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# PREHISTORIC SITES AT OWERA, WHANGAPOUA HARBOUR

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The excavations of depressions, middens, terraces and a ridge top in the Wairoa Valley (Crosby, Sewell and White 1987: 79-93) and investigation of shellfish processing sites on the Omara Spit (Furey 1999: 314-336) have revealed aspects of prehistoric occupation at Whangapoua Harbour. Patterns of settlement which became apparent during an archaeological survey at Oweria broaden the picture of prehistoric habitation which is developing at Whangapoua Harbour. The sites give an insight into Maori organisation and land use in the Oweria area, besides providing a wider context in which to place archaeological research.

## **1992 and 1994 Site Surveys : Summary**

A systematic walk-over survey of the lower Oweria district, funded by grants from the New Zealand Historic Places Trust, was carried out by the writer (1993, 1994).

Oweria is situated between the Otanguru and Oponui Valleys on the south side of the Whangapoua Harbour and encompasses an area approximately 7.5 kilometres long by 3 kilometres wide. It is included in an early description of Matarangi district by McKay, based on geological field work between 1896 and 1898: "Towards the north the country is in part or mainly hilly, with broad marsh lands between the different groups of hills... In the south the country is formed of high hills now or formerly covered by heavy kauri forest" (McKay 1905, Vol. 1: 82). Oweria's history has featured gold prospecting and mining; timber, kauri gum and flax extraction; land alienation; sheepfarming (*Thames Star*, 15 April 1912), "cultivations" (DP 19124 [1916]), dairying and piggeries on rehab farms; and state forestry. The modern economic mainstays of forestry,

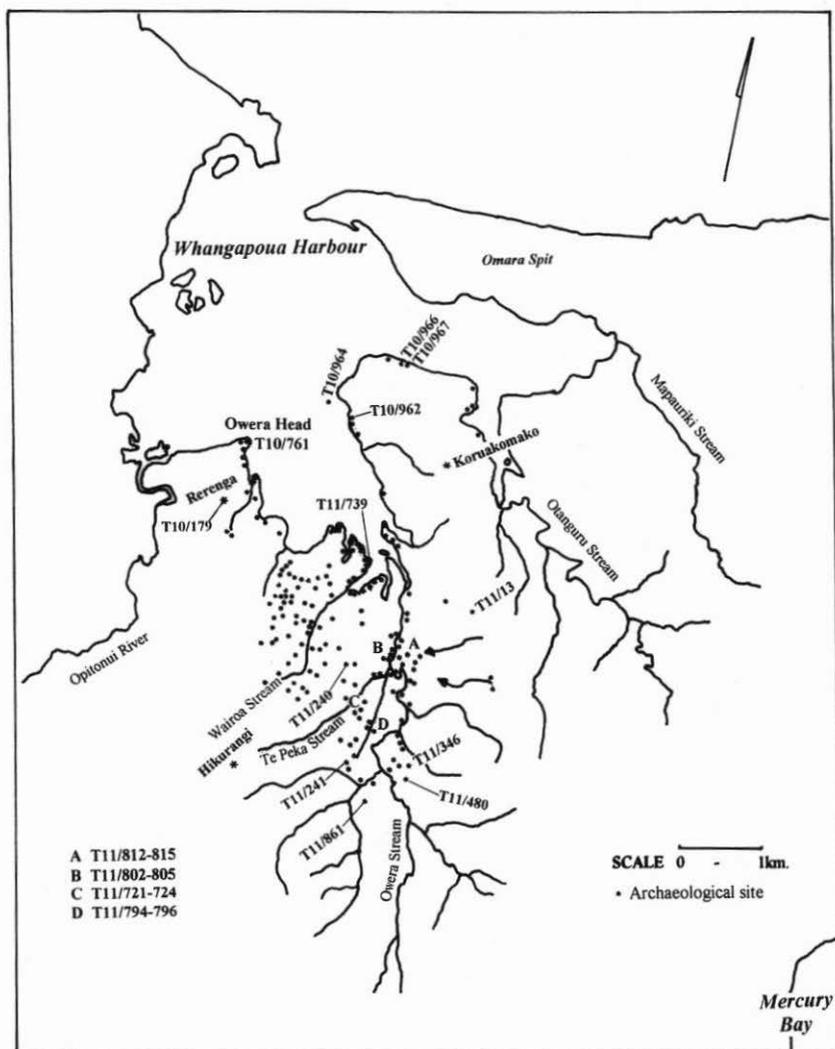


Figure 1. Map showing the distribution of archaeological sites at Ower and the locations of discussed sites.

dairying and raising beef are reflected in a vegetation cover of grass, some peripheral scrub, woodlots on steep land and a backdrop of exotic forest.

The survey extended from the middle area of the Owera Valley to Owera Head and the Koruakomako spit. The topography is varied, comprising the Owera Stream, smaller creeks and water courses, wetlands, ridges, spurs, gullies, the Rerenga and Koruakomako peaks, the estuarine shoreline, inlets, spits, sandbanks and tidal flats. An overlay divided the district into an Esplanade Reserve (vested in the Thames-Coromandel District Council), the Owera Stream Stewardship Land (owned by the Department of Conservation), unassigned land situated in the harbour (administered by the then Department of Survey and Land Information) and private ownership. Each of these land holdings has archaeological site evidence.

Archaeological interest in Owera dates from 1963 when M. Nicholls recorded pa site T10/179, located on Rerenga. About 1978 Tony Walton registered pa sites T11/240 and T11/241, on the west side of the Owera Valley, in the course of other research. In 1979 John Coster and Gabrielle Johnston conducted an archaeological survey of the Western Otanguru Block of the Whangapoua State Forest for the New Zealand Forest Service. They went onto parts of adjoining farmland on the Owera Valley floor to better explain the distribution of sites on the higher ridges and spurs of the Owera - Otanguru dividing ridge which they were surveying. They noted in their report that:

“Soils on the ridges are heavy in fertile clays, but pockets of alluvium occur in some stream valleys. The present day farmland in the flat Owera Valley appears fertile, and Maori agricultural sites occur there, indicating that crops were grown in the valleys in pre-European times” (1979: 2).

Coster and Johnston recorded sites T11/13, 15, 18, 253-257, 340, 344-346, 475-478 and 480 on the east flank of the valley and valley floor, made up of the following site types:

pa : 1 (T11/13 situated inland along the top of the Owera - Otanguru saddle)  
 midden : 9 (some middens were thought to be possibly European in origin)  
 midden/terrace : 1  
 midden/pit : 2  
 pits/terraces : 3

The sites recorded at Owera came under review in 1982 when Jane Connor produced a report on *Archaeological Sites in Three Areas of North Coromandel*

for *Newmont Pty. Ltd.*, prepared for prospecting licence applications at that time. The report was a check-list of Owera sites held in the New Zealand Archaeological Association's Coromandel File with site locations placed on a cadastral map.

A reconnaissance survey was undertaken on the west side of the lower Owera Valley by Louise Furey in 1986 as part of archaeological excavations for the New Zealand Forest Service in the Wairoa Valley (Holzgang Block of the Whangapoua State Forest). Furey recorded T10/761 and T11/681-685 during the survey consisting of:

pa : 1 (T10/761 on Owera Head)  
 midden : 2  
 midden/terrace : 1  
 ?pits : 1  
 pit/terrace : 1

The 1992 and 1994 surveys by the writer added T10/949-956, 958, 960-971 and T11/721-732, 734-750, 754-777, 779-781 and 790-822 to the archaeological record:

find spot : 1 (an adze butt of very fine rhyolite found on a spit)  
 pit : 3  
 platform/pit/midden : 1  
 platform/midden : 5  
 platform/terrace/midden : 1  
 midden : 89  
 terrace : 4  
 terrace/midden : 4  
 terrace/midden/pit : 1

Sites previously recorded in the survey area were revisited in 1992 and 1994 during field work and Site Record Forms were updated.

## **Description of Patterns**

### *1. Owera Valley*

The central waterway in the Owera Valley is the Owera Stream, into which various small creeks and water courses feed. The alluvial floor of the valley has been shaped into floodplains, broad and dissected terraces, elongated ridges, hillocks, easy-sloping spurs, gullies and wetland areas. A lagoon, which no longer exists, is shown in an area west of the Owera Stream in a c.1907 map

(Fraser and Adams:1907). In this diverse landscape prehistoric settlement was focused along the Owera Stream and on the sides of the valley.

There is a concentration of sites where tidal influence ends along the course of the Owera Stream. The number of sites and range of types indicates intensive prehistoric occupation in the vicinity. Te Peka, a named creek on ML 2967 (1897, 1898), flows into the Owera Stream at this point from below Hikurangi. On the east bank the area adjoins a floodplain 126 m long by 67 m wide (at its widest point) and a wetland behind the floodplain. Four large midden sites, recorded as T11/812-815, exist on both sides of an embankment-like ridge beside the Owera Stream. Midden material visible in these sites averages 41 m in length, and is likely to be from kainga floors. Terraces, pits and other middens are also located on an elongated ridge on the other side (east) of and abutting the floodplain and wetland. Midden sites T11/802-805 are opposite on the west bank of the Owera Stream.

Middens are distributed along the lower Owera Stream on the edge of floodplains and on adjacent slopes and ridges. The recurring presence of habitation sites suggests that the floodplains were used for gardening.

Different resource zones existed on the valley floor west of the Owera Stream. They included a lagoon, and associated overflow seepage and channels, creeks, swamps and marshes reaching inland to some extent. Apart from two middens by Te Peka creek, the valley floor was found to be devoid of sites. Sites T11/794-796 and 721-724 are situated on high ground and overlook the apparent location of the lagoon. Pa, pits, middens, terraces and an adze on spurs and in gullies on the western slopes are in close proximity to likely gardens both in gullies opening onto the Owera Valley floor and on the valley floor. A pair of ketu (paddle-like implements used for loosening soil described by Best 1925:65) recovered during Department of Lands and Survey draining operations in the area suggests such horticultural systems.

Sites T11/721 platform/midden and T11/346 midden/terrace are located on spurs further inland overlooking the valley floor and represent relatively large sites. Midden material on these sites is linearly visible for 18 m and 31 m respectively. On first analysis, nearby smaller middens seem to be "satellite sites" to the larger sites, perhaps located closer to the resource. Both the large and small middens consistently comprise pipi, cockles, charcoal and occasional fire-shattered stones.

Coster and Johnston found that sites occurred at least 2.5 kilometres from the harbour to T11/480 midden/pits (1979: 5). They stated that:

“The concept of a strict ‘inland limit’ of occupation probably does not apply to the survey area, since the Whangapoua Harbour is only about 7 kms in a straight line from Mercury Bay, so that the two coasts are only a half day’s walk apart.” (ibid)

In 1998 Cathryn Barr recorded T11/859-866 in the southwest area of Owera Valley during an archaeological survey of forest compartments, with a midden, T11/861, being farthestmost up the valley. Inner valley site types recorded by Barr near T11/861 and pa site T11/241 were:

midden : 5 (includes T11/861)

pits : 1

pits/midden : 1

terrace/midden : 1

An urupa reserve is situated in the same locality as this series of sites.

## 2. Spits

Spits project into the Whangapoua Harbour at Owera, giving immediacy both to the estuary and its resources. The spits are terraces built up from undifferentiated alluvion (New Zealand Geological Survey : Auckland : Sheet 3). The Owera spits are generally broad, level and featureless. They are used for grazing and producing hay, while the edges tend to have some scrub, noxious weeds and indigenous and rogue exotic trees.

Middens are found on the shoreline banks of the spits. Setting and extensive surface exposures suggest that they are the remnants of habitation floors of kainga. Thirty-five spit middens superficially average 22 m in length. The longest midden, T10/962, strategically placed near the Owera Stream channel and estuarine and marine resources, comprises scattered shell intermittently visible for 85 m. Shell also shows through disturbed ground as far back as 30 m behind the spit bank. The second largest site, T11/739, located near the mouths of the Wairoa and Owera Valleys, has a length of 79 m. The variety of contents in the spit middens suggests a sense of permanency and contrast with inland middens which suggest temporary and seasonal occupation. Fire-shattered stones, charcoal, burnt shells, whole hangi stones, fishbones, artefacts (adzes, hammerstones, claypipe stems, glass and metal), flake tool material (obsidian, chert) and shells (pipi, cockle, mudsnail, *tellinae*, oyster, whelk) are evident in spit middens.

### 3. *Small Harbour Valleys*

Two small valleys located between Oweria Head and Wairoa Valley open directly onto Whangapoua Harbour. The concentration of sites in and overlooking the valleys is an indication of their accessibility to the harbour and as favourable places for gardens and cultivated trees. The deep V-shaped gully situated below pa site T10/179, for instance, is associated with shell middens, platforms and a terrace at the head and mouth of the valley. T10/179, positioned on the Oweria - Opitonui saddle and some 134 m above the valley floor, has pits as well as a platform and terraces. An extensive area of land between this valley and the other small valley to the south was found to be relatively absent of sites. Two middens and two terraces were recorded in this "vacant" area, while a nephrite pendant and an adze had been picked up by the landowner in different places.

### 4. *Sandbank*

Site T10/964 shell midden/platform is positioned on a narrow, low-lying estuarine sandbank, close to the Oweria Stream channel. When the tide is out, it is possible to walk out to the site from the Koruakomako spit. The site's present appearance is an 0.1 metre high platform consisting of shell midden which extends approximately 12 m by 3 m in width. The contents of the midden include pipi, cockle, mudsnail, whelk, charcoal, whole hangi stone, fire-shattered stone and burnt shell in a blackened sand matrix.

### 5. *Incipient Shoreline*

Sites T10/966 and 967 are located on low-lying ground in the northwest area of the Koruakomako spit behind the present shoreline and a short distance from the first spit gradation. In 1994 the area was being reclaimed for pasture. Both sites were interpreted as artificially raised platforms, and as adaptations to the once dominant wetland environment.

A feature of the locality is its openness, with the Oweria - Otanguru - Mapauriki channels beyond the tidal flats in the middle distance. The platforms consist of midden material (pipi, cockle, oyster, charcoal and fire-shattered stone) and wood appearing through the surface. The tops of the sites had been truncated in 1994; however, intact sections in a drain along the shoreline showed that they are 0.6 m (T10/967) and 0.1 m (T10/966) above surrounding ground, placed on sand which in turn is on a consolidated sand substrat. T10/966 is 8 m long by 8 m wide and T10/967 extends over 20 m and has a width of 14 m (Fig.2).



*Figure 2. A northeast view of T10/967 in May 1994.*

### **Conclusions**

Sites identified during site surveys at Owera demonstrate the relative role of dryland and estuarine resources. The site types reflect the diversity of past habitation, for example, how the Owera Stream channel and an ill-defined Koruakomako spit shoreline were utilised, as well as the other spit peripheries. There are certain gaps in the distribution of sites which, however, cannot be so readily summarised. One such gap between the Owera Stream and the west side of the valley is caused by a lagoon and its drainage systems, creeks and water courses and marshes. Reasons for other gaps may be cultural (such as land distribution), obstruction from a dense vegetation cover (ML 2967, for instance, notes the presence of kauri bush in the upper Wairoa Valley), distance from navigable water (T11/13 is relatively isolated from other sites) and geomorphological (the spit east of the Owera Stream mouth is graded into different stages of development, while the highest part of the spit has been intensively farmed for many years [DP 19124]).

### Acknowledgements

Thanks to Neville Ritchie for comments on the draft. Thanks also to Cathy Barr and Tony Walton for additional information, and to Owen Wilkes for assistance with several SRF queries.

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