

Cultural significance of Tiwai Point

Tiwai Point was the site of industrial activity long before the smelter was built.

Māori first inhabited Tiwai Point from around 1300, with peak occupation from 1400 to the mid 1600s. Pre-colonisation, Māori occupation of Tiwai Point lasted approximately 450 years in total.

What made Tiwai Point special to Māori was the stone (argillite) - perfect for making adzes. Adzes made from Southland argillite were used for moa hunting, sealing, the hunting of smaller birds, and fishing.

The significance of Tiwai as a key cultural site wasn't 'discovered' until 1968. Archaeologists were keen to learn as much about the site as they could before extensive earthworks would begin for smelter construction. What they found was a sophisticated adze 'workshop', for large-scale adze production. An important feature of this site was the presence of large ovens used for the heat treatment of rocks.

“... the bulk of the adze found are in the rough-shaping stage, indicating a well organised, highly skilled workshop on the site of the raw material – (a type of argillite).” 1967-68 Southland Museum Annual Report.

About 3,000 artefacts of archaeological significance were removed from this site, to be stored at the Southland Museum.

Today what artefacts remain are at risk from coastal erosion and contamination from smelter activities. A significant part of Aotearoa's cultural history is at risk of being lost.



Tiwai Point black argillite.
Source: Jennings, C. 2009. Southland Argillite in Prehistory.



Cultural importance

The ICC District Plan identifies a number of areas of particular cultural importance at Tiwai Point. Parts of the smelter sub area contain both a Wahi Taoka site and an area identified as a Waahi Tapu.

The area identified as a Waahi Tapu is located on the western extremity of Tiwai Peninsula and covers most of Tiwai Point, while the location of the Wahi Taoka* site is located to the east of this Waahi Tapu area.

Māori would have landed on the sandy beach on the seaward side of Tiwai Point to avoid the strong tidal rip at the entrance of Bluff Harbour. This was known as 'Tapu Beach' as it was once used as a burial ground, and therefore deemed tapu.

*Wahi Taoka means all resources that sustain life. Wahi taoka is spiritually, culturally, physically and historically important to Kai Tahu. In some cases there will be similarities to Waahi Tapu.



The grave of Alex Dunlop.
Source: ICC Environmental Reserves Omnibus Management Plan 2021

European arrival

The first European to purchase land at Tiwai was the whaler, Captain James Joss. In 1838, he paid forty pounds to Māori for 2000 acres on the seaward side of the point. Joss was a whaler, and this location was strategically purchased for the hauling of whales.

The first settler at Tiwai was an American, John Davis who settled in the lee of the hill on the point in about 1838. John Davis died from a fatal injury while cutting a flagstaff to celebrate Independence Day. He was buried on the top of a little hill near his hut known as 'Johnny's Hill'. 'Johnny's Hill' was demolished during site preparation for the Tiwai Smelter.

In 1858 Captain Elle declared a quarantine station for vessels in the northern channel of the harbour.

By the 1860s the immigrant vessels began to arrive. A number of passengers on the 'Sir William Eyre' had died en route from an epidemic of scarlet fever and it appears that there are at least three bodies buried at what is now the Tiwai Point Reserve:

- William Baird 1863 (arrived Bluff April 1863 and survived the six months voyage only to die of pleurisy on arrival in 1863).
- Mrs Gordon 1863 (arrived Bluff April 1863 on the 'Sir William Eyre'. Died of Dysentery).
- Alex Dunlop 1863 (arrived Bluff August 1863 on the 'New Great Britain'. Fatally injured. Grave marked with wrought iron fence).

Following a worldwide outbreak of the bubonic plague, a quarantine hospital was erected at Tiwai Point in 1900 close to the site of Davis's Hut. A jetty was constructed on the harbour side of the Point to gain access to the hospital. A shed for fumigating the mail was erected at the foot of the jetty and remains of both of these can be seen today.

Captain William Stirling

William Stirling was born in Brookland, Kent in 1810 and came to New Zealand in 1834. In 1836 he established the Bluff whaling station for Johnny Jones - a pioneer merchant who had a controlling interest in most southern New Zealand whaling stations at the time.

Captain William Stirling died at Tiwai Point in 1851, after a year of self-imposed exile on discovering he had tuberculosis.

William Stirling lay undisturbed on the quiet Tiwai Point for over a century until in 1968 the burial site was disturbed during excavations for the aluminium smelter buildings. The remains were blessed and reinterred in October 1975 by Archdeacon WSL Harbour with descendants of Captain Stirling's family present.

The Southland Girl Guide contingent planted trees at Tiwai Point March 1992 to enhance the landscape where he lies.



The grave of Captain William Stirling.
Source: ICC Environmental Reserves Omnibus Management Plan 2021