A Review of Urban Historical Archaeology in Auckland to 1990

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Historical archaeology in Auckland is a relatively recent phenomenon. This paper traces its evolution from the work of interested amateurs in the 1970s through the development and implementation of an urban archaeology programme in the following decade by the Auckland Regional Archaeology Unit of the New Zealand Historic Places Trust, and later (after restructuring) the Department of Conservation. A number of historic site investigations carried out at the height of the development boom in the late 1980s are briefly described.

Since 1985 historical archaeology in Auckland has developed significantly. Although there was considerable interest in historical sites before this, problems of funding and facilities, and initial inexperience in dealing with sites of this period, delayed progress. It was left to dedicated amateurs such as Jack Diamond, Bruce Hayward, Keith Rusden and H.J.R. Brown to undertake valuable work investigating and recording historical sites.¹

The first excavation of an historical site in Auckland by trained archaeologists was an investigation of a well in Albert Park carried out by University students under the direction of Reg Nichol in 1979. The Park had been the site of the town's main military base (the Albert Barracks) between 1848 and 1871, and the well, which stood just outside the military prison, was located with the aid of a plan compiled shortly before the Barracks were demolished (Fig. 1).² The aim of the excavation was to recover structural details that would allow an accurate reconstruction of the original well by the New Zealand Historic Places Trust, as well as any artefacts associated with the use of the Barracks.

Although on a limited scale, the excavation clearly showed the potential of historical site investigations. Some structural details were recovered, though the well itself was unlined and contained few artefacts. But of far greater importance was the recovery of a valuable assemblage of artefacts from fill beneath a path running past the prison. In addition to glass and ceramic items were large quantities of military insignia of the 12th, 40th, 50th, 57th, 58th and 65th regiments, and of other units such as the Royal Artillery and Marines. There were also personal items such as cutlery marked with soldiers' names or initials. Together they comprise the largest assemblage of military artefacts recovered from New Zealand to date.³

Two years later Dr Susan Bulmer, Auckland and Northland Regional Archaeologist for the New Zealand Historic Places Trust, persuaded the Auckland City Council to fund a brief survey of historical archaeological sites in the Auckland Central City area.⁴ It was very much a preliminary exercise, with the main areas of interest identified and recommendations made for more detailed research in the future. The areas included the Domain, where the Auckland War Memorial Museum now stands and where a number of inadequately recorded sites are located (e.g., the Waikato chief Te Wherowhero's house, the observatory, blockhouses, public washing grounds, the Acclimatisation Gardens and other historical landscape features); the Albert Barracks; the Central Auckland area, where the first European occupation took place; historically recorded areas of Maori settlement (e.g., in St Heliers, Remuera, Epsom, Mechanics Bay, Mt Eden); St John's College and Bishop's Auckland; and other religious sites such as Bishopscourt, St Mary's and the Melanesian Mission at Kohimarama.

The recommendations for further research gave priority to the central Auckland area where the earliest settlements in Commercial Bay, Official Bay, Mechanics Bay and Freeman's Bay were located, since these were under the most immediate threat from redevelopment (Fig. 2). However, it was not until 1986, when it became clear that the central area was being developed at an unprecedented rate, that limited funds became available (from the Regional Committee of the New Zealand Historic Places

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1. Frissell, 1982
2. Nichol, 1984
3. Bulmer, 1985
4. Bulmer, 1987

Fig. 1: Plan of Albert Barracks in 1871 (from Frissell).
Trust) to locate and record significant historical sites through archival research.

The need for adequate documentary research prior to excavation had been effectively demonstrated during a brief salvage excavation in 1982 of what was thought to be the original site of Acacia Cottage, John Logan Campbell's first home in Auckland. Campbell's status as one of Auckland's most prominent early citizens (often described as the 'Father of Auckland') and the consequent public interest prompted the excavation, but the archaeologists were given no advance warning of the threat to the site and therefore no opportunity to carry out the necessary archival research. Structural remains were located but proved to be the remains of Brown and Campbell's neighbouring gum store, while post-excavation research showed the cottage itself to have been located on the site of an adjacent undemolished building.

The survey of historic sites in the central area, which has been carried out intermittently since 1986, has involved detailed research into the primary sources (e.g., title deeds, censuses, city plans, street directories, photographs), coupled with on-site assessment of the survival potential of archaeological features (based on the depth of existing basements and other sub-ground features and what can be established regarding the original ground profile and modifications to it up to the present). Although some of the research has inevitably been a direct response to development threats to specific sites, the overall aim has been to develop a programme of research into the origins and development of early Auckland by selecting a range of historical sites for investigation in advance of any threat to the sites. Priority has been given to the investigation of early public and community buildings (especially those of the period between Auckland's foundation in 1840 and 1865, when the colony's capital moved to Wellington), and a cross-section of early residential, industrial and commercial buildings which might illustrate the social and economic growth of the town in its earliest years.

Inevitably some periods are better documented than others. During Auckland's first 30 years of settlement the years 1845 and 1866 stand out, since a police census giving a wealth of demographic information was taken in 1845 and detailed street plans and directories of the mid 1860s have also survived. Site selection has therefore been biased towards these periods. Nor is it possible to be sure of the extent of surviving archaeological features before the demolition of existing buildings. However, the survey enables the significance of individual sites to be assessed more objectively within the broader context, and developers can be given advance warning of the existence of archaeological sites on their property. The survey has so far resulted in the excavation of eight sites in the central area (Figs. 2 and 3-10).

The first major excavation, and the one which has generated the most public interest, was that of Auckland's gaol and court house on the southwest corner of Queen and Victoria Streets. Built in 1841, they continued in use until 1865, when the prisoners were removed to Mt Eden. A plan published in the appendices to the Journals of the House of Representatives in 1861 shows the layout of the gaol, which housed both male and female prisoners (Fig. 3). In earlier years a gallows stood just outside the prison on Victoria Street, and a set of stocks on Queen Street. Only a limited number of areas could be investigated since excavation time was restricted to nine days. The site was covered by late nineteenth and early twentieth century buildings with deep basements, which it was assumed would have removed most of the archaeological deposits. Attention was therefore concentrated on a lane which ran through the centre of the site from north to south in the area of the main cell blocks and labour yard (Fig. 3) in the hope that deposits would have survived intact there if nowhere else. The well in the airing yard was also selected for investigation, being a deeper feature with a greater chance of survival, as were
Fig. 3: The gaol and court house in 1861 (from Journals of the House of Representatives 1861). The plan is oriented to the west, with Victoria Street to the north.
Fig. 4: Suggested reconstruction of Fort Ligar (after Smith 1989:28).
the original gaoler's house and court house, though their chances of survival were felt to be low (Fig. 3). Arrangements were also made to monitor the contractor's subsequent excavations and record any additional archaeological features.

In the event, far more archaeological evidence was found to have survived than predicted. The Waahorutu Stream, which flowed from south to north just west of the main cell blocks (see Fig. 3, bridge crossing line of stream), had cut a much deeper valley than suspected, so that when the area was redeveloped in the 1870s the buildings were constructed with their basements on or only just set into the existing ground surface, while Theatre Lane in the centre of the site had been built up with 3 metres of fill.

Beneath the fill evidence of the labour yard (with remains of stone-breaking activity), the kitchen (with cooking area and cobbled floor), and the debtors' cell block (consisting of basalt foundations with holes for timber corner posts, and an entrance and drain constructed of sandstone flags) was recovered. The well was also located. It was unlined and had been deepened at some stage of its life. It contained few artefacts, but iron buckets and timber posts that may have been part of the housing were recovered. Of the Court house, only four central pile foundations were located, and the gaoler's house could not be fully investigated owing to structural problems.

None of the artefacts recovered during the main excavation could be firmly associated with the gaol, but stratified layers of artefacts were recovered from the stream bed during the monitoring process, between a stone lining known to have been put in place in 1845 and a brick barrel drain dating to the 1870s. The earliest of these certainly related to the gaol period. The stream itself was a prominent feature of early Auckland. Known as the Ligar Canal, it served as the town's main sewer for many years, much of it uncovered, and the stench emanating from it and the general nuisance it presented were the subjects of frequent complaints to the newspapers. Among the finds from the stream were several dog skeletons deriving from an early dog pound adjacent to the gaol, evidently killed and thrown into the stream when unclaimed.

Evidence of earlier Maori occupation on the banks of the stream was also noted during monitoring, in the form of a shell midden, digging sticks and hangi (oven) stones.

A total of nine days excavation was clearly insufficient to do justice to such an important site. Here, however, as on other sites, one of the main problems was to assess the extent of the surviving archaeological deposits before demolition of the buildings. Our knowledge of the nineteenth-century topography has increased during the course of the survey, allowing more accurate predictions, and it is now common practice to make provision for an initial exploratory phase to establish what has survived, followed by a more lengthy excavation if warranted. The costs of the excavation can be recovered from the developer under the Historic Places Act 1980, but must be approved by the New Zealand Historic Places Trust and can be appealed against by the developer. Compromises are inevitable, therefore, and even with plenty of advance notification the excavation time allowed is rarely adequate for the requirements of the site.

In 1845 in response to the townspeople's fears of a Maori attack after the fall of island^.'^ the building took place, on the ridge just west of the gaol. soon subsided, and it was quickly forgotten. The fort was razed in 1859, and archival research could establish very little about its size and appearance. No published mention of it has been traced after 1890.

Although little physical evidence had survived the various subdivisions and buildings that later occupied the site, sections of two defensive ditches were located. One was 1.3 metres wide and 3.5 metres deep, dimensions which compared well with ditches of other redoubts built in the early 1840s in Wellington and Nelson. Their location through excavation enabled the redoubt to be identified in the shadowed background of a photograph taken in 1857. By combining the archaeological and photographic evidence, Dr Ian Smith was able to suggest a reconstruction of the size and shape of the redoubt (Fig. 4). At about 50 metres square, this would have been slightly smaller than other contemporary examples.

Central city excavations have included two other public buildings: the General Assembly building, in which Parliament met between 1854 and 1865 (Fig. 2, no. 5), and the guardhouse in Albert Park (Figs. 1 and 2, no. 8). Both were undertaken in response to proposed landscaping schemes and were partly aimed at relocating the buildings for presentation to the public in some form.

Other excavations have been carried out in Chancery Street, on a large site covering three city blocks, once the site of the Mechanics Institute and some of Auckland's worst slums. A detailed social and topographical history of the site was undertaken in conjunction with the excavation of selected areas, including the sites of the Mechanics Institute, the brewery and store of one of Auckland's first ginger beer brewers, William Bacon, and some early cottages (Fig. 2, no. 10).

The remaining sites comprise the cellar of the Victoria Hotel on Fort Street, built in the early 1840s and destroyed by fire in 1865 (Fig. 2, no. 9); an early flour mill built in the 1870s, over the remains of a house constructed in 1841 with an associated well containing quantities of organic artefacts (Fig. 2, no. 7); and a small house on Bankside St (Fig. 2, no. 4).

Inevitably, although a range of sites has been pre-selected for possible excavation as part of the overall programme of research into Auckland's origins, the sequence of excavation is determined by the developers. This has resulted in a bias towards the excavation of public buildings, with some industrial and residential but few commercial buildings investigated so far.

Development threats have also meant that priority has been given to the central city, although it has always been intended to extend the survey to other areas of historic interest within Auckland when funding becomes available. Two excavations outside the survey area have already been carried out in response to development or other threats. The first of these investigations, on the site of the Auckland Acclimatisation Society's fish ponds in the Domain (used for trout hatching and rearing from the late 1860s to the 1880s) was undertaken after members of the public were observed removing bricks from one of the structures.

The other was Dr Daniel Pollen's brickworks and pottery in West Auckland, on the banks of the Whau river, an early industrial site of major significance. One of the earliest brickworks located in New Zealand, it operated from the 1850s to the 1870s. The excavation exposed a large area of industrial remains, since there had been no development on the site since the closure of the brickworks. The structures included the base of a brick Scottish kiln (similar to a Dutch kiln) with 12 fireboxes, partly overlying an earlier clamp kiln (Fig. 5); two or perhaps three pugmills, consisting of circular tracks of broken bricks around oval pits containing brick...
foundations and some wooden and metal machinery; a clay preparation tank; and various drainage structures.

The works also produced fine-quality pottery from about 1863, when James Wright, a pottery manager from Hanley in Staffordshire, came to work for Pollen. Artefacts recovered from dumps on the site included forming ribs for cups, jugs and plates; sprigging moulds; and a tool with Wright's signature on it. Also recovered from the dump were an English Varley insulator with local versions copied from it. The material is currently being analysed and is providing a great deal of information about the technology and products of the brickworks and pottery.

NOTES

2. Frissell 1871.
15. Brassey & Macready 1990; Brassey this volume.

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