

# LITTLE MINDIL BEACH – PROPOSED HOTEL SITE – SMALL SCALE ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT REPORT

A report for KTT Investment Pty Ltd

Silvano Jung, Principal Archaeologist,  
Ellengowan Enterprises, Archaeological consultant,  
Darwin NT, November 2020<sup>1</sup>

## 1.1 Background and consultancy brief

On behalf of KTT Investment Pty Ltd, Urbanscope commissioned an archaeological survey for a proposed hotel development on Little Mindil Beach, Darwin. The survey was for any surface finds only. The consultancy brief was specifically to:

- Identify any prescribed archaeological objects or places as defined under the Northern Territory *Heritage Act (2011)*.
- Assess the nature, distribution and significance of these objects or places and discuss possible constraints to the works posed by the presence of archaeological and historic sites and an indication of what sites are likely to be the most sensitive in this respect.
- Present a final report including a summary of survey results, determination of significance of sites and the likely impact of the proposed development, and recommendations regarding management strategies or mitigation procedures as appropriate under the Northern Territory *Heritage Act (2011)*.

A one-day survey was conducted on 13 July by the author that focused on the beach area, cliff base and Little Mindil Creek, which has an associated Sacred Site (Fig. 1). Only modern day shellfish of economic importance, *Telescopium telescopium*, was found at the creek mouth and other shell species, such as *A. granosa*, in a natural shell bed, on the high tide mark. No prehistoric cultural midden material, however, were found, or any other archaeological material.

The following describes the survey area, with historic background information mainly derived from aerial photography, which depicts past land use. A complete history of Little Mindil Beach is beyond the scope of this survey, but suffice to state that the area had been and still is significant to the local Larrakia People of Darwin. Numerous burial sites were found previously in the adjacent Mindil Beach casino site and at Little Mindil Beach. It is concluded that, despite being heavily disturbed, Little Mindil Beach may still have burial sites and that archaeological monitoring should be conducted during any ground disturbance.





Figure 1. Map of the survey area at Little Mindil Beach (After Google Earth).

## 2.0 PREVIOUS RESEARCH

### 2.1 Literature review

There are numerous references to the use of Mindil Beach for cultural practices, but especially for burials (Fig. 2). Wells (1995) recounts the discovery of numerous burials on the site of the casino, but these burials were not assessed to archaeological standards. They were not recorded on the Archaeological Sites Database (Bensley 2020, pers. comm., 13 July). It would appear that the Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority and the NT Coroner's Office excavated numerous burials, but no reports have been sourced for this study.

What is known about the burial practices is that there is patterning in their deposition. A number of burials were covered in corrugated iron sheets, faced towards the beach (Wells 1995: 91).

No specific reference is made to burials on Little Mindil Beach, but some sources indicate that burials occurred along the whole foreshore: '... some people believe the graves to be on the casino site, while others maintain the whole foreshore had been used' (Canberra Times 1982a: 1; see also Canberra Times 1982b).

Aerial photography from the 1940s, however, indicates that Little Mindil was a habitation site. It was significantly disturbed by the military during World War II who used it and the whole length of Mindil Beach as a recreation area (Fig. 3). Figure 4 shows what appear to be huts on the site in 1944. By 1948 they were gone (Fig. 5). Aerial photography supplied by the Heritage Branch indicates that habitation had ceased by 1945 (Fig. 6). An aerial photograph of the site just prior to Cyclone Tracy in 1974 showed no structures there at all (Fig. 7). An aerial photograph of the site, just after Cyclone Tracy, showed extensive debris strewn across the site (Fig. 8). An interpretation sign currently on site indicates that the beach had been used as a dumping ground after WWII and for cyclone debris post clean up. Interestingly, another interpretation sign indicates that Chinese used the site as a market garden. The recorded Sacred Site is shown in Figure 9, indicating the site's continuous link to Aboriginal people today, despite its heavy contamination.

A mud map has emerged of Little Mindil Beach showing an insight into Larrakia funeral practices by Larrakia elder Val McGuinness (Fig. 10). The map also shows the site's use by Darwin's Chinese community and that they had constructed wells there. James (1981) printed the map in an article. The map has been sourced for this report and is shown in Figure 11. Appendix 1 shows the full James (1981) article. According to Larrakia elder, aunty Kathy Mills, the Sacred Site shown in Figure 9 is where the burials were found and that other burials may still exist in and around the Sacred Site at Little Mindil Beach (Mills, 2020, pers. comm., 26 August) (Fig. 12).



Figure 2. 'Ceremony' Mindil Beach c. 1930 (PH0482/0013. <https://hdl.handle.net/10070/38147>. Accessed 16/7/2020).



Figure 3. 'Mindil Beach' (PH0317/0021. <https://hdl.handle.net/10070/25442> (<https://hdl.handle.net/10070/25442>). Accessed 16/7/2020).



*Figure 4. Aerial photograph of the survey area in 1944, showing what appears to be huts in the study area (URL: <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-743377046/view>. Accessed 10/07/2020).*



*Figure 5. Aerial photograph of the survey area in 1948. The 'hut' structures appear to have been removed (URL: <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-743376424/view>. Accessed 10/07/2020).*



Figure 6. Little Mindil Beach 1945 (Courtesy Heritage Branch, NTG).



Figure 7. Little Mindil Beach June 1974 (Courtesy Heritage Branch, NTG).



Figure 8. Little Mindil Beach 1975 (Courtesy Heritage Branch).



Figure 9. 'Little Mindil myths dispelled - public space and rehabilitation focus' (Laurie, 2006. URL: <https://hdl.handle.net/10070/82494>. Accessed 10/07/2020). Note: shows location of sacred site.

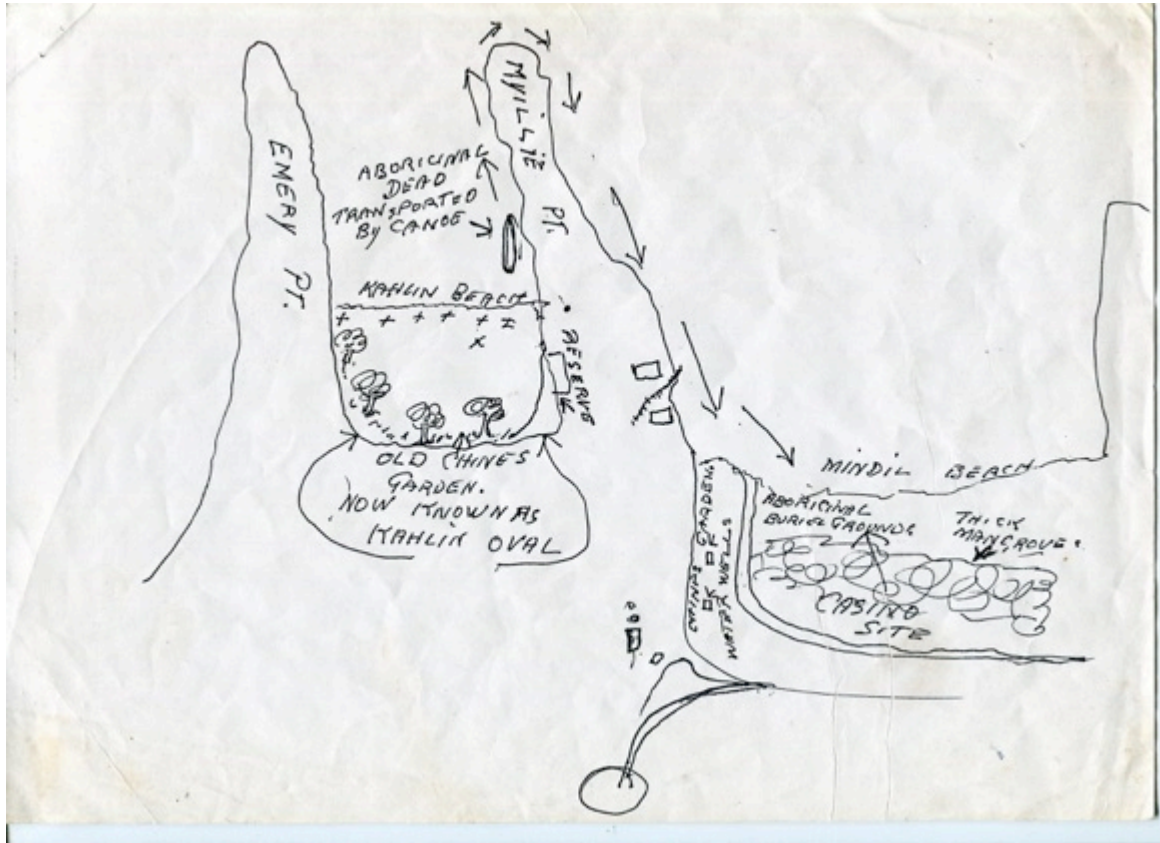


Figure 10. Val McGuinness Mud Map of Kahlin (Courtesy Heritage Branch).

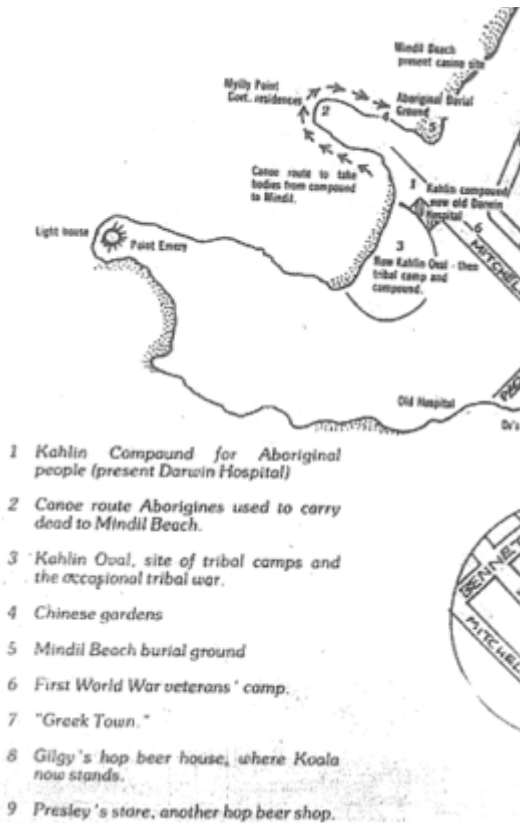


Figure 11. 'The Tree of Knowledge Debate'. Note: shows location of burial ground on Little Mindil Beach (James, 1981: 7).





*Figure 12. Aunty Kathy Mills in her Palmerston home, Darwin (Photo: S. Jung 2020).*

## 3.0 RESULTS

### 3.1 Archaeology

No archaeological material was found during the survey. Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) views of the survey area are shown in Figures 13 and 14. The survey area track log is plotted in Figure 15, which was superimposed over an aerial photogrammetry survey plan, obtained for this survey. A DJI Phantom 4 aircraft was used to develop the photogrammetry in order to accurately survey the proposed works area.

A pedestrian survey was conducted along the beach line to search for any midden sites, but only naturally occurring shell beds were found (Fig. 16). The site has been extensively levelled and a green area established for recreational use, most probably at the same time the casino overflow car park was built, ca. 2009 (Fig. 17). The survey along the cliff base in the tropical vine thicket showed only narrow occupation areas, which are still used today by people. Correspondingly, Ground Integrity is assessed as >5% and Ground Visibility at >5% also, due to extensive vegetation cover (Fig. 18).

The banks of Little Mindil Creek are armoured with a rock wall, which would have obliterated any archaeological material on its banks (Fig. 19). The only suitable occupation area was at the mouth of the creek, where *T. Telescopium* was found, in a modern context (Fig. 20). The site is contaminated by asbestos, which was found eroding along the beach, mostly likely deposited post Cyclone Tracy (Fig. 21).



Figure 13. Little Mindil Beach aerial view looking north of the proposed project site.



Figure 14. Little Mindil Beach aerial view looking south of the proposed project site.



Figure 15. Photogrammetry survey of the proposed works area, superimposed with the survey track log.



*Figure 16. Naturally occurring shell bed on the foreshore of Little Mindil Beach.*



*Figure 17. View across the site towards the casino.*



*Figure 18. Itinerant camp at the base of the escarpment.*



*Figure 19. Armoured rock wall on edge of creek.*



*Figure 20. Telescopium telescopium at creek mouth.*



*Figure 21. Asbestos on the beach.*

## 4.0 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 4.1 Conclusions and recommendations

The archaeological survey of the proposed hotel site at Little Mindil Beach found no surface finds. The historical assessment of the site, however, indicates that the entire length of Mindil Beach may have been used for burial purposes.

The beach has been heavily contaminated since colonisation, with the earliest uses of the site for a Chinese market garden and the establishment of water wells. Further disturbance occurred at the site during WWII and after Cyclone Tracy when it was used as a dump for destroyed and damaged houses. The latest disturbance occurred with the construction of the casino overflow carpark, most likely without archaeological assessment.

Despite the disturbance to the site, it is still used by Aboriginal people today as a food resource. If there is any archaeology remaining, it will be found subsurface as no artefactual material was found on the surface layer.

Recommendations:

- The developer will have to instigate an archaeological monitoring programme for any ground disturbance work, at least to a depth of 1 metre, as there is a chance that prehistoric burials may still exist at the site.
- The site has the potential to reveal information about Aboriginal funeral practices and the early Chinese settlement of Darwin. Research should focus on locating the Chinese wells and dwellings, which may still contain archaeological material.

### REFERENCES:

Canberra Times, 1982a. 'Casino "built on burial ground"'. Tuesday 27 July 1982: 1.

Canberra Times, 1982b. 'Casino site was Aboriginal burial ground: coroner'. Tuesday 9 November 1982: 1.

Darwin City Council. 1993. Mindil Beach burial ground. Not available on line. Not cited.

James, B. 1981. 'The Tree of Knowledge debate'. *Darwin Star*, Wednesday 21 January 1981: 7.

Wells, S. 1995. Town camp or homeland? A history of the Kulaluk Aboriginal Community. Unpublished report for the Australian Heritage Commission.

APPENDIX 1: The Darwin Star article by Barbara James

# The Tree of Knowledge Debate

Darwin's Tree of Knowledge, featured in last week's Star, began bringing in tales of the Territory's past almost immediately.

We'll pass on many of those personal reminiscences in future weeks, but today we give you some memories of Valentine "Byron" McGinness as he recalls Darwin around 1918 when he arrived at the age of 8 to live in the Kahlia Compound.

Valentine has drawn a map of Darwin as it looked to him then, and in the early 20's, and our artist has reproduced it here.

We'd be interested in hearing from others who have items to add to the map or memories to share.

Incidentally, everyone who's contacted us so far says the Tree of Knowledge now in the Civic Centre, in the original Tree of Knowledge.

Dolph Cahill says that Stuart Drysdale (first husband of long-time Darwin resident Brenda Robinson) told him that the manager of the old Terminus Hotel, Sam Budge, on Christmas Day in 1908, planted the tree when Stuart was a boarder at the hotel.

He adds that there were many more heptagen trees in the Cavenagh Street region in the early part of the century, but that this one is the real one.

Valentine McGinness says it is too on his map above.

Valentine, whose middle name is "Byron" because he was born at Byron Harbour in 1910, spent the first eight years of his life at the Lucy tin mine, which his mother found.

His father, Stephen McGinness, was one of the few white men of the day who was married to an Aboriginal woman, Valentine's mother, a member of a tribe called the Koomatjara-Kang.

Stephen McGinness had taken his family to the Byron region after he lost his job as ganger on the railway, working at the 34-mile peg.

Apparently all the men got sicked after a big campfire into an incident where a drunk man was run over by a train in the area.

"They had a drey, drey horses, a herd of goats and a mob of chooks. Mum and the

- 1 Kahlia Compound for Aboriginal people (present Darwin Hospital)
- 2 Cannon made Aboriginals used to carry dead to Mindi Beach
- 3 Kahlia Oval, site of tribal camps and the occasional tribal war.
- 4 Chinese gardens
- 5 Mindi Beach burial ground
- 6 First World War veterans' camp.
- 7 "Greek Town."
- 8 Gigg's hop beer house, where Koola now stands.
- 9 Presley's store, another hop beer shop.

have a Government steam tractor for a few years which we used to drive a machine to crush the stone - we used to call it a single-darce-dingle-doo, because that's the sound we thought it made."

When Stephen McGinness died in Darwin Hospital (where Doctor's Gully is now) he was buried in the old Goyder Road cemetery and his younger brother moved to Darwin to live at the newly built Kahlia Compound for Aboriginals.

"We were virtually starving," recalls Valentine. "We were given one slice of bread for each meal and we could get a drink of tea. Sometimes we got jam for breakfast and sometimes for lunch and dinner we were allowed to get our slice of bread on top of water which had been used to boil meat for working natives, and soak up the juice. For a while mother cooked and worked for Judge Hogan at Myilly Point and she'd sometimes sneak a little food."

"We were never allowed to go out of the Compound without our tags on and we couldn't stay out later than 10pm, unless we were going to the silent pictures at the old Don Theatre. If you were caught without your tag

- 10 Old Chinese cemetery
- 11 Goyder cemetery, where Valentine's father is buried.
- 12 Multi-cultural town in old police paddock.
- 13 Old Man Dimok's house.
- 14 Chinese gardens
- 15 Old Don picture theatre
- 16 Tree of Knowledge
- 17 Terminus Hotel, where Valentine says Felix Spain had his first barber shop after World War 1.
- 18 Man Fong Lau's Chinese store.
- 19 Banyan tree which stood in his horse yard.
- 20 An old Jess house.
- 21 ES & A Bank, which allegedly had the deepest well in Darwin (75 feet) in back.
- 22 Brown's Mart and yard, where pigeons nested.
- 23 Vic Hotel, yard and well.
- 24 Jolly's, largest European store in Darwin.
- 25 Chinese gardens and wells, where produce market is now.
- 26 Feng Cheong Loong tailoring.
- 27 Old steps up into Cavenagh Street.
- 28 Harry Edwards' first blacksmith shop, where Valentine worked.
- 29 His second blacksmith shop.
- 30 Inspector Waters' house.
- 31 Christchurch.

## HISTORY

By Barbara James



as or out after hours you went to jail or were put in solitary confinement at the compound.

"Sometimes we used to lie and say we were going to church on Sunday so we could get into town," Valentine says.

Valentine recalls the many tribes that then camped on what is now Kahlia Oval which he says was once covered in mangroves, and remembers the Bushman Island people came in canoes to live there.

"We could see those objects coming in the water and as they got closer we realised they were canoes from Bushman - with just a mangrove stick, a sail, wires, children, dogs and belongings - all migrating to Darwin. I didn't take long for inter-tribal quarrels to develop and Valentine vividly remembers the people from Bushman and drive them out."

"But the Bushman people were brilliant with spears and could throw them with great force, which they did, so it was decided they could stay."

Valentine remembers too, the burial place, and ceremonies for the Aboriginals who died in Darwin.

"At first they used to put the bodies in canoes at Kahlia Oval and sail them around Myilly Point to Mindi Beach where they buried the dead," says Valentine, who firmly believes the bodies now being dug

up at the casino site are at some of these Aboriginals.

"It's the Aboriginal tradition to hang bodies in trees when people die but that wasn't possible here so they buried them. Only the Tret people used to put up the burial tokens poles though."

Valentine says that about 1925 the council, or government, built steps down to the beach from Myilly Point and from then on the bodies were carried in stretchers.

"I remember about that time too, that there was a camp of men who'd come back from World War 1 near the Kahlia area. They lived in tents there until they could find housing."

Like most long term residents, Valentine remembers Chinese gardens too. He says the city council golf course is now opposite the gardens, and in the area near the wharf where the oil tanks now stand.

"Greek Town was where the basketball courts now are, near the YMCA, and around on to the Esplanade, before the Travelodge right down to Doctor's Gully," says Valentine.

"There was a multi-cultural settlement in Stuart Park, in what was called the Police Paddock. I remember an old Indian woodcutter, named Old Man Dimok, who had a stovewood business in the area and I think Frank Beach was named after him."

Valentine remembers a few sty grab shops around the place too.

Aboriginals weren't allowed to drink or buy drinks in hotels, he says, so there was a couple of local merchants who used to make hop beer and sell it to them for six pence a large bottle.

"We used to cart beer to the hotels and there was a health inspector called Miles Kelly who said this particular lot that went to the Vic wasn't very good and would have to be thrown out."

"So the owner poured it down the street drain, which ran down south apprentice with his brother-in-law, Henry remembers quite a few lighter sides in the Darwin way of life in the late teens and early 20s.

"I remember Brown's Mart used to have pigeons and he had nests for them all around his yard and well. People didn't like the pigeons because the only drinking water was rain or well water and the pigeons used to mess it up."

"So one day, the story goes, the manager of the Vic Hotel started putting out rumpsteak without bones and the pigeons used to fly over

- 20 ES & A Bank, which allegedly had the deepest well in Darwin (75 feet) in back.
- 21 Brown's Mart and yard, where pigeons nested.
- 22 Vic Hotel, yard and well.
- 23 Jolly's, largest European store in Darwin.
- 24 Chinese gardens and wells, where produce market is now.
- 25 Feng Cheong Loong tailoring.
- 26 Old steps up into Cavenagh Street.
- 27 Harry Edwards' first blacksmith shop, where Valentine worked.
- 28 His second blacksmith shop.
- 29 Inspector Waters' house.
- 30 Christchurch.