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TEST EXCAVATIONS, MARSLAND HILL, NEW PLYMOUTH:  
AN HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

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Marsland Hill (P19/9) was the site of Pukaka pa and, after extensive levelling and re-shaping in 1855, it became the centre of New Plymouth's defences and a major military establishment during the Taranaki Wars.

In March 1986 the Department of Lands and Survey advertised their intention to classify Marsland Hill Domain, pursuant to the requirements of the Reserves Act 1977. Two tentative classifications were proposed. An area of approximately 4,700 square metres containing the New Plymouth Observatory, Civil Defence Building and radio hut was suggested as a local purpose reserve, the remainder of the Domain was to be a recreation reserve. After the receipt of public submissions, the proposed designation was changed to historic reserve. No objection was made to the creation of a local purpose reserve area (Fig. 1).

In July 1987 the Taranaki Museum was approached by the New Plymouth City Council concerning the construction of a replacement Civil Defence Building. The Council sought clarification of obligations under the Historic Places Act 1980. Although no obvious surface indication remained of the military establishment that once occupied the hill, the presence of archaeological deposits was thought likely. Reinforcing this viewpoint was the knowledge that some large finds of "dumped rubbish" had been uncovered during construction of the present system of walking tracks around the hill, in 1972 (Daily News 31 May 1972). Following correspondence with the Historic Places Trust, a permit (1987/14) was issued for preliminary investigations. Work was conducted on three weekend afternoons in August 1987. What follows includes a summary of these investigations.

### History

The area known as Marsland Hill was previously the pa Pukaka (Smith 1910:8). The layout of the pa is shown in a plan drawn by Frederick Alonzo Carrington, Plymouth Company Surveyor, in his "Plan of the Town and Part of the settlement of New Plymouth 1841-42". The pa consisted of double ditch and bank defences around the higher part of the hill and single ditch and bank earthworks enclosing smaller areas along the ridge top to the south (Fig. 2).

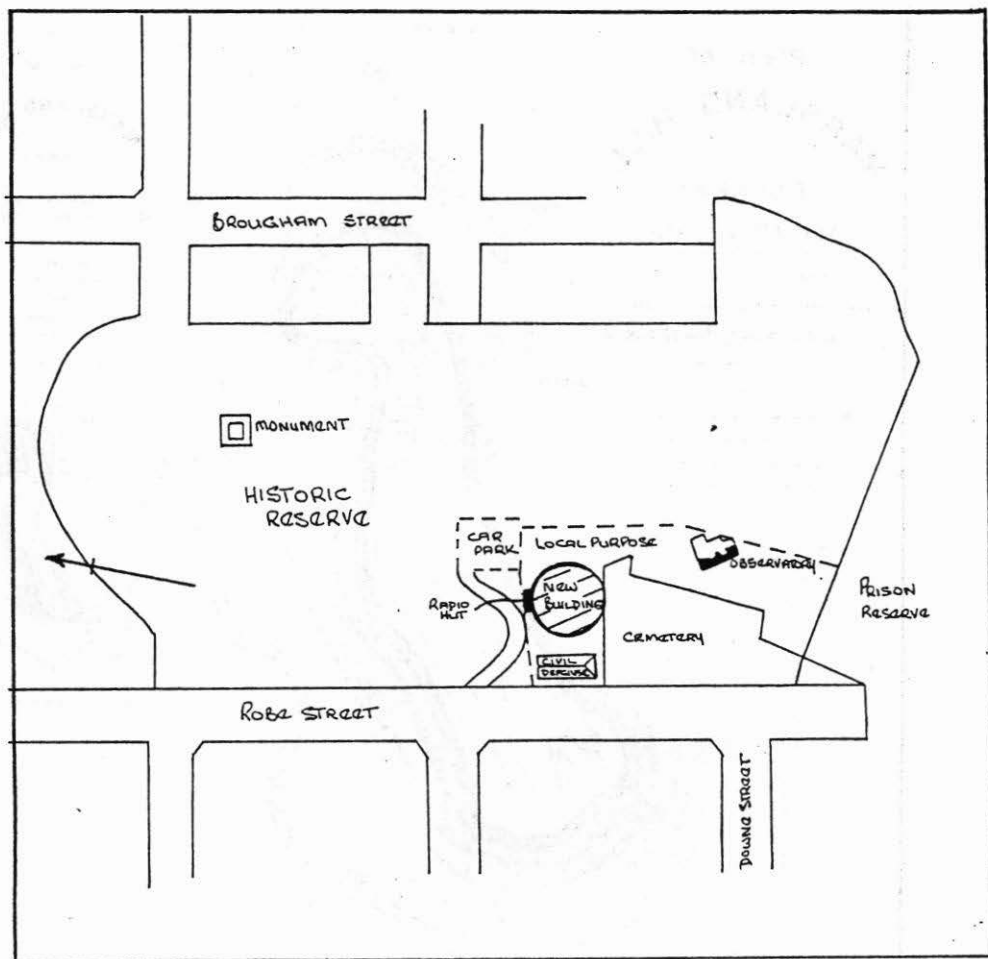


FIGURE 1. Marsland Hill general plan

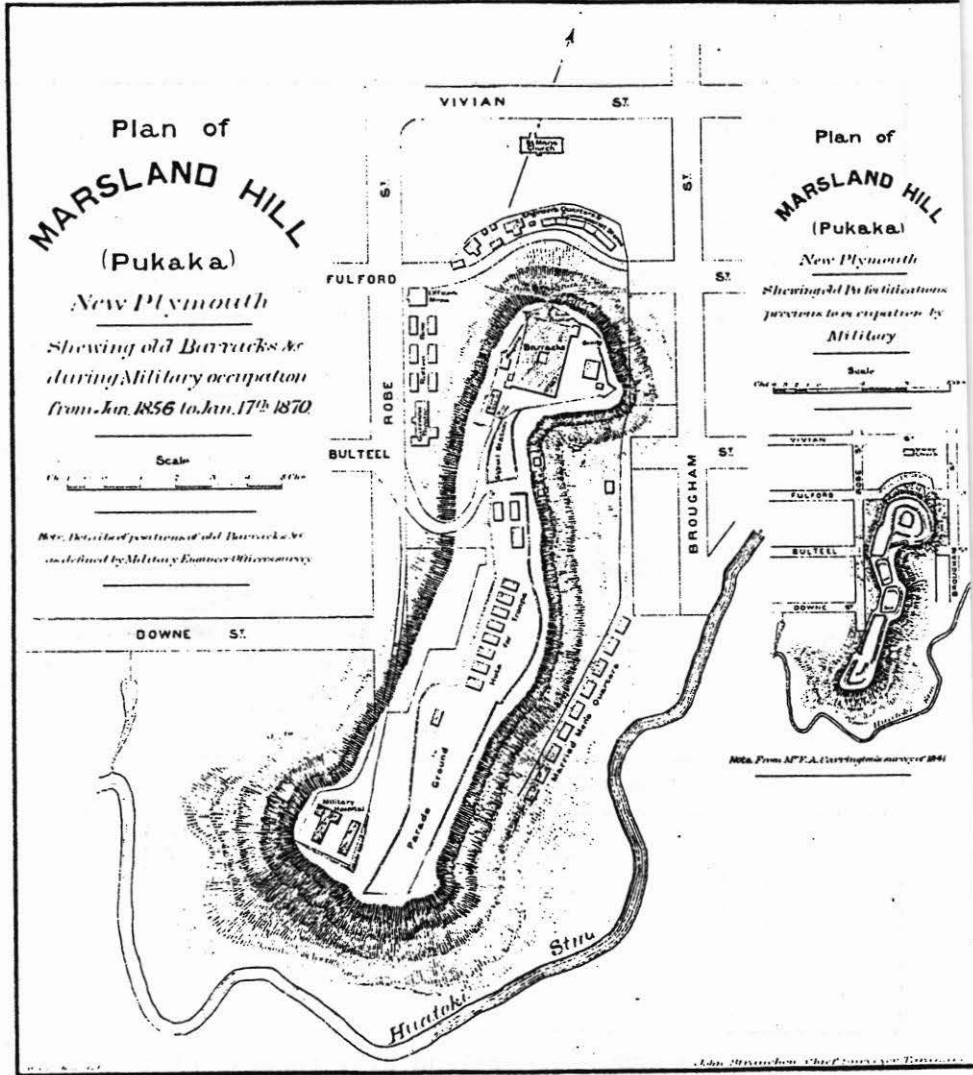


FIGURE 2. Plan of Marsland Hill/Puaka - Strauchon, J. n.d.  
 (Compiled from plans drawn by F.A. & N. Carrington)

Stephenson Percy Smith states that Pukaka pa was built by the Nga-Poutiki-taua hapu of the Taranaki Tribe, who had invaded and conquered the area from the Te Ati-awa sometime between 1730 and 1740. However, in about 1760 Te Ati-awa reconquered all their lost territory and expelled the Nga-Poutiki-taua. During this encounter Pukaka was besieged, taken, and never again occupied (Smith 1910:216-217). Elsewhere, however, Smith, quoting W.H. Skinner as his source, claims that Pukaka was occupied and subsequently abandoned when the Waikato advanced on Te Ati-awa in 1832 (Smith 1910:482).

During the 1850s various sections of the Maori community of Taranaki had become deeply divided over the question of land sales to Pakeha; this situation culminated in some spirited armed skirmishes between adversaries belonging to the Puketapu hapu. In response to strident settler demands for a military presence, the Colonial Government decided to station troops at New Plymouth.

On 19 August the first troops arrived, 275 men of the 58th Regiment and a handful each of gunners and engineers; they were joined on 17 September by 210 more soldiers of the 65th Regiment. Work commenced on levelling Marsland Hill to create a platform. The erection of a barracks and the construction of a stockade and associated buildings followed (Taranaki Herald 16 June 1915, Sunday Express 17 August 1980).

It seems unlikely that the whole pa was levelled by the forty feet indicated in military records. Forty feet may have been taken off the highest part of the pa which lay within the double ditch and bank defences, thereby reducing the ground to the level of the outer ditch. Less earthmoving would have been required on the areas within the single ditch and bank defences. However, the pa was substantially destroyed by the extent of the earthworks.

Marsland Hill was soon to become the single most important military establishment of the Taranaki Wars, serving as headquarters for both imperial troops and local forces in Taranaki. In 1870 the last of the imperial troops departed and the Armed Constabulary was put in charge of Marsland Hill (Fig. 3).

The layout of the military establishment on Marsland Hill is clearly shown on a "Sketch plan of Marsland Hill Reserve shewing (sic) the position of the Barracks and Buildings" by Nelson Carrington, dated 2 February 1870 (Prickett 1981:29) (Fig. 4).

This map and subsequent copies show the barracks surrounded by a stockade on the northern part of the hill, an entrenched area to the south enclosing soldiers' huts and a parade



FIGURE 3. Marsland Hill, Northeast view, Stockade and married Men's Quarters (from vicinity Brougham Street/Vivian Street intersection) about late 1870s.

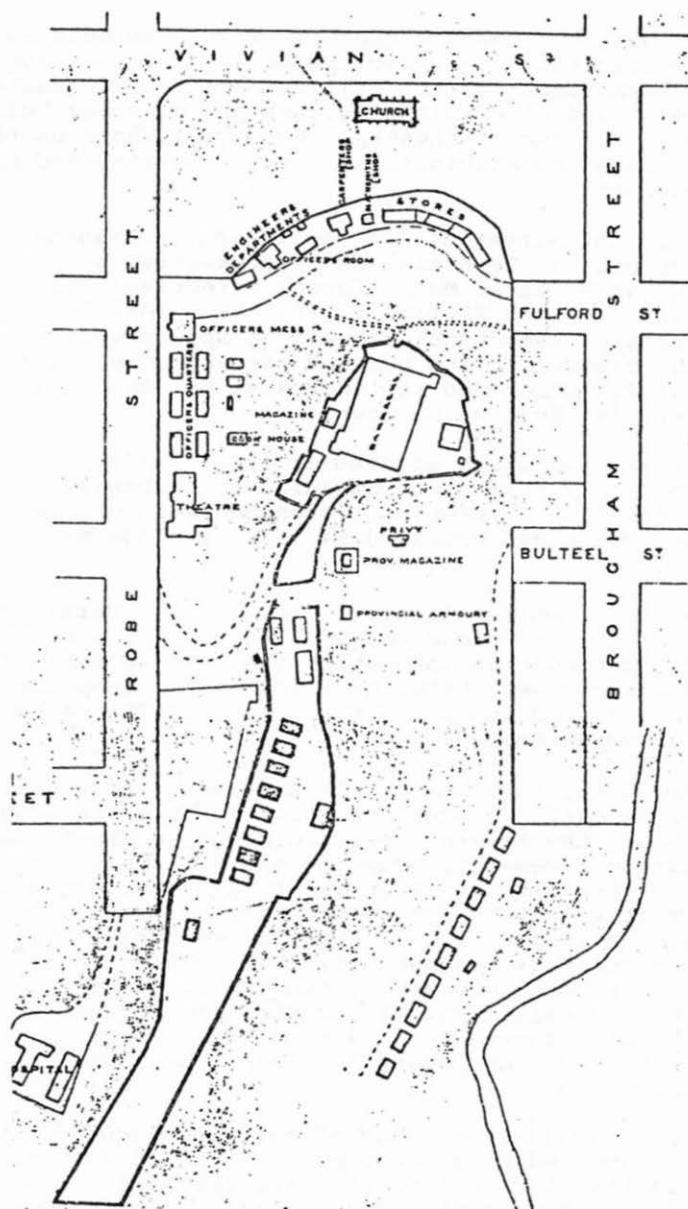


FIGURE 4. Sketch plan of Marsland Hill Reserve, showing position of the barracks and buildings. N. Carrington 2 February 1870.

ground. On the flanks of the Hill were more huts and a military hospital (now under the New Plymouth Prison). Around the northern slopes of the Hill were officers' quarters, carpenters' and blacksmiths' workshops, a stores building, a cook house and even a theatre. Buildings shown on the eastern flank include the Provincial Armoury, magazine and married men's quarters.

During the winter of 1860 following successive "victories" in engagements at Te Kohia and Puketakauere, between New Plymouth and Waitara, Maori forces effectively controlled the countryside (Belich 1986:82-83, Prickett 1981:33). Large contingents of armed Maoris began to appear very close to New Plymouth, plundering and burning the abandoned farm houses, "running-off" stock and killing those persons incautious enough to venture far beyond the Town.

When General Pratt arrived from Australia in August 1860 to assume military command he immediately responded by deciding to improve the Town's defences. Trenches were excavated around the Town centre and extended so as to include Marsland Hill (Fig. 5).

The Armed Constabulary continued to use Marsland Hill throughout the 1870s and early 1880s. Despite the increasingly dilapidated condition into which the buildings had fallen, much of the barracks were taken over in 1874 to temporarily house immigrants from Britain and Europe. In 1891 the barrack buildings were removed.

Immediately adjacent to the area designated local purpose reserve, an early cemetery exists. In 1852 the Congregational Church under the Reverend Horatio Montague Groube was granted a denominational cemetery near the end of Robe Street. No records of the first nine years of this cemetery exist and, although it was probably unofficially closed in 1861 by a Taranaki Provincial Council "Public Cemetery Ordinance" of that year, the cemetery was not officially closed until 1908 when it was transferred to the New Plymouth Borough Council. The presence of unmarked burials in the cemetery was confirmed by the then Chief Surveyor in 1908. (Correspondence from Chief Surveyor to Under Secretary of Lands, Memo 3608/34, File 8/57, 27 June 1908).

The possibility of "random" burials elsewhere on Marsland Hill is suggested by a newspaper account of a coffin containing human remains clad in a naval tunic that was uncovered during the levelling by the military in 1885 (Taranaki Herald 5 September 1855, 19 September 1959). No other record of this event exists.

#### The Excavations



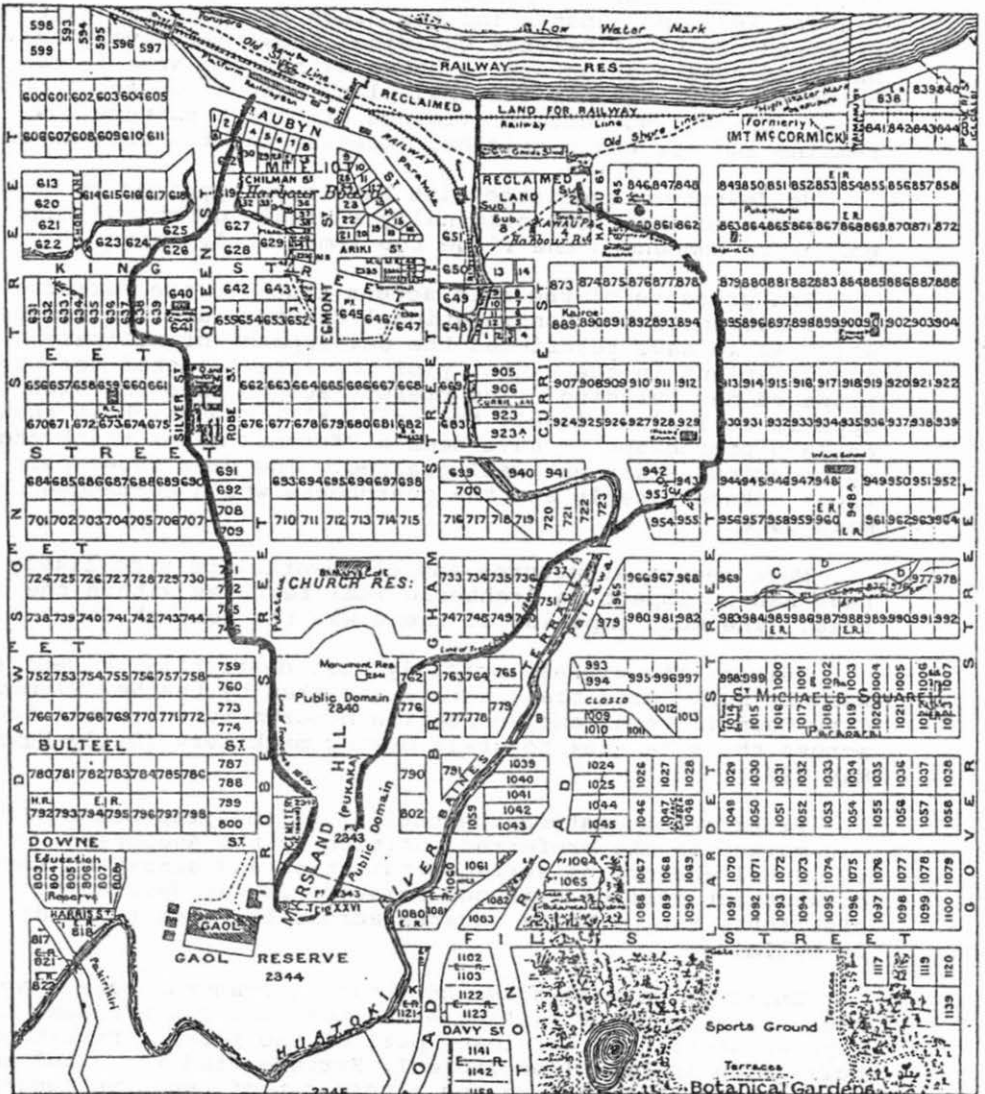


FIGURE 5. Approximate line of 1860 entrenchment of New Plymouth. T. Simpson, Chief Surveyor, 1909.

Using available records it has been possible to ascertain that, at least for the period between January 1856 and 17 January 1870, no substantial buildings stood on the site of the proposed new Civil Defence building. However, a very small, un-named square structure is shown within the area in question on Nelson Carrington's original plan, but not on any of the later copies. No surface evidence of this structure now remains and its exact original location and function is unclear.

No features associated with Pukaka pa appeared to be within the affected area, but originally a single ditch and bank enclosure commanded the ridge top immediately above.

The presence of the main access track to the barracks and the location of the Congregational Cemetery are two features which would have restricted the development of military installations in the vicinity of the site selected for the proposed new building. The present access onto the site appears to follow closely the original route which is shown in an 1870 photograph to have been a "formed" metal track and the surrounding escarpment well grassed. The view shows part of the stockade clearly and the guardhouse which commanded the main gate.

More recent structures and earthworks are also likely to have had an impact on archaeological features within the site area. The most imposing of these was the Borough Stock Pound.

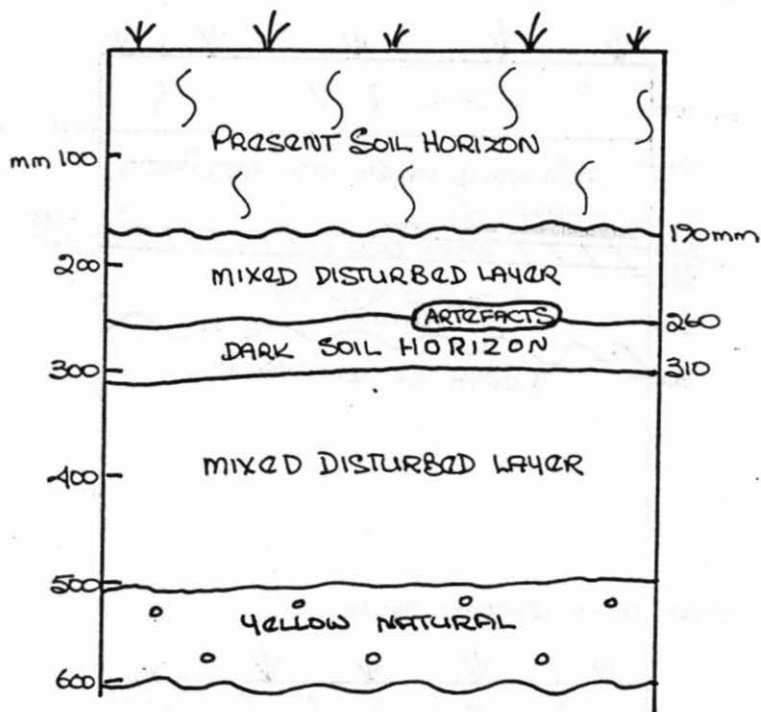
Perhaps the archaeologically most destructive recent event was the bull-dozed track work undertaken by the New Plymouth City Council Parks and Recreation Department to enable access across the site area to grass mowing machinery (Daily News 31 May 1972).

Prior to excavation the outline of the proposed building was marked in the preferred position by the engineers. With the total absence of surface indication and almost no knowledge of what sub-surface evidence existed, it was decided to distribute two or three squares across the area to be disturbed by building.

During a general site inspection a fragment of a clay pipe bowl and a piece of roofing slate were found protruding from an exposed section on the lower part of the site, a result of the bulldozing in 1972 (See Table 1, Surface Finds). A 500 mm section was cleaned down and a test pit of the same length opened into the lower surface until a sterile "natural" had been confirmed. This section revealed a mixed disturbed layer of material 400 mm thick which contained a 50 mm thick dark soil profile (Fig. 6).

The artefactual material appeared to be above the thin

## Cross section of exposed profile



## Test Square One (Eastern Bank)

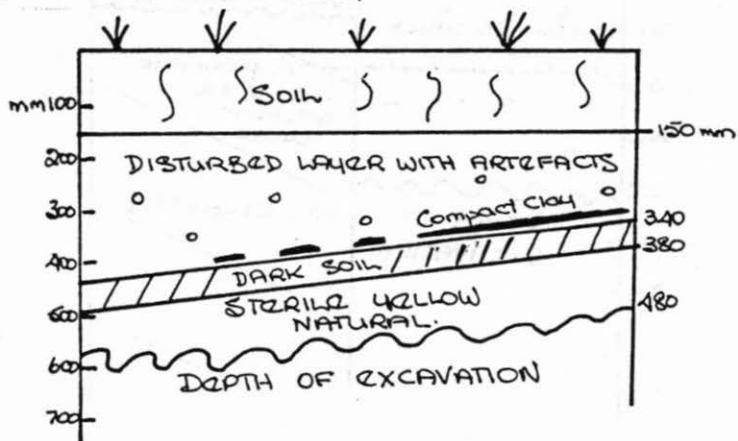
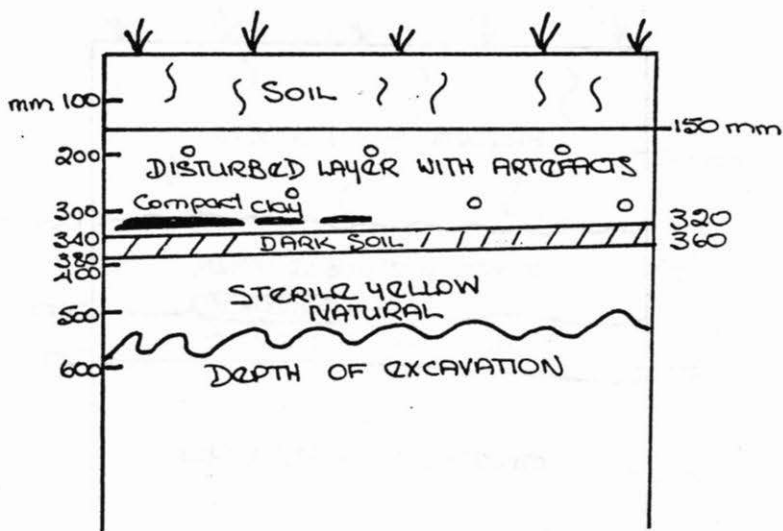


FIGURE 6. Section drawings, exposed profile and test squares

## Test Square Two (Eastern Baulk)



## Test Square Three (Eastern Baulk)

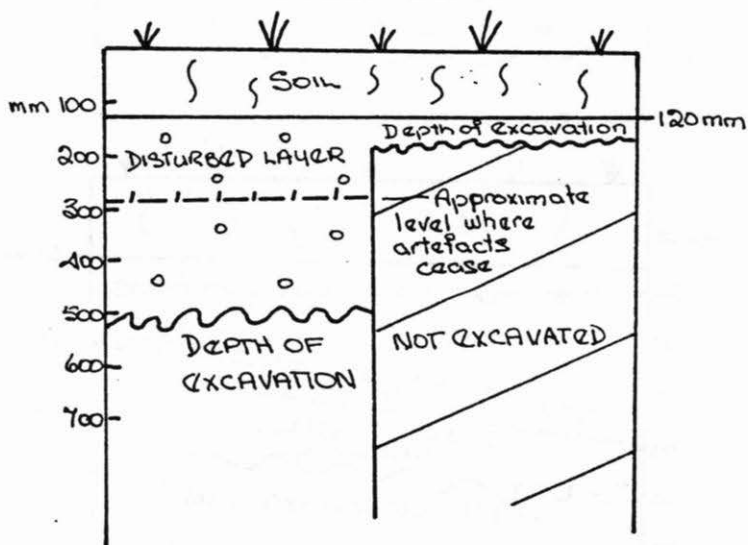


FIGURE 6. Section drawings (continued).

soil layer. The mixed disturbed layer exhibited patchy textural and colour variation with a tendency towards increasing homogeneity towards the yellow natural beneath. Both the darker soil horizon and the disturbed material contained scattered charcoal fragments. Although it is tempting to interpret the 400 mm of disturbed material as the overburden from Pukaka pa, the presence of the darker layer within, and the very small area examined argue for a cautious explanation.

These one metre test squares; numbered one to three, were excavated, the last, square three, produced sparse material evidence and was reduced to half the intended size. Each square will be discussed separately (Fig. 6).

#### Square One

On all squares excavated the surface humus profile layer was unexpectedly deep and heavily infiltrated with root fibres. This turf layer lifted easily and came to a relatively abrupt interface with the apparently disturbed mixed layer beneath. The composition of this mixed layer was comparable with that examined in profile in the exposed section; however, it included many more artefacts. The only feature of note was an intermittently distributed hard, compacted clay layer that was immediately above the dark soil horizon. The undersurface of the "clay" bore impressed patterns, possibly of plant material once growing on the soil surface. Beneath the soil horizon lay an undetermined depth of sterile yellow soil. Because it seemed possible that the compact clay may have been a structural feature, square two was excavated immediately to the south, linking the eastern baulk.

#### Square Two

The stratigraphy of Square Two was directly comparable to Square One. The artefactual finds were also similar. The compressed intermittent clay layer extended only part way across the square, indicating that it was only an isolated inclusion within the generally disturbed layer. As in Square One the yellow layer beneath the dark soil profile was only removed to a depth of 100 mm before being abandoned.

#### Square Three

Square Three was placed beyond the perimeter of the proposed building but still within the area to be affected by earthworks. The surface soil horizon was slightly thinner than on the first two squares, but as occurred previously, the next layer was a mixed disturbed layer.

The upper section of the disturbed layer again contained

artefacts. In Square Three, apart from a broken unmarked clay pipe stem and three fragments of glass, all the finds were small pieces of black coal. Small friable fragments of coal were found in both Square One and Two, but nowhere approached the density of Square Three. Because of the paucity of artefacts, it was decided to reduce the excavated area to half the one metre square. After removing about 160 mm of the disturbed layer, the artefact finds ceased. Excavation continued through the same disturbed material for a further 220 mm before it was decided to abandon the excavation on the grounds of diminishing returns. The actual depth of the disturbed layer at this point therefore remains unknown and the existence of the dark soil layer could not be confirmed.

#### Artefacts (Table 1)

Time has not permitted analysis of the finds and no comparative study has been attempted with either museum or archaeological collections. However, it is intended that all previous finds, the current collection and material recovered during construction of the Civil Defence building, will be the subject of a separate paper. Glass has been simply grouped according to physical properties such as colour, thickness and body part. Provenance has been given to one metre squares only, as all artefacts lay within the mixed disturbed layer and exhibited no apparent meaningful, structural, functional or stratigraphic relationship, one to the other. No attempt at reconstruction has been undertaken yet, most pieces are small and, apart from a half section of a base from a black glass bottle from Square Two, are not likely to be specifically identifiable. The slate pieces found could be ascribed two functions. One "red" piece with a rounded corner has been "ruled" with incised lines and was most probably for writing; the remaining pieces are "grey" and probably roofing material. Although the barracks buildings were entirely clad with wrought corrugated iron, the guardhouse shown in the 1870s photograph is roofed with slate. The ruled slate probably relates to the families of either the troops or the later immigrants, slate being common in period school rooms.

The .577 Snider bullet and the 57th Regiment button are obviously military and the plentiful bottle glass suggests the consumption of alcoholic beverages as a common recreation. The coal fragments may have come from a bunker, which could explain the small structure illustrated on Nelson Carrington's plan. No bone or other obvious food or kitchen refuse was recovered, although one piece of metal from Square Two looks like the circumference from a small diameter circular tin can.

No obviously Maori objects have been located apart, possibly, from the small irregular "flint" chip from Square Three.

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TABLE ONEInventory of Artefacts

## Surface finds

- 1 - intact pint black glass beer bottle
- 1 - piece grey roofing slate
- 1 - part of unmarked clay pipe bowl
- 3 - unidentified glass fragments, mixed thickness and colour

## Square One

- 1 - .557 snider bullet (cut half longitudinally)
- 1 - piece "red" slate ruled
- 17 - unidentifiable glass fragments; mixed thickness and colour
- assorted friable coal fragments

## Square Two

- 1 - half base from black glass beer bottle
- 1 - 57th Regiment button
- 1 - circumference from base of circular tin
- 8 - unidentifiable glass fragments; mixed thickness and colour
- assorted friable coal fragments

## Square Three

- 1 - irregular shaped flint chip
- 1 - part section of unmarked clay pipe stem
- 3 - unidentifiable glass fragments; mixed thickness and colour
- assorted friable coal fragments

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There is no evidence within the areas excavated of the presence of deliberately dumped rubbish; most of what was recovered was distributed in a random scatter.

Conclusion

The archaeological importance of Marsland Hill has previously been recognised (Prickett 1981:25-33). Prickett surmised that "extensive archaeological deposits may be intact on the top of the hill, on the 'plateau' area to the south and on the hillsides below" (Prickett 1981:33). The results of the present archaeological investigations, the first on Marsland Hill, go some way towards confirming this viewpoint.

Although the excavations were very small and restricted to an area without either surface or direct documentary evidence

of Maori or military occupation, they revealed scattered sub-surface evidence to exist. While it seems highly unlikely that any Maori material still remains in situ within the reserves, the reverse has been shown to be the case for evidence of the military establishment. The presence of the mixed disturbed layer in all three squares and the profile section, appears consistent with the actions of the military when levelling the ridge top in 1855 and disposing of surplus spoil down the escarpment. However because the excavations were small and lacked stratigraphic integrity, this interpretation must remain conjectural. The artefactual diversity between squares indicates a variety of activities took place on the hillside in the vicinity of the proposed building. While it appears that no military structures occupied the site, the scattered finds recovered during the test excavations belong to the overall pattern of the archaeological record on Marsland Hill; they too contribute to the illumination of the past. To this extent, the primary aim of the test excavations was achieved. It has been shown that mitigation procedures will be necessary to ensure the recovery and recording of information during earthwork preparation for the proposed Civil Defence Headquarters building. The interpretation of this material evidence has the potential to contribute much to the historical understanding of the totality of human events on Marsland Hill.

#### Acknowledgements

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