bluestone walls. As a material, bluestone was very difficult to work without proper, heavy-duty tools. It was predominantly used for warehouses and the foundations of public buildings in Victoria in the 1800s and, of course, its gaols. Therefore the rubbings into these stone walls must have taken long times to produce; especially those rubbed out of the stone using nothing more than the inmates’ fingers.

The many reasons for people in prison producing graffiti have been analysed (Fliegau, 2009). Johnson suggested that practice and scholarship of prison experience may be informed by the prison art (Johnson, 2009). He also states that works of art “paint a picture of the lives of people within the criminal justice system and include their experiences with their involvement with systems”. There is no separate documentation to indicate the motives for inmates’ making stone rubbings in the J Ward. It is not difficult to imagine the inmates as isolated, disenfranchized and bored with being locked in separate cells, separated at the bath house and meeting only at mealtimes (in silence) and in the heavily supervised exercise yard. The photographs (some of which are shown in this paper) collected as a short photo essay, were the impetus for recording something of this aspect of the lives of those incarcerated in J Ward.

STONE RUBBINGS, SCRAPINGS AND GRAFFITI OF THE J WARD

There appear to be three groups of rubbings or graffiti still obvious in the J Ward. Dividing the works into groups is arbitrary because much of the work cannot be dated nor attributed to particular artists. It is postulated that each group pertains to a separate era in J Ward’s history. The first relates to the prison inmates before the designation of the J Ward (1862-1887). The second set is essentially rubbings by inmates (1887-1960s or 70s); some may not be differentiated from the earlier inmates of the gaol. The third incorporates graffiti and scrapings by workers in, or contractors.

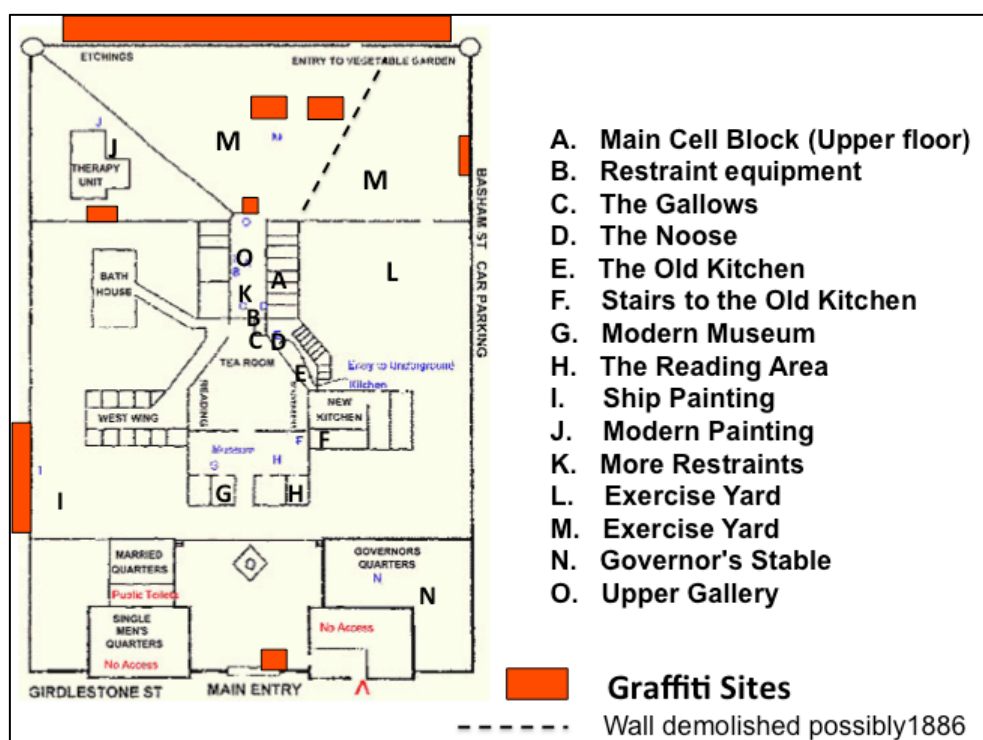


Figure 1 Schema of the prison layout adapted from www.jward.org.au

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EARLY MARKINGS AND WORKS (1862-1887)

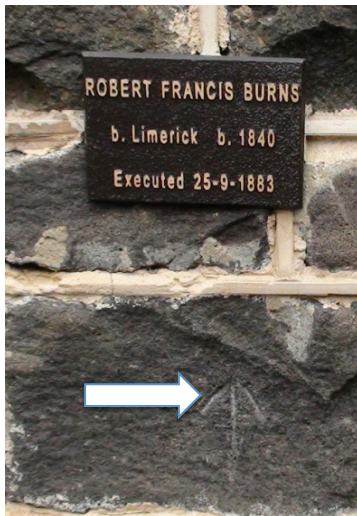


Figure 2 The "broad arrow" used to mark the burial site of executed prisoners. The plaque, "Robert Francis b. Limerick, 1840 Executed 25-9-1883" was erected with those over two other broad arrows on the closure of J Ward by the museum staff.

allowed to complete the touch-up for fear he might paint a swastika on the work! (*ibid*). The one ship painting opposite the bathhouse and nearest the therapy unit (J) is almost invisible now. Restoration is beyond the budgets of the J Ward Friends Inc.

Markers of graves of executed prisoners

On the East wall of the yard (marked M in **Figure 1**) there are three scratched arrows. These indicate the burial places of three prisoners executed by hanging in 1870, 1883 and 1884. Prisoners were required to be kept as property of the State and were buried in the confines of the place of execution (Burgin, 2002). Graves were not in consecrated ground and were to be unmarked. An upward facing "broad arrow" (RAAOC, n.d.; Patel, 2012), indicates such graves and the J Ward Friends have recorded the owners of the markers of the graves (**Figure 2**).

The Ship Paintings

The three ship paintings (see **Figure 1**, Item I) made on to the bluestone were there in 1886 when the goldfields gaol was closed. They may have been painted up to twenty years earlier (Burgin, 2002). Their origins are not known. An inmate named Kurt Gephard, a German who was eventually repatriated in 1962, repainted one ship (**Figure 3**) on the West wall in the 1950s. He was allowed paint and brushes, as reforms on inmate activities were instituted but he was not



Figure 3 Ship painting touched up by Gebhard in 1950s. There are 3 ship paintings but 2 are almost invisible now.

BLUESTONE RUBBINGS FROM 1887 ONWARDS The bluestone rubbings or scrapings are mostly on the North (rear) walls. It is worth noting that a wall was removed (indicated by the dotted line across the exercise yard, M in **Figure 1**). If it were in 1887, the yard would have been accessible to all J Ward inmates. Had it been removed later there may have been two populations of inmates. Thus, one way of dating the wall's removal could have been whether there were differences in the character of the rubbings on either side of the erstwhile wall. The particular themes of hands and faces have been noted over time in prison graffiti or scrapings. There are few themes in the J Ward rubbings, but the most usual are faces as has been noted in other jail wall collections (Thursfield, n.d.). However, these particular subjects are, as said, not confined to particular areas of the wall in question suggesting that there was a single population of creators.

There are at least eleven faces and there may be another two but they are difficult to decipher. There are hands that are either rubbed into the stone or scraped (**Figure 4**). These could be interpreted as inmates marking personal territories. One inmate scraped the outline of a letter box in the hope that he might receive some mail (Burgin, 2002, p 59)!



Figure 4 Themed rubbings of faces and hands, examples of 2 face and one hand rubbing

Other rubbings are less personal. For example there is a perfect bunch of grapes (**Figure 5**) or just deep finger grooves (**Figure 6**) or simply depressions in the stone (**Figure 7**).



Figure 5 Bluestone rubbing demonstrating a bunch of grapes



Figure 6 Markings created by dragging fingers across the bluestone, presumable over a long period of time. It is postulated these types of rubbings were made to define territory.



Figure 7 Deep rubbing into the stone.

GRAFFITI More recently there were graffiti either scratched or painted onto the walls of the J Ward. While some of this was the work of inmates, other work was of workmen or staff especially as the Ward was being decommissioned. Inmates' later works included paintings on the walls and the work of one man of Italian origin who completed a number of mosaic works (**Figure 8**).



Figure 8 An artist of Italian descent created mosaic and painted works in the 1950s or 1960s when the inmates were given ways to occupy themselves

The later scrapings tended to be initials with dates. It is not possible to say exactly which of these scrapings was done by inmates, staff or workmen. However, several of the later ones were probably by workmen (**Figure 9**).

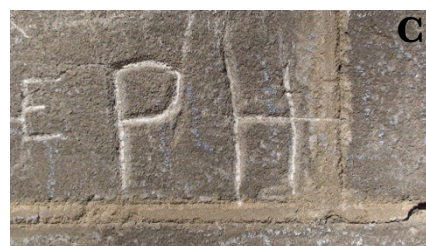
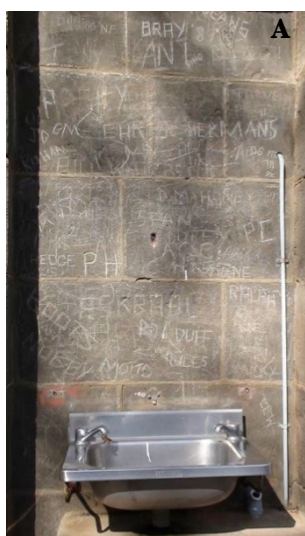


Figure 9 Examples of scraped initials.

A. Over an outside basin these were reputedly by staff as the ward was decommissioned.

B. Initials and dates scraped into a concrete table top in the yard.

C. Initials scraped into the bluestone wall possibly when tools were acquired after the 1950s.

DISCUSSION The stone rubbings, scrapings and graffiti of J Ward should be viewed in the context of the Ward's history. There is no doubt that the place was isolating, depressing, cold and probably involved considerable violence from time to time. There would have been little personal space and it is thought that territorial disputes took place between inmates especially in the exercise yard. The inmates' existence would have been very boring (Burgin, 2002, p. 59). Klofas and Cutshall (1985) have suggested that graffiti can supply insight into the structure of inmate societies and the societal norms of a prison. Their work in a decommissioned juvenile detention facility provided evidence of group structures and institutional socialization processes. However, methods providing those insights have often been intrusive. Bruner and Kelso (1980) write that, 'To write graffiti is to communicate; one never finds graffiti where they cannot be seen by others' (*ibid*, p. 241). These opinions are echoed by White and Habibis, '[W]hether written by pen, spray can, or paintbrush, it is always public and displayed on someone else's property' (White & Habibis, 2005). However, inmate graffiti is often rendered inside inmates' cells – the only quasi-private space a prisoner has – and therefore may be hidden. While in there may have been graffiti on cell walls the J Ward, none of it is evident today. It is possible that some of the rubbings may have been to stake a claim to territory in a violent environment that afforded minimal personal space.

Graffiti is common in prisons and according to McDonald might well be seen as the most natural avenue of non-violent self-expression, where lifelong voicelessness is a product of the prison environment (McDonald, 2001). Given that they were the only means of public communication the wall rubbings might have offered inmates a voice against the voicelessness of incarceration or hierarchy. It is not surprising that some inmates of the J Ward sought to make their mark. It has been suggested that the rubbings in the J Ward were made to stake out territory. Other suggestions include the notion that creating a "permanent" marking was to retain identity. It is possible that the areas defined by the rubbings may have denoted a position or hierarchy. This has been seen recently in more modern situations (Wilson, 2008).

Whatever the reasons behind the creation of the rubbings, some clearly were very long-term projects considering the depth and definition of the works. As has been noted, the stone is extremely hard. Even to scrape an image must have taken time, because tools were not available. It has been postulated that spicules of gravel might have been used as a scraping tool. Again, to achieve the smallest of marks with fingers, grit or gravel would have taken considerable time.

The graffiti that were made later were probably more like classic graffiti; particularly, those made by a staff that wanted to be remembered as the ward closed down. G. Burgin (who had been a member of staff himself) communicated the regret of some staff members at the closing (2009). J Ward is managed as a museum by the Friends of the J Ward. If the context of the graffiti were to be followed up there may be ways to identify the makers of the more conventional, later works; but most are initials only. Earlier works could not be attributed.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS The Author has no conflicts of interest in presenting this work. Her father, Dr Eric Cunningham Dax AO as Director of the Mental Hygiene Authority in Victoria (1952-1969) was instrumental in bringing reform in conditions of J Ward and the treatment of inmates. The present work followed up on a photographic study conducted in 2011 by the Author. The work was presented in part, at a meeting of the History of Medicine Society of Victoria.

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