Cesspits and Old Rubbish

Secondary program | Stage 4 History
SCHEDULE FOR THE DAY

Arrive at Big Dig Archaeological Education Centre
(please arrive at least 10 minutes before the scheduled start of the program)

Bathroom facilities and bag storage are available at the Education Centre

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Please complete a program evaluation survey

Historical Inquiry Question
During the Cesspits and Old Rubbish program our Education Guides will provide students with a research question to frame a historical inquiry:

*Identify key challenges of everyday life that Colonial Sydney faced? How do they compare to life in ancient cities?*

Students will work in groups as they access a range of primary and secondary sources, identifying the meaning and context whilst taking into account the sources’ origins, motivations, perspectives and interpretations, values and historical detail. They will evaluate the reliability of the source material before presenting their findings, using historical terms and concepts, to the whole class.

Pre-Program Activity
View The Rocks Beneath Our Feet video (10 minutes)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5C3KPlxp1X8

Discuss the inquiry question: *Identify key challenges of everyday life that Colonial Sydney faced? How do they compare to life in ancient cities?*
**Curriculum Links**

**The Ancient World**  
**Depth Study 1: Investigating the ancient past**
- How historians and archaeologists investigate history, including excavation and archival research.  
  (ACDSEH001)
- The range of sources that can be used in a historical investigation, including archaeological and written sources.  
  (ACDSEH029)

**The Ancient World**  
**Depth Study 2: The Mediterranean World (Egypt or Greece or Rome)**
- The physical features of the ancient society and how they influenced the civilisation that developed there  
  (ACDSEH002, ACDSEH003, ACDSEH004)

**The Ancient World**  
**Depth Study 3: The Asian World (India or China)**
- The physical features of the ancient society and how they influenced the civilisation that developed there  
  (ACDSEH006, ACDSEH005).

**The Ancient World to the Modern World**  
**Depth Study 5: The Asia-Pacific World (Angkor/Khmer Empire)**
- The physical features of the ancient society and how they influenced the civilisation that developed there  
  (ACDSEH002, ACDSEH003, ACDSEH004).

**The Ancient World to the Modern World**  
**Depth Study 6: Expanding Contacts - The Black Death in Asia, Europe and Africa (14th-century plague)**
- Living conditions and religious beliefs in the 14th century, including life expectancy, medical knowledge.  
  (ACDSEH015)
- The role of expanding trade between Europe and Asia in the Black Death, including the origin and spread of the disease.  
  (ACDSEH069)

**OUTCOMES AND SKILLS**

**Students will:**
- Describe the nature of history and archaeology and explain their contribution to an understanding of the past  
  (HT4-1).
- Identify the meaning, purpose and context of historical sources (HT4-5).
- Sequence historical events, developments and periods (ACHHS205 and ACHHS148).
- Identify a range of questions about the past to inform a historical inquiry (ACHHS207 and ACHHS150).
- Identify the origin and purpose of primary and secondary sources (ACHHS209 and ACHHS152).
- Draw conclusions about the usefulness of sources (ACHHS211 and ACHHS154).
- Locate, compare, select and use information from a range of sources as evidence (ACHHS210 and ACHHS153)  
  HT4-6.
- Identify and describe points of view, attitudes and values in primary and secondary sources (ACHHS212 and  
  ACHHS155).
- Use a range of historical terms and concepts when communicating an understanding of the past (HT4-9)  
  (ACHHS206 and ACHHS149).
- Visit an archaeological site.
- Visit The Rocks Discovery Museum (option to compliment the program).
‘The Big Dig’ was the popular name used for the Cumberland and Gloucester Streets archaeological excavation that took place in 1994. It is Australia’s largest urban archaeological site and plays an ongoing historical and educational role. Over a million artefacts have been recovered from the site, revealing the style and manner in which people lived in colonial Australia in the 18th and 19th centuries.

The Big Dig site, between Cumberland and Gloucester Streets in The Rocks, is an area of land containing archaeological remains from the late 18th century, the time of Australia’s first European settlement.

Archaeological excavations began in 1994 and attracted enormous media and public attention. A dedicated team of 20 archaeologists, assisted by over 400 volunteers, worked on what was known as ‘The Big Dig’. It remains one of the largest urban archaeological excavations in Australia. The team uncovered the foundations of over 30 homes and shops, the earliest built in around 1795, and over 750,000 artefacts. The site provides a rare insight into early urban life in Sydney.
The Pre-European Landscape and the Gadigal people

The Rocks, as its name suggests, is a rocky peninsula jutting out into Sydney Harbour. The area was known as Tallawoladah by the Gadigal people (of the Eora Nation). No remnants of the Gadigals’ presence were found on The Big Dig site, perhaps because the ruggedness of the sandstone would have made it a fairly harsh and exposed area. However, not far up Cumberland Street, a campfire dating to almost 300 years before the arrival of the Europeans was uncovered during the construction of the ANA Hotel (now the Shangri-La Hotel). Among the ashes of the fire were the bones of bream, snapper, oysters and other seafood.

Arrival of the Europeans

The Rocks became home to many of the convicts who arrived in 1788 with the First Fleet. The ridges, known as “the lines”, were named after the lines of tents and huts that housed the new arrivals. These people set about transforming the rugged area by cutting, terracing and draining the landscape. Tracks leading up from Sydney Cove were cut into the rocks, including Cribbs Lane, The Big Dig site’s first laneway.
Early Residents on The Big Dig Site

The names of the earliest European occupants of the area are unknown. In 1795 two convicts, George Legg and Ann Armsden, built a slab hut on the site. George drowned in a boating accident in 1807, and Ann married a local baker, George Talbot, in 1810. Together they rebuilt on the site, constructing a small two-room cottage with an addition room behind that had a large fireplace and deep water cistern, so may have been used as a small bakery.

Irish rebel, Richard Byrne, lived on the site from around 1805. Richard was a stonemason and appears to have quarried parts of the site for stone to build the foundations for his weatherboard cottage. It appears many of the earlier houses on the site were constructed from the very same stone they were being built upon. Richard, his convict wife Margaret, and their family of seven children lived in this house until the 1850s. Their descendants continue to live in Sydney today.
From 1809 to the late 1820s, George Cribb lived on the site, building a handsome two-storied Georgian house on the southeast side of Cribbs Lane. George was typical of many early convicts who prospered from the opportunities of the new colony. Although a convict on a 14-year sentence, he ran his own butchering business, slaughtering cattle, sheep and pigs to sell as meat to the colony and to the ships leaving Sydney. As Cribb’s fortune grew, he built a row of four tenements, which he rented out to other convicts and settlers. His slaughterhouse was in the centre of his property and took up the majority of land on the southern end of the site. It was here that he buried the discarded skulls, horns and bones of the slaughtered animals, poisoning his first water well in the process. Around 1818, a number of household items were discarded down his disused water well, including fine hand-painted Chinese porcelain, a sharp butcher’s filleting knife and a small alcohol still. George had been under surveillance on suspicion of dealing in illegally produced alcohol, which was effectively used as currency. He was arrested, but no evidence could be found to convict him – until the archaeologists found his still 180 years later! By the late 1820s, George was in financial difficulties and was declared bankrupt. His property was purchased by land speculators ‘Raine & Ramsay’, who created Carahers Lane and sold the land off in smaller subdivided lots. In 1830 George’s former home was re-developed into a larger building with stables behind, later known as the Whalers Arms Hotel.

**Subdivision and Development**

Albert John Nicholas bought the land on Cumberland Street at the front of the site, building five cottages over the former quarry. On Carahers Lane, six two-storey terraces were built, and by 1850 three more were built on Cribbs Lane. Over the next 70 years, these and other houses on the site were occupied by immigrant families from England, Ireland and from across Europe.
In many of these houses, rubbish was disposed of under the floorboards. It is this rubbish (roughly 40-centimetres deep, built up over 50-80 years) that tells us much about the daily lives of the people that lived on the site. They ate well, serving their food on fine china, including beef, lamb, oysters, fish, chicken and duck, and they dressed their salads and vegetables with oils, pickles and chutneys. Their houses were decorated with figurines and vases of flowers and sometimes with cowry shells and colourful coral. They sewed their own clothes, wore fashionable jewelry and smoked clay pipes. Their children played with dolls, miniature tea sets, marbles, toy soldiers, chess and dominoes.

The Byrne family had also sold off their land bit by bit in the 1840s and 50s. At the top of Cribbs Lane, Robert Berry established a bakery in 1844. Families in the neighbourhood often took their Sunday roast dinners to Berry’s Bakery to be cooked in the large ovens. On the other side of the lane, Robert’s sister Jane, and her husband Thomas Share, operated a pub called the Plymouth Inn, later called The Australian. When it was demolished in 1913 a new Australian Hotel was built nearby and this remains next to The Big Dig site today.
1900 – Bubonic Plague

When bubonic plague arrived in Sydney in 1900, it was thought the densely occupied area of The Rocks would be hit hard. After the 1850s, Sydney was spreading out into the suburbs and many people no longer considered the old parts of the city to be healthy. The Rocks became known as a “slum”. While piped water and sewerage had been connected to the site since the 1850s, negligent landlords had allowed the systems to fall into disrepair. Some of the houses were 70-100 years old and had been poorly maintained.

The total number of deaths from bubonic plague in NSW was just over a hundred, and of these only three people died in The Rocks. However, one of those was a 15-year-old boy called James Foy, who lived with his family on The Big Dig site in a terrace on Cribbs Lane. He most likely contracted bubonic plague on the waterfront, where he worked as a paperboy. Large areas of The Rocks were condemned to demolition and, after being bought out by the New South
Wales State Government in 1901, the site was gradually cleared. Some people who lived on the site stayed on in The Rocks whilst others moved out to the suburbs.

1917 – 1994

Large scale corrugated iron engineering sheds stood on the site from 1917 to the 1930s, the heavy concrete footings visible around the site. In the 1950s the site was cleared, covered with bitumen and used as a bus depot, and later as a car-park. The bitumen effectively sealed and protected the archaeological remains below, providing an extraordinary opportunity to examine this record of the past when the site was excavated in 1994.

1994 – today

The site was closed to the general public from 1994 to 2009. Further archaeological excavations were undertaken on sections of the site in 2005, 2006 and 2008. In September 2008, construction of Sydney Harbour YHA and The Big Dig Archaeology Education Centre began, with the first guests staying at the hostel on the 31st October 2009. The hostel and The Big Dig Archaeology Education Centre were officially opened on the 7th of April 2010.
The Rocks Discovery Museum

The Rocks Discovery Museum is housed in a restored 1850s sandstone warehouse and tells the story of The Rocks from pre-European days to the present. It is home to a unique collection of images and archaeological artefacts found in The Rocks with exhibits that are highly interactive, using touchscreens and audio-visual elements to bring the history of the area alive.

An interactive journey of discovery through four exhibits includes stories of the traditional land owners, establishment of the English colony and the time when sailors, whalers and traders made the area their home, through to the 1970s union-led protests that preserved this unique part of Sydney.

We suggest a visit to The Rocks Discovery Museum to compliment any Sydney Learning Adventures program. Entry is free, however bookings are essential for self-guided school groups.

For more information and bookings please call (02) 9240 8680 or visit therocks.com

Sydney Learning Adventures

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