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NEW ZEALAND ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER



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EXCAVATION OF A NINETEENTH CENTURY KAURI BUSHMEN'S HUT SITE,
WAITAKERE RANGES, WEST AUCKLAND

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There is a wealth of written descriptions and photographs of kauri bushmen's huts of the 1910s - 1930s that give a good idea of their construction and the everyday way of life of the occupants. How, if at all, did these huts and the bushmen's lot differ from those of the nineteenth century? Written descriptions are virtually lacking, as are interior photographs. Photographs of the external view of early bush huts are sparse, especially prior to 1880.

The opportunity to investigate the site of a small nineteenth century hut, arose out of our survey of historic sites in the Waitakere Ranges several years ago (Hayward and Diamond, 1978). The site (N41/417) is in an area of regenerating native forest in the Pararaha Valley (Fig. 1). It is situated on a small spur, 10 m directly above the top of the former kauri driving dam in Walkers Stream. The thick bush and remoteness of the site (1½ hours walk from nearest road, ½ hour bushcrash from nearest track) has resulted in this being one of the very few sites in the region that has not been scavenged by bottle hunters in the last decade or so, and probably not visited by anyone other than ourselves for thirty or forty years.

Site investigations were carried out by the writers on 12th and 15th January 1982 (H.P.T. Permit 1981/39).

Historical background

The proximity of the hut site to the remains of a kauri driving dam of pre-1890 design, points to it having been built and used during the major period of kauri logging in the Pararaha Valley in the 1870s. About 1870 William Foote built a timber mill near the mouth of Pararaha Stream (Fig. 1). Three driving dams were erected on various branches of the stream and used to flush the felled logs out of the bush and down to a holding dam beside the mill (Diamond and Hayward, 1980). Presumably the hut was initially constructed to house the men building the dam and later used by those working in that part of the forest either felling trees or attending the dam.

The Pararaha Mill was sold to Guthrie and Larnach in 1877 but in March 1881 it was burnt to the ground. Operations then ceased

in the Pararaha Valley until the 1920s and 1930s when the Morningside and later Odilins Timber Companies used haulers to remove some of the remnant kauris left by the early logging.

It is thus clear that this hut was built in the early 1870s and abandoned in 1881. Evidence of its later use and destruction came to light during our excavation.

The excavation

The investigation was carried out in three stages.

1. The site was cleared of ground plants, fallen branches and loose forest floor litter.
2. The location of surface hut debris (corrugated iron, rotting wood, large artefacts) was recorded before removal.
3. Excavation was undertaken to expose the former dirt floor and other subsurface features. On the west side of the terrace this involved little more than removal of the compacted leaf litter. On the east side a thick mat of roots and soil up to

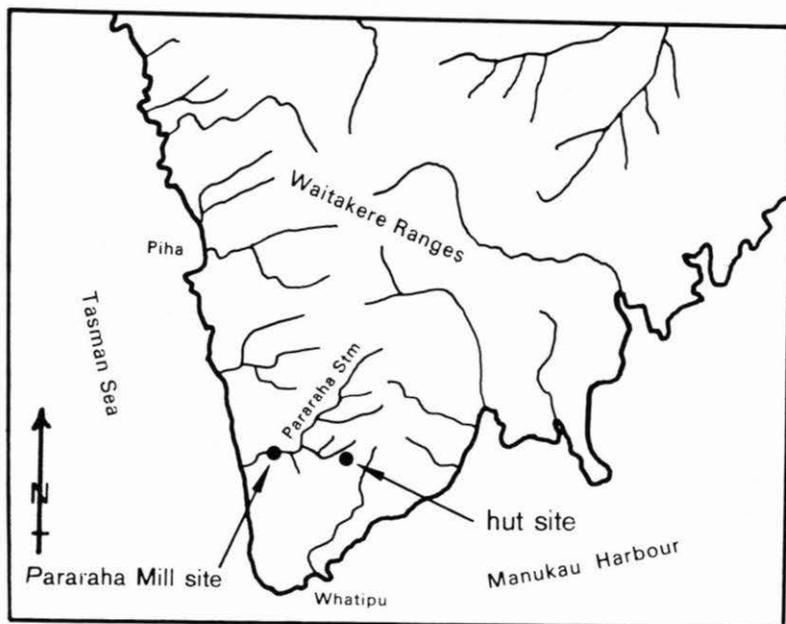


FIGURE 1. Location map.

15 m deep was removed, and in the vicinity of the fireplace a depth of 30 cm of roots and underlying ash and soil was excavated to reach base level.

To produce the flat terrace the bushmen had dug into fairly solid weathered rock on the uphill side. Thus subsurface features in the eastern third of the site were still crisp and well preserved when excavated. The downhill side of the terrace had obviously been built out with spoil during construction and thus it was difficult to locate the floor or any other subsurface features on the western half of the site.

Surface features. Prior to our clearing and excavating, the site was readily identifiable as an 8 x 4 m man-made terrace on the sloping crest of a small spur. The terrace was backed by a near-vertical scarp, up to 1.8 m high (Fig. 2B,c). Several tracks radiated out from the north end of the terrace; one led off down the spur in the direction of the dam; a second, somewhat incised, track led up the spur and was possibly used by packhorses to bring in supplies; and a third led along the contours in an upstream direction.

The site of the hut itself was identifiable by scattered debris on the surface and a low, straight ridge (3.7 m long, 0.2 m high, 0.4 m wide) marking the eastern wall. A line of three stream-rounded stones and a 2 m long, low ridge at right angles to these, clearly identified the fireplace at the north end (Fig. 2c). The extent of the hut to the west and south was not determinable apart from the limits imposed by the size of the terrace.

Also visible was a hole (0.5 m high, 0.55 m wide, 0.6 m deep) cut into the scarp at the back of the terrace adjacent to the north-east corner of the hut (Figs. 2b,c). This was undoubtedly an underground safe used to keep food cool. A square piece of birdwire netting found nearby appeared to fit across the opening to the safe.

Surface hut debris. A heap of collapsed corrugated iron and charred wood lay over the fireplace and out to the west of it and was no doubt once the chimney. Three rotting wooden slabs lay together in the south-west corner of the hut site and were presumably a portion of one of the walls. The rusty, partial remains of a camp oven, several axe and spade heads and a few broken bottles lay loose on the surface.

Subsurface features. Excavations showed the hut to have been 3.7 x 3.2 m in plan with a 1.9 x 1 m fireplace attached to the

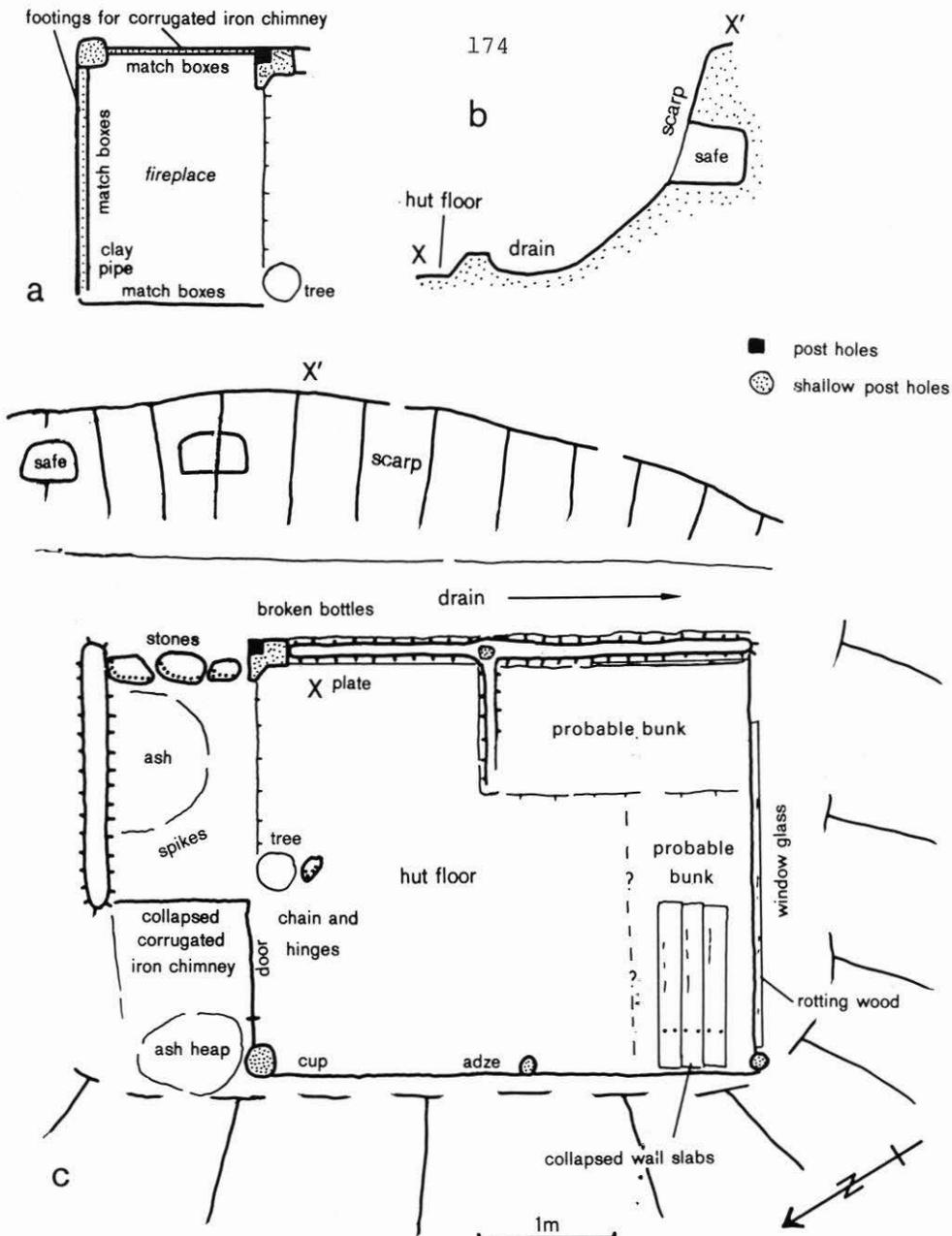


FIGURE 2. a. Plan of excavated lower level (1870s) of fireplace. b. Section showing relationship between hut floor, east wall baulk, drain and terrace scarp. c. Plan of excavated hut site and upper level (post 1900?) of fireplace.

north wall (Fig. 2c). The southern extent of the hut was determined by the presence of a long, straight piece of rotting wood, which appeared to have once been the wall plate. The western extent of the hut was defined by three depressions (probably former post holes) and a line of artefact debris. The east wall was defined by a narrow baulk of hard weathered rock (Plate 1) that had been left between the floor on one side and a drain (0.1 m deep, 0.5 m wide) that had been dug between the hut and the terrace scarp (Figs. 2b,c, Plate 1).

Two well defined postholes (one 0.45 m deep) were located, dug into hard ground on the northern end of the east wall.

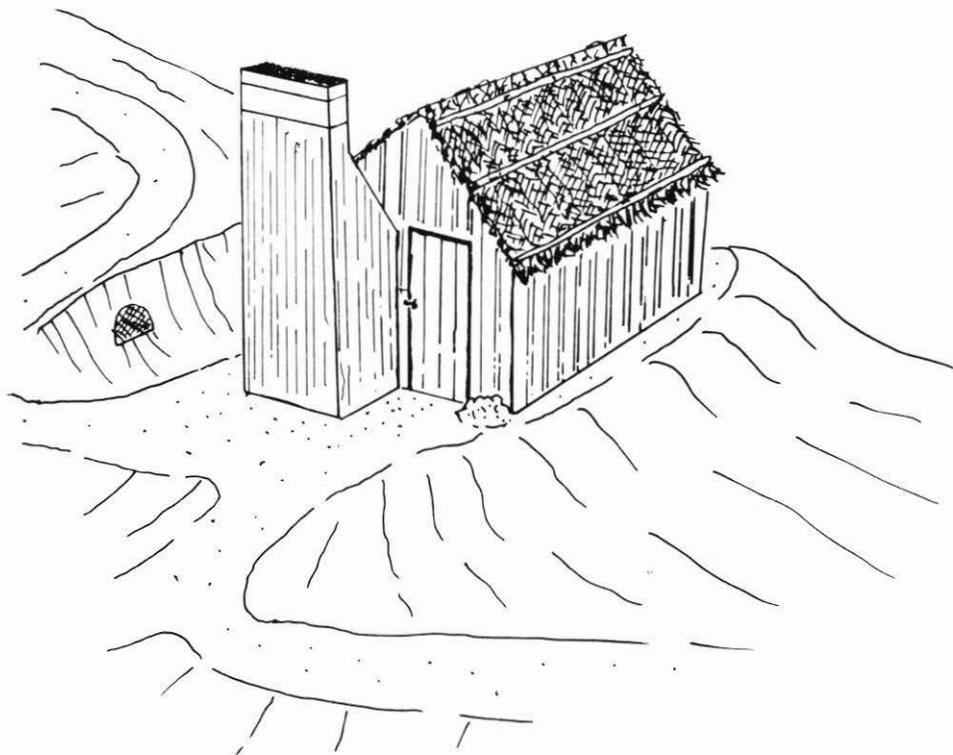


FIGURE 3. Sketched reconstruction of bushmen's hut, based on the excavation and a few informed assumptions.

Rusty door hinges and a chain and padlock were found near the north-west corner and, together with the paths outside, indicate the location of the door adjacent to the chimney (Figs 2 and 3). Fragments of thin window glass, found outside the hut in the middle of the south wall, suggest the presence of a small window in the gable at the far end from the fireplace and door.

The three wooden wall slabs in the south-west corner were rotted away on their western ends. They indicate that the hut walls were made of vertical overlapping palings that had been split from lengths of kauri timber.

Excavation of the fireplace proved the most interesting, for here was the deepest accumulation of ash and soil. The upper half of the deposit contained 111 rusty iron spikes, as well as broken bottles and a few nails. It became clear that the answer to the scarcity of rotting wood on the site lay in the fireplace. Later occupants had obviously used the wood from the derelict hut as firewood and the spikes and nails in them ended up in the ashes. The stones along the east side (Fig. 2c) of the fireplace overlay earlier ash layers and were obviously a late addition.

Excavation of the lower layers of ash revealed further bottles, a broken clay pipe, two bullock ribs and 14 oblong, wax vesta tin match boxes around the perimeter of the fireplace. When fully excavated, narrow slot-like footings (Plate 1) were found around the walls of the fireplace (Fig. 2a), into which the corrugated iron of the chimney had obviously been sunk.

The former flat dirt floor was unearthed over much of the area of the hut, but along the inside of the southern half of the east wall it could not be located. Here a rectangular area (2 x 1.1 m) of slightly elevated, irregularly surfaced dirt is presumed to indicate the location of bunks above (Fig. 2c). The remainder of the south wall (also exactly 2 m long) seems a likely location for further bunks, although no definite evidence to confirm or disprove this supposition could be found.

Direct evidence of the type of roof is lacking, but the absence of corrugated iron (other than around the chimney) precludes this material. Wooden shingles also seem unlikely as each required two nails for attachment, yet very few nails were found during the excavation. A roof made with wooden slabs like the walls is a possibility but most likely the roof was thatched with nikau fronds. These were common on bush huts. The fronds

were laid with their bases along the ridge and the pinnae of neighbouring fronds plaited together. These fronds, three to four layers thick, were held on the roof by teatree poles laid horizontally across the roof at intervals (Bell, 1965).

Artefacts

A list is given in Appendix 1. Judging by the rusted state of many of the iron artefacts, most thin metal objects would have corroded away and only the heavy items remain. Although most artefacts were found on the hut site itself, many fragments of crockery and broken glass were scattered over a large surrounding area.

The majority of items appear to date from the 1870s period of occupation, although two brandy bottles with screw-on tops (found in the upper levels of the fireplace) undoubtedly were left by later visitors, as this type was not made prior to 1905. The range of artefacts is very much what might be expected, with a selection of cooking and eating implements, a group of bushmen's tools (axes, spades, maul, file) and a few personal items (comb, scissors, kerosene lamp, clay pipe, brass button).

Among the bottles there is a fair number of soft drink variety as well as the usual wine, whisky and brandy. The abundance of Davis Vegetable Painkiller bottles confirms the observations made elsewhere that this potion was a favoured bushmen's 'cure-all'.

The presence of a number of pieces of poor quality kauri gum suggests that they may have been used in starting the fire. Of note was a small Maori adze (type 2B) and two choice rock specimens (quartz crystals, chert) that indicate that at least one of the bushmen had an eye for the unusual and may even have indulged in Sunday searching of prehistoric sites for artefacts - a practice known to have been popular among bushmen in the Waitakeres in the 1910s.

Conclusions

Investigations of a small kauri bushmen's hut site, adjacent to a driving dam in the Pararaha Valley, support the theory that it was built and used in the 1870s.

Before construction could begin a terrace was cut out of the sloping spur and later a drain dug across the back to prevent the dirt floor flooding. The hut had an area of 10 m² and probably held bunks for four men along the east and south walls. A small table probably stood in the middle.

The walls were made of vertical overlapping palings and the roof is inferred to have had a high gable with wooden slabs or plaited nikau fronds. The door was at the north end and a small glass window was in the gable at the south. Half the north wall was occupied by the fireplace which had a corrugated iron chimney surrounding it (Fig. 3).

After being abandoned, probably in 1881, the hut became derelict and appears to have been used sporadically (probably by pig hunters or casual gum diggers) in the 1880s-1920s. The chimney remained standing for some time but as the hut fell into disrepair the wood seems to have been burnt on the fireplace. Like modern vandals, some of these visitors seem to have enjoyed throwing bottles and crockery over a wide area.

This 1870s hut appears to have been similar to all the smaller wooden huts constructed in the kauri forests up to the 1920s (e.g. Bell, 1965). The type of construction was also used by early settlers for their outbuildings and in some instances by gum diggers or for workers on local body projects.

Because of the number of workers this hut accommodated (probably four single bunks) it has a much narrower fireplace and chimney recess than the larger bunkhouses in similar locations where the chimney recess, as well as being deeper, extended across the full width of the building. In the chimney recess workers hung clothing to dry after working in wet bush, hence the greater number of occupants in a hut the larger the chimney recess.

The plan of bush huts built in the kauri forests and the materials used to construct them appear to have varied little during the milling days in the Waitakere Ranges (Diamond, 1977:67-71). From about 1910 onwards however, tents with flies covered with nikau fronds (Phillipps, 1952:58-61), for both warmth and rain-proofing, started to replace the slab hut for semi-permanent accommodation in the bush.

Appendix 1

Artefacts found during investigation of hut site, N41/417. Numerous spikes, nails, broken glass and wood fragments are not included.

Bottles:

Davis vegetable painkiller	12	Champions vinegar	2
Cambus Whiskey NLD Co	1	Mother Seigels Syrup	1
Silver Stream Schnapps	1	Roses lime juice	1

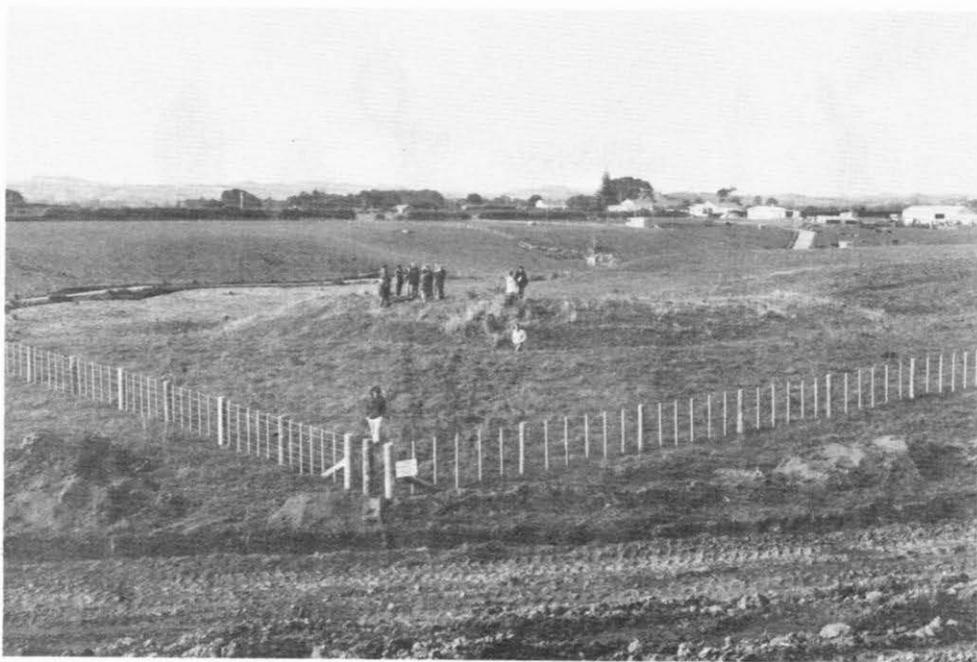
Essence of Coffee and Chicory, T & H Smiths Edinburgh 1
 wide variety of unnamed wine, brandy, pickle, soda etc. many

Other:

cup (gold rimmed, gold circle)	1	camp oven lids	2
teaspoon (Laidlaw, Leeds)	1	dessertspoons	2
scissors	1	saucer	1
kerosine lamp and wick holder	1	fire hooks	2
½ inch brass button	1	pot handle	1
metal band (off 270 mm diam. cask)	1	comb (composition)	1
3 corner file (½ inch)	1	maul rings	2
axe heads (190x110 mm)	2	tomahawk head	1
tin match boxes (oblong)	14	spade heads	2
chain and padlock	1	door hinges	2
pieces kauri gum	10	claypipe	1
Maori 2B adze	1	quartz crystals	1
chert specimen	1	camp oven	1
		dinner plate (W.H.Grindley Co., England)	1

References

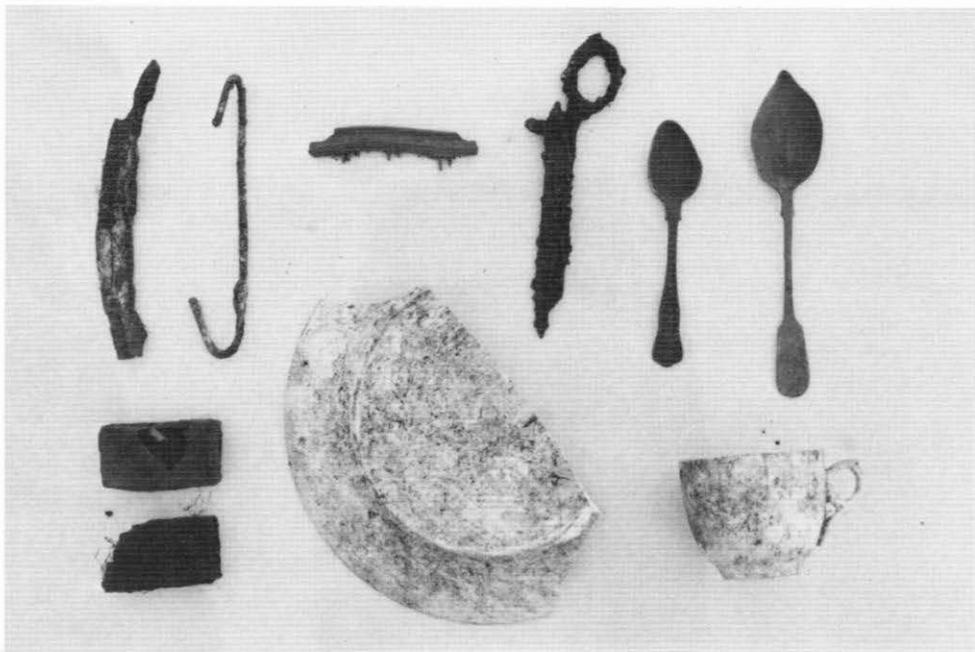
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TARANAKI FIELD SCHOOL. Te Mataiwhetu, a small terrace edge pa at the Motunui Petrocorp site, fenced off for preservation.



KAURI BUSHMEN'S HUT Plate 1. View south across eastern half of excavated site: slot-like footings for corrugated iron chimney (foreground), east wall baulk and outside drain beyond.



KAURI BUSHMEN'S HUT Plate 2. Artefacts including tin match boxes (bottom left), camp oven fragment (top left), and comb (third from left, top).



KAURI BUSHMEN'S HUT Plate 3. Artefacts including pot handle (top left), axe head (middle bottom), maul ring, kauri gum, rock specimens and adze (all bottom right).