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**NEW ZEALAND ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER**



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INTERIM REPORT ON ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS  
IN THE BRIERS BLOCK, COROMANDEL

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The Briers Block project, has been carried out over two seasons (1982-83) to investigate the prehistoric Maori sites present in the block. The aim of the project has been to examine the sites in the context of the environment and to determine the reasons for Maori settlement of the area.

The Briers Block, situated on the western side of the Coromandel Peninsula between Coromandel Harbour and Manaia Harbour, lies between 0.6 and 3 km inland (Fig. 1). The investigation, funded by the New Zealand Forest Service, is a condition of the authority issued by Historic Places Trust for site modification and destruction.

A site survey was carried out in 1978 (Coster and Johnston, 1978) after the burn-off and prior to tree planting. Seventy-six sites were recorded. The majority were within 1.5 km of the Coromandel Harbour with the furthest inland site being 2 km from the coast. Coster and Johnston's conclusions were that the sites in the block appeared to be unusual in several respects: the sites are all small in size, located in steep hill country, and they include a high proportion of shell middens. Questions relating to the inland location of sites, their functions and relationships to the landscape led to the framing of a project to investigate the sites.

Difficulties were encountered in the project. A lapse of four years between planting of pine trees and the site investigation meant many sites were not relocated. This reduced considerably the number of sites available for study. A second problem was that the larger sites in the block were all situated on ridgetops and the majority of these had been modified or destroyed during the construction of forestry roading.

Stage I of the project, carried out in January 1982 (Furey, 1982) involved retrieving basic data on size and depths of shell deposits, the nature of the stratigraphy on the sites sampled and information on the contents of shell middens. Landsnails were also recovered to aid in reconstructing the vegetation conditions adjacent to or on sites. Twelve sites in total were sampled.

Stage II, carried out over three weeks from 13 April to 2 May 1983 focussed on investigating several sites to ascertain

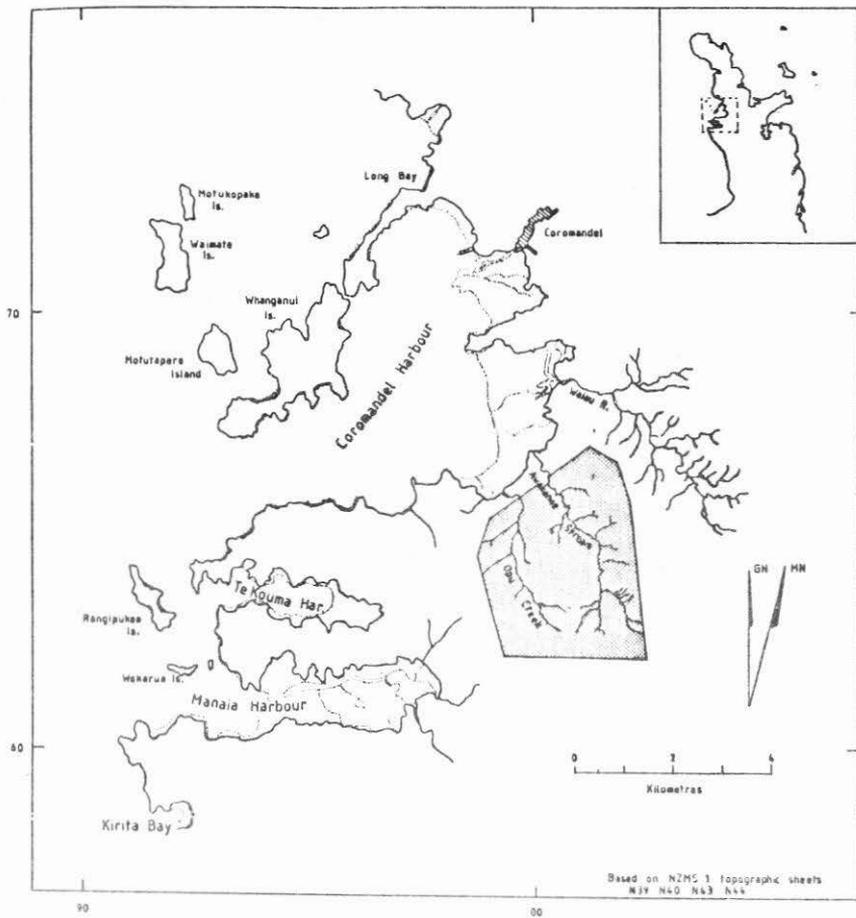


FIGURE 1. Location of Briers Block, Coromandel.

the type of structural remains present. Sites N44/171, 182, 191 and 198 were selected for excavation in the hope that they would provide evidence of the range of structures present in the block.

Authorised under N.Z.H.P.T. Permit No. 1983/11, the second stage involved four people employed on the contract and two additional assistants currently employed by N.Z. Forest Service under a temporary employment scheme. The four sites investigated will be discussed in turn.

N44/182 (007656) Midden/Terrace/Stone Mounds/Drain

This site is unique in having stone mounds and a 'drain' which runs down the slope towards the Awakanae Stream. Two apparent level areas were also recorded on the site in addition to shell midden exposed in a bulldozed scarp.

The level areas had a strip excavated across them, taking in the back scarp. No cultural material of any description was recovered and it was concluded the level areas were natural features. The stratigraphy consisted of topsoil (8-10 cm deep) overlying a hard nutty clay which was very difficult to excavate. A shell midden lower on the slope was partly excavated to define its extent and to look for the source. The shell was a small, slightly heaped, but shallow deposit and no other evidence was found in the vicinity. Two pieces of sinter were found adjacent to the midden but there was no indication that they had been flaked off a larger piece (sinter does occur naturally in the area).

A trench was placed across the 'drain' feature and while the base was slightly more damp than the surrounding area, it did not appear to be a constructed feature. After examining a wider area around the site a similar feature was found to the west which again followed the slope of the land to the stream. It was concluded this was a natural drainage channel. A total of 25.5 m<sup>2</sup> was excavated.

It was felt there was little to be gained spending any length of time on this site. The midden indicated human occupation. The stone mounds appeared to be artificially created, although there were stones present throughout the site. The evidence from the site is inconclusive, nor was there anything to suggest this site was European in origin. A radiocarbon age estimate on cockle shell indicates the site is less than 250 years old.

N44/171 (006661) Midden/Terrace

This site, consisting of a single terrace (8 x 6m) with shell midden present on the backscarp, was low in the Awakanae Stream valley. Green bottle glass had been found nearby during the survey. The site was masked by a dense cover of toitoi, manuka and bracken fern. A 50 cm wide trench was dug from the backscarp to the front of the terrace. The shell midden was 5 cm deep; almost all of it was collected to float off land-snails. The deposit on the terrace itself was badly disturbed by pigs and plant roots. The topsoil or organic matter was approximately 10 cm deep before grading into an extremely firm plastic clay. No features were visible in the sections exposed.

Again it was decided that the information return would be slight for the time spent and a greater amount of information could be gained more easily from other sites.

A radiocarbon date of 325±59 was obtained from shell on the site.

N44/191 (002653) Midden/Pit/Terrace

Situated on a leading ridge overlooking the Coromandel Harbour this site was recorded as having one pit and several possible terraces (see cover). A total of 65 m<sup>2</sup> was excavated. Six storage pits, quantities of shell midden and a cooking area were uncovered. No evidence of dwellings was present in the areas excavated (Fig. 2).

Only one storage pit was fully excavated but the dimensions of four pits were ascertained either by trenching or by probing with a gum spear. Several forms of drainage system, both inside and outside the pits, were encountered. The pits were all dug into clay and consolidated volcanic tuff (laid down during the volcanic period on the Coromandel Peninsula). In all cases the hard tuff formed the pit floors and part if not all of the walls. The pit fill came away very cleanly from the tuff leaving holes exposed where the posts in the pit floor had been.

The level area at the top of the slope had shell midden visible through the grass. Several squares were opened up looking for dwellings. The shell midden was shallow and in discrete patches. The extent of these was determined by probing with a gum spear. A number of obsidian and chert flakes were also found on the surface of the mottled interface zone between the topsoil and the underlying clay. No postholes were found.

| Area | Dimensions   | Fill and Description   |
|------|--------------|--|
| B    | 3.5 x 1.9 m  | Two postholes in floor; estimate three are present altogether. One exterior posthole. An internal drain was present in the uncovered wall. Partially infilled and used as a cooking area.  |
| C    | 3.6 x 1.8 m  | Five postholes in floor. Sump and drain through exterior wall in southwest corner. Filled with cockle shells. (See Plate 1).   |
| D    | 5.5 x 3.1 m  | One stakehole in floor (trenches off-centre for main structural posts). A drain present around internal margin. External drain on slope behind pit. Clean fill of clay and weathered tuff covered with clay mixed with fragmented shell. Fireplace subsequently dug into surface fill. |
| E    | 2.4 x 1.25 m | Clean clay and weathered tuff fill. Internal drain present. Several possible postholes present in floor. Pit shallow in comparison to others on the slope. (See Plate 2).  |

TABLE 1. N44/191 pits.

The storage pits also appeared to have been dug from that layer. A large area was unsuccessfully spaded down into the yellow brown clay looking for features.

The absence of dwellings or evidence can be accounted for in two ways: they were not where expected (that is, on the only large level area on the site), or they were insubstantial and with the clay cracking and continual worm action causing a mottling effect, small stakeholes were not visible. Outside the pits only one posthole was found.

The clean pit fills suggest that pit construction and infilling of disused pits was carried out simultaneously. The pit in Area D, with the mixed shell and clay fill, suggests a thorough disturbance of a shell deposit from elsewhere on the site before it was infilled. The source of this material was not found.

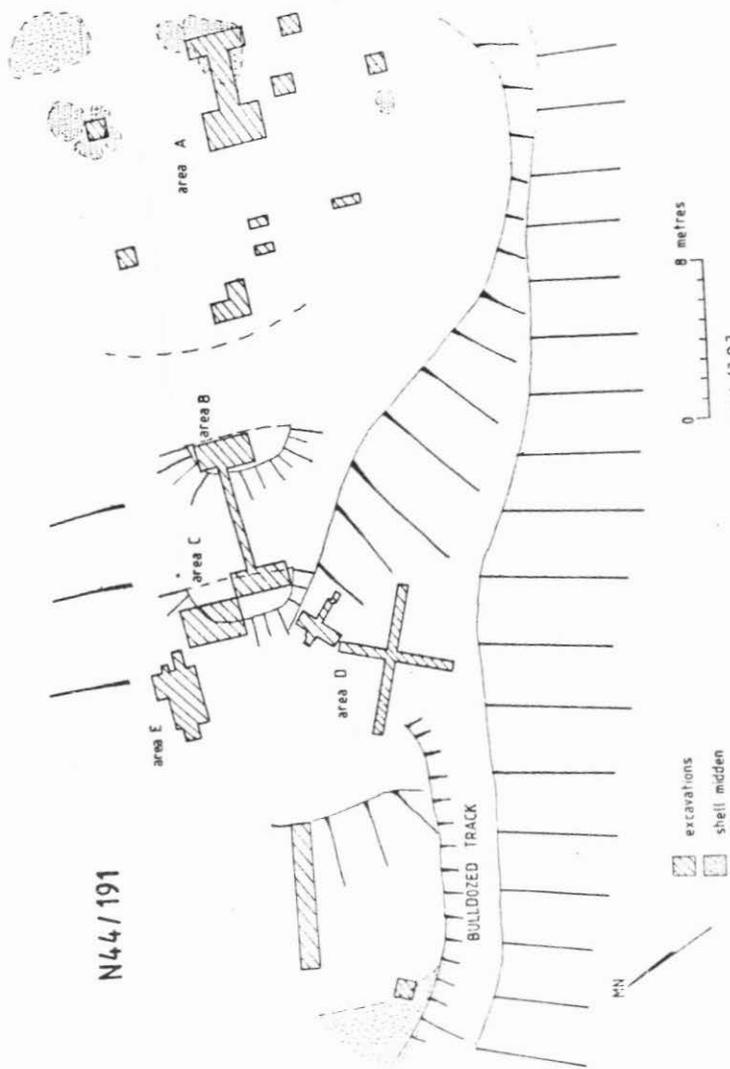


FIGURE 2. Plan showing excavated areas on N44/191.

A radiocarbon age estimate from shell midden on the site suggests the site was occupied in the sixteenth century. Further samples will be submitted to obtain the range of site occupation.

#### N44/198 (005647) Midden/Pit/Terrace

This site had six definite and well defined pits and several level areas in addition to shell midden exposed in a road cutting (Fig. 3). The pits were only partially infilled (unlike N44/191 where all pits had been filled). Several squares, totalling 18 m<sup>2</sup>, were excavated. Similar evidence to N44/191 was recovered. Two infilled storage pits were found on the level areas, both dug into tuff. No drains were found in either of these pits which were not fully excavated although the dimensions of one can be estimated from the posthole pattern in the floor of the pit. In both cases the pit fills formed a surface on which other activities took place. In Area B this was three firescoops filled with stones and charcoal, and in Area C a number of obsidian and chert flakes were present.

One corner of a partially filled storage pit was excavated out in an attempt to solve the problem of pit drainage. It was noted there was a depressed area on the surface in the eastern corner of the pit (Area D) which on excavation became a sump and drain (tunnel) leading out through the side of the pit into the slope beyond. This was dug into consolidated tuff. The drainage feature is probably similar to that encountered in the pit in Area C on N44/191. No postholes were excavated to indicate dwellings.

#### Conclusions

Storage of kumara appears to be a major component of the two larger sites (N44/191 and 198) investigated, and it is more extensive than surface evidence suggests. It is likely that a number of sites along the same ridge will provide similar information. The major question now is why sites some distance inland in an area of poor soils unsuitable for growing crops should have such a large number of storage pits. Ethnographic and traditional information may contribute to solving this problem.

#### Radiocarbon age estimates

Six samples from Stage I were submitted for radiocarbon dating. All were cockle (*Chione stutchburyi*) shell. Sites N44/159, 182 and 202 fit in with the expected pattern based on ethnographic and traditional evidence. The remaining sites indicate occupation of the inland area occurred as early as the sixteenth century.

N44/198  
SITE PLAN

- ▭ excavated area
- ▨ midden
- ▩ pit
- nikau

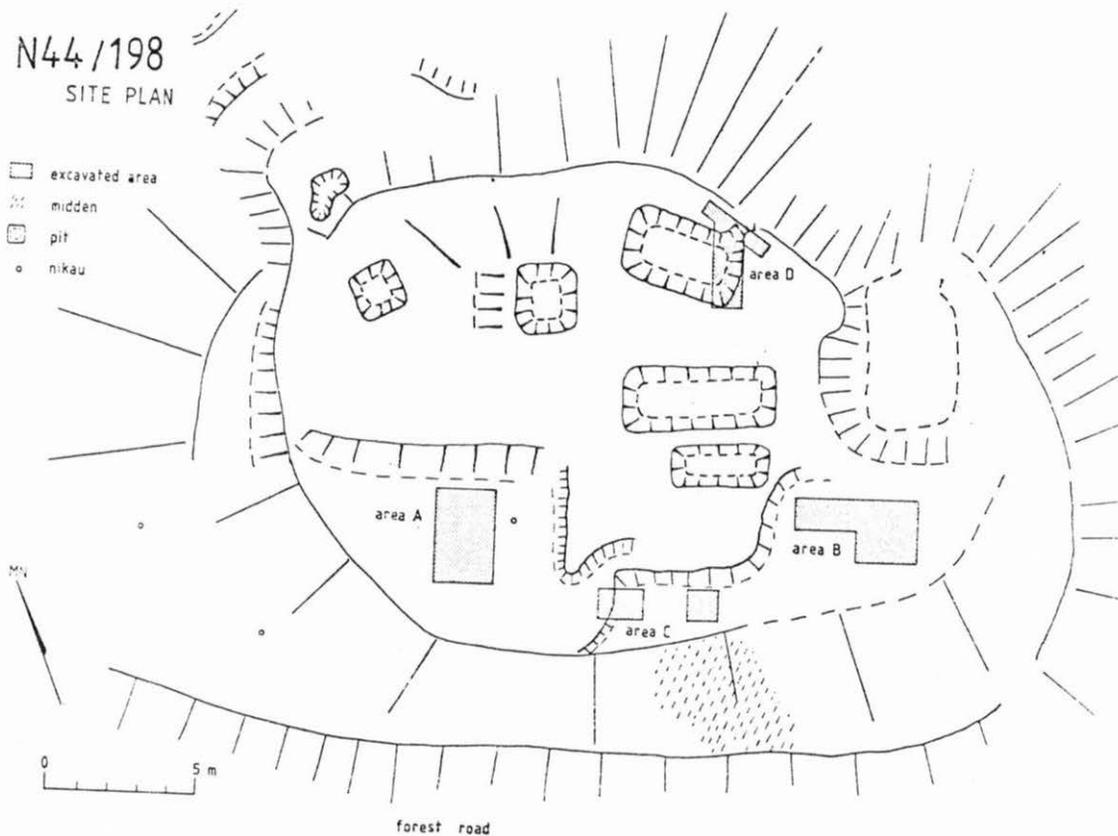


FIGURE 3.. Plan showing excavated areas on N44/198.

| Site no. | Grid ref. | N.Z. no. | Years B.P. Old $t\frac{1}{2}$ (5568 $\pm$ 40) | Years B.P. New $t\frac{1}{2}$ (5730 $\pm$ 40) |
|----------|-----------|----------|---|---|
| N44/159  | 008663    | 6161     | 250   | 250   |
| N44/171  | 006661    | 6162     | 316 $\pm$ 58                                  | 325 $\pm$ 59                                  |
| N44/180  | 004656    | 6157     | 312 $\pm$ 57                                  | 321 $\pm$ 59                                  |
| N44/182  | 007656    | 6159     | 250   | 250   |
| N44/191  | 002653    | 6158     | 391 $\pm$ 58                                  | 403 $\pm$ 59                                  |
| N44/202  | 003629    | 6160     | 250   | 250   |

TABLE 2. Briers Block radiocarbon dates.

Acknowledgements

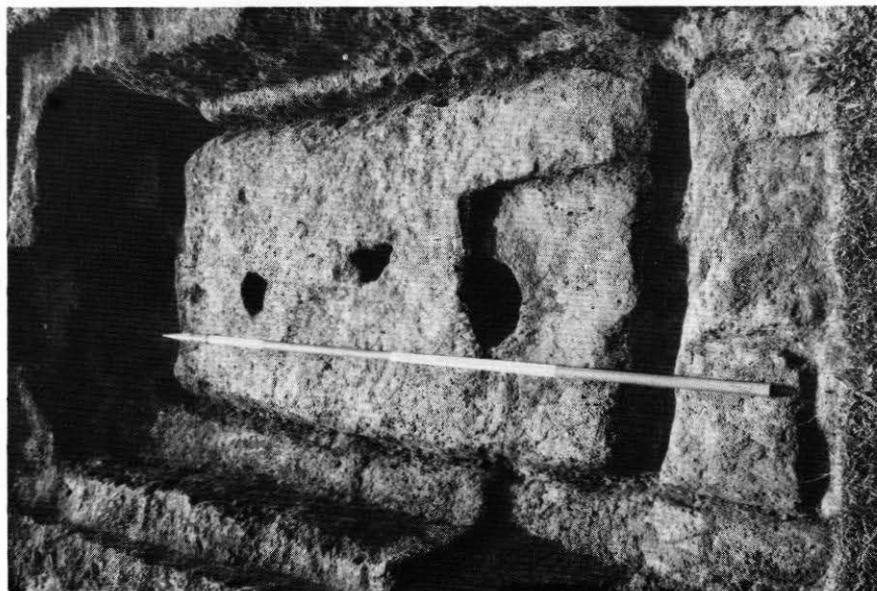
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References

- Coster, J. and G. Johnston 1978 Whangapoua State Forest, Brier Block. Archaeological Site Survey April 1978. Unpublished report, N.Z.F.S., Auckland.
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BRIERS BLOCK EXCAVATIONS Plate 1. N44/191 Pit C.



BRIERS BLOCK EXCAVATIONS Plate 2. N44/191 Pit E.