Abstract: Peter Whitaker Taylor, born 1 January 1925
Recorded: 21 Jan 2005 Engineering Library
Interviewer: Patsy Hulse University of Auckland
Abstracter: Susan Brookes Oral History Archive

(?) means the spelling may be wrong.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tape 1 of 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Side 1 of 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 Name, date &amp; place of birth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 Played with Meccano as a boy (described Meccano), &amp; used it to build mostly structural things like towers or bridges. He gave exhibitions of what he built, and charged 1p a time to look at them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65 Early days in Auckland: there was very little traffic. First school was the Normal school close to the Training College. Then to Auckland Grammar School.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>90 Studied maths, science and a little Latin.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100 Did his Intermediate year, then joined the School of Engineering in the ‘old tin shed’. It was very primitive. There were about 6 staff, who were very earnest &amp; well intentioned.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>115 He began university in 1942. For civil engineering, the final year had to be done at Canterbury</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>130 During the Depression university staff worked for half salary for a year. During the war the tin sheds were used.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>140 Outstanding/innovative staff: Prof Leech was appointed during the war. He was highly intelligent, Head of the School and its only professor, very influential. He looked for a new site for the School at Western Springs &amp; then Ardmore, did war related research including a smoke screen machine &amp; a range finder in the Hauraki Gulf</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>177 One of the first graduates was Arthur Mead who became the Waterworks Engineer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>208 Outstanding students: one went to work in Canada in geotechnology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>222 He had his graduation postoned for a year until he had done the practical work required to complete the degree. He worked in the Auckland Harbour workshops, where he replaced gas cylinders in the gulf beacons etc. He worked for cash in the stores and on the wharves as a seagull, where he got reasonable pay for not much work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>247 He thinks his university fees were 80 pounds per year – which was quite a lot at the time. There were no student loans or allowances, your parents paid or you earned it yourself. There was a fairly generous bursary.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>265 Had to do the final year at Canterbury for Civil, this was not the case for Mechanical. Canterbury Engineering School was much bigger than Auckland’s. Canterbury had highly qualified staff with overseas degrees, though they weren’t all of the highest calibre. The best lecturer had a terrible stammer, but was the most interesting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>288 He had a B.Sc in maths &amp; geology &amp; so on. And a B.E Hons, which you got by sitting selected, harder, questions in the final exam</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Wanted to join the engineering consultants working in Auckland as his first job. Visited them all, but, as he was 21 he would have to be paid the basic wage of 6 pounds 10 shillings, and they didn’t want to pay that.

Met Ian Mead, a fellow student, who advised him to go to his father Arthur Mead. He was immediately offered a job working in the Waterworks in the Town Hall in Auckland, designing & drawing additions & alterations to the waterworks, filtration plants, etc. It was an interesting job.

Spent some time with a surveyor doing the Cosseys Creek work in Hunua. The surveyor interested him in reading the Russian novelists.

He worked there for 2 years, then wanted to go overseas. His Mother was from England and thought he would go there. He applied for a job in Iran instead as first assistant to the area civil engineer in Karnikin. (?) Getting to Iran: he went by passenger steamer to Melbourne; then by train to Sydney where they stayed in a boarding house in a seedier area (which was an eye opener); then by tanker for 28 days to Abadan (then the biggest refinery in the world); as it was a return trip the tanks were filled with seawater & they could use them as a swimming pool; the Captain was a remarkable man who collected operatic recordings which he played for them; Abadan was run by BP.

Some stayed in Abadan, but he went north to ‘Solomon’s Mosque’ (Masjed Soleyman (?)) ruins which are thousands of years old)

He and the surveyor (Pouphassian) were involved in setting up the improved highway between Abadan and the oilfields,. Being alone out there was difficult as the locals spoke Pharsee and/or Arabic. He realized he would have to learn the languages and did so. Afterwards he was promoted to the office at Solomon’s Mosque

While working at a newly discovered oil field, his job was to supervise the construction of all the buildings, pumping stations, water supply, waste management, etc etc. He enjoyed it immensely. He had a driver called Ali who spoke Pharsee & quite a bit of English. He learnt Pharsee from Ali and from classes given at the Head Office. He didn’t bother to learn Arabic.

About 8 people were on the tanker with him, some worked in the refinery and visited him in the field. They could borrow horses to ride in the desert. It was very very hot, and only the very high up people had air conditioning. They slept very hot, and only the very high up people had air conditioning. They slept under mosquito nets. It didn’t rain in summer, only in winter, and although there wasn’t much it was enough to make the desert blossom.

End of side one
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Text</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Tape 1 of 2**<br>**Side 2 of 3** | **1** He was in Iran from about 1949-**11** The rainy season in Iran coincided with Xmas, and some would try to celebrate as a Northern Xmas.
| | **22** He is still in contact with Sam Robottom (?). They used to go camping with Iranian guides, he remembers seeing what looked like a snake’s head coming out of the firewood only to find it was just a bent piece of wood. There are some dangerous insects & animals in Iran, and you learn to be wary.
| | **49** Although it was desert there were mosquitoes; the company sprayed any pool near the camp with kerosene. Malaria was a real danger.
| | **66** Life was very pleasant, although you never got used to the heat. The company provided food. He lived in the bachelors’ mess. He was mess resident, so was responsible for ordering the food. He thought that buying the food himself would save the cook’s rake off and also improve his Pharsee. He made some mistakes in marketing.
| | **102** You had to have a ‘boy’ to act as your porter and guide when you went to the market, or you were hassled until you did.
| | **118** He was in Iran for 2 years, towards the end of which he was also in Iraq at a new oil field. He was the Field Civil Engineer for the District by this time. There were only 2 Europeans there, him and another manager. They supervised the whole of the development of the field initially.
| | **140** His Pharsee was an immense help, as the workers included Kurds, Jews, Sunnis & Shiates. He saw a Shia service on the martyrdom of Ali in a Northern town once.
| | **174** While standing in for the Chief Civil Engineer, who was on leave, he was in a serious car accident and his face hit the steering wheel spokes. So he was airlifted to London and the plastic surgery unit at Park Royal hospital. He had around 30 operations over a year or more.
| | **209** Between operations he was released from hospital. He knew a man at Cambridge University, and attended his lectures on soil mechanics. He also did some teaching there mostly in drawing and design.
| | **220** He helped in the soil mechanics laboratory and made some improvements in the design of the shear box used there.
| | **228** As a boy in the 1930s, the Civic Theatre was being built in Auckland. There was a big hole on the Queen St side of the building that they used for truck access, and even though he was young, he realized that this section would subside in the future. He turned out to be right and the hole had to be filled a couple of times over succeeding years. That is how he got interested in soil mechanics. Also, he read the book ‘soil mechanics for road engineers’ by the DSIR, Road Research laboratory in Britain. When he left the London County Council in 1953, they gave him a copy of this book as a memento.
| | **265** In 1953 he returned to NZ to the staff of the University of Auckland – for the wrong reasons – because he got a paid tour of the UK universities and a free trip by steamer to NZ.
Although he had intended to only work for 2 years and then to get a 'proper' job in design & construction, he found he really enjoyed lecturing - preparing and giving lectures, and the student's reactions.

The School of Engineering was at Ardmore when he arrived. He commuted from Mt Wellington each day.

He was given the job of converting the student's bike shed into overnight accommodation for lecturers. He enjoyed that too, and it became rather pleasant, with a kitchen & a lounge & 3-4 single bedrooms. It was in the same building as the office, and close to the library.

The School had Neil Mowbray as Prof of Civil Engineering (his wife was Joyce), Gordon Bogle as Prof of Electrical Eng, and Ray Meyer as Prof of Mechanical Eng.

When Mowbray retired in 1978-9 he became Head of Civil Eng.

There were numbers of foreign students & at least 2 unfilled positions in Civil, and teaching loads were heavy. There was one Civil office typist (Heidi (?)) and no administrative staff. This is after the move back to the city.

When he became due to be Dean he caused a bit of a fuss. This position had formerly rotated between the Dept Heads. He told the committee that he was fully committed already. Ray Meyer promoted himself to permanent Dean. Fred Kettleborough (?) became head of Mechanical, he now works in Austin Texas.

Joyce Mowbray was from England, and teased Kettleborough in a Yorkshire accent.

Ardmore days: It had been hangers and Nissan huts during the war, with some other buildings, so was not ideal for teaching or laboratories. John Percy designed an upper floor in one of the hangers to act as a lecture room with labs underneath.

Student pranks: The training college staff were the butt of many pranks, as were the School's staff e.g. to lift a car and put it on top of things like 4 oil drums. A car was once placed between two buildings in such a way that it couldn't be driven out.

Ardmore: Harold Wallace was a structural engineer who designed some most unusual structures around Auckland. He could keep his students laughing.

Cecil Segedin came out 2 days a week to teach Engineering Maths. He had done his PhD at Cambridge. He led the tramping club, and Taylor became very keen on tramping.

Soil Mechanics was introduced as a new subject as a part of civil Engineering. It is now known as geotechnology.

When he came to Ardmore, Mowbray had taught a short course on soil mechanics for about a year for 1 hour a week. He took over & taught it for 2 hours a week.

He developed the Soil Mechanics Laboratory, and equipped it. It was also used by some consultants for testing, and the charges for this helped augment the equipment allowance. The business grew, and the soil mechanics technician would be paid to work over weekends with Taylor to process the tests.

When he went on leave, he couldn't abandon his clients, so he set up a soil mechanics laboratory in Auckland, closer to the demand/ the consultants. He approached 2 engineers who had worked on the harbour bridge, Ralph Tonkin & Colin Taylor (who went on to form Tonkin & Taylor).
98  It started off in a small way in some rooms of the Professional Club

107  This became unsatisfactory as, if there were any problems, the test results were blamed. The laboratory became ‘in house’ to Tonkin & Taylor.

120  He attended conferences and met world wide leaders in his field, which is a very useful way of keeping staff in touch with big overseas universities and leading figures

135  His research concentrated on earthquake engineering, following Mowbray's lead. His area was the effect of foundations on the response of building structures to earthquakes. The 1855 Wellington earthquake leveled most of the brick buildings, and most were rebuilt in timber, and turned out to be more resilient.

162  He studied the effects of the foundation conditions and type on building response during earthquakes

170  Moving the School back to the Auckland campus. This took about a year, with staff moving between the two places using frequent buses. It went in a happy way

189  People were happy to be back into the city and the new facilities & laboratories were welcomed. Cecil Segedin had his own dept around then (Engineering Maths & Systems Analysis he thinks).

204  Chemical & Materials Eng was a new dept too

220  Students had lived in at Ardmore, it was hoped that moving to the city meant that they could mix with students from other faculties. Instead of doing this they changed their student cloakroom into an engineering student common room, and didn’t want to mix.

238  The students quickly earned a name for themselves in the city – and not always a good one. A particular publication by the engineering students was a compilation of university songs. This annoyed the Student Union

260  His being Head of the Civil Dept caused a problem because the choice was between him and Raudkivi, and Raudkivi thought he should have got the job, and was somewhat unco-operative afterwards.

280  He worked on the report on university policy for technological education. The subcommittee was himself, John Percy, Cecil Segedin, Gordon Bogle. They were to look at the whole of the engineering education system in NZ. He looked at the report recently, and it is still up to date in many ways e.g. in the need for a 4 year course.

327  When commuting to work one day he saw the university registrar Jimmy Kirkness waiting for a bus, so gave him a lift. Kirkness asked how he could afford to run a car when he was just a new staff member. He explained his work in Iran had paid for it. Kirkness afterwards got a bill from Tonkin & Taylor that listed Taylor as one of the consultants, and rang Taylor in high dudgeon. Consulting by academic staff could be a contentious issue.

362  Thoughts on the School: He thinks that it is a pity that the departments change their names so often. While there are some aspects of which he disapproves, he thinks that it is going well, and he is proud to have been on the staff.

372  He retired in 1986

377  He consulted for some years after his retirement. Some of his consulting work included the Whangarei Dam (Whau Valley dam) – it was, at its time, the most advanced dam of its sort.

400  End of side 3