NOTICE OF GENERAL MEETING

The 6th General Meeting of the Society for 1984 will be held in:

The Conservation Centre,
120 Wakefield Street,
ADELAIDE.

(use the wire gate and go to the back of the building)

MONDAY 27th AUGUST 1984 AT 8.00 pm.

AGENDA


2. Minutes of the previous General Meeting:
Minutes of the previous General Meeting, held in the Conservation Centre on Monday 23rd July 1984, to be confirmed. A copy of these Minutes is attached.

3. Papers and Journals:
Papers and Journals from other Societies and Organisations will be tabled at the meeting.

4. Business:

5. Speaker:

Mr Philip Jones, Acting Curator of Australian Ethnography at the South Australian Museum will address the Society. The title of his address will be:

"Red Ochre Expedition: An Ethnographical and Historical Study of Aboriginal Trade in the Central Lakes Region of South Australia"

6. Supper will be served. A Trading Table will be held.

M. F. Nobbs
Honorary Secretary
c/o 213 Greenhill Road
EASTWOOD SA 5063
Phone: 332 7579
Mungo! the world'sest-kept secret

It is Australia's forgotten park. Once an isolated outback station, Mungo National Park, situated in the Willandra Lakes Region of NSW, has one of the most charming landscapes in the world. Buried in the dunes and lake beds of what is called The Walls of China, are some of the great secrets of mankind. Here, in the starkly beautiful area that has earned a place on the World Heritage list, scientists have discovered the oldest known examples of modern man. The discovery, reports SANDRA McGRATH, is having a dramatic effect on governments, scientists and landowners.

THE twin-engined Shrike Commander bucked in the turbulence and sleet like a horse unused to the bridle.

The rain, ice and thunder were as much a phenomenon over the arid south-western corner of NSW as the mysterious land formation that came in the distance—the Walls of China in Mungo National Park.

"This is the best-kept secret in the world," said the bush pilot as he set the swaying aircraft down on a red dirt strip, scattering a mob of kangaroos in the lake sand.

The park, the third of Australia's World Heritage sites and arguably the most important archeological site in the world today, is also Australia's least known park.

Its natural formation is eerie—grand sand dunes and caves in hues of pink, orange and grey, a place of weird, almost unearthly beauty. Stark and imposing, it was aptly named the Walls of China by Chinese laborers working on Mungo Station in the late 1880s. Looking at the arid, barren country stretching to the horizon, it is hard to imagine that Lake Mungo and its surroundings were once teemed with life: huge cod, giant kangaroos and Dingo cubs, fish and birds. It is as difficult to comprehend this change as it is to imagine that Sydney Harbor in 1800 was nothing more than an empty river valley, with the sea hundreds of metres lower.

It is here that archeologists have uncovered the oldest known examples of completely modern man—Homo sapiens sapiens—anywhere in the world.

In archeological terms modern" means that the remains fit completely within the physical range of man today, as opposed to Neanderthal Man. As late as the 1950s, the Willandra Lakes area, which includes Mungo Park, was a large blank on maps. There is no scientific knowledge of man's interest in the area until the late 1960s. One man, Dr Jim Bowler, changed all that.

Dr Bowler, a geomorphologist from the Australian National University in Canberra, was studying the landforms of the willandra lakes when he noticed on an aerial map the salt formations and dunes of Lake Mungo.

Curious, he decided to take a trip there.

Trudging over the pink sands scattered with rocky shells, Bowler was looking for the remains of human occupation—and he found it. On top of a dune, dotted with blue-green Bowleria and mussel shells. This told him two things—that the lake had once had fresh water and that the she had dried the shells and eaten them.

Back in Canberra the shells were found to be 32,000 years old. At that stage the earliest evidence of modern man anywhere in the world went back only 22,000 years. In one stroke Bowler had rewritten the history books.

Armed with this knowledge he returned to find man himself.

"I was looking for man's presence," says a gruff Bowler. "How do you say that in these days of equality?"

But looking and finding are two different things. Almost by accident, Bowler saw some charred bones cemented in a soil crust.

At first Bowler thought they were the bones of an animal, the remains of a meal. But what Bowler had found was no animal. These were the charred bones of a human—the earliest evidence of cremation in the world. He didn't touch the bones, but marked the spot with a steel rod.

"I didn't move it," he says. "The history of archaeology is bedevilled by amateur collectors removing materials from their original site."

That was in July 1968. After a year of painstaking work the bones were identified. Ironically it 'ain't a man but a woman aged 18 to 20, with fine features and limbs, who had lived 28,000 years ago. The Mungo Woman entered history. It took nearly eight years to piece her together.

In February 1974 Bowler returned to the Walls of China. And again his luck held. He found them a stone's throw from the small cremation pit in which the woman had been discovered. There was a difference in the two corpses that fascinated scientists.

The pink ochre-decorated remains were unknown secrets for the scientists. While Mungo Woman had been cremated and her skull and pelvis smashed, Mungo Man had been decorated in powdered ochres and entombed. Mungo Woman was dated at about 26,000 years; Mungo Man was found to be earlier at 30,000 years.

Why were the burial ceremonies so different? Nobody really knows, but the cremation was a society in which death was viewed with dignity and awe. The smashed and cremated bones of Mungo Woman suggest a society which feared the dead might get up and move about.

Both the cremated woman and the ochred man indicate a complex intellectual response to death.

When the Ice Age ended Mungo Lake changed abruptly. The climate became hotter, the lakes dried and the people left. Silence descended until today. The Walls of China will inevitably be covered by Ayers Rock, but Bowler sees a big difference in these extraordinary land formations. "As Ayers Rock will always be a tourist attraction, Mungo will always be a mecca for scientists," he says. "Mungo is not just a place to look at but a place to experience."

Continued Weekend Two
For me it is the negative image of Ayers Rock. Ayers Rock sticks up and is there for all to see. In this area the landscape is more subtle. One has to be immersed in the landscape.

"It has a mystical air. In a sense it is the kind of site that is sacred to everyone."

Alan Thorne, an anthropologist from ANU, has worked on the Mungo excavations for years and is deeply aware of their importance.

"It was a very exciting time. We weren't sure how old the remains would turn out to be. It took six months just to put the skull together.

"The fact that there were people in south-east Australia 30,000 years ago means the ancestors of these people were the first intercontinental sea travellers.

"And the fact that we know they came by sea also means there must be earlier examples of these people."

Thorne's recent research suggests that these people travelled by bamboo rafts.

Archaeologists now believe the Mungo people are evidence of the movement of people from East Asia through the Philippines to Australia. One has to remember, though, that the sea levels then were considerably lower and Papua New Guinea was part of the land mass of Australia. In other words, the sea distances between the Australian mainland and Asia were not as great as they are today.

"We don't know anything about their language, their social organisation or the way the society worked," says Thorne.

In his view two strands of people came together at Mungo: a delicate-boned people and a more robustly built human.

"The robust people we see in Australia came from Indonesia. The delicate ones came from the north - probably China and the Philippines."

Rhys Jones, another scientist working on the project, says that the discovery in 1968 caused a revolution in Australian pre-history.

"It wasn't just a few nameless bits of stone. What happened at Mungo that was so important was that we found the remains of a society, with a cottage and food remains (shells, fish, golden perch, wallaby and emu eggs) as well as a wide range of tools which give us an insight into their technology.

"The Mungo Woman is amazing. The shaft had been preserved by a mixture of chemical circumstance whereby carbonates worked its way down through the soil and formed a natural concrete block around the bone fragments. It didn't look like human bones when we first saw it. It looked like a concrete block. It took eight years to free the burnt bone fragments from the concrete.

"And when the pieces were assembled it was a fine small-fanged woman, 26,000 years old - as old as Cro-Magnon Man in France - and as such one of the oldest examples on earth of fully modern man."

For this reason alone, the site has world significance, Jones adds. "That's why it's on the World Heritage list."

"It's not surprising that a site such as Mungo is currently causing concern for many people. It poses the question: Protect it? Deal with problems such as tourists, grazing animals, vandalism?

And then there's the question of the people who own the land and don't want to sell it.

The Western Division Joint Secret Committee of the NSW Parliament has recommended that Mungo National Park be expanded ten-fold from its present area to embrace all the World Heritage listing area of the Willandra Lakes.

The thought is sending shudders down the spines of the 32 graziers whose properties are affected and who have proudly protected the area since the discoveries were first made.

Says Bowler: "Scientists owe a particular debt to the landholders and a special one to the great generosity of Albert Barnes and his family, who sold Mungo Station to the National Parks and Wildlife Services some years ago."

Without them there, would not be a national park.

At present the graziers are an unofficial vigilante group - watching over the land for strangers who might destroy or take away valuable archaeological finds that almost daily turn up due to mining and graziers.

At Mungo one can stumble over the fossilised bones of a hairy-nosed wombat some 10,000 years old as casually as one might find a shell on a beach.

The National Parks and Wildlife people are worried that if the Western Division Joint Secret Committee's proposal is carried out the area will be inadequately protected.

The committee obviously doesn't feel the need to protect the relationship between farming families, the wildlife services and the scientific community for such an important area.

Safeguarding our heritage

Marie Fisher, MLC and chairperson for the Western Division Joint Secret Committee, says: "The reason we suggested an extension of Mungo National Park and the declaration of Lake Victoria as a National Park is primarily because of their universal archaeological value."

"They have a world significance. We also had in mind recreational opportunities of the Western District. We had in mind the whole interest of the Western District which has a declining population and a declining viability in the towns where the bulk of the population lives."

She also stresses that the government must give considerable attention to alternative land acquisitions of natural buffer areas to ensure sufficient preservation of a region that has led to a redating of human history.

"It does not necessarily follow, she says, that if the Government decides to support the recommendation, properties would need to be bought."

Archaeologist Peter Clark has been living at Mungo since 1976. He sees the Western Division report as a test case for future archaeological sites in Australia.

How the situation is handled, he believes, is crucial to other important finds that might be discovered in Australia.

If, as Clark postulates, landholders perceive a chain of events - discovery of important finds to loss of land, this could have a drastic effect on future discoveries.

"First the researcher arrives on the scene - an archaeologist or geologist," says Clark. "Then their work leads to the area being resumed for a national park and from that to a heritage listing and then on to possible Aboriginal land claims.

If landholders see it this way, he says, it could lead to graziers or farmers deliberately destroying sites of scientific interest to safeguard their livelihoods.

Richardson, ZL, a well-known, four-generation landholder of the area, is certainly not the kind of guy to destroy works that involve Australia's heritage. But he is worried.

Some of his land, Garnpang Station, lies within the area defined as the Willandra Lakes. It has belonged to his family for three generations.

Richardson is the secretary of the newly formed Willandra Landholders' Protection Group and he has gathered a large weight of mass to support his point of view.

"We just don't know what's happening," he says. "Everything was fine until the Fisher report."

Richardson says that if the report is implemented 30 families will be evicted (6 adults and 26 children). The land will be affected $1,232,500 worth of wool and $600,000 worth of sale sheep will be lost.

He also believes that in the long run there will be more damage done to archaeological sites if the park is extended than if kept at its present management level.

"I know it's part Australia's heritage, but we don't believe it has to be publicly owned for proper management."

Life in the Outback has never been easy - but with the national heritage it is even more difficult than any grazier ever imagined.

The Chronicle on Wednesday night recommended, courtesy of Inflight magazine.