

THE OLD BURIAL VAULT AT NORTH QUAY, BRISBANE

J. C. H. GILL
Queensland Museum

ABSTRACT

A brick structure accidentally uncovered in 1972 during construction of the Riverside Expressway, Brisbane, opposite the eastern side of the junction of Herschel Street and North Quay, has been determined to have been a burial vault dating from the penal settlement days of Moreton Bay and Brisbane Town. This probably represents the last convict structure to be located in this area. It has been assessed as fully as possible from the limited record able to be made at the time of discovery, as within an hour of this it had been destroyed totally.

In the Queensland Museum are eleven sand stock bricks, registered H9750 to H9760 inclusive, collected by the Museum on 23 August 1972; their *in situ* provenance is recorded as 'from suspected grave site on Brisbane River bank 100 yards [90 m] west of Tank Street'. They provide a slender base on which to assert they were part of a structure dating from the convict days of Brisbane Town, yet there is evidence which affords positive indications of the time when the bricks were used, of the structure of which they were part, and of the use to which that structure was put.

The narrative which follows will incorporate the historical evidence. Then the structure as such will be dealt with as far as it is possible to make a reconstruction from the relics available.

HISTORICAL EVIDENCE

On 23 August 1972 a bulldozer working on the Brisbane Riverside Expressway construction opposite the junction of North Quay and Herschel Street dislodged some bricks buried in the soil, and disclosed an aperture in the sloping bank behind which lay a buried chamber. Examination revealed a barrel-vaulted, brick structure, over which a coating of lime mortar had been applied internally.

Main Roads Department officers supervising the construction halted work and informed the

Royal Historical Society of Queensland of the find. The author was contacted and requested Queensland Museum assistance to assess the historical value of the discovery. Very limited time was allowed for investigation before construction work resumed. The urgent situation precluded detailed archaeological investigation. Fortunately a local television station, QTQ 9, filmed external and internal views, and later donated the film to the Queensland Museum. Rough sketches were made of the structure and some bricks were taken for later examination. As nothing further could be done, the Main Roads Department officers were informed and within minutes the bulldozer operator, who had kept his motor running all this time, had destroyed the structure. A press photographer arrived too late to do other than photograph a few bricks lying where the structure had been, resulting in coverage in the 'Courier-Mail', on 24 August 1972, p. 3.

With the wisdom of hindsight it seems to have been a rather inglorious episode. Yet the element of surprise and the pragmatic attitude of the people concerned with the site gave no opportunity for complete survey. Furthermore the nature and purpose of the structure was at first not clear. The situation could not compare, for example, with the discovery, again per medium of a bulldozer, on 30 March 1974, of an early brick vault in what had been the earliest official burial ground in

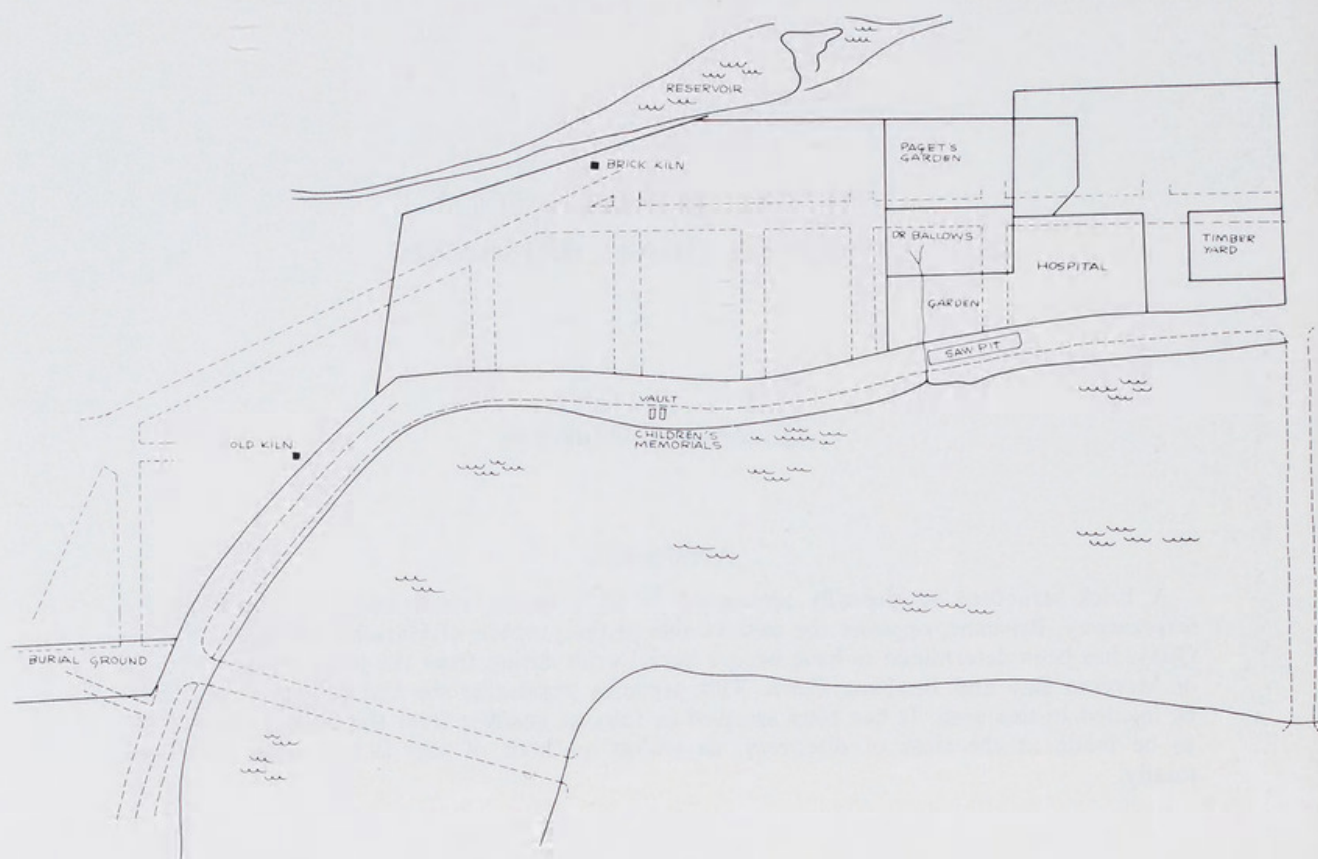


FIG. 1. Plan based on Assistant Surveyor R. Dixon's 1840 survey, with outlines of modern streets superimposed.

Sydney from 1793 to its closure on 27 January 1820. The purpose of the structure was clear — it contained a collapsed wooden coffin within which were bone fragments and Sydney University archaeologists had three days to assemble a team to survey it. Resulting public interest gave the vault a further reprieve and in the end it was dismantled for reconstruction at the Old Sydney Town Project. Finally a thoroughly researched monograph was published (Birmingham and Liston 1976).

The site of Brisbane's earliest burial ground was investigated previously by Gill (1959-60, 1974), who recalled that the structure was only yards away from isolated memorials on North Quay known as 'the children's graves'.

Relics from Brisbane's penal settlement era are few. The absence of a burial ground from this era is particularly notable when one considers the plethora of early memorials in the other states of Australia. Controversy has raged as to the site of Brisbane's earliest burial ground. Yet it has been proved beyond doubt that the penal settlement's earliest and only burial ground was that shown in the town maps of Assistant Surveyor Robert Dixon (1840)* and Surveyor Henry Wade (1842)† situated on the north bank of the Brisbane River at the northern end of the William

Jolly Bridge in the area bounded by the present day Skew Street and Eagle Terrace.

One of the causes of controversy was the presence of three (at least) memorials on the river bank at North Quay directly opposite the eastern corner of North Quay and Herschel Street, immediately above a prominent rock face which rises abruptly out of the river. The Royal Historical Society of Queensland has a photograph (said to have been taken about 1876) which shows memorials *in situ* at this point (Plate 41, fig. 1). This photograph, acknowledged to Mr H.A. Jones was donated in 1921 and was reproduced in the 'Brisbane Courier' on 25 October 1913 at p. 12. It was captioned: 'The Soldiers Graves on North Quay. A controversy has for some time been waged in the "Courier" as to the exact location of the soldiers' graves in the old burial ground on North Quay. Our photo shows their position (indicated by a X).' The memorials have long been gone from North Quay but they are still to be seen in Toowong General Cemetery. On 5 October 1881 the memorials at North Quay and any remains (under licence

* Queensland Survey Office Map M.T.3

† Queensland Survey Office Maps 6 and B.1182

issued by the Colonial Secretary on 23 August 1881) were removed to Toowong.*

Only three memorials and remains were removed. Whether there were any more burials on this site is a matter of doubt.

The three memorials all commemorate young children — William Henry Roberts, son of Charles Roberts of the Commissariat Department who died of illness on 15 November 1831 aged 3 years and 2 months†, Peter, son of Private Peter McCauley of H.M. 17th Regiment of Foot, accidentally drowned on 5 January 1832, aged 5 years and 8 months; and Jane, daughter of John Pittard, former Colour Sergeant of the 57th Regiment, who died on 29 January 1833, aged 12 months and 13 days (Plate 41, fig. 2).

The McCauley and Pittard memorials are the usual headstone and footstone types; the Roberts memorial is a catafalque or table monument type with the inscription on the flat top. The memorials show evidences of the ravages of time. In 1962 the Brisbane City Council took steps to refurbish them. The decay of the first two memorials has been arrested, but the inscription on the Roberts memorial is now lost and is, in fact, covered by a coat of stucco. Fortunately it was recorded in its entirety in 1913 with some errors which, except for the age (5 instead of 3 years) were corrected by Gill (1959-60).

Assistant Surveyor Dixon in his 1840 map, in addition to the official burial ground, showed two small squares, habitually used by surveyors to indicate isolated graves, at a point corresponding to the location of 'the children's graves' (Gill 1959-60).

Steele (1975) indicates that the Reverend John Vincent, in his initial report to Archdeacon Scott, complained that the settlement's 'burial ground is at a very remote distance, is too small and so very difficult to be dug . . . that two men with the utmost exertion are scarcely able to prepare a grave in six or seven hours'.

If the children were buried where the memorials were located, it would have required the cutting of kists in solid rock, and the purpose of the structure unearthed on 23 August 1972 now becomes clear. It was a burial vault sited on or slotted into the rock in which bodies were placed whilst sorrowing relatives were allowed to place memorials around it, a much easier process than

cutting a full-size grave into the rock each time.

Evidence of the existence of the vault was available, but the disappearance of the structure beneath the earthen embankment of the widened North Quay in the latter part of the nineteenth century and the presence up to 1881 of the table monument to the Roberts' child led to the belief that references to the vault were references to the table monument.

The removal of the memorials from North Quay on 5 October 1881 excited no comment from the press of the day. In fact it was not until Friday, 21 October 1881 that the 'Brisbane Courier' on page 2 remarked:

'The old landmarks of Brisbane are rapidly disappearing and although by many the removal of these mementoes of early days may be regarded with some lingering feelings of regret the improvement which will result in the general appearance of the city must be a matter of satisfaction'.

The disappearance of the old convict barracks and old buildings on the corner of Queen and Albert Streets is favourably commented upon, whilst the fact that the dreary looking goal at Petrie Terrace will soon become a thing of the past also is editorially approved. Then:

'Another "landmark" that has disappeared from within the boundaries of the city are the old graves on the North Quay. In these graves were the remains of three bodies that have been under the ground for some fifty years. By the order of the Colonial Secretary, the remains with the tombstones that were over them, have been removed to the cemetery at Toowong, that being considered a more fitting place for them, where it will be less trouble to keep the graves in order, and where they will be subjected to less desecration'.

It was not on-the-spot reporting by any means and it is not surprising that the vault escaped notice by the press. There the matter rested for 32 years whilst improvement works along the North Quay greatly altered the old landscape.

Professor F. W. S. Cumbræ Stewart through the columns of the 'Brisbane Courier' of 30 September 1913 (p. 4) drew attention to the childrens memorials in Toowong Cemetery, expressed the belief that they had been removed thence from North Quay in 1876, and sought information as to where the gravestones originally stood on North Quay.

* John Oxley Library MS.O.M. 65/18, Queensland State Archives [QSA.] COL/A319, 3694; QSA. COL/G15, p. 585, 81/1233.

† John Oxley Library. *ibid.* Mr Melville the sexton at Toowong Cemetery in 1940 says it appears to be 3 but could be 5 years, on account of weathering of the stone. In 1881 (59 years earlier) the age is given as 3 years and 2 months. The stone was then 50 years old and the inscription much more legible.

Between 30 September and 5 November 1913 the 'Brisbane Courier' published fourteen letters on the subject of the 'Old Burial Ground' (Gill 1959-60).

On 7 October 1913 the 'Brisbane Courier' (p. 4) published a letter from a Mr Thos. Illidge who stated he was on the spot when the remains were dug up by Mr D. Hannah of Paddington. Published with the letter was an interview by a Courier reporter with Mr David Hannah of Rosalie who said he had assisted in the removal of headstones on the river bank from North Quay to Toowong. It is significant that Mr Hannah did not refer to the removal of remains.

On 16 October 1913 (at p. 7) 'Sixty Years a Queenslander' wrote about 'the monumental stone' which in earlier years marked the spot known to old residents as the 'soldiers' graves'. He referred to the difference of opinion which seemed to exist as to the exact site. This he regarded as quite natural for during the last few years (i.e. prior to 1913) 'surface appearances have changed or become obliterated'. He also says:

'In the 'fifties and 'sixties of last century much of the river frontage along the North Quay was covered with a tangled growth of lantana, which could only be penetrated by a bird-nesting boy or a billygoat. As the former, I have often "worked my passage" through this scrub and my memory fixes the site of the graves as about midway between Tank and Herschel Streets and just above a prominent rock which here rises abruptly over the river.' (Gill 1959-60).

He was almost on the correct site and indicates that with the profusion of under-growth making the site inaccessible the general public had come to refer to them as the 'Soldiers' Graves'.

On 20 October 1913 (p. 6) the 'Brisbane Courier' published a letter from a Mrs Lucy Sonnonnschein (nee Wynn) of Warwick. She said:

'The old burial grounds were situated opposite the present Roma Streets goods shed gates. After the burial ground was removed, the land was built upon and occupied by Davies (Davis) the Jew, Joseph Jayes, Bill and Joe Jewell, carpenters, Joshua Peter Bell, and Bulger, a wine merchant. New shops have replaced these dwellings. This burial ground was known as the "Soldiers' Graves". On the bank of the river in North Quay there was a large vault, opposite Paddy Pacey's milking yard, which marked the spot where some officer was buried.' (Gill 1959-60).

The existence of the burial vault, rediscovered in 1972, being unknown, the author as already stated believed this to be a reference to the table monument to the Roberts' child.

Yet on 5 November 1913 the 'Brisbane Courier' published (in the Courier Home Circle Sup-

plement at p. 6) the final two letters in the burial ground debate. Mr A. E. Campbell of Rockhampton refers to the sketch in the 'Courier' of 25 October of the "soldiers' grave".

'Yes, that is about the spot, only high up, about ten yards from the fence, [the X was placed too low on the photograph], and there is a high stone face projecting towards the river. It was the grave of an officer who went out riding and his horse carried him against a tree and broke his neck. I think his name on the top slab was "Lawson". The tomb must have been shifted in the early 'sixties. The bottom end near the river was broken, and it acted as a cave. Many a one slept there for the night, for it was a cosy camp for a cold night.' (Gill 1959-60).

Here again the author believed the reference was to the table monument; but it would have made cramped quarters and access would have been grossly difficult. The mean dimensions of the monument are only 1.905 m by 0.990 m by 0.852 m high. The brick vault was in a different category — in the 'fifties and 'sixties it was buried beneath lantana; any remains in it would have been moved in 1881; (in any event the remains of young children would not have the durability of those of adults); the access, if the end near the river had broken away, would have been easier, and air circulation and animal scavengers would have removed any associations with its grisly past by the time 'down and outs' began to camp in it.

It is considered that these reports provide sufficient evidence of the existence of a vault.

In addition to its existence we also have evidence of its use. A macabre story recounted by J. J. Knight (1895) furnishes this. Talking of the offences for which a convict could be sent to the triangle Knight says:

'A very common offence was the purloining of a few cobs of corn and potatoes, the chief ingredients of the convicts' much prized "fiddle-cake", the love for which caused many sore backs at the triangle, and weary legs on the treads. These two things having been obtained, the corn was ground on an improvised grater made usually of a piece of tin or zinc, in which holes had been punched.'

After describing the grating and recipe for the delicacy, Knight goes on

'But it was often more difficult to obtain the material for the grater than the corn and potatoes, and in one case at least a convict finding this so resorted to a very questionable means of gratifying his desires. The overseer at Eagle Farm was unfortunate enough to lose one of his children, and the body having been placed in a tin box, was laid in one of the vaults on the river bank near Herschel Street. This fact was, of course, known to the prisoners, and a day or so after the funeral one who had so urgently desired the possession of a "grater"

effected an entrance to the vault and taking out the dead body of the child found in the box the material for the manufacture of this necessary implement of the "fiddle-cake" maker. Fortunately for the sacrilegist, he was not found out, and was enabled to make many specimens of that delicacy, which was described by one who had often partaken of it as being "better than any pie going".¹

Apart from anything else this indicates that a measure of improvisation was required still in the undertaking line. If there were no coffins readily available for children of officials one wonders what sort of hurriedly thrown together boxes were used for convict burials.

Knight talks of one of the vaults on the river bank near Herschel Street. The available evidence indicates there was only one such vault. It appears to have carried no marks of identification (the adjacent memorials made this unnecessary). Mr Campbell does mention the name Lawson, but he appears to be confusing the inscribed Roberts' monument with the vault. In Plate 41, fig. 1 the Roberts' monument is plainly discernible but the vault is not, although Mr Campbell has no doubt about the location of the latter. It was because the vault carried no identifying marks or inscription that all the stories about soldiers' graves and officers' burial places came into being. The correct function of the vault probably occurred to no one; the memorials were there and it would not be known generally that they were sited on solid rock. Once North Quay was widened in the late nineteenth century the footpath on the river side of the roadway was cut off from the steep river bank by a wooden picket fence of sturdy construction. Apart from wooden stairway accesses to the Commercial, Brisbane and Brisbane Grammar School Rowing Club Boatsheds there was no access and for upwards of half a century until World War II the North Quay river bank from the O'Connor Boathouse (Commercial Rowing Club) upstream to the Grey Street (William Jolly) Bridge became a *terra incognita*.

Even the erection of air raid shelters in 1942 resulting in the partial disappearance of the fence followed by its nearly complete demolition in the post-war period brought about no interference with the river bank itself.

It was not until the construction commenced of the Riverside Expressway section of the South East Freeway that the riverbank began to be altered substantially. In August, 1972 the work began on the expressway exit to Herschel Street. This meant carving away a section of the riverbank; before the bulldozer got down to the

rock, it blundered into the old vault with the results already indicated. The vault could well have been coeval with the Windmill and the Commissariat store*, and may well be the last of the Brisbane Town convict structures which remained to be rediscovered.

DESCRIPTION OF THE VAULT

The vault itself was constructed of sand-stock bricks (as they are commonly known) with mean approximate dimensions of 205.9 mm × 63.5 mm × 107.9 mm. The dimensions of the vault as estimated by Mr A. Sweetser, Queensland Museum, in a drawing he made (Figure 2) are given as 1.53 m × 1.83 m with a barrel vaulted roof rising above 1.53 m high side and end walls. The entrance at the northern end had been bricked up after any remains had been cleared from the vault. Two wooden slabs lay on the floor covered by rubble and a partly burned piece of hardwood plank lay near the southern end of the vault. There was some evidence of dampness in the earth floor but no signs of the vault ever having been inundated with water; the run-off from North Quay to the Brisbane River was steep enough to prevent water from gathering and lying in the vault. The only wall of the structure to show up in full width in the movie film was the northern wall, and estimating from the known lengths of the bricks collected from the site the mean width of the wall could be 1.72 m, 0.19 m more than Mr Sweetser's estimate (Figure 2).

The side walls were grooved for their entire lengths at two levels, which indicated an intention to have the coffins resting on planks (fitted into the grooves) above ground level and provisions for an upper layer of coffins if needed.

An analysis of the lime mortar used to bind the bricks and plaster the interior of the vault has been made by the Queensland Government Chemical Laboratory. The analytical report (Appendix 1) established the source of the burnt lime used in the mortar as Ipswich; a clear link with the penal settlement days.

As regards the bricks, what were known as the old and new brick kilns respectively both were located within 230 m of the vault as shown on Figure 1 (Steele 1975). So the raw materials for the brickwork were close at hand.

Plate 42, fig. 1 shows the intrusion of some tree roots, but the lack of moisture had inhibited the growth of these.

Owing to the gross interference with ground levels, even before the discovery of the vault as

*Both completed in 1829.

well as subsequently, no soil profile could be taken. However it was obvious to the eyewitness that the vault had been covered by fill from elsewhere than the river bank itself and that the river bank proper began at the base of the structure.

Apart from the planks within the vault no timber beams or lintels were noted in the walls of the structure; it appears to have been small enough not to require timber to span any openings or archwork which the bricks themselves could not support. No other features remain to be remarked upon.

Thus a few feet of film and eleven bricks at the Queensland Museum, with this account, will be the only record of a structure dating from the early penal settlement days of Brisbane Town.

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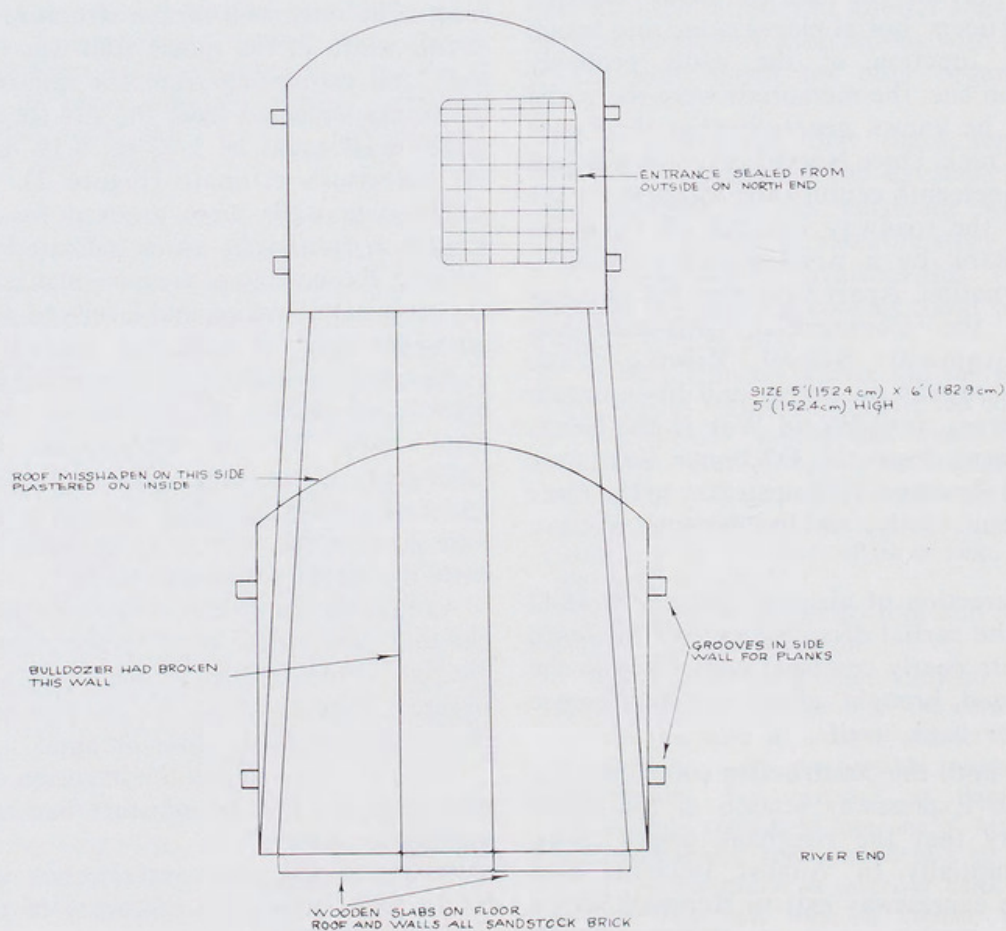


FIG. 2. Diagram of the vault, after a sketch by Mr A. Sweetser held in the Queensland Museum.

APPENDIX 1

Government Chemical Laboratory
William Street,
Brisbane, Q. 4000
16th November 1976

Dr. D. J. Robinson
Qld. Museum
Gregory Terrace &
Bowen Bridge Road,
BRISBANE.

Ref: DR:DF H10/5

Dear Sir,

On Tuesday 8th November, soft portions of the white material in mortar samples H9255 and 9578 provided by the Museum were scraped out and this material on analysis gave carbon dioxide, 9% acid soluble silica and 6% magnesium as magnesium oxide. Also present is calcium oxide, iron oxide and alumina.

The Geological Survey Office was contacted and confirmed that the results of an early analyses of the Limestone Hill Limestone was

Loss of Ignition	43.8%
Total Silica	5.7%
Iron oxide	0.9%
Alumina	1.1%
Calcium oxide	27.5%
Magnesium oxide	20.6%

This indicated that this mineral is an impure mixture of calcium and magnesium carbonates. Other areas of limestone in the Ipswich area have similar compositions. The presence of acid soluble silica and the magnesium oxide indicates that the burnt lime used in the mortar sample probably came from the Ipswich district which seems to be the only source of limestone in the local area other than sea shells. The Ipswich deposits have variable compositions but all seem to have more than 5% magnesium carbonate.

Microscopic and hand lens examination showed no shell particles and it is not expected that shells burnt to calcium oxide would contain acid soluble silica and magnesia.

Warwick and Gympie limestones are much lower in magnesia.

D. Mathers
Director



Gill, James Connal Howard. 1978. "The old burial vault at North Quay, Brisbane." *Memoirs of the Queensland Museum* 18, 265–271.

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