



NEW ZEALAND
ARCHAEOLOGICAL
ASSOCIATION

NEW ZEALAND ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER



This document is made available by The New Zealand Archaeological Association under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

To view a copy of this license, visit
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>.

PITS AT SEDDONS RIDGE, KAIKOURA

Michael M. Trotter,
Canterbury Museum.

From 29 December 1967 to 8 January 1968 a small team of members of the Canterbury Museum Archaeological Society under my direction made an investigation of a series of pits on a spur immediately north of the Kahutara River, near Kaikoura, Marlborough. The pits had been known to several residents in the locality, but were thought by some to be where farm stock had been buried, or depressions caused by trees being uprooted.

Seddon's Ridge - named for convenience after the current landowner - is one of several which run inland more or less at right angles to the coast and separated from it by a half-mile-wide coastal strip of flat land. Immediately behind the beach the soil is predominantly sand, giving way to loam with much gravel in the proximity of the river. Near the spurs the ground is inclined to be swampy and has been drained. Prior to this drainage, easy access to the ridge would have been limited by the Kahutara River and steep bank on the south, and the swamp in the valley on the north. It is probable that there was at one time either a river or swamp to the east, and inland on the western side the country is still fairly rough and bush-covered.

A careful search was made of the other ridges or spurs in the locality, but no pits or other indications of prehistoric occupation were found on them, although it is conceivable that there could be some obscured by heavy bush. Nearer the coast are several patches of charcoal-stained ground and scattered heat-stained stones with some midden shells, flakes of flint, and rarely other artifacts. To the north and the south along the coast numerous archaeological sites have been recorded; three rock shelters are known inland, and high up on the slopes of Mt Fyfe are shell middens and at least two unfinished canoes. It is of interest that these middens are in the vicinity of a nesting area of the shearwater Puffinus huttoni, suggesting that young birds were collected for food, as were those of an allied species, the Mutton-bird, in its nesting areas. In 1961 members of the Marlborough Historical Society and the Canterbury Museum Archaeological Society examined the unfinished canoes, and decided they were in too poor a condition to salvage. The larger is actually part of a composite hull and is shaped at one end to facilitate fitting another section. It is

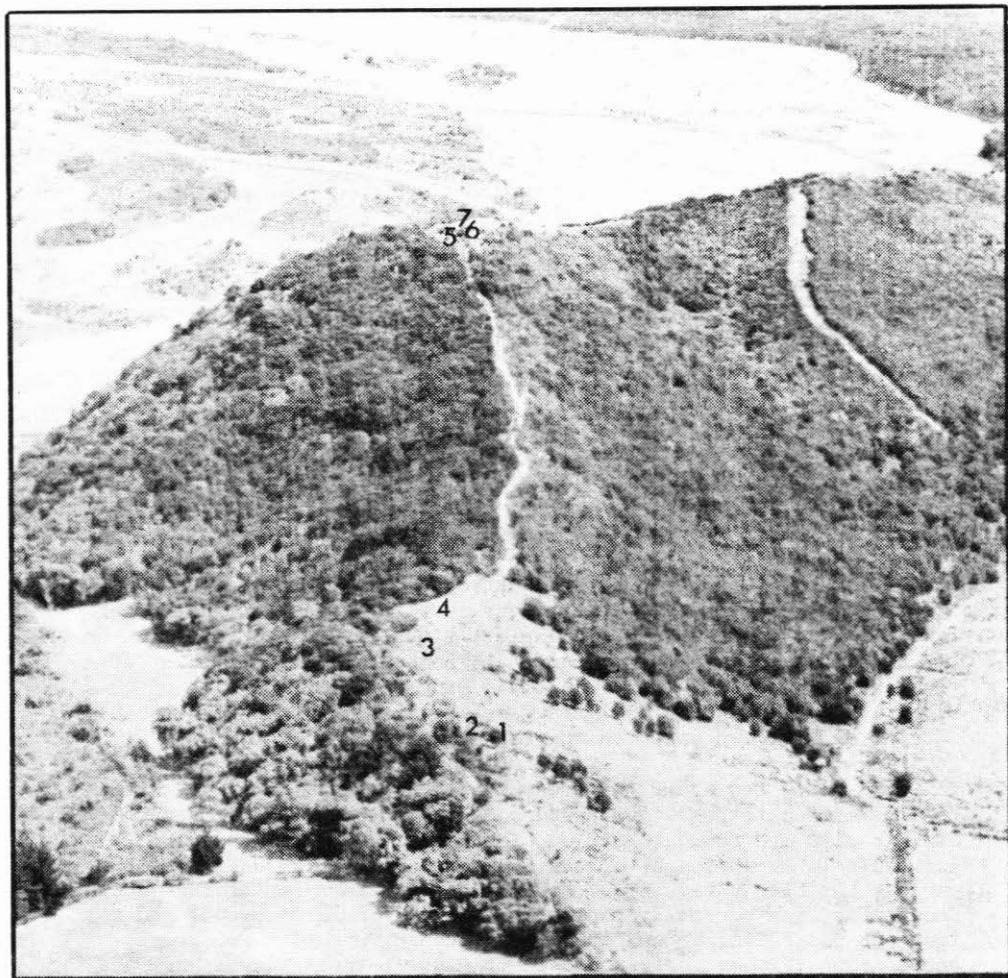


Fig. 1. Aerial view of Seddon's Ridge, looking north-west, Kahutara River in background. Numbers indicate pit locations.

35 ft long with a maximum width of 30 inches and depth of 27 inches. The hollowing out of the inside has been almost completed. The second hull, higher up the ridge, is of a smaller one-piece canoe; it is now 15 ft long but has been shortened at one end by rotting and at the other by vandalism. Its maximum width is 18 inches and depth 14 inches.

On Seddon's Ridge seven man-made hollows were identified (Fig. 1). For convenience and because similar depressions elsewhere have been generally called pits this term has been adopted here. They varied considerably in size, shape and depth (Fig. 2), details being as follows (Nos 1-4 are N.Z.A.A. Site S.49/60 and 5-7 are S.49/61):

<u>Pit</u>	<u>Approximate size</u>	<u>Depth</u>	<u>Shape</u>
1	15 ft x 10 ft	See Fig. 3	Oval
2	12 ft x 12 ft	1 ft 6 in.	Square
3	25 ft x 15 ft	See Fig. 3	Rectangular
4	12 ft x 7 ft 6 in.	1-3 ft	Rectangular
5	9 ft x 3 ft +	1 ft	Rectangular, raised rim
6	18 ft x 10 ft	2-3 ft	Rectangular, raised rim
7	10 ft x 5 ft	6-12 in.	Rectangular, raised rim

One, No. 5, had been partly destroyed by a bulldozed track which has been made along the top of the ridge, and it is possible that other surface indications have been completely destroyed or obscured. On this track, partway between pits 4 and 5, a somewhat weathered point of a "barracouta" hook was found. It was made of flat bone with notches along its outer edge, a design suggesting late manufacture, probably within the last two or three hundred years.

Two pits, Nos 1 and 3, were selected for excavation with a view to determining if possible the purpose for which they had been made. Similar pits are found in various localities in the South Island, particularly Marlborough, on the northern part of the east coast. Their purpose has been variously considered to have been for storage of foodstuffs, for partially sunken dwellings, for large ovens, and for look-out posts to give warning of approaching enemy. Probably depressions of some sort were dug for each of these purposes at one time or another.

Both the Seddon's Ridge pits were only partially excavated, in order to allow future investigations to be carried out if required.

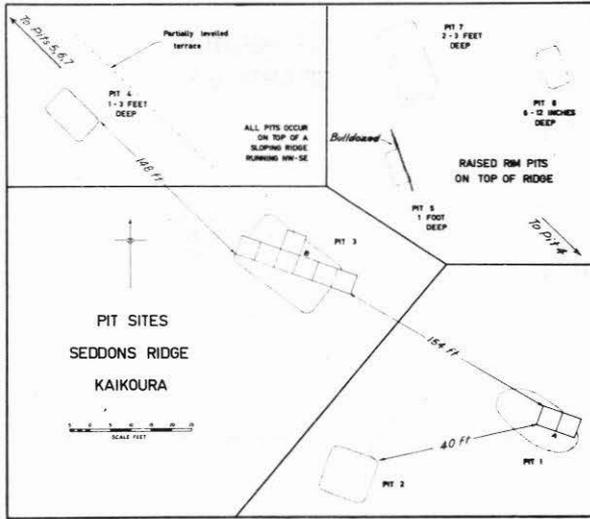


Fig. 2

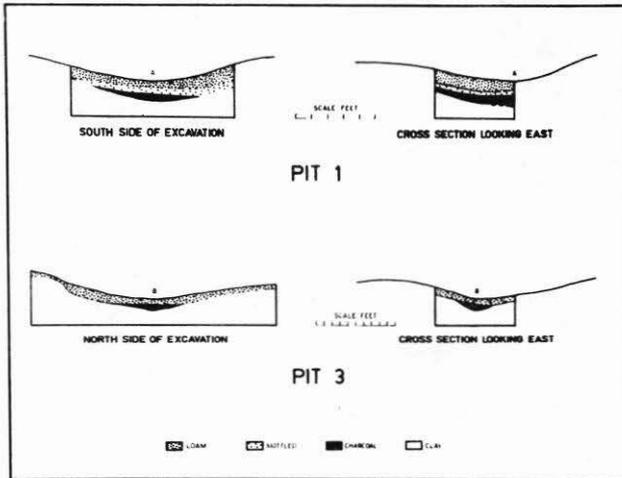


Fig. 3

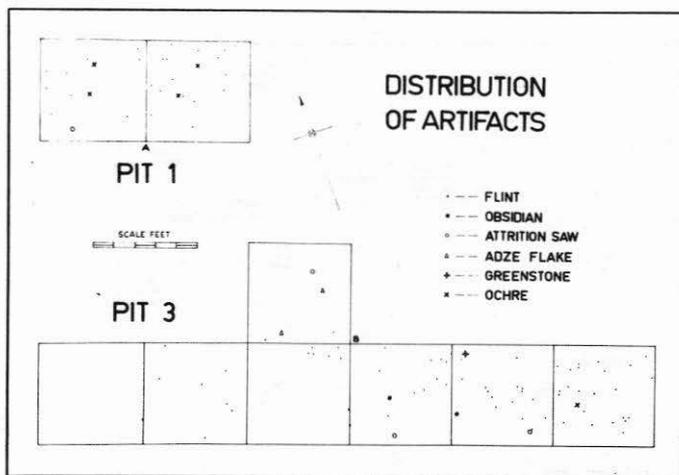


Fig. 4

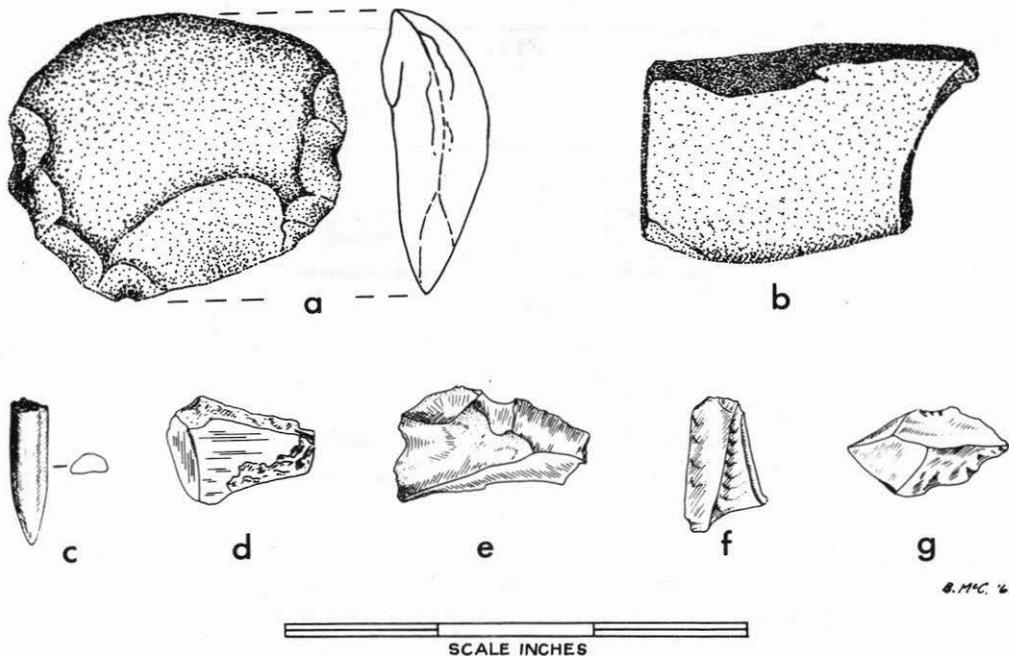


Fig. 5. (a) attrition saw of greywacke; (b) attrition saw of greywacke; (c) broken gouge or chisel of nephrite; (d) adze flake of black argillite; (e) adze flake of black argillite; (f) flake of chalcedony; (g) flake of flint.

The floors in both pits had not been made level but were rather saucer shaped with the maximum depth about the centre (Fig. 3). Immediately upon this lay concentrated charcoal with some burnt and heat-broken greywacke stones, which doubtless had been obtained from the Kahutara River bed a few hundred yards to the south. Above the charcoal was naturally-deposited loam, with an intermediate mottled clay layer in Pit 1. There were no post-holes or other indications of any building or construction associated with either pit.

Artifacts were few, and most of those found were small flakes of flint, with some flakes of chalcedony and obsidian, which, like the flint, would have been used largely for cutting purposes. Besides these were broken pieces of a chisel and two adzes, six attrition saws, a drill-point, a grindstone and several pieces of red ochre. The artifacts thus indicate both food preparation and other occupational activities. Their horizontal distribution in Pit 1 was fairly even but in Pit 3 showed a distinct increase to the lower edge away from the charcoal concentration (Fig. 4). In depth the majority were found in the top of the charcoal layer or (especially in Pit 3) at the base of the overlying infill. The lack of heat staining on those amongst the charcoal indicates that they got there (probably by natural scattering) subsequent to firing. The partial infilling of the pits can with reasonable certainty be assigned to natural causes, principally weathering, and many of the artifacts would have shifted position with the soil movement. From this it would appear that activities involving the use of the artifacts took place mainly on the edge or outside the pits. It is most probable that the use of artifacts was contemporaneous with the fires in the depressions.

The types of artifacts and materials from which they were made points to late prehistoric (Classic) occupation of the site.

If the purpose of the pits was mainly to provide shelter, any walls or roof covering must have been of a temporary insubstantial nature, built without solid uprights being set into the ground. Their location on the ridge spur could have been to allow the occupants to maintain a watch for approaching enemies, but the number of the pits and the evidence of a variety of activities, including the use of fire, indicates that this could not have been the primary purpose of the site. All the pits are on reasonably level dry (i.e., not swampy) ground, and if they do represent dwellings, this is probably the principal reason for their location in this position.

I would like to record my thanks to those who toiled so willingly under hot, dry conditions, to Mr Ivan Hislop who first drew my attention to the site, to Mr Seddon for allowing the excavations on his property, and to Mr Nixon for access over his farm.