

**ARCHAEOLOGICAL MONITORING AT  
T11/62, THE TAIRUA SITE**

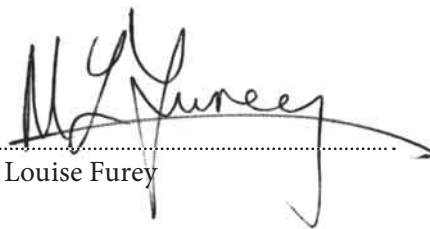
**REPORT TO  
THE NEW ZEALAND HISTORIC PLACES TRUST  
AND  
THAMES-COROMANDEL DISTRICT COUNCIL**

**LOUISE FUREY**


# ARCHAEOLOGICAL MONITORING AT T11/62, THE TAIRUA SITE

REPORT TO  
THE NEW ZEALAND HISTORIC PLACES TRUST  
AND  
THAMES-COROMANDEL DISTRICT COUNCIL

Prepared by:

  
.....  
Louise Furey

Reviewed by:

  
.....  
Matthew Campbell

Date: 11 September 2009

Reference: 2009/14

© CFG Heritage Ltd. 2009

---

**CFG**  
HERITAGE

CFG Heritage Ltd.  
P.O. Box 10 015  
Dominion Road  
Auckland 1024  
ph. (09) 309 2426  
louise.f@cfgheritage.com

# ARCHAEOLOGICAL MONITORING AT T11/62, THE TAIRUA SITE

LOUISE FUREY

On 9 January 2009 I monitored the digging of postholes at T11/62, known as the Tairua site, in a reserve managed by Thames-Coromandel District Council. Wooden bollards were put in to form a barrier to pedestrians at the top of the slope above the eroding archaeological site. The work was carried out under authority 2009/12 issued by the New Zealand Historic Places Trust under section 14 of the Historic Places Act 1993. The erosion was identified during the 2006 Coromandel Coastal Survey carried out by Historic Places Trust, and caused by a rope swing on a limb of the pohutukawa, and by pedestrians traversing the slope to access the foreshore. Lupins, gorse and grasses cover the slope to the foreshore but shell midden was exposed in various places (Figure 1).

Thames-Coromandel District Council employee Lou Mackwell removed the rope swing and organised for a barrier to be constructed along the top of the slope to deter pedestrian access. The barrier, constructed of wooden posts with rope inbetween, was extended to north and south of an existing fence of similar materials which encloses the sacred pohutukawa "Tutuaki" which is also on the archaeological site.

## Site history

The Tairua site was eroding in 1959 when Roger Green, of the Anthropology Department, University of Auckland, conducted a small excavation to the north of the tree (Figures 2 and 3). There were two cultural layers separated by sand. The upper layer was about 5 ft from the top of the dune profile at that time, and the lower, earlier layer 12 ft (Smart and Green 1962). The earlier layer contained basalt flakes from Tahanga, at Opito, and obsidian from Mayor Island, small scoop ovens, and the remains of moa and small birds, and sea mammals. Shellfish in the lower layer were primarily species gathered from the rocky shore such as limpet, mussel, paua and cats eye, while pipi and cockle characterised the upper layer.

The excavations were extended in 1964. More similar material was recovered, but significantly a small fishing lure shank was also found (Figure 4). This item (now in Auckland Museum) was of pearl shell which does not grow in New Zealand waters, and must therefore have been imported with

1 (top). Shell midden exposed to the south of the tree, which is to the left in the photo. The damage to the dune face was caused by a pedestrian track. Photo taken June 2007.

2 (bottom).

Photograph showing the eroding dune prior to the 1959 excavations. The upper layer is about half way through the depth of the dune and shows as a horizontal dark-coloured line. (Anthropology Photoarchive, University of Auckland)





3 (top). Photograph of pohutukawa and earthworks associated with the archaeological excavations in 1959. Note the excavation area immediately to the north of the tree. (Anthropology Photoarchive, University of Auckland).

4 (bottom). Pearl shell trolling lure shank from T11/62. The hook was attached on the broad surface at the right end and the lashing held firm by the grooves in the sides. (Anthropology Photoarchive, University of Auckland).

lower part of the site, based on the small area excavated, has been interpreted as a hunting camp occupied for only a short period of time.

The upper shell layer was much less varied. It had some internal stratigraphy but no features such as postholes or ovens, nor did it have stone flakes or general living debris. It was interpreted as a shell rubbish dump. It has been dated to the mid-17th to late 18th century.

### Monitoring

The holes for the posts were hand dug, 300 x 300 mm, and 600–800 mm deep. The holes were 2 m apart, about 6 m distance from the trunk of the pohutukawa, and 1 m back from the slope edge (Figures 5–7). A total of 16 holes (referred to here as test pits 1–16, running north to south) were dug, extending the bollard line to the south beyond the visible site deposits.

A description of the stratigraphy of each hole is given in Appendix A. The holes did not penetrate into the earlier, lower layer. Instead the northern holes cut through the later shell midden identified during the 1959 excavations.

Test pits 3–5 are in the vicinity of the 1959 excavation carried out by Roger Green (Smart and Green 1962). The basalt flakes uncovered in test pit 5 are likely to be in a disturbed context, and are above shell midden which could only have come from the later occupation layer.

The stratigraphy or layering in the test pits shows that the area to the north of the tree has a sand and clay capping, which probably coincides with the loca-

the tropical Polynesian settlers. This find caused great interest, and is the only item of Polynesian origin found in a New Zealand archaeological site (Green 1967).

The initial radiocarbon dating proved inconclusive and gave variable results, and it is thought that some of the samples submitted for dating were old wood – either heartwood of old trees, or driftwood which had been on the foreshore for some time – which accounted for lack of consistency in the results. Radiocarbon dating dates the time that the organism (plant or shellfish) lived, so old driftwood, or the heartwood of a living tree could give a result several hundred years older than the time it was burnt in an oven. Redating of shell from the site indicated it was occupied in the early-to-mid 1400s (Schmidt and Higham 1998). The site was not occupied for the entire period covered by the date, rather converting a radiocarbon result to calendrical years gives a statistical probability that the occupation occurred within the defined period of time, even though the actual time may have been quite short.

The lower layer of this site was certainly not occupied by first generation Polynesian settlers, and there are other sites on the Coromandel Peninsula which might have been occupied 50–100 years earlier. This

tion of the archaeological excavation. Test pits 11–16 at the southern end of the fence appear to have disturbed stratigraphy, and no shell at all occurs in test pits 13 and 15.

The shell layer was encountered at between 100 and 400 mm in depth below the surface. This is considerably shallower than the depth of the layer in 1959, and it is apparent from photographs that the top of the dune has been removed. The Maori occupation surface would have followed the contour of the dune which also accounts for the variable depth of the shell.

No evidence of the early occupation layer was seen in the test pits, almost certainly because the postholes did not reach that depth. The fence should help to prevent further damage to the dune, and neighbours are aware of the importance of the site and the need to keep off the slope. Public awareness of this site is high, and when the bollards were being put in, several local people approached and told us of the significance of the site. This is heritage protection at grass roots level working in a most effective way.

## References

- Green, R.C. 1967. Sources of New Zealand's East Polynesian Culture: the evidence of a pearl shell lure shank. *Archaeology and Physical Anthropology in Oceania*, 2(2): 81–90.
- Schmidt, M. and T. Higham 1998. Sources of New Zealand's East Polynesian culture revisited: the radiocarbon chronology of the Tairua archaeological site, New Zealand. *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, 107: 395–403.
- Smart, C. and R. Green 1962. A stratified dune site at Tairua, Coromandel. *Dominion Museum Records in Ethnology*, 1(7): 243–266.



5 (top). Same location as Figure 3 taken in 2008. The excavated area was to the left of the tree. The bollards have been extended north as far as the denser vegetation on the slope. Note that the highest part of the dune visible in 1959 is no longer present.

6 (centre). Holes being dug in front, and to the south of the pohutukawa tree, January 2009.

7 (bottom). The completed fence. The test pit numbers, in order from nearest: TP1–14 (the most distant post).

## APPENDIX 1 TEST PIT DESCRIPTIONS

<i>Test pit 1</i>		<i>Test pit 5</i>	
0–280 mm	Sand, road metal and clay capping under turf	0–300 mm	Sterile sand overburden
280–340 mm	Grey sand	300–600+ mm	Grey-brown sand, cockle and pipi. (layer continues deeper than 600 mm)
340–380 mm	Shell in dark grey sand lens		
380–600+	Mixed grey-brown sand to the depth of the hole. Lots of pohutukawa roots.	<i>Test pit 6</i>	
		0–150 mm	Sand
<i>Test pit 2</i>		150–350	Sand, road metal and clay capping
0–200 mm	Sand, road metal and clay capping under turf	350–600+	Mixed dark grey-brown sand with shell to the base of the whole. Some of the shell is burnt.
200–460 mm	Shell and sand. Cockle and pipi. Slightly darker lens 50 mm thick at the base	<i>Test pit 7</i>	
460–600+	Sterile sand	0–200 mm	Sand
<i>Test pit 3</i>		200–500 mm	Shell (small cockle and pipi) in a dark grey matrix, possibly redeposited.
0–240 mm	Clay and road metal under turf	500–760	Dark grey matrix
240–430 mm	Mixed sand, including pale coloured and brown	760–	Sterile sand
430–690 mm	Dark grey-brown sand with shell in top 70 mm and basalt flakes	<i>Test pit 8</i>	
690 –+	Sterile sand	0–100 mm	Sand
<i>Test pit 4</i>		100–300 mm	Shell, cockle and pipi
0–300 mm	Sterile sand overburden	300–800 mm	Mixed brown, grey-brown and grey.
300–430 mm	Grey-brown sand, no shell	800+ mm	Small shell, cockle and pipi
430–550 mm	Shell in dark grey sand. Cockle and pipi	<i>Test pit 9</i>	
550–600+ mm	Pale light grey-brown sand continues	0–100 mm	Sand
		100–125 mm	Mixed sand with roots throughout
		125–130 mm	Shell lens
		130–250 mm	Sand

250–320 mm Shell lens in a dark  
grey matrix (some  
shell burnt)

320–520 mm Sand

*Test pit 10*

0–650 mm Mixed sand, grey-  
brown sand matrix  
and shell (small cockle  
and pipi)

650+ mm Sterile sand

*Test pit 11*

0–500 mm Shell in a mixed grey  
sand matrix

500–670+ Dark grey-brown sand  
(?disturbed)

*Test pit 12*

0–220 mm Sand with lumps of  
clay incorporated

220–700 mm Mixed grey-brown/  
grey sand, cockle and  
pipi shell at base

*Test pit 13*

0–850 mm Sand

*Test pit 14*

0–580 mm Sand and clay

580–800 mm Sand, with shell at base

*Test pit 15*

0–300 mm Sand

300–500 mm Dark sand

500–800 mm Light coloured sand

*Test pit 16*

0–400 mm Sand and clay capping

400–650 mm Sterile sand

650–800 mm Sparse shell in grey  
sand