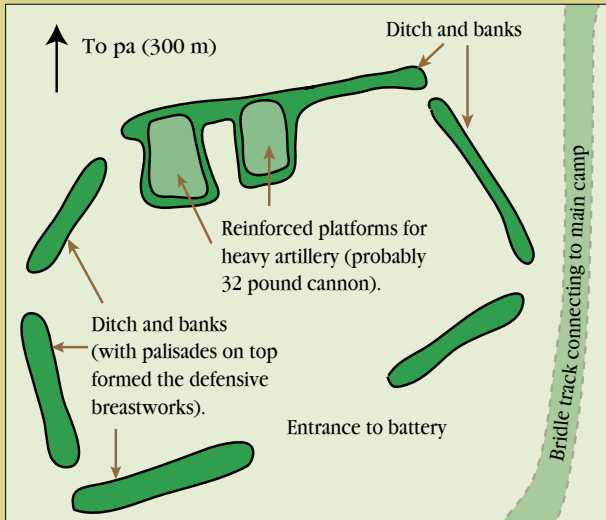


THE BRITISH POSITIONS

The British brought a huge force to Ruapekapeka outnumbering the defenders 3 to 1, but they still had to approach cautiously. The main camp was established about 750 metres from the pa with two gun batteries much closer. The larger of these forward positions was set up to house the mortars and two 32 pounder canons. The smaller battery, closest to the pa, held the Howitzers. These positions were protected by stockades very similar in design to those used on the pa.



Main archaeological features of attackers' forward position.

THE PA'S DEFENSES

Ruapekapeka may not have been the first pa to utilize trenches or to have strong palisades but the combination of design innovations made it one of the most effective against assault by muskets and heavy artillery.

It was a large pa, at 150 by 70 metres, surrounded by two rows of 3-5 metres high palisades. These palisades consisted of puriri tree trunks and split timber lashed together and reinforced with bundles of protective flax padding. Between the two layers was a two metre wide trench divided into numerous gun fighter pits. When attacked the defenders could fire through the outer palisade at ground level while remaining well protected from return fire by the fence and earthen walls of the pits. A second line of defenders could fire from the embankment over the heads of those in the outer trench.

A network of underground connecting tunnels, caves and bomb-proof shelters, strengthened by strong puriri bearers, were built within the pa. The shelters were protected by earthen roofs and robust wooden huts. During times of bombardment they provided excellent protection for the pa's inhabitants in the same way that bomb shelters were later used in WWI. Scattered within and behind the pa were felled tree trunks and raised mounds to provide cover should the palisades be breached and hinder the attackers in the event of a direct assault.

This type of pa was far better equipped to handle cannon fire than traditional pa, but almost as important as its innovative construction was the location. A pa built inland, a long way from European supply sources and navy ships bristling with armaments, was in a strong position. The attackers had to travel through rough, unfamiliar territory, dragging all their equipment with them and would have little choice when it came to finding a suitable base camp.

As a result of its defensive success, many other tribes around New Zealand, took up and developed this pa system during conflicts over the next thirty years.



Above: Extract from Charles Heaphy's sketch of Kawiti's pa (ca. 1860). Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, NZ. B-043-015-3

Left: Overview of attack and defence positions.

Cover: View of the battle from the attackers' main camp showing two rockets being fired at Ruapekapeka Pa (extract). John Williams, 1846. Hocken Library: Uare Taoka O Hakena

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Ruapekapeka Pa

A site guide



Department of Conservation
Te Papa Atawhai

INTRODUCTION

Ruapekepeka Pa was the site of the final battle in the 'War of the North'. The troubles started in the early 1840s as discontent grew over government policies that some saw as detrimental to local Maori interests. Symbolic protests gave way to outright conflict in 1845 and a series of battles were fought inland from Kororareka (Russell). Hone Heke and his uncle, the experienced chief Te Ruki Kawiti, spearheaded the resistance. Other Nga Puhī chiefs, led by Tamati Waka Nene, sided with the British.

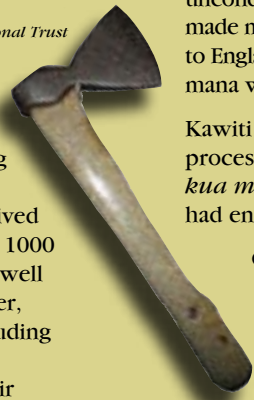


Above: View of Ruapekepeka Pa from the lower stockade at the time that the breach was entered. Cyprian Bridge. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, NZ. A-079-007

Right: Kawiti's tokipātītī. Auckland Museum, on loan to Waitangi National Trust

THE BATTLE AT RUAPEKEPEKA

Ruapekepeka was Kawiti's finest and strongest fighting pa. With months for preparation, he was in a strong defensive position by the time the attacking forces arrived in late December 1845. These consisted of more than 1000 British troops and over 400 allied Nga Puhī who were well armed with three 32 pounder cannons, one 18 pounder, two 12 pound howitzers and seven lighter pieces including four mortars and two rocket tubes. In stark contrast there were only 400 - 500 Maori within the pa and their armaments consisted of two light cannons and muskets.



The leader of the attacking forces was Colonel Despard, an aging commander not known for his strategic abilities. On arrival he saw that the Maori forces were relatively few in number and comparatively ill-armed, however he knew from previous battles that they could both defend themselves and strike effectively at their enemies. Accordingly, he built two forward gun batteries in front of his main camp to get most of his cannons into effective firing range. They started firing on the 1st of January and continued, non stop, for ten days. The impact was small, at least to start with, since the pa was constructed with many underground bunkers and connecting tunnels to protect its inhabitants. Initially Despard allowed only one piece to be fired at a time. This allowed Maori within the pa time to put out fires and effect temporary repairs, but it also enabled his gunners to accurately align their guns on the pa's front palisade. Then, on the 10th of January, Despard ordered a mass bombardment and breached the wall in two places.

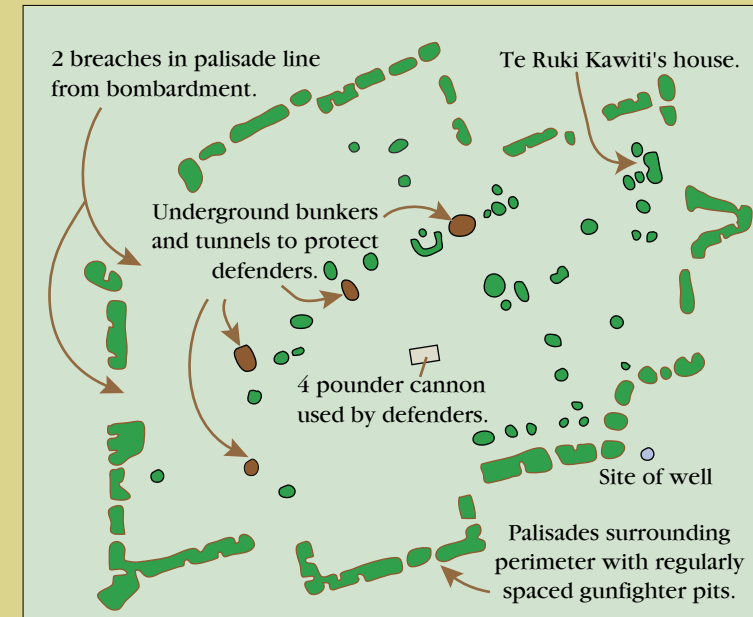
Most of the defenders were out the back of the pa when the British entered but fierce fighting soon ensued. Eventually the defenders withdrew into the surrounding bush where they had established safe positions. The attackers knew that to follow would almost certainly be fatal. So, once again, the Government troops were left with an empty pa while Kawiti and Heke remained at large. Despard's troops buried their dead and burnt Ruapekepeka Pa before returning to the Bay of Islands.

The War of the North was over. Peace was made with Nga Puhī, mediated by the chief Pomare. Grey accepted the settlement and issued an unconditional pardon to all involved. While he made much of this British 'victory' in dispatches to England, no land was confiscated and no mana was lost.

Kawiti had been cautious throughout the process, and told Governor Grey "*Mehe mea kua mutukoe*" (If you have had enough I have had enough).

Grey replied "*Kuamutu abau*" (I have had enough).

Kawiti then offered Grey a kotuku feather, a priceless gift, and peace was assured.



Archaeological plan of pa site showing main features

An artist's impression of Ruapekepeka Pa. Animation Research Limited, Dunedin, NZ.

