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A PRELIMINARY REPORT ON THE EXCAVATION OF
THE HALFWAY HOUSE HOTEL SITE, CROMWELL GORGE

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During November-December 1984 excavations were conducted on the site and associated dump of the former Halfway House Hotel site in the Cromwell Gorge. The work is part of the archaeological project associated with the Upper Clutha power development (Ritchie, 1979). Although the site is not going to be flooded, it will be unavoidably destroyed during the construction of the new Cromwell Gorge highway.

The hotel site is situated on the left bank of the Clutha River, upstream of and adjacent to a small tributary known as 'No 5 Creek'. This is approximately halfway between Cromwell and Clyde, hence the hotel's name. It is believed to have been built sometime in 1864 and served as a prominent landmark and popular hostelry for over 50 years, until it was destroyed by fire in 1917 (Cover and Fig.1). During the excavation, the building's structure and layout were recorded, and the recovery and analysis (presently underway) of a large midden sample is providing detailed insights into its social role and the diet of its inhabitants and customers.

The hotel's role changed over the years. Initially it was an important stopping place for travellers and waggoners making their slow journey through the Cromwell Gorge, and a meeting place for miners and others working in the area. A public meeting called by the local Chinese population was conducted there in 1867; an agreement being reached that "all help" would be given to the police to solve crimes committed by Chinese (Dunstan Times, 23 Aug 1867). As the condition of the road and the efficiency of transport improved, it became primarily a refreshment stop, rather than an essential stopover. In its latter years it was patronised primarily by workers employed on the construction of the Clyde-Cromwell railway line and on local dredges, and by waggoners.

Historical background

Like the majority of settlements and small centres in Central Otago, the Halfway House Hotel owed its existence to the goldrush period. The earliest positive indication of the hotel's existence is its depiction on a survey map drawn by P.Tresider in 1864, the original topographic plan of the area (Lands & Survey Dept, Dunedin). The hotel in its earliest years was owned by Mr Thomas Gibbs and known as 'Gibb's Halfway



Halfway House Hotel ca. 1880, with stables in foreground



Excavation of Hotel site, November/December 1984.

House' (Dunstan Times, 10 Feb 1866). In March 1867 Sir George Grey toured Central Otago and was met "by a cavalcade of leading Clyde citizens at Gibb's Halfway House" (Dunstan Times, 8 Mar 1867).

The first road through the gorge was constructed on the right bank of the Clutha River in 1863. Heavy rain washed away parts of it as soon as it was completed. A new road was built on the left bank and completed in April 1864 (Moore, 1978:73-74). Although traffic also continued to use the road on the western bank, a 'bosun's chair' strung across the river provided access to and from the hotel (Parcell, 1976:156).

The hotel was certainly one of the earliest establishments on the Cromwell Gorge road. In 1867 when Gibb's advertised it for sale he described it as "the oldest and best established hotel in the District" (Dunstan Times, 12 July 1867).

The hotel was often used as a landmark or reference point in descriptions of activities in the gorge, e.g. "the land opposite the (Halfway House) hotel is being mined by the All Nations Company" (Dunstan Times, 7 Apr 1866), and the location at which a mail coach capsized was described "as being on the Clyde side of the Halfway" (Parcell, 1976:178).

Waggoners were regular users of the hotel's facilities from as soon as waggon's could use the left bank road, and continued to 'stayover' at the establishment until it was burnt down. "Good Stabling" together with "Excellent meals, First Class liquors, Scrupulously clean beds, Private sitting rooms, and every attention that travellers could desire" are mentioned in the earliest newspaper advertisements (e.g. Dunstan Times, 15 Jan 1869). In 1915 hotel advertisement's proclaimed "Special Provision for teamsters camping overnight" (Dunstan Times, 17 May 1915). Because of the "manure nuisance" large teams of horses were not very welcome in the towns whereas the hotel was ideal according to the only known surviving former resident of the hotel (Mrs L. Sinclair): "The huge covered waggons with eight to ten horses would stop by the hotel to feed and water the horses in the large paddocks close by, sometimes staying overnight, and setting off for Cromwell the next morning".

In 1905 the first motorised vehicle came through the Cromwell Gorge on its way to Queenstown. A taxi service was operating between Cromwell and Clyde from 1912 (Parcell, 1976:169-170). This, in effect, marked the end of the coaching era.

The railway line was the next improvement in communications. By 1915 it had reached the Halfway House. "Many people lived in tents as the rail line was being laid...the men visited

the hotel at nights and there were two permanent boarders at the hotel (1915-17) who were employees of the railway" (Mrs Sinclair). The construction of the railway provided temporary relief from a situation of declining patronage. The hotel continued to operate until it was accidentally burnt down in 1917. Several people were staying in the hotel at the time and were lucky to escape (Mrs Sinclair, pers.comm.).

The site and excavation

The site consists of two main areas: the remains of the hotel and three outbuildings (Fig. 2) and a midden deposit located on the riverside of the present Cromwell Gorge highway.

The midden. Rubbish from the hotel was dumped down the steep bank of No 5 Creek, in an area between the present highway and the railway cutting (the railway was pulled up in 1980). This area, measuring 10 x 10 m, was excavated first (Fig. 3). Although two thirds of the deposit had been fossicked in the 1970s (information from project geologist, Clutha Valley Development - R.Thomson), in 1979, several metres of debris from a nearby slip in the gorge was dumped over the area, inadvertently but effectively sealing it from further fossicking.

A backhoe was employed to remove the overburden. The midden was divided into Areas A, B and C. Although Areas A and B had been extensively fossicked, the extent and depth of the deposit were determined and a large sample of midden was recovered minus intact bottles. Area C encompassed the unfossicked part of the midden. The deposit contained a wide variety of discarded hotel tablewares as well as large volumes of bottles and other discarded containers, reflecting its nature as a hostelry rather than just a 'grog shop'.

The inferred pattern of midden deposition was as follows: loads (probably bucketfuls) of ash, broken tablewares and discarded containers and table wastes were periodically dumped down the creek bank forming successive layered deposits. During these depositions heavier items such as intact bottles, and large pieces of ceramic and bone tended to roll to the foot of the slope whilst smaller fragments of glass and ceramic and other artefacts lodged at the top. The ash was thickest at the top of the slope and lensed out toward the bottom.

The hotel site. An attempt was made to locate the four corners of the hotel building using data recorded in a 1915 field survey book which detailed the position of the original road and the hotel when it was operating (Field Book 761, Lands & Survey Dept, Dunedin). When the road was realigned in 1938, the remains

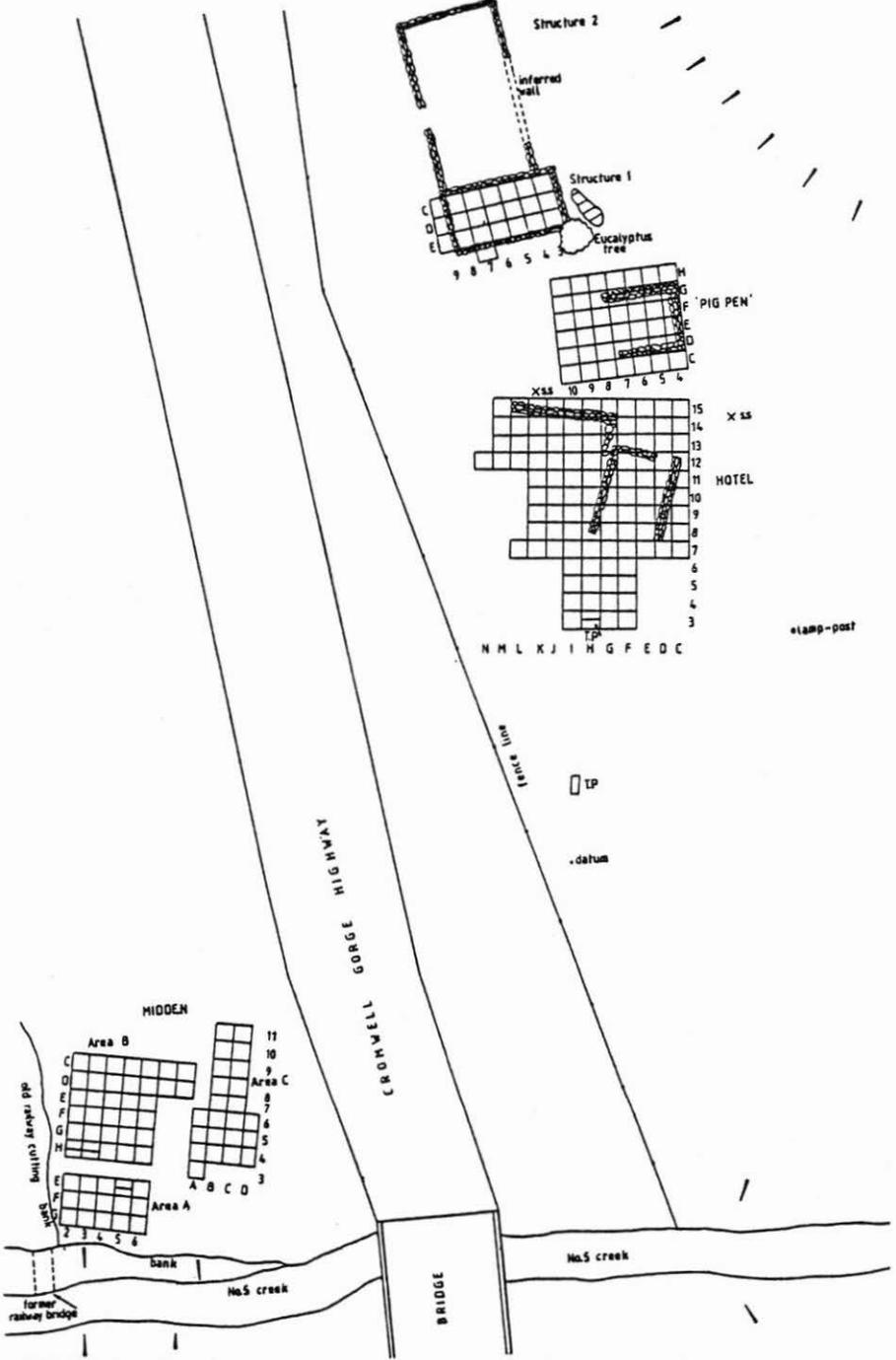


FIGURE 3. Halfway House Hotel: plan of excavated areas.

of the eastern half of the hotel site were destroyed. The hotel as depicted in early photographs and described in contemporary accounts was a wooden structure with stone foundations. Excavation revealed stone walls demarcating the kitchen area (possibly indicating the wooden building was built around an earlier structure). A concrete slab (a coal range foundation) was also uncovered in the kitchen area. Burnt floor beams were uncovered in-situ in several parts of the building.

The remains of a structure adjacent to the hotel simply consisted of three stone walls and an earth floor. Fossicked midden from a dump behind the structure had been thrown over the back wall into the interior. According to Mrs Sinclair "it was where they kept the pigs!". Three metres to the west a further two (adjoined) outbuildings were located; a stone shed (Structure 1) and stables (Structure 2). The shed had no evidence of flooring, and although the rear wall stood to a height of 2.38 m, all that remained of the front of the building were the stones which formed the base of the walls. Excavation of this structure provided few clues as to its function, but the building is now known to have served a dual role as a post office (from 1 Jun 1902 until 18 Mar 1919; Startup, 1977) and, according to Mrs Sinclair, as a storage shed from at least 1915 until the hotel burnt down in 1917.

The remains of the stables consisted of low stone walls with large schist slabs on the floor. The stone walls had largely collapsed into the interior necessitating considerable stone removal during the course of excavation. A drainage channel uncovered in the south-west quarter exited the building through a small outlet built in the west wall. The wide doorway (1.6 m) in the centre of the front wall was obviously designed to facilitate bringing horses in and out of the building without difficulty.

A semi-subterranean stone-revetted enclosure with a crudely paved floor was also investigated. It had no evidence of a roof and it contained negligible midden suggesting it was some form of stock enclosure. According to Mrs Sinclair it was used to house two pet goats.

The artefacts

The 50 odd cartons of material recovered from the site are at present being analysed. The middens were dominated by glass, bone and pottery. So far only the analysis of the glass artefacts from the midden area has been completed; a minimum of 673 bottles and glass containers being represented. This material dates from the 1870s to ca. 1915 based on study

of the bottle types, brands and manufacturing techniques. In addition a large number of other glass artefacts were recovered including drinking glasses, bowls and dishes.

A wide range of table ceramic wares was recovered from the site including some very ornate platters and serving bowls, as well as fragments of a Chinese ginger jar and an oriental bowl featuring a pictorial scene.

Tin cans and matchboxes have fared badly in the ash-rich deposits and their numbers are likely to be considerably under-represented. Those from the hotel site were in much better condition. Other metal artefacts included eating utensils, structural components and large numbers of nails and bullet shells.

Other items, which make up a relatively small percentage of the total volume of recovered materials include buttons (including some military ones), clay pipes, fruit stones, lamp parts and coins. Faunal material is dominated by sheep bones with lesser amounts of rabbit, beef, pig, bird and fish bones. A detailed analysis of the cooking and table-wastes is presently underway. More than a thousand oyster shells were present throughout the midden (they are a common component of historic deposits in Central Otago).

Most of the material from the hotel site had been burnt. This affected some artefacts more than others. Many glass artefacts were melted beyond recognition.

A detailed final report is yet to be completed. Already several interesting differences have emerged between the deposits of the Halfway House Hotel and those from two other early hotel sites, the Bridge Hotel site, Cromwell; and the first Hermitage at Mt Cook (Ritchie, 1985), we have excavated recently. These aspects will be elaborated upon in the final report.

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about its operation in its last years. I would also like to acknowledge the assistance of the Ministry of Works and Development.

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