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# **From Transient to 'Iconic': The Mustering Huts of the Canterbury and Marlborough High Country**

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## **Introduction**

The mustering huts of the South Island's high country were built as simple structures to shelter mustering teams while out on their mustering beat. Few of their builders – who were mostly the men (and they were almost certainly all men in the 19th and early 20th centuries) who subsequently used the huts – would have imagined that either the huts would have stood for quite as long as they have, or that they would have obtained the somewhat iconic status they have in New Zealand today.

Mustering huts were built in the high country throughout the South Island, and in the North Island as well – estimates suggest that some 500 remain standing (Barnett et al. 2012: 29). The huts were built on pastoral stations, most of which ran sheep, and which were taken up as large tracts of land leased from the Crown. In Canterbury, these stations were taken up in the 1850s and 1860s, and most have continued to be farmed since then. Mustering huts were built on these properties from the mid-late 19th century through until at least the mid 20th century.

Mustering huts were built to shelter musterers out on their mustering beat, along with the packie (the person in charge of the pack horse(s)) and cook who might have accompanied them. Mustering huts differed from boundary keeper's huts in that the latter were typically built, as their name suggests, on property boundaries, whereas mustering huts were built in the most appropriate location for carrying out the muster, which may have been related more to topography and proximity to the shearing shed than property boundaries. Boundary keeper's huts typically pre-dated the fencing of the property and quickly fell out of use after fences were erected. Surviving examples in Canterbury are rare, with the only recorded example (I37/26) being on Balmoral, in the Mackenzie country. Some mustering huts were apparently built to house just the packie and cook, with the musterers sleeping outside in tents (Barnett et al. 2012: 29). Most properties were mustered twice a year – once in the autumn to bring the sheep down off the summer pastures and below the snowline and once in the spring, to bring the sheep in before shearing. In general, the mustering teams would have stayed in the huts for

only a night or two at a time – although bad weather might have kept them holed up for several days. During the remainder of the year, these huts might have been occupied occasionally by those out doing work on the station, checking on stock, mending fences, killing rabbits, etc. Recreational use – by hunters and trappers – did not commence until the early-mid 20th century. All in all, these huts might have been occupied – and this is a very rough estimate – for some 30 nights a year, if that.

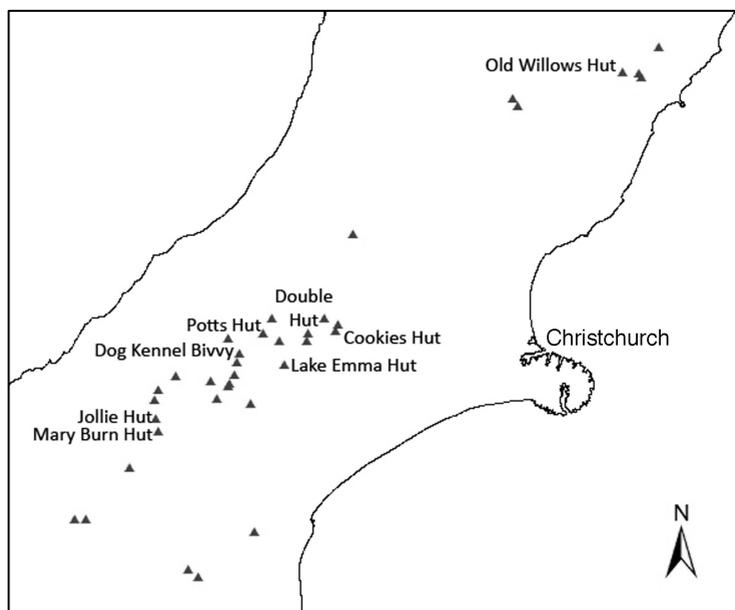
No doubt because the occupation of these huts was so transient, very little information is recorded about them in historical documents – they are not always shown on maps, and they are rarely mentioned in newspapers. Surprisingly, they are not even mentioned in sale notices for the stations in question, suggesting that the huts added little value (monetary or otherwise) to the property. It is also rare to find mention of them in the official documents relating to the station – because these stations were formed on land leased from the Crown there are often quite detailed records of the station's operations for much of the late 19th and 20th century, but few mention the huts. And there are few historic photographs or paintings of them – or perhaps more to the point, these photographs tend to be held in private collections, not at public institutions.

And yet today, these huts are often considered 'iconic' and hold a special place in the hearts of those who use them, particularly recreational users, with the result that a number of books have been published about these and other types of huts in recent years, such as Barrett et al.'s (2012) *Shelter From The Storm* and Mark Pickering's (2010) *Huts: Untold Stories from Back-Country New Zealand*. The huts have been brought to public attention particularly through the process of tenure review – by which existing leasehold land is either converted to freehold or returned to the Crown – which has seen many of these huts either become Crown property, or effectively be privatised on freehold land. The latter can result in limited or no public access, while the former can lead to the hut's removal. Because changing access to high country land is a key outcome of tenure review, the process is a highly political one and the huts are part of the tension about access. It is also the tenure review process that has led to many of these huts being recorded and/or investigated archaeologically, and it is this work that this paper draws on, to investigate the role of transience in their construction and use and in current perceptions of the huts.

## **The huts**

This study has looked at 41 mustering huts in Canterbury and southern Marlborough's high country, 35 of which remain standing, in varying condition (Figure 1). Due to the financial constraints of the project for which much of this

work was undertaken, most were not visited as part of the work, but were instead investigated on the basis of comprehensive written and pictorial records (Watson 2016). Those that were visited were the subject of a brief survey. No detailed buildings recording, or any excavation, was undertaken at any of the huts. While the broader project that this paper grew out of looked at a range of pastoral hut types in the Canterbury and Marlborough high country, including rabbitier's huts, this paper focuses on the mustering huts, to examine the relationship between the very transient nature of occupation of those huts and the form, fabric and perception of the huts. The huts are distributed throughout the high country, although most are concentrated to the north of the Clarence River and the south of the Rakaia, leaving a large gap in the middle. It is not clear from the research to date if this gap represents a real absence, or relates instead to which stations have been through tenure review.

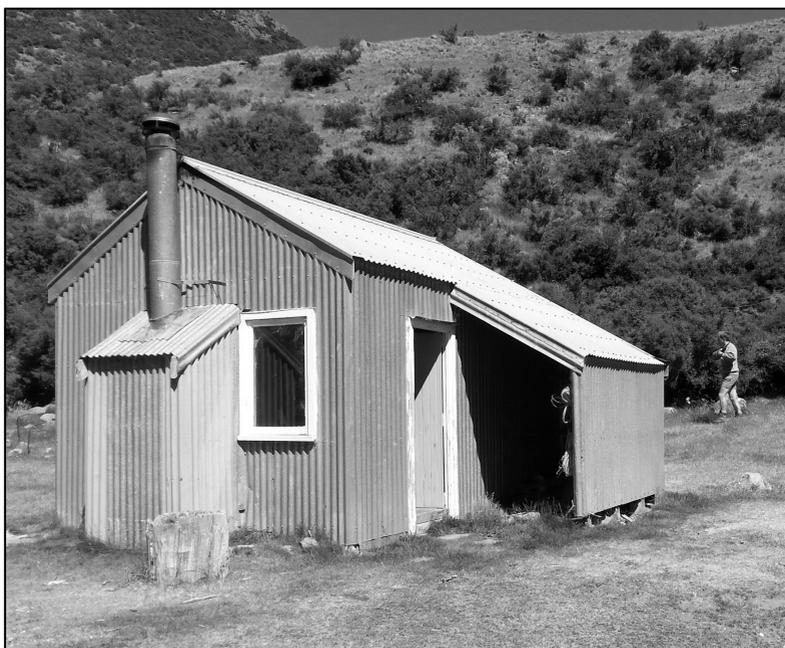


*Figure 1. The central South Island, showing the location of the huts included in the study, with those huts mentioned in the text named.*

Given the lack of historical information available about these huts, as well as the ongoing cycles of repairs and maintenance to which many of them have been subject, it is often hard to date their construction. The oldest in the sample appears to be Potts Hut, located in the upper reaches of the Rangitata River on

### *Watson – Musterers' Huts*

Hakatere station and shown on a map drawn in 1889 (General Survey Office 1889). Given the relative frequency with which huts were destroyed and rebuilt, this is not necessarily compelling evidence for dating its construction, but the presence of graffiti dating to 1899 is reasonably so. The most modern of the huts dates to c.1969-70, and is Cookies Hut, on Glenrock station, up the Rakaia gorge (Figure 2). This is also on the site of a hut shown on a map drawn in 1888. The current hut was built after the previous one was burnt down by poachers and then rebuilt by the local deerstalkers' association, with the materials supplied by the runholder – a story that exemplifies the changing use of the huts over time. It also indicates that the date when a hut was built may relate to little more than when the previous one on the site was destroyed, rather than larger processes at work, whether at a local or global scale – such as the auction of all runs in Canterbury in 1889 (when a small number were also subdivided into smaller properties) or the wool boom of the 1950s (Barnett et al. 2012: 29). It has been argued that the two main period of hut construction in Otago were the 1880s-1890s and the early decades of the 20th century, with each coinciding with major periods of run subdivision (Guy Williams & Associates 2010).

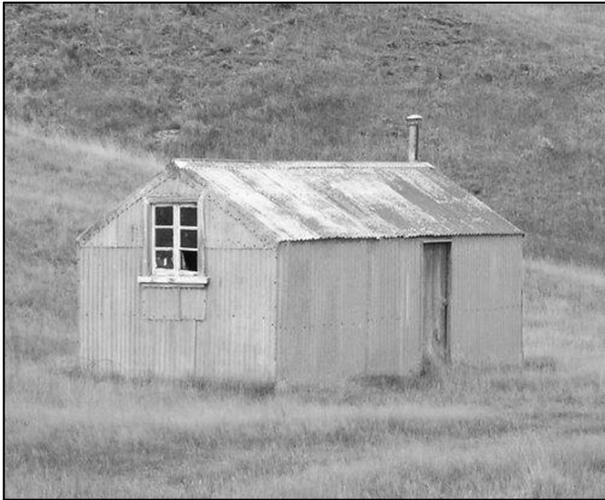


*Figure 2. Cookies Hut, Hakatere Conservation Park (DOC).*

### *Watson – Musterers' Huts*

About three-quarters of the huts could be dated with a reasonable degree of accuracy (i.e. to a decade), and the largest concentration of these in this sample were built in the 1890s – only one of these was on a property subdivided at the time of the 1889 sale of runs, so clearly some other process was at work here. It is possible that runholders had held off investing in their properties in the 1880s, perhaps because of the depression of that decade, and/or knowing that the sale was approaching at the end of the decade, and the uncertainties that this generated. Perhaps unsurprisingly, there was little hut construction during either of the world wars or the depression of the 1930s. One notable cluster of hut construction came in the 1920s, when at least four of the five huts on the Clarence Reserve were built. This intense period of hut construction may have been related to a lack of investment during the 20 year management of the property by the Asset Realisation Board, on behalf of the Crown.

Almost all the huts (35) are rectangular in plan, and only three are known to have had more than one room (each of these having two rooms; Figure 3). Corrugated iron was the most common cladding and most were framed with either sawn timber or poles of some description, most commonly beech (Tables 1 and 2).



*Figure 3. Birdcage Hut (Te Kahui Kaupeka Conservation Park) is a typical musterers' hut (DOC).*

The common use of corrugated iron to clad the huts no doubt reflects its availability, cheapness and the ease with which it could be moved. It was also the ideal cladding for buildings that were not going to be occupied

for an extended period of time, where the gaps and potential leaks were not going to be the end of the world. Corrugated iron is lightweight and thus easily portable, and it is durable, particularly in the high country, where rust is not such an issue as on the coast. It is also easy to build a simple structure using corrugated iron as cladding, which is important if the hut is not being built by a carpenter. Stone was never a common building material in Canterbury, where there were not the abundant and readily available sources of stone found in other parts of New

Zealand. The absence of sod huts from the current study is unsurprising – while such huts were built (typically prior to the ready availability of corrugated iron), if abandoned and not maintained, they do not stand the test of time well. With regard to framing, there is no information to suggest that pole framed huts were generally older than sawn timber framed huts. It is more likely that availability and economics were the key determinant in the choice of framing. The huts with beech pole framing were all on stations with bush nearby – Benmore, Cora Lynn and Mesopotamia.

*Table 1: Hut cladding*

<b>Cladding</b>	<b>Number</b>
board & batten	2
concrete block	1
corrugated iron	32
rough cast?	1
slabs	1
stone	2
unknown	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>43</b>

*Table 2: Hut framing*

<b>Framing</b>	<b>Number</b>
beech pole	5
pole	1
sawn rimu	3
sawn timber	23
willow poles	1
unknown	8
<b>Total</b>	<b>41</b>

*Table 3: Hut lining*

<b>Lining</b>	<b>Number</b>
building paper	7
hardboard	5
match-lining	4
mesh	2
sacking	3
sarking	1
sarking/match-lining	1
timber	1
unknown	8
unlined	11
<b>Total</b>	<b>43</b>

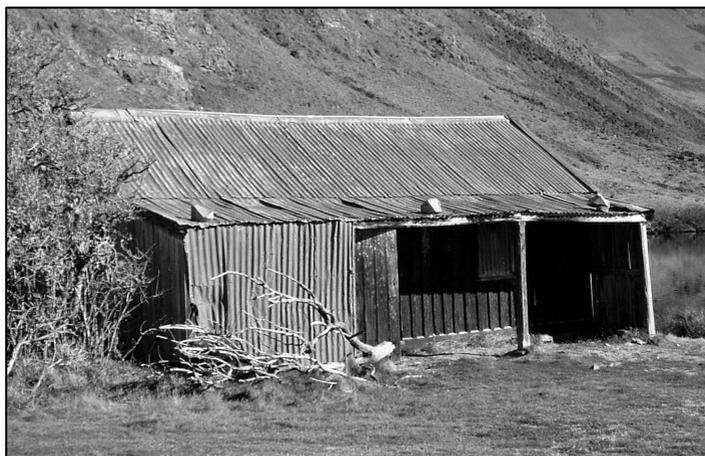
*Table 4: Hut floors*

<b>Floor</b>	<b>Number</b>
clay-concrete	1
concrete	14
dirt	6
hardboard	2
timber	7
tongue & groove	4
unknown	9
<b>Total</b>	<b>43</b>

*Note: some huts were framed, clad or floored in more than one material, so the total numbers in these tables is higher than the total number of huts.*

### *Watson – Musterers' Huts*

A range of linings were recorded, including building paper, wire mesh, sacking, hardboard and various timber linings, including four with match-lining and two with sarking (Table 3). Concrete was the most common type of floor, and in some cases was clearly a later addition, probably replacing the original dirt floor – which six huts still had (Table 4). Four huts had tongue-and-groove floors and a number of others had timber floors. Open fires were the most common form of heating, although one hut – the aptly named 3.9 square metre Dog Kennel Bivvy – did not have one at all. A number of huts (6) had a coal range and in one – Lake Emma Hut (J36/4) – this had a wetback. Most huts had either four or six bunks, while those on Hakatere all had 10, suggesting that the size of the mustering teams on this property were larger than the norm. The largest of the huts (in terms of number of bunks) was the Old Willows Hut on the Clarence Reserve, with 12 bunks, although not all of these were original. The smallest was Dog Kennel Bivvy, which had no bunks, with the musterers who used it sleeping on the dirt floor, and cooking outside – this was the most basic of the huts.



*Figure 4. Lake Emma Hut, Hakatere Conservation Park. Board and batten cladding can be seen on the front wall under the veranda.*

Most of the huts were very basic – built to do little more than provide shelter from the elements, with a fire for heat and cooking and bunks for sleeping. It is the exceptions to this that are particularly interesting – Lake Emma Hut, with its two rooms, wet back and tack room, which also happened to be clad in board and battens, not the more normal corrugated iron (Figure 4). Or Jollie and Mary Burn (H37/3) huts, on Braemar, also each with two rooms,

### *Watson – Musterers' Huts*

match-lined walls and ceilings and, of all things, skirting boards (Figure 5). While no one knows exactly who built these huts or when, the local story goes that they were built during George Murray's ownership, as he was renowned for his insistence on the quality of the goods he purchased. He is reputed to have taken personal delivery of the rimu used for huts, sheds and the homestead, returning any timbers with knots in it – the extreme weather of the Mackenzie country was known for popping the knots out of wood. And these huts were undoubtedly the most well-constructed in the sample, and

would surely have been the warmest.

*Figure 5. Top: Mary Burn Hut. Bottom: Jollie Hut.*



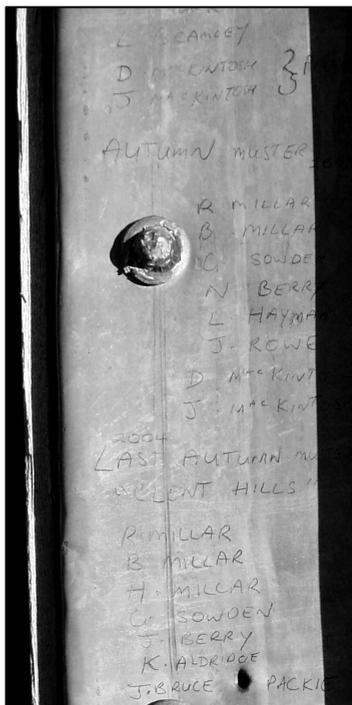
One feature that many of these huts shared was graffiti, left behind by those who had stayed or visited. This is undoubtedly the most personal aspect of these huts. For the most part, the graffiti is a simple record of who was in the hut, when and why. Some is particularly evocative, such as that which records the last muster on Clent Hills, before

the property ceased to be farmed (Double Hut, J35/4; Figure 6). It is likely that it was the very transience of the occupation of these spaces that led – and still leads – people to graffiti them – we do not, after all, graffiti our homes. And the graffiti provides a more permanent record of this transient occupation, as well as a connection between those who used to use these huts and those who use them now. For modern users, this graffiti contributes an important and direct sense of history to these huts – in many ways the huts are ageless, in the sense that it can be very difficult to establish their age from

their appearance, because the basic form remained unchanged for so many years, and because they were subject to constant cycles of repair and maintenance.

Figure 6. Graffiti, Double Hut, Hakatere Conservation Park.

Other types of hut were of course built on pastoral stations, including boundary keeper's huts, shepherd's huts, fencing huts and/or rabbitier's huts. With the exception of fencing huts (which is a relatively unusual type), most of these huts were typically occupied for longer and more continuously than mustering huts. While most of the boundary keeper's huts, shepherd's huts and fencing huts recorded by this author are now derelict, meaning that few details about their construction can be recorded without excavation, a number of the rabbiting huts were extant. These were



invariably better constructed than the standard mustering huts, the best example being Fowlers Hut (N31/4), on the old St James station. This hut was relatively large, had two rooms and was match-lined. At least two rabbitier's huts in the Mackenzie country – Red Hut (I38/25) and an unnamed hut (I38/21) at the base of the Rollesby Range – had originally served a rather different purpose and were subsequently moved to their current locations. Both were timber-clad, well-lined structures. This suggests a greater degree of care with regard to the materials used in rabbiting huts, which are likely to have been occupied for longer periods of time than mustering huts.

## Discussion and Conclusions

The transient nature of the occupation of the mustering huts was one of the factors determining their size, form and fabric, along with the hut's location and cost of its construction. Because these structures were only ever going to be occupied on a temporary basis, no great investment was required in their construction. They were built of cheap, readily available, easy to use and relatively robust materials, in many cases by the men who would subsequently use them. Corrugated iron, for example, was cheap and portable,

while those huts with pole framing were all on stations with bush nearby. And in some ways the huts themselves can be regarded as transient – for the most part, they were not built to last, and many huts did not, falling victim to fire or the elements, or to time and a lack of maintenance, as any building will – at least two of the huts in this sample are the third on their site.

And in part, it is the very transience of these huts, along with the transience of their occupation, that has led to their now iconic status – that these relatively fragile and very basic structures have withstood time and the elements makes them remarkable in and of themselves. The transient nature of the use and occupation of the huts means that they are in many ways spaces outside the norm, bringing together groups of people who, while they worked together on a daily basis, would not normally have shared a – small – room at night, often with poor heating or only minimal protection from the elements. And sometimes bad weather would mean that mustering teams were holed up in these huts for days on end. These huts have become intimately associated with tales of the high country muster, about which many books have been published over the years, and with stories – and stories is the key word – of the time musterers spent in these huts, clustered around the fire. There is a romance about these stories that captures the public imagination, particularly the largely urban imagination of what was once a much more rural country, and it is perhaps in part the idea of recapturing or recreating those stories that draws people to these huts today. For many people, these huts hold a far greater appeal than more modern purpose-built tramping huts, because of their ‘character’, which stems from the very basic nature of these structures and the stories they hold, many of which are hinted at by the graffiti left behind.

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