‘Come down in the world?’ Assessing social status from a nineteenth century burial in Far North Queensland

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Abstract

This paper outlines the exhumation of the grave of Jane Ann Owen situated on Low Island, a sandy coral cay 15 km northeast of Port Douglas in Far North Queensland. It examines the remote burial in the context of assessing social status from a nineteenth century burial. It is argued from the presence of a prosthetic dental attachment that the individual was at one time in her adult life reasonably affluent which stands in contrast to the simple nature of her grave, lacking as it does any of the accoutrements expected of a burial of someone of either status or wealth. It is concluded that the evidence of both wealth and poverty present from the grave and body of Jane Ann Owen is not necessarily related to evidence of status but most likely a product of geographic isolation, highlighting the complexities in interpreting status and wealth archaeologically from nineteenth century burials in remote Australia.

Introduction

As part of the management of the grave of Jane Ann Owen on Low Island in Far North Queensland, an opportunity arose to exhume, study and reinter a rare example of a remote nineteenth century grave and to examine how such a burial might be interpreted archaeologically. This paper outlines the excavation, the historical record and the results from the examination of the material remains of the grave before discussing the complexities of archaeological interpretation in the light of what was found. The paper asks whether material indicators from a nineteenth century burial in a remote Australian context can reliably be used to infer social status, and the role geographic isolation plays in how such burials might be interpreted.

The Low Isles (Wungkun), consisting of Low and Woody Islands, is managed by the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA) and Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service (QPWS), through the Reef Joint Field Management Program (RJFMP). Low Island is Commonwealth Heritage Listed for its significance to Eastern Kuku Yalanji and Yirrganydji First Nations People and for its historic lighthouse and light station buildings constructed in 1878 (Figure 1). The working lighthouse is today managed by the Australian Maritime Safety Authority (AMSA) under a lease agreement with the GBRMPA. A key component of the light station’s associated infrastructure is an historic grave on the western side of the island. The grave is recorded as the final resting place of the first lighthouse keeper’s wife, Jane Ann Owen (née Coulson) (Jordan and Chilcott 2023). The Draft Low Island and Low Islets Light-Station Heritage Management Plan assessed the grave as highly significant under Commonwealth Heritage Listing criteria (Jordan and Chilcott 2023:5; Marquis-Kyle 2019).

The grave of Jane Ann Owen was originally located on the western end of Low Island. The grave itself consisted of a concrete headstone and base, and a concrete border encompassing the grave area (Figure 2). The grave was approximately 50 m above the high water mark at the time of Jane’s death in 1880. However, subsequent migration of the cay to the northeast has resulted in substantial loss of the western cay shoreline, which has exposed the historic gravesite to erosion (Figure 3). By 2022, the erosion scarp was abutting the grave, and a sand-bag wall was constructed as a temporary measure to prevent further degradation of the gravesite and the possible loss of human remains (Figure 4).

A recommendation was thus made to relocate the grave as the only way to ensure its long-term protection from further erosion (Smithers 2022). An attempt at exhumation was carried out in 2023 in which the headstone and grave border were relocated and the loose sand directly below the removed border was excavated by hand. At the very end of the 2023 excavation a fragment of the pubic bone from a human pelvis was found in the test pit at approximately 1.3 m depth. A further 4 cm was excavated below this without encountering more bone. Due to time constraints and a range of other logistical issues, no further excavation was able to be carried out below the 1.43 m excavated and the test pit was backfilled (Jordan and Chilcott 2023). Having established that human remains were present at a depth of 1.3 m, plans were made to revisit the site to exhume and reinter the remains of Jane Ann Owen. Therefore, in 2024, a team was established for Stage 2 of the excavation comprising an archaeologist from the Queensland Department of the Environment, Tourism, Science and Innovation (DETSI), the Centre for Culture and Heritage, University of Southern Queensland, and personnel from the GBRMPA, and Eastern Kuku Yalanji and Yirrganydji Traditional Owners with assistance from the Low Island Preservation Society (LIPS).

Historical background

Jane Ann Owen (née Coulson) was born in Hexham, Northumberland, England on 25 November 1836 (Hexham Census 2025). Her death certificate lists her father as John Coulson and her mother’s maiden name as Jane Robb from Hexham, Northumberland, England. However, according to England and Wales Marriage records, Jane Robb was married to George Coulson, not John, in 1836, the same year as Jane Ann was born. The 1851 England Census data also list Jane at age 15, as the child of George and Jane Coulson suggesting

Figure 1. Low Island Lighthouse, 1928 (Photograph: C.M. Yonge, 1928) (Courtesy Douglas Shire Historical Society).

Figure 2. The original grave of Jane Ann Owen (Photograph: Celeste Jordan).

Figure 3. Low Island, showing erosional change since 1929 and location of original grave site (adapted from Hamylton et al. 2019).

Figure 4. Sandbag wall protecting the grave site (Jordan and Chilcott 2023).

that the father's name on the death certificate may be wrong (England Census 1841). The 1851 census lists Jane Ann as the oldest of four siblings including her brother William who accompanied her to Australia in 1873 (England Census 1851). George Coulson's occupation is recorded as being a railway guard, a railway employee, considered a respectable working/lower middle class industrial occupation at the time. However, Jane Ann's mother, Jane Coulson's (neé Robb) grandfather was William Robb the founder of one of the world's earliest department stores in Hexham in 1818, and thus a man of considerable means at the time Jane Ann was still in England. The 1861 census data then list Jane Ann Coulson at Hexham, with the appropriate age correlation (25) as the niece of John Ridley, a glover with several employees where her occupation is listed as 'assisting in house'. John Ridley was the husband of Jane Ann's maternal aunt, Ann Robb. In the 1871 census Jane Ann is recorded, at age 35 as the niece of Thomas Pearson a brewer employing six men with two household servants as 'in charge of house' (England Census 1861, 1871). Thomas Pearson was also related through Jane Ann's brother William's wife, Sophia Ridley, her uncle, and thus Jane Ann's uncle by marriage (Ancestry.com). It is clear from ongoing retention of her maiden name and from the census data that Jane never married in England at a time when marriage was expected of all eligible women. Indeed, Levine (1989:150) states that 'Marriage for the nineteenth-century women, was perhaps the single most profound and far-reaching institution that would affect the course of her life. For women who did not marry, whether by choice or by chance, spinsterhood marked her as one of society's unfortunates, cast aside from the common lot of the sex.'

In 1873 Jane Coulson migrated to Australia aboard the ship *Great Queensland* where she may have first met her future husband Captain Daniel Hugh Owen. Both Jane and Daniel arrived in Australia on the *Great Queensland* on 2 September 1873. Daniel (42 years old) travelled as a Saloon Class passenger (1st Class) while Jane, her brother William (33 years old) and sister-in-law Sophia Frances (26 years old), travelled as Second Class passengers (Immigration Department [Queensland] 1873). Their berths onboard the ship suggest that they may have become acquainted during the three month-long voyage to Australia. Jane's brother William was a preacher for the Uniting Methodist Free Church (UMFC), an English non-conformist denomination with a focus on lay participation and establishing a global presence which was active in sending missionaries to various colonies including Australia (Beckerlegge 1957). It is possible that William and his wife were migrating to the colonies as UMFC missionaries and that Jane was accompanying them in a supporting role such as housekeeper. However, only days after arriving in Brisbane, Jane Coulson married Daniel Owen in Brisbane on 5 September 1873 at the age of 37. The couple had one child, Susie born on September 1874, in Surrey Hills, Sydney (Jordan and Chilcott 2023). Daniel Owen became a ship's captain in north Queensland, captaining the coastal steamer *Corea* at Island Point (Port Douglas) in 1877, just before taking up the position of station superintendent on Low Island in 1878 (*Townsville Daily Bulletin* 11 January 1946:5).

As the wife of a lighthouse keeper, Jane would have experienced the hardships of a relatively isolated island life in the Queensland tropics where access to the mainland was limited. Food and mail were delivered every two weeks by boat, dependent on conditions, and visitors would have been mostly officials arriving for inspections or maintenance purposes. Life on a remote island with a young child would also have proven challenging with no natural freshwater source on the island. An example of the sometimes haphazard nature of access to Low Island is illustrated in a newspaper article from 1878 which describes an evening where bystanders in Port Douglas could see two large fires burning on the Island, which was a widely accepted distress signal. Because of the low tide it took two hours before men in a customs boat could even launch before sailing the 14 km to Low Island, only to discover that Captain Owen and his wife had lit the fires as their daughter struggled with a fit of whooping cough (*Morning Bulletin* 28 November 1878:2).

Only six years into her marriage, and two years after moving to Low Island, Jane died on 15 July 1880, following a nine-day illness, recorded on her death certificate as congestion of the lungs. She was buried the next day on her remote island home. Jane was 41 years of age at the time of her death and left behind her five-year-old daughter, Susie. It appears that Susie spent her life in Queensland and never married or had any recorded children. Susie died in Ingham on 11 July 1950 at 75 years of age. Captain Owen went on to marry Agnes Bellairs, the daughter of the late lightkeeper from Dent Island and they had one daughter together (Jordan and Chilcott 2023). He would continue to serve as superintendent on Low Island until 1899 (Marquis-Kyle 2019). Captain Owen died on 4 August 1907 at Kangaroo Point, Brisbane, aged 76 years and is buried in Toowong Cemetery next to Agnes (Jordan and Chilcott 2023).

Methods

The aim of the 2024 Stage 2 excavation was to complete the excavation and exhumation of human skeletal remains, record and document the process and outcomes, and reinter Jane Ann Owen's remains at a less dynamic locale. The Stage 2 project plan originally included a machinery-assisted excavation to a depth of 1.2 m. and a 1:1 ratio wall slope, designed to preclude wall collapse and assist with excavation. However, this was unable to be carried out, and the excavation proceeded manually using shovels and spades where appropriate and latterly trowels (Barker and Jordan 2024).

As the site had been excavated down to a depth of approximately 1.34 m in November 2023, before cessation of excavation and subsequent backfilling of the grave, it was determined that digging out the backfill using spades down to a level of 1.2 m would provide a sufficient buffer before encountering any potential skeletal material.

To safely excavate in loose sand to that depth, as well as to provide room for excavation, plotting in and exhumation of the potential human remains, a much larger area was deemed necessary to be excavated than just the extent of the grave cut. Consequently, a space measuring 2 m x 3 m amounting to approximately 11 m^3 of sand was excavated. Although the walls of the excavation were well away from where the main work was being carried out, wood panel sheets were also secured in place by stakes against the inside walls, as shoring (Barker and Jordan 2024).

At a depth of 1.2 m, small test holes were excavated using trowels near the southwestern wall of the trench, eventually revealing bone at a depth of 1.48 m below the surface. General excavation then proceeded down to the depth of 1.4 m or until encountering bone, after which non-metallic excavation

instruments and brushes were employed to remove the sand from the surface of the skeleton. All sediment excavated from when bone was first encountered was either dry or wet sieved through a 2 mm sieve. As much care was taken as possible to preserve the individual bones in their original position for accurate recording. Extensive photographs were taken both in plan view and of specific detailed elements. Skeletal elements were plotted in situ. Once the bones had been exhumed, excavation continued for a further 20 cm until reaching clear sand underneath the grave cut. All the material beneath the burial down to 20 cm was sieved through a 2 mm sieve to retrieve any potential small bone fragments, possible coffin pieces or personal effects. The original intention, once the excavation was complete, was to record a detailed stratigraphic section drawing of the grave profile. However, due to the large area excavated around the grave to ensure the safety of the excavators no profile related to the grave remained. Bones were individually removed and placed in a calico-lined plastic tub at the grave site and each bone was cleaned, photographed and recorded on a skeleton recording form in the Low Island research laboratory before being reinterred at the new grave location. Sediment removed from the bones during cleaning was collected and placed in the specially made burial box with the calico-wrapped remains before the new grave was backfilled. At the reburial a service from Anglican priest Deborah Kachel was delivered over the grave to recommit Jane's remains to the earth.

Results

The main aim of this project was to relocate the remains of Jane Ann Owen. This involved determining what remained in situ, and recording the in situ remains before exhumation and eventual reburial. It is thus important to note that the project did not aim for a comprehensive osteological study of the skeletal material as a management outcome. However, as part of the reinterment process in which individual bones were cleaned and photographed before being placed in a hand-sewn calico fardel for reburial, a range of obvious pathologies were identified.

The mostly articulated skeleton was in a conventional supine position, oriented east-west between a depth of 1.48 m and 1.65 m with the head turned to the right shoulder (Figure 5). There was no jewellery or evidence that Jane Ann Owen was buried with clothes as no buttons, buckles, hooks or leather were retrieved from the grave; however, pieces of coarse fibre were found attached to parts of the skeleton (Figure 6) (Barker and Jordan 2024). Non-bone material retrieved from the grave consisted of a ferrous metal 'plaque' resting on the anterior surface of the skeleton within the thoracic/lumbar region and some ferrous metal nails/tacks found at the head and the feet ends of the skeleton. The metal 'plaque' was in an advanced state of decomposition and too fragile to remove intact. No inscription was visible (Figure 7).

A noticeable pathology was the skeleton's poor dentition. All the teeth of the maxilla, except four molars, two on each side, were absent. In their place was a large maxillary gold dental plate originally set with 10 porcelain teeth of which 9 remained. It is likely that the loss of the single porcelain tooth occurred antemortem as it was not present in the grave. The plate was attached to the two back most molars on the left and right sides, the only natural teeth in the maxilla. The two right molars viewed from the inferior aspect show evidence of significant pathology (Figure 8). The teeth of the mandible consisted of four incisors, two canines and three premolars (Figure 9). There were no molars in the mandible. The bone of the right side of the mandible showed an area of past infection likely due to tooth decay.

Further skeletal pathology was noted on some cervical and thoracic vertebrae. Evidence of osteoarthritis was apparent on some cervical vertebrae. For example, vertebrae C3 shows a blunting of the uncovertebral joints along the right side, suggesting the presence of osteoarthritis. There is also a wedging of the T2 and T3 vertebrae indicating the existence of mild scoliosis, also evident in the misalignment of individual ribs at the dorsal end when laid flat (Barker and Jordan 2024).

Although most of the skeleton was largely articulated, anomalies included disarticulated vertebrae from the thoracic region and inverted femurs, which unlike the rest of the skeleton were oriented in a posterior position. Bones of the hands and feet were also mostly disarticulated and were found at slightly different levels making exposure on a single plane impossible (see Figure 5). Although the bones were generally in good condition, post-mortem decay was present on the proximal and distal end of the right femur, a broken component of the pubic symphysis (related to part of the left pubic bone, which was detached during the 2023 excavation), and by the absence of part of the head and tubercle of the left proximal humerus.

The posterior position of the two femurs, the out of context position of the mandible and the three thoracic vertebrae and ribs, may suggest that there was capacity for movement of bone within the grave, which may indicate that the original burial was in some kind of void such as a pinned shroud or, a coffin. Although bloating and subsequent deflation of the body could explain some disarticulation, it is likely with the weight of 1.4 m of sand, that these bones would have been compressed against the sediment and unlikely to have changed position. This could explain the posterior positioning of the femurs in a skeleton that was otherwise interred on its back. Once the ligaments attaching the head of the femur to the acetabulum decomposed the femurs dropped out turning over to their posterior positions.

It is also possible that the metal 'plaque' on the thoracic region of the skeleton was on top of whatever she was buried in which then came to rest on the skeleton with its weight combined with the weight of the sand dislodging the thoracic vertebrae.

Discussion

Archaeological interpretations of conspicuous consumption, affluence and status from burials and mortuary practices generally tend to focus on grave goods and the accoutrements accompanying the deceased upon burial. This often takes the form of valuable items interred with the body, personal items such as jewellery, or nonperishable remnants of clothing such as buttons and buckles and sometimes shoes (Robb et al. 2001; Tarlow and Stutz 2013). The nature of the grave structure itself including type and size of headstone, as well as the nature of the vessel in which the body was buried, such as a coffin and associated hardware, also commonly provide evidence. Additionally, detailed osteological examination of the bone material can illicit information relating to the type of life an individual may have led and what may have contributed to their death (Chapman 2013; Hems 2016; Robb et al. 2001).

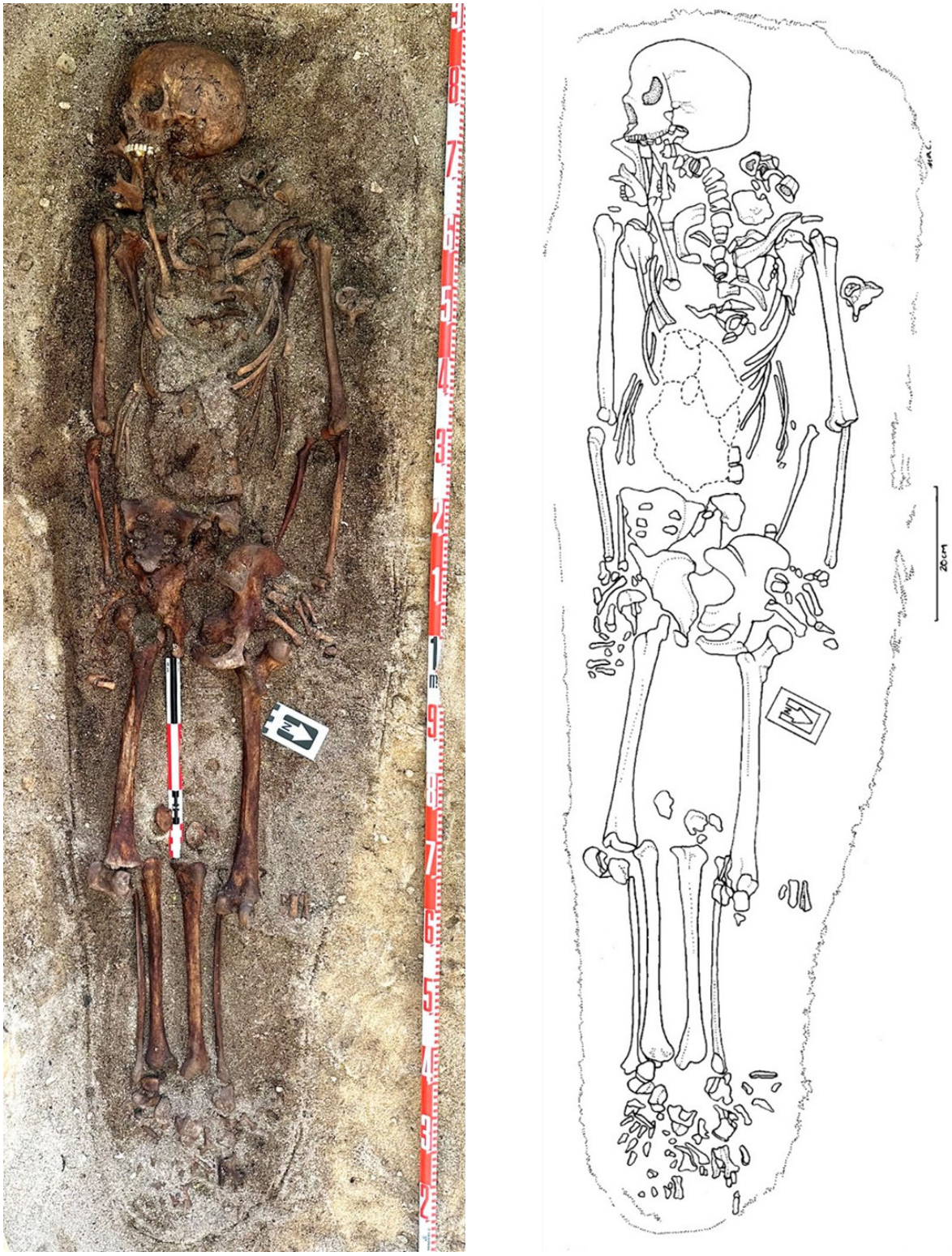

Figure 5. Excavated in situ remains of Jane Ann Owen (Photograph: Bryce Barker. Illustration: Nicole Crosswell).

Figure 6. Fibres attached to the skull (Photograph: Bryce Barker).

Figure 7. Metal 'plaque' on thoracic/lumbar region of skeleton and detailed view (right) (Photograph: Bryce Barker).

Figure 8. Gold maxillary dental plate with 10 porcelain teeth showing attachments to natural, intact teeth (Photograph: Celeste Jordan).

Figure 9. Teeth remaining in the mandible (Photograph: Celeste Jordan).

A feature of the excavated burial of Jane Ann Owen is the absence of any burial paraphernalia in the grave, either relating to the body itself or funerary items associated with it. Indeed, the only item apart from the dental plate was a plaque, placed on the top of the body.

Mortuary practices in the Victorian era tended to be elaborate depending on degree of wealth and/or social status, and coffin hardware was often ornate and expensive. Hoile (2018:1) states that by the early eighteenth century a coffin was the minimum expectation for a decent burial and widely used by all classes, and only the most basic pauper funerals did not include coffin furniture at all. For example, archaeological excavations at the nineteenth century Lang Park cemetery in Brisbane (1843–1875) show that coffin handles of varying quality and quantity were present in the graves exhumed, with Haslam et al. (2003:3) inferring social status from the type of coffin furniture excavated. Hoile (2018:2) states that by the 1880s the presence of breast plates or plaques on coffins had become a minimum expectation even for pauper burials. Depending on cost, these consisted of lead, brass, bronze or tin, with Greenwood (1883:74) noting that even the cheapest coffins associated with pauper burials had a scanty tin plate, which seems to have been the case in Jane Ann's burial, judging by the corroded and fragile nature of the plaque, resting on the thoracic section of Jane Owen's skeleton.

It is clear the headstone and grave surround is a more recent addition to the grave site on Low Island because it is constructed from concrete rather than the more usual granite, marble or sandstone and because an asbestos sheet was found within the grave surrounds during Stage 1 of the excavation (Jordan and Chilcott 2023). Victorian era grave markers and surrounds were often large and elaborate, and while the headstone of Jane Ann Owen's grave is small, its shape and basic surrounds are more indicative of twentieth century graves than those from the nineteenth century (Hardingham 2024; Horton 1989). There was no evidence of any earlier grave markers or surrounds from the excavation and an account from a visitor to Low Island in 1936, notes of the grave that 'there is also a solitary grave on the island marked only by a white wooden cross nailed to a tree' (*Sydney Mail* 25 March 1936). Although the lack of a substantial grave marker and surrounds could be explained by the isolated location of the grave, a significant number of remote outback graves in Australia have relatively elaborate permanent grave markers dating to the nineteenth century. These often involved rudimentary interment initially before more substantial funerary fittings were eventually acquired by those who could afford it and subsequently erected at the remote grave site. For example, Constable Micheal Dwyer, after a shooting accident in 1877 on the Barron River in north Queensland was quickly buried the day after his death in a horse paddock before an engraved sandstone headstone was eventually erected, after which a concrete plinth with brass plate was installed in 1986 (Assfalg n.d.; Coate and Coate 2017; Cole 2004; Hardingham 2024; Rogers and Helyar 1994). It would appear however, that Jane Owen's grave site remained rudimentary until twentieth century recognition of the historical significance of the grave may have led to its more elaborate and permanent grave fittings.

The body of Jane Ann Owen appears to have been unclothed with no evidence of buttons, buckles, or footwear, however coarse black fibres were found attached to some of the skull and long bones of the skeleton suggesting she was possibly wrapped in a simple blanket which served the purpose of a shroud. Although people were sometimes buried in their clothing, it was more common to be buried in their nightwear or a homemade shroud (Litten 1991). It is possible she was buried in a buttonless night dress which has left no trace, however, factors such as the remoteness and tropical nature of Low Island, the likely absence of shroud-type material, and the probable necessity to bury Jane Ann Owen quickly may have precluded such burial norms. The presence of tacks/nails at either end of the body may suggest that she was buried in a coffin, although no trace of wood or coffin furniture were apparent and it is possible that they were used to fasten the ends of a cloth 'shroud'.

Jane Ann Owen was also buried without any personal items such as jewellery, including the absence of a wedding ring. Evidence of jewellery such as wedding and engagement rings being interred with the dead has been recorded from recent clearances of over 2,000 eighteenth and nineteenth century coffins from vaults in London churches, which contained a high percentage of burials with wedding rings present (Litten 1991). Similarly, excavation of a nineteenth century family crypt in Ipswich cemetery in southeast Queensland dating from 1853 to 1891 contained two gold rings as well as a button and a bone hair comb (Rennie 2019) and the excavation of the 1877 grave of Constable Michael Dwyer near Cairns in northern Queensland also contained a gold ring (Hardingham 2024). It should be noted, however, that of the 397 graves exhumed at Lang Park in Brisbane dating between 1843 and 1875 only a small percentage contained any personal items. Those found included religious

medallions, beads, some coins, belt buckles, but not a single wedding ring – with the most common item being false teeth, consisting of human teeth set in vulcanised rubber (Prangnell, pers. comm., 2025). The rings found in London churches as noted above were from vaults – the popular choice for the more affluent middle classes and the aristocracy (Mytum 2020). Similarly, the Ipswich crypt belonged to a wealthy local business family. It is likely that the poorest people had very little personal jewellery and if they did its value would most likely suggest that it would be passed on to relatives rather than buried with the deceased. Given this context, it is possible that any valuables Jane Ann Owen might have owned, either brought with her from England or gifted to her by her husband, may have been kept by the family.

All the material evidence so far outlined for this grave would seem to indicate the burial of someone of possibly straitened circumstances, as it lacks any of the accoutrements expected of a burial of someone of either status or wealth. However, the presence of a large maxillary dental plate fashioned from gold, inset with porcelain teeth, seems to belie this interpretation.

Phillips (2024:1) describes gold dental plate dentures from the nineteenth century as a luxury item representing a bioarchaeological artefact of affluence and conspicuous consumption linked directly to the body and its identity (see also Morris 2019). Similarly, a gold dental plate recovered from the 1857 shipwreck of *Dunbar* off Sydney Heads is described as 'a highly personal item that shows the level of wealth that was aboard the Dunbar when she sank and in the burgeoning colony of Sydney' (Australian National Maritime Museum 2026).

Before around 1820, most false teeth were made from ivory, which was prone to discolouring, or human teeth. Human teeth were extracted from the corpses of soldiers (e.g. Waterloo teeth) or executed criminals, stolen by grave-robbers, or even obtained from direct sale from the poor. The mounting of porcelain teeth on 18 carat gold plates was superior both aesthetically and functionally to the older models, because of the lack of staining on porcelain, and lack of corrosion on gold coupled with easy moldability (Ladha and Verma 2011; Oleszek-Listopad et al. 2015; Woodforde 1968). Porcelain teeth were first invented in 1792 but not commonly used until after the 1850s. To form the base to fit false teeth, a range of materials was used throughout the nineteenth century including hippopotamus ivory, cheoplastic, alloys, aluminium, gold and vulcanite. By 1864, vulcanite became the base material of choice playing an important role in 'democratising' dental prostheses, it being much cheaper than other bases (Australian Dental Association 2021; Corrado 1990; Woodforde 1968).

Dentistry in the nineteenth century was principally related to pain relief through extraction and dental hygiene was generally rudimentary, with toothbrushes not being commonly used until the latter part of the nineteenth century (Woodforde 1968). For most ordinary people tooth extraction was the only affordable relief from tooth ache, a result of poor dental hygiene, often undertaken by barbers, blacksmiths, shoemakers and farriers (Woodforde 1968; Wynbrandt 1998). Of the 32 teeth normally found in adults, Jane Ann Owen had 13 of her own teeth with 4 upper molars to which the dental plate was attached.

From an archaeological perspective the grave of Jane Ann Owen would seem to indicate that her life in Britain prior to coming to Australia in 1873 was one of relative affluence based on the very expensive dental work, which contrasts with the simplicity of her funerary paraphernalia. Although no detailed osteological study was able to be carried out on the skeletal material, certain observations were made prior to reinterment, which suggest a more affluent past for Jane Ann Owen. Some of the traits more likely to be found on the skeletal remains of someone involved in manual labour are not present in this case. There was no evidence of antemortem bone damage such as healed fractures, with the only obvious antemortem pathology identified relating to the teeth and vertebrae. Although there was evidence of blunting of the uncovertebral joints on one cervical vertebra, these are often associated with normal aging of an individual (Hartman 2014). Also, there was no evidence of arthritis on the lumbar vertebrae which is often recorded in relation to compression due to repetitive weight bearing from physical labour (Jurgen and Kilgore 1995).

From an historical perspective, Jane's relative social position in Britain seemed to change from a working class family background to a comfortable middle class position in adult life as housekeeper in her uncle's houses, typical of upward mobility made possible by the industrial revolution in the mid-nineteenth century. The relative affluence of her extended family, especially on her mother's side, probably accounts for the ability for Jane to afford expensive dental work prior to emigrating to Australia. Although the motives for Jane Ann Owen's move to the colonies are unknown, mid-to-late nineteenth century migration from England often related to widespread unemployment and urban poverty of working class people. Assisted migration schemes for skilled workers or perceived land opportunities for a burgeoning middle class were also drivers of migration. Additionally, after the 1851 census revealed the extent of Britain's female overpopulation, Female Emigration Societies were established focusing on the 'redistribution' of 'surplus women' to the colonies (Ruiz 2019:1). It seems likely however, that it was Jane's brother William's decision to immigrate to Australia with his wife that may have led Jane to accompany them to Australia.

Conclusion

At 36 years old Jane Ann Owen was apparently unmarried, which was viewed with disapproval in the Victorian era, even though in the 1850s English women outnumbered men by a considerable margin resulting in a third of all eligible women aged 24 to 35 remaining unmarried (Greg 1869; Levine 1989). Whether she boarded the *Great Queensland*, bound for colonial Brisbane in 1873 with the desire to find a husband in the colonies remains unknown, as does how she and her husband developed a relationship, and indeed, when. Although her position as the wife of a ship's captain and latterly superintendent of a light station would have placed her as a respectable member of the Australian colonial middle class, her burial seems to point to a decided lack of affluence or status. In terms of archaeological interpretation, if it were not for the expensive gold dental plate and the historical record indicating a relatively affluent background, this grave would most likely be construed as the grave of someone of little wealth or status bearing all the hallmarks of a pauper's grave. A logical explanation for the circumstances and evidence for the burial of Jane Ann Owen relates to the isolated location of Low Island and lack of access to normal

burial paraphernalia such as more elaborate coffin furniture, considered a feature of some remote nineteenth century graves in Australia. The historical record states that she was buried the day after she died and, in the tropics, before refrigeration, bodies had to be interred relatively quickly. There is evidence to suggest that her method of interment may have utilised what was readily available on the island with no time to procure more elaborate funerary paraphernalia reflective of her status. Why more elaborate grave markings and surrounds were apparently not subsequently erected as has been recorded elsewhere in remote locations in north Queensland is unknown.

This paper highlights the complexity inherent in interpreting status and wealth archaeologically from burials in once remote locations, which, without the aid of the historical record relating to this individual, and considering their burial location, could be wrongly inferred. It also draws attention to the vulnerability of coastal cultural heritage sites in Queensland in the face of ongoing sea-level rise and provides a good example of multi-institutional cooperation in salvaging significant historical sites such as the grave of Jane Ann Owen in the face of environmental change.

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