

---

# Finding Convicts and Convict Sites: A Job For Professionals, Community, Or Both?

## Landscapes of Production and Punishment: Convict Labour and Industry on the Tasman Peninsula 1830-77

**Prof. Martin Gibbs**

I am very honoured to have been invited to present the Lesley Muir address to this year's annual meeting of the Royal Australian Historical Society, especially as I am an archaeologist rather than an historian.

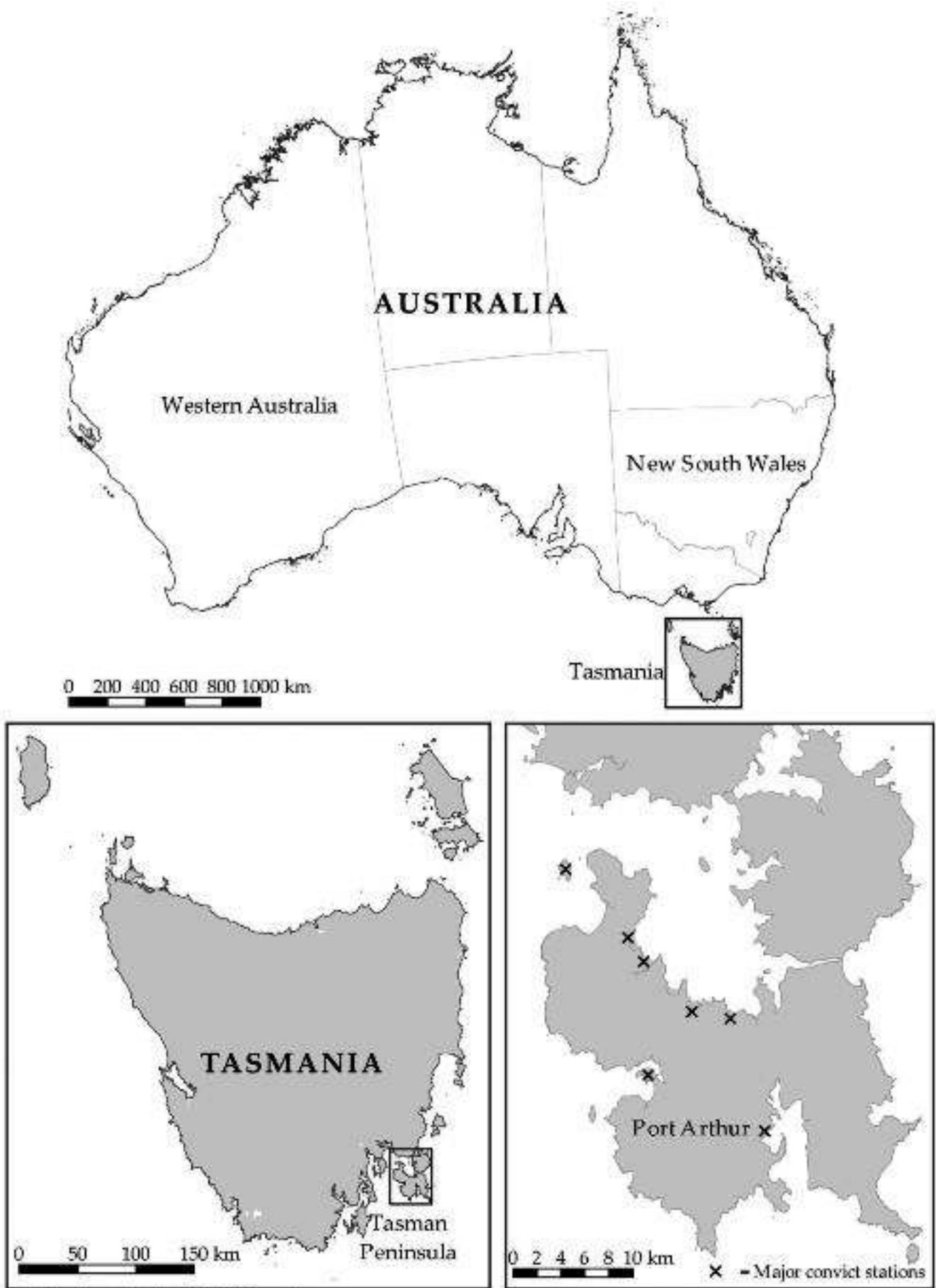
This year's theme of 'Illuminating the Past' posed questions about what different historical records reveal about the past, how we share history with new audiences in new ways, and how we protect historical resources. It also raised the thorny question about how we arrest declining historical society memberships. Universities also are dealing with changing expectations and demographics. Unlike most universities, my students at the University of New England tend to be middle-aged, tech-savvy, often drawn back to study by career change or early retirement and often with deep interests in family and local history but not necessarily with connections to traditional history or heritage interest groups. There is the question for both the universities and historical societies of how to translate, guide or co-opt this latent 'market'.

The digital environment and the potential for wider student and community involvement was very much part of our thinking in my latest project with colleagues from the Universities of New England, Tasmania and Liverpool. Put simply, our *Landscapes of Production and Punishment* project tries to draw on the strengths and interests of several disciplines—history, archaeology and sociology—to interpret the convict system as an industrial system. As we all know, the foundation of the convict system was not to have prisoners languishing in cells, but to have them actively and productively engaged in industry, whether in government employment, assigned to settlers, or as ticket-of-leave holders. The path to freedom was through adherence to the rules and a solid track record of productivity, with a slide backwards into heavily managed labour in irons, corporal punishment and

imprisonment should they fail on these counts. Convicts functioned in the full spectrum of industries from the most refined white-collar professions through to complex manufacturing and service industries and down to the hardest forms of manual labour. The products of the system were not just the buildings, roads and manufactured items, but also the reformed and released convicts themselves, taking their places as emancipists and free settlers.

The *Landscapes* project is examining this flow of people and goods through the convict system, focusing on institutional settings and convicts within government employment. Our current project looks at the Tasman Peninsula, which operated as a closed penal environment from 1830 to 1877. The headquarters were at Port Arthur, with various outstations including the Coal Mines and the probation stations such as at Cascades (now Koonya). We are very mindful that whatever information we produce should become accessible to the public, so amongst other strategies which I will describe below, we are working with the Port Arthur Historic Site Management Authority (PAHSMA). The now gloriously serene nature of the World Heritage site hides the fact that this was once the hub of extensive industry, including everything from raw material extraction and processing through to complex manufacturing such as shipbuilding. The iconic penitentiary started its life as a huge flourmill with a waterwheel, whose diameter measured fifteen metres, embedded in its centre. Partially as a result of our project, PAHSMA will introduce that industrial element into the interpretation of the site.

As an archaeologist I am particularly interested in where convict places were; whether institutions, worksites, or the products of convict labour such as public works. While the late James Kerr's volumes *Design for Convicts and Out of Sight, Out of Mind* did a



Data: Geoscience Australia, TheLIST Tasmania

Figure 1. Location of the Tasman Peninsula and Port Arthur [Map by R. Tuffin, 2019].

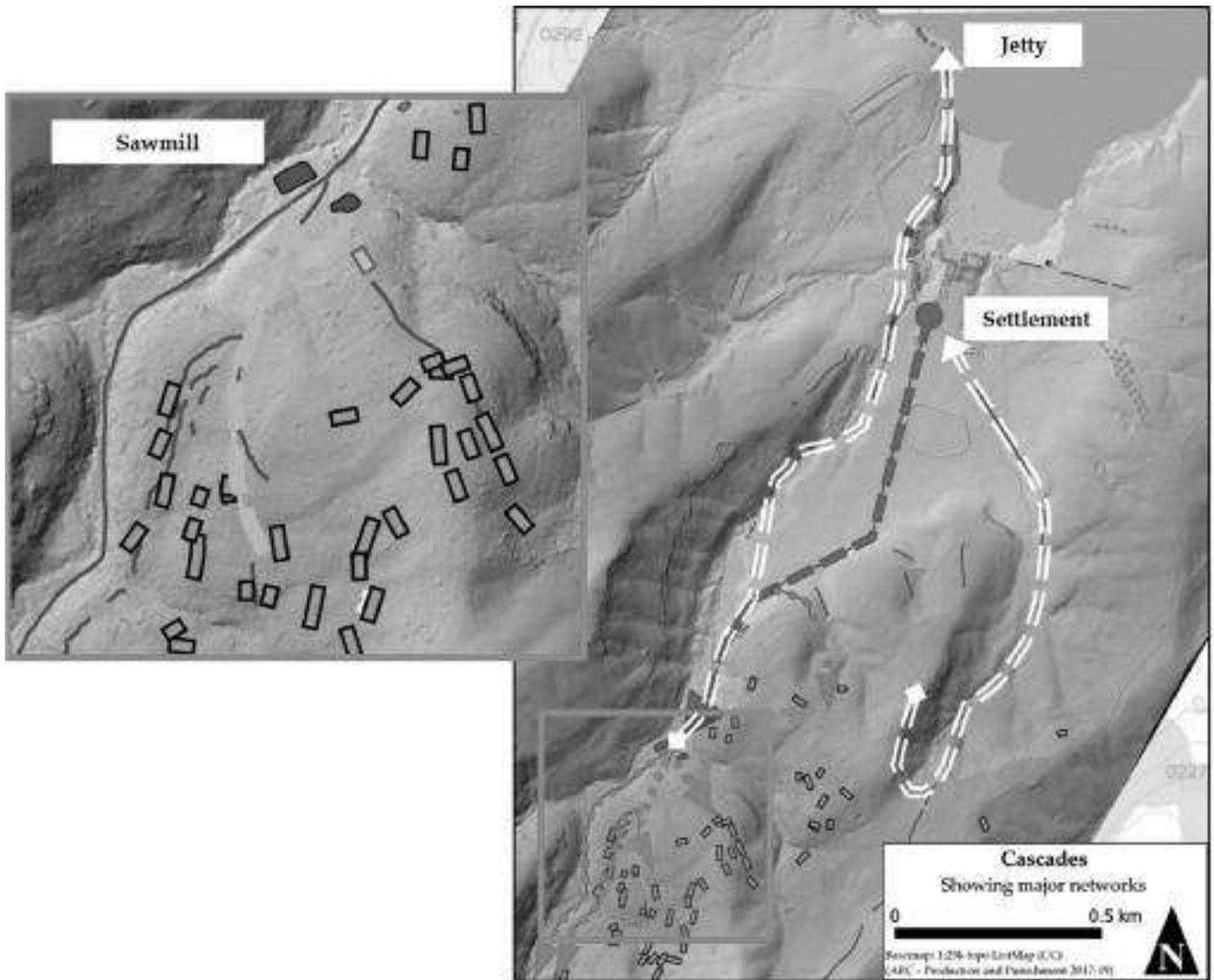


Figure 2. Industrial Hinterlands of convict stations - mapping sawpits via LIDAR and understanding time and motion at Cascades Probation Station [Maps by R. Tuffin, 2019].

superb job of tracing the evolution of convict institutions within Australia, they were largely based on the documentary record and the beautifully drawn architectural plans being sent from Britain.<sup>1</sup> However, these plans and directives were very much the work of remote administrators who were steeped in the current ideologies of penal reform, but had little or no understanding of the environments into which these buildings were to fit, the raw materials available to construct them, or the industrial capacities of the workforce grudgingly engaged in their construction. Through the combined approach with archaeology, at Port Arthur and the other stations, we can see the confusion and compromises of those colonial administrators tasked with bringing these complex British design directives into effect: the real structures and layouts sometimes bear little resemblance to the original plans.

As the title of the project might suggest, we are also interested in the industrial operations and outputs of these stations. Despite nearly four decades of PAHSMAs intensive management of Port Arthur, it is the first time that anyone has actually looked at the production records of the dozens of industries carried on the site. By identifying the industries there, we then need to understand where and how these activities were carried out. While we do have the plans of many of the buildings, there has been limited sense of how activities were organised in these spaces, let alone who the convict craftsmen and workers in them were. We are also exploring the hinterlands of these convict stations, where these men laboured to extract timber and stone, burn lime and make bricks, grow crops or a multitude of other tasks. Those sites of industry, previously overlooked, are now of great significance but much harder to find. We use a combination of oral history

---

from long-term residents, old-fashioned archaeological field survey, and new remote sensing techniques such as *LIDAR* (Light Detection And Ranging) to detect the convict saw pits, quarries and agricultural areas today lost within the dense Tasmanian forests. Finding these sites allows us to consider the dynamics of how these industries operated, including simple questions such as how people and materials were moved to and from stations.

In parallel with the archaeological work, we have been engaged in an intensive process of transcribing convict records to try to understand the nature of the workforce, especially how they entered, progressed through, and exited this industrial system. We are working in collaboration with the *'Founders and Survivors'* project which has for some years been transcribing convict records, adding to their corpus our own transcribed materials. What we find is that the convict records are rich with spatial information telling us not just who people were and what skills they had, but what industries they were employed in and where. In the 'conduct records' of individual felons we have information about their offences within those places of work and elsewhere around the Port Arthur site: where they stole materials, refused work, absconded, were injured, or even died. We are then combining this information with the industrial production data and the spatial information to pinpoint exactly where these activities took place on the Tasman Peninsula landscapes—even in such detail as to discover specifically which room—and how people and material moved about, as a way of understanding how these industrial landscapes operated.

One way that we are making this archaeological and historical information freely available to the public is through a new internet site. People will be able to use a time slider to see how the site evolves physically and what buildings were where (and what they were used for), as well as what offences were committed in each place and by whom. If the public have a particular interest, such as in a convict ancestor, they can enter his name and see where he was on the map. This will also be available as a phone app which can be used at the Port Arthur site.

This brings me to my final several points. The first is that the transcription of the convict records has been performed by (mostly mature age) student volunteers from UNE and UTas, but also by members of the public including those from historical and genealogical societies, as part of a 'citizen science' framework of data collection. These project volunteers are given initial training in transcribing the records as well as membership of a website that provides further aids and

resources, a discussion group to chat with other members and to seek advice or support from more experienced volunteers, as well as access to varying levels of the project data for their own research interests. The online environment, including increasing access to digital archive records, means that they can undertake these tasks at their own pace from the comfort of home. Volunteers come and go as their capacity to engage and their interest in the project develops or wanes, but all have expressed how enjoyable the experience is to be part of a collaborative group working towards a common goal. Embracing the digital environment and these sorts of collaborative projects may be one avenue for historical societies to engage new membership and involvement across a wider (and digitally savvy) demographic.

The second point is to ask how we might evolve these kinds of collaborative projects. In the case of the 'Landscapes' project, one of our next missions is the *'Convict Mapping'* project. A surprising discovery was that despite the significance of the convict system, there has never been a coordinated project to find where all of those convict places mentioned in the records, whether institutions or worksites, are actually located. We believe that the knowledge of these locations is held not just in the documents, but also in local and oral histories. Once again, a collaborative citizen science project inviting members of the public and particularly members of historical societies to make entries via a web interface to tell us where they know or suspect convict sites and works were located, would seem to be a wonderful way of creating links and enthusiasm between a large group of people.

While I may appear obsessed with convicts, I have a similar project in development on inland waterways archaeology and heritage, trying to locate and identify the thousands of vessels wrecked and abandoned on the thousands of kilometres of rivers stretching far into the interior of Australia, as well as the maritime infrastructure that supported these lost river trades. The brief trial run with a single group of students added nearly 300 new vessel and infrastructure sites within weeks. It might be that by embracing the new technologies of communication and engagement, as well as finding a biennial theme that engages the collaboration of not just the collective of existing historical societies but also the diverse interests and strengths of that emergent body of new history enthusiasts, new interests, enthusiasms and involvements can be engendered, hopefully leading back to membership of the societies. Remember, this type of collaboration could easily extend to the universities and schools, as well as to professional

groups and government agencies. It could be convicts, shipwrecks, migrant camps, police stations, pleasure grounds—you decide!

Once again, I would like to thank the RAHS for the opportunity to speak to such an enthusiastic group of people at the Tamworth conference. It was a thoroughly enjoyable experience.

### About the Author

Dr Martin Gibbs is Professor of Australian Archaeology at the University of New England (Armidale). His areas of interest are the historical and maritime archaeologies of the Australia-Pacific region, with projects including nineteenth-century shore whaling, shipwreck survivors, lost sixteenth-century Spanish colonies, World War II archaeology, river system heritage, and convict archaeology across several states of Australia and Norfolk Island.

### References

1 James Semple Kerr, *Design for Convicts: An Account of Design for Convict Establishments in the Australian Colonies During the Transportation Era*, Library of Australian History in association with the National Trust of Australia (NSW) and the Australian Society for Historical Archaeology, 1984; James Semple Kerr, *Out of Sight, Out of Mind: Australia's Places of Confinement, 1788-1988*, S.H. Ervin Gallery in Association with the Australian Bicentennial Authority; S.H. Ervin Gallery, National Trust of Australia (NSW), 1988.

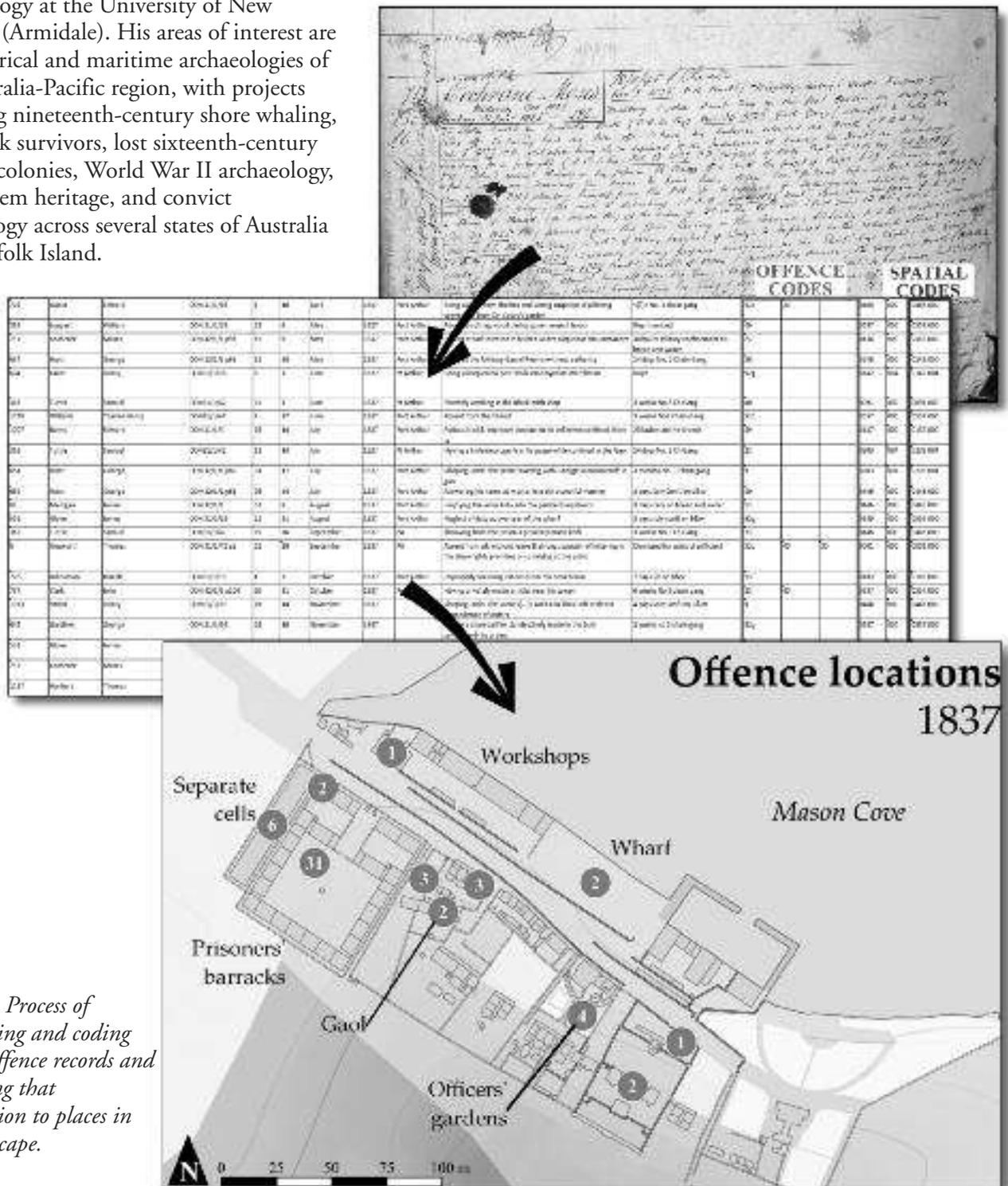


Figure 3. Process of transcribing and coding convict offence records and connecting that information to places in the landscape.