

# NEWSLETTER

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Pirongia Heritage & Information Centre

Te Whare Taonga o Ngaa Rohe o Arekahanara

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## At the Boxing Day Races

The Centre mounted a comprehensive display of photographs and other memorabilia recalling the history of the Boxing Day Races over 150 years when the Alexandra Racing Club held its 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Meeting in December. The presentation attracted considerable interest. Joy McGregor compiled most of the items for the display that was assembled by Marilyn Yeates. Member and Alexander Racing Club President (right) was an early visitor to the display.

Much of the presentation is currently displayed in the Heritage Centre and is worth a visit.



## Thanks for Support

- **Trust Waikato** for a grant of \$2000 for administrative support at the Centre.
- **Barbara Walter & Marilyn Yeates** who organized the annual barbecue.
- **Nick and Jill van der Sande** who again hosted the annual barbecue.
- **Joy McGregor** for painstakingly gathering photographs about the Boxing Day Races.
- **John Kelly** who located the necessary seat ends and **Robert McWha** who constructed the memorial seat at the Centre.

## The Alexandra Hall – 1921

Late last year the Centre was sent a photograph of a hall bearing the name “Alexandra Hall 1921” with the request that we identify where the building originally stood in Alexandra/Pirongia from where it was believed to have been moved. The picture was sent from both the Waihi Museum and Hamilton City Libraries. There is no evidence that such a building ever stood in Alexandra. However, research in Papers Past revealed that in 1921 the Alexandra Hall Company in Hamilton was building a dance hall in Anglesea Street, more-or-less opposite the end of Knox Street, with no indication that it had been removed from another place. In the 1950s, the building was given a face-lift, a sprung floor was installed and it was renamed the Starlight Ballroom which some of our older members may remember.



*The Alexandra Hall before it became the Starlight Ballroom*

About that time, it seems to have been speculated that its original name was associated with Alexandra, renamed Pirongia in 1896. In 1921, the old Alexandra Public Hall was about to be replaced by the War Memorial Hall, and it is possible that some thought that it then became the new Hall in Hamilton. However, we know that the Pirongia Public Hall was bought by the Methodist Church in 1922 and remained on its site in Crozier Street until it was demolished in 1957.

It is likely that Hamilton’s Alexandra Hall was named in honour of the former Queen Alexandra who in 1910 became the Queen Mother following the death of King Edward VII in 1910. Nevertheless, the myth that the building came from Pirongia was alive and well only a few years ago when a

researcher from the University of Waikato interviewed regular patrons of the Starlight Ballroom in the 1950s who believed that the building originally stood in Pirongia before its change of name.

## Come to the Quiz Night

The Alexandra Hotel will run a Quiz Night on Saturday 25 March as a fund-raiser for the Heritage & Information Centre.

The venue will be the Five Stags Bar where there will be a table to seat each team of up to six participants who will collectively answer the questions posed. It will be a lot of fun. So, why not make up a party of up to six and come along in support of a good cause. The captain of each team must book his or her team in beforehand by contacting Brenda Collins at the hotel (Ph 07 871 9838) and the entry fee of \$10 per participant must be paid before the night. Everyone needs to be seated by 7:00 pm for a 7:30 pm start. We look forward to seeing you there.

## Another Successful BBQ

The van der Sande family, with the cooperation of the Coach House Café proprietor Stacey Benton, hosted thirty-three members attending what has become the Heritage Centre’s Annual Barbecue at the Pirongia Clydesdales on 20 February. Members commented on the excellence of the food and the good company. President Barbara Walter gave a brief state-of-the-centre address in which she reviewed the achievements of 2016 and made a plea for more volunteer assistance to help staff the Centre which is now open on most days of the week.



## Coming Events

Join a **Path of War Tour** by minibus with Alan Hall and Robert McWha on Saturday 18 March between 9:00 am and 4:00 pm The tour will follow the advance of General Cameron’s army from Te Rore to Orakau between January and April 1864. We will visit sites including the Te Rore encampment, Paterangi Pa, the soldier’s graves on Bird Road, Waiari Pa, the route to Te Awamutu, Picquet Hill, Rangiaowhia, Kihikihi and Orakau Pa. Cost \$30 per person. Book at the Centre by leaving a message for Paula McWha.

An informal **Sunday afternoon trip** for members is being arranged to the sites of the original **Turner and Reynolds dwellings at Kaipiha** on 26 March. Member Lance Vernall, who owns the property has created vehicle access to the nearby Turner Urupa so there will not be a lot of walking involved. We will meet at the Heritage Centre at 2:00 pm and share car transport to Kaipiha. There will be no charge. If you intend to come, leave your name at the Centre.

## Congratulations

A special gathering at Purekireki Marae in December celebrated the awards of doctorates to Tom Roa and Te Rita (Bernadette) Papesch by the University of Waikato and AUT respectively. It was also announced that Dr Roa has been appointed to the Waitangi Commission.

## For your diary

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|----------|---|
| 18 March | 9:00 am - 4:00 pm. Path of War Tour: Te Rore to Orakau.   |
| 25 March | Quiz Night at the Alexandra Hotel. Seated by 7:00 pm.     |
| 26 March | Trip to the Turner & Reynolds dwellings sites at Kaipiha. |

## Visitors to the Centre

During January, three members of the Auld family from Auckland spent a day in the village finding out about Mathias Asmuss, an original settler at Alexandra from whom they are descended. They were accompanied by Maria de Jong who is recording a history of Mathias' son Henry who became an Auckland merchant. He

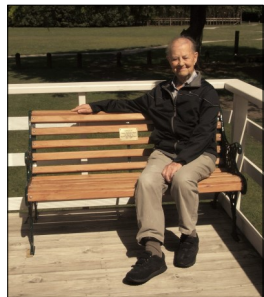


Alan Hall at the AC Redoubt with Rosemary, Tim & Felicity Auld.

founded H J Asmuss & Co in 1920, a firm that continues to trade today. The accompanying story about Mathias Asmuss shows that he was a significant figure in Alexandra, but left the settlement in the late 1880s, a victim of the ten-year depression. Visits to the Centre, like this one, are of mutual benefit to both the visitors and the Centre because we are able to pool our information.

## In Memory of Sabina

On 16 December, at a gathering of Heritage Centre stalwarts, a new seat on the deck outside the entrance to the Centre was dedicated to commemorate the contributions of the late Sabina Owen. Sabina's many roles at



Mervyn Owen on the memorial seat

the Centre were outlined by President Barbara Walter, and Keith Ormsby spoke about her wider contributions in the community. Mervyn Owen acknowledged the significance of such a fitting reminder of Sabina's engagement with the Centre's affairs. The seat was constructed by Robert McWha.

## Another Steam Engine

A display mounted by Joy McGregor about the remains of a stationary steam engine lying on the bank of the Waipa River below Matakaitiki Pa generated interesting spin-off. A visitor to the Centre told us of another rusted steam engine standing near Waikawau, on the little-used coast road between Awakino and Marakopa.



The Marshall steam engine at Waikawau

Robert McWha, accompanied by local man John Kelly located it and found its number on the boiler, above the firebox. Information about it has been sent to DoC's steam engine expert in the hope that Robert may be able to find out more about its history.

## Mathias Asmuss: Entrepreneur

Mathias Asmuss was a well-known resident of Alexandra between 1864 and 1889. Although Prussian by birth, he had lived and worked for some time as a confectioner in the south of England where he married Jane Anne Meredith in Dover during April 1860. Their first child, Henry James, was born in London in May 1864 when Mathias appears to have been en route to New Zealand where, at Mangatawhiri he enlisted as a militiaman in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Waikato Regiment on 18 July. He gave his occupation as 'baker' and was immediately posted to Alexandra where he became a baker for the militia commissariat and was granted Alexandra East Town Acre 24 at the intersection of today's Ross and Belcher Streets when Ross Street ran through today's school ground. He was also granted Tuhikamea Farm Lot 156, located more than 10 miles away, across bush tracks, between today's State Highway 39 and Gillard Road.

By early November 1865, Asmuss was joined by his wife and son, by then 18 months old. They had travelled to Auckland on the *Aliquis*, accompanied as steerage passengers by Jane Anne's mother, her sister, and her brother James Meredith with his wife Elizabeth. Mathias was refunded £21 by the military authorities for the fares of Jane Anne and Henry under a scheme to settle complete families in the new frontier settlements. Three other children (Albert, Edward and Estelle) were born to them at Alexandra and attended the local school.

Besides cultivating his town acre and plying his trade as a baker, by 1869 Mathias had built up an impressive portfolio of 10 town acres, bought from other militiamen keen to get what they could for their town lots after they became freehold in 1866-67. One was bought for 11 shillings (\$1-10) and another for 5 shillings (50c) but others cost up to £20. They included 4 adjacent town lots on the north side of Beechey Street, between Franklin and Ross Streets, Lot 32 on Crozier Street, next to today's hotel, and Lot 60 with a two-storied house, at the corner of Parry and Crozier Streets. Asmuss had sold Town Lot 24 and his Tuhikamea farm lot and bought Ngaroto Lot 152 at the junction of Hams and Forkert Roads. He was becoming a significant local owner of property.

These properties were mortgaged to William Scott of Paterangi in 1873 for a loan of £800 (\$1600) that was used to adapt and add a wing to what had been Captain Tisdall's house on Section 60, to establish the *Royal Exchange Hotel* which in June 1873 was trading with Asmuss as its licensee. However, Asmuss' intention appears to have been to lease the building to other licensees. Thus, between August 1874 and early 1876 Samuel Bright became the licensee who was followed from April 1875 to December 1877 by Jules Wilson. In the face of established competition from Finch at the Alexandra the business appears to have been only marginally profitable so that from time to time, Asmuss took over the licence between transfers to three other licensees.

By 1874, Asmuss had also purchased Town Acre 119, on what was planned to be Hudson Street. Here, between 1875 and 1878, in partnership with Aubin Ahier he manufactured bricks fired in a kiln. The partnership was amicably dissolved in 1878, but whether Asmuss continued brick-making on the site is not known.

Mathias must have cleared his debt to William Scott because he was able to use the hotel and his other properties as surety when he later borrowed money to build another hotel. In a national Return of Freeholders of New Zealand, printed in October 1882, Asmuss was recorded as owning land valued at £1,100.

On 27 November 1879, Asmuss purchased from J.D. Hill, for £200 (\$400), a half acre portion of Section 41, immediately opposite Finch's Alexandra Hotel on Crozier Street. Why he chose to make the purchase at that time is not clear. Owning property in the commercial centre of the village may have simply looked like a good investment.

By late 1882, however, after King Tawhiao had laid down arms, declared peace, and established the Kingitanga headquarters to the west of the Waipa River at Whatiwhatihoe, it appeared a much better commercial proposition. In 1882, the government built another bridge across the Waipa to provide access to the Kingitanga settlement, and the road to that bridge passed Section 41.

Using plans drawn up by J L Mandeno early in 1883, Asmuss contracted J L Carter to build an impressive hotel distinguished by a generous balcony, with 15 rooms, and a bar. Asmuss funded the new hotel by mortgaging all his properties with the Auckland Permanent Cooperative Building Society. This was a brave move at a time when the fortunes of Alexandra were suffering the effects of the decision to route the railway from Hamilton to Te Awamutu rather than Alexandra, with the result that Alexandra's population was diminishing and businesses were moving to the railhead. As the economic recession began to bite, the competition with Finch's Alexandra Hotel, must have been fierce.



The Shamrock Hotel - mid 1880s

In September 1883 Connell transferred his licence from the Royal Exchange to the new Shamrock Hotel. Connell must have brought significant debts from the old hotel because early in 1884 he was facing insolvency and relinquished his licence that was taken over by W. James who lasted less than a year before moving to the Commercial Hotel in Te Awamutu. He was followed in 1886-87 by Jesse Sage who also became insolvent, leaving the business to Asmuss who attempted to trade his way out of difficulty, but also became insolvent in 1888.

Both Sage and Asmuss were judged bankrupt in 1889 and left the settlement. As a result the Shamrock Hotel, and ownership of all Asmuss' other properties passed to the Auckland Permanent Cooperative Building Society which eventually sold the vacant Shamrock Hotel building to Mawhai Wickham in 1898 for £25 (\$50).

## Welcome new member

- Grant Middlemiss
- Vicky App