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DERIVING SOCIAL EVENTS FROM THE REITMANN'S FAUNAL WASTE

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Introduction

In 2007-8, archaeological investigations were undertaken within the grounds of the current Thames Hospital (Phillips and Druskovich 2009). This property includes the site of the original hospital built in 1868, the 1880 Thames High School and various late 19th century dwellings, one of which was owned by the Reitmann family from 1871-1909 (Figures 1 and 2).

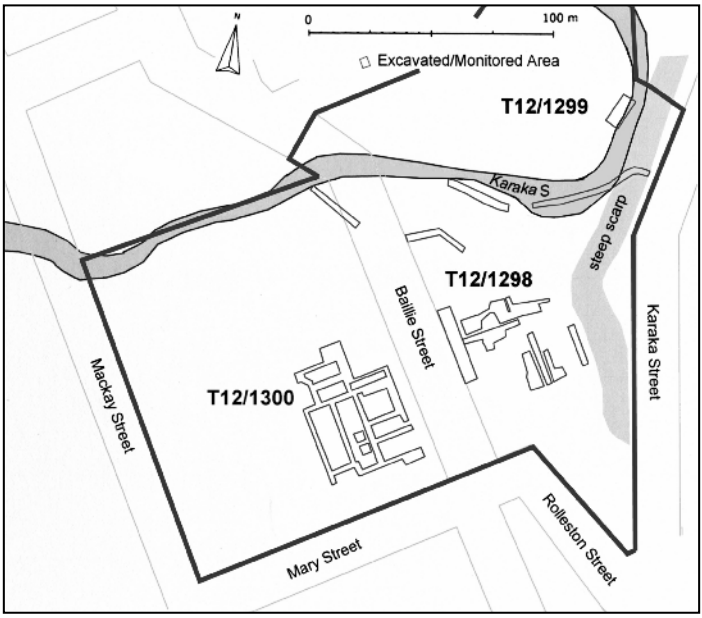

Figure 1: Excavated and monitored areas within the current hospital property. Note that Baillie Street existed until the mid-20th century when it was subsumed into the hospital grounds and built over.

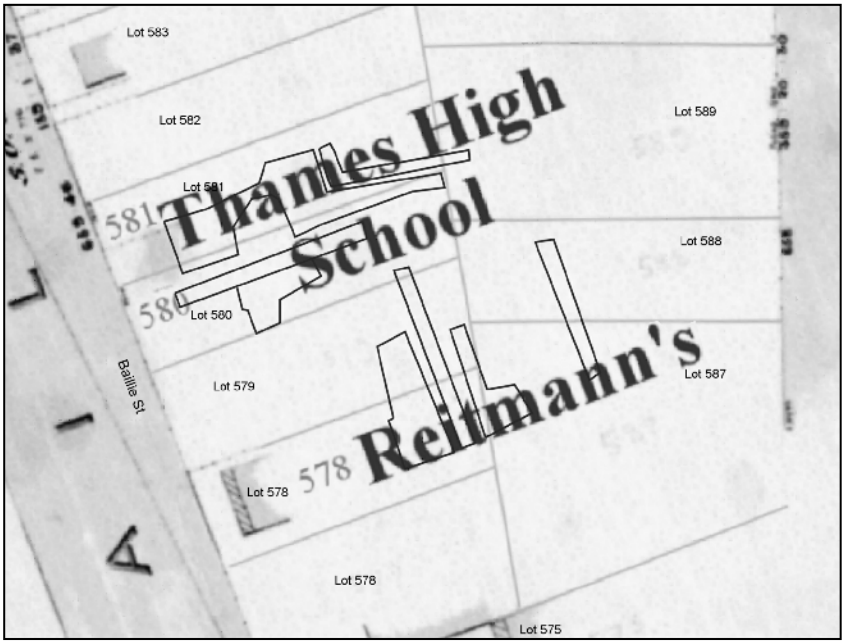

Figure 2: Detail of SO 36155, dating to 1898, marking the front of the Reitmann house, and showing the location of the three excavated areas at the rear of the property (SO 36155 from Land Information New Zealand).

Field results

In the Reitmann's back yard a number of features were identified, including 38 rubbish pits, of which 33 were small and five were large (Figure 3). The small pits were the size of one-two spade holes and shallow, whereas the larger ones were up to 3 m long and 1 m deep. Rubbish in the latter was layered and some material showed signs of burning. A patch of charcoal may have been the site of an incinerator.

It was notable that the contents of the smaller pits appeared to be slightly earlier based on the date of the ceramics and glass than the larger ones. The smaller pits also contained a few children's toys and writing slate tablets and pencils.

Figure 3: Features recorded in the three excavated areas in the rear of the Reitmann property ('not exc'= not excavated).

Faunal analysis

The faunal analysis included identification of the Minimum Number of Elements (MNE) where the elements and element fragments were identified according to species, element, portion and side where possible. Epiphysial fusion of long bones was assigned a value from 0-3, where 0 equals unfused and 3 equals completely fused. These values were used in turn to determine age estimates for pig, sheep, cattle and horse using Silver (1963).

Minimum Number of Individuals (MNI) totals were calculated based on MNE counts, though some elements which do not fit conveniently into portion description (and therefore create greater room for error) were purposely left out

of MNI calculations (including cranial fragments, mandible fragments, teeth, vertebrae and sacra).

The standard practice is to calculate MNI values based on the remains from all features being taken as one assemblage. However, this is not practical when an assemblage is known to extend over 20 or more years and where not all the pit contents are available for analysis (it is likely that the upper portion of some pits had been removed by later earthworks and only part of the contents were recovered from the large pits).

In this context, a more reasonable approach is to use MNI for the small species, such as fish and chicken, and for the large species present, such as sheep, pig and cow, to calculate Minimum Number of Butchery Units (MNBU). It is likely that the Reitmann family bought cuts of meat – pork, mutton and beef – from the local butcher. The MNBU counts were estimated based on Watson (2000). Unfortunately, pig and sheep vertebrae and ribs are virtually impossible to differentiate, and this means that elements that are suspected to belong to one or the other species are labelled 'medium mammal species'. This in turn means that the butchery units which they contribute to are underrepresented. Estimates using 'medium mammal species' vertebrae and ribs are impractical as butchery units vary between mutton and pork.

The types of meat from each pit gave some indication of the Reitmann family diet (Figure 4). Despite the problem of identifying certain bones to species, mutton was the main meat eaten throughout, but it is noticeable that there is more variety in the large Area D pits.

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Area	Feature	Meat				Age	Cuts
		sheep	cattle	pig	other		
A	68	sheep					sheep's head
A	86	sheep	?beef	pork	horse, cockles	mutton	sheep's head
A	89	sheep	?beef				sheep's head
A	92	sheep	beef		oysters		sheep's head
A	106	sheep	?beef	pork		hogget	
A	107	sheep				mutton	
A	119	sheep			cockles		
A	120	sheep					
D	104	sheep	beef	pork	chicken, grey duck, snapper, oysters, cockles	hogget & lamb	sheep's head, ?pigs head
D	113	sheep				mutton	
D	141	?sheep			dog cockle		
D	142	sheep	beef	pork	chicken, fish, oysters hen egg		sheep's head
D	165	sheep					sheep's head
T2	8				chicken		
T2	10	sheep or pig				pork or lamb	

Figure 4: Fauna from Reitmann rubbish pits, with the addition of shellfish. All the large pits were in Area D.

The cuts of meat also varied. In the earlier pits there was evidence that sheep's head broth, with beef and pork flap, all cheap cuts, were the most common meals.

It is often assumed that head and feet bones are waste. At the Australasian Society for Historical Archaeology Conference in Dunedin in 2011, a discussion about the use of sheep's heads revolved around the suggestion that they were bought to extract brains and tongue or for feeding the dogs. Although dogs were present in the Reitmann household (the burials of both dogs and cats were found in the back garden), it is also known that in the 19th century all parts of an animal were consumed by people.

> "Mrs Beeton's cookbooks [from 1861] …offered recipes for the feet and heads of most animals. … Later New Zealand books gave an equally large number of instructions for rendering even the most unlikely pieces of animal edible" (Veart 2008:29).

Therefore we consider that it is most likely that sheep's head broth was on the Reitmann family menu in the early period. In contrast, there were more expensive cuts represented in the later Area D pits, including mutton forequarter, loin and leg, beef rump, chuck or beef rib cuts.

Reitmann family

Archival records indicate that the Reitmann family was a young family in the 1870s. In 1875 there were six children, five of whom were under 10 (Figure 5). In 1880 the Reitmanns bought the neighbouring property and by 1890 had converted it into a general store. Three of their children had left home by this time to be married, and certainly one, it not all, the others were working.

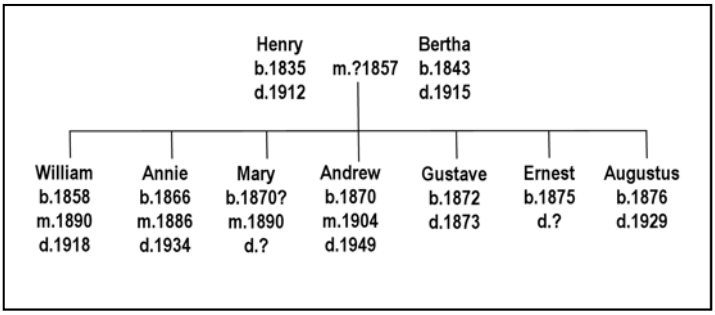

Figure 5: Reitmann family tree (constructed with the help of the Coromandel Historical Society), showing the dates of the family births, marriages and deaths.

Henry, formerly a gold miner was now in his 50s. He and Bertha, his wife, became storekeepers for at least the next 15 years.

The wealth of the family appears to increase over time, which may be due to the reducing number of dependant children in the household. This change in wealth is reflected in both the range of foods and the cuts of meat, with much greater variety and more expensive cuts being eaten.

Summary

The aim of this research was to identify social events through the diet of past inhabitants. In this case, a series of rubbish pits was dated approximately by the ceramic, glass and other contents. Each rubbish pit was regarded as a separate assemblage being the residue of one or more meals and MNI was used only for the smaller species, with the MNBU being used for the large animals. The faunal analysis indicated that there was a greater range of animal types consumed in the later period and the meat cuts were more expensive. Research into the family history suggests the reasons for this change in their diet over time. The evidence suggests that the family were not well off while they had young children, but were more prosperous when the children had left home, or were working.

Acknowledgements

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