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THE ONAWE FISH TRAP

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Onawe Peninsula is a dominant feature of Akaroa Harbour in Banks Peninsula on the east coast of the South Island. It stands as an elongated pear shape connected to the mainland by a narrow neck at the head of the harbour. Its sides tend to be steep and in places rocky, and on its gently-sloping, north-facing slope, stands Onawe Pa (site number N36/86), some 20 to 65 metres above sea level.

The Pa was the scene early in 1832 of the last of Te Rauparaha's major attacks on east coast pas of the South Island, following closely on his sacking of the paramount Ngai Tahu pa of Kaiapoi in North Canterbury. A review of the available accounts of this battle, together with a full description of the Pa and some limited archaeological excavation, is being published elsewhere (Trotter and McCulloch 1998, in press).

On the western side of Onawe peninsula, on the shore beneath the Pa and extending into the Harbour, is a large curved structure, which we have tentatively identified as a fish holding pen or "fish trap" (Trotter and McCulloch 1989:62; 1997:62; 1998). It is located in the tidal zone near two trenches which run from the Pa downslope towards freshwater springs near the shore and which are believed to have been constructed to facilitate obtaining water in the event of a siege. Although we have mentioned and illustrated this feature in earlier publications, it has not previously been described in detail.

The fish trap (site number N36/127) comprises a roughly semi-circular wall which has been built of rocks from the shore platform extending from high tide level out into the harbour. It is 65 metres across and is clearly visible at

low tide (Figure 1; see also Trotter and McCulloch 1989:62; Jones 1994: 75; Trotter and McCulloch 1997:62; Trotter and McCulloch 1998, in press). Kevin Jones (1994: 73) describes it as the largest example of a fish trap in New Zealand - even so he gives its size as only about 25 metres across (Jones 1994: 75) instead of the 65 metres which it is in reality. He also suggests that towards the shore the stone wall appears to have been destroyed; this is not in fact the case. Although to some extent disturbed by the countless tides that have washed over it since whenever it was built, it is still a massive structure - a 2.3 metre wide wall built of selected large red volcanic rocks on each side with smaller black rocks filling in the centre (Figure 2). There are also a number of smaller artificial rock structures in the vicinity, including three which are circular in shape and 3.5 metres in diameter, and which are inside the fish trap itself - others immediately outside it are less readily identifiable (Figure 3).

For years there has been some controversy about this structure. Is it Maori in origin, or is it in fact an artificial oyster bed that is reputed to have been built by one Edward Latter late last century?

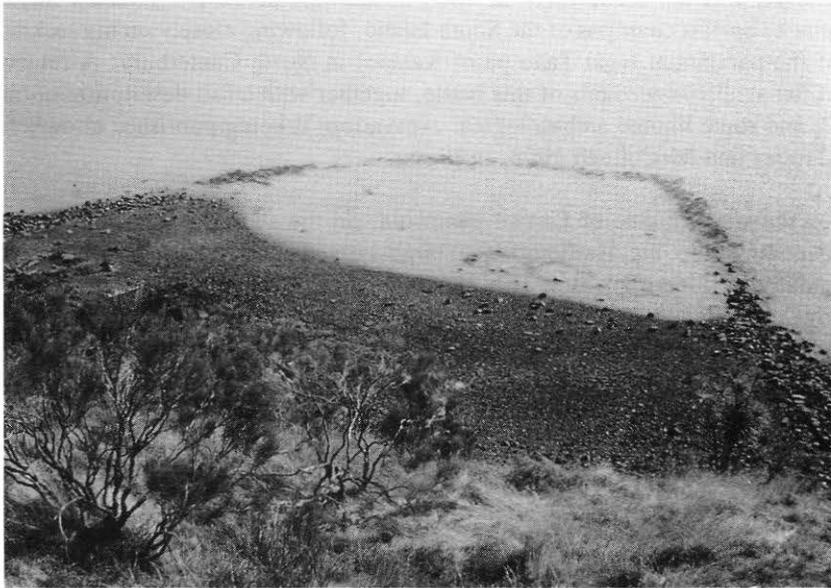


Figure 1. Photograph of the fish trap as seen from Onawe Pa.



Figure 2. Detail of the southern arm of the Onawe fish trap.

The idea of an oyster bed isn't entirely imaginary. In his book *Banks Peninsula : Cradle of Canterbury*, Gordon Ogilvie (1990: 92, 184) refers to an oyster farm which was operated by the Latter family last century in Barry's Bay - which is that part of the head of Akaroa Harbour on the

western side of Onawe Peninsula (where the fish trap is). There were also other oyster farms elsewhere in Akaroa Harbour (Ogilvie 1990: 41). And the late Daphne Harrison, one time honorary curator of the Akaroa Museum, told us that when she was researching the *Akaroa Mail* for 1879 to 1889 she had come across a reference to E. C. Latter having three artificial oyster beds on the western side of Onawe Peninsula. Unfortunately she hadn't kept the exact date and we haven't had the time to follow this up.

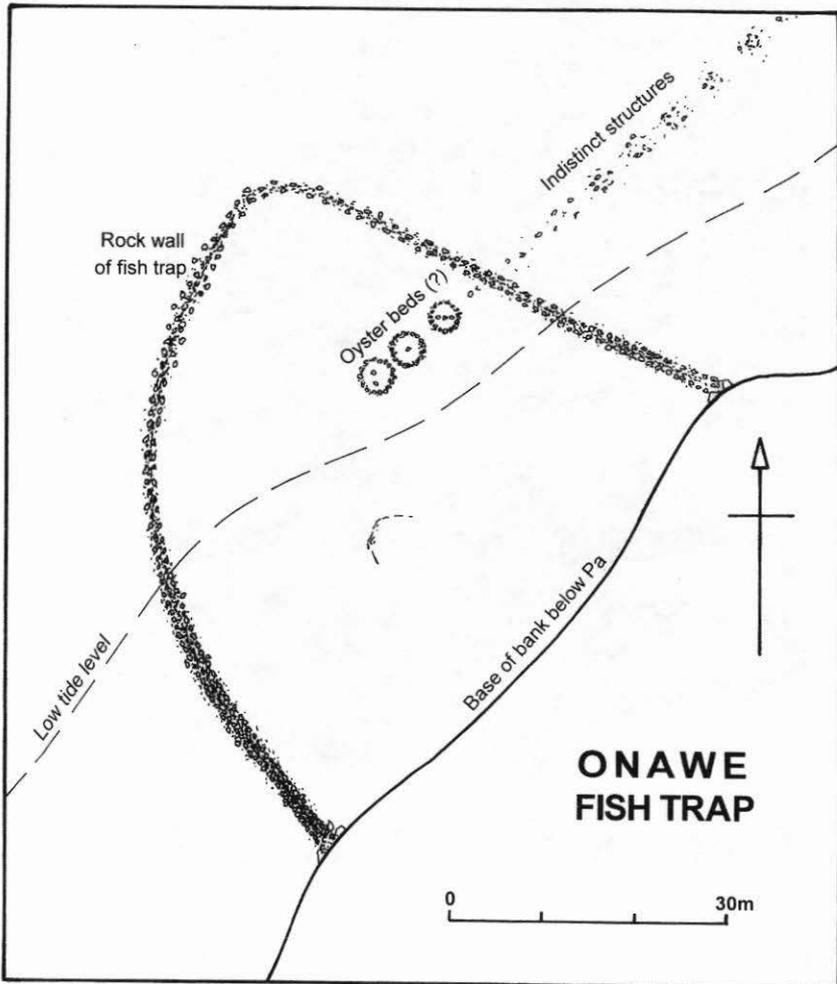


Figure 3. Sketch plan of the fish trap and other artificial structures in the tidal zone on the western side of Onawe Peninsula.

The idea that the main structure may have been a rock oyster farm does not lie well with us. There would seem little point in building an enclosure of this nature solely for the purpose of growing oysters, while in its original condition it seems highly likely that it would have trapped fish. Its tidal range, from well below low water to above high water mark, could not have provided an ideal environment for oysters. (On the other hand, the smaller circular structures, roughly paralleling the shore, might well have been artificial oyster beds - and they do in fact have oysters growing on them today.)

On the whole, a Maori origin for the main structure seems most probable and the question arises as to its relationship with Onawe Pa. In our forthcoming paper on Onawe (Trotter and McCulloch 1998, in press) we have suggested a likely direct association given that the pa was built to withstand a possibly prolonged siege (which never transpired), and that from the protected access to fresh water it would have been only a short step to the fish trap which an attacking force could not approach without being seen in a sufficiency of time.

Onawe Pa was well and carefully planned, with forethought, and the provision of an accessible fresh food supply would have been fully in keeping with that planning.

We acknowledge the assistance of Akaroa kaumatua, the late Henry Robinson, who facilitated all our work in connection with Onawe.

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