



## RECONSTRUCTION OF CROMWELL CHINATOWN

### DISCUSSION REPORT

#### **Brief History**

This report describes a project to reconstruct a small Chinese settlement that was located on the banks of the Kawarau River, Cromwell. It was destroyed by the formation of Lake Dunstan behind the Clyde Dam in the early 1990's. The Chinese were attracted to the area by the Otago Provincial Council who made overtures in the Victorian goldfields to come and try their luck in the Otago goldfields. Most landed in Dunedin between 1868 and 1900.

Cromwell's Chinatown was continuously occupied for more than fifty years and more than 400 Chinese lived in the settlement between 1866 and 1920, when it was finally abandoned. Those years were important and represented a period of history where life was difficult for the Chinese. Anti-Chinese agitation and the 1881 Chinese Immigration legislation were all aimed at deterring Chinese immigration. With the legislation, and decline in easily won gold, came the waning in Chinese immigration.

As part of the work involved with the construction of Clyde Dam, the site, along with many others, formed part of investigations undertaken by the Clutha Archaeological Project headed by Neville Ritchie. That work was for NZ Historic Places Trust and was funded by Ministry of Works & Development. The site was excavated for some three months in early 1980 and many reports and articles are available that outline the site and Chinese way of life in the goldfields.

#### **Objective**

The Cromwell Promotion Group is initiating the reconstruction project because:

- The early Chinese occupation and workings on goldfields represent an important part of the district's history that should be explained and celebrated.
- The Group promotes Otago's golden heritage and numerous goldfields sites in the Cromwell district.
- A reconstructed Cromwell Chinatown would compliment Old Cromwell Town and add a short interesting walk to the more 'commercial' area of Old Cromwell.
- Cromwell Chinatown would fulfil the educational function in the portrayal of the Chinese role in the history of gold mining in Otago.
- The project is relatively easy to construct, would be self-explanatory and would not require any staff.
- Interest in Chinese tourism projects is increasing and this, along with Old Cromwell, would represent a Cromwell 'destination' facility and a 'must-do' tourism activity. Once completed, it would form part of the 'Chinese heritage tour' that would see tourists diverted from Queenstown/Arrowtown to Dunedin via Kawarau Gorge, Alexandra and Lawrence. This proposed 'Golden Highway' is being promoted by Dunedin interests and is expected to become a world class cultural tourism experience featuring stop-off points

at the Arrowtown Chinese Camp; Cromwell Chinatown-Old Cromwell; Alexandra's Central Stories; the Lawrence Chinese Camp; and Dunedin.

### **Notes on Cromwell's Chinatown**

The following brief history has been sourced from various archaeological records and reports by Neville Ritchie.

The original Cromwell Chinatown was set up about 1870 when some Chinese storekeepers established themselves at the undeveloped upper end of Melmore Terrace. The business sector included general stores, grog shops, gaming rooms and brothel – and offered services such as post office, interpreter, news outlet, high interest bank and social centre. It extended some 150 metres along the south side of Melmore Terrace from adjacent to the present Memorial Hall to Victoria Hotel and comprised mostly wooden Chinese stores. They were deserted by the end of the century and about 1930 were demolished by the Public Works Department because they were a health risk.

About the same time as the businesses were established, some miners erected stone huts on the mined river terrace below the stores thereby forming the nucleus of Cromwell's Chinatown residential area. The two areas were separated by a steep 40 metre high bank and its heyday occurred between 1885-1890 when about 50 inhabitants lived there in 33 huts. The mostly stone dwellings were gradually abandoned as the old miners left or died and it was finally deserted by 1920. Removal of the roofing iron hastened the decay of the buildings and the area was soon overgrown by vegetation. Some were occupied by 'down and out' Europeans during the 1930's Depression.

The 1980's archaeological excavations required clearance of the vegetation in order to determine the extent of the settlement. It had been built on hummocky ground resultant from the working of the terrace before the Chinese arrived. A total of 20 huts, six suspected hut sites, sections of revetted (walled) terraces and tracks, a spring, and two possible shafts were uncovered. A plan of the settlement is attached to this report.

Several of the huts were located adjacent to the riverside track and records suggest that they were deliberately orientated at various angles to hinder the passage of evil spirits. In most cases two walls of each hut were built adjacent to gravel or earth banks, which were retained by stone revetting. Two-thirds of the huts were single isolated units – the other seven were amassed back to back forming a central cluster around a stone walled enclosure which probably housed pigs.

Huts were constructed of cobbles of greywacke and slabs of schist derived from the tailings. Mud mortar bound the stones, and in some instances lime mortar was used. The stone walls were surmounted by corrugated iron sheeting patched with offcuts of zinc and iron sheeting and flattened kerosene tins. Internal support was provided by timber frames. In some huts the flooring comprised interlocking slabs of schist – and in others, compacted river terrace gravels. A stone fireplace/chimney and door would be at one end, with the sleeping platform at the opposite end wall. Windows and vents were absent. The bulk were either 3x2 or 4.5x2.5 metres in size.

## Proposed Reconstruction of Cromwell Chinatown

The Group is proposing to develop a reconstructed 'Cromwell Chinatown' on the lakeshore batter nominally below the Memorial Hall and Memorial Centre on Melmore Terrace. The proposal has been developed to an extent where various necessary approvals may be sought for the project. Following obtaining approvals the project could, given available funding, proceed to the construction phase. At this stage, and subject to various conditions that may arise from the consultation phase, the following works have been undertaken or are planned for the project:

- Work to Date. The Group commissioned Paterson Pitts Partners Ltd to prepare a 'Layout Plan' for the proposed project - refer attached C.1730.4.1A. Contour information was surveyed and the original Chinatown archaeological layout plan superimposed over it to provide a 'best fit'. The plan is an A3 colour aerial photo-print and because it may be difficult to locate various aspects of the proposal, original and enlarged plans of the layout are provided. The Group has resolved to proceed with the planning for the project.
- Reference Material. Other plans and reports are available for information, if required. The main reference material comprises:
  - ▼ *The Excavation of a Nineteenth Century Chinese Mining Settlement. Cromwell's Chinatown. An Interim Report. Neville Ritchie NZHPT. 1980?*
  - ▼ *Archaeology and History of the Chinese in Southern New Zealand During the Nineteenth Century. Neville A Ritchie. Thesis. 1986.*  
This is the main reference book for Cromwell's Chinatown and includes discussion on the archaeological excavation, diagrams of various huts, analysis of diets, lifestyle, photographs of the archaeological excavation etc.
  - ▼ *Chinatown Area Buttress: Geology of the Undercut Excavation. R Thomson GNS 1994.*  
This report outlines the geology of the area pre-lake formation and notes location of some 11 gold and five coal drives in the vicinity of Memorial Hall. The drives are some 25 metres below Lake Dunstan. It also illustrates the original ground and final buttress contour following lakeshore preformation. Figure 2a locates applicable cross-sections 'D' and 'E' which are shown on Figure 2b. Figure 2a also indicates the extent of workings for the 'Goodger' coal mine.
  - ▼ *Landscaping – Lakeshore Protection. Memorial Hall – Sligo St. Plan. MWD. 8/1291/08/7834/57-58. 1987.*  
These construction plans illustrate plan and cross-sections of the lakeshore preformation works. Applicable cross-sections are 1161 and 1230.
- Consultation. This 'Discussion Report' and 'Layout Plan' will be sent out for comment and approval to the following organisations: Land Information New Zealand, Contact Energy Ltd, Central Otago District Council, Otago Regional Council, Te Runanga o Ngai Tahu, Kai Tahu ki Otago Ltd, Jim Ng, Royden Thomson and Old Cromwell. Should a resource consent application be required for the works it is expected that the Group will engage Paterson Pitts Partners to undertake the work. Other concerns/comments from consulted organisations will be assessed and incorporated into the proposal, if appropriate.

- Detailed planning. Following approval to proceed, detailed plans will be produced that indicate all proposed cuts and fills, disposal areas, rock/stones sources and storage areas, track formations, work areas etc. Note that the amount of earthworks involved is minimal – some 200m<sup>3</sup> for platforms (including 0.5m surrounding each hut to allow for construction space) and access tracks; and some 220m<sup>3</sup> for the driveway and parking area.

The Group will engage an earthworks contractor to construct all platforms, driveway/parking area, tracks and special features. Setting out will be undertaken by Paterson Pitts Partners. The site will then be grassed down in readiness for construction of huts and walls. Depending on the availability of labour for undertaking rock work, the project site may remain in this ‘state’ for some time, however it is not considered that would be an objectionable situation.

- Rock Work Construction. In general terms the intention will be to reconstruct the settlement as best as possible to the original – as illustrated on the archaeological plan of Chinatown and the hut plans in Neville Ritchie’s thesis. That means huts will be positioned in relationship to each other as per the plan; ‘gravel mounds’, ‘scrub covered knoll’, and ‘hummocky ground’ reconstructed using waste material; and the ‘circular depression’ and ‘tree filled shaft’ rebuilt.

Rock for the reconstruction of huts and walls will be sourced locally and comprise ‘rounded’ greywacke tailings for walls; and schist slabs for floors. It is expected that the rock would be purchased by the Group and stored in the designated car park area while construction is taking place.

Options are available for labour to undertake rock work as follows: hire a specialised contractor (will require little supervision but would be most expensive option); use Polytechnic students as part of their course-work (less expensive and may take several years); voluntary labour such as local service group (cheap option but would require adequate supervision); and Department of Corrections ‘Community Service’ people (cheapest option but would require constant supervision). In the end, and depending on availability of funding, several of the options may be used.

- Miscellaneous. Following the reconstruction of the bulk of the settlement an Information Kiosk should be constructed in the location adjacent to Melmore Terrace car park. The kiosk could be a similar form to the Cromwell Mall pergolas and would comprise copious interpretation material explaining the history of Chinese in New Zealand-Central Otago-Cromwell; and Cromwell’s Chinatown. A suggested kiosk size of 3mx3m would allow about 10 persons to view display material at one time thereby allowing for visitations by bus groups. It is expected that Department of Conservation would be asked to assist with the research, design and construction of interpretation displays for the kiosk.

As part of the development it is proposed to construct a narrow track extending some 110 metres from Melmore Terrace to the south of the Memorial Hall. A small parking area comprising eight car parks is proposed to service the project. The bulk of this road is on Crown land apart from the 15 metres located in Melmore Terrace road reserve.

During the construction phase of the project it is expected this track/car park area will be used for siting construction material, such as rock.

## **Summary**

This Discussion Report is the starting point for the reconstruction of Cromwell Chinatown. It outlines possible methods of undertaking work on the project but does not make any firm decisions. At this stage the Group is canvassing for ideas and support, as well as any conditions that may be required to undertake the work. Funding which, at this stage appears to be minimal, is another aspect that will need to be addressed following the approval to proceed has been obtained. Following the formation/excavation of hut platforms and tracks, it is envisaged that work would progress as and when labour becomes available for constructing the various huts. This is therefore a long-term project that may take some five years or so to complete.

The Group is committed to the preservation, development and interpretation of local historic sites consistent with national policies. Promotion of the Cromwell districts rich heritage is seen as one way of attracting Otago residents, domestic and overseas visitors into the area, and more especially to the Old Cromwell and Cromwell Chinatown vicinity. The Group also wish to portray the development of Cromwell Chinatown, that has been lost for several decades, in order to explain the important role of the Chinese in Otago's gold mining history.

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Secretary

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