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## ARCHAEOLOGY IN NEW ZEALAND



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# SOMES ISLAND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE SURVEY

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An archaeological site survey of Somes Island or Matiu (Fig. 1) was carried out by Science and Research Division archaeologists at the request of the Wellington Conservancy, Department of Conservation (DOC). The bulk of the survey work was done on 16 May 1995 and most remaining areas were covered during a visit on 14 August 1996. Management of the island transferred from the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries (MAF) to the Department of Conservation on 1 July 1995.

This report is concerned with details of the survey and is intended to provide commentary and supplementary information relating to records (R27/89, 90, 91, 179, 208-218, 223-225) filed in the New Zealand Archaeological Association Site Recording Scheme. Three of the four previously recorded sites were relocated and updated records were filed. Fourteen new records (R27/208-218, 223-225) were added, all of which describe historical occupation between the 1870s and the 1940s.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **Environment**

Somes Island (25.7 ha) is the largest of the islands in Wellington Harbour. Immediately to the north lies a small island called Mokopuna (Leper Island)(0.7 ha). Apart from a small area designated as lighthouse reserve, the main island is currently an unclassified reserve under the Reserves Act 1977. Mokopuna is classified as a reserve for wildlife management.

Somes Island has been extensively modified during the last 130 years. Features created by human activity are evident on almost all parts of the island.

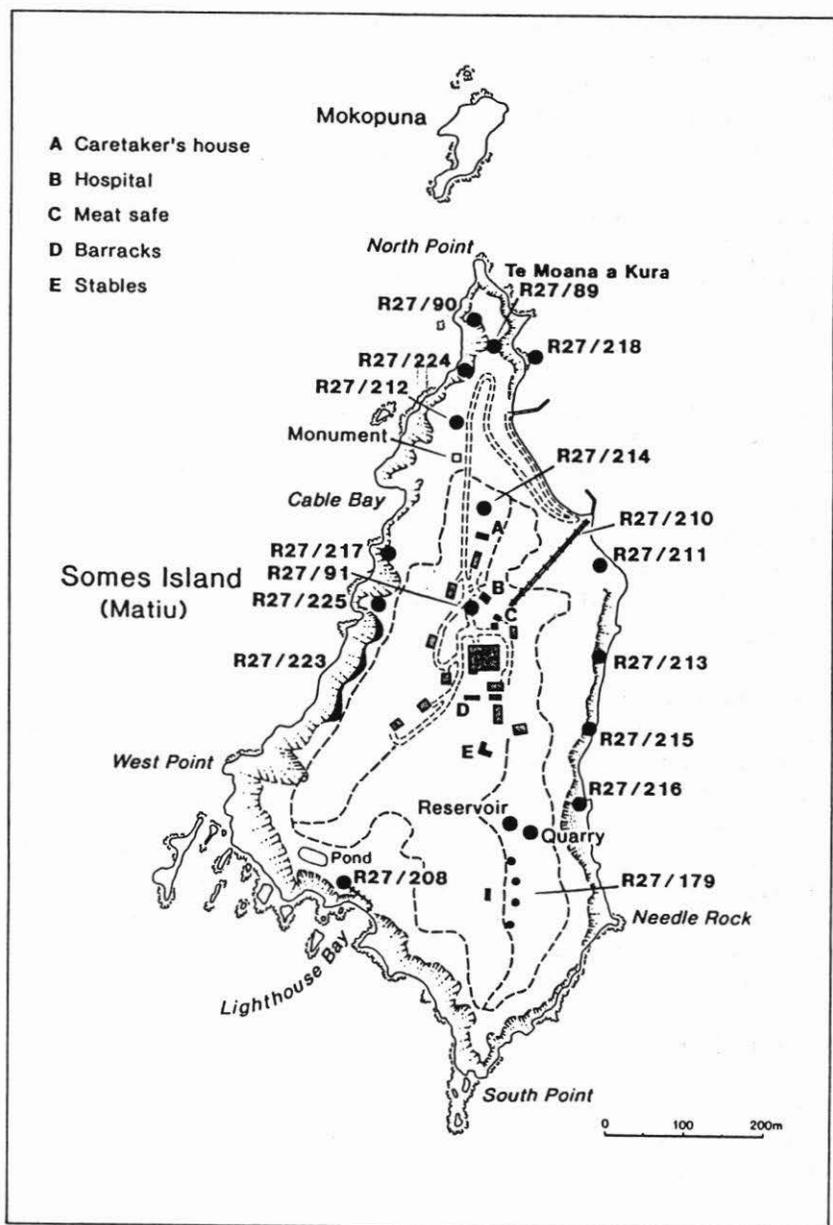


Figure 1. Plan of Somes Island showing the location of recorded sites.

The central part of the island has been progressively modified to provide space for buildings and other facilities. The last phase of construction included the erection of the maximum security animal quarantine building in 1968, after which a series of houses, garages, workshops, and other buildings were added. A water treatment pond was also constructed.

Extensive areas of the island were under cultivation during World War I. The highest point of the island was truncated and levelled for a heavy anti-aircraft gun emplacement during World War II. An extensive set of tracks and roadways cross the island and, even on steep slopes, benched pathways are often evident.

The coastal strip, too, has been much modified. There are two wharfs at the northeast end of island. Derelict facilities in Lighthouse Bay were once used to service the lighthouse. The narrow coastal strip behind the beaches on the west coast was modified in a number of places during World War I to provide extra usable ground, mostly for recreational purposes (such as a tennis court). A degaussing station was built on a narrow platform behind the beach on the eastern side of the island and a roadway extended from the main (southeastern) wharf around the coast, truncating two headlands.

Apart from shelter belts of pine and macrocarpa, most of the island has been kept in pasture since at least the 1870s. There were 120 sheep on the island in 1873 (National Archives, Immigration Department Index 1873-79, letter dated 2 June 1873). Photographs in Alexander Turnbull Library collections and vertical aerial photographs (RN 178/23, 17 February 1941 and RN 4233/22, 28 August 1969) provide good evidence of the vegetation cover this century. Changes have occurred since 1981 when slopes on the south, west, and east of the island began being replanted with native species by Royal Forest and Bird Protection Society (RFBPS) and the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries (Royal Forest and Bird Protection Society 1990).

### **Maori history**

Little is known of Maori use of the island and most of what is known from oral traditions was recorded by Elsdon Best at the turn of the century. The island was named *Matiu* by Kupe and it was there that Tara and Tautoki first settled when they took possession of Te Whanganui-a-tara (Wellington). Additional traditional information about *Matiu* is summarised by Adkin (1959).

The island was a refuge for Ngati Ira in the early 19th century. Ngati Ira were, however, displaced by Ngati Mutunga and Ngati Tama. In 1835 these two groups seized the brig *Rodney* off Matiu and began moving to the Chatham Islands. While a second party of migrants waited on Matiu for transport, Te Wharepouri of Te Atiawa arrived with 300-400 people and remained there for a month, during which time Ngati Mutunga and Ngati Tama either transferred or entrusted the land in the vicinity of Wellington to them and others (Ballara 1990:26-28).

### History since 1840

There is no definitive history of Somes Island and the following summary is based on notes collected by Stan Butcher (RFBPS), discussion with Richard Anderson (Department of Conservation Somes Island Field Centre Manager), photographs in Alexander Turnbull Library, and a reading of selected primary sources held by National Archives (Walton 1995).

A lighthouse and keeper's cottage were built on the south coast in 1866. A tramway down to the bay serviced the installation. The original lighthouse was replaced in 1900. The new lighthouse was automated in 1924 and the living quarters subsequently removed.

Somes Island was designated as a quarantine station in 1869 and was first used for this purpose in March 1872 when the crew and passengers on the immigrant ship *England* were held in quarantine there because of an outbreak of smallpox on board (MacLean 1964:38). The Government hastily approved funds to erect buildings for accommodation there and there were parallel developments at other ports. In early 1873 the Department of Immigration took possession of the new station. The responsibility for running the station subsequently passed to the Department of Health.

The island was designated as a quarantine station for stock in 1889 and was recognised as the country's primary quarantine facility in 1908, a role it retained until recent years. It is not known what facilities were built specifically to service the animal quarantine station in this period. Early photographs (c.1915) show only insubstantial buildings in the animal quarantine area. The human and animal quarantine facilities existed side by side for many years.

In World War I, the existence of secure accommodation at the quarantine station made Somes Island an obvious place to house internees and prisoners of war. Extra accommodation was added in 1916 to house the guards.

The crew, but not the captain, of the commerce raider *Seeadler* were imprisoned on Somes Island late in the war. Allegations by their captain, Lt cdr. Count von Luckner, of insufficient food and ill treatment led to an investigation in 1918 by Judge Chapman who found that there were 296 prisoners on the island but that there was no evidence of ill-treatment (McGill 1986:180-182).

By the end of the war, the quarantine station buildings were run down and in need of maintenance and refurbishment. A report dated 17 April 1919 considered the buildings 'scarcely fit for habitation, having been built some 50 years ago' (Ministry of Works and Development, Series 1, 24/180, Somes I. Quarantine Station 1913-1919). There was public criticism of the conditions on the island during the influenza pandemic of 1918-19 when people were again held in quarantine on the island. The station was refurbished and extended in 1919-20 so that it could accommodate up to 900 passengers and crew (*ibid.*).

The station proved a constant drain on tight Department of Health budgets and by 1931 the situation had deteriorated to the point where the department warned that it could not guarantee that the station 'would be available for occupation at short notice in the event of a vessel arriving with infectious disease on board' (Department of Agriculture, Series 40, 1526 Pt 1, Somes I. Quarantine Station, General Working 1925-33). Maintenance continued to be deferred and in 1933 the government agreed to change their instructions to the department and reduce the capacity and state of readiness rather than provide the necessary funds (Department of Health, Series 1, 145/2/2, Somes I. Buildings 1923-34). This decision marked the end of reliance on quarantine stations to contain shipborne contagious diseases.

In World War II the quarantine station was again taken over to house internees. The island also became the site of two other defence installations at this time. A degaussing station was built in 1941-2 and a heavy anti-aircraft emplacement was constructed on the then highest point of the island in 1942-3.

Following World War II, most of the buildings associated with the human quarantine station, some dating back to the early 1870s, were demolished and the island was given over wholly to animal quarantine purposes. In 1968 a large specially-designed animal quarantine station was built. Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries control of the island ended in 1995.

## THE SURVEY

### Objective

The objective was to record all visible archaeological evidence on the island. Time and the extent and scale of human modification of the ground surface of the island limited what could be achieved and some features undoubtedly still remain to be located and described. Detailed mapping of selected individual sites has just got under way.

### Methods

A brief written description was made of each site and some features were also photographed. Knowledge of the history of the island was used to group features into meaningful clusters.

Site locations were marked on a 1969 aerial photograph (RN 4233/22) which had been enlarged to a scale of 1:5000. Grid references were assigned afterwards from NZMS 260 R27 (1:50,000) using the marked-up aerial photograph to establish the correct co-ordinates. Site locations are shown on Figure 1.

### Maori occupation

McLeod (1912:114) refers to 'dwelling squares' on Matiu but gives no useful details. Best visited the island in 1915 and published a detailed account of his observations of two middens and the earthworks of Moana-a-kura pa (Best 1918:88-90).

Susan Davis visited the island in 1959 and three records were subsequently filed in the Site Recording Scheme. The terraces recorded as R27/89 and the midden recorded as R27/90 are associated with Te Moana-a-kura pa, and the midden recorded as R27/91 lies adjacent to the Haowhenua pa. Haowhenua pa was the site of the original quarantine station and, except for this small remnant of midden, nothing of the pa now remains.

### **The Lighthouse (R27/208)**

This site contains three sets of features. First, there is the 1900 lighthouse, which still stands. Second, there are the remains of the tramway and other facilities in Lighthouse Bay. Third, there are the terraces for a cottage and other buildings. Figure 2 shows the complex in 1886.

The position of the tramway is still evident and numerous rails are still in place. There is a derelict shed in the bay, alongside of which are the remains of a trolley. Nothing remains of a boatshed which shows on the 1886 photograph. Although the terraces where the cottage and outbuildings were located have been planted in native species, they are still partly visible under the thick vegetation cover.



*Figure 2. Lighthouse and keeper's cottage and outbuildings, 1886. Edgar Richard Williams Collection, Alexander Turnbull Library. Reference G-25715-1/1.*

### **The Quarantine Stations (R27/209)**

Almost nothing now remains of the original 1872-3 station. Five buildings dating to the early part of this century remain: (1) the caretaker's house

(c.1904); (2) hospital (pre World War I); (3) meat safe (c.1919-20); (4) half of an old barrack building (c.1919-20); and (5) the stables (c.1916). Most buildings on the island are of post World War II vintage.

A number of photographs held by Alexander Turnbull Library show parts of the station in World War I, including two long barrack buildings added to the station in about 1916 to house the guards (Figs. 3 and 4). The stables in the animal quarantine area also appear to have been built at this time.

The station was refurbished and extended in 1919-20, and a plan (Part of PW/WDO 1252) exists showing the proposed addition of huts to increase the accommodation capacity. This plan was largely carried out and the older buildings were re-furbished and altered. The resulting layout is shown on a map drawn two decades later (WDO 10380, August 1942).

Outlying structures associated with the quarantine stations are the smoke house (R27/211, built c.1873), the cemetery (R27/212, dates to 1870s onwards), a rubbish dump (R27/224, age uncertain, possibly turn of century), the tramway (R27/210, constructed c.1919-20), and a reservoir (built c.1919-20).

The smoke house and another structure occupied the shore near the main wharf and show clearly, if distantly, in an 1877 sketch of the island. Passengers and crew from *Collingwood* were in quarantine in 1875 and, in his reminiscences (written c.1925), Thomas Heath provides a description of single men entering the smoke house to 'stay there for ten minutes to be thoroughly fumigated', followed by the single girls, and then the married folk including 'the young ones [who] choked and coughed in the fumes'. The remains of this small brick building litter the shore: it was demolished some time after 1969.

Some 40 people are buried on the island and most of the burials date to 1872-1876, but with a small group dating to 1919. The headstones have been removed from the cemetery and are held in storage on the island. Little now distinguishes the cemetery from the surrounding pasture. A monument has been erected on the ridge above the cemetery, and a memorial to Italian New Zealand internees of World War II occupies the same ridge.

Associated with the use of the island for accommodating internees in World War I are the remnants of a substantial reclamation (R27/223) on the largest



*Figure 3. Animal quarantine area (foreground) and shelterbelt around the human quarantine station in the early part of World War I. Photographer unknown. Alexander Turnbull Library. Reference F-112226-1/2.*



*Figure 4. Quarantine station in about 1917 or 1918. The shelterbelt has gone and two long huts have been added to the station. Photographer unknown. Alexander Turnbull Library. Reference F-38622-1/2.*

beach on the western side of the island. A number of photographs held by Alexander Turnbull Library show the internees, the reclamation, and huts and terraces along the base of the cliffs. Figure 5 shows one such scene. Two other bays were modified less extensively. The bay southwest of Te Moana-a-kura pa was modified to hold a tennis court (see WDO 10389, August 1942).

### **Gun Emplacements (R27/179)**

The site, on what was till then the highest point on the island, required 'considerable excavation and building up' (National Archives, Ministry of Works, Series 1, File 23/828, AA Defences:Somes Island 1942-3). The levelling of the hilltop was done by bulldozer and was completed by early November 1942. The contract to build the four emplacements and a command post was awarded to A.G. Wells after another contractor withdrew. The emplacements, which were for 3.7" heavy anti-aircraft guns, were built to 'a new, simplified design' (*ibid.*) and so differ from those at the other two local battery sites (Brooklyn and Point Halswell) which still survive. One emplacement has been damaged but otherwise the site is intact (Fig. 6).

### **The Degaussing Station (R27/213)**

The degaussing station appears to have been built in 1941-42. Degaussing protected ships from magnetic mines by demagnetising the hulls. Photographs show a long narrow building with a central section two stories high, behind a fence. The building appears to have been removed at the end of the war when the navy moved out. The most obvious surviving evidence is a concrete foundation with an engine mount.

### **Miscellaneous earthwork features**

Miscellaneous earthworks include two deep-cut pits each sited on a headland on the western side of the island (R27/217 and R27/225). The pits are commonly said to be observation posts but this appears to be conjecture.

The top of the hill next to the caretaker's house has been modified to create two terraces, the lower one containing a depression (R27/214). The hill was known as 'Flagstaff Hill' and this may be a clue as to the function of the terraces.

A terrace (R27/215) has been cut into the foot of the hill immediately behind the beach at one point on the eastern shore. Measuring about 13 by six metres, the front riser is stone-lined along much of its length. The southwest



*Figure 5. Interned Germans celebrating the Kaiser's birthday. The photo shows the recreational area on the shoreline. Photographer unknown. Alexander Turnbull Library. Reference F-112288-1/2.*



*Figure 6. Anti-aircraft battery site from the air, mid-1995. Photographer Kevin Jones, DOC.*

corner is also stone-lined. Although it seems likely to have been constructed to hold a structure, no traces of foundations were found.

A small natural ledge beneath a rock face near the eastern shore contains a small feature with stone-lined sides (R27/216).

## DISCUSSION

The major historic themes associated with Somes Island (modified from Challis 1995) are:

- |     |                           |  |
|-----|---------------------------|--|
| (1) | Maori occupation          | Pa, midden, wahi tapu                            |
| (2) | Communications            | Lighthouse complex                               |
| (3) | Immigration/Public Health | Quarantine station                               |
| (4) | Pastoral Industry         | Animal quarantine                                |
| (5) | Defence                   | Internment camps, AA battery, degaussing station |

Comprehensive recommendations on the conservation of sites have not yet been made but it has been recommended that sites be maintained *as they are* until properly assessed. An architectural survey of the few surviving pre-World War II buildings and an assessment of the historic trees have also been recommended (Challis 1995) and the former has now been completed.

The major site protection issues are high visitor usage of parts of the island, with potential deleterious effects on historic sites, and establishing and maintaining a vegetation cover appropriate to each site.

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