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## ARCHAEOLOGY IN NEW ZEALAND



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**PROJECT NJORD: DECLARATION  
OF THE 1926–1932 NORWEGIAN  
WHALERS’ BASE, PRICE’S INLET,  
RAKIURA/STEWART ISLAND, AS  
AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE  
A SOUTHLAND COASTAL HERITAGE  
INVENTORY PROJECT**

MATTHEW SCHMIDT  
REGIONAL ARCHAEOLOGIST OTAGO/  
SOUTHLAND, HERITAGE NEW ZEALAND

## **Introduction**

The ‘Kaipipi Shipyard’ or Norwegian whalers’ base is located in Price’s Inlet in Kaipipi Bay, Paterson Inlet, Rakiura/Stewart Island (Figure 1). It is an enigmatic and isolated coastal cultural heritage site often visited by tourists to Rakiura by taxi boat, walking from Millars Beach or by kayak from Golden Bay.

The site is highly significant to the history of Rakiura, New Zealand and Norway because:

- It is directly related to the creation of the Ross Dependency in Antarctica in 1923.
- It is unique in New Zealand in terms of the history of Norwegian whaling.
- The tangible remains of the base are very intact and can still be seen and interpreted.
- ‘the base’ is part of the story of Stewart Island/Rakiura.
- People in Oban today still live in two of the buildings from the base, the manager’s house and the bunkhouse.
- There are persons living today who are either related to the Norwegians from the base or persons who worked on the ships.

In spite of its high heritage significance, however, the Norwegian whalers’ base was not legally protected under any government legislation, such



Figure 1. Location of the Norwegian whalers' base in Price's Inlet, Kaipipi Bay, Rakiura/Stewart Island. The sunken hulk of the 1853 ship *Othello*, used as a dry jetty by the Norwegians from 1926-1932, is noted.

as the Historic Places Act (1993) (now the Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga Act 2014). In addition, although the extent and nature of the physical remains had been briefly described in the past (Jacomb 2001, Schmidt 2007), there had been no detailed terrestrial archaeological mapping, nor had any professional marine archaeological survey of the water in front of the base been undertaken. This lack of legal protection has put the site at risk from fossicking for some time, particularly in the last four years where attempts have been made to remove whale chaser propellers.

This report describes Project Njord (Njord is the Norwegian god of the sea and fishing), a cultural heritage project managed by Heritage New Zealand on behalf of the Southland Coastal Heritage Inventory Project (SCHIP) partners, that resulted in the declaration of the site as an archaeological site and hence providing it legal protection.

The Southland Coastal Heritage Inventory Project

Project Njord was a heritage initiative undertaken under the umbrella of the Southland Coastal Heritage Inventory Project. SCHIP is a partnership between the Southland Regional Council (also known as Environment Southland), the Department of Conservation, Te Ao Marama Incorporated on behalf of Kaitiaki Runanga of Murihiku, Heritage New Zealand, the Southland District Council, Invercargill City Council and the New Zealand Archaeological Association.

### **Aims of *Project Njord***

The aims of *Project Njord* were:

- 1) to undertake a marine archaeological survey of the water in front of the Norwegian Whalers' Base to determine the nature and extent of any marine heritage structures/features/items;
- 2) to gather detailed terrestrial heritage data to supplement that already recorded previously at the base; and
- 3) use the marine and terrestrial heritage survey data to prepare a proposal to the Board of the New Zealand Historic Places Trust to declare the Norwegian Whalers' Base an archaeological site under Section 9(2) of the Historic Places Act (1993).

The fieldwork to achieve the aims one and two was undertaken from 7-12 March 2013.

### **Brief history of the Norwegian whalers' base**

Between 1926 and 1932 the Ross Sea Whaling Company of Sandefjord, Norway established its repair base for whale catcher vessels in Price's Inlet, Rakiura. The company had been undertaking whaling in the Ross Sea since

Christmas Eve, 1923, using the factory ship the Sir James Clark Ross and five whale catchers but soon realised it required a repair base close to where they were whaling.

The company named their shipyard on Rakiura the 'Kaipipi Shipyard' but it is also known as 'the base', 'Price's' or 'The Whalers' Base' (Watt 2006: 3). Watt (2006: 3) notes that the purpose of the facility was to maintain and repair whale catchers during the southern winter while the factory ships returned to Europe with the whale oil taken during the hunting season from November to February.

Fifteen Star whale catchers were repaired at various times at the yard as well as other catchers such as the Karrakatta. The yard consisted of the slipway, workshop (including a forge), cookhouse, carpenter's shop, bunkhouse, winch house, a tin hut and the Othello jetty, a jetty made from the hulk of the ship Othello (the hulk was fixed, not floating). The buildings were weatherboard and built on concrete foundations with the manager's house and bunkhouse being kitset buildings brought from Norway (these buildings still survive in Oban today). The base was used for basic maintenance and repairs of the catcher boats as it did not have a foundry to undertake any larger repairs, this being carried out at Port Chalmers (Watt 2006: 3). Up to 38 Norwegians operated the base and during the weekends excursions were made to Oban, Rakiura's main town, for supplies and socialising. From 1923 to 1933, up to three factory ships operated in the Ross Sea (the other two factory ships being the C.A. Larsen and the Sir James Clark Ross II), each with five whale catchers and during this decade they processed 9122 whales (Barr & Watt 2005: 281).

The base closed in 1932 due to a glut in the whale oil market (Watt 2006: 3). This led to whaling moving away from the Ross Sea and the Ross Sea Whaling Company moving its facilities to South Africa. The base has not been occupied since 1932 and is currently privately owned.

Before they left, the Norwegians sold equipment, buildings and structural materials and any other items of interest to any buyer. Unwanted items or items too hard to move at the time, such as damaged whale catcher propellers, accumulator springs, the Swiss boiler and the old whaler the Othello, were left at the site or buried in the beach.

### **The terrestrial archaeological survey**

The terrestrial survey was undertaken by the author and David Dudfield of the Southland Museum and Art Gallery. Due to the extensive bush cover, vegetation needed to be cleared from the site prior to surveying so features could be recognised and mapped. This was achieved by the project



*Figure 2. The workshop cleared of vegetation and the boiler room turfed to reveal the structure (Photo: David Dudfield).*



*Figure 3. The foundations of the tin hut, where the base's diver initially resided (Photo: Heritage New Zealand).*



*Figure 4. The foundation of the slipway winch, which drove the slipway cable system (Photo: Heritage New Zealand).*

team and volunteers from the Rakiura/Stewart Island community and staff from the Department of Conservation. The vegetation clearance uncovered all the known structures at the site, which were found to be in a very good state of preservation. The building foundations, such as those of the workshop, tin hut, manager's house, winch base and its associated hawser pulley base (Figures 2-4), were made of a high quality concrete, a significant achievement for the builders considering their isolation from any populous centre where materials could be readily sourced. The structural features exposed and other artefacts, such as propellers and cables, were able to be identified in historic photographs of the base. Remains of the terrestrial sections of the shipyard slipway were uncovered beneath the vegetation and this confirmed that the slipway extended some distance onto the land from its origins in the bay and up to the edge of the concrete winch pulley base. The slipway had been made of interspersed 17 m long horizontal lengths of timber and poured concrete. On this was laid the tracks on which the rollers used to pull boats up the slipway were placed. Only the concrete sections of the slipway survived in the bush environment with bolts present where timbers used to be.

One of the key features that needed to be identified in the terrestrial survey was the original 19th century survey peg from which the boundaries of the land used by the Norwegians were established. This was important as a



*Figure 5. Top: Photo of the flagpole base and surveyor's mark, March 2013. Bottom: Photo of the manager's house provided to Heritage New Zealand by the Norwegian Maritime Museum (Norsk Maritimt Museum, Oslo) showing the surveyor's mark/flagpole nearby flying the Norwegian flag. An enlargement of the split granite rock flagpole base is also shown.*

clear legal boundary of the site was required for the increased legal protection. Surveyors in the 19th century typically chose high areas and a distinctive permanent feature in the landscape to establish survey marks. A surveyor's mark placed in this location could be an iron bar with a letter stamped on the top, a large wooden stake with the top foot of the stake painted white, or a cairn built using stone or earth. If a natural feature was used, it would be one that stood out from any of the surrounding landscape features. The survey found the a large split granite rock used by the Norwegians to set their flag pole in was the location of the 19th century surveyor's mark, established by at least 1878 (Figure 5). Bearings from this rock found that only from this point could other geological features noted on an 1893 survey map be seen.

The terrestrial survey also identified the fresh water dam built by the Norwegians in the bay to the west of the inlet. The dam was built of earth and a pipeline took water from this around the rocky headland to the base to the east. This was confirmed during the marine survey when two water pipes were found in the water below the rocky headland.

Evidence of 19th century occupation was also found at the site by way of black beer bottles, a dark green 'champagne' style bottle, a clear glass bottle and handmade nails. In the bay to the west where the dam is located, a rubbish dump was found, containing both late 19th and early 20th century bottles and shoes/boots.

### **The marine archaeological survey**

The marine survey area extended from the high tide mark to approximately 130 m into the inlet. Any heritage items within the inter-tidal environment were mapped by the terrestrial based archaeologists while the marine archaeologists (Andy Dodd and Matthew Carter) concentrated on any underwater remains. The underwater survey was non-invasive. The most important artefacts recorded in the inter-tidal survey area were the 12 discarded whale chaser propellers (Figure 6). The dimensions of the propellers were measured and any distinctive features, such as ice damage to the propeller blades and whale chaser boat identification marks, were recorded. Other key objects of interest recorded were the slipway rollers, winch drums (which can be seen in their original position in historic photographs of the base), the Swedish boiler, which came to rest in its position today after a failed attempt to salvage it in 1946, and the dimensions and makeup of the slipway for the shipyard (Figure 7). In this tidal environment, the timbers from the slipway had largely survived, though the level of preservation was quite variable, compared to those revealed during bush clearance. Given this, the construction technique could



*Figure 6. Group of 10 abandoned whale catcher propellers lying on the beach (Photo: Heritage New Zealand). These are the most at risk items at the base being the subject of fossicking attempts.*



*Figure 7. The slipway (Photo: Heritage New Zealand).*

be clearly interpreted and mapped. Many of the iron fixtures, such as large timber fixing bolts, were still present.

The underwater archaeological survey provided data on the nature and extent of heritage remains on the seabed, such as winch cables, fresh water pipes, glass bottles, discarded or dropped metal objects, etc. It also produced crucial data about the two most significant heritage items in this environment: the form and structure of the 1926-27 slipway below the low tide mark, and the remains of the 1853 whaler the *Othello*.

It was found that the construction of the slipway below the low tide mark was quite different from that above this level. The investigation confirmed the historic account that numerous granite boulders were dumped on the soft sea bed to build a solid and stable base for the slipway (Figure 8). The slipway timbers were then lowered onto this base as sections and connected one after another by the base diver, who used a 'John Brown' diving suit with air pumped to the suit from a diver's air pump located on a pontoon floating above the diver. The rails were then bolted down onto the completed timber base. Only one of the rails is present today, still bolted to the timbers. A concrete strip on which the central roller rail would have originally been fixed was recorded in the centre of the slipway. The total length of the slipway from the high tide mark out into the inlet was 76 m (the total length of the slipway from the concrete pulley base was 101.3 m; Figure 9).

The survey of the 1853 whaler the *Othello* produced unexpected results. The *Othello* was brought to the base from Bluff in 1927 by the Norwegians and used as the 't-end' of the shipyard's jetty by being pushed up onto rocks, holed in its side and bollards driven into the seabed on its port side to hold it in place. This oak ship was built as an American whaling vessel in 1853 and it finally ended up in Bluff as a coal hulk. After the Norwegians left the base, it was abandoned. Over the years the hulk shifted off the rocks and sank onto the shallow bottom of the bay in approximately 5 m of water. At very low tide the bow and stern ends of the ship can be seen just protruding from the water's surface.

The marine survey found that the *Othello* was in a good state of preservation with the hull largely intact. The original rudder was still in place, as was copper sheathing placed along the hull in 1863. Also found was the hawse pipe, planking timbers, wood and iron knees, a possible mast support, ballast stones, etc. Overall, the wreck still retained its original 1853 main frame and the structure and features of its later maintenance, such as the 1863 copper sheathing. The wreck generated international interest, such as from the Archaeological Institute of America, and is at least nationally significant in New Zealand as a unique example of an in situ wreck of a 19th century



*Figure 8. The slipway under water showing roller rail and rock foundation (SCHIP & Subsurface Ltd).*

American whaler. More research will ascertain the international importance of this site.

### **Protecting the base through ‘declaration’ under the Historic Places Act (1993)**

In June 2014, the Historic Places Act (1993) was superseded by the Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga Act (2014) and this definition of an archaeological site was changed slightly to include any pre-1900 building or structure or part of a building and structure. However, the pre-1900 time limit remained and hence any post-1900 heritage site does not have any direct legal protection under the Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga Act (2014).

One of the most effective ways of legally protecting a significant archaeological site that post-dates 1900 is to have that site declared an archaeological site by the Board of Heritage New Zealand (prior to June 2014 known as the New Zealand Historic Places Trust) under Section 43 of the Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga Act (2014). This gives that site the same legal protection as a pre-1900 site, meaning that the site cannot be modified or destroyed without an archaeological authority from Heritage New Zealand. This

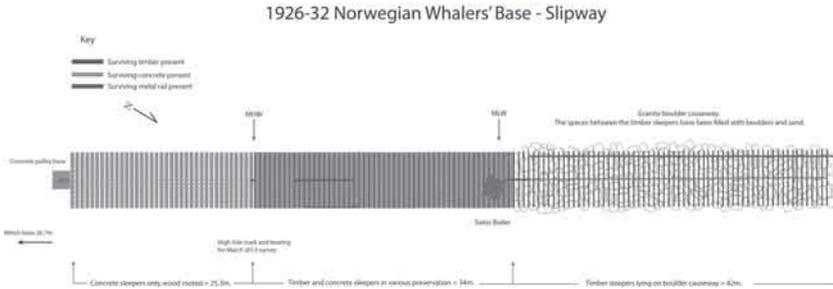


Figure 9. Plan of the slipway from its commencement at the pulley base on land, to its termination point in the inlet. (Graphic: M Schmidt).

declaration is notified in the New Zealand Gazette, hence why this protection mechanism is often termed ‘gazettal’.

In February 2014, a proposal was presented to the New Zealand Historic Places Trust Board to have the 1926–1932 Norwegian whalers’ base declared an archaeological site. On 27 February 2014, the 1926–1932 Norwegian whalers’ base, Price’s Inlet, Rakiura/Stewart Island was declared an archaeological site, New Zealand’s first legally protected post-1900 maritime heritage site. The declaration was notified in the New Zealand Gazette on 20 March 2014.

### **A Norsk Feiring, a Norwegian Celebration: 4–6 April 2014 and recognition of the project**

The overarching goal of Project Njord was to ensure this important part of New Zealand and Norwegian history was preserved for future generations of New Zealanders and Norwegians to enjoy, particularly those relatives of the Norwegians and New Zealanders who worked at the base and who undertook whaling in the Ross Sea.

In April 2014, the Rakiura Museum and Stewart Island community celebrated the first arrival of Norwegians on Stewart Island 90 years ago when the ship the James Clark Ross (captained by C. A. Larsen) first entered Paterson Inlet. The event saw 180 people celebrate the Norwegian arrival, with many of these people being relatives of the original Norwegians as well as some of the New Zealanders who worked with the whalers (Figure 10). The event drew out artefacts related to the site retained by relatives and locals, one important item being a cabin door from the Othello.

On 5 April 2014, plaque announcing the protection of the base as an archaeological sites was unveiled at the base by the Royal Norwegian Consulate General of New Zealand, Graeme Mitchell.



*Figure 10. Visitors to the base during the Norsk Feiring. Many of the people in the photograph are either related to the Norwegians from the base or New Zealanders who worked with the Norwegian whalers. The two small boats in the background are original Norwegian oselvar from the base, still used today by locals (Photo: Heritage New Zealand).*

### **Future management of the base**

Since the completion of Project Njord, pro-active management of the site is being undertaken to aid in its preservation and to educate visitors. Permission has been gained from the Rakiura Harbour Master to have buoys placed around the hulk of the Othello to prevent this shallow wreck from being accidentally damaged by visiting vessels, and interpretation panels are being planned for the site. Rock armouring for the front of the site is also being proposed, to slow down or stop the coastal erosion.

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