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EXCAVATIONS AT THE OMATA STOCKADE, N108/39,
JANUARY-FEBRUARY 1977: A PRELIMINARY REPORT.

Nigel Prickett

The Omata Stockade, N108/39, is situated above the Herekawe Stream next to South Road on the outskirts of New Plymouth (Map reference 605884, N108 New Plymouth, 3rd edition 1970). Excavations at the site began on 3 January and ended 13 February 1977. The excavation was financed by the University Grants Committee and the Anthropology Department of the University of Auckland and was carried out under permit 1976/27 from the New Zealand Historic Places Trust.

The Omata Stockade was built by local settlers early in 1860 in response to rising tension between Maori and European over the proposed purchase of land at Waitara. Before historical times the site was occupied by a Maori pa, Ngaturi, the earthworks of which encircled the hill and were adapted by the settlers for the later position. Like the Bell Block Stockade, the fortification at Omata was built to protect European homes and farms; in this it differs from other European military sites of the Taranaki war period which were built to press military advantage and consolidate land acquisitions. The Omata site is now unique since the site at Bell Block was most unfortunately destroyed about 1970. The Omata Stockade was occupied throughout the First (1860-61) and Second (1863-66) Taranaki Wars. During the first war the Taranaki Militia garrison at the post was under Captain George R. Burton and numbered between 50 and 70 men. During the second war numbers fell from 80 in March 1864 to four in May 1865 as the advancing front southwards secured rear areas such as the Omata district.

The history of the Omata Stockade is well documented. There is a great deal of information on the post in contemporary newspapers, surviving military order and letter books, diaries and other manuscript material and printed works. There are also a number of paintings and sketches. A full description, unique for Taranaki military works, is given by Colonel (later General) Sir James Alexander, 14th Regiment (Alexander, 1863). Alexander saw the post in March or April 1861, immediately after the cease-fire which ended the First Taranaki War. In addition to the written account, he gives a perspective sketch, plan and section of the defences (Figure 2).

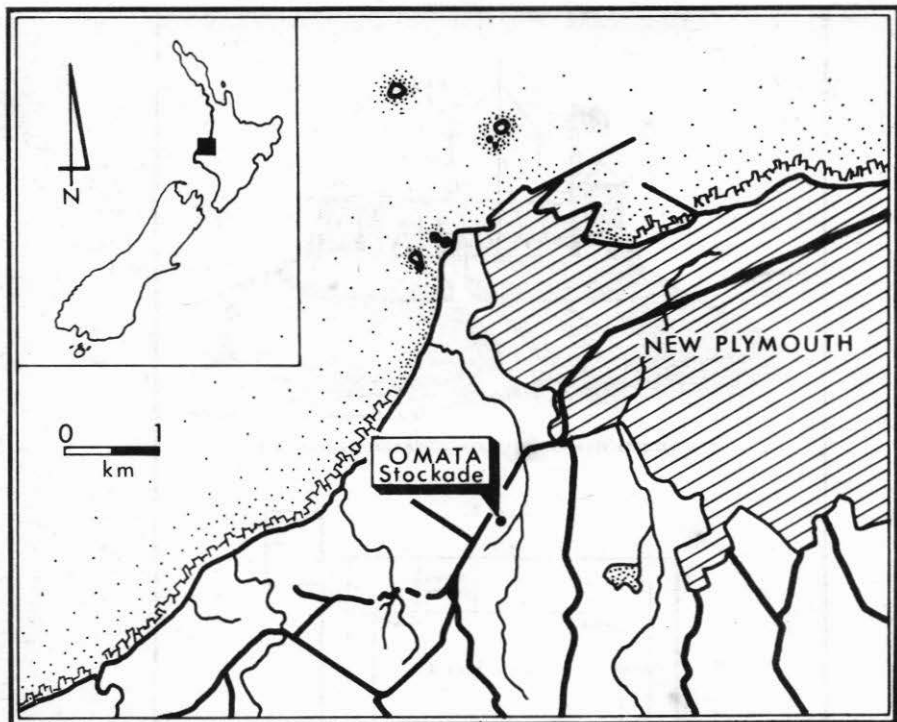


FIGURE 1. Location of the Omata Stockade.

The main aim of the excavation was to recover an archaeological assemblage of the material culture of settlers turned soldiers in Taranaki of the early 1860s. Other aims were to check Alexander's plan and see if there were any later alterations, and to secure a midden sample - which, unlike those of prehistoric sites, would include manufactured containers of various kinds as well as surviving food refuse. It was also hoped that such a site of known age would provide comparative data on natural erosion and infilling rates and on the deterioration of biological materials. The study of a European fortification might also provide insight into the functioning of pa, both prehistoric and gunfighter.

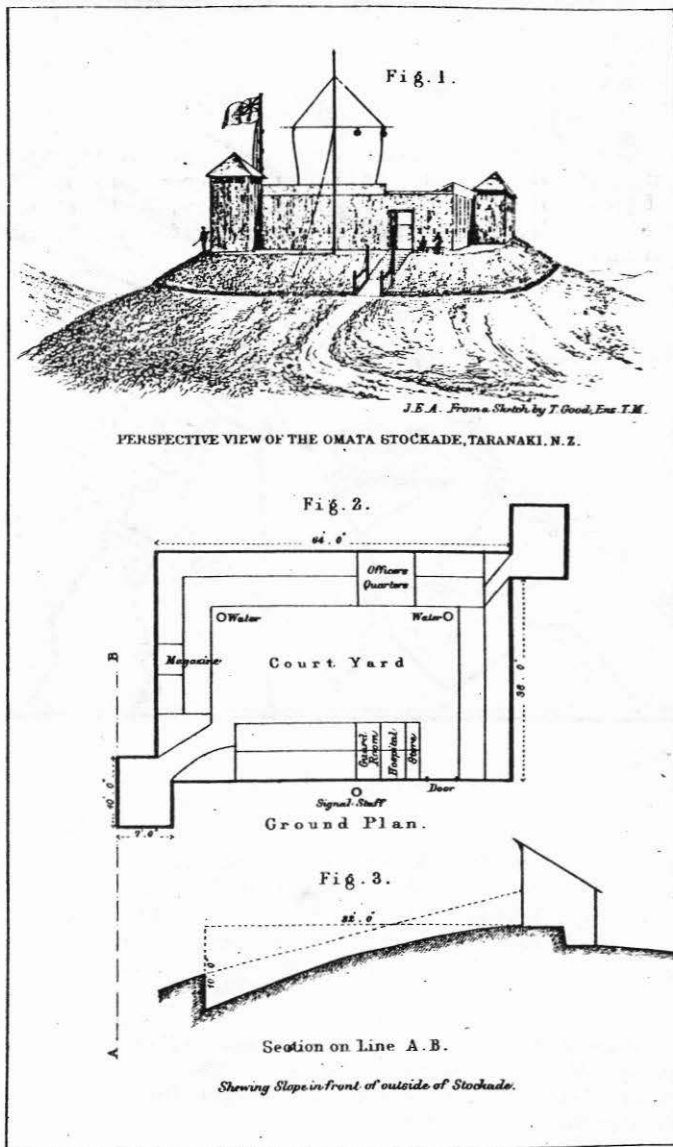


FIGURE 2. Alexander's perspective sketch, plan and section of the defences of the Omata Stockade.

The site is on a knoll commanding a deeply dissected terrace at the seaward margin of Mt Egmont's ring plain. It consists of a platform about 15 x 25 m surrounded by a steep scarp to a ditch, now so shallow that in places it has the appearance of a terrace. Beyond the surrounding ditch the land falls away all around (Figure 3).

The site was laid out square with the length of the main platform. 3 x 3 m or 3 x 6 m squares were given Roman numerals in the order of their being opened up. In addition, each metre square had a unique letter/number reference, letters referring to the east-west axis and numbers to the north-south axis.

Excavations were begun on the top platform of the site. Nine 3 x 3 m squares (I to IX) were opened up separated by one and two metre baulks and covering the northern half of the platform. Excavated soil was dumped on the southern end of the platform - on black polythene sheeting to facilitate the subsequent opening up of that half of the stockade area. With the removal of many of the baulks and the extension of squares to locate or follow important structural features, the excavation area of the northern half of the platform finally totalled 143.5m², this including an additional square (XI) dipping over the edge of the scarp at the north-east corner of the platform.

On 29 January much of the excavated area at the north end of the top platform was filled in and three 3 x 3 m squares were opened up at the southern end (Squares XIII, XIV, and XV). Later extensions to one of these squares resulted in an excavated area of 33m² in this part of the site, making a total of 176.5m² excavated on the top platform.

This part of the site proved shallow. Alexander's description has the perimeter of the platform, with stockade walls and barrack and other rooms, three feet above the central courtyard. He also says that the stockade posts were sunk three feet six inches. Archaeologically, however, the deepest part of the stockade wall proved less than 30cm (1 ft) and in places the trench was so shallow it had almost disappeared. Further, the courtyard floor, while very apparent in places, proved only 20-30 cm, and less, below the surrounding area. It is clear that the stockade was demolished, its timbers no doubt being a valuable resource for local farmers, and that at the time of demolition most of the higher perimeter of the platform was thrown into the ditch.

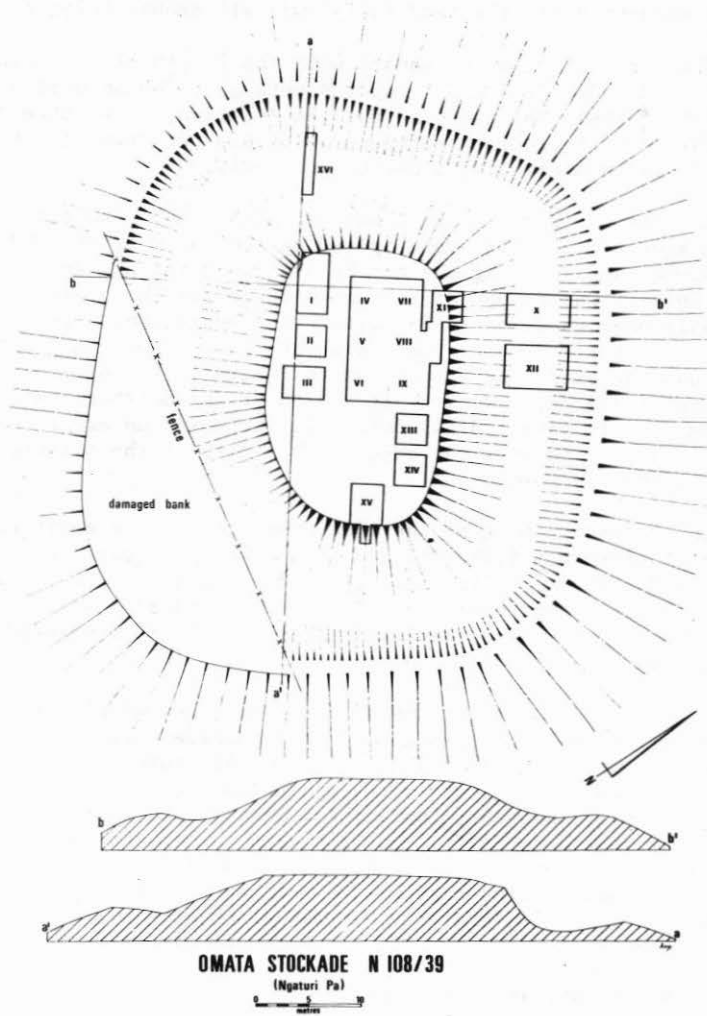


FIGURE 3. The Omata Stockade, showing excavated areas.

Parts of all four walls of the stockade were uncovered. In addition, the bastion at the north-west corner was excavated and a deep drain underlying the bastion revealed. A large number of post-holes included some in prominent lines parallel to the stockade wall and representing buildings surrounding the yard which used the stockade as their outer wall. Artefactual material included rifle bullets and musket balls, buttons (including a 57th Regiment button), pieces of glass, china, stoneware and clay pipes, fragments of iron and window glass and other material.

Evidence of the earlier, Maori, occupation of the hill was given by a single small piece of chert, a fragment of polished greenstone, and three storage pits found at the northern and eastern margins of the platform. The pits are between 1m and 1.5m deep and are of two kinds (see Figure 4). Rua A had a small vertical entrance, a broad step and a kidney-shaped floor area 2.35m in length and 1.13m from the step to the wall opposite. Rua B had a vertical entrance, a narrow step and a four-sided floor plan with upright rather than overhanging walls. Rua C was in poor condition but appeared similar in arrangement to B. A terrace was found in an extension to Square XV, about 1m below the top platform. Evidently belonging to the pa, it had been filled in to the same general slope of the defensive scarp at the time of building the stockade.

Work began in the ditch on 11 January when a 6 x 3 m square (X) was opened up close to the north-west corner of the site. Another 6 x 3 m square (XII) was subsequently opened up separated from Square X by a 2m baulk, this square later being extended to 6 x 4 m. Towards the end of the season a 6 x 1 m trench (Square XVI) was dug across the ditch at the north-east corner of the site to act as a check on the picture emerging in Squares X and XII. The total area excavated in the ditch was 48m².

Stratigraphically the ditch was broadly similar throughout. A large number of layers and lenses may be included in three levels.

Level 1 ('sandy layer') at the bottom of the ditch consisted of water-laid sandy loam between 80 and 120 cm deep. In places this material was fairly homogeneous but elsewhere it was made up of thin lenses of discrete material. This level contained a great deal of cultural material especially within a 'bottle lens' - chiefly of broken bottles but with other material as well - in Square XII and to a lesser extent in Square X.

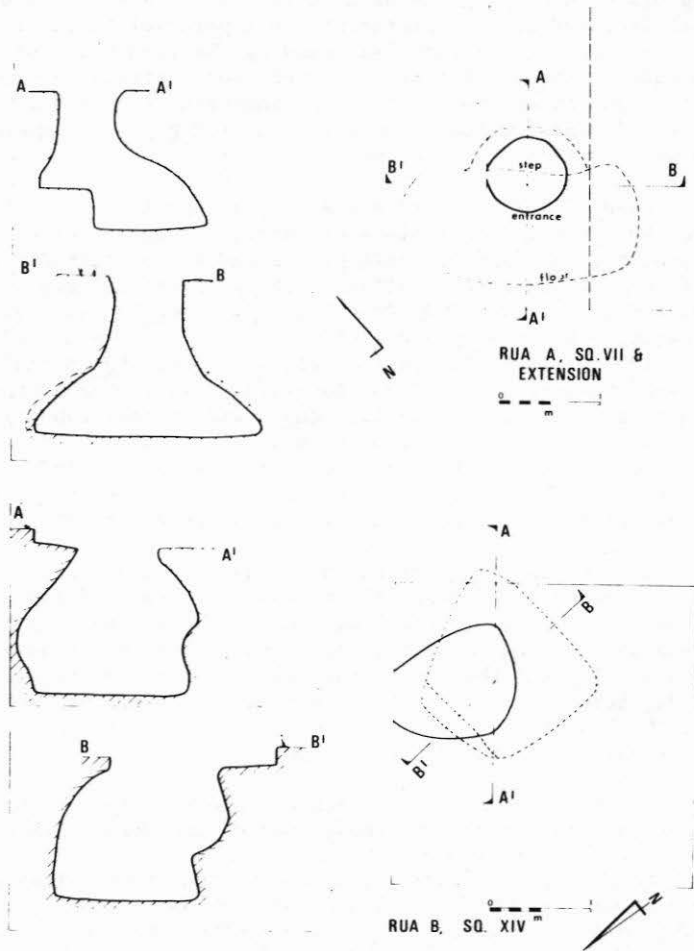
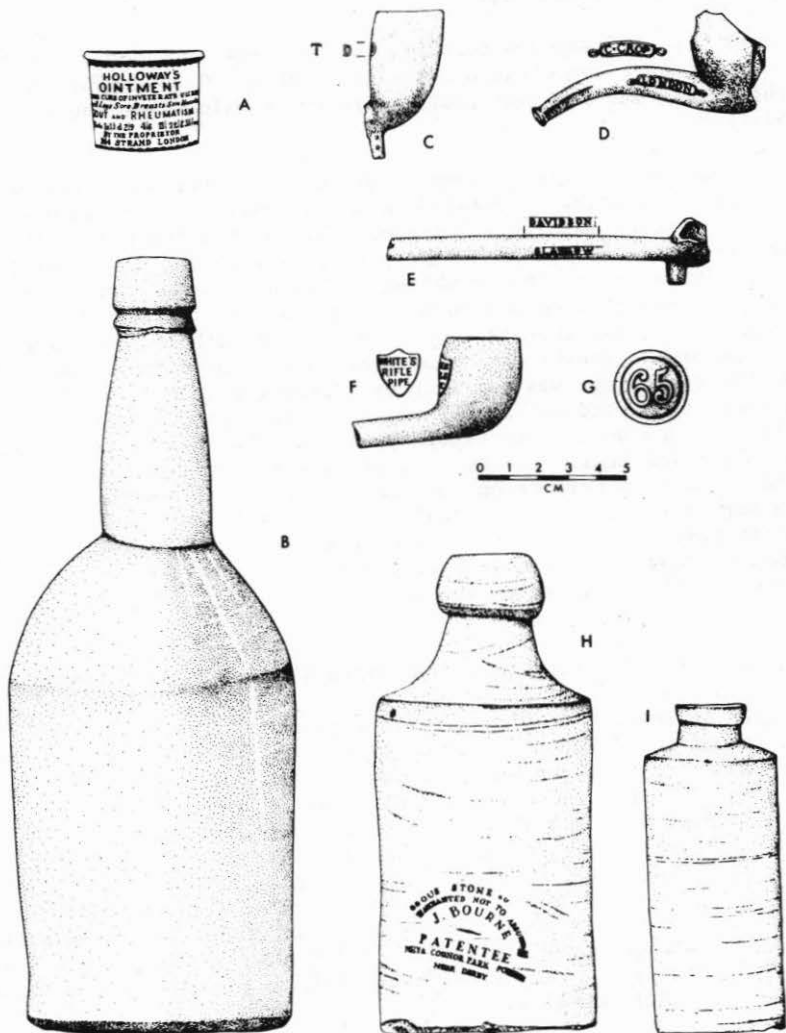


FIGURE 4. Sections and plans of Rua A and B.



Level 2 ('mixed fill layer'), up to 70 cm deep, consisted of a large number of lenses or blocks of different material including compacted ash (or clay), charcoal enriched and other soils, sand and other material. Level 2 resulted from a rapid and deliberate infilling of the ditch which probably occurred when the stockade was demolished. It contained comparatively little cultural material.

Level 3 ('turf layer') consisted of present turf and underlying compact and structured soils to about 50 cm depth. Rare cultural items are the result of recent erosion from the top platform.

In Square X a single large posthole on the outer bank close to the south baulk is probably related to the drawbridge which spanned the ditch. A second massive stepped posthole on the inner bank of the ditch in Square XII is also likely to relate to the drawbridge. Beneath the inner end of the drawbridge a block of natural material breaks the otherwise steeply sloping scarp from the top platform. This block of material appears to have added strength to the inner (hinged) end of the drawbridge. Sometime during the life of the stockade the drawbridge was replaced by a causeway across the ditch, the extremely compacted surface of which is clear in Square X. In Square XII, alongside the new causeway, a small hut was built in the ditch with a brick hearth on the step of natural material. A compacted occupation surface on the same level as the hearth extended across the ditch and establishes the date of cultural material in Level 1 as prior to this alteration to the entrance arrangement. Square XVI was without structural features and included very little cultural material.

FIGURE 5. (Opposite). Artefacts from Omata Stockade. A) Holloway's Ointment pot. Inscription reads, "Holloway's / Ointment / for the cure of inveterate ulcers / bad legs sore breasts sore heads / gout and rheumatism / in pots 1s 1½d 2/9 4/6 1l/ 22/ & 33/ each / by the proprietor / 244 Strand London". Sq. XII/AE14, Level 1. B) 'Black bottle'. Sq. XII/AE14, Level 1. C) Pipe bowl - 'TD'. Sq. XII/AE11, Level 1. D) Pipe stem and part bowl - 'C.Crop / London'. Sq. X/AD-F7, Level 1. E) Pipe stem - 'Davidson / Glasgow'. Sq. X/AB-F8, Level 1. F) Pipe bowl - 'White's Rifle Pipe'. Sq. XII/AE12, Level 2. G) 65th Regiment uniform button. Surface collected from outside the ditch at the foot of the hill. H) Stone bottle. Inscription reads, "Vitreous stone bottles, &c. / Warranted not to absorb. / J.Bourne, / Patentee. / Denby & Codnor-Park Potterie / near Derby". Sq. XII/AE11, Level 1. I) Stone bottle. Sq. XII/AE11, Level 1.

It can be seen from Figure 2 that the ditch surrounding the Omata Stockade was quite unlike defensive ditches of pa. The steeply angled scarp from the top platform was designed to allow defenders an unobstructed view to the bottom of the ditch. Beyond the ditch the defenders had a similarly unobstructed view, at a more shallow angle, down the glacia.

Cultural material in the ditch includes pieces of clay pipe, glass, stoneware and china, musket balls and bullets, buttons, metal cans, pieces of leather, and nails and other pieces of iron including some parts of a horsedrawn agricultural implement. Clay pipes included a large number of stems, and bowls of the common rounded form of the period - many pieces having brand names. Glass bottles are mostly broken; the most common form is the typical hollow-based 'black bottle' of very heavy green glass. A small collection of stoneware bottles range in size from ink bottles upwards. Buttons include a number with brand names and one 65th Regiment button. A 65th Regiment cap badge was also found. Among the metal containers are match boxes and a number of sardine tins with intact labels in copper. Some material is shown in Figure 5.

During the occupation of the stockade three houses at the foot of the hill were used as kitchens and messes. The present market garden is littered with fragments of glass, china and other material. An attempt was made to locate a rubbish dump close to one of the old house sites in an area from which clay pipe fragments and other material was eroding. A number of test pits were dug but the area was found to have been greatly disturbed and a small amount of material belonging to the stockade period was found along with much belonging to the 1920s and 1930s. In the event, the discovery of a good sample of items of material culture in the ditch in Squares X and XII removed the need to find a dump at the foot of the hill.

An important part of work at the Omata Stockade was catering for the considerable public interest. A pamphlet was produced outlining the aims of the excavation and giving a brief history of the stockade. This was sold through the Taranaki Museum and at two 'open days' at the site. The local press gave excellent coverage including a weekend feature in the Taranaki Herald (5/2/77) and a good series of articles in The Sunday Express, a local advertising 'giveaway' (12/12/76, 6/2/77 and 13/2/77). There was also some attention from both television channels and good coverage by the local radio station. A well-attended talk was given to the Friends of the Taranaki Museum.

The two open days (on January 22 and February 6) attracted 500 and over 1000 people. A small display was set up of items from the excavation alongside section drawings and other archaeological records. A model of the stockade made by staff of the Taranaki Museum proved a great attraction. But it was the opportunity of seeing archaeologists at work which was clearly the most interesting aspect of these open days for visitors.

Archaeologists who worked at the excavation were: from Auckland, Harry Allen, Gerry Barton, Mark Bellingham, Joanna Boileau, Dorothy Brown, Marlene Deans, Roger Green, Wendy Harsant, Ian Lawlor, Steve Mangan, Elizabeth and John McEwan, Mary Newman, Reg Nichol, Peter Pearce, Caroline Phillips, Margaret Sims, Bruce Stevenson, Tony Walton and Lynette Williams; from Taranaki, Agneta Bartoldson-Lander, Kelvin Day and Gregory Reardon; from Dunedin, Ruth Bartlett, Laurence Buckley, Stuart Park and Paul Wernham; from Wellington, Ray Gilbert and Phil Moore; from Christchurch, Mike Hurst; and from Australia, Anne McConnell.

Thanks are due to a great many people for help in making the work at Omata possible, productive and thoroughly enjoyable. In the present context, however, I hope I will be forgiven for confining the list to - Kathy Prickett, Roger Green of the University of Auckland Anthropology Department, Ron Lambert, Director of the Taranaki Museum, the Reardon family and Mr and Mrs R. Mace of Omata, and of course to all the archaeologists who gave their time and energy. Thanks also to Karel Peters who drew the illustrations.

REFERENCE

- Alexander, J.E. 1863 Description of a serviceable Field Work, the Omata Stockade, Taranaki, New Zealand. Journal of the Royal United Service Institution, 6(25): 595-599.