

PHOTO ESSAY

UNEARTHING THE SECRETS OF WINDMILL WAY

Archaeologist Professor Lynley Wallis, provides a fascinating insight into an archaeological dig being carried out in southeast Cape York Peninsula by Griffith University and other researchers working in partnership with the Laura Rangers.

From Brisbane to Cairns, from Cairns to Laura, we fly, then drive, reaching the final stretch to the small township on a road bituminised only two decades ago, to prevent dust destroying once vivid Aboriginal paintings at Split Rock, located a short distance outside Laura.

Split Rock is renown for its Indigenous art, and visitors can engage a guide from the nearby Quinkan and Regional Culture Centre to show them this cultural and historical area.

Split Rock is a great example of the kinds of amazing rock art that exists in the escarpment country around Laura. The site is part of the Quinkan Reserves, created in 1977 to protect this expansive sandstone country. This safety net was significantly expanded in 2018 when, after a 10-year struggle, parts of the region were inscribed on the National Heritage List. It includes a pastoral holding known as "Welcome Station", which is our final destination.



The walking track and boardwalk at Split Rock.

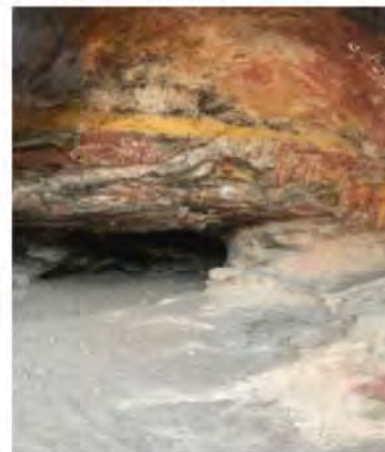
Heading north from Laura down a seldom used gravel road, we pass through the gate at Welcome, veering on to ever more infrequently used station tracks. Here, the annual wet season rains routinely wash out creek crossings and create new hazards. Fallen trees, fast darting wallabies, indignant cattle and the occasional bewildered Australian bustard provide additional threats to avoid.

We're accompanied on our journey by Senior Laura Ranger Christine ("Chrissy") Musgrave. Chrissy has been looking after country for decades, following in the footsteps of her father, a highly regarded Kuku Thaypan man whose expertise was recognised by an honorary doctorate from James Cook University in 2005. Starting as a guide, she has been with the small but tenacious Laura Rangers for many years, while raising her own family and maintaining cultural practices, and also serving as a Board member of Ang-Gnarra Aboriginal Corporation. Chrissy knows this country intimately, and feels a great responsibility for everyone visiting and working on it.



Senior Laura Ranger and Traditional Owner, Chrissy Musgrave.

Chrissy is taking us by 4WD to a remote rock art site known as "Windmill Way", picking out the best way to reach this remarkable place. It has always been known to local Indigenous people, even after they had been moved off country to live in a fringe camp outside Laura traditional owners remained aware of it. Vivid images of their ancestors are painted there, some still so bright they appeared to have been done yesterday. Spirit figures, people, flying big foxes, dilly bags, kangaroos and even a pig — the latter attesting to the massive changes that were wrought in the area when the Palmer River gold rush commenced in the late 1870s.



The Windmill Way rock art site.

A few days earlier some of the team had hiked in to Windmill Way, covering a distance of about 2 km across the soaring sandstone escarpment from a more easily accessible location. They had carried with them the bare minimum of equipment that would allow them to start to reveal Windmill Way's archaeological secrets.

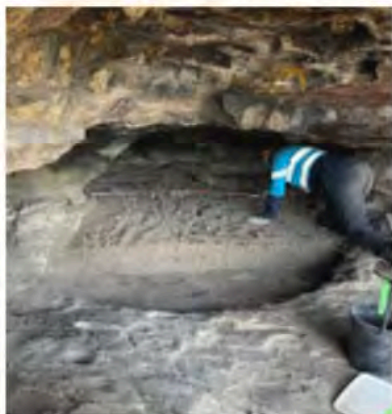


Team members hiking across the top of the escarpment into Windmill Way.

Winding her way carefully through the Cooktown ironwoods, across shallow sided creeks and rocky ground looking for a route suitable for a 4WD, Chrissy explains, "You can always find a way, you don't need to knock down any trees, just go between them". This concern to protect the environment is demonstrative of the Laura Rangers' approach to land management: work with the country, leave things the way they are if you can, and do as little damage as possible.

In the early afternoon at Windmill Way the excavation team hears the throaty growl of a quad bike. They glimpse Chrissy and Laura Ranger Co-ordinator Sue Marsh pulling up at the base of the escarpment. "It'll be slow going but you'll be able to get a 4WD in now," Chrissy announces to the palpable relief of the excavators, who weren't looking forward to lugging their backpacks filled with finds back up and across the escarpment.

Professor Heather Burke emerges from the recesses of the rock shelter. Covered from head to toe in grey dust apart from a pristine white lower face previously covered by an N95 mask to filter the dusty air while she digs, she takes a few large gulps of fresh clean air and stretches her back. "Enjoy," she says sardonically to Laura Ranger Cliff Callaghan, and ABM team members Mia Dardengo and Keeley Wood as she hands them two buckets filled with sediment.



Professor Heather Burke in the recesses of Windmill Way preparing to take out more sediment. The ceiling of this part of the shelter is less than 1 m in height, making working conditions cramped.

Sieving is a filthy task and just hard work. Senior Research Assistant Mia loves it: "It's better than a day in the gym for core strength" she grins, covered even more heavily than Heather in dirt. The sediment is poured into silver metal sieves which, when shaken, leave behind the larger objects, amongst which are a treasure trove of artefacts; the things made, used or modified by the people who once occupied the site.

Cliff, Mia and Keeley peer eagerly into the sieves. "Aha," Keeley exclaims joyously, "more string!" "This is why sieving is the best", Cliff says. "We get the first real look at what's coming out – we can 'cherry pick' the most exciting finds and make everyone else jealous!"



Sieving is a dirty job. Here Cliff Callaghan pours sediment into the metal sieves that Mia Dardengo is shaking to get rid of all the sediment, leaving behind the 'finds'.



Chrissy Musgrave, Sue Marsh and Roseanne George sorting through the sieve residues as the dust from the sieving station billows around.

The sieve residues are then handed over to the sorting team, today comprising myself and graduate student Gabriella McLay, joined by Chrissy and Sue, Laura Ranger Sam Lowdown and Traditional Owner Roseanne George. Roseanne is the daughter of another highly respected elder, also awarded an honorary doctorate from JCU for his cultural heritage work. Like Chrissy, Roseanne has lived and worked on the country around Laura for her entire life, and delights in spending time where her Old People once lived.

Team members pour the finds on to trays and then sort them into categories. Stone artefacts, string, bone points, wooden points, burnt bone, charcoal, mussel shells, ochre—every tray brings with it more finds that will eventually be individually catalogued and studied in detail to learn more about how Aboriginal people lived here in the past.



Laura Ranger Sam Lowdown sorting the sieve residues from Windmill Way.

Sam peers quizzically at an object pulled from her latest tray. It's a macropod incisor, a bright white shiny find amongst the otherwise dusty objects. "It's not right," she starts to say as comprehension dawns and a huge grin breaks out on her usually serious face. "It's wax!" she exclaims loudly. "Look!" She hands the find over to Chrissy and Roseanne. Four more similar items soon emerge. What Sam has found was once part of a necklace or a head band, with a small knob of spinifex resin or wax attached to the butt end of the tooth to fasten it to string from which it was hung.

This is what makes Windmill Way so incredible. The preservation is fantastic. Objects like the incisor Sam found are rare even in museum collections—archaeologically they are like hens' teeth. We have found the largest assemblage of string and dilly bag fragments ever recovered archaeologically in Australia—it's simply extraordinary.

What also makes Windmill Way unusual is the fact that, when it wasn't being used by people, the site was a dingo haunt. This means that, as well as artefacts, it is also filled with thousands of splintered bone fragments—the task of working out which ones might have been left behind by people versus which were simply the remains of dingo meals will be a job for a future graduate student.

After another six hours of arduous work, the sun lowers in the sky and the stretching shadows



A fragment of dilly bag found at Windmill Way.



A macropod incisor with resin recovered from Windmill Way.

reach the team. The days' finds are carefully packed away and handed to Chrissy and Sue to transport back to the ranger base. They fire up the quad bikes and disappear amongst the savannah, the engine sounds fading away to be replaced by the wind in the trees and birds calling.

A flock of red-tailed black cockatoos passes lazily overhead as the team trudges back up the escarpment and across to a waiting 4WD. In the quiet peace of the late afternoon it is as if time has stood still, making it easy to imagine the lives of the Aboriginal people who once called Windmill Way home.

The Laura archaeological dig is being carried out under a partnership with Griffith University over a period of five years. Funded by the Australian Research Council under their Linkage Scheme (LP190100194).

