

NEWSLETTER

No. 14, December, 2008

Pirongia Historic Visitor Centre
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The new storage and work area

The Centre is now using the outside storage and work area created by a make-over of the former DOC garage behind the former St Saviour's Church. In our last newsletter, it was reported that the structural work, insulation of the building and painting was largely complete. Since then, vinyl flooring has been laid, and new work benches, cupboards and shelving installed. During November, the installation of a heat pump largely completed the project. All that remains to be done is to set up a security grill on the window.

It looks a million dollars and will be a major asset to the Historic Visitor Centre, giving us both sorely needed storage for archives and artifacts, with controlled temperature and humidity, as well as an area where new displays may be assembled.

A flow-on benefit has been that it has been possible to clear the kitchen in the main building of a clutter of artifacts and display items not currently on display. The installation of some cupboards in the kitchen, also makes that area more functional.

The project was funded by grants from Pub Charity, New Zealand Community Trust, Kihikihi Rotary and Te Awamutu Rotary (all acknowledged in Newsletter 13), together with a more recent grant from Trust Waikato. The cost of the heat pump was topped up with some of the donation reported previously from the Pirongia Darts Club. Coordination of the project was undertaken by Murray Walter and Glenyss Hall, and member Charlie Coles did sterling work in assembling and installing the cupboards in buildings where true right angles seemed to be pretty rare.



Charlie Coles assembling kit-set cupboards.

Pirongia Craft Day, 2008

The Centre was busy on both the Craft Day, Saturday, 27 May, and the following day when there was a re-union of craftspeople involved in the inaugural Pirongia Craft Day, organized 30 years ago as a fund-raiser when the original school building was moved to the current Playcentre site.

In the Centre, a special display, assembled by President Marilyn Yeates, one of the organizers of the original event, included craft items from that era and photographs compiled in a special album by Paula McWha.



The pedal-powered lathe outside the Centre.

Also on display for the first time were an authentic model waka taua (war canoe) loaned by the de Thierry family and the ceremonial sabre and portrait of Rewi Maniapoto donated by Owen Ormsby.

Outside, wood-turning enthusiasts from Hamilton operated a traditional, pedal-operated wood-turning lathe which attracted considerable interest.

On the Sunday morning, craftspeople from the first Craft Day met for morning tea and visited the Centre to be reminded of the modest origins of what has become a major annual event.

Thanks for support

COGS (Community Organization Grants Scheme) for a grant of \$1600 for volunteer training and travel.

Trust Waikato for a grant of \$2,000 for furniture and fittings for the new storage and work area.

Cambridge Museum for the donation of four recycled shelf storage units for the work area.

Waipa Community Board whose grant of \$900 helped fund the heat pump for the new storage and work area.

New Zealand Post who donated 100 postage paid envelopes.

Charlie Coles who assembled and installed new cupboard units in the outside storage and work area, and the kitchen.

Rob Quinlan who, without charging, moved an electrical plug in the kitchen to make room for new cupboard units.

John Halford for the gift of a label pricing gun which saves us from having to repeatedly borrow one to price sales stock.

Boye and Sharon de Thierry who, on behalf of their family, loaned a model war canoe for display in the Centre, together with a handsome case within which to display it.

Ngairé Phillips who donated to the Centre Library a handsome copy of her recent publication, *My Family Story: The Story of the Johnston Family of Mangapiko*.

Marilyn Yeates for assembling a special display for the 25th Craft Day Anniversary.

Paula McWha for compiling an album of Craft Day photographs.

Alan Livingston and Heather and Les Garret for their contributions which made the first West Tour such a success.

Those members of the Executive Committee who did the hard yards and were so successful with funding applications throughout the year.

All those volunteers who helped staff the Centre throughout 2008.

Information evening

On 28 October, we held an evening about the Centre's growing set of resources, which was for members, particularly those who volunteer to open the Centre. Sabina Owen talked about the files containing information about historical sites and families, and Glenyss Hall and Sharon Rayner demonstrated the electronic database of resources, and related this to the Centre's collections policies.

The presentations and the associated discussion were a pleasing affirmation of how much has been achieved by the Centre since 2003.



Sabina talks about the filing system.

Coming events

Members' Barbecue: 20 January

Join us at Pirongia Clydesdales, 1375 McClure Street, on Tuesday, 20 January, at 6:00 pm for what is becoming our annual BBQ to kick the year off. Bring some meat to cook and an accompanying dish, and something to drink. We will send a reminder by email or telephone early in January.

Path or War Tour: 14 February

Start at the 1864 encampment of General Cameron's army at Te Rore, confronting Paterangi Pa, and then follows events, including an incident at Waiari, the night march of the army by-passing Paterangi, armed confrontations at Rangiaowhia and Hairini, and the battle at Orakau. The tour will end at St John's church in Te Awamutu, where many of the fallen from Orakau were buried. Cost \$25 a head. Only 20 places.

South Tour: 21 March

Visit Mangatoatoa Pa, off Frontier Road, and the site of the 1838 CMS Mission at Mangapouri. Identify where William Turner lived at Kaipiha. See where the family of Robert and Pianika Ormsby lived and visit the Ormsby family Cemetery. Visit the site of the Wesleyan Mission on Canon Road and have an overview of the area from Puketotara Pa, near Te Kopua. Cost \$25 a head. Only 20 places.

Note that bookings are essential for the tours. Enquire at the Centre or from Paula McWha who will coordinate bookings. Phone: 07 871 9585. Email: mcwharjpk@callsouth.net.nz

**Merry
Christmas**

Vernon Roberts: telegraphist and postmaster

The first telegraph officer and postmaster at Alexandra was appointed in 1873 when the old post and telegraph office (the one in the photograph above the Visitor Centre reception desk) opened. Roberts trained in London as a telegraphist and worked for the British Post & Telegraph Department before he emigrated to New Zealand in 1865, aged 18.

In this country, he worked for an Auckland solicitor before moving to the Thames goldfields in the late 1860s, to become an agent buying kauri gum and selling supplies to gum-diggers.

In 1873, he took up the position of telegraph officer and postmaster at Alexandra. Soon afterwards, he married Mary Codlin of Waiuku and they lived in accommodation in the rear part of the Post and Telegraph building. They contributed to the life of the community. Vernon joined the Masonic Lodge, and was a member of the committee which organised the Masonic Ball held in August 1876, soon after the Public Hall opened. He was appointed auditor for St Saviour's Church and the Public Hall Committee. Mary is recorded by the *Waikato Times* as having hosted a *private quadrille practice* for the Masonic Ball.

Roberts must have been a dedicated telegraphist. In February 1877, a grisly murder occurred at the Ngaruawahia Gaol. Samuel Morgan, a former resident of Alexandra, had been convicted of vagrancy and was gaoled in a totally inadequate facility at Ngaruawahia where, during the night, he was killed in an attack with a tomahawk by another prisoner who then escaped towards the King Country on a stolen horse. A telegraph message was sent about midnight and Roberts, who heard the telegraph machine operating at Alexandra, got out of bed, deciphered the message, and delivered the telegram to AC McLeod, the 'Town Bobby'. McLeod placed men at bridges on the Manga-o-tama Stream, near Ngahinapouri, the Mangapiko, Waipa and a bridge on the Harapepe Road where the murderer was apprehended.

In 1877, Roberts left the Post and Telegraph Office and leased JD Hill's store in Crozier Street, when Hill moved to Hamilton to run a business in partnership with his brother for three years. It was during this period, in 1878, that Mary Roberts died of tuberculosis. Mary's cousin, Frances Codlin, moved to Alexandra to look after Vernon's motherless children. She married Vernon later in the year.

In 1881, after JD Hill had returned to Alexandra, and taken over his store, Vernon Roberts was appointed postmaster at Ohaupo, where the family lived until 1884, when he was re-appointed to Alexandra for a further six years. In 1890, he moved to a similar appointment at Mercer from where he moved to Greytown in 1902, where he retired in 1911, spending his retirement years at Tararu, near Thames.

West of Waipa

On Saturday, 15 November the Centre added a fourth historical tour to its catalogue. Waipa District Mayor Alan Livingston, who had recently returned from official duties in France, took time out from a busy schedule to lead a tour group which visited sites at Te Rore, Harapepe, Te Pahu, Karamu and the Limeworks Loop Road areas. Alan, who grew up at Harapepe and has lived in the district for much of his life, shared his extensive knowledge of the history of the area.

We were fortunate to also have on the tour, and enjoy the hospitality of long-time Te Rore residents Heather and Les Garret who live in historic Homewood, a part of which was built by John Cowell in 1841.



The West Tour Group outside the former Kaniwhaniwha School.

A model waka taua



The Centre has been fortunate to have an authentic model waka taua (war canoe) loaned for display by the de Thierry family. The model has been in the family for 150 years and may be older. The carvings attest to its Northland origins, but it authentically depicts how such craft were constructed more widely, right down to the materials used for the lashings. It is well worth a visit to view this treasure which is displayed in a handsome case.

When you view it, pay particular attention to the construction of the hull in three sections which dovetail together, the sidestrakes, which tie the three sections together, and the battens lashed over the joints with muka (flax fibre). Spreaders, between the sidestrakes braced the structure and served as seats.