Aboriginal fire places on the Mitchell Grass Downs, northwest Queensland

Introduction
Aboriginal fire places (or hearths as they are formally known) are relatively common throughout the Mitchell Grass Downs. They occur as clusters of reddish coloured pieces of mudstone (Fig. 1), often with charcoal and mussel shell fragments visibly eroding from around the stones. In 2002 archaeologists, students and members of the Woolgar Valley Aboriginal Corporation carried out a study of hearths around Richmond in northwest QLD. This poster provides a summary of the results of that project.

Details of the archaeological study
A number of hearths were singled out and GPS readings and photographs were taken of each (Figs 2 and 3). Detailed plans were then drawn up of each hearth, along with more general plans of the surrounding area (Figs 4 and 5). Once this recording had taken place, excavations were carried out (Figs 6 and 7). Excavation allowed us to find out what the fireplaces looked like in terms of their structure below the ground and also to charcoal which could used to radiocarbon date the hearths and find out how old they are.

Results
The radiocarbon dating of charcoal from some of the hearths provides irrefutable evidence that many of these sites are hundreds of years old, with some having been used at least 2,000 years ago! While hearths are very common throughout the Mitchell Grass Downs, they are increasingly being damaged by cattle and vehicles and there is a very real possibility that in years to come they may all be destroyed. It is very important that an effort is made to protect them now, so that we don’t lose these valuable reminders of the longevity of the Aboriginal past in this unique part of Australia.

How where these fire places used?
One of the earliest European settlers in the region, Edward Palmer, in 1884 wrote the following account of how hearths were used by Aboriginal people:

“They roast all their food, or bake it in the ashes, making hollows in the ground and heating stones therein, in which the game is placed and covered completely with hot ashes. For fish and small game leaves are frequently places on the stones, and also over the game before covering it with the ashes … if no stones are available, ant beds are broken up in small square pieces and made to answer.”