

The Architecture of Contact: unearthing a cultural landmark of early Melbourne

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INTRODUCTION

The recent excavation of William Thomas' house by AHMS offers a compelling insight into a shifting cultural landscape and the curious dynamic of the Victorian frontier. The investigations were completed in close consultation with Wurundjeri traditional owners and in conjunction with Moreland City Council, which plans to develop the site into a recreational reserve. The exposed bluestone foundations bring the early history of Melbourne to life, conveying a visceral sense of cross-cultural encounter.

William Thomas, Assistant Protector and later 'Guardian' of the Kulin people, built Strangway Farm in Melbourne in 1842 and lived there with his family for almost two decades. The house was the hub of daily life, a site of family celebration, and it became marked by personal tragedy when his eighteen year-old daughter Susannah 'drowned in a pond in the garden' in 1845. But Strangway Farm also belonged to the Kulin people, who invested it with their own stories and associations and absorbed it into the existing cultural landscape. It became used as a pit-stop on hunting expeditions, a place to eat, sleep and share knowledge, a site for shelter and employment. This nineteenth century homestead was and is a profoundly Aboriginal place. In 2014 AHMS exposed the foundations of the property and explored the histories housed within.



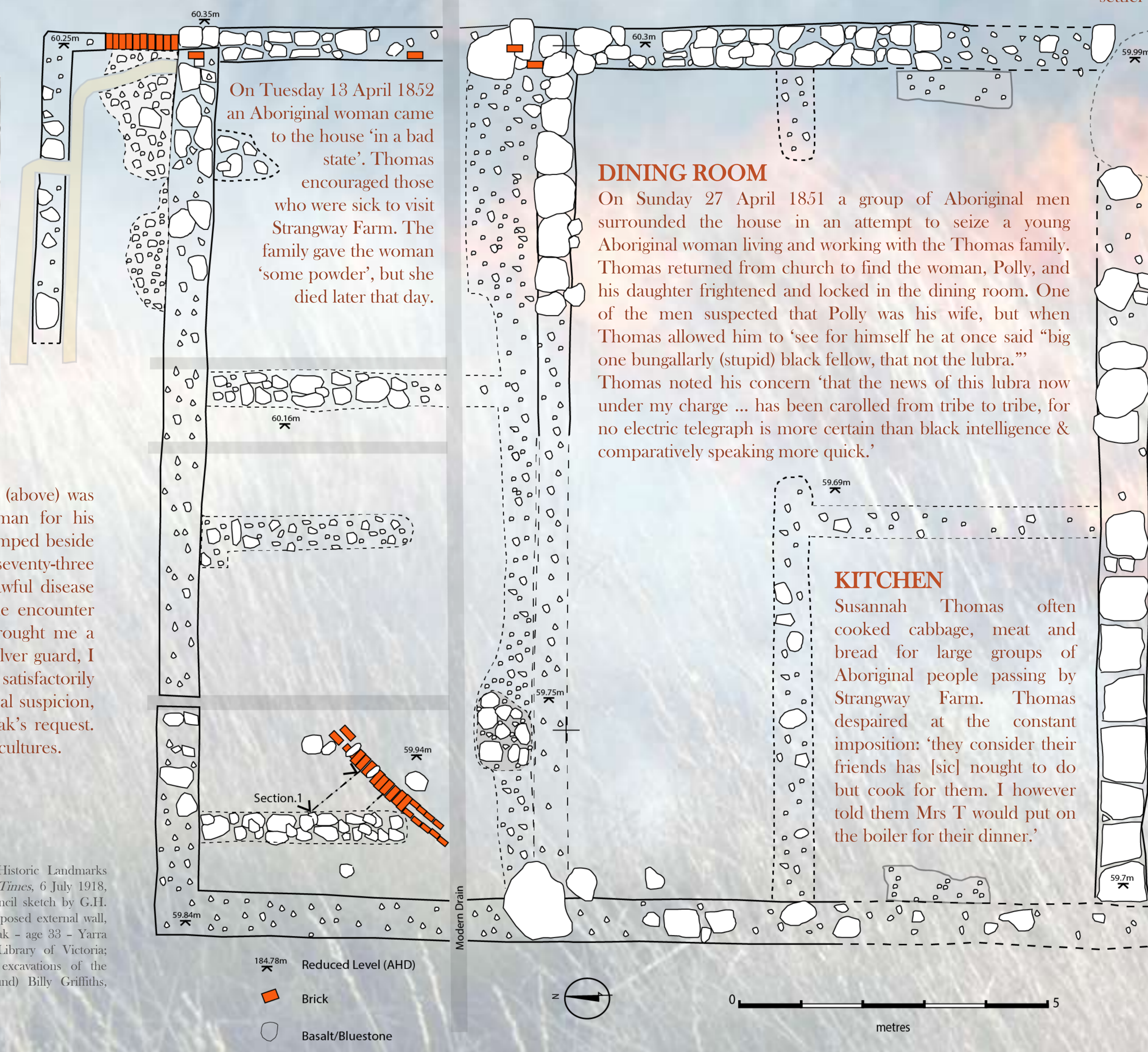
William Thomas (above) named Strangway Farm after his wealthy liberal patron William Fox-Strangways, 4th Earl of Ilchester, a vocal figure in the emancipist movement. The decision reflects Thomas' politics. Henry Reynolds has portrayed Thomas as one of few 'white humanitarians' in this early settler period who had 'close personal contact with Aboriginal society'. The Kulin people knew him as 'Marminata' (Good Father).



PADDOCK

Wurundjeri man William Barak (above) was a skilled mediator and spokesman for his people. In February 1848, he camped beside Strangway Farm with a group of seventy-three men and women, 'many in an awful disease of bubrum'. Thomas records the encounter in his journal: 'King William brought me a plate to Engrave, I find on it a silver guard, I question him touching it, he satisfactorily accounts for the plate.' After initial suspicion, Thomas was happy to fulfil Barak's request. A fragile trust had formed across cultures.

FIGURES: (clockwise) Strangway Farm in 'Historic Landmarks around Melbourne', W.H. Nicholls, *Weekly Times*, 6 July 1918, 28; 'William Thomas, Assistant Protector', pencil sketch by G.H. Haydon, c. 1842, State Library of Victoria; Exposed external wall, AHMS excavation, March 2014; 'William Barak - age 33 - Yarra Yarra Tribe', by Carl Walter, 1866, State Library of Victoria; (centre) Adrian Burrow, 'Plan of Stage 2 excavations of the homestead', AHMS, March 2014; (background) Billy Griffiths, *Burning Grassland*, June 2012.



CONCLUSION

Sites like Strangway Farm force us to reflect on the lines we draw across the discipline of archaeology, separating 'Indigenous' from 'non-Indigenous', history from prehistory. Denis Byrne and Nicholas Thomas challenge the idea of a moment of 'contact' - as if two cultures bumped into each other like billiard balls. Perhaps, as they suggest, the term 'entanglement' better expresses the architecture of contact: the ongoing process of interaction and exchange between cultures, the constant working and reworking of the landscape. Early Melbourne was invested with intense human meaning from both sides of the frontier.

William Thomas and his family saw Strangway Farm as a place of sanctuary and retreat, a site of sorrow and celebration. The name they gave it hints at their philosophy and intent, and the broader social movements that defined their time in Victoria. But for the Kulin people, Strangway Farm held different memories and associations. It sat near the banks of the Merri Creek, a major corridor of economic activity, and it became an important pit-stop for hunting parties, traders, the sick and the hungry. Thomas' journals allow us to catch rare glimpses of individuals in the archaeological remains. They help us to people this landscape. These bluestone walls, and the stories they house, remind us of the amorphous nature of the rolling Australian frontier. They provide contemporary Kulin descendants with a tangible link to a dramatic time in their history.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Moreland City Council