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## HOW FAR SOUTH? THE SOUTHERN LIMITS OF KUMARA GROWING IN PRE- EUROPEAN NEW ZEALAND

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On Sunday, 28 January 1844, Edward Shortland, designated Assistant Protector of Aborigines, reached the tiny kainga of Taumutu (population twenty according to his census) at the south-western end of Lake Ellesmere in Canterbury – almost at the end of his epic overland journey from Waikouaiti to Akaroa. He wrote: *'This is the most southern part of the island at which maize or "kumara" has ever been cultivated.'* (Shortland 1851).

Now this is an oddly worded comment. The obvious interpretation is that he meant *either* maize *or* kumara, but the placing of "kumara" in quotation marks (he doesn't do this with Maori words generally) suggests that the names are being used synonymously. We know of no other instance of such usage. However, Shortland, as a Maori speaker, is unlikely to have used "kumara" in any sense other than its usual one, so it seems most likely that he did mean that kumara (*Ipomoea batatas*) was grown at Taumutu. (Had he referred to "corn" rather than maize, we might have assumed that he was using it in its original English sense – as the current main crop of the district.)

Four years later, in 1848, Alfred Wills, Surveyor for Walter Mantell, Commissioner, drew a sketch map of Native Reserves 3 and 4 at Taumutu, on which he marked an area of 'garden' but unfortunately gave no indication of what was grown there (Brailsford 1981:155 – location of original not given).

Shortland's observation seems to have received little attention even with an upsurge in interest in Maori garden areas by archaeologists – especially since

the work of the Leachs' in Palliser Bay (see Leach and Leach 1979). General references to the southern limit of kumara cultivation up until the 1980s virtually always cited that limit as Banks Peninsula (apart, that is, from the odd mention of the somewhat mythical kumara pit at Temuka). These references are typified by Brailsford (1981:5) who noted that kumara was grown along the east coast "as far south as Banks Peninsula" and that beyond this "it was not grown at all".

On 1 June 1982, following up a communication from an acquaintance, Murray Patterson, one of us (Michael) visited Taumutu to inspect a reported area of pits. As a result of this visit, a site record (S93/36, now metricated to M37/111) was filed, which included the following information.

The site was identified as gravel pits (or borrow pits as they are more commonly referred to today) and garden soils, and was described as comprising at least forty pits in two lines extending for about 1000 metres along an old beach ridge (see Figure 1). At a central point gravel had been added to the soil for about 100 metres west of the pits. It was also noted that the pits showed very clearly on aerial photos.



*Figure 1. Some of the Taumutu gravel pits, part of a series stretching for about a kilometre, photographed in 1982.*

The filing of this record made no great impact; archaeologists continued to cite Banks Peninsula as the southern limit for kumara cultivation. Janet Davidson (1984:120) suggested “from Banks Peninsula north” and Helen Leach (1984:69) noted that “South of Banks Peninsula Maori gardening proved impossible”. It is possible, of course, that their publications were already ‘in press’ when the site record was filed (or perhaps they simply didn’t agree with it!)

However, there was a period of acceptance. In a later publication, Helen Leach (1987:92) noted that “Taumutu, at the southern end of Lake Ellesmere, was reported to be the most southerly area of sweet potato [kumara] cultivation.” And in the same year historian John Wilson, working from historical and Maori traditional sources, in a feature article on ‘The Food Basket of Rakaihautu’: Taumutu”, recorded that “At Taumutu are the remains of some of the southernmost kumara gardens in New Zealand.” (Wilson 1987:68). He illustrated his chapter with a photograph of some of the gravel pits (which he obtained from us when he came to seek archaeological confirmation of the kumara growing stories).

Trotter and McCulloch (1989:56) naturally cited Taumutu as kumara growing’s southernmost limit – and we can here add that the late Riki Ellison, kaumatua of Taumutu, told us that his grandmother could remember kumaras being grown in the area. We can also add that the identification of a made soil adjacent to the gravel pits was confirmed by soil scientist, Huntly Horn, in 1985 after extensive sampling (Trotter 1985).

In 1993 another historian, Harry Evison, also recorded Taumutu as the southern limit for kumara cultivation (Evison 1993:5), but things seem to have taken a backward step since then.

Kevin Jones, in his publication on aerial photographs and archaeology said “In the South Island, horticulture was possible on the coast, from Banks Peninsula north” (Jones 1994:200) with an endnote that “Records of pits to the south of the peninsula are not considered to be for horticulture.” (Jones 1994:282). He did not expand on this statement.

Aidan Challis in his overview of the archaeology of Canterbury went further and maintained that with respect to the garden soils in Canterbury “claimed” near Taumutu that there was a considerable suspicion that they might be associated with European crops (Challis 1995:28). Challis gives no evidence

to support this theory – he ascribes the idea to the suggestion of Helen Leach that Maoris used traditional methods to grow potatoes introduced by Europeans at an early period (Leach 1984:99). Her suggestion, however, refers to the continuation of growing and harvesting ceremonies, the use of the ko, and in one place the planting of potatoes in “molehills”. Nowhere is there evidence of the (wholly unnecessary) adding of tonnes of gravel to the soil – an extremely laborious exercise – solely for the growing of potatoes. Of course, potatoes may well have been grown in existing gardens – originally prepared and used for kumara cultivation – even at Taumutu.

Finally Atholl Anderson (1998:111) noted that evidence of gardening marked by archaeological remains is found “as far south as Banks Peninsula,” emphasizing (p.115) that horticulture “was only possible north of Taumutu.”

We maintain that Jones, Challis and Anderson are wrong.

There is, however, one point at issue in all this, and that is, just how far south of Banks Peninsula Taumutu actually is. If you leave the Peninsula to travel to Taumutu along the coast you may have the illusion that you are travelling south. In fact, the coastline here runs almost due east and west; Taumutu is about on a level with the southernmost headlands of Banks Peninsula. But it is undeniably south of the southernmost garden areas reported on the Peninsula.

We do not know the current condition of the Taumutu gardens and pits; at the time the site record was made in 1982 it was noted that some of the pits had already been filled in – the marks of these could be seen on aerial photographs. And ongoing damage from cultivation was possible.

However, on the strength of the evidence – traditional, historical and archaeological – we would contend that tiny Taumutu should be reaffirmed as the southernmost locality where it is known that kumara was cultivated, and that Shortland (albeit belatedly) should be recognized as having been right.

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