Abstract: Peter Whitaker Taylor, born 1 January 1925
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Interviewer: Patsy Hulse University of Auckland
Abstracter: Susan Brookes Oral History Archive

(?) means the spelling may be wrong.

Tape 1 of 2	
Side 1 of 3	
20	Name, date & place of birth
30	Played with **Meccano** as a boy (described Meccano), & 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
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.**
90	Studied maths, science and a little Latin.
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 & well intentioned.
115	He began university in **1942.** For **civil engineering**, the final year had to be done at **Canterbury**
130	During the Depression university staff worked for half salary for a year. During the war the tin sheds were used.
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** & then **Ardmore**, did **war related research** including a smoke screen machine & a range finder in the Hauraki Gulf
177	One of the first graduates was **Arthur Mead** who became the **Waterworks Engineer.**
208	**Outstanding students**: one went to work in Canada in geotechnology
222	He had his graduation postponed 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
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.
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.
288	He had a **B.Sc in maths & geology** & so on. And a **B.E Hons**, which you got by sitting selected, harder, questions in the final exam

298	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.
310	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.
323	Spent some time with a surveyor doing the Cosseys Creek work in **Hunua**. The surveyor interested him in reading the Russian novelists
338	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**.(?)
356	**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**
397	Some stayed in Abadan, but he went north to '**Solomon's Mosque**' (Masjed Soleyman (?)) ruins which are thousands of years old)
405	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**
433	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
460	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 outside 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
481	End of side one

Tape 1 of 2	
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 time 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.

275	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.
285	The **School of Engineering** was at **Ardmore** when he arrived. He commuted from Mt Wellington each day.
297	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.
310	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
321	When **Mowbray** retired in 1978-9 he became **Head of Civil Eng**
323	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
333	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.
352	**Joyce Mowbray** was from England, and teased **Kettleborough** in a Yorkshire accent
359	**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.
375	**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.
408	**Ardmore: Harold Wallace** was a structural engineer who designed some most unusual structures around Auckland. He could keep his students laughing.
418	**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**.
432	**End of side 2**

Tape 2 of 2	
Side 3 of 3	
17	**Soil Mechanics** was introduced as a new subject as a part of civil Engineering. It is now known as **geotechnology**.
30	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.
38	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.
74	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 re-built 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