



NEW ZEALAND  
ARCHAEOLOGICAL  
ASSOCIATION

## ARCHAEOLOGY IN NEW ZEALAND



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## AS IT WAS IN THE BEGINNING... A PERSONAL OVERVIEW

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“Two major excavations—one in Otago and one in Auckland—are planned for early next year by the newly-formed New Zealand Archaeological Association” (N.Z. Press Association, 27 August 1954). On 28 August 1954 this statement introduced an *Otago Daily Times* report on a meeting that had been held in Wellington the preceding day. This was my first indication that an Archaeological Association had been formed—and that it would be launched with a dig in my area.

I was eighteen years old, and as an enthusiastic amateur had been carrying out archaeological research in North Otago under the guidance of Dr H.D. Skinner for several years. (Interestingly, although H.D. promoted the Association and was its first convenor, he did not promote it to me. As a result I did not join immediately—that came a little later at the instigation of Roger Duff).

On the 6 December that year a telegram from Les Lockerbie of Otago Museum arrived at my home. As a result I found myself part of one of the first NZAA-promoted archaeological excavations in New Zealand. This was to take place at a Moa Hunter camp site at Hawksburn in Central Otago early in the New Year, carried out by a seven-man team led by Les. The location of the site was initially kept secret to prevent possible fossicking—common in those days when sites were completely unprotected. Nevertheless, we set out from Dunedin with a positive fanfare of local publicity (being caught by the news reporters as we were about to leave) on 11 January 1955. My diary records that the *Evening Star* published later that day “carried an awful photograph and a worse write-up.” We arrived at the site at 6 p.m., having walked the last six miles with our gear loaded on to two packhorses.

I am not going to go into details of the excavation, which has been published elsewhere (Lockerbie 1955, 1959), but as a matter of interest I note that a newspaper report on our return indicated that we brought back “several hundredweight of material.” There is no doubt that the emphasis (inevitably) was on the recovery of artefacts and subfossil bird bone (although no attempt



Figure 63. Cartoon of the Hawksburn excavation, 17 January 1955. Courtesy Otago Daily Times, with acknowledgement to the late Sid Scales.

was made to look at butchering methods or the range of other information the latter might have provided). This is not surprising. If you look back at the presiding giants of the day who founded the Association—H. D. Skinner, Roger Duff, W. J. Phillipps, Terry Barrow, Vic Fisher, the list goes on—they were all ethnologists whose principal and lifelong study was artefact typology. Coupled with this was the revival of interest in our subfossil birds, especially the moa, engendered by a decade of much-publicised discoveries of natural bone deposits at Pyramid Valley.

The really significant thing in retrospect is that Les Lockerbie's work marked a change from a century of what was little better than fossicking for portable artefacts to the beginnings of a scientific approach. Les pioneered three-dimensional recording in New Zealand—we didn't just dig for artefacts, we

noted and recorded exactly where they were found. Roger Duff, at that time at the summit of the archaeological tree, thought this was a good idea—he had got me doing it in early 1954—but couldn't quite get the hang of it himself. (Les and Roger indulged in numerous differences of opinion at this period, and these were ongoing throughout the Association's formative years). Les's other great introduction was the collection of materials for radiocarbon dating—then in its infancy as an archaeological technique.

For me, the next significant point in the development of archaeology in New Zealand was the arrival of Fulbright Scholar Dr Bob Bell in 1956—he was described by Roger Duff as “an expert with a long-handled shovel.” Regardless of his methods, Bob's contribution was the idea of clearing off the bottom horizon of a deposit to look for signs of structures—pits, trenches, post-holes etc. To do this he expertly wielded a shovel to clear off a horizontal level on which marks of downward intrusion could be seen. It was an entirely new idea and one which had, until that period, been virtually ignored in an archaeological world dominated by the search for portable artefacts.

Bob Bell accompanied Les, myself and a couple of others to the mouth of the Tahakopa River in South Otago in January 1956, where there was a large Moa Hunter site that had been investigated by David Teviotdale in earlier decades. Les was determined to obtain evidence to refute Roger Duff's claim that New Zealand sites lacked stratigraphy (Lockerbie 1959: 79). Sure enough we found pits that had hitherto been ignored, projecting downwards into sterile sand beneath the clearly stratified occupational deposits—some to a depth of nearly seven feet from the surface. The site is later referred to as Papatowai by Lockerbie (1959: 80–82). Bob became best known for his similar work with Roger Duff on house structures at the so-called Pariwhakatau site in southern Marlborough (Duff 1961).

The next two who greatly influenced my future interests in archaeology were Wal Ambrose and Frank Davis. For three days in January 1958 Roger Duff and I accompanied them to the Waitaki Gorge area. Here they recorded endangered rock drawings using the latest techniques of photography as well as making tracings on transparent sheeting. They set a standard of accuracy and detail in recording previously unrealised in New Zealand. I, in turn, learned methods that I was to use for the next thirty years.

It was shortly after this, on 20 January 1958, that an impressive team from all over the country assembled in Christchurch for the great Moa Bone Point Cave dig, which was the first, to the best of my knowledge, official New Zealand Archaeological Association excavation (Hawksburn, though promoted by the newly formed Association, was an Otago Museum dig). Like so many excavations, then and now, it has never been written up. It is briefly referred to



*Figure 64. Frank Davis tracing rock drawings at Shepherds Creek shelter as a rescue operation before the filling of the Benmore hydro dam on the Waitaki River, 1958. Photo Wal Ambrose.*

in Trotter (1975: 193). Organised locally by Canterbury Museum and directed by Roger Duff, it gave me my first and only opportunity to work with Jack Golson—already familiar to me through his northern investigations with “Golson’s Gang.” Jack’s speciality was stratigraphy and its interpretation (he was in charge of this on the cave dig) and he promoted yet another new concept—excavation and recording in stratigraphic layers—where hitherto we had largely cut down through these to view them in section. It was at this time also that I was introduced to the use of the diamond-shaped trowel as a basic tool of excavation (the traditional tool prior to this resembled a small pick or ice-axe).

In those five years then, 1953–1958, I became acquainted with the latest techniques of the professional archaeologist’s trade, as well as the new methodology in which the stress was on the obtaining of information, rather than primarily the recovery of portable artefacts and bones.

This is, of course, a strictly personal overview relating to the progress on New Zealand archaeology as it was revealed to me in southern New Zealand.

And because it is personal, I cannot leave it without looking at the contribution of Dr Roger Duff.

Roger, with his work at Wairau Bar and subsequent publications, was the towering figure in New Zealand archaeology at the time of the formation of the Association. His great tragedy was his inability to accept change or any challenge to his own ideas—especially the sort of changes in New Zealand archaeology that came about largely by the Association’s efforts. Despite this, he was to dominate the Association’s Councils and considerations for many years. Roger was not an easy man to work with (as I have good cause to know), especially in his latter years. And as he failed, it became fashionable to belittle much of his work—and especially his methods. Yet few had the courage to challenge him in his heyday.

He made two outstanding contributions. He consulted with the Maori community much of the time before working on Maori sites. In this he was decades ahead of his peers. This may not have been consultation as we know it today, but he did it, usually introducing the subject in fluent Maori, and in doing so earned Maori respect and co-operation. And he was the ultimate communicator at all levels. Regardless of his theories, his publications stand today as models of how to get the message across to the community in general. And it worked! No archaeologist had before, or has since, so greatly influenced people’s thinking on New Zealand’s Maori history.

Those are my thoughts on some major influences during the formative years of the Association. My greetings to all of those I have worked with over more than half a century who may read this—and my best wishes to all those who are following along after. As a devotee of Julius von Haast, I say to all of you: *Hoch altertumswissenschaft!*

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