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LETTERS

Dear Editor

Ah mm

I would like to encourage New Zealand archaeologists to express measurements under one metre in mm. This would have several modest advantages: it would tend to increase accuracy in measurement and data collection; it would economise on data expression because decimal points (“35 mm” rather than “3.5 cm”), and leading zeros (“5 mm” rather than “0.5 cm”), often fall out; and it would mesh with modern construction methods, where relevant measurements are usually in mm - thus buried telephone cables might require 700 mm cover, i.e. “700”.

The last is possibly the most important point, because the trend seems to be that an increasing proportion of archaeological work now taking place occurs in the context of civil construction. In my experience digger drivers think only in mm and I reckon we should follow suit. On the other hand there is one area where we should be trying to bring digger drivers round to our way of thinking. This concerns the desirability of using digger buckets without teeth. There is a very good reason why digger buckets are usually toothed, because the effect is to focus the effort of the digger onto the points of the teeth, which greatly increases the penetrative power of the machine.

The problem is that toothed buckets make it harder to see what is going on in the ground: a toothed bucket 300 mm wide might have three teeth on its edge. When such a bucket digs a hole the finished surfaces, and especially the bottom of the hole, are usually so smashed up that very little useful can be seen. If there is some suspicion that archaeological traces are present it is now necessary to tidy up the excavation, slowing up the whole operation. We could make life easier for everyone, and improve the quality and value of monitoring, if buckets with smooth cutting edges were the norm. This may not always be practical, but digging in cultural sediments will seldom need toothed buckets just because the sediments are typically soft and fine grained.

Most construction companies would have access to smooth buckets and it is just a matter of taking the right gear to the site. But archaeological monitoring often starts after that decision is made. Archaeological consultants might be able to intervene at an earlier stage, but even then the message will often not get through. So probably the most effective way to promote this idea is through conditions attached to N.Z.H.P.T. Authorities. I suggest that the Trust consider applying such a condition, at least experimentally, say on beach-front developments.

Reg Nichol, Picton