



NEW ZEALAND
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NEW ZEALAND ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER



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THOMAS LAWRENCE BIRKS, 1910-1985

Laurie Birks was born in Auckland. His family moved several times during his childhood, eventually settling at Kohimarama. He attended Seddon Tech. and then began work as a trainee with an architectural firm. Indoor work did not appeal to him and he went to Matamata to learn bee keeping. During the war, Laurie served overseas from 1941 to 1946, first in North Africa and then in Italy. During this time he was able to indulge his great interest in ancient history, spending every available leave studying ancient Egypt, visiting Palestine, and later Pompeii.

Laurie's interest in history and archaeology was always very strong. When Jack Golson arrived in Auckland in 1953, Laurie was one of a small group of enthusiasts who quickly rallied round him forming the nucleus of what later came to be referred to as Golson's Gang. Laurie was a foundation member of the Auckland University Archaeology Society and took part in early excavations such as Taylors Hill, as well as the later work at Sarah's Gully.

In 1957, Laurie and Helen Birks were married. This was the beginning of a remarkable partnership in archaeology. About a year after their marriage, Laurie retired from the firm of Potter and Birks (manufacturing chemists) to devote more time to archaeology. The following summer saw Laurie and Helen remaining at Sarah's Gully to continue work on the pa after the main season had ended. In the winter of 1959, at Jack Golson's suggestion, they spent several months in Tonga excavating the Mangaia Mound on the outskirts of Nuku'alofa. The next summer they were again at Sarah's Gully, where Laurie directed the final season of work at the pa, and the following year, the first season at Kauri Point, Laurie took responsibility for the very complicated area inside the pa.

Although Laurie had been in charge of fieldwork at Mangaia Mound and Sarah's Pa these excavations had been part of a wider programme of work directed by Jack Golson, and when Jack went to Australia in 1961, he took the material and documentation with him. At this point, Laurie and Helen felt free to devote some time to their other great interest, travel, and spent two and a half years touring Europe in a camper van.

Returning to Auckland they built the home at Orakei which was to be the setting for their greatest archaeological work. Roger Green invited them to excavate in Fiji under the Polynesian prehistory programme organised by Bishop Museum, and

in 1965 and 1966 they excavated the Sigatoka Dune Site and the Yanuca Rock Shelter in southwest Viti Levu. Both sites yielded quantities of pottery, that from Sigatoka offering unusual opportunities for the reconstruction of whole pots. The work on the pottery was extremely time consuming, and was a labour of love of a kind for which few archaeologists have sufficient dedication.

In 1973, Laurie's monograph on the Sigatoka site was published, and for a while he returned to paid employment, finally retiring three years later to Karekare. Although still a member of the Auckland Archaeological Society, he no longer took an active part in archaeology. He and Helen continued to travel widely, visiting England and Europe, China, Japan and North America. Laurie's interest in ancient history remained as strong as ever.

Laurie was a modest and retiring man, who thought deeply and said little. He was a very able excavator, as skilled with a ladies spade as with a trowel. His early architectural training stood him in good stead and his plans and section drawings were meticulous and detailed. He was thorough and careful in everything he did. His greatest contribution to Pacific prehistory was his Fijian work, but his excavations at Sarah's Pa and the Mangaia Mound should not be forgotten. He will be remembered with affection and admiration by those who knew him and those who were fortunate enough to dig with him as someone who carried out really valuable archaeological work without any fuss or self assertion whatever.

Janet Davidson

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