

THE VERNON LAGOONS AREA
(A little of the history)

I Did the Maori dig all those canals ?

"One of the most interesting relics of ancient Maori occupation, credited to the Rangitane tribe, was the series of canals through the adjoining lands and the islands in the Vernon lagoons. These can still be traced by air....

The aggregate length of these canals is about 12 miles. They must have been the work of numerous bands of Maoris, and their completion must have extended over a considerable number of years. Local tradition states that they were started by the Rangitane in the time of their ancestors Whata-koiro and Patiti, who flourished some two hundred years ago, and were completed in the time of Nganga, a grandson of Whata-koiro, about 150 years ago.

These canals, although filled to some extent with silt brought down by the Wairau floods, are still in fair condition and are navigable for small row-boats. They were carefully constructed. Many were ten to twelve feet wide, and two to three feet deep at low water.

One of them, known as Orua (Morgan's Creek), connected the Opawa River to the Upper Lagoon, and was widened during the 1939-45 war as a prospective tank trap against the possibility of a Japanese landing on the Boulder Bank.

Another had a remarkable course. Starting at a bend well up the Opawa River, it crossed the State highway near the Riverlands homestead, tapping en route a large swamp, which was probably a lagoon in far-off days. It continued past the old Riverlands racecourse to the Lagoons, where it was taken along a narrow ridge between the Upper and Chandler's Lagoons. Then it skirted another small lagoon and terminated at the point of a long narrow strip of land projecting into the Big Lagoon. This canal was four to five miles in length and a considerable portion has been utilised for the

Co-operative Drain, which has proved so useful in draining the low-lying lands south of the Opawa River.

According to tradition these canals were dug with the ko or wooden spade, with the assistance of the stone adze in the stiffer clays. The spoil was placed on hand barrows a stretcher of flax plaiting between two poles - and would be carried away for deposit where required.

At regular distances buttresses had been left projecting into the canal, narrowing the passage along the waterways. These were left to fix eel traps and fish nets, and near these were sand pits into which the fish were emptied.

The old Maori method of killing the eels they trapped was by sprinkling them with sand.

The principal use of the canals, however, was to facilitate the capture of the wild duck during the moulting season. During this period the birds were unable to fly and could be driven into these canals.

(From "Kei Puta te Wairau" -
W.J. Elvy, 1957)

"Without doubt the most puzzling aspect of prehistory in the Vernon Lagoons area is the so-called "Maori channels". These were first made known to the scientific world in 1903, and a report on them was published a few years later. They have not yet been subjected to a scientific investigation, and we still do not know for sure if they are really artificial.

The total length of the channels is nearly twenty kilometres and parts at least are known to have existed since the first survey of the area in 1843. The 1903 account describes them as averaging about three metres wide and up to one metre deep, though some on Budge's Island have recently been measured as up to fifteen metres wide.

There is no likelihood whatsoever that Maoris dug channels of this size as an aid to fowling or fishing. It is possible, however, that some (or all) of them originated as Maori ditches and that erosion has subsequently excavated them out to their present size. There is evidence that the banks of the channels are at present eroding at quite a fast rate, but it may have been slower before an earthquake in 1855, which is said to have caused the level of the land to drop about one and a half metres."

(From "Development of the Vernon Lagoons" - Dept. of University Extension, Victoria University - M.M. Trotter, 1979)

Notes

- (a) Elvy was a well known surveyor who knew the local Maori and the Marlborough area intimately. He was in a position to be told all about the human history. In comparing the two above accounts, Michael Trotter, of Canterbury Museum, makes no mention of hearsay tribal history and states there is some doubt over the man-made origin. At the same time Elvy in other writings carefully recorded anything he was told and that included local legends bordering on the supernatural. Trotter is a meticulous archaeologist who has done much work in this area, particularly with regard to the pits of Port Underwood, Queen Charlotte Sound, Kenepuru Sound and Titirangi Bay.
- (b) The map below is compiled from two sources. The work of Trotter; the additions are the now eroded isthmus-banks which showed up in the 1901 map, and the location of the former Riverlands racecourse and the possible "hearsay" channel that Elvy said ran "from a bend well up the Opawa River" - "crossed the State highway near the Riverlands homestead ... it continued past the old Riverlands racecourse ...".

II Jim Eyles and the Wairau Bar moahunter discovery

"In 1939 ... Jim Eyles was a pupil of Dillon's Point primary school He was thirteen and in Form II.... To get to school he had to row for over a mile, then ride a bicycle for three miles Jim was always interested in history Jim was born and brought up on the bar of the Wairau river. And this Wairau bar was just the kind of camping place for people who long ago had to live by hunting

Jim (and many New Zealanders for that matter) was confused about Moriori. (Kupe had indicated that he had not found any people in New Zealand and yet Toi, 200 years later, said that there were many people - not brown-skinned like the Maori but black-skinned with frizzy hair. Folk dubbed them "Moriori".) ...

Eyles found the answers to his questions, for himself and for others He unearthed the bones and implements of the earliest human beings in New Zealand.... The bones Jim dug up were just like those of the Maoris. These ancient settlers were certainly Polynesian; and some of the tools found with them proved that they had come from Tahiti and Rarotonga. As other bones dug up in their camp showed, they lived here when there were moas, and swans, and eagles, and other birds which died out many hundreds of years ago.

So Jim's shovel proved that the people living here before the Maori fleet of 1350 were just an earlier branch of the same Polynesians.

Many years before Jim's discovery in 1939, Jim's grandfather put his plough through the biggest Moa-hunters' camp yet found. When he saw the surface white with great thick bones, he wondered why so many bullocks had been killed there by the bullock drivers The Wairau bar was used as a road in the early days for bullock teams to cart wool from the Vernon Hills north to the river mouth where it could be shipped. The bar was indeed a natural road, five miles long and a few chains wide To the Moa-hunters the bar was a natural trap. If the young men spread out in a great circle in the Vernon Hills (perhaps starting in the Lower Wairau Plain west of the Lagoons), they could edge the moas towards the

broad base of the bar. Soon the birds would be helplessly rushing north along the narrow "road" of the bar, with their hunters behind them. The moas would find themselves huddled at the north end. Before them rushed the main stream of the Wairau river; to their right the sea pounded on the shingle beach; to their left canoes waited for any who tried to escape by wading the deep lagoon. Probably the big ovens had already been dug, the fires laid, and packed on top with stones. Soon the birds would be dead, their bodies would be skinned, laid on the hot stones, and all covered over with earth. How many years and generations must this have been repeated, because today burnt and broken moa bones lie everywhere beneath the surface over twenty acres at the north end of the bar.

Just past the sheep-yards ... he drove his shovel into a gently sloping bank of shingle. About a foot down, the shingle gave way to sand, which was easier digging, and at the same time the blade of the shovel just tipped something which rang hollow It was a huge egg, with a small neatly drilled hole at one end. Apart from a crack where the shovel had hit it, it was perfect. A foot deeper he struck bones, brown and crumbling - the skeleton of a man, who was lying at rest, his head pointing to the rising sun Round the bones of the neck were a number of shiny beads like cotton-reels.

In these twenty acres Jim had opened up the one place where the chiefs of the Moa-hunters had been buried. Later, other graves were found. They were in little groups, scattered here and there among what had been the houses of the village. The best clue to the house sites is the fireplace of stones placed in a square or rectangle. The Moa-hunter Maoris obviously had no enemies. Otherwise they would not have buried their dead so openly in the village. Also it is clear they were not cannibals because, among the thousands of bones of birds, dogs, seals, fish, and whales ... there are no bones of human beings. Nor did they make fish-hooks or needles from human bones

as did the Maoris of later times. No stones clubs have been found in their camps. Most of all, their villages were open and unfortified

Like primitive people the world over, the Moa-hunters of Wairau honoured their dead by placing in the grave beside them many of the things they most valued in life

The most valuable grave gift was the moa's egg drilled from only one end. To people without pottery or the vegetable gourd, the moa-egg bottle must have been valuable property. Particularly when the moas were beginning to get scarce, we can imagine each egg being carefully blown from one end, and treasured as the special property of the chief. Yet the Moa-hunters must have been careless at the start. All over the camp were found, mixed with the bones and seashells from the ovens, the fragments of hundreds of eggs which had been broken to pieces in the cooking. Six bones with moa-egg bottles were opened up, but all except two of the ten eggs buried in them were broken by the weight of the stony shingle bar.

These moa eggs also proved another thing. Up till the time Jim unearthed the Wairau graves, some people doubted whether the finding of moa bones in ovens proved that moas were alive when the old Maoris made the ovens. But what could be said about ten moa's eggs? The Moa-hunters must have found them fresh because, though one egg in a thousand might survive without bursting, it could not otherwise be expected that ten would be found intact in a small area. ...

One of the cleverest things they did with bone was to make beads from the middle part of the moa's thigh-bone. This middle part was a rounded section like a cocoa tin; to shape it they would smooth off each broken end, and grind a ridge round the middle of it. These big clumsy beads, up to 2 inches long and $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches thick, were strung as necklaces with the curved tooth of the sperm whale hung in the middle. Sometimes the Moa-hunters copied the beads in a soft, greasy stone: until Jim Eyles' discoveries no one knew what these stone beads were. The first skeleton found had smaller beads cut from the ivory of the sperm whale's tooth."

"Duff considered that Wairau Bar, ... was a most suitable site for people having a fishing and fowling economy. Here the river mouth (he wrote), gave access to the sea, for fish or trading expeditions, while along the sea beaches accumulated the large quantities of firewood necessary in a treeless spot. White bait and kahawai ran seasonally into the river and lagoon; herrings, eels, and flounders formed a more permanent population; and banks of edible shellfish thrived inside the bar. In addition, the extinct swan must have flourished in this favourable estuary ... as well as great numbers of grey and paradise duck Finally, in some manner which is still not finally decided, the site was well placed for hunting the large numbers of moas An obvious suggestion is that they were rounded up in the Wairau plain or driven down from the Vernon hills A less likely possibility is that these birds were hunted some distance inland and brought by canoe or raft down the Wairau river to the camp site." (and later he says -)

"Archaeological sites around the lagoons, for instance on Budge's Island, may be indicative of the changed economy of prehistoric New Zealanders after they had killed off many species of birds, burnt off great areas of forest, and reduced the seal population on the coast. These sites are principally shell middens - scattered heaps of shells left from a diet that largely comprised shellfish and the roots of bracken-fern. Incidentally, this gritty and abrasive diet had a disastrous effect on the Maori's teeth, and it is common to find jaws with the teeth worn down to the gums, if not missing altogether.

The itinerant hunter-gatherer life style gave way to a more settled existence with the introduction of, and dependence upon; agriculture. ... this would have been about three hundred years ago....

On the low-lying land between the lagoons and the Vernon Hills, some low earthen walls can be seen when conditions of light and growth are right. These are typical of those associated with Maori gardens."

(From "Development of the Vernon Lagoons" - M.M.Trotter, 1979)

III Vernon - the large station fronting the Lagoons and Bluffs

"The Wairau Massacre (1843) cast a gloom over the Nelson Settlement and delayed expansion towards the Wairau and Awatere by four years. They had pinned their faith on this area as the solution to their problems and now the settlement saw much unemployment and hardship. Also, by this time, farmers had made the exciting discovery that sheep, cattle and horses would thrive at all seasons out in the open, living entirely on the native grasses. Who would worry about agriculture if a block of grazing country could be obtained? But alas these grazing lands lay in the hills of the Wairau and Awatere.

In March 1846 the new Governor, Captain George Grey, visited Nelson where a deputation waited on him and stressed the Company's land problems and the urgent need to expand into the Wairau. ... After twelve months of negotiations by Grey, the Ngati Toa tribe (Te Rauparaha's) agreed to sell and the "Wairau Purchase" was signed on March 18, 1847. The large tract of country purchased included the Awatere.

Once more the survey parties set to work, this time in peace. After surveying the flat land on the Wairau Plain into rural sections, the surveyors moved into the Awatere at the end of 1847. William Budge's survey of 150 acre rural sections on both sides of the Awatere River become known as the "Wakefield Downs Block".

(From "The Awatere" -
A.L.Kennington, 1978)

1848 William Budge, the surveyor, took up the "Bluff" run of 12,000 acres between the Wairau and Awatere rivers and bounded on the north-east by the sea.

The same year, on the south-west side of the "Bluff", Edwin Dashwood took up 6500 acres.

Neither man was very successful at the job and so

Early 1850s Henry Redwood, Senior, of Nelson, took over both properties.

His son, Thomas Redwood, established a homestead near the lagoons, naming the house and property "Vernon".

(1906 "Cyclopaedia of New Zealand"

says that either Redwood named his property after his grandmother whose name was Elizabeth Vernon or it is in honour of the vice admiral who captured Portobello from the Spaniards in 1739.)

1882 "Vernon" sold to William Clifford by trustees of Henry Redwood. Purchasing finance was supplied, by way of mortgage, by Clifford's father, Lord Clifford of Ugbrooke Park, Chudleigh, England. Because of the large amount of good agricultural land on the Awatere side of the run, Clifford decided to make his main homestead there, and name it "Ugbrooke". The house, when built, was to boast a floor area of almost 10,000 square feet. Feeling the pinch financially, only half the planned house eventuated. Financial worries plagued Clifford ever after.

1897 Henry Dunstan Vavasour, cousin of the Hon.W.Clifford, bought "Ugbrooke".

1900 John Greenfield bought the "Vernon" portion off Vavasour so that the Lagoons homestead would once again function as a separate property in its own right. "Ugbrooke" yielded 5400 acres (or 5240 acres) to make up this "Vernon" property. Greenfield ran 2500 sheep.

Today J.D.Balfour operates "Vernon Holdings".

(Most of above from "The Awatere")

The Bluffs route to the Awatere

"In 1839 James Wynen settled among the whalers in Port Underwood, where he established a general store at Kakapo Bay. By 1848 the whaling trade was declining, and in that year, Wynen moved to the north bank of the Wairau River mouth, where he set up in business as a trader to take advantage of the trade which was bound to follow the settlement taking place in the Wairau and Awatere at that time. Before long, others were attracted to this strategic position, and the nearby Boulder Bank area, which soon became notorious for its

collection of primitive stores and badly run "grog shops". For the next ten years this was the only place where the Awatere run holders could ship their wool away and procure stores.

At that time all transport was by bullock dray, and the track used, to get from the Boulder Bank to the Awatere, ran along the beach and around the White Bluffs. Only at low tide was this route possible, and even then it was an exciting and dangerous experience. Large stones frequently came bounding down the cliffs, frightening the teams, and bigger than usual waves would sometimes threaten to engulf the dray and its contents."

(From "The Awatere")

Note

The first road to the Awatere was the Taylor Pass route. It apparently had

scattered parties of roadmakers busy on it in 1859. It was rough, narrow winding and often blocked by swollen fords.

"In the 'nineties, there was a good deal of grain growing on the "Ugbrooke" flats, and across the Awatere River at Seaview It was a long haul by wagon, carting the grain through the Taylor Pass to Blenheim, and thoughts were turned to the opening up of a more direct route from the Lower Awatere to Blenheim. The projected subdivision of "Ugbrook into small farms, lent further weight to the case for a new road.

The line of this proposed new road lay through the Redwood Pass ... 1894 the road was formed." (So the Redwood Pass route became the main road southwards from Blenheim until 1933, when the present Weld-Dashwood highway opened.) (From "The Awatere")



