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EXCAVATION OF THE VICTORIA HOTEL SITE, AUCKLAND:A PRELIMINARY REPORT

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This is a preliminary report on the excavation of the site of the Victoria Hotel (site R11/1530), a mitigation investigation undertaken in September/October 1989 by the Department of Conservation as part of an ongoing Urban Archaeology Programme in the city of Auckland.

Introduction

The settlement of Auckland was established as the new capital of New Zealand on 18 September 1840. In December of that year the first liquor licenses were granted to aspiring publicans and the Victoria Hotel opened for business on the Commercial Bay waterfront. The first Victoria Hotel was a temporary hut made of raupo, jointly owned by James Williamson and Thomas Crummer (George 1876:302). It was replaced during 1841-2 by a dormer-windowed structure with an outbuilding to the rear (Fig. 1). The new hotel opened on 29 January 1842 (*NZ Herald & Auckland Gazette* 29 January 1842:1[3]).

For the first two decades of its existence the Victoria Hotel was popular and fashionable. However by the 1860s Commercial Bay had been reclaimed, the main commercial centre had shifted away from nearby Shortland Street to Queen Street, and the hotel was left on a side street (Fort Street) amongst a cluster of older buildings.

A new bar, which opened into Shortland Street, was added to the hotel in January 1865. However, the new addition was found to be in breach of the Licensing Act, and a court order was made for the Shortland Street entrance to be closed up. The problems over the new bar were followed by financial difficulties and only a few weeks later a meeting of creditors was called to appoint a manager to wind up the business (*New Zealander* 28 February 1865:6-7, *Daily Southern Cross* 16 February 1865:5[1-2]).

On 15 February 1865, thirteen days after the new manager had been appointed, fire broke out in an unused room in the new addition to the hotel. The fire spread quickly through the Shortland Street bar, which fortunately was separated by a long passage, a large dining room, and a brick courtyard from the original hotel building in which the guests and staff were accommodated.

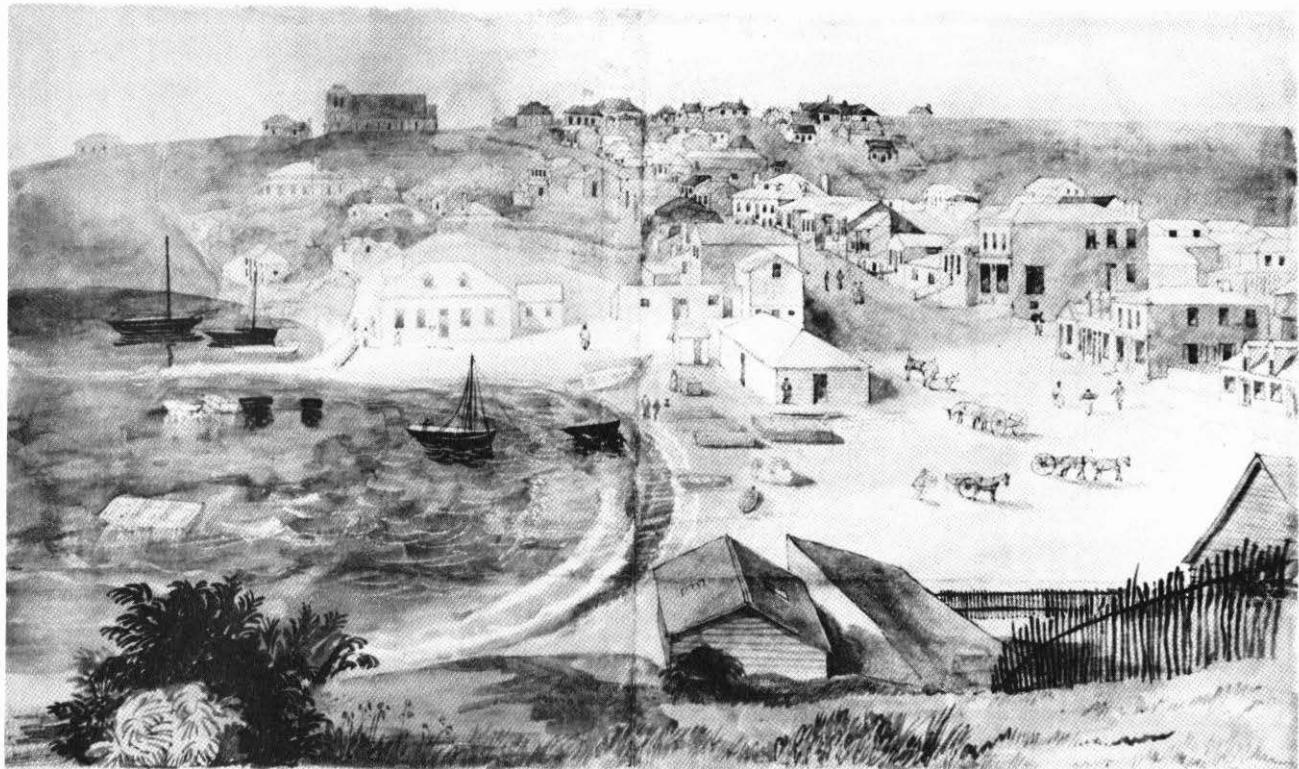


Figure 1. West view of Commercial Bay by Edward Ashcroft, c.1843. The Victoria Hotel is the dormer windowed building on the foreshore. Reproduced with the permission of the Auckland City Art Gallery.

The fire brigade were assisted by numerous volunteers in fighting the blaze. However they were severely handicapped by the totally inadequate water supply and the dilapidated condition of the fire engines, and were unable to prevent the complete destruction of the hotel and a number of other adjacent buildings. In all, two hotels, three boarding houses, eleven commercial buildings and two dwellings were destroyed in the fire (*Daily Southern Cross* 16 February 1865:5[1-3]).

The entire fire brigade resigned on the day following the fire, citing as the reasons the constant abuse received at the scenes of fires and repeated interference by members of the City Board (*Auckland City Board of Commissioners* 20 February 1865:49).

An inquest failed to reach a verdict as to the cause of the fire (*Daily Southern Cross* 18 February 1865:5[3-4], 21 February 1865:4[6], 5[1]), but circumstances suggest that it was deliberately lit, out of spite, by one of the proprietors.

The Victoria Hotel was never rebuilt, and the allotment was left vacant for almost two decades until the 1880s, when a four storey commercial building was constructed on the site. This building remained standing until 1989, when the Auckland Star newspaper complex was demolished in preparation for redevelopment of the property.

#### Excavation

In September 1989, the Department of Conservation's Regional Archaeology Unit commenced test excavations on the property, which is located in Fort Street, backing onto 20-30 Shortland Street. The object of these excavations was to determine the location of, and to examine, the original shoreline and other topographic features of the pre-European environment, and to assess whether any prehistoric or early historic period sites remained intact beneath the concrete floor and foundations of the demolished buildings.

The results of preliminary diamond drilling looked distinctly unpromising, with 3m of brick and reinforced concrete in one area, and other parts of the property cut down to undisturbed natural stratigraphy. One area where archaeological deposits did exist had been dug over with a tracked excavator by bottle hunters in cooperation with the demolition crew, despite clear advance notification of the Department's intention to excavate the site. Fortunately, however, a large test hole excavated through the concrete adjacent to Fort Street uncovered an area of subsidence, which turned out to be an infilled cellar of the Victoria Hotel. This cellar was associated with the early part of the hotel that had been completed in January 1842. The cellar, and a

drain which led from it, were the only surviving archaeological features found at the hotel site. All other traces of the hotel, including the cellar known to have existed beneath the later extension, appeared to have been destroyed during levelling of the property in the 1880s.

Further preliminary excavations revealed that the cellar had been filled in with the remains of the hotel and its contents after the 1865 fire. The significance of the site, as a unique time capsule of material remains associated with mid-Victorian Auckland, soon became apparent. During the subsequent four week period the cellar was completely excavated with the intention of recovering as much as practicable of its contents, and of recording details of the construction of the cellar, drain and any associated features.

This second phase of the excavation showed that the cellar had been cut into by large concrete footings from the 1880s building. These appeared to have been put in to counteract settling of the cellar fill after construction of the later building. About one third of the contents of the cellar fill had been removed during excavation for these footings, and some material had been lost when the property was levelled. However the rest of the cellar and its contents had remained undisturbed since infilling after the 1865 fire.

The cellar had been cut out of consolidated volcanic tuff. It measured 9 m in length, up to 4.5 m in width, and 1.5 m in depth. On the floor of the cellar a range of artefacts that had accumulated while the hotel had been in operation were found. These included pieces of timber, coins, tools, bottles, parts of barrels, and clay tobacco pipe fragments. A drain had been put in to allow excess groundwater to drain from the cellar towards the beach. Layers of cobbles and clay had also been used in places to cope with flooding. Postholes indicated that there had been racks along at least three sides of the cellar.

Above the deposits in the base of the cellar was a layer of ash and burnt or melted objects that had collapsed into the cellar during the 1865 fire. After the fire the remnants of the hotel building and its contents had been collected up and used to fill in the cellar. This fill deposit contained numerous broken bottles and ceramic items, bricks, barrel hoops, pieces of building hardware, faunal remains, and a large number of clay tobacco pipe fragments.

We initially began by dry-sieving the fill deposit. However the huge quantity of cultural material within the cellar fill, probably in the order of tonnes, and our limited budget, made this impractical and we had to become more selective about what we retained. A strategy of discarding non

diagnostic glass, and sampling and discarding the bricks and stone from the site was eventually adopted.

The bottom of the cellar was below the water table, and even with the regular use of a pump we were working in ankle-to knee-deep mud. The deposits from these levels, which predated the fire, were all wet sieved using mains pressure water.

#### The artefact assemblage

The artefact assemblage, which is currently undergoing analysis, falls into two distinct components: items that were discarded or lost prior to the fire that destroyed the hotel; and those that were recovered from within or above the burnt layer.

The first group of artefacts accumulated during the period between the construction of the hotel in late 1841-early 1842 and the time of the fire on 15 February 1865. Most of these artefacts, such as an assortment of ginger beer bottles stored in the cellar, probably date from the 1860s, but some items found on the floor of the cellar below the clay layer could be much older. Artefacts recovered from the burnt layer and overlying fill were within or were part of the hotel on the night it was destroyed by fire, and as such represent a unique, accurately dated, contemporaneous assemblage.

Amongst the fire debris were hundreds of bricks, mostly broken. A small proportion of the bricks were frogmarked, but most were unmarked sandstocks. Some of the bricks were fire-blackened and appeared to have come from the hotel's chimney stacks; the remainder are likely to be from the brick courtyard mentioned in contemporary descriptions of the hotel (see *Daily Southern Cross* 16 February 1865:5[2]).

There were also, as would be expected amongst the remains of a hotel, hundreds of broken bottles. Most of these were 'black' glass beer or stout bottles, but a range of other liquor bottles was also recovered. Ginger beer, aerated water, salad oil and other non-alcohol bottles were represented by a comparatively small number of examples. Several bottles from the site had legible paper labels still in place.

Numerous ceramic artefacts were recovered from the site. The majority of these are components of at least three large sets of dinnerware. The newest and most complete set, represented by the largest number of broken vessels, was decorated with a blue transfer printed pattern called 'Bouquet' and was manufactured by Pinder Bourne and Company. Other dinner services were decorated with the popular willow pattern, and with another blue transfer-printed pattern called

'Albion'. This latter pattern appears, from recently excavated assemblages, to have been popular in Auckland during the 1860s. A number of other designs are represented by fewer examples. Several large water filters manufactured by J. Stiff and Sons were also recovered.

The clay tobacco pipes are one of the most interesting components of the artefact assemblage. The clay pipe assemblage is the largest and most varied recovered so far in New Zealand, with more than 2000 pipe fragments, representing dozens of different varieties and more than 20 manufacturers. Many of the pipes appear to be unused and were probably for sale in the hotel when it burnt down.

A number of coins and tokens were recovered from the cellar, including a gold guinea dated 1790. Other items found include hardware such as door locks and fittings from the hotel building, and objects directly related to the operation of the hotel such as barrel hoops, bungs and spigots, auger bits, and bottle corks and wires.

The report on the excavation, which is currently in preparation, will primarily be concerned with describing and documenting the artefact assemblage. A separate publication on the clay tobacco pipes from the site is also planned. Ultimately it is hoped that the artefacts from the site will be deposited in the Auckland Museum, where they will be extremely useful for comparative purposes as a securely dated assemblage containing nothing manufactured after 1865.

#### Discussion

The Victoria Hotel site is, in some ways, similar to site R27/157 excavated by Pam Chester in Lambton Quay in 1987. At the Wellington site two cellars were uncovered, one of which was thought to belong to the Wellington Hotel built by Baron von Alzdorf in 1843. That hotel had also been built on what was originally the waterfront prior to uplift associated with the 1855 earthquake, and subsequent reclamation (Chester 1988).

However that is, to a large extent, where the similarity ends. The history of the Lambton Quay site is comparatively poorly documented, and the artefact assemblage spanned the entire period of European settlement in Wellington. By contrast, contemporary records of the Victoria Hotel include illustrations of the building, a list of the occupants at the time of the fire, eyewitness accounts of the destruction of the hotel, and a description of its remains shortly afterwards. The subsequent history of the site is also well documented. The artefact assemblage from the Victoria Hotel dates entirely from the period between initial European settlement in Auckland and the date of the fire in February 1865, with much of the

material attributable to the actual time of the fire.

The argument could be made that it is difficult to justify excavating a site when there is a large amount of information available from written records. However one of the reasons for undertaking the Urban Archaeology Programme in Auckland has been to provide a permanent record of the material remains associated with Auckland's early history, and it is as a time capsule of artefacts from the first few decades of the settlement's existence that this site's importance lies.

#### Acknowledgements

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