



Issue No 3

Chatham Islands Museum News

Museum volunteers and staff have been busy over the Covid-19 lockdown time collating interesting background information for the new museum exhibition gallery. Over 20 topics are being researched. For each topic an historic time-line of facts is drawn up, amusing incidents and anecdotes sought from *Papers Past* and other primary sources, and relevant illustrations documented.

Good progress has also been made with the transfer of a number of videos onto USB memory sticks, the editing of the audio-visual material into short excerpts for use with ipads, and the preparation of touchscreen information, all funded by a grant from Lottery Environment and Heritage. It is planned to carry out further community, iwi and imi consultation in mid-November when the designer, Sally Papps, will visit again and then prepare a detailed plan (including the costs involved) so the Museum Trust can then seek funds for the fit-out.

Chatham Islands 100 years ago – A snapshot of the 1920s

Throughout the 1920s the population varied from about 400 to near 600 rising from the lowest recorded, of 292 in 1878 (49 Moriori, 53 Maori, 172 European, 18 Mixed race) to 580 in 1928 (1 Moriori, 319 Maori and Mixed race, 260 Europeans).

Farming and fishing were the main industries but both were hampered by the islands' isolation and poor shipping. The farmers had experienced lean years in 1921-22 but by 1925 they were gaining good returns for their surplus sheep and wool; in 1928 there were 83,000 'big-framed Romney sheep averaging 8½lb wool clip', and 2000 head of cattle including 500 dairy cows.

Although the establishment of a cheese factory had been discussed in mid-1899 and again in 1902 it was not until 1924 that such a factory was built, by Seton Henderson who received a Government loan to do so. Initially it comprised a four-stand cow bail, with concrete yards, that were adjacent to a boiler room and cheese storeroom. Henderson milked about 150 cows, and there were several outside suppliers; about 382 cows altogether supplied the milk. A qualified cheese-maker, Joe Wyeth, was employed and at the height of operations some 1400-1500 crates of cheese were shipped to Christchurch annually, with each crate holding two 80 lb cheeses. The cheese was graded top-quality in Christchurch.



The fishing industry, begun in 1910 with factories at Owenga and Kaingaroa, waxed and waned over the years. In 1920 and again in 1924 the industry was at a standstill as the fishermen wanted an increase in the price paid for their fish –from 1d to 1¼d per lb. The company refused to pay and the fishermen eventually returned to work at the old rate. Blue cod was the main fish exported, to Wellington and Australia.



Loading fish at Owenga

Shipping was a problem after the *Himitangi* was wrecked in 1918. In mid-1920 and again in late 1922 the government vessel *Tutanekai* made special trips to take stranded passengers and cargo back to the Chatham Islands as other vessels were not available. In 1920 the Chatham Islands Fishing Company purchased the HMS *Torch*, renamed *Firebrand* and then *Rama*, to become the islands' trader, but this proved unsatisfactory for the farmers and she was converted to a trawler in 1923 and wrecked in late 1924.

In December 1922 the *Tees* was purchased by the Westland Shipping Company from Glasgow, and in 1923 was subsidised by the government to provide a regular service. The *Tees* was noted as 'a splendid sea boat and well suited for the carrying of livestock'. With the more regular shipping the need for an improved wharf and breakwater at Waitangi was emphasised as all stock and cargo had to be moved by surfboats.

In such an isolated community letters from family and friends were always eagerly awaited and the arrival of a ship was warmly greeted. Mail Day was a great event on the island, the residents galloping on their horses along the beach to the port with packs of barking dogs following closely at their heels. Once the mail was sorted there was a great deal of good-humoured pushing, jostling, and banter as residents picked up their large piles of letters, newspapers and other mail.

Record mail delivery brought by South Seas in 1930s



In August 1920 a Chatham Islander wrote to the proprietors of the *Auckland Weekly News* expressing pleasure at the receipt of a number of papers, but stated that it was the first mail received since 8 May. He wrote 'Try to imagine being 15 weeks without a newspaper'! In May 1923 mail was received after a 6 week interval and the next mail, brought by the *Tees*, was left on Pitt Island as the seas were too high for landing it at Waitangi.

Older residents considered the weather at the time was the worst experienced in 20 years. In August that year the *Rama* arrived with 8 bags and 53 hampers of mail,

an exceptionally large delivery, and it was at that time that the Islanders sought a mail subsidy from the government to enable the *Tees* to visit at three-monthly intervals.

In 1925 the *Awarua* landed the mail at Owenga and it had to be carted to Waitangi. In fording the lake, the dray got badly bogged in soft mud and with the floor awash the driver unhitched the horses and took the letter mail ashore. The dray remained in the lake all night with the heavier parcels piled for safety off the floor!

Other communications had improved with a radio-telegraph station having been built in 1913. It had a range of 500 km in daytime and 1000 km at night, providing ship-to-shore contacts and real-time communications between the Chathams and the mainland. Residents took full advantage of it with telegraphic messages being sent to the mainland for a charge of six pence per word. In 1921 Pitt Island was seeking to have a radio station erected there. It did not go ahead but short-wave radio became available later to connect the two islands. In 1926 it was reported that there were 3 licensed 3-valve radio sets on Chatham Island and reception was excellent with the news and other entertainment being received loud and clear from 1YA, 4Ya and 2BL. From 1926-27 there was also a weekly news sheet provided to the residents by the radio-telegraph station.

Other aspects of life were changing also. In 1922 the Chatham Islands was included in the Lyttelton electorate for European voters and the Western Maori district for Maori voters, the latter represented by Sir Maui Pomare. In 1923 the formation of a county council was discussed and in 1925 established with Seton Henderson elected as chairman.

Pressure from the community, assisted by the energetic doctor and resident magistrate, Dr E.P. Ellison and the local M.Ps, J. McCombs and M.E. Lyons in 1924 and 1926 resulted in the cottage hospital being built.



In 1924 a site was procured, the building materials brought to the island on the *Tees* in late 1926 and the hospital officially opened in May 1927.

The need for resident clergy had been a matter of concern for many years. St Augustine's Church at Te One was completed in 1895, services being taken by lay preachers. In 1923 a petition was raised for an Anglican vicar and in 1926 Rev. R. Kelham visited. In late 1927 Rev A.H. Barnett arrived to take up residency. Bishop West-Watson visited in 1927 and 1929. In 1924 Rev. Father Hanrahan, administrator of the Roman Catholic Cathedral in Christchurch spent some time on the islands and in 1928 the right Rev. M.J. Brodie, Roman Catholic Bishop of Christchurch and Rev. Father J. McMonagle were warmly welcomed by the residents.

Two Governor-Generals of New Zealand visited also during the 1920s. Lord and Lady Jellicoe arrived in 23 June 1922 aboard HMS *Chatham*. They were given a hearty welcome by the Islanders. An official address was made by Dr Clayton, the stipendiary magistrate and Lord Jellicoe replied and included a message from Mr Massey [Prime Minister]. The returned soldiers and the leading residents were then presented to their Excellencies. After a luncheon the party rode to Te One where they were met by a guard of honour of 100 school children on horseback. A haka was performed, a hangi prepared for their tea, and gifts exchanged. During the afternoon the HMS *Chatham* was open to the residents and school children. On shore the ship's band played to a delighted audience.

In June 1929 Sir Charles Fergusson and his wife, Lady Alice visited on the *Tutanekai*. They were fogged in for a day near the Chathams but finally reached Waitangi for an official welcome and reception. During their stay they visited the hospital, attended church at Te One and 'rode around the country' before returning to their ship to travel to Owenga.



There they were met by a fleet of launches, taken towards the shore and 'transferred to a 3-horse wagon in the shallow water'. They met the local people at a reception held at the school house, and visited the fish freezing works. This was followed by the dedication of St Barnabas church (built 1928), 'the Governor-General addressing the congregation and his wife, Lady Alice, played the harmonium.' Next was a clay pigeon shooting match and then then the Governor-General noted 'embarked at 2.30 with the whole crowd to see us off. Very nice people and everyone seemed pleased and happy. And so ends our visit, and it has been a pleasant experience'.

Governor-General Fergusson's Reception in 1929

