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THE PLACE OF THE GOLDFIELDS RUIN: THE OTAGO HOTEL AT SKIPPERS

PETER PETCHY, TRISTAN RUSSELL, NAOMI
WOODS (UNIVERSITY OF OTAGO)
JEREMY MOYLE (UNIVERSITY OF NEWFOUNDLAND)

Introduction

The ruin of the Otago Hotel (site E41/83, previously S123/174) at Skippers in the Shotover Valley in Otago (Figures 1-2) is one of a number of historic buildings in this mountainous setting known for both its gold mining history and spectacular scenery. The small settlement of Skippers was established on the terraces on the true right of the Shotover River during the gold rushes of 1862, and endured until the 1940s. The site of the settlement is now within the Mount Aurum Recreation Reserve, and apart from several small holiday houses in private ownership, the main structures to survive are the Mt Aurum Station homestead, the Skippers School, the Skippers Bridge and the ruin of the Otago Hotel. The first two have been restored by the Department of Conservation, and conservation work to stabilise and partially restore the hotel ruin is now being considered. In 2015 the ruin and its setting were recorded in detail during the preparation of a conservation plan (Petchey 2015). This paper presents the results of this survey and recording work, and discusses the role of ruins as an element within the Skippers and wider Central Otago landscapes.

History of Skippers and the Otago Hotel

The first European to see Lake Wakatipu was Nathaniel Chalmers in 1853, after he was guided into the interior by the chief Reko. The first white men to actually set foot on the shores of the lake were probably John Chubbin, John Morrison and Malcolm Macfarlane who, advised by Reko, reached the southern shore in January 1856 (Miller 1949: 2). The first European settlers to arrive in the area were William Gilbert Rees and Nicholas Von Tunzlemann, in search of new land for sheep in the interior. Rees established his homestead and woolshed at the spot where Queenstown stands today, and the first mob of sheep was driven in from Coal Creek in the Shag Valley at the end of 1860 (Miller 1949: 17-18).

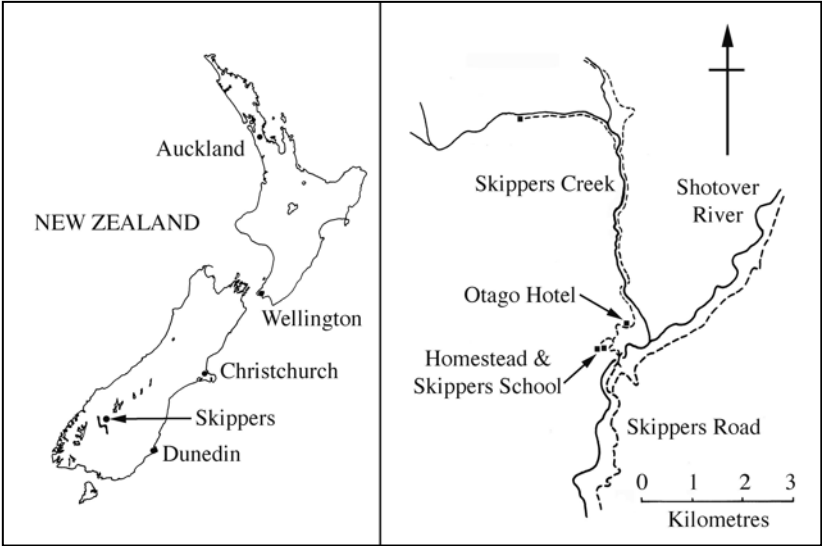


Figure 1: The location of the Otago Hotel at Skippers, Central Otago



Figure 2: The ruin of the Otago Hotel as it stands today

After the Dunstan Rush in Otago was sparked by Hartley and Reilly's spectacular recovery of 87lb of gold from the Dunstan Gorge in 1862, the ever-hopeful diggers quickly spread out, and reached Skipper's Creek (a tributary of the Shotover River) by December 1862. The name 'Skippers' probably derived from 'Skipper' Malcolm Duncan (so-named because of his time at sea), who discovered gold at Skippers Point in 1862 (Hall-Jones 2005: 118). There were no formal tracks or roads in place when the gold rush started, and men and horses had to pick the best routes possible to get to claims along the river. Between 1863 and 1866 the Otago Provincial Council constructed a pack track to Skippers, with a narrow bridge across the Shotover River. Work on an improved road started in 1883, and the final part of the road to Skippers Saddle was finished by May 1890, but the road still ended at the old bridge at Londonderry Creek, and it was not until 1901 that a new suspension bridge over the Shotover River was opened. The Skippers Road and Skippers Bridge are still in use today (2015), little changed from when they were built.

At Skippers itself a small and somewhat strung out settlement was established on the terraces on the true right side of the Shotover during the initial rush of 1862, and at its peak it had somewhere between 700-1000 inhabitants. At this time there were as many as six hotels at Skippers Point, but in common with most gold rush businesses they had a short life (De La Mare 1993: 59; Gillies 1993; Hall-Jones 2005: 119). Samuel Johnston established both the Otago Hotel and a bakery at the Point during the rush years, and his was the one establishment to persevere.

The Otago Hotel stood on Aspinall's Terrace (although this name was only applied later) beside the track to Skippers Creek. Early photographs show a complex of timber buildings and one stone building (the stone ruin of today) (Figure 3). The main hotel building itself was timber, and at some point the original structure was burnt down, and it was replaced with a new wooden building in the same place (Griffiths n.d.). This new structure included a billiards room, dining room, bar, and accommodation. The stone building stood on the east side of the main hotel, and has always assumed to have been part of the hotel complex. It may have provided accommodation, or may have been the residence of the Johnston family (primary historic accounts are quiet on its actual use). In 1869 Johnston was also appointed the postmaster, and the Skippers Post Office was for many years housed in a small building on the east side of the stone building (De La Mare 1993: 60; Griffiths n.d.).

After Samuel Johnston died in 1896 his widow Eliza continued to run the hotel. One notable event of this period was the construction of the new Skippers Bridge, and a banquet for 40 or 50 people was held at the Otago Hotel to celebrate its official opening on 29 March 1901 (De La Mare 1993: 18; *Otago Witness* April 3 1901: 53). In 1908 Eliza Johnston's daughter Rachel and



Figure 3: A postcard image of the Otago Hotel complex from the early twentieth century. The stone ruin is on the left, past the wooden hotel building.

son-in-law Jack Flynn took over the hotel and the post office, and ran them until 1919, when the liquor licence lapsed (Griffiths n.d.; Hall-Jones 2005: 120).

The hotel buildings were then used for many years as private houses, but the decline of the Skippers settlement became inexorable during the late 1930s. The main wooden building was occupied by Alfred Smith and his wife Louise, and in 1927 the Post Office was moved into this building when Louise took over as post mistress. After the Smith family left Skippers in 1934, Murdoch and Eileen Soper moved in to the building, and they ran it as a boarding house for a period, but they also soon left the district. The stone building was occupied by George and Doris Schriffer, but they also left Skippers in 1934 or 1935 (Griffiths n.d.).

By the 1940s the buildings were empty and becoming derelict, and were often used by unauthorised campers. They were purchased by Archie Macnicol of Mt Aurum Station, who intended to use the timber to build a new station homestead. The new house was never built, and instead Macnicol sold the wooden building for removal to Lower Shotover where it was rebuilt as a house, and stripped the reusable materials from the stone building, leaving just the stone walls standing (Hall-Jones 2005: 120; Macnicol 1967: 63; Macnicol & Trotter 1987). Photographs taken in the 1950s and 1960s show the stone structure still largely intact, but from the early 1970s until the late 1980s the

building deteriorated significantly, and the front wall collapsed in this period. By the 1990s it presented a sorry sight, and has continued to steadily decline.

The site of the Skippers settlement was within the Mt Aurum Station pastoral run, and in 1977 this was resumed by the Crown in the interests of water and soil conservation, due to the soil erosion problems on the property. As an interim measure most of the station was gazetted as a Recreation Reserve, and this classification has remained in place. The reserve is administered by the Department of Conservation, and in the 1990s the Department restored both the stone Skippers School and wooden Mt Aurum Homestead buildings. The area continues to be a popular tourist destination, and the combination of the spectacular scenery, the Skippers Road and Bridge, the restored homestead and school, the Skippers cemetery, and the ruin of the Otago Hotel, all contribute to the visitors' experience.

The Setting

The Shotover River flows through steep mountain country, and forms the divide between the Richardson Mountains to the west and the Harris Mountains to the east. A series of high alluvial terraces runs along the true right of the river at Skippers, and these have been all been sluiced for gold, with sizeable parts washed away. Aspinall's Terrace is no exception, and the Otago Hotel site overlooks the steep scree slope of Aspinall's sluicing claim. The Mt Aurum Homestead and Skippers School are on the adjacent Burkes Terrace to the south.

The vegetation in the area has been dominated by the wilding Douglas fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*) and larch (*Larix decidua*) trees that have spread out from historic plantings around the homestead and school. These trees have recently been killed by aerial spraying in a joint eradication programme by the Department of Conservation and the Wakatipu Wilding Conifer Group. At present the dead trees dominate the immediate landscape, but these will progressively be felled or will fall naturally. Several Leyland cypress (*Cupressus* × *leylandii*) trees that stand in front of the hotel site have been left alive, but most of the trees and the hawthorn hedge in the old orchard associated with the hotel have been killed. Introduced pasture grasses are still present in the old cultivated areas around the settlement, and raspberry canes are also growing near the homestead. The native vegetation in the area includes open snow tussock (*Chionochloa rigida*) grassland, and a number of large stands of mountain beech (*Nothofagus solandri* var. *cliffortioides*). Care has been taken during the wilding conifer aerial spraying to avoid the mountain beech stands.

The Field Survey

The survey of the hotel ruin and site was carried out on 1-2 May 2015. A plane table and alidade was used to map the overall site (Figure 4), and the elevations of the stone ruin (Figure 5) were drawn by setting out horizontal string lines and then using a drawing frame. Accommodation was provided by the Department of Conservation staff hut on Londonderry Terrace.

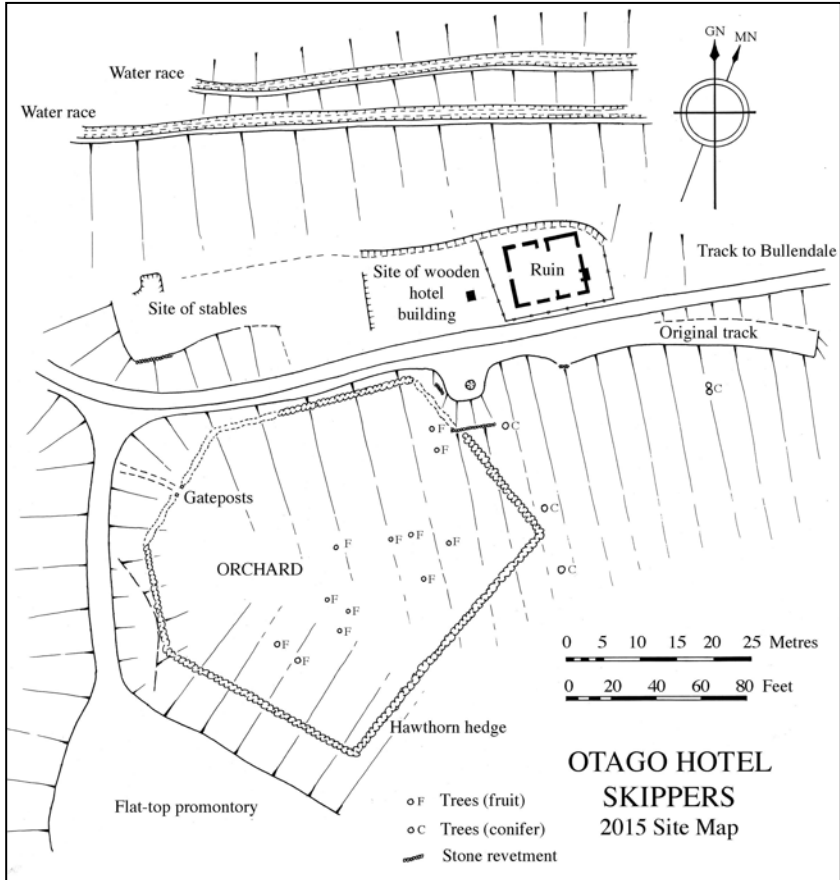


Figure 4: Plane table map of the Otago Hotel environs

The Otago Hotel Site

The site of the Otago Hotel is located on Aspinall's Terrace, beside the old Skippers track up to the Bullendale Reefs. This track is still in use as a walking and four-wheel-drive track. Most of Aspinall's Terrace has been sluiced away in the past, leaving a large gully between the Otago Hotel site and the Shotover River. A branch in the Skippers track in front of the hotel once led around to the Skippers Point Hall, but it has been washed away and now ends at the sluice face edge. The present track runs higher up the slope.

Early photographs show that most of the hotel buildings, including the stone ruin, were on the north side of the road (Figure 3), with one building on high piles on the south (downhill) side of the road. The location of the main complex of buildings is easily identified today, and consists of a series of terraces running alongside the track, covering an area approximately 67m long by a maximum of 15m wide, at three different levels. The stone ruin is located at the eastern end of the terraces, and the site of the main wooden hotel building is kept clear and grassed on the west side of this. The fallen concrete fireplace and chimney from the wooden building are lying beside the stone ruin. The slightly higher western terraces are presently covered in felled trees, and so could not be inspected in any detail, but the NZAA site record form states that the foundation stones for the hotel stable are in this area. The bank behind the hotel site rises steeply, and two large water races cross it 15m and 25m behind the stone ruin.

The Stone Ruin

The stone ruin is in poor condition, but the basic plan and elevations can still be determined with some accuracy (Figures 5-6). The building measures 33 feet 6 inches by 28 feet 6 inches (10.2m by 8.7m), and the walls are nominally 1 foot 7 inches (0.5m) thick. According to measurements made in 2015 the building is not quite square. No walls stand to full height, but based on the remaining evidence the front and side walls originally stood 10 feet 6 inches (3.2m) tall. Old photographs and detailed recording of the structure show that the building had a hipped roof to the front elevation (and the front and side walls were therefore flat-topped), with two gables on the rear wall (Figure 7). This meant that the roof plan was a U-shape, with a centre gully that opened to the rear of the structure. The rear wall presently has a maximum height of 13 feet 9 inches (4.2m), in the area of the east gable.

The building is constructed of mortared schist rubble masonry with cement architraves on the exterior door and window openings. The corners of a stone structure are generally the strongest points, and this has proved to be the case at the Otago Hotel, as the four corners still stand to a reasonable height,

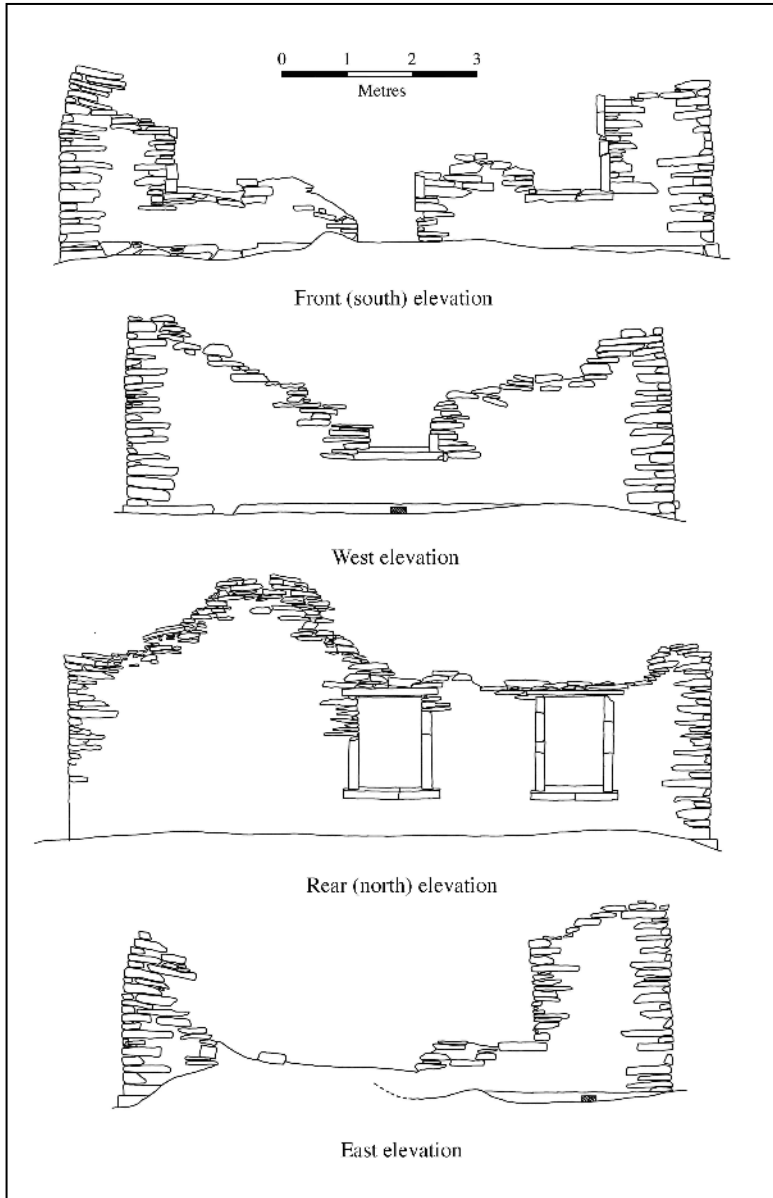


Figure 5: The four main elevations of the ruin as they appear in 2015

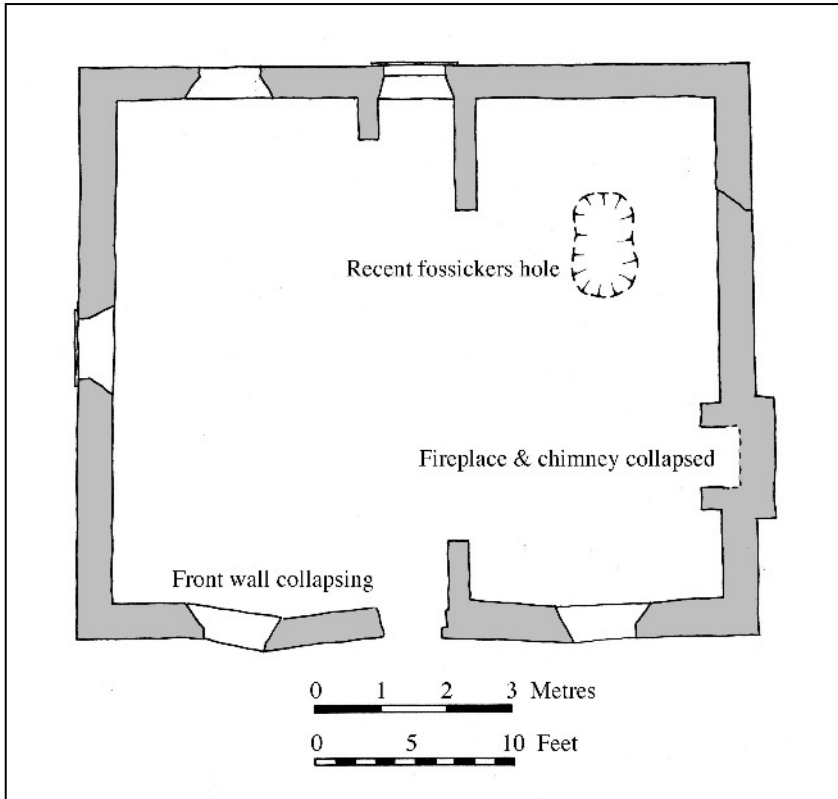


Figure 6: The floor plan of the ruin in 2015

although both front corners have developed a severe inwards lean. The front wall has fared the worst (probably due to its numerous openings and exposure to the weather), and has largely collapsed, and the east end wall is little better, as the collapse of the chimney pulled much of the wall down. The rear wall is best preserved, and is still largely plumb with both windows surviving to their full height.

The front elevation displayed a typical 'Colonial Georgian' symmetry (see Hamel 2001: 132; Salmond 1986: 73), with a central doorway and a window placed on either side. The front door was the only exterior doorway, and was 2 feet 9 inches (0.85m) wide. There was a single window on each end wall, and two windows in the rear wall. One rear window was placed at the end of the central hallway, directly opposite the front door. Based on the evidence of the surviving window openings and hardware all of the windows were probably the same size, approximately 3 feet wide by 4 feet 6 inches tall (0.9m by 1.4m).

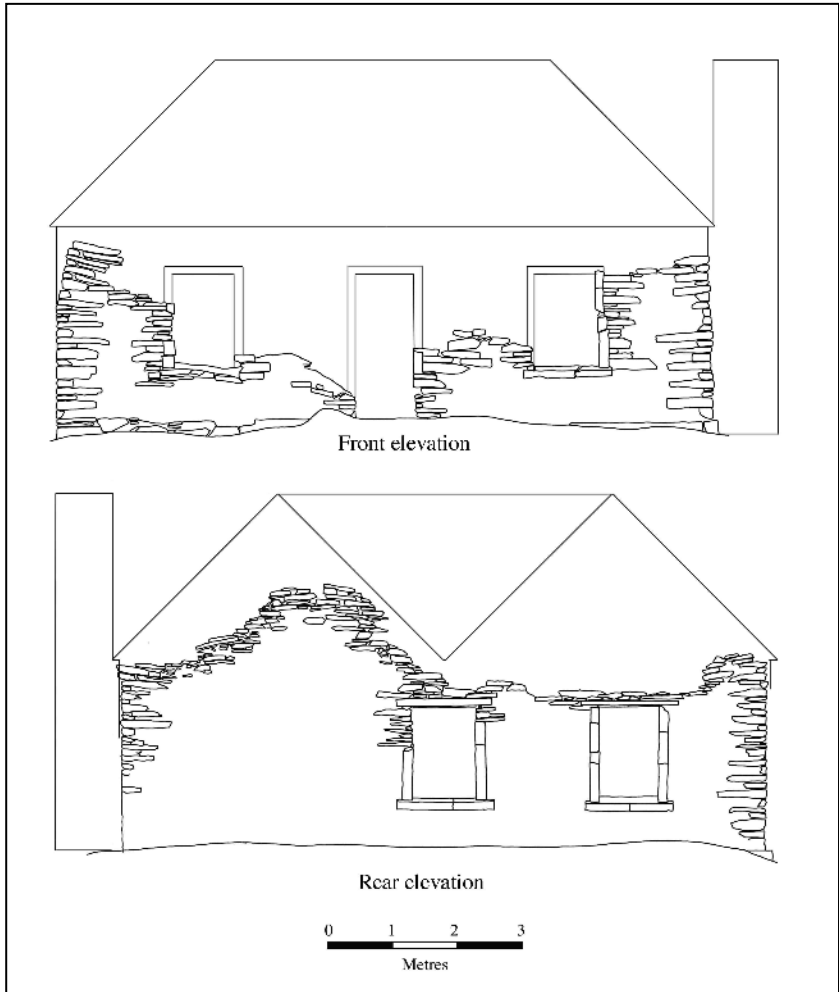


Figure 7: The main front and rear elevations, with the original wall and roof profiles shown

The lintels were timber, and these remain in place in the two rear windows, although both are decayed. One rear window also retains substantial parts of the wooden window frame, which confirms that the building was fitted with sash windows.

The presence of a large stone chimney on the eastern end of the building is known from various historic photographs, but this has largely collapsed. The

base courses of stonework of the fireplace inside the building are visible (allowing accurate location of the fireplace on the site plan), but the remains of the chimney base on the outside wall are presently covered by fallen schist rubble.

Little internal detail of the building survives, other than the wall returns on either side of the central rear window and front door, which indicate that there was a central hallway that ran from front to rear. The return at the far end of the west side of the hallway shows that there was an internal door at this point, which suggests that there was a rear room on that side. The most likely layout, based on the available evidence and the known layout of similar nineteenth century buildings, was that there was a central hall with two rooms on either side. The location of the fireplace was in the front east room. The internal walls were plastered and whitewashed, and one section of this plaster remains intact in the rear wall. Vents let into the base of the main walls suggest that the building had wooden floors (hence the need for underfloor ventilation).

Orchard

The orchard area is a hexagonal shape, bounded by a (mostly-dead) hawthorn hedge, with maximum dimensions of 50m by 42m (Figure 4). The hedge had grown considerably in height since its maintenance stopped (presumably in or before the 1940s), but was still well defined for much of its length until it was killed during the wilding tree spraying operations. In 1987 Paula Smith reported that the orchard contained apples, pears, plums, raspberries and gooseberries (Smith 1987: 21). When the site was surveyed in May 2015 only one tree was showing slight signs of life, but an inspection in mid to late spring would be necessary to accurately ascertain which trees were still alive, and to identify those that do. The entrance to the orchard is still visible, with a pair of gateposts still in place.

Discussion: The Place of the Ruin in the Landscape

The Otago Hotel ruin is one of many historic ruins scattered throughout the Otago goldfields, some of which are within reserves (such as the Otago Hotel itself and the Welshtown ruins (Figure 8)), while many others are on leasehold or private land (for example the Wetherstons Brewery ruins (Petchey *et al.* 2015)). The Otago Hotel represents part of the ‘ghost town’ settlement of Skippers, a product of the Dunstan Rush and the subsequent movement of miners up the Shotover River in late 1862. This event was one of a series of international rushes, of which the most famous preceding events were California (1848-49) and Victoria (1851). The New Zealand gold discoveries created an

economic boom, and for much of the decade until 1871 gold exports constituted more than half of the country's export value (Salmon 1963: 209). The goldfields were a mixing pot of people, and the infrastructure and settlement pattern of the modern landscape was largely formed during the gold mining period. Many small settlements sprang up during the gold rushes, and while most died out again after the gold petered out, some found new lives as rural service centres (for example, Alexandra, Clyde and Cromwell). The settlements that faded have left varying amounts of visible evidence, from the stone ruins at the sites such as Welshtown (Figure 8), Carricktown and Stewart Town (Figure 9), to the yet-to-be identified sites of Chamounix and North Pole (Hall-Jones 2005: 88; McCraw 2007: 164; Petchey 2008). Skippers itself struggled on for 80 years, servicing the remote and shrinking mining and pastoral farming population, before bowing to the inevitable.

Within the vanished Skippers settlement, the Otago Hotel was one of the centres of the local community, along with the nearby Skippers School and (long gone) Skippers Hall and Library building. In many communities the local hotel was the centre of social life (McNeish 1957: 9), and special events, such as the banquet to celebrate the opening of the Skippers Bridge in 1901, were held at the Otago Hotel. In his work on New Zealand's ghost towns, David McGill (1980) features many of the hotels from these places, some of which (such as the Cardrona Hotel) continue to serve their original purpose. It is almost a cliché, but the goldfields hotel is an important cultural icon, and the Otago Hotel ruin is a useful cultural counterpoint to the (ostensibly more respectable) school, and therefore represents an important aspect of the social history of Skippers.

In addition to their historic value, the Central Otago abandoned stone buildings also have a role as picturesque ruins. When visitors photograph the Otago Hotel or Welshtown huts it is not generally their historical significance that is the attraction, but their picturesque qualities. The ruin has a long history in the appreciation of gardens and landscapes, much of which can be traced back to the late eighteenth century and the development of picturesque theory (Gilpin 1792; Hussey 1967; Leach 2000: 98). In this approach, there were three aesthetic ideals: the sublime (vast and terrifying), the beautiful (smooth and gentle) and the picturesque (roughness, with sudden variation, the rustic) (Hussey 1967: 55-60). At Skippers the mountainous setting provides the sublime (Figure 10), the tended green lawns around the homestead and school provide the beautiful (Figure 11), and the gold mining sites, Skippers Bridge and the Otago Hotel ruin arguably provide the picturesque.



Figure 8: Stone ruin at Welshtown, Central Otago



Figure 9: Stone ruin at Stewart Town, Bannockburn, Central Otago



Figure 10: The sublime: the Shotover Valley with the Skippers terraces on the left



Figure 11: The beautiful: the carefully tended Mt Aurum Homestead (left) and Skippers School (right)

In *Essays on Picturesque Beauty* William Gilpin wrote that a piece of Palladian architecture may be elegant, but if introduced into a picture it immediately becomes a formal object, and to give it picturesque beauty it must be partially beaten down and made into a rough ruin (Gilpin 1792: B4). This concept has relevance in New Zealand today because of the earthquakes in Christchurch, and in particular the debate about the future of the ruined Christchurch Cathedral. The descent into ruins of the Central Otago stone buildings was not intentional (in that they were not ‘beaten down’ for aesthetic effect, and neither could they be described as having been Palladian), but it is as ruins that many are now managed by the Department of Conservation, which often involves stabilisation/restoration work to halt their decay. As Harbison (1991: 102) has observed, ‘most ruins have been helped along, arrested, added to, or subtracted from.’ If its decline is not at some point halted, a ruin must inevitably return to the ground.

But a ruin is more than simply an attractive element in the scenery: it can engage with our understanding of the world we inhabit. To quote Harbison (1991: 99) again:

Ruins are ideal: the perceiver’s attitudes count so heavily that one is tempted to say ruins are a way of seeing. Of course they actually exist, but since the eighteenth century they are never just problems of maintenance. Rather, practically any human thing slipping into dereliction, the forecast of ruin, engages our feelings about where we see ourselves in history, early or late, and (in poignant cases) our feelings about how the world will end.

The Otago Hotel ruin symbolises the disappearance of a settlement, Skippers, more than do the nearby Mt Aurum Homestead and Skippers School, both of which are restored and present a sanitised appearance. In this regard, the Otago Hotel is as important as the more complete buildings, as it immediately represents abandonment and decay, and contributes to the *sense of place*. The concept of sense of place involves identifying the attributes that create the distinctiveness of a place, while still allowing for change (Smith 1987: 31). At Skippers, the sense of place involves the combination of grand-scale mountain scenery with small-scale human endeavour, which are the much same qualities that were discussed above with regard to the picturesque: the sublime, the beautiful and the rustic. The Skippers landscape is not simply a cultural landscape because it contains cultural features, but because our appreciation of it is the product of our cultural background.

Conclusions

Historically or architecturally the Otago Hotel at Skippers (along with the other Central Otago ruins) is not necessarily an exceptionally notable structure, although it does inhabit a spectacular setting. It is certainly no English ruined castle or abbey. But it is nevertheless important in this place, and worthy of rescue and stabilisation. It is representative of the local vernacular architecture, as it was built from mud mortared schist in the common ‘Colonial Georgian’ style typical of many modest nineteenth century buildings. But as a ruin it not only has historical and archaeological value, it is also an element within a picturesque landscape that both contains cultural significance and is culturally defined. Its role as a marker of a disappeared settlement is important, and immediately provides even the most historically uninterested visitor with the knowledge that people lived there in the past; this was once a community.

Skippers is once again undergoing change, as the Wakatipu Wilding Conifer Group poison and remove the conifers that have spread vigorously over the past 100 years, and the landscape there will soon be different to that which anyone alive now remembers, but possibly closer to its nineteenth century appearance. The Otago Hotel ruin will be more visible in this new open environment, and hopefully proposed restoration work will ensure it is a permanent feature of this picturesque landscape.



Figure 12: Three quarters of the survey team: (from left) Tristan Russell, Jeremy Moyle, Naomi Woods

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