

# Tiwai Peninsula

preliminary cultural significance report

Photo credit: New Zealand's Aluminium Smelter (NZAS)



**Murihiku**  
**Regeneration**

January 2021

## Appendix E - 1969 – Tiwai Point expedition by E. Freeborn



NEW ZEALAND  
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**NEW ZEALAND ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER**



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TIWAI POINT EXPEDITION

E. Freeborn

(Reprinted from Canterbury Museum Archaeological Society  
Newsletter, No. 16, September 1968.)

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Little did I think that my attendance from August 3rd-16th 1968 would entail so much excitement and adventure as it did.

At Invercargill we were met by our leader, Stuart Park, Assistant Anthropologist at the Otago Museum, waving a printed placard, "TIWAI POINT EXCAVATIONS". Before leaving for Bluff we were taken to the Southland Museum where we were welcomed by Mr McKenzie, the Curator, who showed us artefacts already collected from Tiwai Point. The sight of so many interesting finds whetted our enthusiasm. We arrived at Bluff and were pleasantly surprized to find such a comfortable house with modern conveniences made available by the Harbour Board. Four wooden chairs, two trestle tables, and a plank of wood on apple boxes was our only furniture, the rest of the floor space being taken up by sleeping bags. After a hot supper for the travellers, we had a team talk from Stuart Park.

The official start of the dig was to be on Monday, the 5th, with a site survey party crossing to the Point by jet boat on the Sunday. Storm warnings and seas too rough for the jet boat caused our trip to the Point to be cancelled. We spent the morning sorting gear, helping the cook, and joining in a sing-song led by Ron and accompanied by a tin can band.

After lunch, the team divided into two parties. Brian, Margaret and others were to go to Green Hills to see a reported Moa Hunter site, whilst Stuart, Ron, Graeme, Kevin, Greg and myself went through Riverton to Colac Bay to see an excavated Moa Hunter site near cliffs of argillite. The weather was threatening but calm with no rain. When we returned to Bluff, we found the other party had got lost in swamps, been drenched with rain, and had not found their site.

On Monday we went down to the Island Harbour at 8.30 a.m. to board the pilot launch, but stormy weather delayed the start with the possibility of the trip being off, but later the skipper decided to take

the risk. The crossing was very rough with seas coming aboard and the gear sliding all over the deck. After a very difficult landing, we staggered under loads of gear to a tiny hut near the end of the jetty, approximately 6ft square, where we eighteen people took shelter from a full gale of rain and sleet. An hour later Stuart called for volunteers to carry two 10 x 10ft tents to the site, about a mile's walk along the beach. An overland route would have been shorter but was impossible because of swamps, matagouri and thick, chest-high reeds. One and a half hours later we all arrived at the tent site where we were very pleased to shelter from the weather. While we rested our lunch was prepared. A gas burner heated the oxtail soup, and we had sandwiches, cake, fruit, and coffee. The first job was to collect beach gravel in buckets (and were they heavy?!!) to spread on the tent floors to stop puddling them into a bog. The beach was strewn with driftwood. Boxes and planks were collected for seating accommodation. As the rain had now eased off, we went to the dig site and commenced preparing squares of two metres, one square per person. The trowelling was good, the ground being a mixture of sand and pea gravel. The recordings were made according to layer depth, and, except for test holes, two feet and less would be the average depth excavated. The site was strewn with argillite flakes, tiny to very large, with some obsidian, quartzite and rock crystal. Among the more interesting finds were several adzes of various types, polished, broken and roughouts. There was very little flint or bone. There were several well-defined hearths, but no shell, and a small scatter of charcoal.

Our first day was destined to be a terrific experience. The storm increased to a 50 m.p.h. gale, with thunder and lightning. Work was abandoned to fight our way back to the jetty to meet the launch at 4.30 p.m. The launch was seen coming across the harbour, disappearing in the trough of huge waves, but it was unable to approach the jetty. It gave a toot and returned to Bluff, leaving us stranded. Three Comalco surveyors working in the area were in contact by radio-telephone with Bluff, and they told us the launch would try again next high tide if the storm abated. The surveyors decided to rescue the six women. We were taken, two at a time, by tractor, across swamps to a Land Rover, and thence to Invercargill and Bluff, the journey taking nearly three hours over very rough, swampy ground and several miles of beach flats. The male members of the team left sheltering in the hut were picked up by the launch five hours later.

Just before I left, a second site about one hundred yards inland from the first site was surveyed and started. These squares were one metre sides. Oven material lay on the surface or just under the short grass. Several sections of moa toe bones, shells of various types, and argillite flakes were uncovered within a concentrated, greasy charcoal layer.

On the second Sunday of my stay we were taken to the top of Bluff Hill. It was a beautiful, calm, sunny day, and the view was magnificent. Tiwai Point lay before us, a great flat sprawling brown mass. The air was so clear that even the green tops of our tents, almost hidden in the scrub, could be seen.

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#### TIWAI POINT - A PRELIMINARY REPORT

G. S. Park,  
Otago Museum.

Tiwai Point is situated at the end of a long, sandy tussock and scrub covered peninsula, which stretches for eight miles between Awarua Bay and Foveaux Straits (Fig. 1). A channel some half a mile wide separates it from Bluff. The peninsula is comprised mostly of marine gravels and sand, but at the point there are a number of volcanic and metamorphic rock outcrops which are related to the Bluff series. Amongst these are several seams of fine grained black argillite, and a low hill of grey-green, coarser argillite.

Tiwai Point is the site chosen for the Comalco Aluminium Smelter. Several people with archaeological interests have surveyed the peninsula since this became known in 1961, but failed to find any stratified deposits beyond a few eroded ovens.

In April 1968, however, it became obvious that there was an extensive area of stone working, and possible habitation. Southland Museum requested that the Otago Anthropological Society should undertake excavations on its behalf. These excavations lasted nine weeks, in three "seasons" in May, August, and November/December 1968.

The area chosen for excavation was a flat, relatively sheltered area situated between the Awarua Bay and the swampy freshwater lagoon, adjacent to the hill of argillite, about  $1\frac{1}{2}$  miles from the point itself.