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ARCHAEOLOGY IN AUCKLAND, 1975–1982

Brenda Sewell
Opito Bay

The passing of the 1975 Historic Places Amendment Act gave greater protection for archaeological sites than ever previously and set out the procedure to be followed when a site was to be destroyed, including provision for the destroyer to pay for the necessary investigation. In Auckland this, the Government's Temporary Employment Project and the appointment of Susan Bulmer in 1979 as Auckland Regional Archaeologist for the Historic Places Trust paved the way for the employment of professional, non-academic archaeologists other than volunteers, as had been the case in the past.

From 1975 to 1979 the Trust instigated and organised many archaeological surveys from Northland through to the Coromandel Peninsula and the Bay of Plenty. There was a huge flurry of activity by more than 20 archaeologists or students, too many to mention them all. Caroline Phillips surveyed the western coast of the Firth of Thames; Simon Best worked on the Hauraki Plains, Coromandel Peninsula and Kaipara Peninsula; David Butts and Roger Fyfe spent time on Great Barrier Island; Janet Davidson surveyed in the Far North; Laren Diamond on the Thames coast; Russell Foster and Dilys Johns surveyed around the Pukaki Creek following on the work started by Agnes Sullivan; Anne Leahy and Wendy Walsh worked in the Bay of Islands and Waipoua, Kaipara and Eastern Bay of Plenty; Louise Furey surveyed Great Barrier Island and Coromandel; Ian Lawlor was on the Poor Knights and surveyed more of the Kaipara area; Bruce McFadgen and Tony Walton were in the Bay of Plenty as was Kevin Jones. In addition Wynne Spring-Rice was working for the Department of Lands and Survey and surveyed more of the Kaipara region while John Coster and Gabrielle Johnston worked for Forest Service in Tairua and Aupouri State Forests. The reports of all these early recorders show real professionalism in the work covered, although in comparison to today's documents their carbon copies and cyclostyled plans look very simplistic.

At the same time Lady Aileen Fox was working in New Zealand, based at Auckland Museum and she worked in the Bay of Islands and Hawke's Bay with Mary Jeal. She also took students out to South Auckland to recognise and

record sites. I understand that she once led a group through a couple of paddocks (not having obtained any permission) when an irate farmer roared up on his farm bike and asked, “Who the hell are you?” to which she replied, “Fox, Lady Aileen. Come along everyone”, and marched past him leaving him gasping.

The first excavation in the Auckland area carried out under the 1975 Act was in 1978, at Waitete Pa on the Waiuku Inlet. Here Susan Bulmer, accompanied by Louise Furey and Lyn Williams excavated some of the ditch and bank of this pa before it was destroyed by the formation of a boat ramp and access road.

The first major excavation carried out under the Act was at Puhinui in 1979, under the general supervision of Roger Green and field direction of Ian Lawlor. This really was a case of ‘learn to be an archaeologist as you go’ for many of us. While Ian had a core group of qualified archaeologists (including Sherry Reynolds, now General Manager of the NZ Historic Places Trust in Auckland) many of us were very green, on our first or second dig. We were proud to be allowed to work with professionals and earn \$2.75 per hour. One of the experienced excavators (who will be nameless, and is not involved in archaeology these days) complained to the union at the poor rates of pay and conditions. The man from the union said we should demand lunch room-cum-lab, toilet (we used to take a spade into the mangroves), and wet weather gear and hot showers! Hot showers in a paddock miles away from anywhere! After negotiations we were provided with a large relocatable shed and a port-a-loo, facilities that were written into most contracts with developers thereafter. Joan Maingay, Jan Coates, Rosemary Taiaroa and I were part of a team working furthest away from the creek and nearest to the quarry. One day the 3 pm blast went wrong and football sized rocks rained down around us—it gave us and the quarry manager quite a shock. Apart from excavating stone mounds I also thoroughly enjoyed a day spent in the mangroves at low tide removing centuries of still intact leaves until we reached a fish trap below. Exciting stuff.

In February 1980 Mokoia Pa was excavated by Susan Bulmer under the area supervision of Louise Furey and Wynne Spring-Rice. The site was alongside the main road to Panmure where there seemed to be a constant procession of ambulances, fire engines and police cars all with sirens blaring. We also entertained a string of little old ladies en route to the shops who asked daily “have you found anything dear?” We tried to explain the purpose of our excavation but by the last day when backfilling the answer was a definite “No.” One young crew member devoured a huge sticky bun and a 1.5 bottle of coke every morning tea. When backfilling he said the work could strain his back. I tried to jolly him along but in the end I had to backfill for him! We didn’t see much of him after that.

During the university summer vacations of 1979, 1980 and 1981 the Student Community Service Project Scheme was set up by the Government and Auckland City Council to find summer work for students. In 1979 13 students were employed under the supervision of Richard Cassells and Susan Bulmer. They carried out coastal surveys with Jan McKay, covered several regional parks and a regional survey of the Mangere area and surveys in Northland and the North Shore.

In 1980 Susan was appointed leader of a team of about 30. Students from all disciplines were part of the team—I remember a music student and two commerce students who worked in partnership with archaeology students carrying out surveys. One was Brendon Bartlett (now of MAF at Auckland Airport). Another was Peter Addis (now HOD of Maori Studies at Victoria) who took along Mary Sewell (now of the School of Biological Science at Auckland). Several geology students, including Chris Slane and Glenn White (last heard of searching for gold in Sumbawa), carried out a study of gold mines in the Coromandel State Forest. Paul Simmons took his yacht to Little Barrier to carry out the survey there but unfortunately holed it on his return to Auckland and decided to return to teaching to pay for the repairs.

Susan took us all to Hamlin's Hill where we had a crash course in recognising pits, terraces etc., and how to sketch them and write out Site Record Forms. Then we were let loose on the unsuspecting countryside—one “experienced” novice with one total greenhorn. One major project was to revisit all recorded sites within Auckland City and to upgrade the record. One particular day Joan Maingay took two new and very young students to the Kepa Road Reserve. Apparently Joan called out “I've found the midden” ...pause... “There's a boot in it” ...longer pause... “There's a foot in the boot.” Survey ended for that day and the police took over.

The SCSP students learnt their craft well, in particular how to write good site record forms, in particular the aids to relocation. The forms of one student slipped through the checking net only to frustrate me in later years when I was NZAA filekeeper. The aid to relocation said “midden at the back of the beach”—no mention of which beach and with no description of size or content of midden. For those of us that stuck it out it was a quick learning curve, but one that only increased our interest and awareness of sites and our ability to recognise and, perhaps, interpret them. So many of us who worked over those summers carried on to complete our degrees and in most cases to complete Masters degrees also. The intensive work that we did over those summers was a very good grounding for our future profession as archaeologists and I for one stand in debt to those people who helped and guided us.