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**NEW ZEALAND ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER**



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INTERIM REPORT ON EXCAVATIONS AT N77/606, KAWERAU

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This excavation is Stage III of the archaeological investigations being conducted in the Kawerau area by the Department of Anthropology, University of Auckland, under contract to N.Z. Historic Places Trust (NZHPT Permit No.1981/18). Stage I of the project involved a site survey of the area under consideration (Phillips, this issue), while Stage II was the initial series of investigations of cultural features under threat of destruction (Lawlor, this issue). Stage III involved the rescue investigation of N77/606 (terraces 1 and 2), a low knoll protruding out into the Long Valley (see Phillips, this issue, Fig. 2). This knoll was required for landfill in the valley floor and hence the site would be totally destroyed.

Aims of the investigation

The site survey of the Long and Marshall Blocks had isolated four low knolls projecting out into the previously swampy valley floor as being an uncommon feature within the landscape. N77/606 was the largest and least damaged of the knolls. With its imminent destruction it was considered an ideal opportunity to investigate this particular topographical feature. The site before excavation was recorded as having two terraces (16.7 x 7.7 m and 18.4 x 12.6 m) and a storage pit of 6.3 x 5 x 0.6 m deep (see Fig. 1).

Priority was given to finding out the nature of the archaeological deposits and recovering maximum information in a short time. The work was aimed at determining how different the site features were to those excavated in the nearby Ballantrae Block and recovering material which would enable the occupation of the site to be dated, and assessing the relationship between survey data for the site and the excavation data, particularly with respect to the size of site features.

Excavations

Excavations on N77/606 took place from the 11th to the 28th of May 1981. A total of 241 person days were spent on the project involving a core group of eight people, with 17 others present for shorter periods (Plate 4). A total of 155 m<sup>2</sup> was opened up (Fig. 2).

Media coverage of the excavations consisted of articles in the Kawerau and District Gazette (26 May 1981) and the Whakatane Beacon

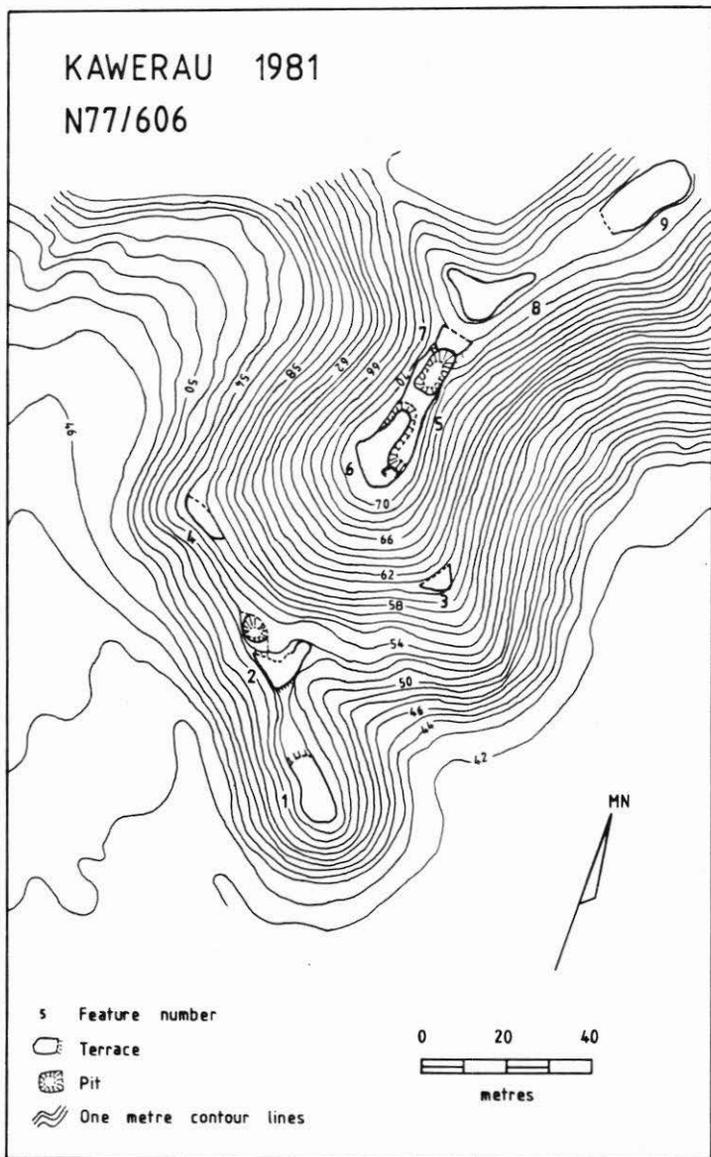


FIGURE 1. N77/606 before excavation.

(26 May 1981). Television coverage was presented on 'Top Half', the northern regional news programme on 29 May 1981.

A combination of mechanical and archaeological excavation was used. A traxcavator removed 30-40 cm of the Tarawera ash to within a few centimetres of the cultural deposit (Plate 5). This was the most efficient way of removing culturally sterile overburden from the site, allowing archaeological excavation to then proceed. Excavation involved a combination of trenching and areal excavation in order to maximise the amount of information recovered in the short time available. Terrace 1 was excavated areally as was a portion of the saddle between Terrace 1 and the large pit at the base of the slope. A trench was dug through this saddle to intersect any cultural features which might be present. Terrace 2 was also trenched to determine the nature of the archaeological deposits.

The geology in this area is characterised by a number of air-fall tephra deposits from the Okataina volcanic centre which includes Mt. Tarawera (see Lawlor, this issue). The latest in the series was the Tarawera basaltic scoria and ash from the 1886 Tarawera eruption which acted as a sealing layer over the cultural deposits on the site. Maori occupation of the site occurred between the Kaharoa and Tarawera eruptions.

Stratigraphy proved to be complex as the natural tephra layers had been disturbed and mixed quite considerably in some sections of the site. However, it is apparent there was a deliberate selection for the Rotoma and Waiohau ashes, the solid texture of which was desirable for storage pit construction.

A generalised stratigraphy across the site consisted of topsoil and Tarawera Ash overlying a charcoal and organic rich black layer which mantled all the features. This layer probably represents successive vegetation burning after abandonment of the site as well as build up during occupation, particularly on Terrace 1 where the layer was deeper than elsewhere. The layer beneath this was either Whakatane or Rotoma, depending on the area of the site.

It is evident from the stratigraphy that the majority of the Kaharoa Ash was deliberately removed from the site prior to construction activities. This was also evident at Site GH 579 in the Ballantrae Block, Kaharoa Ash, mixed with other ash deposits was used at N77/606 to build out and extend the sides of the knoll. The stratigraphy in a trench through the south edge of the knoll showed successive deposition of material overlying the natural tephra layers.

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N77/606 Terraces 1 and 2

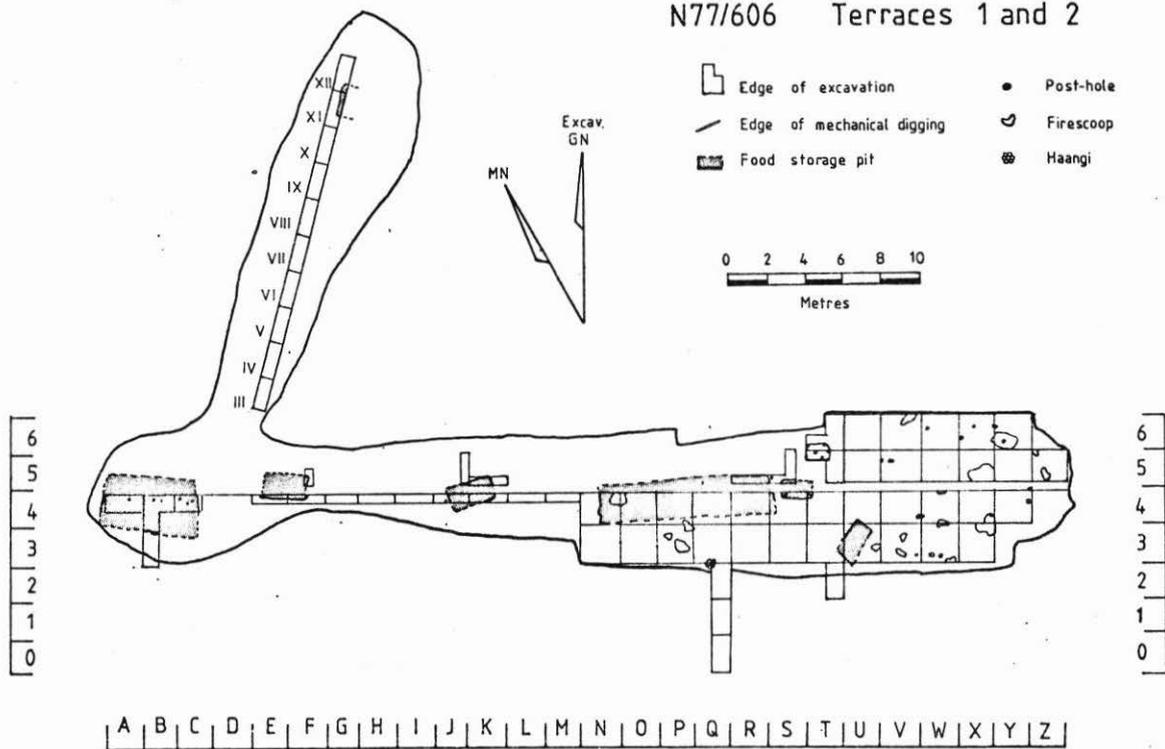


FIGURE 2. Excavations at N77/606.

Features were usually overlain by the black layer although at least one posthole relates to this layer on Terrace 1. The fill of the surface recorded storage pit in squares B-C had a stratigraphy of alternate black and white sand layers indicating a natural infilling process. These layers were not uniformly distributed in the pit and appeared from the settling out of the larger grain-sized particles to represent slope wash and erosion. The alternate black and white sand is interpreted as periods of stability and instability on the slope behind the storage pit where burning off of the vegetation caused erosion of charcoal-rich sand followed by clean white sand as vegetation became re-established. Another six storage pits were found during the excavation. Those in squares E-F and J-K were dug into Whakatane Ash and filled with a similar material, while three more (in squares N-S, S-T and T-U) were dug into Mamaku, Waiohau and Rotoma respectively and were again deliberately infilled. Other activities, represented by firescoops and a hangi then occurred on the fill layers which extended over an area greater than the pits.

An obsidian assemblage of approximately 900 pieces including utilised flakes and waste manufacturing material was found on Terrace 1, as were a number of pieces of polished stone fragments, probably from an adze. A pumice reel similar to that found in the Ballantrae Block was collected.

### Conclusion

Excavations at N77/606 uncovered evidence for a number of prehistoric activities. Features included: seven storage pits of variable size and depth; three small shallow rectangular bins; a number of firescoops and postholes which formed no apparent pattern or structure. Several occupations or phases of activity are represented on the site with the initial function of the site being for storage. The storage pits, with one exception, were deliberately infilled and general activities are represented on the fill surface. The evidence from the site is similar to that recovered from site GH 579 in the Ballantrae Block.

### Acknowledgements

The following people from Auckland University took part in the excavations: Peter Adds, Heather Albert, Wayne Carter, Helen Edgar, Lawrence Foanaota, Judith Gardner, Leslie Goodliffe, Chris Grace, Francis Halpin, Jill Jones, Des Kahotea, Rosalind Kay, Elke Kurschus, Ian Lawlor, Rachel Lilburn, Ben Nanasca, James Papalii, Wiki Robinson, Jeffrey Seth, Christina Smith, Wynne Spring-Rice, Jo Sullivan, Tania Wilson and Richard Winder. Mrs L. Jordan and Dave White of the Whakatane District Historical Society assisted with the excavating. Ken Moore

(Archaeological Association filekeeper, Kawerau) provided assistance throughout the investigation. Thanks also to Waiotahi Contractors for fitting their work around our needs and plans. Allan Pullar visited the site and provided valuable knowledge on the tephra deposits.

Basic organisation for the project was done by Ian Lawlor and I am very grateful for his help and support in ensuring things ran smoothly. Harry Allen and Caroline Phillips provided background information and discussion subsequent to the excavation. Albert Te Rire, elder and paramount chief of Bay of Plenty Ngati Tuwharetoa and Mrs Te Rire visited the site and gave approval for excavations to commence.