

Katherine Mansfield's Birthplace: Archaeological Investigation for a Late-Victorian House Museum

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Katherine Mansfield, the New Zealand author, was born Kathleen Beauchamp at 25 Tinakori Road, Wellington, in 1888. In 1987–1988 the house was purchased and restored as a memorial to the writer. The house had been heavily altered in its service areas in 1907 and 1940. The archaeological investigations were carried out in collaboration with architectural investigators prior to and in the course of restoration of the building. The section on which the house was built had been heavily filled prior to construction, and lenses in this fill produced artefacts that relate to the domestic utensils of the period. Topsoil in the yard contained rubbish from the house including domestic fittings from the re-furbishing of 1907 and 1940. Investigations under the house related principally to the location and orientation of the coal ranges in the service areas. Samples of the original wallpaper from this area contributed to the analysis of wallpaper designs elsewhere in the house, where samples had been found under architraves in the course of architectural investigation.

The birthplace of Katherine Mansfield (1888–1923) was at Number 25 Tinakori Road. In 1987–1988 the house was purchased and restored as a house museum to commemorate the centenary of her birth. An excavation was part of a wider programme of oral history, and documentary and architectural investigation carried out according to the principles of the Burra Charter.¹ In general terms, the archaeology was intended to offer a reconstruction of late Victorian lifestyle in an urban setting in New Zealand, with a particular emphasis on the elements that may have affected a small child. The aims were to investigate structural details of the house surrounds and its interior at or below ground (the assumed demarcation point with the architectural investigation) and to recover artefacts or house fittings related to the various periods of occupation and refitting of the house. Particular attention was to be paid to fine stratigraphy or associations that allowed attribution to the period when Katherine Mansfield lived in the house. As such, the archaeology was designed to fit the historical archaeology paradigm, 'In small things forgotten [remembered]', expressed by Deetz.²

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The house section was originally leasehold, and a condition of the lease to Harold Beauchamp, her father, was that a 'substantial house' was to be built. Beauchamp was at this time a senior clerk in an importing firm. He later became Chairman of the Bank of New Zealand and was knighted. Mansfield's name as christened was Kathleen (Kass, or Kezia in the stories). Mansfield's relationship with her father was a troubled one, and it has been the focus of much biographical study.³

The family was large, with three generations living in the household, and perhaps a servant. Although purposebuilt in a new subdivision on the outskirts of the town, the facilities of the house were cramped and plain. This we know from the written records of the family's perception of the place, and, importantly, from the early works, filled with childhood remembrance, of a special daughter of the household, Katherine Mansfield. The family left the house in 1893.⁴

In the late 1880s New Zealand was in the middle of a significant slowing in the rate of growth of its economy, with consequences for exports, borrowing, expectations of capital gains from the sale of land, and individual incomes.⁵ The last factors may be the reasons why 25 Tinakori Road was under lease; why the house's construction was modest; and why the family shifted from it in 1893, when economic conditions again began to ease.

In the 1880s the northern end of Tinakori Road was an undeveloped part of Wellington. Some 150 metres to the north-east, down a gully forming part of the Wellington faultline, lay the railway line and edge of Wellington Harbour. The preparation of the section seems to have been hasty. The initial cuts forming Tinakori Road appear to have left a raw fill adjacent to the road line, but had not completely levelled the adjoining sections. Surplus road fill was deposited in the lowest eastern corner of the section, the site of the rear yard excavations. The fill had not consolidated at the time of building, so that the rear of the house settled considerably over the century since its construction.

In its original form the house comprised two storeys, with bedrooms upstairs (not shown in figures). Downstairs, there was a parlour and sitting or dining room in the front (the northwestern segment) facing towards Tinakori Road (Fig. 1). A complicated set of passageways and doors gave access from the sitting room and the entrance hallway to the rear of the ground floor. Here there was a tiny bathroom (on the northeastern wall) and a scullery and kitchen or family room adjacent to each other. The scullery opened on to a lean-to. This had an asphalted earthen floor, some 60 cm beneath the level of the floorboards of the rest of the house. The lean-to contained the single flush toilet. As noted, the section slopes to the rear and drainage to the roadline was marginal.

EXCAVATION

The excavations were carried out with volunteer assistance in three main areas: the rear yard, the front driveway, and under the house including monitoring of the emplacement of reinforced concrete corner foundations.

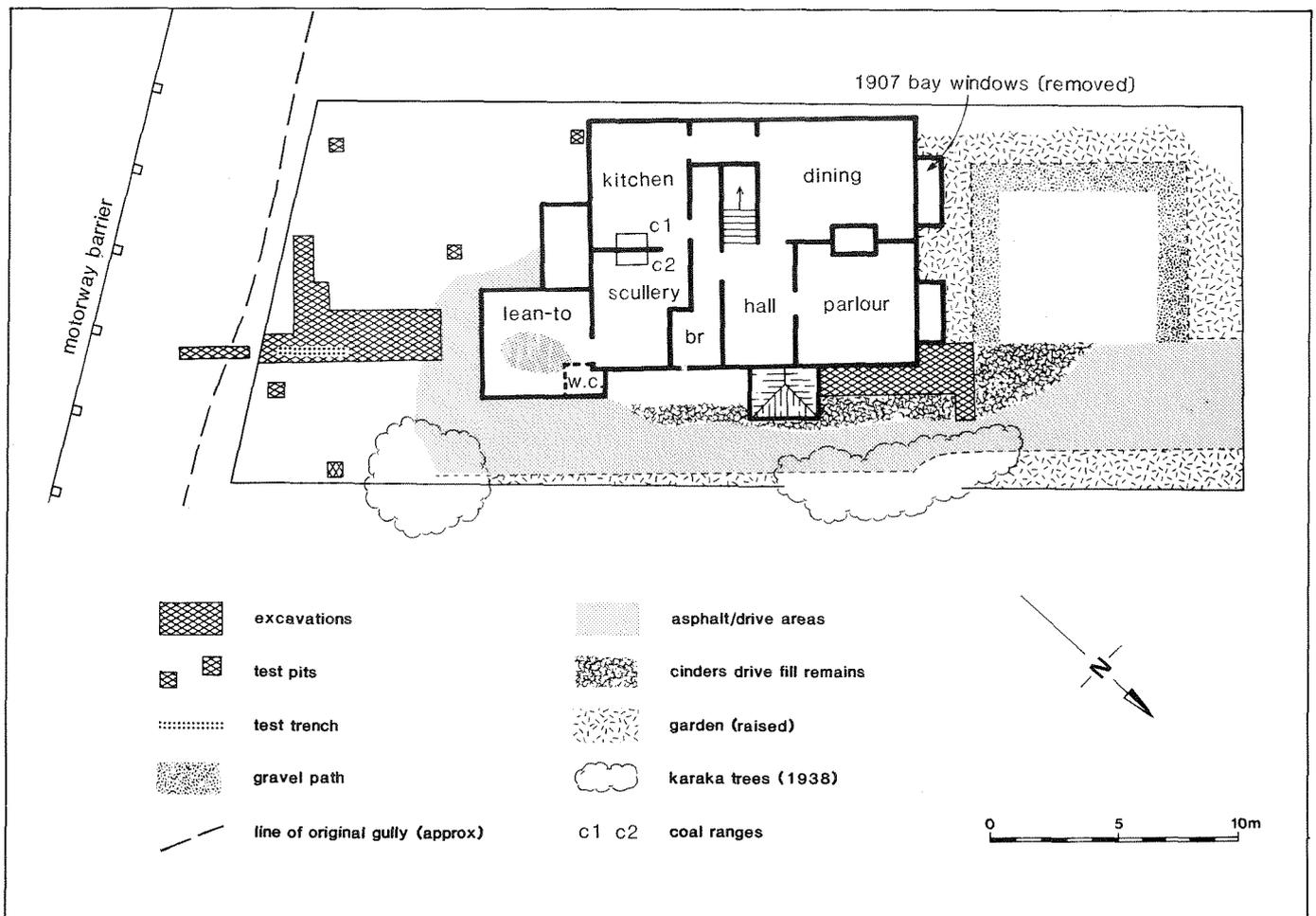


Fig. 1: Plan of section at 25 Tinakori Road showing the interior layout of the ground floor in its 1907 form. The bay windows were added at this period and were removed in the course of the recent restoration. The floor of the lean-to was at ground level, hence the asphalted floor.

Fourteen square metres were excavated at the rear of the property, in a broad trench running from the lean-to to the motorway fence, and a further three square metres were excavated at the northern corner of the house by the driveway.

Figure 2 shows the schematic stratigraphy. This was comprised of topsoil at the rear of the section (Layer-1), and a fine layering of driveway fills (although no signs of stripping) at the front and northern side of the section. Underlying the whole of the property was a subsoil fill of yellow-brown silty clay and crushed stone. The fill was probably from concurrent widening of the adjacent road cutting. The crushing of the stone arises from faultline activity and is common in Wellington hill soils. The general chronology of the various layers and surfaces of the property as they were in use over 100 years is shown in Table 1.

Initially, it was assumed that only the rear yard had been filled to any depth, and that it may have been filled after the construction of the house. It was thought that there would be contemporaneity between the lenses of rubbish in the layer 2 fill and the occupation debris of the Beauchamp household at 25 Tinakori Road; in other words, it was suspected to be the Beauchamp's rubbish, in the form of 'the broadcast sheet of refuse'.⁶ In the rear yard, about one metre below the surface of the layer 2 fill, there were lenses of household rubbish, china, leather shoes, etc., that were of the approximate period of the house's first use. However, the stratigraphy of the layer 2 fill extends under the house, so that this domestic rubbish must have been dumped in the course of filling immediately before the house was built. Investigation of

the house foundations subsequent to the rear yard excavations proved this conclusively. This result was instructive in itself, reflected dramatically in the sloping floor levels of the house, confirming again Deetz's dictum: 'Fill is an artefact itself, and intelligent study of it can be most instructive'.⁷

The rear yard topsoil (above the layer 2 fill) nevertheless contained house and building materials, including a large volume of used nails, lead-head nails, drainage pipes, and ceramic tiles, presumed to be from the original service areas reworked in 1909 and 1940. The building materials in this layer may be securely attributed to the house in its original 1888 form. They include the 'Cook's' telephone/lightning arrester (Fig. 3).⁸

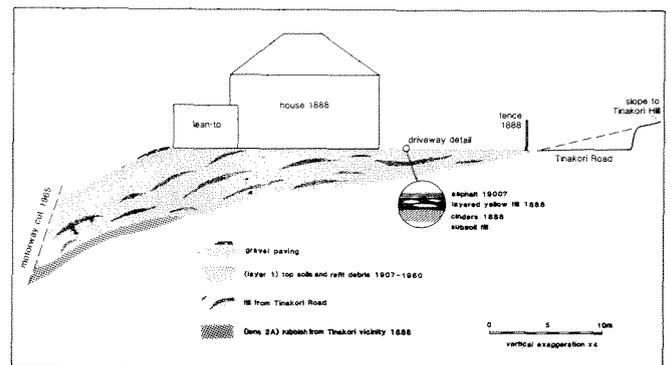


Fig. 2: Schematic stratigraphy of the site. The modern motorway was formed in the original gully at the rear of the house. Stratigraphy is vertically exaggerated, not the house.

Table 1: Summary chronology of 25 Tinakori Road

Tinakori Road progressively formed, fill placed by cart on adjacent sections or farmland (1850?–1888) along with domestic rubbish.

An apron formed of cinders, clinker, household rubbish, etc., just off the road.

Platform levelled and house built, 1887-88 on relatively unconsolidated fill.

Earliest services laid down in centre and towards NE side of drive, 1888.

Garden surround made at front of house.

Children playing in gravel driveway, and at rear 1888-?

Driveway levelled and resurfaced with stony clay fill.

Driveway surfaced, possibly with asphalt.

Garden surround demolished and bay windows constructed 1907.

Unknown sequence of driveway being stripped and resurfaced with asphalt, and further work on surfaces.

House extensively remodelled and plaster-lined to create two flats/apartments; chimney mouldings demolished, and wooden frontsteps removed and replaced with concrete in the 1940s.

Garden surround re-emplaced 1960s; concrete block fence erected.

The bulk of the layer of cinder fill on the front drive immediately pre-dates the building of the house (Fig.4). It extends slightly under the baseboards, and may have been an apron of fill placed in the course of constructing the house. Fill for driveways and compacting of surfaces generally was made up from household fireplace ash and cinders.⁹ This could have been stockpiled with other domestic rubbish in the near-city neighbourhood and laid on the drive to some depth. Household rubbish also occurs in the yellow layered fill which occurs above the cinders and below the asphalt layer.

There was a possibility that the driveway had originally been looser gravels, in which children's playthings might become lost. The driveway is by the sunniest, most sheltered corner of the house, and the front yard is referred to in stories as a play area.¹⁰ However, it is probable that the driveway was always sealed in a nineteenth century hand-tarsealing process (i.e., thin tar poured and gravel sprinkled on in several layers). Paving by doorways proper, however, was at first a loose beach gravel in which some marbles were found.

The cinder layer was one of the most artefact-rich layers on the site. Material from it matches the lowest lenses under the fill in the rear yard. Two fitting parts of one important artefact, the Japanese-style cherry blossom with bird mug, occurred in the driveway cinders and the rear yard fill.

Further excavation or inspections were carried out when major structural strengthening was undertaken (Fig. 5). This offered an opportunity to inspect significant sections at the four corners of the house, where reinforced concrete foundations were employed. The planned work also involved disturbance to structures under the house.

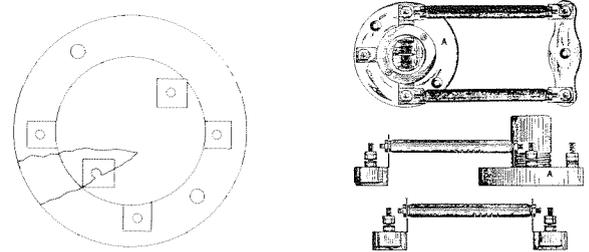
The chimney base was the focus of the excavation work, and held the possibility of unique material from the house in its original condition, since the thorough refurbishing of 1907 and 1940 had greatly changed these areas. Also, architectural inspections under architraves and skirtings had revealed some of the wall coverings of this area of the house, and there was a possibility that further fragments

survived under the house in the chimney demolition debris. Space does not permit discussion of the rear yard excavations, but those under the house are relatively unusual and warrant attention.

The removal of base boards on the east corner of the main house and on the lean-to opened up an area under the lean-to that earlier could not be seen clearly. The isometric plan of this corner of the house (Fig. 5) shows a ceramic drain pipe broken at the surface and leading away from the northeastern side of the lean-to. The pipe turns up at its southwestern end. This is probably the vent pipe for the original gullytrap, connected outside the asphalt-paved lean-to.

As in all houses, it is the service areas that are most expensive to re-make, but which are also the most in need

Cooke's Protector 1890. Telephone lightning arrester



underside of circular base "A" showing fragment see "Telephony" by A.V.Abbott, 1904

Fig. 3: Reconstruction of the ceramic base of the Cooke's lightning arrester. The fragment in dark tone was recovered in the excavation.

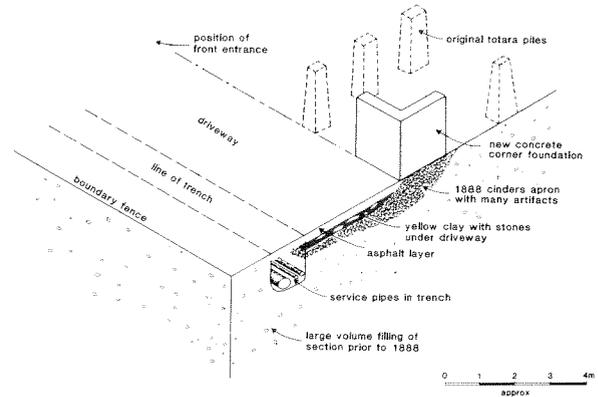


Fig. 4: Schematic isometric drawing of the relationship between front drive stratigraphy and the house. (The reinforced concrete corner foundation, installed during conservation work, is embedded at a lower level than shown).

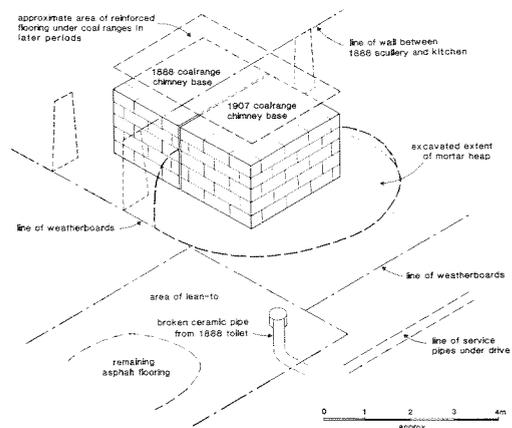


Fig. 5: Isometric drawing of the eastern corner of the house, showing details of the under-floor area of the lean-to-scullery-kitchen.

of updating. In this respect, 25 Tinakori Road was no exception. Architectural investigations of the timber structures and their changes at the rear of the ground floor were among the last to be conducted. This was in part because these areas had to be kept intact as servicing areas for the front of the house and upstairs bedrooms while the first phase of restoration was under way.

The architectural concerns related principally to the relationship between the scullery, and the kitchen/family room adjacent to each other at the rear of the house. The exact interpretation of the function of these rooms had proved to be a problem. In 1907 the original alcove appears to have been demolished, and false flooring constructed. This reversed the position of the coal range, from an alcove facing into the original kitchen on the southwest, to an alcove constructed facing into the former scullery on the northeast, thereby making the latter a kitchen proper.

Apparently in 1940, the chimney was demolished down to the fifth or sixth course from the bottom of the base, with a false flooring inserted above it on joists that ran north-east and south-west, i.e., at right angles to the prevailing line of the joists of the house. Debris from the demolition of the chimney, principally mortar sand and dust, lay in a heap around the chimney base, extending about 1.5 metres to the south-west. To the south-east and north-west the debris had been somewhat disturbed by limited concrete re-piling carried out in the 1970s. The heap had decorative tiles scattered over its surface, with occasional bricks and ironware.

Of the artefacts recovered, several are worth further discussion. At least five pieces of the coal range were recovered. These include pieces potentially diagnostic of the type of coal range taken out in 1940, which may be the original one. They comprise a finger plate for inspection of the side flues, an oval butterfly flue valve, a grate frontpiece, and steel bars, probably rods, for manipulating flues. This adds to the firedoor and top plate found earlier in the rear yard topsoil, of which only the top plate is likely to have come from the house. It seems likely that the original range was one of the smaller types, to judge from a local catalogue.

Many fragments of wallpaper were found (Fig. 6). These occurred in some large pieces on the surface in the vicinity of the chimney base, and also buried in the chimney debris on the east of the base. These were sometimes associated with pieces of 1940s newspaper, i.e., contemporaneous with the rebuilding of that date. A number of pieces were comprised of several layers of wallpaper, some of which came from beneath architraves since they form the edge of the paper. This was a style of papering found throughout the house in the architectural inspections. However, the prime evidence for wall coverings came from architectural inspections of areas behind skirtings, cornices, and jambs.

Among artefacts found in the layers of prime interest are the following:

- Lea & Perrins bottles from the driveway cinders and rear yard rubbish lenses;
- Tin cans from the rear yard rubbish lenses, identified to be of the period 1880–1900;¹¹
- Brown underglaze transfer printed Japanese blossom and bird mug, from both the rear yard rubbish lenses and the driveway cinders (Fig. 7);
- Maroon and yellow-banded earthenwares with lithograph both under and over glaze which occur in some volume and variety in the driveway layered yellow fill and impressed on layer 2 at the rear, indicating that the upper

driveway fills immediately post-date the filling at rear;

- Maroon-banded with gilt dinner-set pieces: fragment of a cup in rear yard rubbish lenses (i.e., layer 2 lens A), with the bulk in driveway cinders fill near the house;
- ‘Hampden’ plate from driveway cinders;
- Child’s tea-set pieces, from the rear yard rubbish lenses and driveway cinders;
- The original chimney-head mouldings (Fig. 8) found in the hard fill of the front steps, placed there during the 1940s refurbishment.

Although initially it had been thought that the rear yard was filled following construction, re-fitted artefacts and the extent of fill, including the cinders apron under the house, indicates that the section was filled and near-level at the time of construction of the house. The artefacts recovered indicate a period in the 1880s, and are similar to those found at the South Island’s Hermitage (tourist hotel) site of the same period.¹² Beauchamp’s occupation as an importer is a topic that needs further examination in the light of the style of artefacts found for this period, a topic of potentially great interest for New Zealand historical archaeology.

ARCHAEOLOGY AND KATHERINE MANSFIELD’S PUBLISHED WORKS

There are references to features of 25 Tinakori Road in various of Katherine Mansfield’s stories. The stories are written in a style, slight but affective, that Mansfield never shook off except in her Journal and Letters, now fully published. Her style irritated Virginia Woolf immensely; she was jealous of its intimate imagination, yet found it cheap and tawdry. The stories that have greatest relevance to the archaeology are *The Aloe*, *Prelude* and *A Birthday*. The first two are differing versions of the one story; the earlier version, *The Aloe*, being much more fully and clumsily written and less effective as a short story.¹³ Besides general references to the meanness and the darkness of the house, there are references to the setting of the house. The description of dumping rubbish in the gully at the rear of the back yard is full and delightful:

He looked down at the row of garden strips and back yards. The fence of these gardens was built along the edge of a gully, spanned by an iron suspension bridge, and the people had a wretched habit of throwing their empty tins over the fence into the gully ...

There are other yard references:

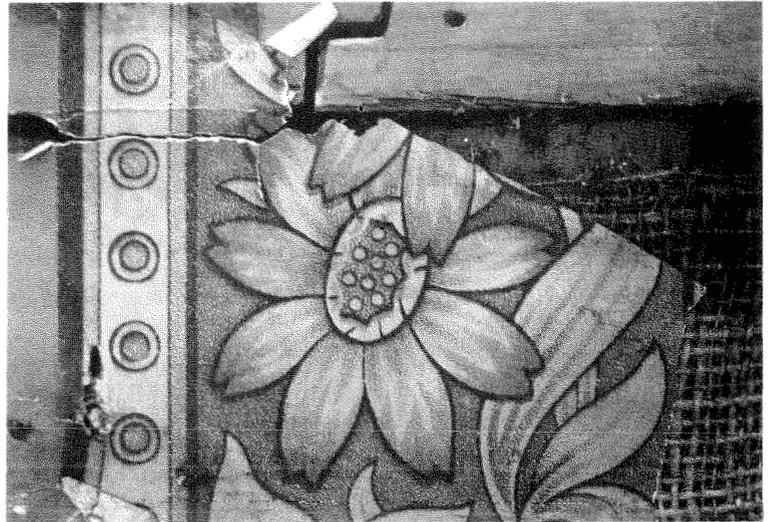
Burnell’s [i.e., Beauchamp’s] yard was small and square with flower beds on either side [compare Fig. 1]. All down one side arum lilies aired their rich beauty, on the other side there was nothing but a straggle of what the children called ‘grandmother’s pin cushions’, a dull, pinkish flower....¹⁴

The general arrangement of the lean-to, scullery and kitchen is clear, as is the step up from the asphalted level to the scullery. There is no specific reference to the lean-to, though.

Slowly she walked up the back steps and through the scullery into the kitchen. Nothing was left in it but a lump of gritty yellow soap in one corner of the kitchen window-sill and a piece of flannel stained with a blue bag in another. The fireplace was choked up with rubbish.¹⁵



(a)



(b)

Fig. 6: Wallpaper: (a) reconstructed from original papers found mainly under architraves but also from excavations; (b) original fragments showing scrim. The designs show a strong Japanese influence (see also Fig. 7).



Fig. 7: Brown underglaze Japanese blossom and bird mug. Separate fragments were recovered from the base lenses of the rear yard fill, and from the driveway fill.

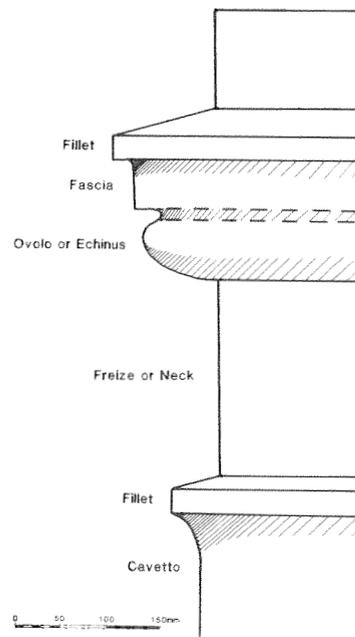


Fig. 8: Chimney head moulding detail, reconstructed by project architect, Jim Beard, from material used as hard fill in the front steps, and from pre-1948 photographs of the house.

'The fireplace was choked up with rubbish' matches the kind of debris with mixed cinders and domestic rubbish found laid on the driveway. This walk up the backsteps was in fact through the lean-to into the scullery in the house proper.

The details of the fittings in the house are clear in some particulars. There is a reference to the single flush toilet. The Nathan children (the Samuel Josephs in the stories) were disdainful:

"You've only got one w. at your place," said Miriam scornfully. "We've got two at ours. One for men and one for ladies. The one for men hasn't got a seat."

"Hasn't got a seat" cried Kezia. "I don't believe you."¹⁶

There are here many ingredients of colonial class-aspirations and rivalry, and more than a hint of the breaking of taboos that warrant much closer analysis than is possible here. The archaeology with its clear indication of the toilet location and the kitchen is relevant, too, indicating a pinching in the money spent on the house. It might be noted finally that this is *The Aloe*, unpublished in Mansfield's lifetime, and chiefly of literary interest because of its relationship with the mature cut-down and re-written version published as *Prelude*.

CONCLUSIONS

The basic aim had been to use archaeological techniques to set chronological limits to lenses of dirt and rubbish cast down around the house, and within the lenses, to recover and document everyday utensils and household fittings of a particular family in late-Victorian Wellington. This aim is modest, and perhaps has to be open to the criticism of Connah that historical archaeology has not achieved the profundity of purpose and method of archaeology in long time-scale in the prehistoric period.¹⁷ Some of the material recovered can be related to Katherine Mansfield's stories in a general way. These include references to house fittings recovered in the course of the excavation. In general the decorative styles of the house show a strong Japanese influence, reflected also in some of the better quality porcelain recovered. The excavations have therefore been moderately successful in partially establishing both house fittings and the artefacts in use in the first household; they more fully document typical late-Victorian housewares not necessarily associated with this particular household. In this respect, the architectural investigations prior to restoration have been of greater significance in establishing the state of the house at the time of its first occupation.

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NOTES

1. ICOMOS 1966; Kerr 1985.
2. Deetz 1977:120-136.
3. e.g. Tomalin 1987.
4. Alpers 1980; Tomalin 1987.

5. Hawke 1985:66-183.
6. Deetz 1977:125.
7. Deetz 1977:15.
8. See Abbot 1904 for identification.
9. Stockton 1981:18.
10. O'Sullivan 1982:29.
11. Ritchie and Bedford 1985.
12. Ritchie 1985.
13. O'Sullivan 1982.
14. O'Sullivan 1982:29.
15. O'Sullivan 1982:33.
16. O'Sullivan 1982:31.
17. Connah 1983.

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