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# A QUICK NOTE ON THE TOPS OF BOTTLES OR BOYS WILL BE BOYS

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## **Introduction**

Archaeological evidence of the pioneer habit of opening alcohol bottles by simply knocking their tops off has been observed at a number of military sites in the North Island, including the Ohaupo Redoubt, Te Awamutu Redoubt, Omata, Forts Galatea and Clarke, Runanga and Opepe (Ritchie and Gumbley 1992: 38). To date this habit has been assumed to be unique to military sites, and has not been observed in goldfields site.

## **Observation**

Recently the presence of bottles with their tops neatly removed has been noted on a number of Central Otago goldfields sites. Two such tops, still with cork and foil intact (Figure 1) were recovered from German Hills (in the Ida Valley, Central Otago) during the Otago University Anthropology Department's field school there in 1994 (now held as HA42 and HA142 in the comparative collection). German Hills was established in 1864, peaked late that year, and declined during 1865. A small population lingered until the 1890s.

At Cardrona several tops, corks and foils were recovered in association during a small test excavation in 1999 (Petchey 1999). Cardrona had a longer life than German Hills, being established in 1862 or 1863, and declining in the late 1870s. Unlike German Hills, Cardrona still exists today as a small settlement, known for its hotel and skifield.

At this stage, it seemed that a possible similarity was emerging between northern redoubt sites and southern goldfields sites. However, the German Hills sample was small, and the Cardrona sample very fragmented. More evidence came to light during an excavation carried out Queenstown in January 2000

prior to the construction of a new casino. The site was known to have had a continuous history of use since the 1860s, and had been the location of several hotels. This work revealed a mixture of material, dating from the 1860s to the 1980s with black beer glass and coke cans in close proximity in places. A report on the excavation is yet to be completed. Of relevance here were a small cache of black glass bottles found in the southwest corner of the site, in an undisturbed context. Every one of these bottles had been neatly topped, just below the applied lip. The tops themselves were not found.

Three sites have therefore produced similar evidence for the quick opening of bottles. All of the bottles themselves were black glass, which is typical of the 1860s and 1870s, but was beginning to be replaced by lighter coloured glass by the 1880s. Historically, the sites were all occupied in the 1860s and 1870s, with Cardrona and Queenstown still existing, although on vastly different scales.



*Figure 1. HA42 and HA142 from Otago Anthropology Department Historic Comparative Collection. Both tops from German Hills. Cork, wire and foil intact in both tops.*

### **Speculation**

There are a number of possible explanations for the observed occurrence of topless bottles or bottleless tops. One was that in transporting bottled goods to remote goldfields, a certain amount of breakage would be inevitable. This

would, obviously, lead to unopened bottle tops from broken bottles ending up in some middens. A second option was offered by the publican of the Cardrona Hotel, Brian Gilbert. He suggested that it was possibly a way of avoiding excise duty, whereby bottles of liquor opened by completely removing their tops could be consumed, and the undisturbed seals could then be forwarded to the appropriate agent as proof of breakage in transit, with any duty then being refunded. These alternatives seemed to be possibilities, and in the report on the Cardrona excavation (Petchey 1999: 35) I discussed them along with the potential similarity with military sites, but thought that more research was yet required. The recent Beach Street casino find taken in context with the German Hills and Cardrona material begins to suggest that the habit of opening bottles this way was a distinct behavioural trait in Otago, and was not confined to North Island military sites.

So what does this suggest? One possibility is that some ex-militamen from the North had migrated to the goldfields by the 1870s, to become part of the cosmopolitan population there, and had carried some of their habits with them. Another, somewhat all-encompassing, possibility is suggested in the sub-title to this paper. Men in isolated and difficult environments and situations may have behaved in similar ways. Alternatively, it may simply have been impatience with bottles that had flush corks wired down, and were therefore time-consuming to open (particularly by the end of the evening).

## Conclusion

As discussed above, there are a number of processes whereby unopened bottle tops can be found in archaeological contexts. However, there does seem to be good evidence for the habit of opening bottles by simply breaking the tops off in Otago goldfields sites. That it was not ubiquitous is shown that the method was not observed in Otago by Ritchie (Ritchie, pers. com.), who is both aware of the practice and excavated numerous sites during the CVD project days. All three sites where evidence of this type has been observed in Otago have certain things in common; all were small goldfields towns, with populations that had large mining components and were some distance from the coast and Dunedin. Many of the men drinking in these towns were therefore miners, living hard and wearing lives, away from the comforts (of various kinds) of the city. A certain degree of machismo may be expected to have been present. As to whether the practice was part of the participants' cultural baggage, or whether it was a more spontaneous expression of masculinity, is hard to say. Whatever the reason, it does show an interesting similarity to the North Island military sites, and archaeologically it can provide an excellent source of undamaged bottle foils,

which are a potentially very useful fine-grain dating tool for historic sites (see Nayton 1992).

### References

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