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EVIDENCE OF SEALERS ON OPEN BAY ISLANDS, SOUTH WESTLAND

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Between July and November 1989 we conducted research pertaining to the breeding ecology of Fiordland crested penguins (*Eudyptes pachyrhynchus*) on Open Bay Islands (43 50° S, 168 53° E), South Westland. Taumaka, the largest of the two islands and several islets that make up the group, is predominated by a dense, 1-3 m high tangle of the epiphytic vine kiekie (*Freycinetia banksii*). Travel through vegetated areas is, therefore, mainly restricted to a track that runs the length of the island. While cutting a rough tunnel from the main track to a penguin sub-colony to avoid repeated disturbance of large numbers of southern fur seals (*Arctocephalus forsteri*), we discovered the walls of a low rock structure. We believe the structure was built by a group of sealers known to have been marooned on the island between 1810 and 1813.

An outline of four walls is discernible beneath the kiekie and other vegetation that cover the site, but only the east wall, approximately 1 m tall, appears complete (Fig. 1). The north wall is a similar height and terminates a little over 1 m from the east corner. The south wall has a 0.5 m opening midway along its length and tapers gradually in height to the south-west corner where a few loosely piled stones make up the west wall. Most of the stones are relatively flat and are stacked and interlocked to form walls up to 74 cm thick. Dried mud chinking persists between the stones of the north, east and south walls.

A few other stones of varying shape and size are scattered within and around the walls. The rocks appear to be limestone, as is most of the island, but erratic boulders of schistose exist elsewhere. Trunks of kiekie and seven finger (*Schefflera digitata*) extend from within the structure and branches are partially supported by the walls to a height of 1-2 m. Thick cover makes it difficult to see the stones from above; indeed we had walked over them on two previous occasions without knowing of their existence.

The structure is positioned approximately 25 m from the edge of the exposed rocky reefs that border the northwest coast of the entire island and about 0.25 km from a rocky beach from which such stones might be gathered. Another collection of stones is present on the main track, about 25 m from the first, towards the middle of the island. This pile is completely collapsed forming a mound of stones approximately 30 cm high and covering an area of roughly 3.4 x 2.6 m. We saw no

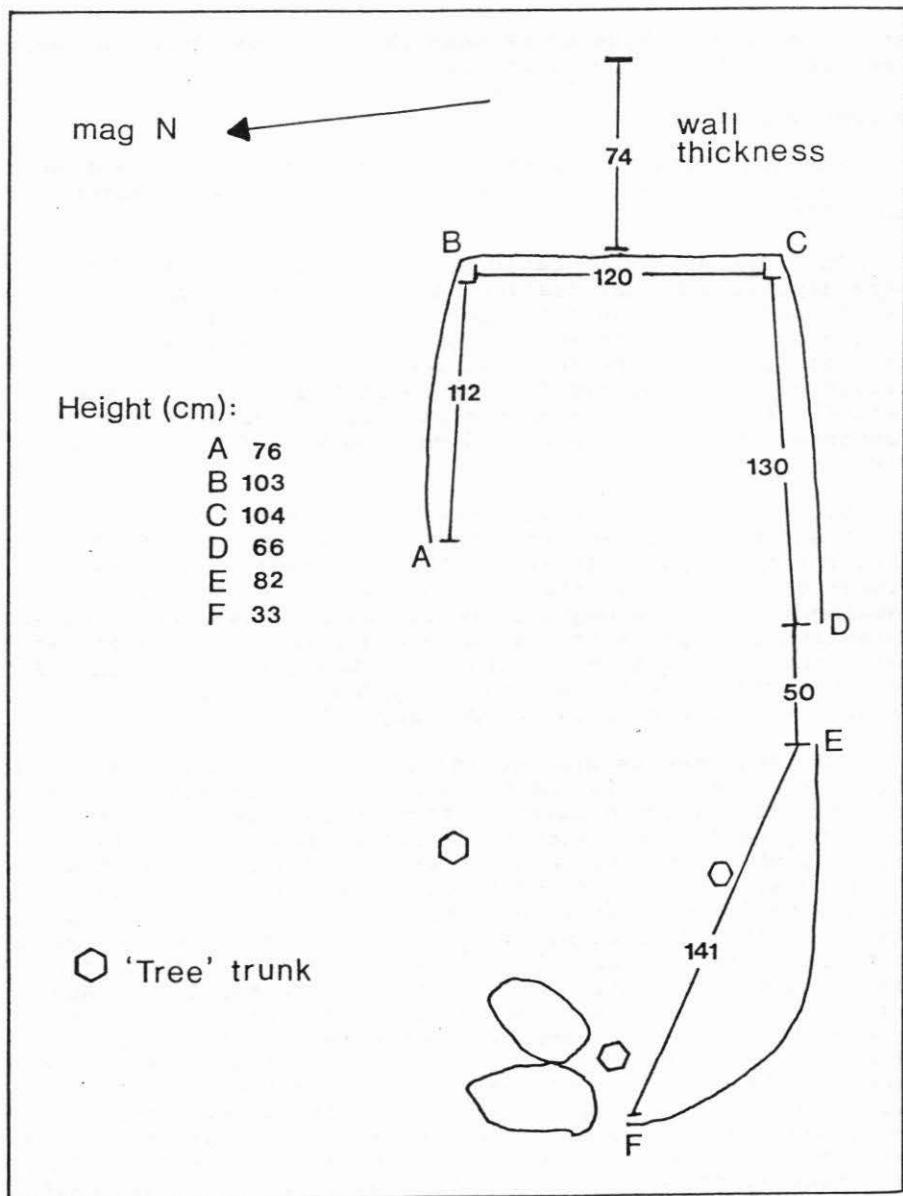


Figure 1. Diagrammatic representation of the inner dimensions of the rock structure found on Open Bay Islands. Outside dimensions were not measured, but wall thickness is greatest along the east wall. All measurements are in cm.

evidence of mud chinking between these stones, but none were removed for closer examination.

A possible origin

The following information is mostly summarized from Begg and Begg (1979), in turn drawn largely from McNab (Notebooks and 1909).

On 3 January 1810, David Loweriston and a crew of nine men were deposited by the sealing and whaling brig Active on Open Bay Islands. They were provided with a few basic supplies, including a boat, and were to obtain and cure as many sealskins as possible while the ship returned to Sydney to replenish provisions. The Active did not reach Sydney nor did she return. A folk song of anonymous origins tells of how "she foundered in a gale and went down, and went down, and went down".

By November of that year the men had amassed some 11,200 skins and must have realized they were marooned. In the months that followed, parts or all of the crew made five dangerous crossings to and from the mainland where they finally remained. They had begun to build another boat, chopping and chiseling each plank from a whole tree, when on 27 November 1813 John Grono arrived by chance on the Governor Bligh. All ten survived and were returned to Sydney with 8,700 of the skins they had preserved on Open Bay Islands.

John Boulton records seeing a hut on the north-east end of the island when he visited there in 1826 (Begg and Begg 1979) and bits of glass and charcoal found more recently (Burrows 1972) may be further evidence of its presence. This is probably where the marooned sealers lived while on Taumaka, but the rock structure we found beneath the kiekie is at the other end of the island. It is possible both it and the pile on the track originated as caches, built to protect stored sealskins from the elements and, following events further south, from marauding thieves while the crew was on the mainland. When the sealers returned to retrieve their skins, the caches - if indeed this was their purpose - would have been hastily dismantled, perhaps explaining the delapidated state of the rocks on the track and the west portion of the other site. A.C. Begg and N.C. Begg suggested that the kiekie structure would have been too small to house many sealskins and instead was used to store tinned provisions or kegs of salt for curing the skins (pers. comm.). The difficulty of replacing these items would have made them well worth protecting.

Because of the impenetrable nature of the kiekie and because our research priorities were directed at penguins, we did not attempt a thorough search beyond the immediate environs

of the initial find. Such a search, although it would be extremely difficult to conduct, may provide further information about the sealing era in New Zealand.

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