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PRELIMINARY REPORT ON THE EXCAVATION OF A WELL
IN THE ALBERT BARRACKS, AUCKLAND

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Between 1848 and 1871 the Albert Barracks occupied 23 acres of the present Albert Park and University of Auckland grounds in what is now the centre of Auckland. Within a loop-holed stone wall about three metres high there were a large number of barrack and store buildings and other structures and a large parade ground. Albert Barracks was therefore a very important feature of early Auckland - its visible remains, however, are now reduced to one 80m section of wall within the University grounds. This preliminary report describes excavations carried out in January and February 1979 on a well within the old barracks.

The Auckland Regional Committee of the Historic Places Trust is attempting to revive interest and knowledge of the Albert Barracks by restoring some of the wells that once served the Barracks. To make the reconstructions as authentic as possible it was decided to excavate at the sites of the wells selected for restoration. I supervised the first of these excavations which was carried out by students, mainly from the Anthropology Department of Auckland University, employed on the Labour Department's Student Community Service Programme (Plate 1). The well selected for pilot excavation was that located next to the Barracks prison, the choice being made because, of those wells visible on early maps, (Fig.1), this was the one most easily identified on the ground.

A shallow circular depression was noticed quite close to the point reached using tape and compass and data from one of the old maps, and this was recognised by Mr Fred Thornley of Milford and Mr Roy Owens of Royal Oak as being the site of a well struck during the Second World War when tunnels for air-raid shelters were dug into the sides of the hill on which the Barracks was situated. At that time it was found that the well had been sealed using timber and heavy corrugated iron, apparently during the demolition of the Barracks. The shaft, still full of good drinking water, was then filled with spoil coming from the tunnels. Accordingly, when excavation began in early January a single six metre square was laid out centred on the shaft.

Structural sequence

The original well was found to involve a shaft about 2.2m in diameter, indicating a well about 2m inside diameter, which seems quite large and suggests a storage function. In the eastern corner of the square a

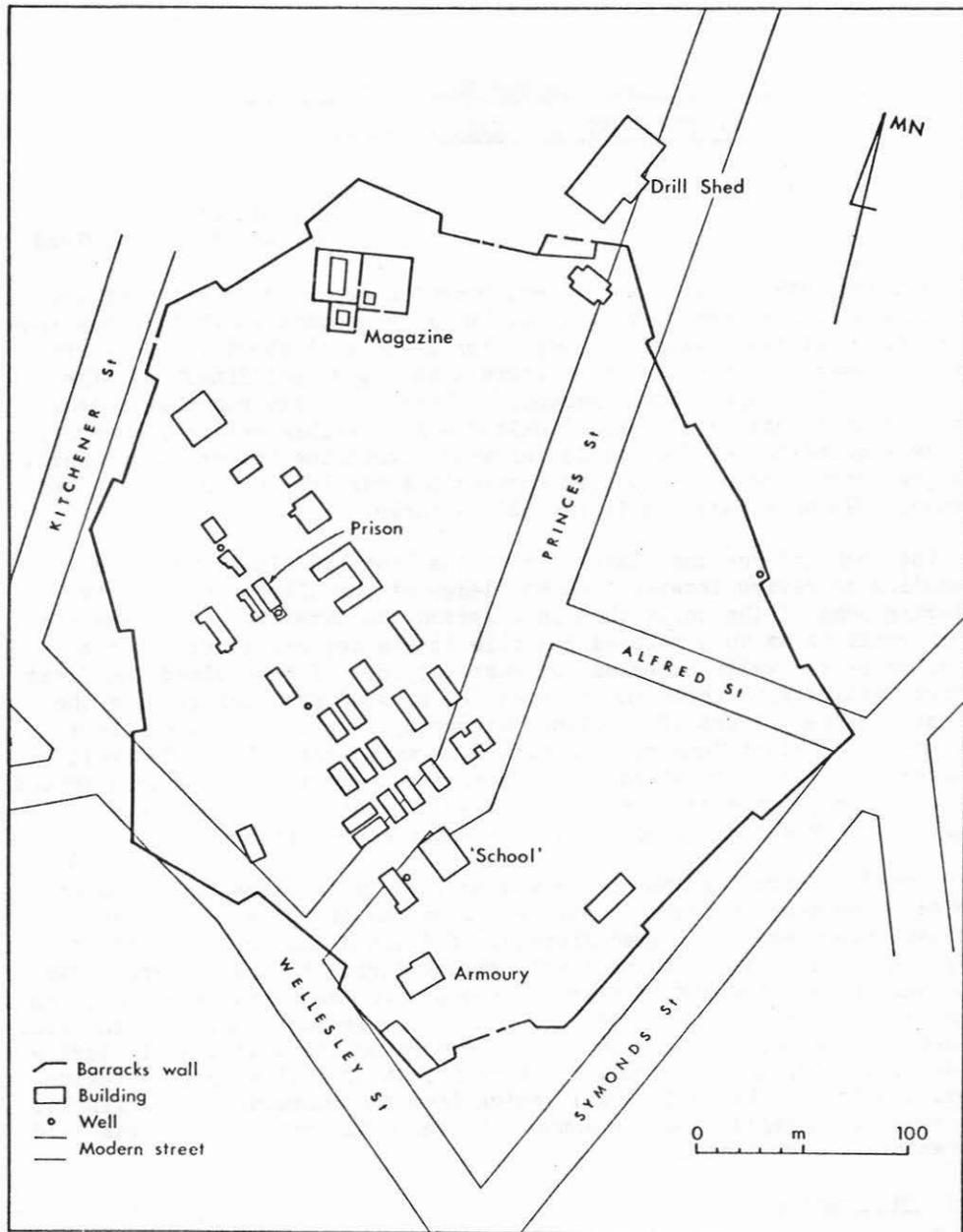


Figure 1. Albert Barracks showing location of excavated well.

series of layers were found to have been deposited on the old ground surface (Fig.3). These are, from the bottom, red soil, yellow clay, and very soft greyish sandstone ('papa'). These are apparently the major strata encountered by the shaft, but in reversed order, and the three are interpreted as being the spoilheap produced by the digging of the shaft.

To the north of the shaft was a posthole (Fig.2a), which had been truncated by the cover. The overall depth would have been about 1m originally and the substantial timber indicated was very probably part of a windlass. A matching posthole opposite could not be found, however, as the area has been cut by later features. An early map shows that there was something square, about 4.9m on a side, around the shaft. This is probably a waterproof surface, designed to prevent the ground around the well becoming churned up with use. Some large pieces of a sheet of tar about 1cm thick, which has clearly been poured hot onto a level surface made of an array of bricks, were found within the excavation and this sort of material would be very suitable for use around the well. In Figure 2b the appropriate area of the early map has been superimposed on Figure 2a. The eastern end of the prison can be seen to intrude on the excavation and one posthole found during excavation could be related to that structure.

The seal of the well was supported by a shelf about 70cm wide and 80cm deep cut around the shaft (Fig.2c). Cutting the seal is a trench about 1m wide and deep running from the shaft into the north-east baulk. This feature is hard to interpret, but may be a drain. Passing over the western edge of the cover is a broad strip of limey soil which is interpreted as being a path. A group of curbstones marked the eastern edge of the path over the length of the overlap, and traces of a footing for curbs are visible along most of the intact portions of the eastern edge.

On the far side of the path is a similar linear feature with the same orientation. This was empty when excavated, but to the south of the feature, and destroying it over much of its presumed extent within the square, a hole containing a pile of stones resembling curbs was found (Fig. 2c). Two rows of curbs in the places suggested might have helped to warn against the freshly covered well. By themselves these would be rather inadequate, however, and a clear group of four postholes with a possible fifth seem to form a structure around three sides of the shaft (Fig.2d). All five postholes have a papa fill, the four clearly associated being square, about 40cm on a side, while the fifth is smaller, circular and slightly out of position. Perhaps the real fifth has been destroyed. Two of the square postholes cut the cover, so they are later, and they would form a solid base for an effective barrier on all but the western side of the shaft. The clear indication is that the prison was

still standing, with the path running between the prison and the covered shaft (Fig.2d).

Cutting the path just south of the overlap with the cover is a discrete deposit of bits of broken brick and slate and lumps of lime mortar. This 'cache of bricks' is interpreted as being unusable debris from the demolition of one of the buildings within the Barracks, tidied up by being buried in a shallow pit. The building involved was probably the adjacent prison (Fig. 2e).

A slit-trench, dug in the weeks immediately following the attack on Pearl Harbour in December 1941, cuts both the fill of the shaft and the 'cache of bricks'. The sides of the trench have been timbered to retain the loose material (Fig.2f). Apparently dating to the same time are two strips of bricks laid flat, which seem to have been positioned in relation to the shaft. Perhaps they are tracks for a small vehicle bringing spoil from the air-raid shelters for filling the shaft.

Faunal remains

Faunal remains have come from several features encountered in the excavation. For example, the feature that destroyed the southern end of the presumed curb-footing to the east of the shaft contained fragments of coal, a large amount of ash and several bones, apparently from mutton chops. As a rectangle of corrugated iron about 25 x 40cm was present, with several large stones that seem to be displaced curbs, the feature is fairly obviously a grill. Food wastes from this and other features have not yet been studied in detail but a range of European food species seem to be present, including cow, pig, sheep and domestic chicken.

Rather more interesting, a scatter of shells were found on the old ground surface in the west of the square. Most were cockle (Chione stutchburyi), but three foreign species were present: Strombus luhuanus and Polinices tumidus, both widely distributed Indo-Pacific species, and Velacumantus australis, 'a temperate water species, endemic to southern Australia. Distribution is south Queensland along the south Australian coast to Perth, West Australia' (W. Cernohorsky, pers. comm.). The presence of people on the site who had been to Australia is clearly indicated, and thought this does not have to have been a soldier, many regiments came to New Zealand from there, including the 58th and 65th Regiments, both important in the early years of the New Zealand Wars.

Artefacts

Numerous artefacts from various periods were found in the excavation. For example, the head of a mattock and the base of an amber quart beer bottle embossed '1940' were found in the slit-trench. A scatter of

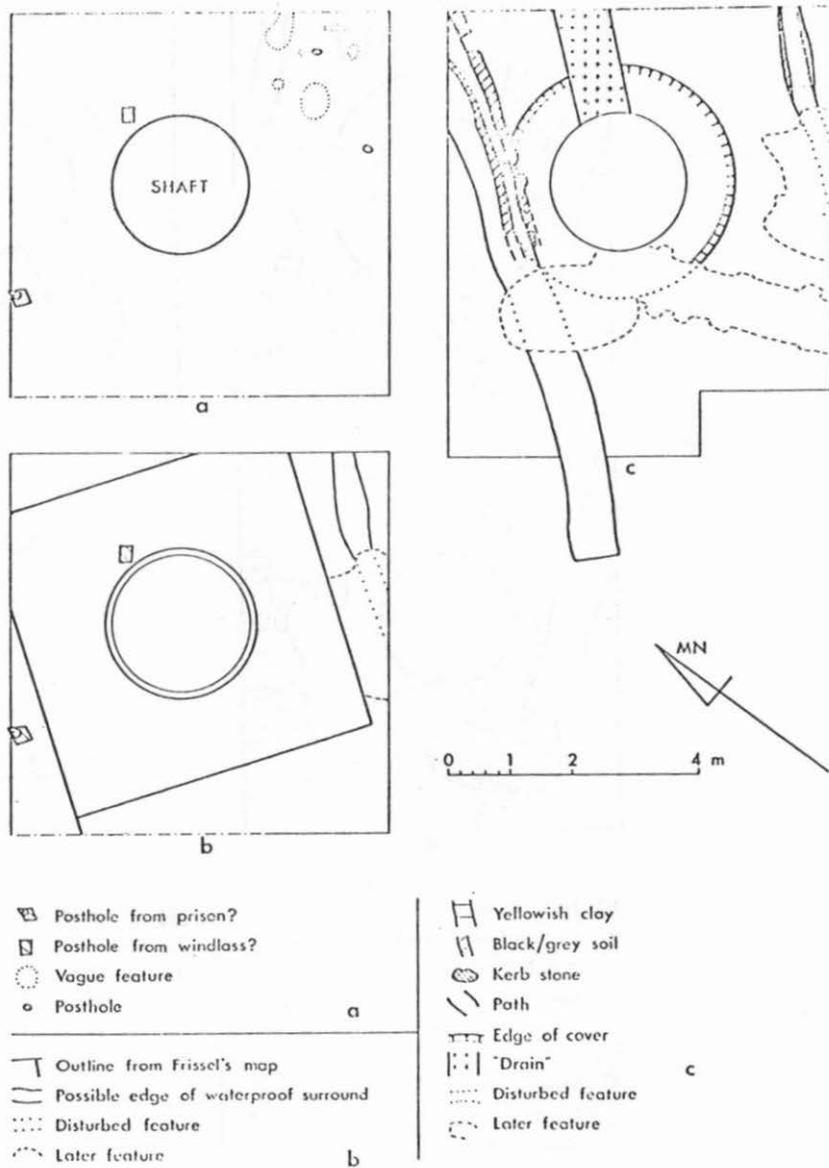
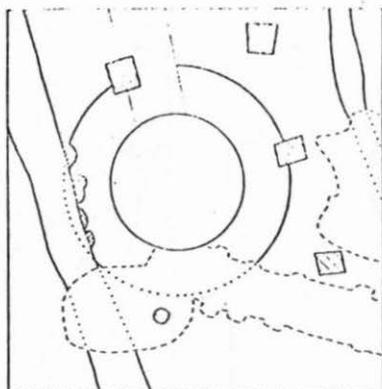
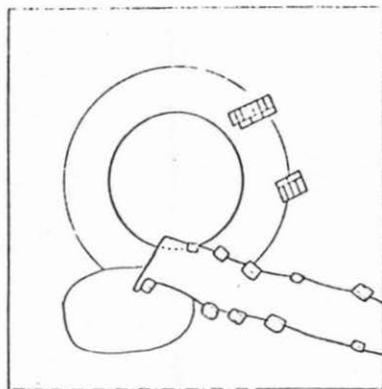


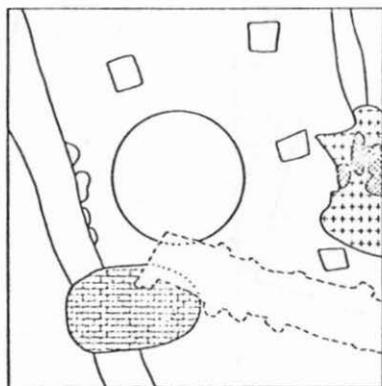
Figure 2 a, b and c. Albert Barracks excavation plans.



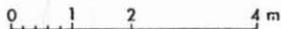
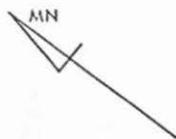
d



f



e



- ▣ Fence posthole
- Possible fence posthole
- ⋯ Disturbed feature
- - - Later feature

d

- ▣ Cache of bricks
- Stone
- ⊙ Fireplace
- ⋯ Disturbed feature
- - - Later feature

e

- ▣ Brick track
- - - Slit trench
- Posthole

f

Figure 2 d, e and f'. Albert Barracks excavation plans.

rubbish from about 1900 and an English florin dated 1892 were in the surface material in the western corner of the square. Perhaps of greater significance were pieces of a shako plate from the 65th Regiment, found in the material of the spoil-heap from the well.

Much more important, the path over the edge of the cover of the well was very rich in artefacts (Plate 2), and indeed the path seems to have been constructed by filling a trench with a mixture of approximately equal parts of lime mortar, soil and artefacts. The path was traced right across the square except where it was destroyed by the 'cache of bricks'. In the north it passed under the curb of the modern path, but in the south more deposit was accessible, and I extended the excavation to collect as much of it as possible (Fig.2c).

The conservation and analysis of the many hundreds of items of a wide variety is now being undertaken in the Anthropology Department of Auckland University. Reports on various classes of material will be prepared in the future, but some idea of the richness of the assemblage can be gained from a brief list.

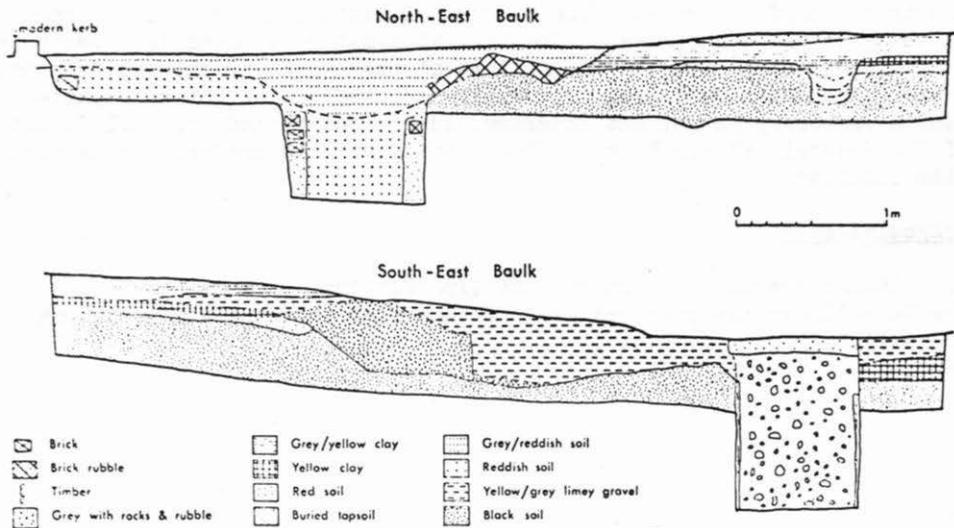


Figure 2. Albert Barracks excavation section.

Some of the common items were potsherds and broken and intact glass and stoneware bottles. Iron items are harder to identify because of corrosion, but knives, scissors and razors can be recognised. Clay pipes are numerous, with makers from Britain, Europe, America and Australia represented. There are several eating utensils, and spoons and knife handles marked with the names or initials of individual soldiers are noteworthy. Another very interesting group of objects represent popular games, including marbles, dice, dominoes (a double eight), and chess (a rook). The most striking material, however, is the large assemblage of military insignia, including shako plates, cap badges and brass and pewter buttons. Units so far identified are 12th, 40th, 50th, 57th, 58th, and 65th Regiments, Royal Artillery, Royal Marines, Royal Sappers and Miners, Royal Engineers, Military Train and Commissariat Staff.

Conclusion

Wells are traditionally rich sources of artefacts, but the estimated 90 feet (27m) of almost sterile fill made clearing the whole of the shaft an unrealistic objective for the group carrying out the pilot excavation. Excavation was therefore concentrated on the surface around the shaft, with fill removed from only three or four metres of shaft. Our main interest was to define some of the details of the construction of the well. The rather complicated structural sequence on the site was a surprise. The very rich material assemblage recovered a most unexpected bonus. The fill is at present being cleared from the rest of the shaft by a group of people employed on the Labour Department's Temporary Employment Programme supervised by the Regional Committee of the Historic Places Trust. The results of this project are awaited with interest.

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to Caroline Phillips for the drawings and Pam Russell for the photographs. Thanks also to those who worked on the site.



ALBERT BARRACKS Plate 1. The excavation under way in Albert Park.



ALBERT BARRACKS Plate 2. A selection of artefacts including stoneware and glass bottles, earthenware, clay pipes and militaria.