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PRELIMINARY REPORT ON THE INVESTIGATION OF AN EARLY EUROPEAN HOUSE SITE AT CUST, NORTH CANTERBURY

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Introduction

The excavation of the remains of an early European house site at Cust, inland North Canterbury, was undertaken by the present writers as part of a general, somewhat informal project of obtaining hitherto unrecorded details on the lives of people who have lived in North Canterbury in the past. Investigation of the Cust site was originally intended as part of a Summer School in Archaeology organized by the Centre for Continuing Education at the University of Canterbury, but in the event the Summer School was cancelled because of insufficient enrolments. Because of the interest generated in the proposed excavation, however, it was decided to undertake this project with the aid of members of the Cust and District Historical Records Society and other volunteers. Authority to carry out the excavation was given by the New Zealand Historic Places Trust (5.12.1995); and the site has been recorded in the New Zealand Archaeological Association's site recording scheme as number M35/343.

House Sites in the Cust Area

A number of early European house sites are known to occur in the Cust area and several of these were located in 1995 with the assistance of the president of the Cust and District Historical Records Society, Bernard Kingsbury. Those examined were as follows (preceded by NZMS 260 grid references):

M35 563 682	Wooden	Tippings Road
M35 568 678	Wooden	Tippings Road
M35 569 677	Clay	Tippings Road
M35 571 681	Wooden	Terrace Road
M35 612 681	Clay	Terrace Road

M35 614 687	Clay and timber	Gardiners Road
M35 632 681	Probably timber	Stoke School Road

Of these, the clay cottage on Terrace Road (M35 612 681) was chosen as being (apparently) of relatively small size and lacking complications of excavation. In particular it had the prospect of providing information on building materials and methods not as well known as those of timber. There was also the advantage of some of its history being known - the land having been settled by a Scot, James Webster, and his family in 1863 (Webster 1950; Kingsbury 1995). As far as the investigators are aware, this is the only Scottish clay cottage in the area, most clay cottages in Canterbury, having been built by settlers of English or Irish origin (Ward 1986:12).

Other sites having archaeological potential - including those of houses, railway buildings and mills - are also known in the Cust area.

Archaeological Excavation

Surface evidence of the Webster cottage site consisted of a low, roughly rectangular, mound of clay, which appeared to derive from adobe (sun-dried clay bricks - see Taylor 1986; Thornton 1986: 15) walls on the otherwise grassy top of the terrace above Terrace Road, together with scattered pieces of broken crockery, metal-ware and bricks lying both amongst the clay and visible on bare ground beneath pine and macrocarpa trees alongside it. On the eastern side of the clay mound two short rows, about a metre apart, of closely placed greywacke cobbles which projected through the grass, were tentatively identified as marking the edges of a path to a centrally placed door and eleven metres east of the clay was a small isolated D-shaped area of cobble-stone paving.

Initially the aim of the excavation was to locate the original position of the adobe walls by removing overlying clay which had been deposited by the collapse and weathering of the walls. The walls had been built of formed blocks of clay material but in most cases these had been almost completely weathered away. At the southern end enough of several blocks remained to measure dimensions of about 480 millimetres long, 220 millimetres wide and 180 millimetres high - this is in keeping with the average size of such blocks (see Taylor 1986:15). The width could be measured in a number of places around the walls but their height could be determined on only two blocks. Shorter blocks about half this size had been used where required for constructional purposes.

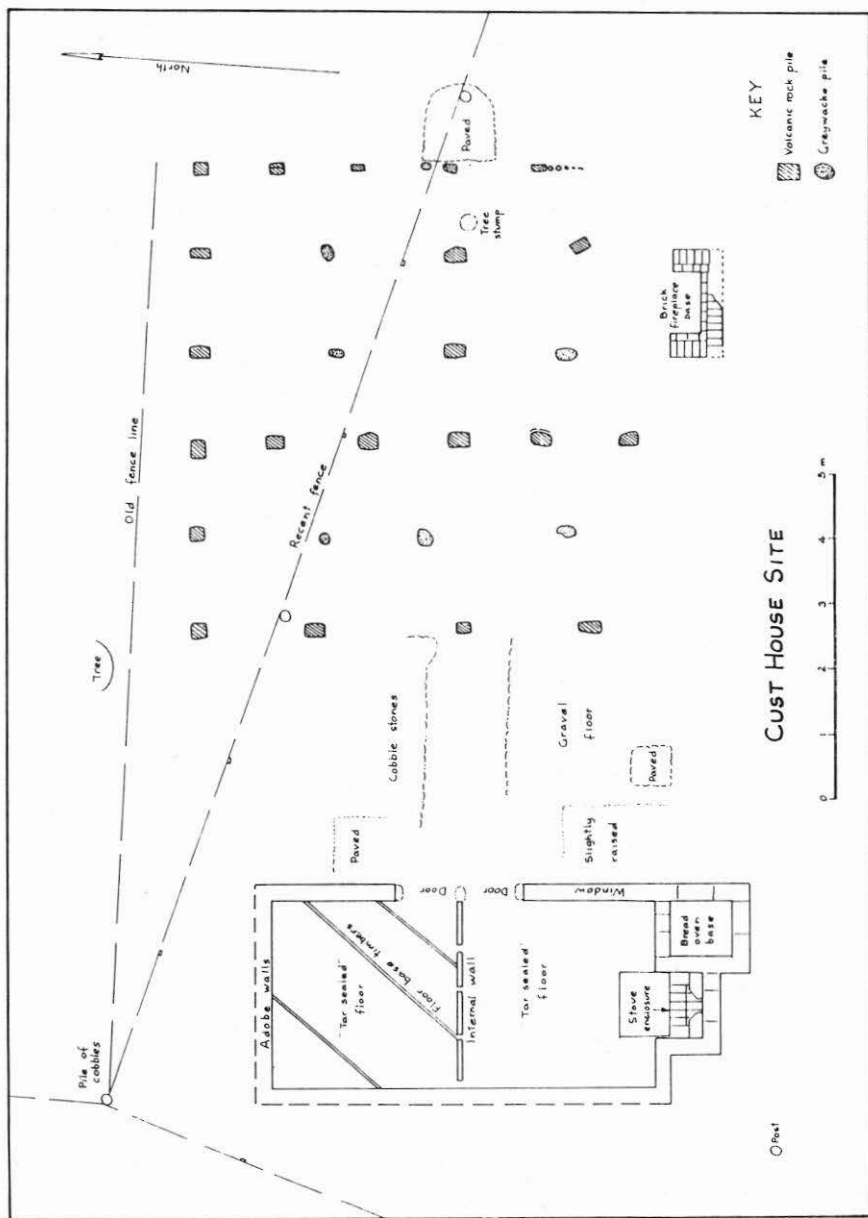
The overlying clay from the collapsed walls had become very hard, and the boundary between it and the remnants of the adobe walls was often not easily identified except on the inside where it had been darkened by burning. Once revealed, all structural evidence was left in position to facilitate the archaeological interpretation of the layout of the building and also to enable school classes, Historical Records Society members, and descendants of the Websters to see the results of the excavation.

The clay cottage proved to be basically rectangular, oriented north-south, with interior dimensions of 5.75 by 2.85 metres. At the south end were two rectangular projections, one containing a fireplace enclosure paved with slate and brick, while the other, which was packed with stones, was identified as being the base of a raised stand for an oven of the bread oven type (e.g. Browne *et al* 1996:9-11).

The lack of heat staining on the bricks and clay blocks of the fireplace enclosure suggested that it had not been used for an open fire or Colonial oven. In front of it a sheet of iron had been laid on the floor, covering a layer of spilled ashes. The enclosure was too small to have housed a conventional coal or wood range, but it may well have held a free-standing stove with cooking facilities on top which was complemented by the adjacent oven.

There was a double doorway about the mid-point of the eastern side of the cottage, with a partition wall running from between the two doors across to the western side, thus dividing the cottage into two rooms, each with a door opening to the outside. A few flakes of clay lining indicated that the walls had been plastered with clay in the inside and painted white and possibly pink. The interior partition wall had been constructed of wooden boards nailed to either side of squared wooden studs spaced at about 700 millimetre centres, with the space between filled with clay. The blocky nature and shape of clay lying on the ground to the north of the cottage suggested that it had had a gable end here and that the whole northern wall had collapsed and fallen outward. Presumably there would have been a gable at the southern end as well where there would also have been a chimney.

Beneath the cottage and extending beyond its walls, a foundation of greywacke river stones and clay, up to about 100 millimetres thick, had been



Plan of the excavated cottage.

laid prior to its construction. Inside, finer gravel and clay had been laid as a base for the floor; diagonal pieces of timber had been inserted in this floor base in the northern room, presumably as a guide to getting the surface level. The floor of both rooms had a top coating of sand and fine gravel in a tar-like matrix, producing a smooth hard "tarseal" surface.

Parts of a cast iron oven and a possible piece of a free-standing stove were found near the supposed oven base and the stove enclosure, and sheets of roofing iron and guttering, now largely reduced to rust, had been laid on the floor of the northern room. A number of the nails that had been used to fasten the guttering were still in place in it; these were about 150 millimetres long and had a rough "tube" spacer of rolled galvanized iron to enable both the outer and inner surfaces of the guttering to be fastened to timber around the top of the walls. Household chattels and tools lay in both rooms but mostly in the northernmost. The nature and location of some of the items found in these rooms indicated that at some stage subsequent to their occupation as a two-roomed cottage they had been used for storage. Door hinges and locks were closely associated with the double door opening, and some window furniture and cupboard door hinges were found elsewhere. At one point along the eastern wall, between the doorway and the southern corner, pieces of broken window glass and putty suggested that there had been a glazed window in this wall; elsewhere, scattered pieces of window glass were not so indicative.

Burn stains on interior wall surfaces, baked brick-like clay from the internal partition, pieces of glass that had been melted out of shape, and quantities of charcoal - some still in the shape of structural timbers - indicated that the cottage had been burnt down. The material of the roofing was not determined. Sheets of roofing iron in the northern room had been placed there subsequent to its occupation, possibly after it had burnt down, and hence may have come from a later extension (see below).

Excavation outside the eastern wall in the area where two rows of placed stones showed through the surface (initially, thought to mark a pathway) revealed burnt remains of timber lying south of and sub-parallel to the northernmost row. There were also numerous nails, mostly concentrated in vague rows parallel to and perpendicular to the clay walls, together with door and window furniture, and objects of various materials. These all indicated that a wooden framed extension (which had also burnt down) had existed to



Door and surround of probable bread oven excavated from the Cust cottage.



Very similar door shown on a bread oven at Rangiora Museum, some 16 km from Cust. (The remainder of the fireplace does not appear to have been the same).

the east of the clay cottage and the aims of the exercise were revised to incorporate an investigation of the extent and nature of this construction.

Although final interpretations have not yet been made and indeed may await the results of other research, it appears that the extension was erected in two stages, and that prior to it, there was a narrow paved area of brick and stones - or possibly two separated areas, one on each side of the double doorway - outside the eastern wall of the clay cottage. The first extension of the building covered an area from the double doorway to the southern end of the clay cottage and extended out about 3.75 metres to the east. It probably had a floor of existing soil plus additional gravel, and charcoal and nails found showed that this area was timber framed. North of the double doorway there appears to have been an open area paved with greywacke river cobbles (and incorporating the earlier cobble and brick paving) which may have been an open porch or verandah; the paving is now incomplete, but there is a relatively recent pile of similar stones north-west of the site on the other side of a recent fence, and these may have been cleared from this area. (There is also an older twentieth century fence line further to the north).

The second extension had stone foundation piles - mostly of trimmed volcanic rock plus some greywacke river boulders - and covered an area about 7.2 metres square. Seven of the original piles had been moved from their positions on the southern and eastern walls and placed against the recent fence that cuts through this part of the site, presumably to facilitate cultivation of the area since the house was burnt down. This extension was clearly also of timber-framed construction but it had a wooden floor. There was a brick fireplace near the south-east corner, indicated by foundation bricks still in position below ground level and scattered bricks (from its chimney) mostly north of it but also scattered in the ground for some distance around - some of the foundation bricks had been disturbed by farm cultivating equipment. The size of this second extension suggests that it contained at least four rooms, and a possible doorway in the eastern end of it was marked by a D-shaped area of cobbled paving immediately outside it. The size and spacing of one north-south row of piles suggests that it underlay a load-bearing internal wall. Similarly, a short east-west row between this and the cobbled paving outside the eastern wall may have underlain another internal wall, but if so, there could not have been a doorway at the paving, which calls into question the purpose of the latter.



Bernard Kingsbury of the Cust Historical Records Society talks to volunteers about the history of the area. The terrace-top cottage site in the foreground. Cust valley in the background.

North of the house site, macrocarpa trees outline three sides of a rectangular area in which a pear tree and other exotics still grow. This would appear to have been a garden area with a gateway on the northern side. The macrocarpas would probably have been a hedge at the time of occupation, and appear to be at least a hundred years old.

During the course of the excavation special lessons with follow-up visits to the site were given to three local schools. Portable material found on the site will be offered to the Cust and District Historical Records Society for the Cust Museum once it has been processed. Planned future work will include a survey of the area immediately around the site and historical research on people who lived there.

Thanks are due to all those who assisted with the excavation, and to Andy and Heather Smith for permission to work on their property. It was pleasing to have descendants of the original owners, the Websters, assisting with the excavation and with information on the family.

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