

NEWSLETTER

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Pirongia Heritage & Information Centre

Te Whare Taonga o Ngaa Rohe o Arekahanara

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Sabina Owen 1932-2016

The death of Sabina Owen on 1 October marked the end of an era for the Heritage Centre. Sabina and Mervyn Owen became Pirongia residents in 1992 and very soon, Sabina became involved in community affairs, particularly through the Residents and Ratepayers Association, of which she was president in the later 1990s. In the process, with others members of the community, Sabina was involved in local heritage issues, particularly as a member of a group that agitated successfully to protect the site of the Alexandra East Redoubt as a reserve when the Waipa District Council publicised its initial plans to subdivide what is now Aubin Close. This resulted in an archaeological investigation of the site.

In 1998, as president of the Residents and Ratepayers Association, Sabina played a leading role in negotiations with the Corrections Department and the Anglican Church to have the second St Saviour's Church building returned from the Waikeria prison village to Pirongia where it became the present Heritage Centre. This complex task involved obtaining a site as well as soliciting substantial funding for the removal and subsequent upgrade of the building, together with the recruitment of local volunteers to adapt the building and establish the fledgling Pirongia Historic Visitor Centre, as it was initially named. When opened in 2003, the Centre owed much to Sabina Owen's leadership and organizational ability.

Sabina served as president of the Centre's executive committee for seven years from the time of its opening and then continued as its secretary for a further four years until 2014. Throughout that time, she was an enthusiastic participant in all its activities. Her service to the community and the Centre was recognised with a Commendation of Excellence Award by Volunteering Waikato in 2015. In the same year, Sabina became the fourth Honorary Life Member of the Pirongia Heritage & Information Centre.

Sabina will be greatly missed. We share the sorrow of Mervyn and her family at her passing. The Centre has purchased a garden seat that it plans to locate on the deck outside the main entrance, with a plaque suitably inscribed in memory of Sabina's outstanding contribution to its establishment and development.



Sabina Owen
Life Member

Thanks for Support

- **Waipa District Council** for an annual grant of \$8,400 (plus GST) to cover the costs of operations such as insurance, telephone, & power.
- **Waipa District Council** for a Discretionary Grant of \$669 to prepare for publication a booklet on the history of the names of streets, roads and some locations in the wider Pirongia district.
- **Robert McWha** who continues to complete numerous maintenance tasks, including the recent installation of a buzzer to alert staff on duty when another visitor comes into the

BBQ for Members

Join us at the Pirongia Clydesdales at 6:30pm on Monday 20 February for what has become the annual Heritage & Information Centre BBQ to get the New Year under way.

We are again indebted to the van der Sande family and the staff of the Coach House Café for making their facilities available to us.

Bring meat to cook on the barbie, an accompanying dish to share, and your favourite tippie.

There will be no charge.

Maurice Troup

We were saddened to learn in early August that Maurice Troup, in his 88th year, had passed away in Cambridge. Maurice and Tricia lived in the village after retiring from their farm. They were long-standing members of the Centre who were also useful sources of local history information. It was Maurice, for example, who told us a few years ago precisely where Richard Todd had been murdered in late November 1870. Todd's survey camp had been on the land later farmed by Maurice and Tricia on O'Shea Road. We share the sorrow of Tricia and family in their loss.

Wanted

Further volunteers to help staff the Centre.
Talk with Barbara Walter about the options.

For your diary

26 December: Alexandra Racing Club Boxing Day Races

20 February: Members' BBQ at the Pirongia Clydesdales. 6:30 pm.

Moonshine on Mount Pirongia

The New Zealand government passed legislation in 1866 restricting the permitted distillation of alcoholic spirits to licensed businesses which were required to pay a government levy of 8 shillings (80 cents) a gallon on their product. The Distillation Prohibition Ordinance Amendment Act 1866 meant that anyone contravening the legislation could be arrested without a warrant, and if convicted they could be heavily fined or gaoled. Many prosecutions followed throughout the country as the DIY gene asserted itself.

Countless stories have been told about the continuing contest between moonshiners and customs officers and police in the Hokonui Hills of Southland that continued until the 1930s, but it is not appreciated that there were evidently stills in the Pirongia district – located in bush where it was difficult to locate them.

Armed Constable McLeod's diary records that in November 1878, he was a member of a police party led by Sergeant Castle that went into "the Pirongia Ranges" on a fruitless quest to locate a still known to be in the area. The tell-tale sign was smoke observed from Alexandra in one location over several months. Eventually, they located the spot, having climbed trees to ensure that they were on track, only to find a smouldering rata stump, and no sign of a still. McLeod was far from pleased as he had been delegated to climb the trees.

In the 1920s, moonshine continued to be distilled in the area, one still in the vicinity of Alexandra was reportedly worked by two men. However, as the *Auckland Star* told in 1928 in an article entitled "Getting It Both Ways", the attentions of customs officers were becoming just a little too pressing; the business was becoming dangerous, and the still was getting out of repair. So, the men decided to give up the risky trade, and at the same time make a good haul. It was arranged that one should turn informer, get the reward, and divide it between them. Accordingly one went to Auckland and with a great show of secrecy said he could lead an official to a still. The offer was accepted, a day was fixed, and an officer was led to the spot where the still was in working order. Needless to say, the partner was not there, but there was no denying the fact that the informant was entitled to the reward, which was duly paid and divided between the precious pair. The newspaper report concluded "I grieve to say there was an unholy feeling of approval among the public when the secret leaked out ultimately. If the authorities ever heard of it – which they could hardly fail to do – they were discreet enough to keep silence."

Like us on Facebook

Paula McWha, who has done the hard work, reports that the Pirongia Heritage and Information Centre now has a Facebook (FB) page. If you are on Facebook, type *Pirongia Heritage* in the search box. There is a link from the page to the Centre's website, and in time it will link to the quarterly Newsletter.

Paula says that the page has only been up a short while but you will find posts on author Mary Scott, promotion of the Centre, and of Alan Hall's book, *WWI Roll of Honour*. She also zoomed in on its cover to show the poppy, in remembrance of Armistice Day. As administrator, Paula will continue to post photos and snippets of information regularly. She is open to suggestions and will be interested in photos that you may want featured.

So please **Like** if you already have a Facebook page to let others know we're here. For those not on Facebook – ask someone who is to **Like** it! - Paula.

A Recent Volunteer

Mary Wilton is a new volunteer who began helping to staff the Centre a few months ago.

She was born Mary de Thierry and is a descendant of the Turner family; Mihi Reynolds was her great-grandmother. Mary's family, including her brother Boy de Thierry, moved from Rangiriri to Pirongia when Mary was a year old, to farm de Thierry land at Kaipiha, so she lived her early life here, attending Pirongia School and Te Awamutu College, but moved to Rangiriri to obtain work at Huntly after leaving school. Later she moved to Auckland where she worked, married, raised a family and lived for most of her adult life.

Mary and her husband, Rob, moved back to the Waipa in September 2015 to fulfil a long-held ambition to return closer to Mary's roots; the Wiltons live on the Highfield Country Estate in Te Awamutu. As a virtual Auckland, Mary found that re-connecting with the district entailed a lot of finding out. Close reading of the Te Awamutu Courier was particularly helpful, and volunteering at the Heritage Centre has helped her re-connect with Pirongia through renewed acquaintance with people like Keith Ormsby and regular conversations with others such as Joy McGregor, who know the district well.



Mary at the desk

Mary enjoys her work as a volunteer and feels well-supported in that role; she can call Barbara Walter or Joy McGregor at any time she is uncertain about her duties, and Andrea Thrower has also been very helpful. All she has to do is ask. Mary adds that to be an effective

volunteer, you need to be interested and take the opportunity to catch up on the local story while you are on duty.

New & Improved

Have you seen the new display of material about the Ormsby family compiled from material gathered by descendants convened by Gloria King and presented by Marilyn Yeates? We hope that this will be the first of a number of new displays about other families who contributed to the early development of Alexandra.

Welcome new members

Anjit & Chood Singh (Corporate Membership)

Garages in the Village: 1948 - 1980

The first local motor garage that serviced motor vehicles and sold motor spirits appeared after World War 2, in 1948. It was established where the present service station stands at the junction of present-day Beechey and McClure Streets, by Eric Papesch, following his return from overseas service in the Pacific during World War 2. The choice of site was influenced by the fact that at the time, McClure Street was the main thoroughfare through Pirongia to Kawhia; it was known locally as the Kawhia Road. Papesch reasoned that locating his garage there would attract custom from passing traffic, particularly from farmers travelling to Te Awamutu on sale days.

There was disagreement about the location of the garage from Reg Bell of Bell Bros store on the corner of Crozier and Franklin Streets in what was seen, with the hotel, post office, butchery and library, as the commercial centre of the village. Bell, who was becoming a leader in the village, reasoned that the logical place to position a garage was in the same locality where it would attract potential customers to the other businesses. He made his view plainly known to Papesch, that he saw the development on McClure Street as drawing trade away from the village centre.

Nevertheless, Papesch remained resolute, and, as he predicted, it became common for farmers to leave their vehicles for service at his garage and travel to Te Awamutu with others, picking up their serviced car or truck later in the day on the way home. He also serviced farm machinery, taking over some of the work previously done by blacksmiths.

Papesch's competence as an engineer and his developing workshop also attracted trade from three local transport companies that developed in the 1950s. Peter Kendall tells how he and other transport operators, Jim King and Colin Wilson, sometimes worked with Papesch well into the night to affect repairs needed to keep their trucks on the road at busy times of the year.

As a further development, the Papesch family added a tea rooms/milkbar adjacent to the garage in the 1950s. It was run initially by Charlotte, Eric's wife, who also sold school lunches for the nearby school in Beechey Street. Later in the 1950s it was leased to Elsie Francis and then to Rona Harper before it was purchased by Monty and Lois Myers about 1959.

A Second Garage

Reg Bell's vision of a garage in the heart of the village was realised in 1950 when Rob Signal established a second workshop and service station with petrol pumps on Franklin Street, opposite the hotel and next to the Post Office. The business was run by Signal for two years before being leased to a succession of mechanics: Jim Hardy 1952-53, Roy Cobbald 1954-58, Andy Hoefhamer 1959-61, Neville Taylor 1962-65 and Harry Holmes 1966-69, after which it was closed for two years. The regular turnover of leasees, followed by its closure suggests that business may not have been especially profitable.



Dennis' Service Station circa 1973

The garage built by Signal was purchased by Tom Dennis in 1972. He ran it for three years before leasing it to Steven Gane who operated the business in 1975-76, after which it closed again for two years.

Grant Hodgson, the present owner of the property took it over in 1979. He traded as Alexandra Engineering, and ceased to sell motor spirits. The pumps and tanks were removed, and the premises gradually lapsed into their present state where the profile of Dennis' garage may still be discerned.

The Tea Rooms / Milkbar

In 1971, the Rasmussen family purchased the tearooms/milkbar business from Monty Myers. They operated it during the period when the original garage workshop building and service station frontage was re-developed. In 1981, the decision was made to re-develop the adjoining building. This proved problematic because after it was pulled down in preparation for replacement, the Waipa County Council refused to grant a permit to build a replacement on the same site that had been zoned as *Industrial*. The decision was appealed by the community but the County Council remained resolute so that no building permit was issued.

The Boxing Day Races

The 2016 Alexandra Racing Club Meeting on Boxing Day will mark the 150th anniversary of the first Boxing Day Races run as part of the Christmas Sports in 1866. Joy McGregor and Marilyn Yeates are currently working on a display to mark the anniversary.



Papesch's Tea Rooms and Garage -1950s