

Evidence of the Working of Greenstone by Taranaki Maori Prisoners in the Dunedin Gaol

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ABSTRACT

During 2001 archaeological investigations were carried out at the Dunedin Law Courts during a restoration and redevelopment project of the historic building complex. The Courts were built in 1900 on the site of the former Dunedin Gaol, where a number of Maori prisoners from Taranaki had been held in 1869–1873 and 1879–1881. In 1891 Judge F.R. Chapman published an account that related how some of these prisoners had worked greenstone in the gaol to make artefacts for sale, and the 2001 archaeological excavation found a small tab of sawn greenstone in one corner of the old exercise yard. The role of these prisoners in building various civil engineering works in Dunedin, including some of the harbour walls, has been well documented, but this small piece of greenstone is tangible evidence of their life within the gaol walls in the 1870s.

Keywords: Gaol, jail, greenstone, pounamu, Parihaka, Dunedin

INTRODUCTION

At various times between 1869 and 1881 several groups of Maori political prisoners from Taranaki were held in Dunedin, where they lived in the Dunedin Gaol and laboured on public works around the town. They are probably best remembered for their work on the harbour walls and Andersons Bay causeway, and for the oft-repeated but largely discredited stories that they were at times imprisoned in the caves in Andersons Bay (*Otago Daily Times* 31/12/2011, 13/8/2012). Their actual home, the gaol, stood from 1855 until 1899 on the site now occupied by the Dunedin Law Courts on Lower Stuart Street (Figures 1 & 2). The archaeological site of the gaol is recorded as I44/324 in the New Zealand Archaeological Association Site Recording Scheme. In 2001 an archaeological excavation was carried out on part of this site during a major restoration and redevelopment of the Law Courts building, and this investigation found extensive evidence of the old gaol foundations and part of the old exercise yard (Petchey 2002a). Trodden into the surface of the yard at the foot of a stone retaining wall was a small piece of sawn greenstone (pounamu). Greenstone was (and is) a stone of particular significance to Maori, and was much used to make tools, weapons and ornaments, especially in the later prehistoric period (Beck & Mason 2002: 77, 83–94; Kai Tahu ki Otago 2002: 88; Trotter & McCulloch 1997: 86–87). It

was particularly valued because it is hard and tough and is an attractive green colour, and European collectors found it equally appealing which created a ready market for greenstone artefacts (both old and newly manufactured) in the historic period (Beck & Mason 2002: 95). This paper describes the historical and archaeological context of the greenstone fragment from the Dunedin Gaol, and its possible links with the Taranaki Maori prisoners and their life in Dunedin.

HISTORY OF THE DUNEDIN GAOL SITE

Dunedin's first gaol was erected in September 1848 at the foot of Bell Hill, where the Law Courts Hotel now stands. It was a small timber structure, probably initially built from manuka saplings, and later covered with weatherboards to improve security (Reinsborg 1987: 12–13; Martin 1998: 7). In 1855 the building was destroyed by fire, and in order to replace it the Superintendent of Otago, James Macandrew, offered to sell to the Otago Provincial Council the nearby Immigration Barracks as a new prison building. His offer was accepted, and the buildings were fitted out to suit their new purpose. The land on which the gaol stood was vested in the Superintendent of Otago and his successors as Reserve No. 3, site for a public gaol, in June 1858 (*Otago Provincial Council, Votes & Proceedings*, Session XII, 1861; Reinsborg 1987: 48–49; Martin 1998: 8). The new gaol was located on what was then the foreshore (reclamation has since moved the shoreline over 400 metres away), and at high tide the water came up to the building (Figure 3).

For many years the Gaoler's reports decried the state and layout of the gaol buildings, which were added to in-

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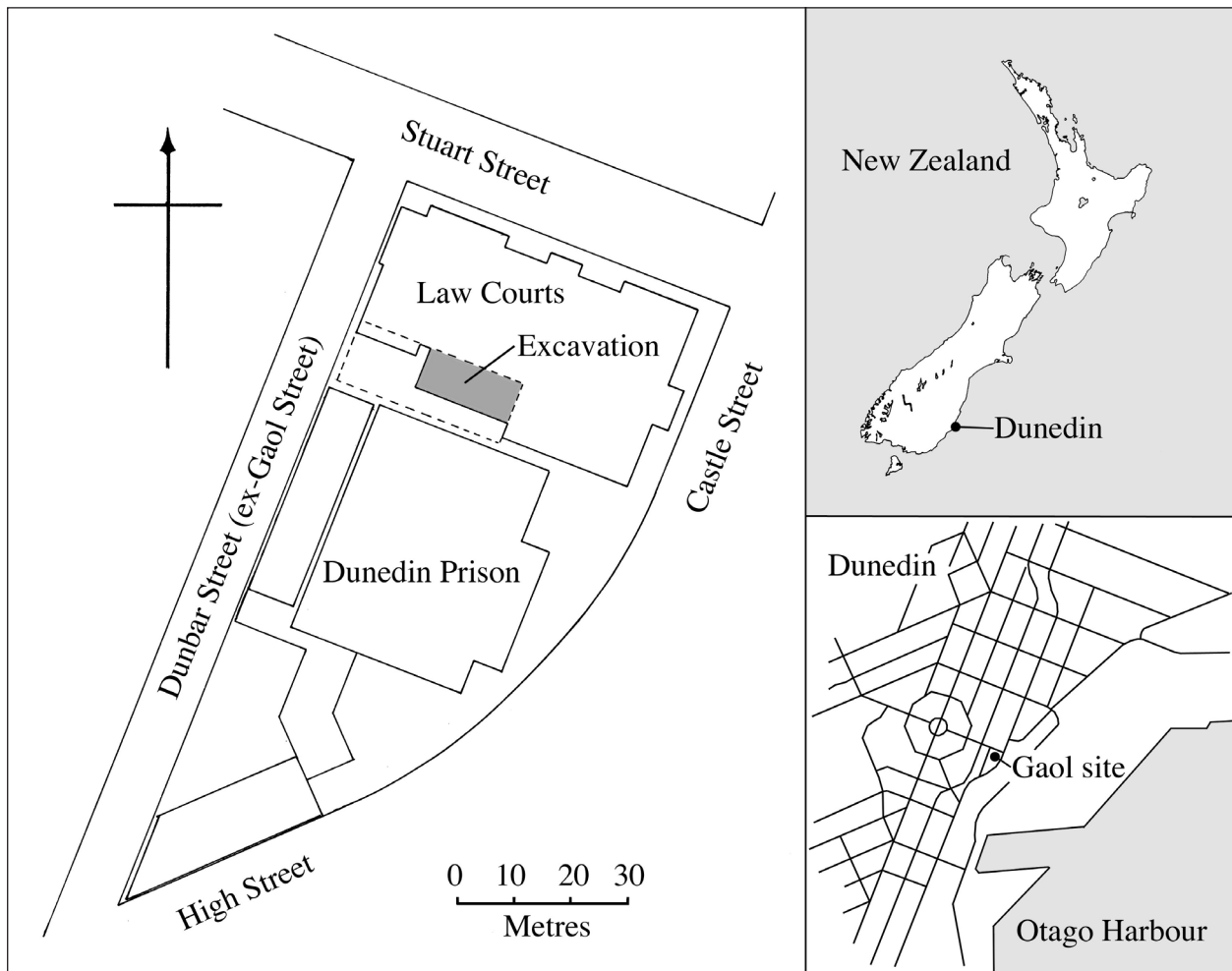


Figure 1. The location of the Dunedin Gaol excavation.



Figure 2. The Dunedin Law Courts building in Lower Stuart Street, which occupies the site of the old Dunedin Gaol.

crementally over time. The Gaol was damp and cold, as it was situated right on the shoreline, and the exercise yard

was awash in wet weather (Trotter 2002: 27). Substantial additions were made in 1860, 1862 and 1863, leading to the somewhat jumbled layout of the complex (Figure 4). Despite the additions the old gaol was still inadequate, and in 1892 the Government Architect J.J. Campbell drew up plans for a new prison based on the Old Scotland Yard building in London (Martin 1998:19). Work on the new structure, located beside the old gaol, began in January 1895 and was completed in May 1898. The demolition of the now redundant old gaol started in May 1899, and involved the exhumation of three executed prisoners who had been buried in the grounds (Martin 1998:39). On the site of the old gaol a new courthouse was built, which opened in 1902 (Bowman 2000:8). This building still occupies the site.

THE TARANAKI MAORI PRISONERS

The number of prisoners held in the gaol at any one time varied; for example in 1871 the range was from 155 to 191 (*Otago Provincial Council, Votes & Proceedings, Session*

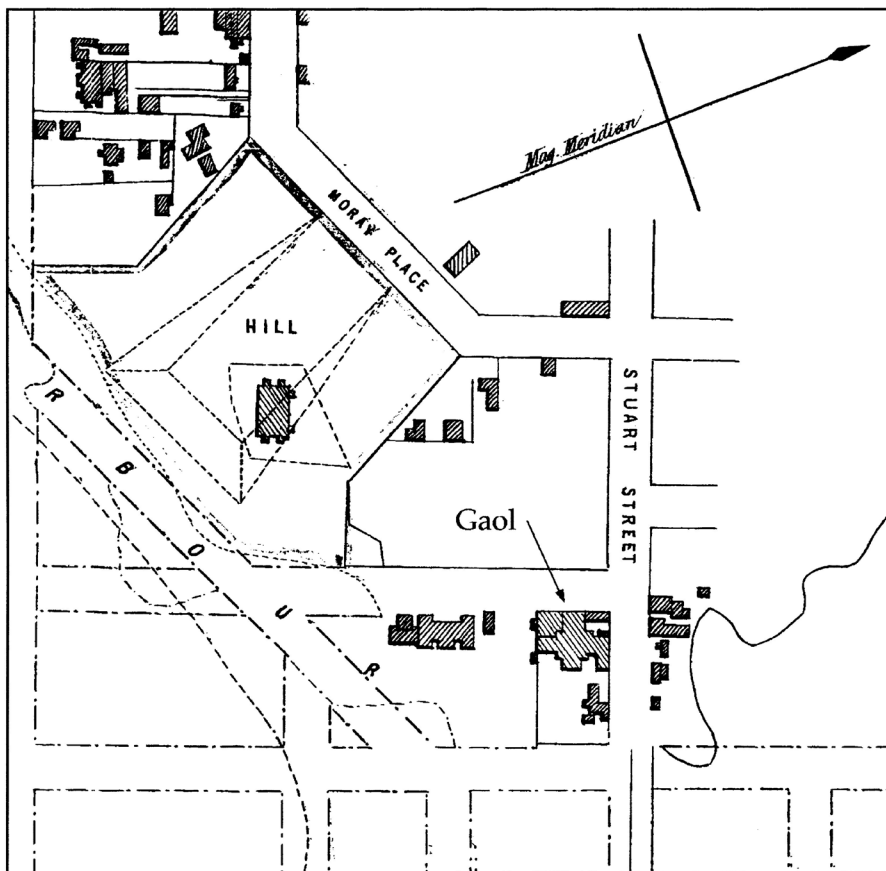


Figure 3. Annotated detail of 1863 map of Otago Harbour reclamations, showing the goal buildings (*Otago Provincial Council, Votes & Proceedings, 1863*).

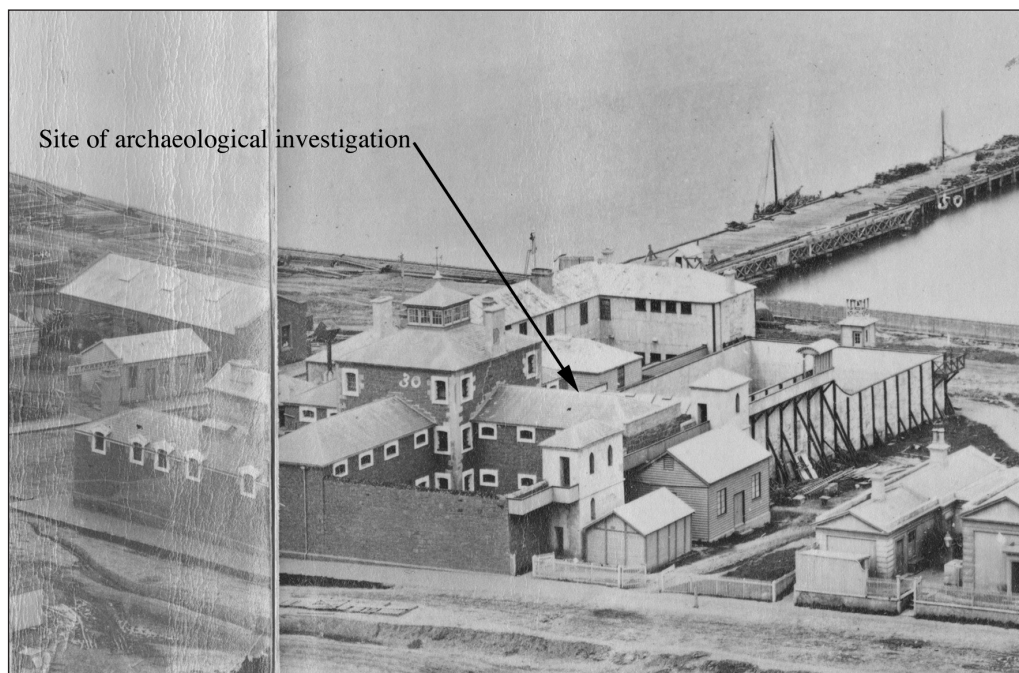


Figure 4. Annotated detail of part of 1874 Burton Bros. panorama of Dunedin taken from the First Church (with permission, Hocken Archives).

xxix, 1871). In the context of this paper, the most significant groups of prisoners were the Maori who were associated with various land disputes around Taranaki. In November 1869 the Pakakohe group of 74 men arrived in Dunedin, having been sentenced to penal servitude for high treason, 12 of them to seven years and 62 to three years imprisonment. The gaoler, James Caldwell, commented soon after their arrival that ‘they are well-behaved, industrious, and strongly attached to their chief, Rihare Watone Ngawakataurua, who wields a paramount influence over them’ (*Otago Provincial Council, Votes & Proceedings*, Session xxvii, 1870).

The Maori prisoners suffered quite a high mortality rate, five having died by April 1870, and by the time they were released in March 1871 a total of 18 men had died (*Otago Provincial Council, Votes & Proceedings*, Session xxvii, 1870; Session xxx, 1872). In all cases the inquest returned the verdict of ‘death by natural causes,’ a number of the Maori apparently being elderly or infirm. The cold and damp conditions inside the gaol no doubt exacerbated the health problems suffered by the prisoners who were used to a warmer northern climate.

In August 1871 five Maori prisoners, also charged with High Treason, were received from the East Coast of the North Island (*Otago Provincial Council, Votes & Proceedings*, Session xxx, 1872). These were released by 1873 (*Otago Provincial Council, Votes & Proceedings*, Session xxxii, 1873).

In 1879 another cohort of Maori prisoners arrived in Dunedin, these being the ‘Taranaki ploughmen’ who had been arrested at Parihaka and were followers of Te Whiti o Rongomai and Tohu Kakahi. A group of 46 men arrived in August 1879, followed by a further 91 men in January 1880 (Reeves 1989: 40, 42; 1999: 126, 127). They were released in 1881.

Life in the Dunedin Gaol

What was life like inside the gaol for the Taranaki Maori? Reeves (1999: 132) has commented that the conditions that they lived in are difficult to assess, and that written and oral sources differ markedly. However, in many ways their experiences would have been much the same as for most prisoners there, and some aspects of this life are well documented.

In the second half of the nineteenth century productive labour was expected of prisoners, both as a means of rehabilitation and of punishment. A sentence of ‘hard labour’ meant just that. In Dunedin the gaol was also run for a number of years at a profit, the value of the prisoners’ labour being balanced against the cost of their keep. James Caldwell, the gaoler from 1867 until 1882, was a particular advocate of the value of prisoners’ work, and commented in 1868 on the need to ‘render the labor [sic] of the prisoners to the utmost extent reproductive to the Province which is burthened with their maintenance’ (*Otago Pro-*

vincial Council, Votes & Proceedings, Session xxiv, 1868).

In the same report, Caldwell set out the following description of the daily routine inside the Dunedin Gaol:

The following is the daily routine in this Gaol for the winter months- it varies with the season as the days shorten or lengthen:—Rouse-bell, 6.15; unlocking and washing, 6.30; prayers at 7; breakfast at 7.10; muster for labour at 7.50; dinner at 12; muster for labour, 12.50; return from labour at 4; supper at 4.15; prayers at 4.50; lock up at 5; and silence-bell at 8, when perfect silence must be observed. On Sundays muster for Divine Service at 9 and 3. Grace is said and thanks returned at all meals. Such is prison life in this gaol.

The men who went out to work from the gaol supplied labour for many construction projects around Dunedin. An idea of the nature of this work is given in a list setting out the value of prison labour included in the 1866 Gaol Report (*Otago Provincial Council, Votes & Proceedings*, Session xxii, 1866):

Removing Bell Hill
Dredging at Rattray Street Jetty
Material supplied, and work done for New Hospital
Material supplied to Road Department
Clothing supplied to Provincial Storekeeper
Boots supplied to Hospital Department
Boots supplied to Lunatic Asylum
Labour of Tailors & Shoemakers

One of the largest tasks undertaken by prison labour was the removal of Bell Hill. For over ten years from 1863 prisoners were used for the quarrying of this landmark, the stone being used for building and harbour reclamation (*Otago Provincial Council, Votes & Proceedings*, Sessions xvii, xxi). It is locally well known that the Taranaki Maori prisoners worked on the harbour walls and the Andersons Bay causeway, and their work is also commemorated by the name of Maori Road, which they helped construct (Martin 1998: 89; Reeves 1989: 13; 1999: 128).

In their own time, one of the activities of the Maori prisoners while they were incarcerated was to work greenstone, as described by a visitor to the Gaol, Judge F.R. Chapman (1891: 497):

When the political prisoners were down here (at Dunedin) two years ago, I saw more than a hundred men cutting greenstone in a most systematic way. These people worked in companies. They had a gridiron-like apparatus made of fencing wire, having each ten or fewer bars. This apparatus was worked backwards and forwards with a sawing movement between two of them, while a third fed the machine with water and sand out of an old teapot or similar vessel. In this way a slab was cut into eleven narrow strips, which were

then rubbed down into ear-pendants on a flat stone, and afterwards drilled through at one end. When afterwards liberated the Maoris had thus accumulated a little capital in the shape of manufactured goods, the government having supplied the raw material. They also made meres. I saw them making one in the gaol-yard on the grindstone. This occupation tends to keep them in bodily and mental health.

Archaeological Investigations

The archaeological investigation was limited to a small area to the rear of the Law Courts building (see Figure 1), where a new structure was to be built. The initial archaeological excavations were undertaken inside the standing old building after the floors had been lifted, but the main excavations were done after the superstructure had been demolished in late 2001. The court foundations were very deep (up to 2.1 m) and in places were constructed directly on top of the foundations of the old gaol. They were therefore left in place to avoid damaging archaeological features, and the archaeological work was carried out in a series of compartments within these court foundations. The archaeological areas (1 to 6) were numbered accordingly (Figure 5). The original ground surface sloped down to the east (towards the harbour), and in Area 1 was at the modern surface, but by Area 3 had dipped to a depth of 1.4 metres. Overlying this surface was a considerable amount of clay and rubble fill, introduced both during the life of the gaol, and after the construction of the Court foundations to level the ground (Figure 6).

The Gaol foundations were cut into the sloping original ground surface, and consisted of large mudstone and sandstone blocks set into shallow trenches, supporting bluestone walls. The foundation blocks were hand cut and varied in size slightly, but were nominally 43 inches by 23 inches by 14 inches (1.1 m × 0.6 m × 0.36 m). Four wall lines were identified, two running east-west and two north-south, connected to form three sides and several internal divisions of a large stone structure (Figure 5). Some of the stonework of the walls themselves also survived, and examination of this showed that the structure had been built in several phases, with the northern section built first and the southern section added later (labelled 1st Phase and 2nd phase in Figure 5). The 1st Phase walls were 42 inches (1.06 m) thick, and the 2nd Phase were 39 inches (1 m) thick. Comparison with a plan and photographs of the Gaol indicates that these wall lines were associated with the southern cellblock wing (see Figure 4). The longest section of north-south wall that was found was probably a retaining wall that supported the cell block (on higher ground) and bounded the exercise yard (on lower ground) where a mess room was at one time located (Martin 1998: 11). A dark coloured buried topsoil was found in several places to the west of the main retaining wall, and had been cut through by the gaol foundations (see Figure

6). This topsoil horizon sloped down to the east, and probably represents the ground surface immediately prior to the construction of the gaol.

To the east of the main retaining wall the ground consisted of numerous lenses and layers of mixed silts and soil fill, overlain by brick and stone rubble. The rubble was probably debris from the demolition of the Gaol in 1899. Immediately beneath the rubble was a level surface that was interpreted as the final occupation surface of the exercise yard. On this surface, distributed along the foot of the retaining wall (Figure 7), was a concentration of artefactual material, including glass, faunal material, two spoons, ceramics, and a fragment of greenstone. This material is discussed in detail below.

Further excavation of the exercise yard surface found evidence of several trenches and a 0.2 m layer of clay that had been laid down – presumably drainage trenches and an attempt to raise the yard level to combat dampness. The exercise yard surface was calculated as only being 0.6 m above spring high tide, which confirmed contemporary accounts that referred to the very wet nature of the main exercise yard, and to the water at high tide lapping the walls of the building. Deeper excavation was prevented by the ingress of ground water.

Artefactual Material

The artefactual assemblage from the excavation was small, but the material that was found was in secure archaeological contexts. This material fell into three main categories: material found associated with the foundations for the Law Courts walls (and therefore associated with the 1900 construction of that building); material found in the general fill on the site (and therefore introduced at different times between ca. 1860 and 1899 as the site was built up); and material found in contexts associated with the occupation of the old gaol (and therefore dates to 1899 or earlier). Of these three categories, it is the third that is of interest here.

The largest artefact assemblage was recovered from the base of the main retaining wall in Areas 4 and 6. Material had accumulated here both during the use of the gaol, and during the subsequent demolition of the buildings in 1899. Demolition material included iron nails, including 11 with lead washers of the type used to secure corrugated iron sheets. Immediately beneath the demolition material was a thin but distinct lens of cultural material that included ceramic and glass fragments, buttons, spoons, nails, bones and a fragment of sawn greenstone.

The sawn greenstone fragment (Figure 8) measured 34 mm by 30 mm by 20 mm, and had been sawn on two parallel faces, sawn and snapped on a third, and fractured on the remaining sides. The saw marks were parallel and straight, which matches Judge Chapman's account (quoted above) of the Maori prisoners using frame saws fitted with fencing wire blades fed with an abrasive slurry. The size

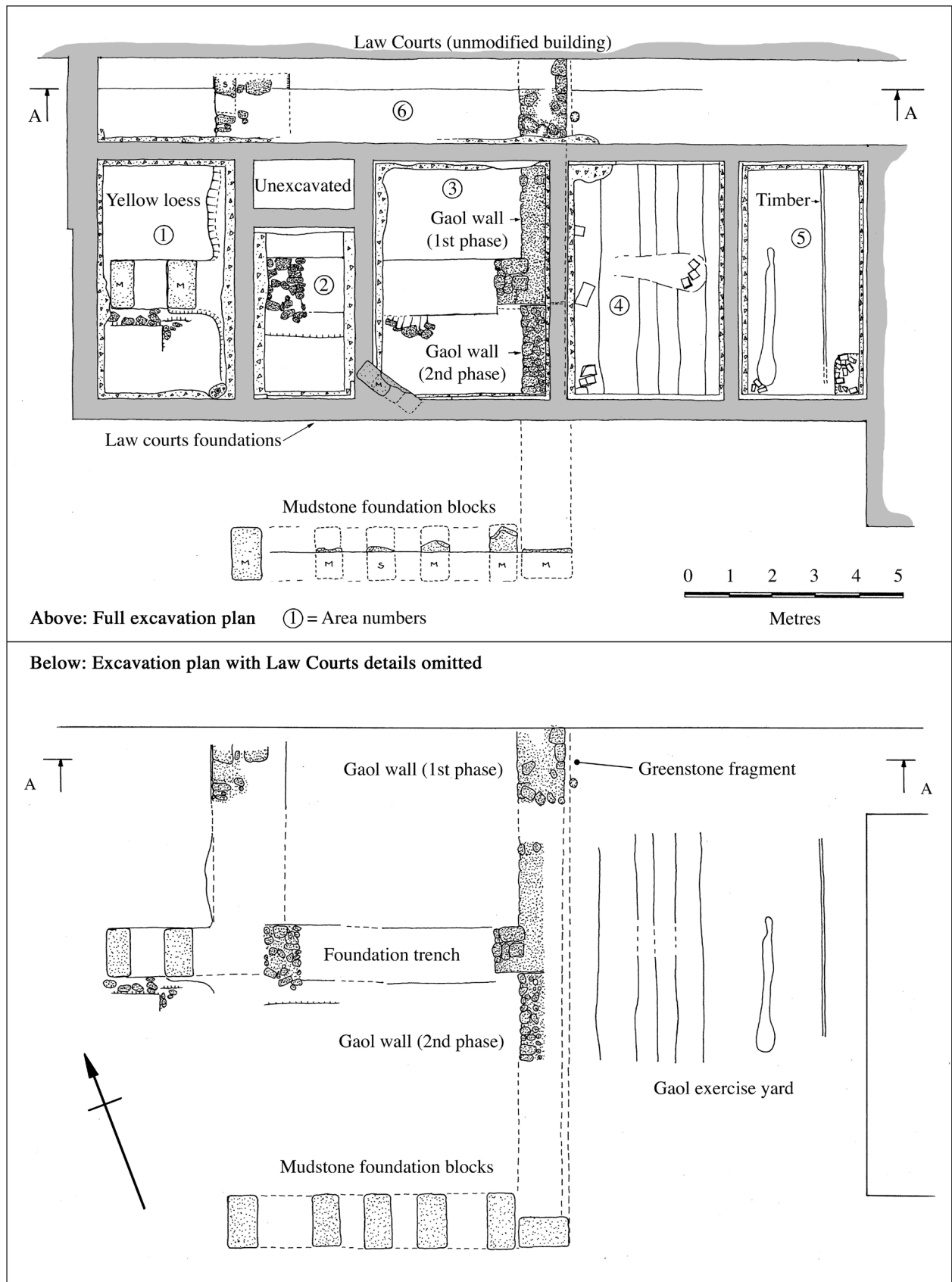


Figure 5. Plan of the archaeological excavation. The top plan includes all of the recorded details, and the bottom plan has the Law Courts features omitted in order to clearly show the Dunedin Gaol evidence. For Section A-A see Figure 6.

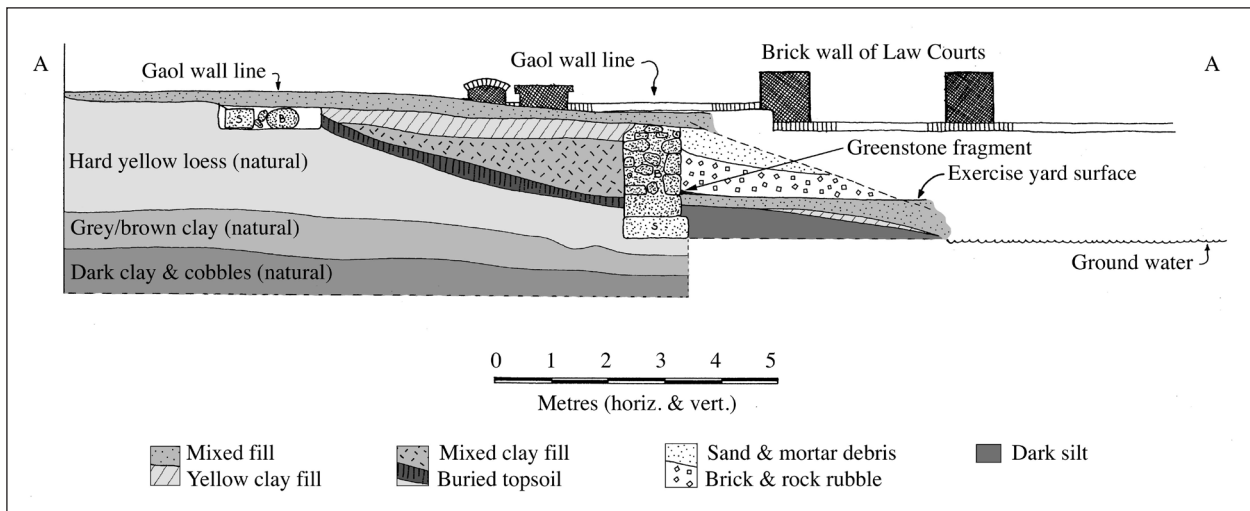


Figure 6. Cross-section through the Dunedin Gaol site.

of the fragment would suggest that it was waste from a 20 mm (nominal ¾ inch) thick slab that was cut from a larger boulder. No cortex was present.

The ceramic items consisted of four clay pipe stem fragments (embossed ‘Glasgow’), a single fragment from a plate with violet and gold band pattern, and a single

fragment from a Holloway’s Ointment jar. This last item is the only one that could be confidently identified, and Holloway’s Ointment was popular in the mid to late nineteenth century. Jars have been found in Otago at numerous sites including the Halfway House Hotel in the Cromwell Gorge and in Alexandra township (Bedford 1986: 69;



Figure 7. The base of the gaol wall, where the greenstone fragment was found. To the left and right the Law Courts foundations have been built over and through the earlier gaol foundations. The scales are each 0.5 m long.



Figure 8. Fragment of sawn and snapped greenstone found at the base of the gaol wall.

Petchey 2002b). The glassware was similarly fragmented, and consisted of flat window glass as well as blue, aqua and black bottle glass. Two buttons were found, both 17 mm diameter with four holes, but one was non-ferrous metal and the other was bone. There were two spoons (Figure 9), both of about the same size. One was a large table spoon, 218 mm long. It was stamped 'JR & S' (the maker's mark) and 'BP' (for 'British Plate'). British Plate is a variety of nickel silver, an alloy of copper, zinc and nickel (Wilson 2002:280). The second spoon was incomplete, consisting of only the bowl, and was made of iron, and was very corroded. The faunal material consisted of sheep bones,

mainly rib fragments but also parts of a humerus and pelvis. Many of the bones had been gnawed by rats. This assemblage is similar in content (although much smaller in quantity) to the artefactual material found during excavations at the Mt. Eden Prison in Auckland (Bickler *et al* 2011). At that site nails, buttons, cutlery, clay pipes and animal bones were all present, although beef rather than sheep was most common (and unsurprisingly rat bones were also found). Domestic items were also found at the Lyttleton Gaol site, but this material is likely to originate from occupation prior to the area in question becoming part of the gaol (Habberfield-Short 2007:34).

DISCUSSION

The archaeological study of prisons and gaols has been a particular Australian favourite for many years because of that nation's unique history as a penal colony, and an entire volume of *Australasian Historical Archaeology* (Volume 19, 2001) was dedicated to the 'archaeology of confinement.' In New Zealand there have been fewer investigations, but a number of excavations have been carried out including the Mt Eden Prison in Auckland (Best & Clough 2005; Bickler *et al* 2011) and the Lyttleton Gaol (Habberfield-Short 2007). The Dunedin Gaol investigation, while limited in extent, found evidence that fits in well with this wider archaeological literature, particularly that of the Mt. Eden Prison. The structural evidence of the Dunedin Gaol confirms the stone construction of this section of the complex, and also indicates that it was built in several phases as it was developed from 1855 onwards. The damp conditions experienced when excavating the exercise yard level confirmed the contemporary accounts of the place as being damp and cold, and a number of the deaths of the Taranaki prisoners while in Dunedin have been attributed to these conditions.

The small amount of domestic material that was found



Figure 9. Two spoons found at the base of the gaol wall.

had accumulated at the foot of the retaining wall, probably having been missed during cleaning of the yard area. As Gojak (2001:76) has observed, the prison environment is not generally conducive to the retention of unauthorised archaeological evidence that might reveal much about the lives of the prisoners, and the small amount of material found at the Dunedin Gaol site reflects this. However, the material that was present is typical of many 19th century archaeological sites with a domestic component, and is similar to assemblages from other gaol sites such as the Mt. Eden Prison (Bickler *et al* 2011). In a gaol where both men and women were imprisoned, and the gaoler and warders sometimes lived on site, these sorts of everyday items would be expected (albeit in reduced numbers). The rat gnawing on the sheep bones also testifies to the less welcome inhabitants of the gaol. This material relates to the experiences of all of the gaol residents, both Maori and Pakeha.

More specific to the Maori prisoners is the small tab of sawn greenstone. At the Mt. Eden site nothing was found that could be associated with different classes of prisoner or a particular ethnic group (Bickler *et al* 2011:251), but this small piece of stone might be just such evidence. While a definitive association with the Taranaki Maori prisoners cannot be proven on the basis of a single item, its secure archaeological provenance on the exercise yard floor and evidence of having been sawn agree with Judge Chapman's account of the Maori prisoners' activities. In particular, the parallel saw marks match Chapman's description of the prisoners using a reciprocating frame saw, while sawn greenstone found in a later historic site in Great King Street in Dunedin in 2013, which probably came from the workshop of Pakeha lapidaries, has circular saw marks (Middleton 2014; see also Beck & Mason 2002:122–128). A very strong argument can therefore be made for the association of the gaol greenstone fragment with the Taranaki Maori prisoners. This association is convincing enough for the fragment to have been displayed in the exhibition *Te Iwi Herehere: Nga Mau Herehere Toran-gapu, Political Prisoners* at the Dunedin Public Art Gallery in 2003, and subsequently placed on permanent display in the Otago Settlers Museum (cat. No. TLI2006/18/1).

CONCLUSION

The archaeological investigations at the Law Courts site revealed excellent surviving evidence of the old Dunedin Gaol that was in use from 1855 until 1898. A number of wall lines were identified, one of which was the retaining wall separating the large exercise yard and messroom area on the low-lying eastern part of the gaol site from the cellblock area on the higher western part of the site. Artefactual material included glass, ceramics, sheep bones, two spoons, and a fragment of greenstone. This piece of greenstone was probably a waste offcut discarded by the Taranaki Maori prisoners who were held in the gaol. These

Maori prisoners are best remembered in Dunedin for their efforts in public works construction projects, and for the stories that still circulate about their association with the Andersons Bay caves.

Much of the discussion of the Taranaki Maori prisoners has been in terms of the men as symbols, almost as extensions of the passive-resistance symbolism of Parihaka itself. But it must not be forgotten that these were individual men, separated from their families and homes for a number of years, living and working in conditions dictated by the Colonial authorities. One great strength of an archaeological approach is that it can engage with the evidence of everyday life, and in the case of the Taranaki Maori the archaeological evidence of the gaol, the low-lying yard, the everyday domestic items and the greenstone working, can flesh out Judge Chapman's brief description of the Maori prisoners working together in their spare time to make greenstone items for sale on their return home. It can provide an added human dimension to this important episode of New Zealand's history.

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