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How do you solve a problem like Pitcairn?

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How do you solve a problem like Pitcairn?

This paper examines the historical, administrative, and socio-political history of Pitcairn Island, a British Overseas Territory in the Pacific, which was compounded by the external threat of French nuclear testing in the Pacific. Despite its negligible economic and strategic value, Pitcairn exemplifies the complexities of Britain's smaller territories in the post-decolonisation era, because the UK remains responsible for its administration and people. The island's isolation, dependency on external aid, and declining population have posed unique challenges for British policymakers, who have grappled with balancing local autonomy and cultural identity with the logistical and financial demands of maintaining such a remote territory. The study contextualises Pitcairn's position as a "problematic remnant" of empire, exploring its symbolic importance, the implications of nuclear testing in its vicinity, and the broader legacy of imperial governance. Highlighting Pitcairn's social, economic, and administrative history, the paper situates the island within the broader narratives of decolonisation and the "smaller territories problem," ultimately reflecting on its status as a microcosm of Britain's imperial legacies and the limits of post-imperial responsibility.

Keywords: decolonisation; remnants; nuclear weapons; British Overseas Territories; politics.

Introduction

In 1949, an article was published in the *Spectator* stating that 'it is apparent, unless measures are taken, the days of the historic colony of Pitcairn in the South Pacific are limited.'[1] The lack of economic and strategic value was later acknowledged by the Colonial Office (CO) in 1960 which stated 'it is paradoxical that [the South Pacific] is the last major place that we retain colonial responsibilities'.[2] As Reid Cowell, Commissioner for the South Pacific Commission, admitted in 1964 'there is really no simple solution to the problem of administering a rock in the middle of the ocean …'[3] It is striking that these arguments were not just localised to the immediate postwar decades

when decolonisation swept through European empires. In 1990, the Office of Governor of Pitcairn Island wrote to Douglas Hurd, Foreign Secretary, that being Governor is a 'romantic sounding title … but it is not an easy office to discharge' owing to the logistics of travel and its geographic isolation from New Zealand and the rest of the Commonwealth.[4] Furthermore, the Ministry of Overseas Development (ODM) noted in 1993 that 'the key [question] is when [does] it becomes unreasonable to spend more and more on fewer and fewer people when the rising cost of maintaining Pitcairn begins to outweigh the political cost of declining to do so?'[5]

Pitcairn's precarious status as a British Overseas Territory (BOT) exemplifies the complexities of governance and identity after decolonisation. Despite its lack of economic or strategic value, Pitcairn—alongside its sister islands Henderson, Ducie, and Oeno—remained a BOT by choice, sustained by the desires of its small population (now fewer than 40) to retain British sovereignty.[6] This desire was rooted in both a sense of cultural identity and the practical benefits of British protection. Yet for the British Government (HMG), Pitcairn posed unique challenges. The island's extreme isolation, dependency on external aid, and declining population highlighted the logistical and political difficulties of administering such territories.

The aim of this paper is to historically analyse Pitcairn's social, economic, and administrative history which will show how it charted a path of continued dependency. Framing this within the political issue of smaller states during decolonisation and the end of empire will emphasise that Pitcairn was a difficult territory to dispose of. Pitcairn is the last remaining BOT in the Pacific, following the decolonisation of Tuvalu (1978), Kiribati (1979), Solomon Islands (1978), and Vanuatu (1980) and as one of 14 UK Overseas Territories, it is also the world's least populated territory. It remains an anachronism, not because it remains attached to the metropole, but because of its geographic isolation, dependency on aid and its shrinking population.

These challenges were heightened following 1966 when the French government conducted atmospheric nuclear tests on Moruroa, an island in French Polynesia, located approximately 600 miles (1,000 kilometres) from Pitcairn following Algerian independence. Crucially, Moruroa was upwind from Pitcairn, raising concerns about nuclear fallout and the safety of residents. Despite Pitcairn's isolation and small population, the British government was compelled to monitor the situation and address the potential dangers of nuclear contamination, which had both political and economic implications. In 1966, France and the UK held discussions in Paris regarding nuclear testing in the Pacific, focusing on health and safety concerns. These talks concluded that the French were unable to provide conclusive evidence that all risks to the inhabitants of Pitcairn could be entirely ruled out necessitating British action to protect the islanders.

Pitcairn serves as a key example of how smaller territories, the remnants of the British Empire, continue to be sources of contention. While the British government had a duty to safeguard these territories and their populations, this obligation often conflicted with concerns about Pitcairn's future—whether that be continuing as BOT, or as will be seen later, evacuation or full association with New Zealand.

Historians of empire have long examined Britain's smaller territories. However, these studies are often overshadowed by research on larger, more geopolitically significant colonies.[7] Whilst some scholarship references Pitcairn, it is often relegated to historical footnotes in the broader historiography. However, its history reveals how even the smallest territories reflected the enduring tensions of imperial governance: the challenges of balancing local autonomy with metropolitan oversight, the economic burdens of sustaining unviable territories, and the geopolitical sensitivities of relinquishing control.

Peter Clegg's research on the BOTs includes Pitcairn, particularly focusing on its legal, social, and economic systems.[8] W. David McIntyre's work on decolonisation and the Pacific Islands touches on

Pitcairn in the context of regional geopolitics and the forces driving colonial independence. However, while McIntyre's scholarship is valuable for contextualising Pitcairn, it does not analyse why the island remains a BOT to this day.[9] Additional scholarship from Aldrich and Connell's *The Last Colonies* examine colonial remnants as vestiges of a larger system and is useful for contextualising smaller territories.[10] Aldrich and Connell 'revisited' the *Last Colonies* in 2020, exploring the changing geopolitical challenges such as Brexit, to imperial remnants since first publication in the 1990s.[11] Andrekos Varnava traces the origins and legacies of Akrotiri and Dhekelia in the British Sovereign Base Areas of Cyprus, emphasising their strategic significance and their challenge to the notion of Cypriot decolonisation, linking remnants of empire, their ongoing strategic use and the end of empire.[12] Parsons' chapter in *The Oxford Handbook of the Ends of Empire* is particularly significant for remnants and smaller territories because it links their history to the UK's, expanding on why they remain attached and expanding on the metropolitan-peripheral link.[13] Nichola Harmer's work on identity and 'Britishness' in the BOTs, particularly the British Virgin Islands and St. Helena, examines how the local identities 'nest within British identity' while maintaining a distinct sense of local uniqueness.[14] This balance of belonging and autonomy is a recurring theme among small BOTs, reflecting the diverse ways in which imperial identities have been negotiated and redefined in the post-colonial era.

Pitcairn also intersects with broader debates about the legacies of colonialism and the nature of imperial governance. While some general works on decolonisation, such as Nicholas J. White's *Decolonisation*, acknowledge these remnants, they often treat them as minor or 'irritating' aspects of the British Empire.[15] More comprehensive analyses like John Darwin's *The Empire Project* and *Britain and Decolonisation* discuss the residues of British imperialism but fail to frame how these territories fit within the broader imperial system.[16] More recently, Martin Thomas' *Ends of Empire and a World Remade* underlines that imperial connections 'were too complex to be severed by a surgical cut' stressing the ongoing debates over what decolonisation actually is.[17] This article addresses this gap and develops the scholarship to show that even small territories can reveal bigger

stories, namely that these small territories are not unique and have analogous histories to other smaller territories which have been troubled by external threats. Pitcairn's history exemplifies this adaptability, as British policymakers navigated the challenges of managing a territory that was both an administrative burden and a symbol of imperial continuity.

At the heart of this analysis is the "smaller territories problem," a term used by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) to describe the challenges posed by territories like Pitcairn and those 'too small to stand on their own.'[18] Unlike larger colonies, which could pursue independence or negotiate new relationships with Britain, smaller territories were often deemed unviable as independent states. Yet their retention posed significant economic and political challenges, particularly as Britain sought to redefine its global role in the post-war era. As Margery Perham, historian and one-time advisor to the Attlee government, observed in her 1961 BBC Reith Lecture:

> Sixteen years ago, we ruled some 600,000,000 people … We shall soon be left with some small and scattered ports and islands. We may have a sense of association, even affection, toward them. But, in realistic terms, some of them represent obligations rather than assets. Even the utility of some of the once cherished military bases is beginning to look rather questionable in the age of jets and atoms. The Britain of 1961 is very different too as regards her external power from the Britain of 1939 or even 1945.[19]

Smaller territories in the empire had a troubled history after World War Two, with the post-war Clement Attlee government struggling to harmonise their viability with broader aims of decolonisation which was 'to guide the Colonial Territories to responsible self-government within the Commonwealth' something difficult to do in sparsely populated, geographically remote regions.[20] The Rees Committee, established by Attlee, explored constitutional paths for smaller territories recommending a midway status between dependency and full self-governance as 'Island or City States.' Although unpublished, the report underscored the significance of these smaller territories within the imperial system.[21] Reconciling smaller states with the desire to guide colonies toward self-government was challenging due to their diverse social, economic, and demographic profiles. By 1955, the Labour Party's pamphlet *Facing the Facts in the Colonies* acknowledged that not all colonies could stand alone, with Lord Ogmore, minister in the CO, noting that 'special arrangements'

were necessary for smaller states like St. Helena, contrasting them with larger colonies like Nigeria.[22] Despite this acknowledgment, no comprehensive policy was developed, and imperial inertia prevailed.

The relationship between these territories and Britain's international standing was further complicated by issues highlighted in a 1978 speech by Ted Rowlands, Parliamentary Under-Secretary at the FCO. Rowlands contrasted the traditional view of the 'diplomat as the polished negotiator' with 'the Governor of the Falkland Islands [in reality] tramps around rural hamlets to meet residents; Anguillans take pot-shots at the unprotected house of our Commissioner; combating illegal immigration from China to Hong Kong, and Diego Garcia.'[23] Rowlands described the challenges faced by British governors and commissioners in these territories, emphasising a sense of responsibility that the British government was reluctant to abandon, despite the absence of clear solutions.[24]

Sir Hilton Poynton, Permanent Under-Secretary at the Colonial Office, resisted the idea of relinquishing these territories simply because they were seen as nuisances, stressing the importance of concluding decolonisation carefully, rather than hastily.[25] Smaller states also posed diplomatic challenges at the UN, where they risked devaluing the institution and its resolutions. This tension clashed with Britain's self-image as a champion of self-determination, a principle it had applied to hundreds of millions of people. In a 1968 interview, Commonwealth Secretary George Thomson echoed this concern, noting that many smaller territories lacked the resources necessary for independence, reflecting the prevailing view among British officials.[26]

Pitcairn's history, particularly the potential contamination from nuclear fallout, and the 'smaller territories' contextual backdrop, underscores the concept of the 'Janus-faced [and] late-imperial' state, as described by Sarah Stockwell, where Britain found itself in a paradoxical position,

embodying both post-colonial and colonial identities.[27] Pitcairn epitomises this duality—an island the British government was reluctant to maintain yet bound by duty to support. This study aims to situate Pitcairn within these broader historiographical frameworks, demonstrating how its history illuminates the enduring legacies of empire and the complexities of decolonisation. Examining Pitcairn in detail, therefore, integrates remnants into this broader history of Empire, revealing their role as constituent parts of a larger system as well as situating them alongside other vestiges. Such analysis enriches social, political, and economic histories of imperialism.

The Historical background.

Pitcairn Island is one of the most isolated places in the world. Its nearest neighbour, Tahiti, lies 1,350 miles away, while Auckland, its communication hub, is 3,300 miles away; Panama, its trading gateway to the USA and Europe is 4,100 miles to the east.[28] As the High Commission in Wellington observed in 1976, Pitcairn is as far from Wellington (the current administrative centre) as Tehran is from London.[29] This pronounced isolation has shaped Pitcairn's history, contributing to its foundation and subsequent status as a distant outpost. Its remoteness within the Empire, and later as a vestige of it, left it too distant to warrant sustained attention and too small to inspire a cohesive policy.

Pitcairn's history is largely anchored in its settlement, with the Mutiny on the Bounty standing as one of the most renowned naval stories of the British Empire, which in turn, according to Alison Bashford, produced an idiosyncratic society.[30] Pitcairn's identity is deeply tied to its origins as the refuge for the Bounty mutineers, often imagined as an empty island in which fugitives could start afresh and 'where one's existence can be lived this side of Eden according to God's plan, where the Gospel is free to reign.'[31] This unique narrative has cemented Pitcairn's iconic status, with an estimated 1,200 books, 3,200 magazine articles, countless newspaper stories, documentary films, and three major Hollywood movies dedicated to the mutiny on the Bounty.[32] However, there is only limited historiographical

interest in Pitcairn's place within the British Empire and later as an Overseas Territory. Nevertheless, it has a long and varied history which mirrors the rise and fall of the British Empire.

After mutineers settled on Pitcairn, murder, alcoholism and social divisions took over. In the beginnings of the nineteenth century, Pitcairn increasing came under the protection of visiting British naval ships and in 1838 HMS *Fly* called at the island where residents asked for protection from the Royal Navy. Captain Elliot agreed and drew up a basic constitution and legal code for the islanders.[33] Officially, Pitcairn became a British colony in 1887 under the British Settlements Act part of the British Western Pacific Territories where it was administered from Suva, Fiji until 1970.[34]

Recent focus has been on Pitcairn's legal and constitutional history, particularly following the underage sex scandals that came to light in the early 21st Century highlighting how Pitcairn's isolation shielded it from external scrutiny. The ensuing trials were complicated by the lack of an existing judicial system on the island, necessitating the creation of the Supreme Court of Pitcairn specifically for these cases.[35] In the aftermath, a new constitution was established, notable for being three times the length of the U.S. Constitution.[36] These events raised concerns about Pitcairn's future, leading the *Guardian* to speculate that the island was 'in the last chance saloon,' though these fears ultimately did not materialise.[37]

Historically, Pitcairn's settlement by mutineers is one that, taken literally, was an act of rebellion against colonial authority, engendering suspicion of external authority in the population. This mistrust influenced Pitcairn's relationship with the United Kingdom which has been described as one of 'neglect' rather than 'protect' placing the island in a subordinate or peripheral-power relationship.[38]

Pitcairn's Administrative and Economic History.

Administratively, Pitcairn is as remote as its geography; managed from Wellington, New Zealand with the British High Commissioner to New Zealand holding the dual role of Governor of Pitcairn, albeit as a non-resident. Significant authority is vested in the Governor, who holds substantial power, but it is seldom used, deferring to the 'local' government instead. Locally, the island's governance is structured by the Local Government Ordinance, which provides for an elected Mayor and a ten-member Island Council, allowing residents to manage their internal affairs.[39] The Pitcairn Islands Office (PIO) in Wellington oversees Pitcairn's main administration and represents it in New Zealand. Presently, a UK Governor's Representative resides on Pitcairn, accompanied by professionals like a schoolteacher, policeman, doctor, and community and social officer, all employed on annual or biannual contracts.[40]

However, this administrative structure does not fully reflect the practical challenges of governing the territory. The Governor's visits to Pitcairn are rare due to the island's extreme remoteness. In 1989, a letter from the British High Commission in Wellington highlighted the difficulties faced by Governor Robin Byatt in reaching the island. His journey involved travel on an Associated Container Transportation (ACT) ship to Pitcairn, spending five days there, and then chartering a yacht to Mangareva (the largest island in French Polynesia) followed by flights to Tahiti and then Auckland. This round trip took 8-10 days each way, depending on the weather, significantly affecting the Governor's ability to fulfil other duties in Auckland.[41] Byatt later recounted the 'palaver' of travelling to Pitcairn for the *British Diplomatic Oral History Programme* in 2016. Starting from the Cook Islands, he travelled via Easter Island and then boarding a cruise ship to Pitcairn. For his return trip, Byatt's transport was a de-commissioned Danish lightship, which had been bought some enterprising Danes, taking him back to the Cook Islands to continue his journey to New Zealand.[42] The isolation

of Pitcairn thus results in a hands-off approach to its administration with little to no oversight of day-to-day business.

The challenges of reaching Pitcairn underscore not only administrative difficulties but also Britain's diminished global presence and its struggle to maintain remote territories. In 1972, Arthur Galsworthy, Governor of Pitcairn from 1970-73, was reportedly offered a lift from Tahiti to Pitcairn by the French naval authority due to the lack of British services.[43] Although Galsworthy later denied this, it caused concern in Whitehall, leading to a flurry of handwritten notes and discussions about the political and diplomatic implications. Giles Fitzherbert of the Southwest Pacific Department (SPD) called the idea 'thoroughly stupid,' while Mr. Thomas at the Defence Department pointed out that recent budget cuts had left Pitcairn without a British naval ship east of Suez.[44] Reducing military commitments east of the Suez Canal, which was announced in 1968, strategically altered naval capability in Southeast Asia and the Pacific, leaving the region not only exposed but isolated. Mr. Llewellyn-Smith at the Disarmament Department further raised concerns about the embarrassment of collaborating with the French on naval matters, especially in light of French nuclear testing in the region.[45]

Postwar shifts in British strategy and international relations complicated the governance of smaller territories like Pitcairn. By 1984, the self-styled Pitkerners inquired about British naval vessels resupplying the territory, instead of reliance on commercial vessels, but the Ministry of Defence (MoD) declined. Citing the limited presence of Royal Navy ships in the Pacific, and the "nearby" ships of the Falkland Islands Garrison being busy and preoccupied, the high costs of diverting a vessel, estimated at £250,000, was an expense the MoD could not justify.[46]

The current administrative arrangement has been in place since 1970, following Fijian independence, which ended Suva, Fiji's capital, as the administrative hub for Pitcairn. On initial administrative

handover to New Zealand, correspondence for Pitcairn was mishandled, going to the Diplomatic Service, emphasising the island's perceived insignificance.[47] The transfer of administrative duties also raised financial issues, particularly regarding who should bear the costs of running Pitcairn. While three staff members were needed in New Zealand to manage Pitcairn, the island's annual contribution of £1,920 in 1970 was sufficient to cover only one salary, leaving questions about how to fund the shortfall.[48] Additionally, rising costs, particularly in education because 'promising students' were sent to New Zealand to further their studies, added to the financial strain.[49] Despite these challenges, the islanders never requested the administrative transfer, making it unfair to burden them with the additional costs.[50] Despite its small size, Pitcairn required 'disproportionate' administrative effort due to its isolation, which made management both costly and time-consuming, as noted by Massingham at the Pacific Dependent Territories Department (PDTD).[51]

The hands-off administration and remote governance had significant effects on Pitcairn's economic situation. By the mid-1960s, it became evident that there was a 'revolution of rising expectations [across the Pacific]', driven largely by the United States, which was providing massive amounts of aid to their territories.[52] This left the British government in a difficult position: either match the U.S. in aid or risk 'leaving behind' the territory, which could anger allies and open the region to Chinese influence.[53] However, the financial challenge was partially overcome through the growing interest in philately/stamp collecting, which increased Pitcairn's revenues and helped Pitcairn's growing financial independence. The first issue of stamps, overseen by Harry Maude, a lawyer from Fiji, sold out within the first six months and generated £12,760 to fund developments on the island such as the schoolhouse.[54] Philately was an important revenue stream across many smaller territories, notably Hong Kong, with enthusiasts drawn to territories exoticism but also their representation through stamps, telling important foundational stories such as the Mutiny on the Bounty.[55] By the early 1960s, Pitcairn's revenue was primarily derived from postage stamps (70%) with interest on investments a distant second (28%).[56]

Nevertheless, the growing revenue from stamp collectors and Pitcairn's increasing financial independence did not deter the British government's advisors from 'counselling' the possibility of evacuating the island's population to New Zealand.[57] This option, among others (see Table 1), was considered as the British government recognised the increasing difficulty of maintaining a 'dwindling, ageing population' on Pitcairn. The policy at the time, however, mandated that islanders must be allowed to stay if 'they wished, and were physically able' a stance consistent with British policy for all dependent territories.[58] These wishes were clearly outlined by the Island Council, which made a statement in 1973 after discussion at the United Nations Committee on Colonialism (a UN General Assembly committee dedicated to decolonisation), that 'it has no wish to seek to change the nature of the relationship with the UK and Pitcairn'.[59] Whilst 'Present Policy' was not a long-term goal of HMG, it did mean a more cost-effective aid policy.

Pitcairn Policy Options.[60]

	Total Project costs to UK ('000s)		
	1973	1978	1983
Present Policy. *Of which. non-aid*	15 (10)	17 (10)	20 (10)
Evacuation	13	160	-
Association with New Zealand	5	167	-

Table1: administration expenses inclusive of UK High Commissioner, New Zealand, plus MoD expenditure. Revised drafts of Pitcairn Country Papers, 18 July 1973, FCO 86/95.

In 1973, HMG was also concerned with other small territories. The FCO Research Department produced a similar analysis for the Falkland Islands, which also had a small population, limited income streams, and a remote location. This assessment included options such as 'transfer to Argentina' in place of New Zealand and 'abandonment' instead of evacuation.[61] While the estimated costs for the Falklands reached millions of pounds—significantly higher than the thousands projected for Pitcairn—the analysis reflected a broader effort to balance the financial and strategic implications

of maintaining British territories against geopolitical priorities of the era. In both cases, the decision to retain the territories was made, but not solely at the initiative of the British government.

By the late 1970s, R.J. Stratton, Under-Secretary of State at the FCO, raised Pitcairn's viability to the New Zealand High Commissioner, Harold Smedley. His frank, but personal thoughts, outlined that after New Hebridean independence in 1980 he could not imagine HMG 'in their anxiety to divest of colonial responsibilities vis-à-vis the UN, being willing to contemplate much longer continued responsibility for 65 people.'[62] Stratton outlined three possibilities for Pitcairn:

> (i) Come 1981 we should tell the islanders that thenceforth they would be on their own and and that we would take the necessary constitutional steps to divest ourselves of formal responsibility for them;
> (ii) That, despite the previous unsuccessful attempts to resettle them…we should after consultation with New Zealand authorities offer them resettlement in New Zealand with generous financial terms;
> (iii) we should arrange with the French for their incorporation into French Polynesia with which they have racial affiliations.[63]

Whilst this left Smedley shocked, it showed that some in government were thinking about how and when to divest. Nevertheless, Smedley's view of Pitcairn was pithily summed up only a few days later when he sent the 1977 annual review to David Owen, Foreign Secretary, with the summary that it had been an 'eventful year' for Pitcairn because 'a doctor and a dentist visited.'[64]

By the 1980s, the South Pacific Department at the FCO noted that income from philately (stamp collecting) was declining: in 1980-81, stamp sales brought in NZ$ 828,440 but by 1983-84 this had fallen to around NZ$ 600,00 meaning investments in a new long boat had to be shelved; by 2004, revenue had declined so much the island went bankrupt forcing the UK government to intervene.[65] This necessitated the maximisation of Pitcairn's investments. Like other former territories of the

Empire, Pitcairn's funds were managed by the Crown Agents, a quasi-independent administrative body under ODM supervision. Their role to procure supplies and raise non-aid for colonial governments was important, but came with concerns that they were mismanaging investments, resulting in a 'meagre' return.[66] One proposed solution was to move Pitcairn's investments into the New Zealand property market. However, the Crown Agents, still 'smarting from losing Brunei's investment portfolio' (the Sultan of Brunei removed his personal investment portfolio to an investment bank on independence) were reluctant to lose more business.[67]

In 1989, concerns over Pitcairn's long-term economic viability persisted. The High Commissioner in New Zealand and Governor of Pitcairn, David Moss, bluntly stated, 'there are no real advantages to having the colony, but we have found no suitable way of jettisoning it,' reflecting the government's ambivalence towards the territory.[68] Ironically, the wishes of HMG was secondary to those of the islanders, demonstrating that the metropole could not always dictate the course of smaller territories, even when maintaining the status quo offered no clear benefits.

Pitcairn Island's remote location presented unique challenges for its administration and economic development, particularly in the post-World War Two era. The absence of a central administration and its isolation contributed to the territory often being overlooked. The files from the FCO from this period reflect this neglect, indicating a lack of coherent, long-term strategies for the islands' governance and economic management.

Pitcairn's small size and sparse resources meant that Pitcairn was of limited economic value, and this made it difficult to justify significant investment or intervention. At the same time, the islanders were generally content with their situation, which reduced the urgency for change from their perspective. The strategic importance of Pitcairn was minimal, though there was a consideration of its 'denial value' in preventing potential influence from adversaries like Chinese Communists in the region.[69]

This, however, was more theoretical than practical given the islands' actual strategic and economic impact.

Overall, Pitcairn remained a largely forgotten territory in the broader geopolitical context, with its administrative and economic issues being low-priority concerns for the British government. This led to a status quo that persisted largely due to the lack of any compelling reasons to either significantly invest in or divest from the territory.

Social Life.

The economic and administrative inattention affected Pitcairn's social life, with isolation supporting a territory which was notably 'dull'.[70] RAF personnel who visited the island in 1966 to monitor French nuclear tests offered vivid descriptions of their experiences. As the islanders were Seventh-Day Adventists, smoking and alcohol were prohibited; entertainment was limited to a twice-weekly film screening, which was often repeated if a ship was delayed; more engaging activities like dancing, playing cards, and listening to pop music were banned on religious grounds, and even shellfish was off-limits.[71] Despite these restrictions, the CO noted in 1965 that although social life was strict, the youth, like their peers elsewhere, were caught up in the 'Beatle age,' prompting the British government to consider interventions through a new broadcasting station to encourage new thinking within the community.[72] Charles Dymond, British High Commissioners Perth Office, Australia, noted in his visit the 'indifference [to the visitor] of Pitcairners (sic.) homes. Houses long since deserted…nearly all homes present a shanty-town atmosphere, reminiscent of 'Tobacco Road' [a squalid and impoverished community].'[73]

However, the brief success of the RAF visits was overshadowed by an incident involving Chief Technician R. Wootton. Wootton was reportedly unwelcome on the island, and a handwritten note

from Mr. Reeves, a Pitcairn resident, accused him of several serious misdeeds: inappropriate 'association with a 15-year-old girl', interference with the education officer's duties, refusing hospitality from an elected family (those he stayed with on the island), and obtaining a driving license under false pretences.[74] The SPD later discovered that Mr. Reeves, who was also the education officer, had a personal animosity towards Wootton. Reeves' complaints included 'snide remarks on casual visitors and their non-onerous tasks.'[75] Further investigation suggested that, in the island's claustrophobic environment, small and petty incidents were easily blown out of proportion.[76]

Despite these social challenges, the islanders were noted for their distinctly British outlook. Reporting on a 1991 a visit to Pitcairn, David Moss, observed that the community resembled an isolated Somerset village from 20 years earlier rather than an island in the Polynesian Triangle.[77] However, unlike Somerset, Moss noted that island life is marked by public squalor and private affluence because most disposable income went on electricals--such as freezers because of the irregularity of supply ships—and not the 'shoddy prefabs' and furniture which could be ruined by termites. Nevertheless, the islanders' have a 'charming fecklessness' and on recounting a post-dinner dance, Moss was charmed at traditional tunes like 'The Grand Old Duke of York' and 'Oranges and Lemons' suggesting that social norms had relaxed somewhat since the 1960s.[78]

However, this patriotism could not overcome the island's economic and administrative challenges. The British government's view of the islanders was not always favourable and charming. In 1949, officials noted that while Pitkerners had little formal administration and poor education, they enjoyed good health and avoided the degeneracy often associated with inbreeding.[79] The social life on Pitcairn Island was also deeply shaped by its isolation, fostering a community that was self-sufficient, private, and insular. The residents' discomfort with outsiders stemmed from a long history of separation from the broader British world, tracing back to the island's founding by mutineers and Polynesians who sought refuge from external authority. This foundational experience instilled a sense of independence

and caution in the islanders, making them protective of their privacy and resistant to outside interference.

However, this insularity created a complex dynamic for HMG. While the islanders were proud of their British heritage and valued the protection and traditions that came with being a British territory, they were also wary of excessive control or external influence from New Zealand or the UK. This delicate balance meant that the islanders were not interested in independence but preferred to maintain a relationship with Britain on their own terms. A similar dynamic can be observed in other BOTs, such as St. Helena. Like Pitcairn, St. Helena is remote, heavily reliant on financial aid, and firmly rooted in a British identity defined by shared heritage and citizenship, albeit one that is geographically distant. As Nichola Harmer observes, the self-styled 'Saints' of St. Helena embrace Britishness alongside a sense of local distinctiveness.[80]

Pitcairn, despite lacking economic or strategic value, could neither be relinquished nor ignored due to the islanders' strong desire to remain under British sovereignty. The residents' reluctance to pursue independence, which HMG had to respect, coupled with their scepticism toward excessive external control, ensured that Pitcairn remained a British territory by choice. While managing Pitcairn posed certain burdens, it was not a territory Britain could simply abandon, as the population's wishes carried significant weight. This social context and the islanders' wariness of external influences shaped how the British government approached one of Pitcairn's most significant challenges: the detonation of nuclear weapons after 1963.

French Nuclear testing.

The social, administrative, and economic contexts of Pitcairn provided a critical backdrop to the external geopolitical threat posed by French nuclear testing in the Pacific. Following the

decolonisation of Algeria in 1962, France shifted its nuclear testing program to French Polynesia, conducting a total of 42 atmospheric and 137 underground tests in the South Pacific between 1966 and 1996.[81] This activity, which contravened the 1963 Partial Test Ban Treaty on atmospheric nuclear tests, alongside Pitcairn's relative proximity to the testing sites (see Figure 1) raised concerns, even though the health impact was minimal. A 1972 report measured radiation exposure at just 8 roentgens per hour—comparable to the UK and lower than the Cotswolds.[82] However, as Alexis-Martin notes, other South Pacific islanders faced higher radiation levels, increased thyroid cancer rates, and psychological and environmental consequences—some of which Pitcairn also experienced.[83]

The British government found itself responsible for addressing the concerns of the Pitcairn residents, who were understandably anxious about the potential risks of nuclear fallout. This involved monitoring the island for radioactive contamination, reassuring the population, and developing contingency plans for possible evacuation, particularly during the years to the mid-1970s when the fear of nuclear fallout was most acute.

This situation posed a complex diplomatic challenge for the UK. Anglo-French relations were strained by the nuclear tests, coinciding with the UK's bid to join the European Economic Community (EEC), which was vetoed by French President Charles de Gaulle in 1967. Diplomatic tensions deepened as atmospheric testing began just a month after the International Court of Justice ruled against it. The UK also had to balance its ties with France, particularly regarding the Common Market, while addressing concerns from Commonwealth partners in the Pacific.

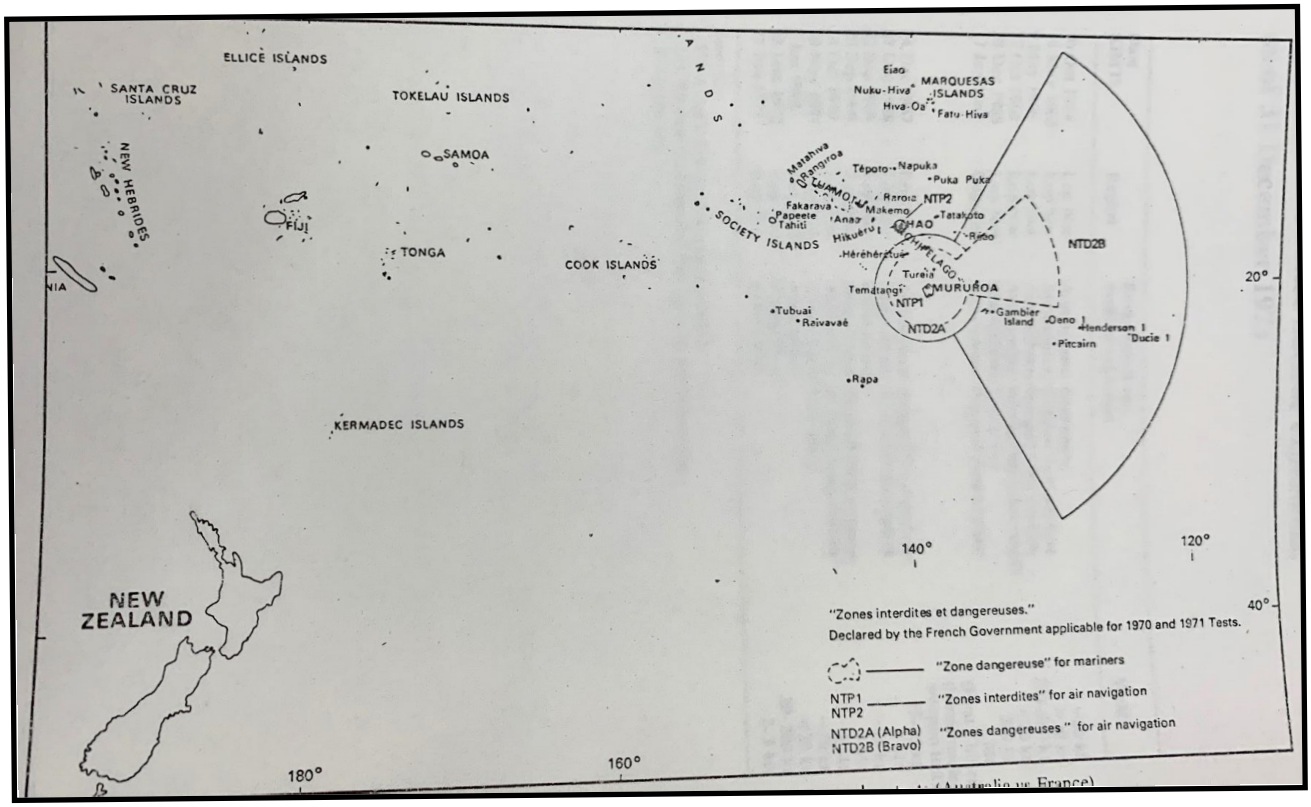

Figure 1. Prohibited and dangerous zones in the French Pacific Tests Centre. French Nuclear Tests in the Atmosphere, The Question of Legality, April 1974, FCO 32/1114. Pitcairn can be seen on the far right of the image, within the potential fallout range.

Prime Minister Ted Heath, in a 1973 letter to Australian Prime Minister Gough Whitlam, highlighted the delicate balance the UK needed to maintain. Heath acknowledged the UK's diplomatic obligations to France, the importance of its economic ties within the Common Market, and the need to address the legitimate concerns of Commonwealth countries, including Australia and New Zealand, but also Pitcairn, which were affected by the French tests.[84] This balancing act underscored the broader geopolitical implications of the French nuclear testing program, not just for Pitcairn but for the UK's relationships and responsibilities across the region.

Monitoring on Pitcairn was a difficult task for the British Government and caused ‘a good deal of anxiety for the government.’[85] Whilst Pitcairn was outside of the direct danger zone, any change in wind speed would result in radioactive debris falling on the island. Even though the likelihood was remote, the Government had commitments for welfare of all UK Dependent Territories, no matter how small.[86] This was reflected in British government attitudes to the French with Crispin Tickell, Foreign Office, telling the French Ambassador to the UK that the Government did not think that the French were taking this matter seriously enough and ‘did not understand the concern and

responsibility for British subjects.'[87] Frustration with the French government was reiterated in correspondence between the Treasury and CO with suspicion that the French government may refuse to evacuate any residents on the island meaning there needed to be backup plans by the British Government.[88]

Pitcairn's isolation and lack of central government meant monitoring of tests could not be easily achieved. At the outset of French nuclear testing, the Treasury and CO recognised the need for radioactive testing on the island to 'ease restiveness and panic, especially as islanders are subjected to C.N.D. type propaganda from New Zealand.'[89] Initially, the Atomic Weapons Research Establishment (AWRE) estimated the cost of monitoring French nuclear testing at £750, which was for equipment only.[90] Importantly, this cost would not include training personnel to monitor results or sending personnel to install any equipment on the island which would substantially increase the cost.[91] It was also noted by the Treasury that Pitcairn should not be expected to front any costs for this with all proceeds coming from the Colonial Office Vote and all help had to come from the British government; any French assistance in this matter would be objectionable for the island's residents.[92] As officials acknowledged at this time, 'Pitcairn is more newsworthy than its size suggests' and there was a fear of being plagued by press accusations of neglect of British citizens.[93]

HMG's anxiety over Pitcairn had precedent in a similar situation during the 1950s, when French nuclear tests in Algeria (proposed in 1958 and running between 1960-66) posed a threat to citizens in West Africa and the then-British colony of Nigeria. As with Pitcairn, the French were opaque about the nature and scope of the tests, which sparked widespread condemnation, after the 1958 proposal. Opposition came from diverse quarters, including the Nigerian diaspora in the UK, trade unions, and officials in African territories.[94] The press lent its support to African citizens, with *The Times* reporting protests 'against the setting off [of a nuclear weapon] by a foreign power of a bomb on their borders which, to their mind, apart from any harm that may be caused by radiation or fallout,

is as likely to be used against them as for their protection.'[95] Concerns also reached the House of Commons, where MPs like Fenner Brockway, Labour representative for Eton and Slough, voiced fears about the 'danger to health amongst surrounding peoples.'[96]

French testing also brought up consideration of immediate and emergency evacuation of Pitcairn in the unlikely event of a miscalculation by the French military. Whilst this was unlikely, the Treasury would expect the French to pick-up any costs incurred for this.[97] Anthony Fairclough, Head of Pacific and Indian Ocean Department, CO, also raised the issue of onward travel, likely to New Zealand, but, highlighting the lack of British naval capacity in the region, the British would have to rely on an US Cable and Wireless ship to transport any islanders.[98]

Monitoring French nuclear tests increased after 1971 and the next round of tests because of the increased yields of weapons (Rhéa, detonated in August 1971, was a TN-60 model and the first French thermonuclear weapon). The French postponed many of their 1971 tests because the new weapon was in development and this raised hopes of a permanent cessation of detonations; however, 1972 witnessed the resumption of tests meaning criticism for the French government. The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of the New Hebrides, an Anglo-French Condominium in the Western Pacific, wrote that they 'deplored the French government for resuming tests in the Pacific' and the Australian Prime Minister expressed his 'profound disappointment' with the French.[99] This renewed focus on Pitcairn also came with increased costs considering British geopolitical changes.

While the costs of monitoring nuclear tests were not excessive, they were still notable given Pitcairn's remoteness and limited economic potential. Royal Auxiliary Force (RFA) *Percivale* was allocated to monitor French testing and would also transport personnel to the islands. The costs of training two RAF personnel and the equipment they needed was £2491 in 1972, billed to the AWRE.[100] However, further costs included air fares (technicians flew to Miami, stayed for one night, then flew on to

Panama to meet RFA *Percivale*), pay of technicians when stationed on the island at £2600, and contingency for evacuation costs at £2000.[101] Costs increased again the following year with a 10 per cent rise in living costs and the cost of board and accommodation increasing from £6 to £7.28 per week.[102] 1973 also saw the loan of RAF personnel increase to £3300.71 which would be paid to the MoD by the FCO.[103] Whilst these figures pale in comparison to larger territories, the numerous files on these costs show that it was deeply considered against Pitcairn's value as a territory. Ultimately, protection of "British" citizens took precedent.

Testing also impacted islanders' social life. Whilst there were negligible radioactive effects on the island itself, anxiety spread amongst residents about the effects testing was having. In December 1972, Pitcairn Postmistress, Miss Violet McCoy, wrote to Gerald Nabarro, MP for Kidderminster, presumably for his outspoken nature and relative notoriety as a constituency MP on her dear of nuclear testing:

> We are glad that Australia and New Zealand kicked up a fuss about the French tests…We have had enough of nuclear fallout and polluted air out here. All our gardens are drying up again; all growth is stunted, even the fruit trees, and especially the bananas which are only two inches long in some places, and the yams have only half a growth, and so on. It only stands to reason that after all these years, it is bound to take a toll on us. I don't care what the scientists say, we are so few we are insignificant - too insignificant for anyone to worry about. The few very elderly say they won't leave, they will bury their bones here and the young families and the middle-aged people just have to carry on …[104]

Nabarro forward this letter directly to Prime Minister Heath, outlining that McCoy's concerns were diametrically opposed to Heath's previous statements in the House of Commons on French nuclear testing. Navarro also told the Prime Minister that he should consider further enquiries to protect British citizen and asked Heath for his specific thoughts on two-inch bananas.[105] Such was the sentiments of this letter the Prime Minister's office replied outlining no threat, and no comments on the bananas. Yet, in the FCO, the feelings towards this letter were stronger. E. Freeman, PDTD, wrote

to the Arms Control and Disarmament Department advising that one way to deal with the letter was to 'demolish the (probably eccentric) correspondent if we can.'[106] This was later done with a telegram to Wellington which outlined McCoy as an 'inveterate complainer' who has caused trouble before regarding Pitcairn's misadministration in the late 1960s.

This anxiety was not limited to McCoy, however. In the same year, other islanders raised concerns about the failure of melon crops - which was attributed to colder, rainier, and windier weather, not radioactivity.[107] There was also concern about increasing press interest in Pitcairn, nuclear testing, and the perception of damage to the crops. Tom Christian, Governor's Representative on Pitcairn and radio host, was worried about pressure from the news organisation ITN who were asking 'loaded questions' even if the FCO News Department thought that many journalists were misrepresenting themselves.[108]

The islanders' social anxiety also drove one resident to test for radioactivity themselves. Mr Henry, former education advisor on Pitcairn, gathered rainwater which was sent to the National Radiation Laboratory (NRL), Christchurch, New Zealand in a show of distrust at UK officials' assessment of results.[109] Whilst the unscientific sample showed no signs of concern, there was fear that this would generate 'adverse publicity' for fear of manipulation. Whilst it was recognised that islanders at this time had some undue anxiety, it was noted that people like to stir up trouble about Pitcairn and the diasporic population in New Zealand may cause trouble.[110] The FCO, however, made sure that the NRL edited and downplayed any concerns from the 'disgruntled schoolmaster'.[111]

Pitcairn's proximity to the nuclear tests also generated political interest, something which had not occurred before. In 1973, Charles Loughlin, MP for West Gloucestershire, raised the responsibility that the UK had over Pitcairn Islanders, as well as in Australia and New Zealand, because of their help during war, which showed the UK's enduring paternal role in the Pacific even after

decolonisation.[112] Tam Dalyell, MP for West Lothian, pressed the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary three time in 1972, showing a newfound political interest in Pitcairn (something he maintained throughout his life). This was also echoed in the House of Lords with Lord Kennet declaring that '[French nuclear testing and evacuation] is something to do with us, if only because of Pitcairn Island. Those islanders are a direct, legal responsibility of this Parliament. They are as much our responsibility as every British subject in the street outside this building.'[113] Kennet's ancestry, tracing back to the Bounty mutineers, however, gave him a unique perspective on the protection of British citizens.

The geopolitical challenges posed by French nuclear testing in the Pacific during the 1960s and 1970s had significant implications for the small, isolated British territory of Pitcairn Island. While the physical threat of radiation was minimal, with recorded levels comparable to the UK, the testing generated considerable social anxiety among the islanders and created complex diplomatic challenges for the British government. The UK's responsibilities to protect its citizens, regardless of the territory's size or strategic importance, were emphasised through costly monitoring efforts and contingency planning, which highlighted the tension between British obligations and its broader geopolitical relationships, particularly with France. The situation also brought Pitcairn into the political spotlight, revealing the island's significance in British policy discussions despite its remoteness. The social problems and political attention that arose from the testing underscored the broader implications of nuclear testing on even the most isolated communities under British governance. However, whist it was acknowledged to cause anxiety for the British Government, it was a 'thinly disguised blessing' for the islanders.[114]

Contemporary Pitcairn and Overseas Territories

In recent years, Pitcairn has maintained its distant relationship with New Zealand and the UK. The end of French nuclear testing on Moruroa, French Polynesia, in 1996 removed a long-standing external threat, but new challenges have since emerged. COVID-19 highlighted the island's vulnerability—while its isolation shielded residents from the virus, it also disrupted supply chains due to fewer ships and the risk of infection.[115] In 2015, it was designated as one of the largest protected marine environments in the world, and in 2019, it became a recognised dark-sky sanctuary. There has also been a growing interest in tourism, though, as highlighted by the *Financial Times* in 2024, the cost of visiting remains prohibitively expensive for most.[116]

More pressing issues now stem from financial uncertainty, particularly following Brexit and the war in Ukraine. Although Pitcairn was never part of the EU, it benefited from access to the single market for honey exports and funding from the European Development Fund (EDF). Under the Withdrawal Agreement, the island secured £2.4 million for tourism, but this support ended in 2024, leaving residents without access to crucial long-term funding. [117] The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) allocated £4.32 million annually for 2021–23 (more recent figures remain unavailable), covering 90% of the island's budget. However, the loss of EU funding has restricted spending to essential administration, evident in the recent cap on councillors' working hours to reduce pension costs.[118]. The rising cost of fuel, exacerbated by the war in Ukraine, has further strained Pitcairn's viability, making it increasingly difficult to balance its budget. Once again, global pressures and external forces pose a significant threat to this small territory's future.

Yet, post-Brexit geopolitical shifts have sparked a reassessment of Britain's and other Commonwealth state's role in the Pacific, potentially giving Pitcairn new relevance. The UK's "Pacific tilt," first introduced under Boris Johnson's government, has been continued by Labour since July 2024.[119] In a speech on Strategic Studies in November 2024, FCDO Indo-Pacific Minister Catherine West emphasised the Indo-Pacific's importance to national and global security. The urgency of this shift became clear following the China-Solomon Islands Memorandum of Understanding in 2022. The Solomon Islands' recognition of China over Taiwan alarmed the UK,

Australia, New Zealand, and other Commonwealth nations, with analysts warning that Pacific Islands could become a geopolitical flashpoint.

Australia has expanded its military air facility on the Cocos (Keeling) Islands—transferred from the Colony of Singapore to Australia in 1955—with the potential for a future U.S. base, as outlined by the Australian government in 2024. Meanwhile, Niue, a Free-Associated state of New Zealand, has drawn geopolitical attention. Its 2018 Memorandum of Understanding with China and entry into the Belt and Road Initiative alarmed New Zealand and spurred the U.S. to recognise Niue as a sovereign nation, establishing an embassy there in 2024.

European powers also grapple with their overseas territories. France's reassessment of its Indo-Pacific strategy coincided with 2024 riots in New Caledonia, following three referendums on independence. Similarly, Britain's Overseas Territories remain strategically significant. The Sovereign Base Areas of Akrotiri and Dhekelia in Cyprus played key roles in the War on Terror and subsequent regional conflicts, despite local opposition to this 'unwanted remnant'.[120] Meanwhile, negotiations over the British Indian Ocean Territory and the potential handover of the Chagos Islands to Mauritius have reignited debates over Britain's territorial legacy. These 'continuities and discontinuities' in imperial rule are globally mirrored in OTs, their local and regional contexts important for their future status.[121]

These cases reflect broader tensions in the evolving status of overseas territories and free-associated states. While Pitcairn's decolonisation has not been formally proposed, shifting regional dynamics could elevate its strategic importance in the 21st century.

Conclusion

Pitcairn Island's history encapsulates the complexities of managing small, isolated territories in the wake of decolonisation. The island, with its rich narrative rooted in the Mutiny on the Bounty, its extreme remoteness, and its minute population, has long tested the limits of British administrative, economic, and geopolitical commitment.

The British government's approach to Pitcairn has largely been shaped by inertia and a sense of obligation to its residents, rather than by strategic or economic imperatives; as David Moss asked in 1991, 'does Pitcairn matter?' concluding 'the short answer is no'.[122] Despite concerns about its viability, Pitcairn has remained a BOT due to its residents' attachment to British sovereignty and the practical challenges of alternative arrangements. Proposals for resettlement, evacuation, or integration with New Zealand have been explored but rejected, often out of deference to the islanders' wishes.

Throughout its history, Pitcairn has been marked by its dual identity: a proud symbol of British heritage and a perpetual administrative burden. French nuclear testing in the Pacific in the mid-20th century brought this tension into focus, forcing Britain to act decisively to protect the islanders while navigating complex international diplomacy. This 'spasmodic action when local needs became too pressing to ignore' encapsulates Britain's reluctant engagement—intervening only when the islanders' needs demanded it, despite the associated frustrations.[123] Such episodes underscore the broader challenge of managing territories like Pitcairn—small, symbolic outposts that require disproportionate resources and attention compared to their practical significance.

Pitcairn serves as a poignant reminder of Britain's enduring colonial legacies. Its story illustrates the broader dilemmas of post-imperial governance, where history, identity, and practicality intersect in

the ongoing negotiation of Britain's global role. So, how do you solve a problem like Pitcairn? There is no solution if the islanders want to remain and the political will to address the matter was absent. For the foreseeable future, Britain will continue to maintain this small, remote outpost, thousands of miles from home.

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[3] South Pacific Office to Pearce, 3 July 1964, TNA, CO 1032/1412.

[4] Governor of Pitcairn to FCO, 30 Apr. 1990, TNA, OD 120/128.

[5] Wilkinson to Guest, 17 May 1993, TNA, OD 120/199.

[6] The last census was in 2023, and the population was registered as 40, down from a high of 250 in the 1930s. See UK Parliament briefings on the Overseas Territories, Jan. 2023, available at https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9706/CBP-9706.pdf. The Pitcairn immigration department estimates the population at 35 available, at https://www.immigration.pn/life-on-pitcairn-island.

[7] See Stockwell, *The British Empire*, 269.

[8] See Clegg, "Polynesia in Review - Polynesia: Pitcairn", 231-238; Clegg, "Pitcairn - In the Last Chance Saloon", 214-215.

[9] McIntyre, *Winding up the British Empire in the Pacific Islands*.

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[31] Amoamo, "(de)Constructing Place-Myth", 108.

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Table 1. Administration expenses, inclusive of UK High Commissioner, New Zealand, plus MoD expenditure. Revised drafts of Pitcairn Country Papers, 18 July 1973, FCO 86/95.

Figure 1. Prohibited and dangerous zones in the French Pacific Tests Centre. French Nuclear Tests in the Atmosphere, The Question of Legality, April 1974, FCO 32/1114. Pitcairn can be seen on the far right of the image, within the potential fallout range.