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RICHARD PEARSE'S SOUTHERN SOJOURN: HISTORICAL & ARCHAEOLOGICAL FEATURES RELATING TO RICHARD PEARSE'S RESIDENCY IN MILTON, OTAGO, 1911–1921

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Introduction

With the 100th anniversary of powered flight occurring in 2003 there has recently been keen interest in the efforts of pioneer New Zealander aviator Richard Pearse. Research by George Bolt, Gordon Ogilvie (1971, 1973), Geoff Rodcliffe (1983, 1997) and others has indicated that Pearse may have become airborne in his small monoplane at Upper Waitohi near Temuka in South Canterbury (Figure 1) on 31 March 1903, some eight months before the Wright Brothers flew. The lengthy and involved debate over this issue is not the subject of this paper, but rather the examination of a later phase of Pearse's life, when he moved from Waitohi to Louden's Gully near Milton in Otago (Figure 1).

Pearse's Milton farm was his home for ten years from 1911 until 1921, after which he moved north to Christchurch where he died in 1953. Ogilvie found some evidence that Pearse attempted to fly on his Milton farm; he certainly took a flying machine and engine there with him (Ogilvie 1973: 117–18).

The small farmhouse and barn/workshop on Pearse's Louden's Gully property have survived, although the house has been converted to a woolshed (Figure 2). The site was surveyed in April 2001 and recorded as archaeological site H45/31. This paper describes the house, workshop and environs.

The standard published text on the life of Pearse is Ogilvie (1973), and most subsequent publications appear to use that work extensively. He had the advantage of writing at a time when many people with first hand acquaintance with Pearse were still alive. Little of substance appears to have been added to

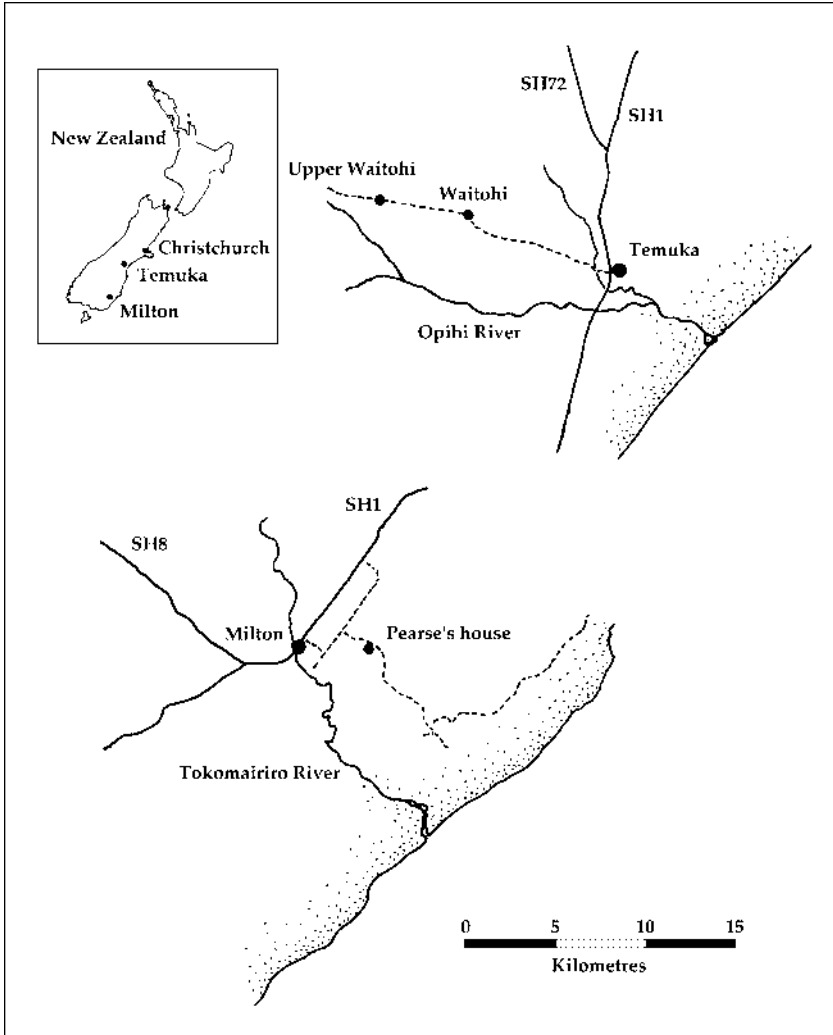


Figure 1. Location of Richard Pearse's Milton farmstead and main places mentioned in text.



Figure 2. Richard Pearse's house (right) and workshop (left), Louden's Gully, Milton, in 2001

the debate since Ogilvie made his conclusions. For this reason Ogilvie is extensively referenced in this paper rather than later publications.

Richard Pearse

Richard Pearse was born at Trewarlet farm, Waitohi on 3 December 1877 (Ogilvie 1973: 27). He was the fourth of nine children, and although the family was comfortably off, his father could only afford to send the eldest son, Tom, to university. Richard Pearse left school at sixteen and when he turned twenty-one his father gave him the use of a 100 acre block of land (Ogilvie 1973: 35–38). However, Pearse's interest was not in farming, but in his inventions and experimentation, particularly concerning flight, and he converted the cottage on the property into a workshop.

It was here that he not only constructed his aeroplane but also the internal combustion engine to power it. A great deal of effort has been expended in trying to determine both when Pearse first flew his machine and the details of these flights. Arguments over primacy of flight between the Wright brothers and Pearse hinge less on the date of his attempts than on the concept of "controlled flight" versus powered take-offs. Ogilvie (1973: 67) came to the conclusion that 31 March 1903 was the most likely date for Pearse's take-off, while Rodliffe (1997: 75) suggests 31z March 1902 as a possibility. Either option places Pearse's

attempts before the Wright brothers December 1903 flight, but Pearse himself was later to concede that he had not achieved fully controlled flight.

In late 1910 Pearse fell ill with typhoid and after his recovery he went on a holiday to Dunedin. While in the south he apparently made a snap decision to move and bought a farm at Loudens Gully near Milton. This property had been taken up by Robert Melville in 1866 (Ogilvie 1973: 113; Deeds Register, LINZ, Dunedin) and already had a house and barn. Pearse moved there in April 1911 taking his latest aeroplane and aero engine (Ogilvie 1973: 112, Rodliffe 1997: 40–41). It was here that he built his motorcycle that is today on display at the Museum of Transport & Technology (MOTAT) in Auckland. No details are known but it is likely that Pearse made a number of attempts at flight on his new farm (Ogilvie 1973: 117), the irony of course being that by this time the science of powered flight was advancing rapidly, Blériot having made his crossing of the English Channel in 1909. Pearse was of course aware of overseas developments and conscious of his lack of resources, and gave up his aerial experiments for a number of years. He concentrated instead on agricultural inventions, one of which, a “motor plough”, used the aero engine that he had taken to Milton with him (Ogilvie 1973: 133–134).

In 1917 Pearse was called up for military service but was discharged on health grounds the following year. However, in his absence from Milton his property had been burgled and many of his tools stolen (Ogilvie 1973: 139, Rodliffe 1997: 43).

Richard Pearse eventually left Milton in 1921, selling his property to his neighbour, Frank Barra. Ogilvie (1973: 142) described how Pearse left behind in Milton his “dynamo, potato-planter, moulding machine, topdresser, motorised discs, sixteen-cylinder engine and aeroplane remnants.” However, over the years much of this material was removed for scrap and some (including a water wheel that Pearse built to power his dynamo) was buried under a culvert. The sixteen cylinder aero engine was last seen in a shed at Wharenui (Ogilvie 1973: 142). After Pearse’s departure the house was not again inhabited, instead being converted to a woolshed at some time in the 1950s or 1960s.

After leaving Milton Pearse moved north to Christchurch, where he built three houses, living in one and letting the other two. He then built another aeroplane, which never flew (and which would be incapable of flight), and which is now on display at MOTAT. He died in July 1953 at Sunnyside Hospital in Christchurch.

The Milton farmstead

Richard Pearse’s Milton farm was located in Loudens Gully four kilometres east of the small Otago township of Milton (Figure 1). The farmstead

buildings are clearly visible on the south side of the present Milton–Taieri Mouth Road, although the road itself has been realigned for about a kilometre on the western side of the property. In 2003 the Milton Rotary Club erected a roadside sign marking the farmstead (ODT 26/3/2003).

The cluster of farm buildings stand at the foot of a gentle hillside, from which Pearse may have attempted to fly in about 1913. The earliest unequivocal record of the structures on the site is a 1946 aerial photograph (1143/21) which clearly shows the house and barn/workshop. At that date the house had not been modified, and still had its original lean-to structure at the rear and was surrounded on three sides by trees. At the time of the field survey in 2003 there were three main extant structures: the house, the workshop, and a small shed on piles (Figures 2 and 3). The house had been converted into a woolshed, with the original rear lean-to removed and new iron and timber structures added on three sides. The workshop had also been added to, with a lean-to structure on one side. The small shed is of modern construction.

There is also evidence of at least two other structures having existed on the site, two building platforms being identified during the survey (Figure 3). Ogilvie (1973: 116) referred to a shed, adjacent to the workshop, in which Pearse stored his dismantled aeroplane. This is no longer extant, but one of the visible terraces may be its site.

Between the buildings and the road there is a small meandering stream in which a concrete culvert has been constructed to carry the track to the house. This is probably the culvert under which the remains of a water wheel that Pearse built to drive a dynamo were buried in the 1970s (Ogilvie 1973: 135, Rodliffe 1997: 42). Pieces of iron machinery can be seen in the water beneath the concrete.

The house

The house is a small weatherboard one-and-a-half storey cottage of typical colonial form with a central front door and two front windows, although the original windows have been replaced with louvres and the wooden door with a metal sliding door (Figure 4). The framing timber of the house has pegged mortice and tenon joints, indicating an early (possibly 1860s) date of construction. It has a rectangular floor plan (Figure 5), measuring 30 by 14 feet (9.1 by 4.2 m). The ground floor no longer has any internal divisions but there is some evidence that there were one or two internal walls running from front to back, defining either two rooms or two rooms and a hall. There are two doors in the rear wall one of which is in line with the front door (Figure 6). These would have led to the lean-to at the rear of the house that is visible in the 1946 aerial photograph but was probably removed when the woolshed additions were made. A chimney

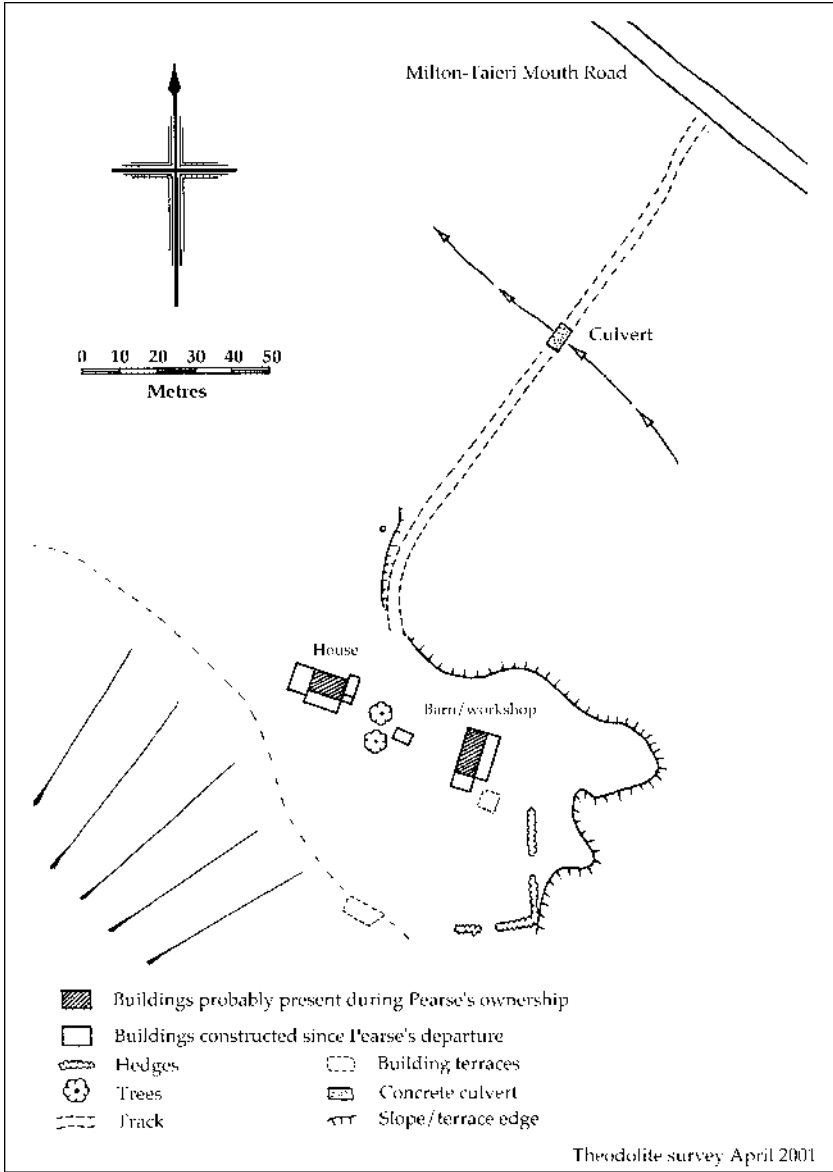


Figure 3. Site plan of Pearse's farmstead, 2001.



Figure 4. Pearse's house in 2001.

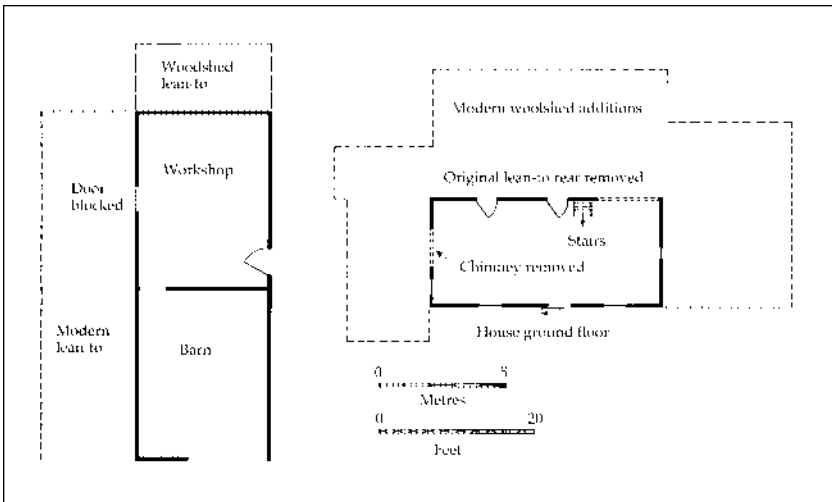


Figure 5. Floor plans of Pearse's house and barn/workshop.



Figure 6. Interior of Pearse's house in 2001, showing rear door on left and stairway on right.

was originally located on the eastern end wall but this and the associated fireplace have been removed.

A very narrow (26.5 inches, 670 mm) and steep set of internal stairs leads to the upper floor (Figure 6), where there are two rooms separated by a lightweight wall. A section of the floor has been cut out to allow a wool press to be used. The upper floor windows are only in the gables and both are presently covered with corrugated iron, making this space quite dark. Pasted to the sarking in the attic rooms are a mixture of newspaper pages and floral wallpapers. The



Figure 7. Interior of Pearse's workshop in 2001.

newspapers include a number of pages from the *Sketch*, dated December 1895, thus considerably pre-dating Pearse's occupation.

Modification of the house into part of a woolshed involved the removal of the rear lean-to, removal of at least one interior wall, and the cutting out of a large section of the upper floor. However, despite these changes the remaining fabric is largely original and appears much as it would when Pearse was in residence.

The workshop

The workshop is also of timber construction, 41 feet long and 17 feet 6 inches wide (12.55 by 5.3 m), with lean-to structures on its southern and eastern walls (Figure 5). The eastern (side) lean-to post-dates the 1970s as it does not appear in photographs in Ogilvie (1973), while the rear lean-to was there in 1946 (aerial photograph 1143/21).

In the main building there is an internal wall dividing the building approximately in half, the rear section being equipped as a workshop with a bench and vice (Figure 7). The front section is timber framed with weatherboard cladding while the rear is clad in corrugated iron, with some framing members

having been relatively recently replaced. It is likely that the workshop section was an addition to the original building but it was probably there during Pearse's ownership as it appears in the 1946 aerial photograph (1143/21), and Ogilvie (1973: 129) identified it as Pearse's workshop after interviewing members of the Barra family (who bought the property from Pearse). It is almost certain that it was in this building that Pearse built his motorcycle that is now at MOTAT.

There is a great deal of agricultural junk in the workshop area and, although it has undoubtedly been sorted many times by visitors, there could still be some of Pearse's material present. Ogilvie (1973: 129) recounted how parts of two of Pearse's inventions were located in the workshop by Jim and John Barra in 1971. However, most of the material will be associated with the use of the building since 1921.

Indications of other buildings

Two further building platforms were identified during the survey: a terrace at the foot of the hillside, and a platform at the rear of the workshop (Figure 3). The platform at the rear of the workshop is roughly square, measuring five by five metres. The other terrace is rectangular, measuring ten by five metres. There is no surface evidence of structures in either case. The 1946 aerial photograph showed an additional extension off the east side of the workshop, which is no longer extant and which has been partly replaced by the existing lean-to structure.

As mentioned above, Ogilvie (1973: 116) referred to Pearse storing his aeroplane in a shed adjacent to the barn, but which of the now disappeared structures this was is not now clear.

Discussion

Richard Pearse's Loudon's Gully farmstead is significant for several reasons. Firstly, it was the home for a decade of an important figure in New Zealand history, and secondly it is also an example of a very early farmstead where substantial elements of the original building fabric survive.

Despite numerous modifications to Pearse's farmstead it is still possible to clearly identify the main elements of the buildings. Because no-one lived in the house after Pearse left no domestic modifications would ever have been made to the buildings. The changes that did occur were for purely practical reasons. Thus, while some internal material has been removed from the house, what is left is almost certainly exactly as Richard Pearse last saw it in 1921 (although now far shabbier). Similarly, the workshop is likely to be structurally much as Pearse left it, although whether any of his tools or parts of his machinery remain after thirty years of visits by Pearse researchers is debatable.

It is likely that the debate about whether Pearse was the first to fly will simmer away for some time to come, with occasional flare-ups (for example, see the letters to the editor in the *Listener* in July and August 2003). However, Ogilvie in his clear discussion (1973: 200–1) set out Pearse’s undisputed achievements:

- he was the first aviator in the British Empire to make a powered take-off in an aeroplane.
- if his first takeoff did occur in March 1903, it was the fifth powered take-off anywhere in the world.
- his home-made engine was probably the lightest in the world at the time in terms of its power output.

Pearse’s sole surviving workshop at his Milton farm (his Waitohi and Christchurch workshops are gone) illustrates well the conditions he was constantly working under—it is a small basic timber structure in a remote rural area. In common with nearly all farmsteads in the early twentieth century neither house nor any outbuildings had running water, electricity or insulation. His workshop at Waitohi, where he built his first aeroplane, would have been no better equipped.

The house is of particular interest because of its suspected very early date of construction and survival without cosmetic modification. Pegged mortice and tenon joints are exposed in the top of the wall frames in the upstairs rooms and in places in the ground floor structure. Salmond (1986: 58) discusses this construction technique as being typical of the first (1800–1860) period of European house building in New Zealand. Although the conversion to a woolshed involved the removal of a number of elements of the structure it ironically probably extended the life of the house. Some of the roof has been repaired, while the modern additions have provided buttressing and protection from the elements to three sides of the house.

Even if Richard Pearse did not achieve controlled powered flight before the Wright brothers what he did achieve was remarkable for a man working in remote communities with few resources. Pearse’s Milton farmstead stands as a modest memorial to him.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Geoff Finch for permission to visit and survey Pearse’s old farmstead. Nigel Chang assisted with the survey of the property and Katharine Watson accompanied me on the first trip to find the site.

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