



NEW ZEALAND  
ARCHAEOLOGICAL  
ASSOCIATION

## ARCHAEOLOGY IN NEW ZEALAND



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## OTAGO ARCHAEOLOGY OVER 36 YEARS

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I came sideways into archaeology, from a 1950s-type degree in botany and zoology at Otago after my two children went off to school. I had led the semi-cloistered life of a full-time mum for seven years, which was meant to give me something referred to as suburban neurosis—you don't hear about it these days. The set course of Stage I lectures in 1967 provided me with Les Groube who glumly lectured to the upper far right corner of the room; and Peter Gathercole who made eye-contact with anyone and everyone and was clearly enjoying every minute of his lectures and tutorials. The contrast with science lecturers of the 1950s was a marvel.

Having a family that I still felt dutiful about, I was not willing to go out on more than one day excavations around Dunedin. My first ever excavation was in 1966 on the B area terraces at Karitane Peninsula where Les Groube had opened about four separate areas on four terraces and having scraped off the turf, found an irregular pattern of post holes but no midden and no artefacts that I saw. After sitting and scraping in the sun for several hours, Les made a statement which I don't think would find favour these days: "We can't understand this pattern. We will have to cover up and leave it alone." He may have been arguing with Lin Phelan about what the pattern meant, and he may have simply felt he was losing the argument .

My second effort was a visit with my family to Shag River Mouth when Peter Gathercole was running trenches out of the sandhills into the peat. The only notable thing about it was that my husband boldly drove our Holden clean across the estuary on a rough track right to the edge of the sand dune. Admittedly we got stuck in the sand just as we were leaving, but I am sure that the salt marsh flats were a lot drier then than I have ever seen them since. Peter was aware that there was occupation material below the high tide mark but certainly that material seems to be more deeply inundated now.

My third field opportunity came in 1969 when I realised that Dave Simmons would be working at Glenorchy when we were in Queenstown at our

family cottage. Dave had given me careful instructions on how to find his pleasant informal camp site on the south east corner of Diamond Lake. I had not realised that we would essentially be two families, each with young children, camping in two sets of tents. It didn't feel very archaeological. But the next day Dave showed me what he thought were Contact period potato gardens at Camp Hill (SRF E40/13), which memory suggests could have been a gold miner's garden surrounded by sod walls, now almost entirely weathered away. But at that stage we had done little surveying on the gold fields, and I certainly was not familiar with such remnant sites. I also helped Dave excavate an umu ti (E41/7), larger than I have ever seen in subsequent years, and which proved to have four large post holes forming a square around it, presumably for a thatched roof.

In the following decades my colleagues, having noticed that I could tell them the names of native shrubs and trees, thought I was a plant ecologist. I wriggled, but Foss Leach and Doug Sutton just thought I was being modest. In any case, given the lack of funds, I was the best they could afford. I protested vigorously that I could not leave my two sons of 7 and 9 years with my busy lawyer husband, but Foss and Helen insisted in 1972 that I bring them along for a fortnight in the shearers' quarters at Palliser Bay. I had to visit and record particular areas of vegetation with Peter Cresswell, our micro-snail expert, up steep valley sides and over distances which my sons could not traverse. Each day I apprehensively left them in someone else's care. Sometimes they were bored and made proper nuisances of themselves. One day they were given a walkie-talkie and sent hundreds of feet up a hillside by Foss, who kept them in view and directed them from point to point, probably for no other purpose than to keep them out from under his feet. When I walked back down valley to Foss to pick them up, they were nowhere in sight. With slight malice in his voice, Foss brought Michael in on the radio and then pointed out two dots on a distant ridge top to their alarmed mother.

When Doug decided I could do a vegetation study of the Chathams for him in 1976 the boys were old enough to stay home and keep house for their father. We were able to fly to the Chathams, though some of the students had to endure a small coastal steamer. The plane, however, was a converted Anson troop glider of the 1939–45 war, which had been fitted up with an engine for the Chathams run. To get into the plane you stepped straight off the ground up one step into the side of the plane, it was so low-bellied. Once it took off, every one of its 10,000 rivets vibrated, as they all tried to coordinate to get us across an unexpected amount of sea to a bit of land which looked as if a good spring tide would cover most of it.

The house on the Chathams, which had been condemned and was due to be bulldozed, had a bathroom built over a cess pit, into which the rats regularly

fell with a splash when they weren't screeching with rage at each other in the ceiling. The vegetation, however, was a field naturalist's delight: whole forests with canopies made up of species I had never seen before. I knew the genera well enough and in the South Island they were shrub genera. I was charmed to see shrub species struggling up to make a real canopy, and one which was truly effective against the rotten Chathams weather. I have never felt so isolated, standing on a cliff top on the uninhabited south east corner of Chathams Island, and peering into a southerly storm over a very rough sea in the direction of home and children. I was now ready to believe a story told by Charlie Wright, who mapped the Chatham Islands soils. He needed to write up his notes and found a sheltered spot within a gorse hedge. He had to chase a sheep out before he climbed into it, and when he came out the sheep had not fled into the gale but was patiently waiting for him to leave.

One of the most interesting changes in New Zealand archaeology that I have watched happen is the effect on developers and local authorities of the firmer application of the Historic Places Act over the last 10 years. Reactions to the conditions in authorities still range from abuse and complete incredulity to the contractor who says to the archaeologist, and I quote, "You're in charge. I will programme my work in stages so that you have time at each stage to do your work." I doubt that my North Island colleagues, when working in Central Auckland eight years ago, would have believed that could ever happen. But it has taken 10 years to reach the stage where at least some contractors take such a stance, supporting the notion that laws and regulations are kept only when people actually agree with them. We need to keep working on getting that agreement.