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FOREWORD: OF FISHHOOKS, BISCUITS AND HISTORY

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One of the more famous, or notorious, stories in New Zealand archaeology concerns a hoax fishhook made from a gingernut biscuit that was put into an excavation square. I first heard this story as an undergraduate at Otago in the 1980s: “someone” had made the fishhook and put it in “someone’s” square on “some dig ... or other.” The details were hazy (perhaps it’s my memory: there was probably beer involved in the telling), and I have since heard quite a number of variants. When we had the idea to put together this volume to mark this 50th anniversary of our Association I decided that I would try and get the true version of this story included one way or another; after all, the fun of archaeology should be remembered as much as the serious stuff. So I started to do a little research into the matter, and was hardly surprised to find that things weren’t as clear cut as they might be. The following account is a confabulation pieced together from numerous emails and communications with a variety of people who were there at the time, or might have been there, or were somewhere else... For the sake of decorum, names are kept to a minimum.

First of all, where did it happen? I was told by my numerous informants, that it was (or may have been) Heaphy River, Wairau Bar, Kauri Point (settlement, pa or swamp), Houhora, Karitane B, Washpool, Huriawa (where it turned up beneath one of Les Groube’s boots, which are surely worth a story in their own right), Tairua, Sarah’s Gully or Opito Bay, and it follows the date of the offence will be as varied as the locations. I was also told, apart from the standard gingernut, that it was made from a digestive, a milk arrowroot and even a dog biscuit. What is more, Exhibit A was either a fishhook, a harpoon point, a lure shank or even a potsherd—the latter was at Washpool in 1969 when recent discoveries of potsherds at Hane in the Marquesas still had the local archaeological community excited! The names of the perpetrators are as varied as the names of the informants (I can’t say witnesses, so many of these stories are second hand), which is the reason few names are mentioned here—however, I retain a thick file on the incident.

Now, common sense tells me that you cannot make a fishhook, certainly not a complete one, out of a biscuit, even a ginger nut, and certainly not by chewing it into shape. It also tells me that a milk arrowroot or a digestive would get pretty soggy pretty quickly, though perhaps not a ginger nut. I was beginning to believe, as did a number of my correspondents, that the whole thing was an urban myth, but two ‘facts’ kept coming up again and again in these seemingly apocryphal stories: firstly, that the recipient of the hoax was Ron Scarlett (in the end, some names must be named); and secondly, that it was exposed by the perpetrator owning up and eating the item as proof of his or her perfidy. I kept asking, and finally I have found a ‘definitive’ version, which I present here.

The place was Houhora, the year 1965. My informants are Karel Peters and excavation director Wilfred Shawcross. The excavation was producing prodigious quantities of archaeological material, but not in Ron’s square. During lunch Karel Peters and Ken Gorbey were fooling around with “almost inedible” biscuits making artefacts: Karel a harpoon point and Ken a fishhook. Rubbed with sand they looked most convincing, so they were salted into Ron’s square for a joke. Now, part of the point of this story is that Ron, trained (if that is the word) in the pre-Golson days, was a most untidy excavator, and the harpoon point was not found for a few days, and then on the other side of the square from where it had been placed (the fishhook was never found). When it was found Ron was tremendously excited, and identified the item as moa bone, in fact *Dinornis* on the basis of its being so flat. It was only after a couple of days that Karel admitted the felony, and when not believed resorted to biting it in half and chewing it “sand and all.” The two accounts I have don’t agree entirely: one version has it that it was Ken’s fishhook that was found; and Karel says it happened while Wilfred was away, while the latter claims to have been witness. Either way, I offer as final proof Figure 1—after all, the camera does not lie...

There are, perhaps, two morals to the story. The first is that history is a slippery eel. We are archaeologists and history is what we do. Perhaps we already know this moral, even if we forget from time to time, but we also know that history is vitally important.

Secondly, though, Ron’s enthusiasm should be a tonic for us all. He was wrong—so what, we often are. Certainly not one of my informants thought less of him for it.

It is in the spirit of these two short but not particularly earth-shattering morals that this volume is offered.



Figure 1. Ron Scarlett at Houhora, 1965. The original caption reads “Ron Scarlett pointing to ‘bikky’ lure. *Griffins.” Photographer unknown, courtesy of the Auckland University Anthropology Photographic Archive.*

My thanks to Nigel Prickett and Stuart Bedford for their assistance in planning and editing this volume, to Nigel Prickett and Jack Golson for their overviews of NZAA and its history, to those who shared their recollections of excavation hoaxes, but most of all to the contributors to this volume: I hope you enjoy their stories as much as I have.