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CUTTERS BAY (S22/40): A WHALING STATION IN PORT UNDERWOOD,
MARLBOROUGH SOUNDS

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Cutters Bay is one of several well-known early nineteenth century whaling stations on the south side of Cook Strait. The bay is one of the earliest sites of European occupation in New Zealand, with whaling stations probably back to the 1830s, and the documented establishment of a station there by Daniel Dougherty in the 1840s (Manson, 1974). The site lies near the entrance to Port Underwood, a southern extension of the Marlborough Sounds frequently visited by ships waiting for a fair wind to enter Port Nicholson (Wellington Harbour). Archaeological records of Port Underwood have been gathered by Trotter (1975).

Much of the peninsula forming the eastern side of Port Underwood has been or is about to be planted in pine forest. Log marshalling and loading on to barges is one of the principal hazards faced by archaeological sites in areas like the Marlborough Sounds (Jones, 1982). Cutters Bay is a possible candidate for such operations. In addition, there was some prospect of acquisition of the vicinity of Cutters Bay by the Crown as a reserve. For these reasons, a closer examination of deposits behind the beach at Cutters Bay was warranted.

Surface archaeological features, mainly house sites, stone fire places and other structures, and a spring are shown in Figure 1.

Test pitting

A line of five 50 cm deep test pits about 40 x 25 cm at 10 m intervals was excavated up the centre of Cutters Bay. A detailed plan of the location of the test pits may be found in Jones (1982).

A substantial deposit of darkened soil, at least 25 cm thick and deeper than the base of the test pits, extended up the mild slope from the modern beach (Fig. 2). The darkened soil was mixed with grey beach-worn schist pebbles. The small volume excavated from Test Pit 2 contained lumps of charcoal, two rusted iron nails and a fragment of clay pipe stem (length 40 mm, diameter 6 mm, bore diameter 2 mm). Test Pits 3 and 4 also contained lumps of charcoal, with a number of burnt stones in 3. This evidence

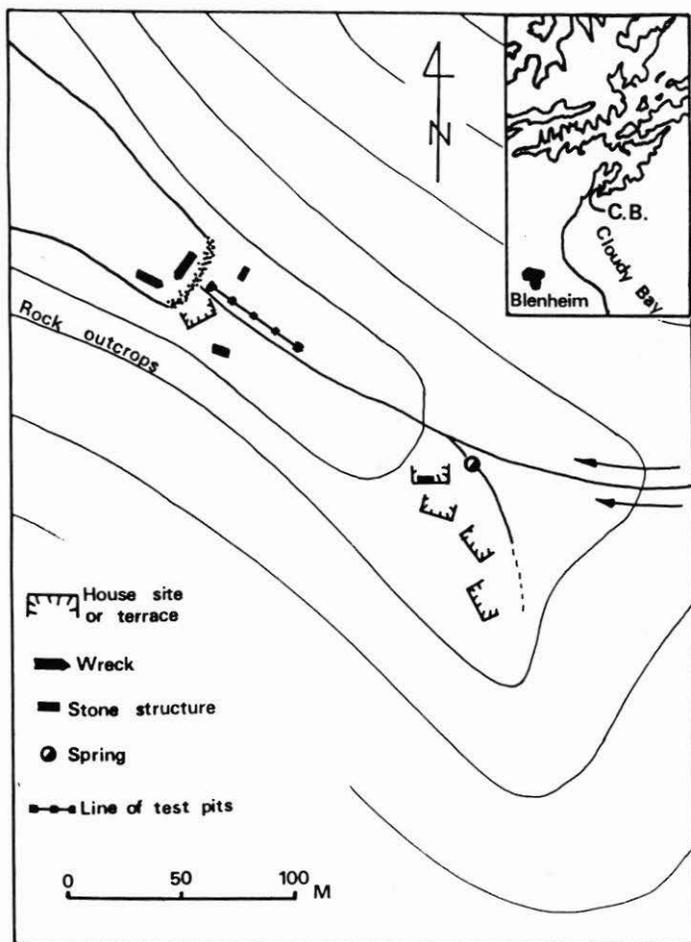


FIGURE 1. Sketch plan of Cutters Bay. Contours at 5 m intervals.

suggests structures of some kind, and firing, in an area 10-30 m behind the present beach. The darkened deposit was overlain by 20 cm or so of compacted yellow-brown soil and angular gravel, the result of erosion from the principal gully coming down to the bay.

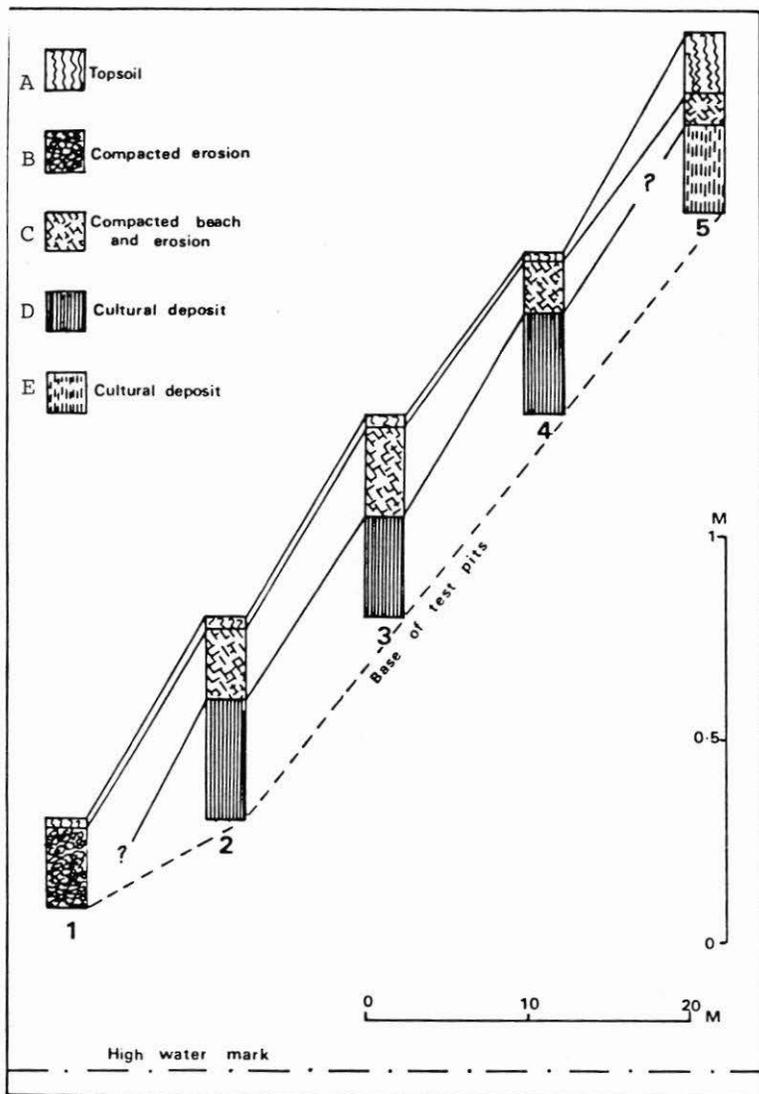
Beach stones in the man-made deposit suggest either deliberate introduction to the site, or that the site was built on an older beach or beaches. The characteristic grey schist outcrops a short distance to the south of the beach on the high water mark. There appears to be no source of this stone up the gullies since the erosion debris, soil and stone, is yellow-brown or cream in colour. A schematic reconstruction of the progradation of the beach during and after deposition of the site is shown in Figure 3.

There are no adequate historical accounts of the effect of the 1848 Marlborough earthquake on this particular coastline. A recent view is that there was little change in coastline (Eiby, 1980:33-59). Progradation and stabilisation of the beach would be the result of three processes:

1. scrub clearing, burning, and subsequent erosion at all phases of the site's occupation,
 2. the possible use of fill to enlarge the site's usable flat land, and
 3. the sinking of two ships hulls just off the beach in the 1940s, which will have reduced wave action in the bay.
- The superficial deposit is very hard, which may be attributed to stock trampling in the makeshift sheep yard which exists there.

The deposits at Cutters Bay are therefore in all likelihood in a remarkably good state of preservation, and should provide much evidence of artefacts and structures used in the bay. This is in marked contrast with many areas of the Marlborough Sounds where archaeological sites are typically found eroding out of beach scarps. Such sites, e.g. Pipi Bay (S22/35) to the north of Cutters Bay (Trotter, 1975), are probably the result of sites being occupied on erosion deposits or even during their deposition. With relative stabilisation of vegetation, these have begun to erode back, exposing the archaeological evidence. Initial

FIGURE 2. Test pit sections. A) grey loam; B) light brown loam, many angular cream-coloured stones, compacted; C) grey-brown loam, many pebbles of beach-worn grey schist and angular cream-coloured stones; D) dark grey loam with many pebbles of grey beach-worn schist and some angular stones; E) grey loam with some fragments of grey beach-worn schist. Heights of test pits above H.W.M. estimated; other measurements by tape.



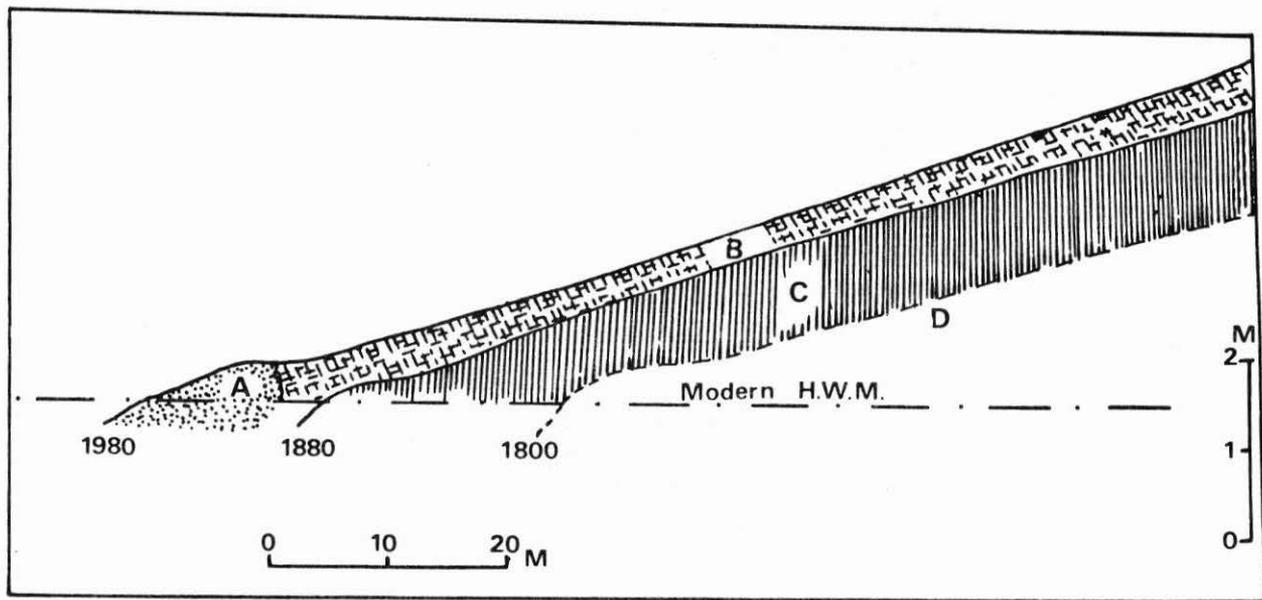


FIGURE 3. Schematic section showing progradation of beach at Cutters Bay. A. modern beach deposit; B. stock-compacted erosion debris; C. whaling deposit on old beach; D. old beach.

Maori settlement of the Sounds may lie even further back in these bays under quite massive quantities of erosion debris.

Certainly, industrial activity on these locations should be subject to very close archaeological inspection. Cutters Bay (S22/40) itself warrants protection under the Historic Places Act 1980.

Acknowledgement

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