

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF NEW ZEALAND'S FIRST GOVERNMENT HOUSE, OKIATO, BAY OF ISLANDS

REPORT TO
THE DEPARTMENT OF CONSERVATION,
WHANGAREI AREA OFFICE

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JADEN HARRIS

Okiato is located in the Bay of Islands approximately five kilometres south of present day Russell (Figure 1). Archaeological excavation was carried out by staff from the Department of Conservation Northland Conservancy between 1992 and 1995. The area investigated in Okiato was the site of New Zealand's first Government House (which dates from 1840) and so was potentially a site of some significance. The material recovered and retained from the excavations remained in storage in the Department Whangarei Area Office until 2008. This report is based on an analysis of this material by the author without recourse to the original excavation plans or notes.

Historical background

The European history of Okiato begins with the purchase of the Opanui block from the Ngati Manu chiefs Pomare, Kiwikiwi, Wiremu and Hoia by an English merchant and trader, James Reddy Clendon, on 7 December 1830 (Lee 2006: 5). Clendon finalised the purchase in 1832 and moved onto the property establishing a house, store and trading post (Lee 2006: 8).

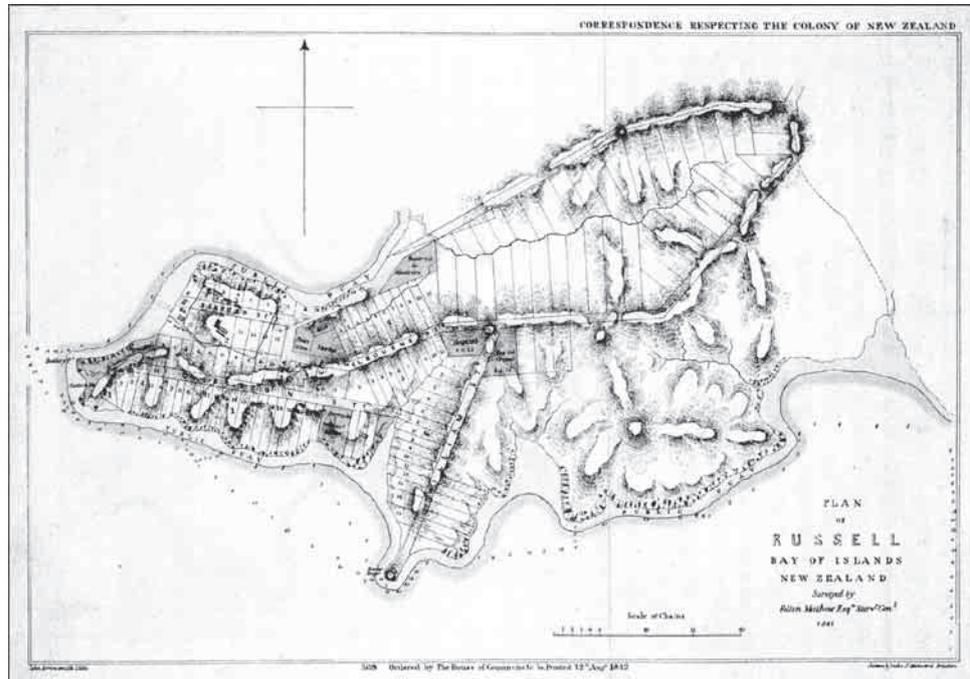
Much early 19th century European settlement of New Zealand was centred on the Bay of Islands and this was largely due to trade opportunities offered by industries such as whaling which had already established Kororareka as a base. Whaling vessels first visited New Zealand waters from as early as 1792 and from the early 19th century safe harbours such as Kororareka were visited with increasing frequency to replenish stores and take on fresh provisions. As a centre of early commerce and fledgling European settlement the Bay of Islands was targeted not just by traders but also by New Zealand's first administrators.

The first formal step towards creating New Zealand's first capital was an agreement between Captain William Hobson and James Clendon in April 1840 for the purchase of Opanui and Kahikatearoa Blocks at Okiato (Lee 2006: 5). Plans were then drawn up for the new town, to be named Russell, by Acting Surveyor-General Felton Mathew (Figure 2). The town was never developed as

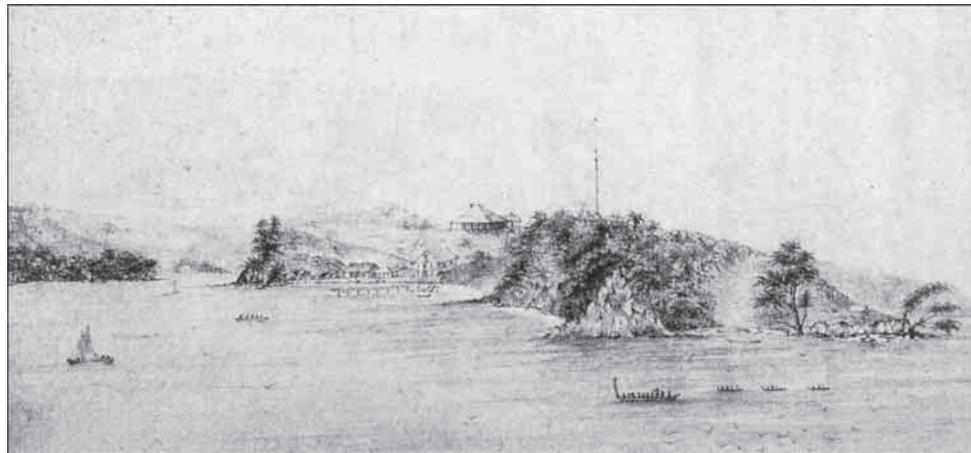
1. Location of Okiato, Bay of Islands, New Zealand.



2. Plan of the proposed town of Russell, at Okiato, drawn up by Acting Surveyor-General Felton Mathew in 1841 (from Lee 2006: 19).



3. View of Government House, Russell, Bay of Islands, 6 April 1840, by Felton Mathew (from Lee 2006: 10).

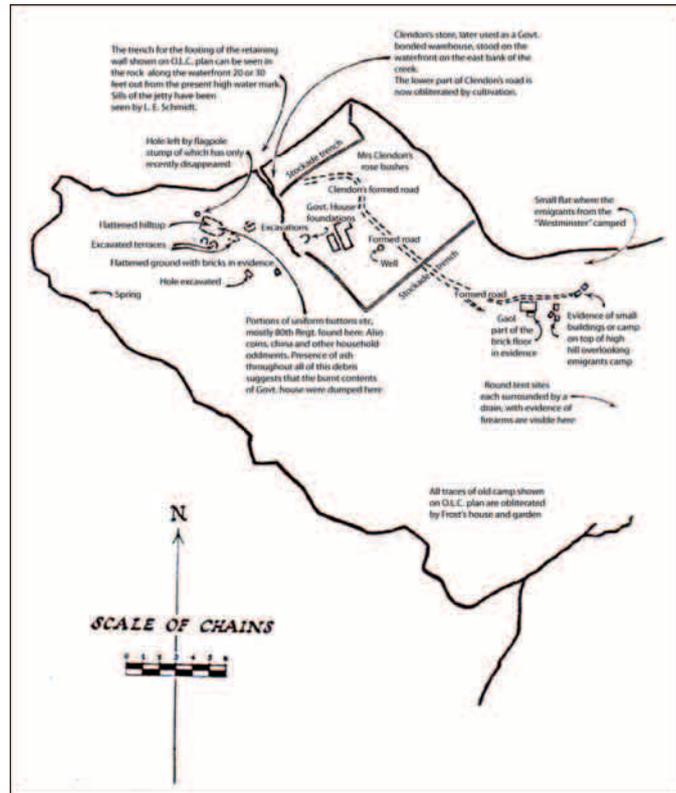


intended and was based largely around the infrastructure already put in place by Clendon, which at the time of Mathew's survey in 1841 included a wharf and "a very comfortable Cottage with suitable Out Buildings, an Extensive and substantial Store, Office, Smith's Shop, Boatbuilders Shed, etc..." (Lee 2006: 15). From the end of April 1840 until early March 1841 Okiato, or Russell as it was known, was New Zealand's capital. Along with Hobson and the rest of the government officials there was also a contingent of soldiers from the 80th regiment stationed in Russell and a few other workers and residents.

That Hobson had never intended Russell to be the permanent seat of government is indicated by correspondence on 19 October where he advised the Secretary of State for the Colonies of his intention to set up a capital on the Waitemata Harbour, to be called Auckland (Lee 2006: 26). As his plans became known people soon began to drift away from the township at Okiato. Hobson himself took up permanent residence in Auckland on 13 March 1841 and most of the government staff fol-

lowed suit (Lee 2006: 27–28). The final blow for Russell came on the night of Sunday 1 May 1842 when Government House caught fire and was burnt to the ground (*ibid*: 28). In 1844 Robert FitzRoy, who took over as governor after Hobson's death, severed any remaining ties to the old seat of government by issuing a proclamation which extended the boundaries of the town to include Kororaraka, which was henceforth to be called Russell (Lee 2006: 32). However the property remained in government ownership and was gradually sold off during the remainder of the 19th century.

Much of the land around Okiato remained undeveloped up to the 1940s and the original layout of the settlement could still be traced on the ground at this stage (see Figure 4). Later in the 20th century much of the area was sub-divided resulting in the destruction or modification of most of these visible features. The site of Government House itself and its associated well are preserved as part of a small historic reserve.



4. 1943 Plan of Old Russell by John R. Lee based on a ground survey of visible features (from Lee 2006: 35).

Archaeological excavations

Excavations at the site of New Zealand's first government house in Okiato appear to have been focused on the well and around the house site. A series of test pits, trenches and other features were also investigated but without the excavation plan and notes the exact nature and relationship of these features is not known.

The well

The well at Okiato was established by James Clendon to service his household and remained in use after his home and property was purchased by the government. As archaeological features, wells are usually relatively easy to locate and even when filled in are often defined by a distinct depression. In the case of Okiato the location of the well was already known from Lee's 1943 plan and may have still been visible at the time excavation commenced in 1992.

In 1995 a brief description of the excavation of the well was given in notes on fieldwork in Northland in Maingay (1995: 5):

The Okiato well proved to be over 12 metres deep; it contained numerous structural timbers including joists, shingles and weather boards up to 4.4m long which showed evidence of charring and were almost certainly from the first government house. A number of 19th century bottles were recovered from near the base of the well, also a flax kit and stock of a musket complete with trigger and trigger guard.

From this description it would appear that the filling in of the well was a 19th century event, but an analysis of the material recovered shows that this is not the case. The well was excavated to a depth of 12.7 metres and was filled in with a range of domestic rubbish and building debris throughout this depth. The most obvious point to be made upon first examining the material collected from the

well was that the majority of it appeared to be modern. This is best illustrated by the glassware where of the 225 items retained, 216 were machine-made containers dating from around 1940 up to the 1950s. Machine-made glass was found at depths up to 10 metres down the well. The ceramics are also modern with a minimum number of 38 vessels having manufacture dates ranging from the 1930s to the 1950s. These include thirteen vessels from the Crown Lynn pottery, which did not produce domestic wares in any quantity until after the Second World War. Clearly this evidence suggests that the top ten metres of the well at least was filled in as a single event not before the 1950s.

There is no evidence that the well was deliberately used for disposing of rubbish either immediately after the Government House fire or later in the 19th century. The only positively identified 19th century artefacts during the present analysis were five black beer bases, one case gin base, and three ring-seal bottle tops. All of these items were from the bottom two to three metres of the well. The musket stock described above is also probably an early to mid 19th century item, but was not among the material examined. The five black beers all have pontil formed bases and the case gin base has a blowpipe pontil mark, which are manufacturing attributes which could potentially place them in the period of Government House. However the very small amount of material clearly indicates that the well was not used to dump material destroyed in the 1842 fire. There is evidence in Lee's annotated plan from 1943 that debris from this event was dumped elsewhere, where he remarks on a concentration of domestic rubbish and burnt material to the west of Government House (see Figure 4). Although the provenance of this material has not been tested archaeologically, the presence of 80th Regiment paraphernalia indicates that it relates to the period of Government House.

The large pieces of wood in the well attributed to Government House described above, were not retained and so have not been analysed. As mentioned above the presence of modern rubbish ten metres down the well makes it unlikely that any significant amount of material was dumped in the well immediately after the fire. If they were from Government House at all it is more plausible that any serviceable timbers not destroyed in the fire were reused by later occupants of the site and deposited in the well with the rest of the rubbish in the 1950s.

Test pits and other features

Of more interest was the much smaller amount of artefactual material recovered from excavations other than the well. Although information about the nature of the features and the spatial relationships between them is not available, a few general points can be made. Depths were recorded on the bags from most test pits and features and artefactual material was consistently found no deeper than 250–300 mm below the surface. In many cases sterile subsoil seems to have been reached at depths between 100 and 200 mm. As would be expected small amounts of modern material were found in the top 50 mm, but below this was what would appear to be a layer containing brick fragments, nails and small pieces of domestic ceramics and glassware.

Artefacts from this layer almost certainly relate to the occupation of Government House. Many of the fragments of glass were melted and some ceramic sherds also showed obvious signs of burning. This coupled with early pre-1850 manufacture dates for identified ceramic patterns securely ties this material to the 1842 fire. Many of the brick fragments also appear to date to the early 19th century with some having large cinder inclusions which indicate that they were clamp fired. It is possible that this type of brick could have been made locally or alternatively have been brought in by ship. The distribution of this material across the site and the

lack of larger pieces or concentrations of rubbish suggests that the site was tidied up at some after the 1842 fire.

The early and fragmented nature of the artefacts is best illustrated by the ceramics. Not including the well a total of 307 ceramic sherds were recovered representing a minimum number of 87 vessels. Of these, 237 sherds are decorated by transfer printing, representing 65 vessels. Blue is the dominant colour with 206 sherds, followed by green with 27, purple three, and black just one sherd. Seven patterns were identified, all of which are securely dated or can potentially date to the 1830s. For example three vessels in the Pomona pattern were produced by Elijah Jones between c. 1831 and 1839. Similarly, the Corinthian pattern plate, of which six sherds were found in six different contexts, was produced by John Ridgway between c. 1830 and 1841. Other potentially early ceramic styles apart from the blue transfer printed vessels include a blue shell-edged plate, an industrial slipped bowl and a sprigged jug.

Discussion

The excavations at Okiato, while not extensive, provide a tantalising glimpse into one of the formative chapters of New Zealand's European history. The well, more impressive for its depth than its contents, provides a link between the household established by James Clendon in 1832 and the following occupation by Hobson and other members of his government from April 1841 to May 1842. The small assemblage of broken and burnt artefacts found in a rubble layer across the site provides a direct link with the event of the fire on the evening of 1 May 1842 which destroyed Government House. That the site was abandoned after the fire and not occupied again for some time is clear from the lack of later 19th century material from any of the excavated areas.

Although the site of Government House itself has been partially investigated and is now protected as part of a historic reserve, clearly much of the early European occupation of Okiato from 1832 to 1842 falls outside these bounds. How much evidence of these early activities still remains is not known, but they are likely to have been adversely impacted by modern development. Of particular interest for future research would be the wharf area and Clendon's store and the encampment occupied by soldiers from the 80th Regiment during the period that Russell, as it was then known, was the capital of New Zealand.

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APPENDIX A IDENTIFIED TRANSFER PRINTED PATTERNS

Broseley

Broseley is a similar style pattern to Willow usually found in light blue on tablewares. Fragments from one cup were recovered from three contexts.

Corinthian

Corinthian is a green printed design of which six sherds were found from a single plate. One of the sherds is backmarked with the pattern name and the initials 'J. R.', standing for John Ridgway, operative from c. 1830–1841 (Godden 1991: 533–534). Sherds from this plate are noticeably burnt, presumably from the 1842 fire which destroyed Government House.

Italian

Nine fragments from an blue transfer printed hollowware vessel were identified as Italian pattern. This pattern was first introduced by Spode and continues to be produced by the factory today. This piece was most likely produced in the 1830s.

Palestine

Palestine is a blue printed Oriental style design found on tablewares. At least two plates and one serving vessel form are present in the assemblage. Two different scenes are represented on the dinner plates and all the vessels have the same border. One plate fragment carries a partial backmark '...EST...' identifying the pattern as Palestine. An alternative name for the pattern is Damascus as identical scenes with the same border were issued by Adams under this name. Marked examples by William Adams and Sons are illustrated in Williams (1978: 120–121) and Snyder (1997: 23–25). William Adams and Sons operated under this name from 1819–1864, but these vessels most likely date to the 1830s (Godden 1991: 21).

Pomona

Pomona is a blue printed design depicting a basket of fruit within a border of fruit and C-scrolls (Coysh and Henrywood 1982: 287). Two serving vessels and one plate are present in the assemblage. The plate is backmarked with the pattern name and the initials E. J., which stand for Elijah Jones active from 1831–1839 (Godden 1991: 358).

Scroll

Scroll is a blue printed pattern identified through its distinctive border from examples illustrated in Williams (1978: 409–410). Sherds from two plates are present, one being of dinner plate size and the other a smaller side plate.

Wild Rose

Wild Rose is a blue printed pattern which was popular from the 1830s to the 1850s (Coysh and Henrywood 1982: 399). In New Zealand archaeological sites Wild Rose is rarely found in contexts dating to after the 1850s. One sherd from a plate is represented.

Willow

Willow is one of the most popular transfer prints ever produced and is certainly the most common pattern found in pre-1850 contexts in New Zealand. Fragments from eleven plates and four serving vessels, all in blue, were identified.

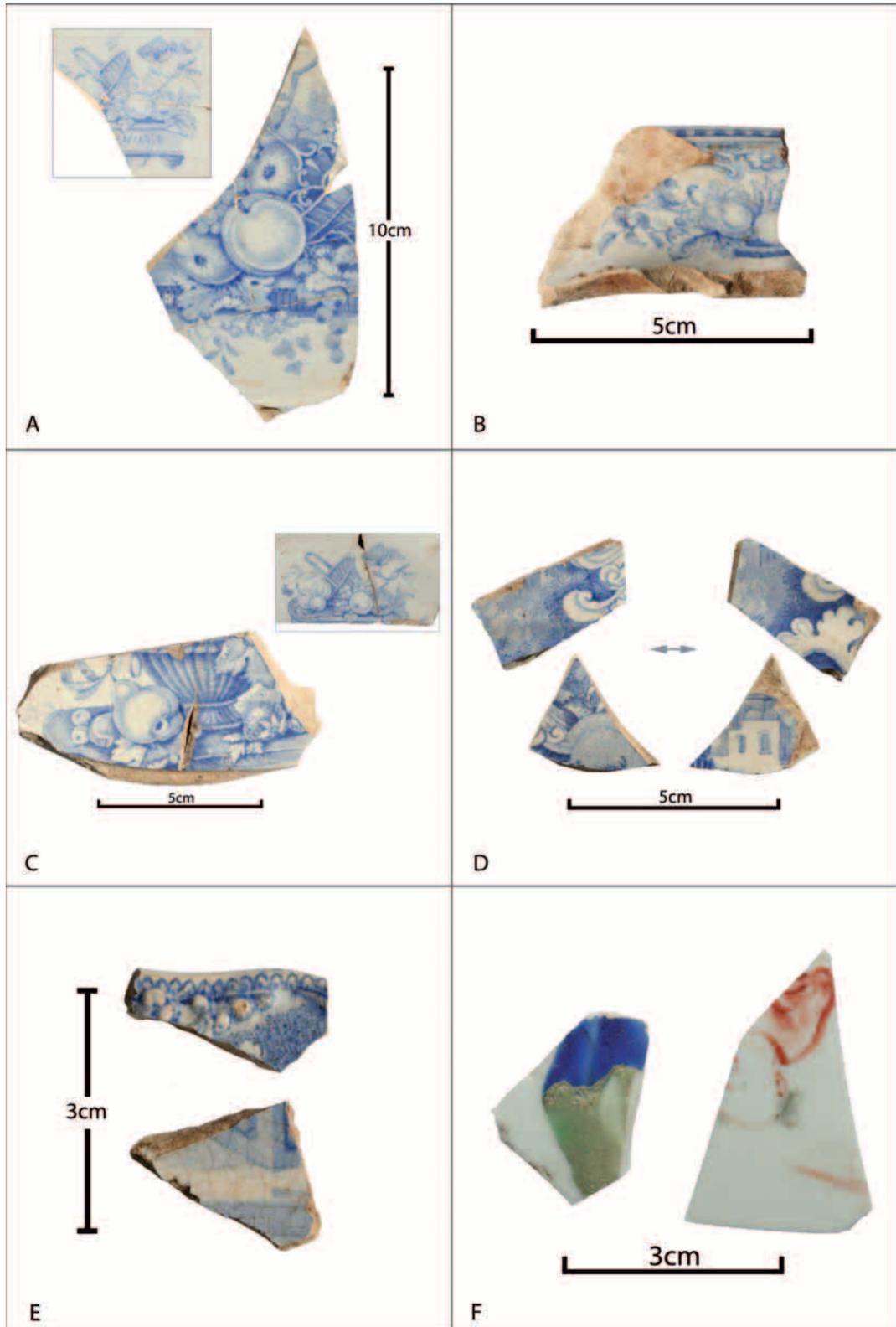


Plate 1 A, Pomona pattern plate with Elijah Jones backmark; B, Pomona pattern serving vessel; C, D, Pomona pattern serving vessel fragments, with partial backmark; E, Plate fragments, unidentified blue printed pattern; F, Handpainted porcelain bowl or cup fragments.

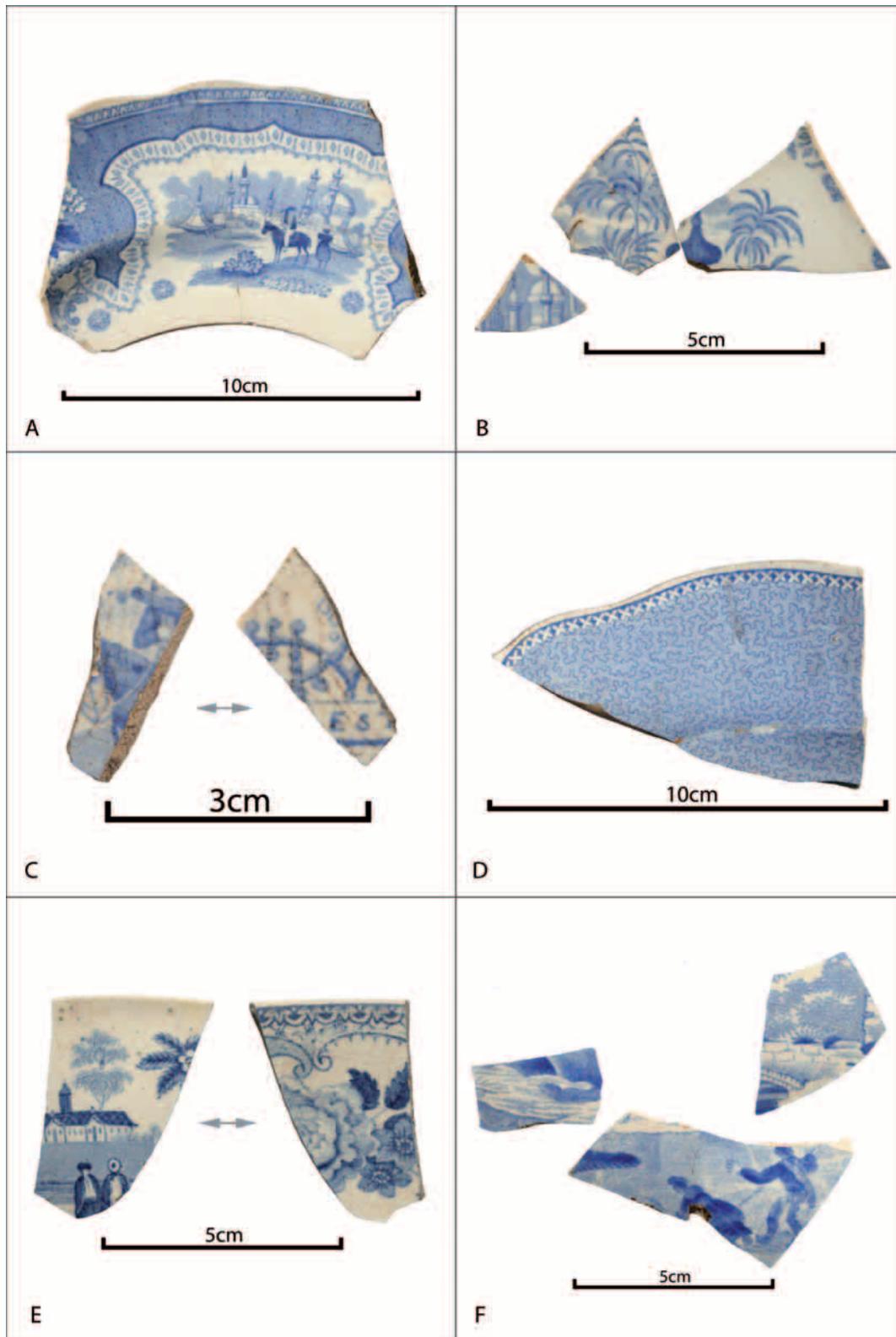


Plate 2 A, Palestine pattern plate rim; B, Palestine pattern plate fragments; C, Partial Palestine back-mark on a blue plate (attributable to W. Adams); D, Scroll pattern plate rim; E, Cup, unidentified blue printed pattern; F, Italian pattern bowl or serving dish.

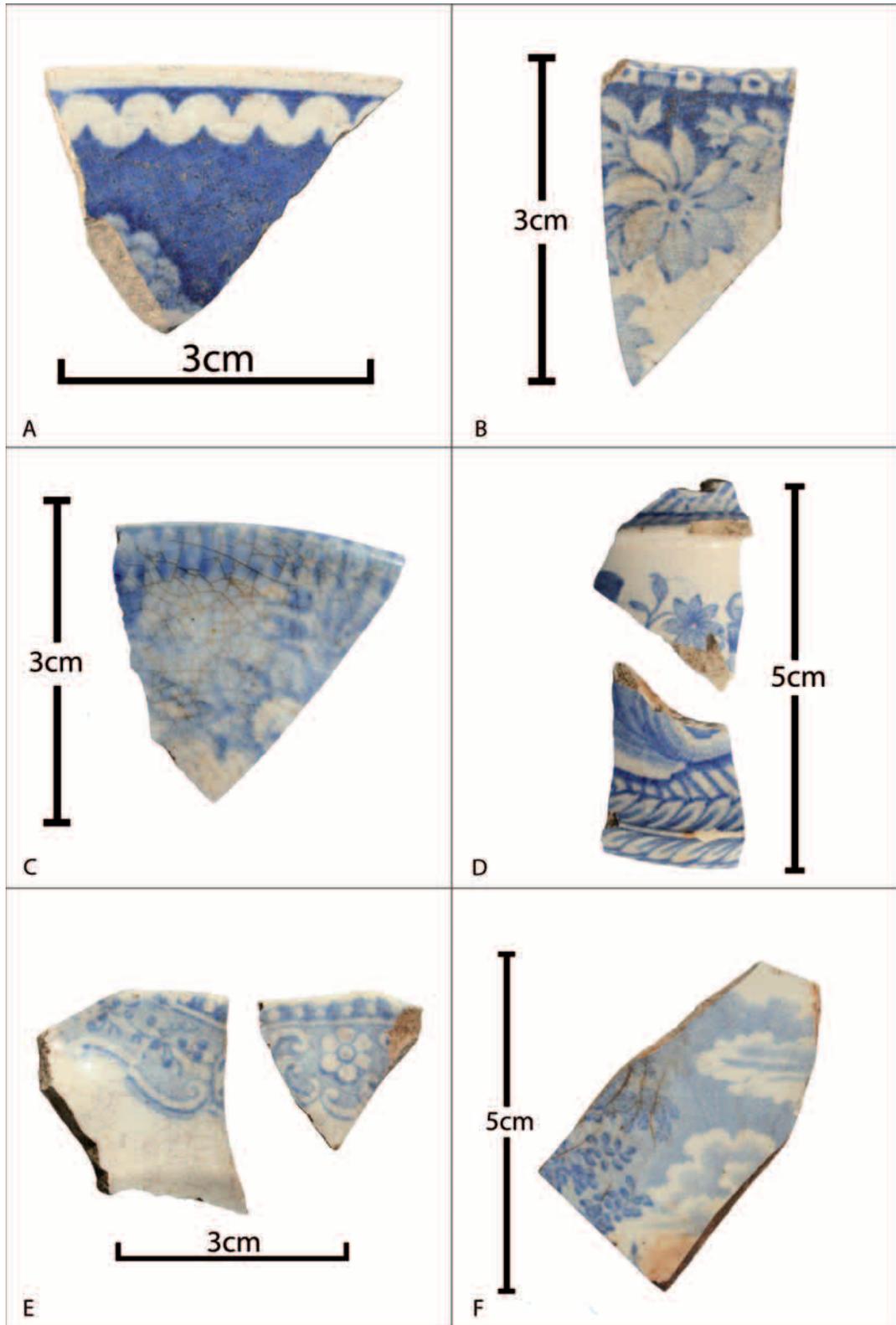


Plate 3 A, Wild Rose pattern plate rim; B, Plate rim, blue unidentified printed pattern; C, Serving vessel rim, blue unidentified printed pattern; D, Jug, blue unidentified printed pattern; E, Jug or sauce boat rim, blue unidentified printed pattern; F, Palestine plate fragment, from a different scene to Plate 2.B.

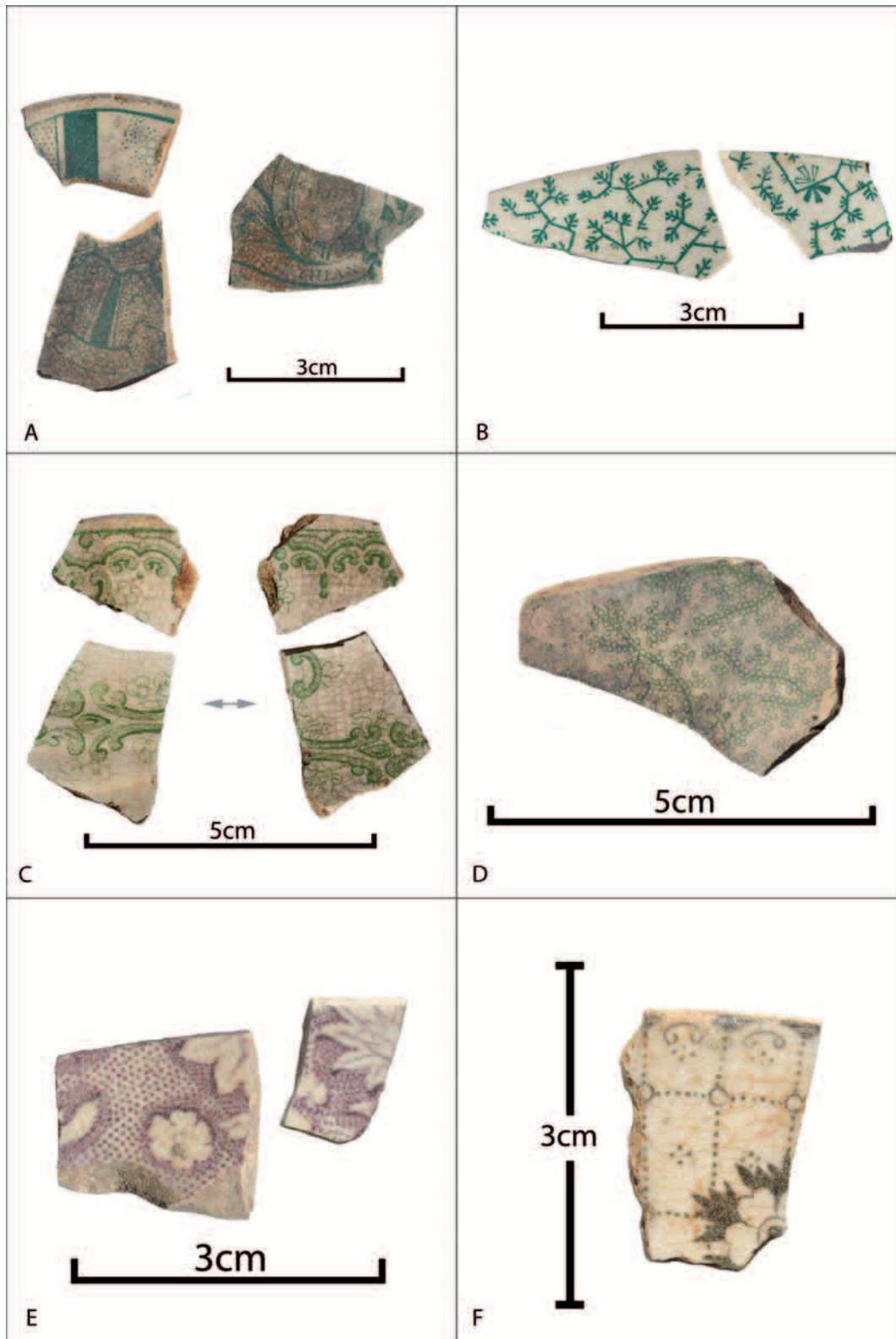


Plate 4 A, Corinthian pattern plate fragments with John Ridgway backmark; B, Saucer, green unidentified printed pattern; C, Cup, green unidentified printed pattern; D, Green 'Coral' type pattern saucer; E, Saucer, purple unidentified printed pattern; F, Plate or saucer rim, black unidentified printed pattern.

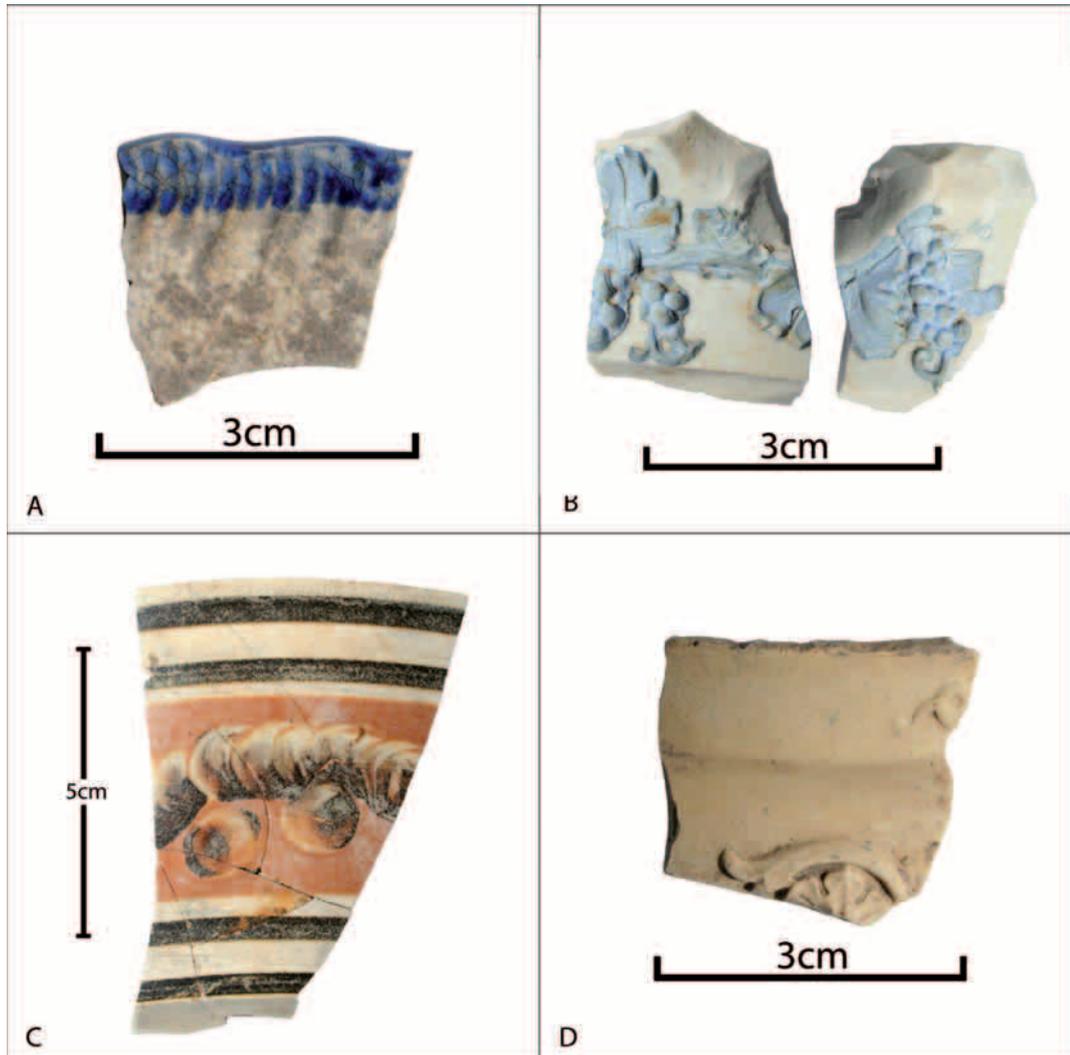


Plate 5 A, Shell Edge style plate rim; B, Semi-vitreous jug, with blue sprigged grapevine decoration; C, Industrial slipware decorated bowl; D, Jug fragment with relief moulded decoration.