

Barrier's Wheel of Fortune

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IN 1838 AN American trader, William Webster, and his partners Jeremiah Nagle and William Abercrombie, claimed to have bought the whole of Great Barrier from Maori of the Ngatiwai tribe. Following the Treaty of Waitangi, the purchase was found to be invalid, but the partners were later awarded land at the north-western tip of the island. In 1957 copper was discovered in the area, setting off a cycle of boom and bust industries that have plagued the island's economic stability ever since.

Miners, mainly thankful Cornishmen from the failed copper mines on Kawau Island, moved to the Abercrombies' Barrier mines where they extracted copper, manganese and sulphur. But the workings, although at the time the country's most extensive, were short-lived.



(Above) Miners on the island in 1897. (Photograph Auckland Museum)

(Right) Silver bracelet owned by Bev Blackwell (nee Sanderson) was made from the first silver mined on the island. (Photograph John Pawlick)

Towards the end of the century the discovery of silver at Okupu and gold inland on the northern slopes of Mt-Te Ahumata, a region known as the White Cliffs, injected new life into the island. The first strike was on a farm, but before owner Ben Sanderson could take advantage of the find, he was stricken with typhoid. Tom Ryan, a neighbour who could neither read nor write, seized his chance, lodging a claim which he later



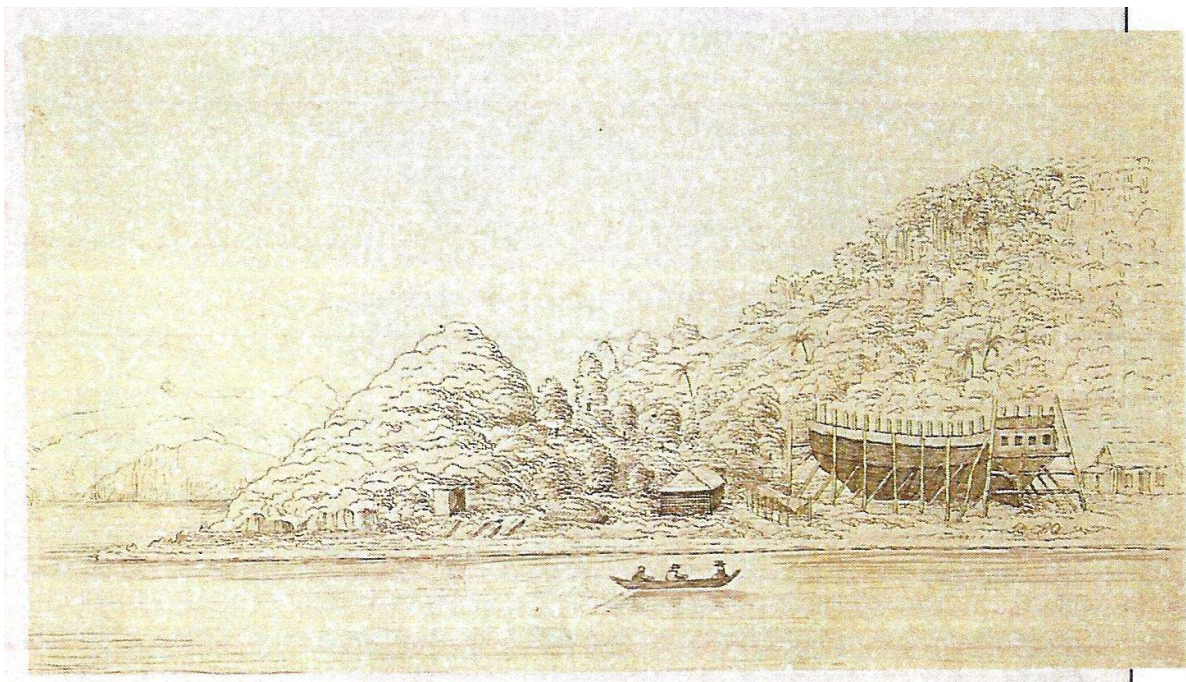
sold for an astounding £3000. Ryan, the epitome of the hard-working pioneer, led a frugal life nonetheless, later boasting that he had neither bought a potato nor lit a lamp in his life.

Miners flocked to the island from the Coromandel fields to work the Sunbeam and Iona mines, and the inevitable trappings of the industry quickly sprang up. A colossal stamping battery was built to crush the gold- and silver-bearing ores and extract the precious metals. The battery's foundations still rise up the hillside in concrete tiers, each the dimension of a house, though the great building and the mercury baths have long gone.

Where there was once a cacophony of machines and whistles, there is now only a desolate silence. Little remains of the mining town that grew up in the shadow of the White Cliffs apart from a few overgrown hearths. Yet Oreville was once a vibrant collection of tents, shanties, cottages and boarding house, served by two cook-houses, a number of stores and even a bakery. At its peak up to 700 workers trod its mud tracks, a population not equalled on the island until recent times.

Inevitably, though earlier than had been hoped, the seams ran out. A change of manager and of mining strategy failed to reverse the Barrier Reef Mining Company's declining fortunes. In 1908 the company shut up shop and dismantled its equipment. The miners drifted away, and even the island's pigeonram agency, which had been kept busy with company correspondence, reverted to its old roost at Okupu.

With the end of tribal fighting on Great Barrier, the Ngatiwai and Ngatimaru came together around Katherine Bay to cultivate the land and cut puriri posts for sale in Auckland. When, after the Second World War, dairying suffered a decline, life became difficult and many families left to find work on the mainland. Now the few remaining Maori struggle, as do most of the islanders, to make a living.



The Stirlingshire, one of a number of ships built on Great Barrier, was the largest sailing ship to be built in New Zealand. She was a three-masted barque of 409 tons, with a frame of Barrier pohutukawa and planking of kauri. This 1847 sketch by Rev William Bambridge shows the vessel under construction at Nagle Cove, Port Abercrombie. (Alexander Turnbull Library)

Though kauri had been taken by ships of the Royal Navy for spars as early as 1794, coastal milling began in a sporadic manner in 1840. The first true industry on the island was the cutting of manuka to heat Auckland villas and for fish-smoking. An unlikely export, it began in the 1860s and by 1890 had reached volumes of up to 200 tonnes a week. Even today red-netted bundles of firewood occasionally stud the foreshore of sheltered bays, a supplementary income for cash-strapped locals.

In 1888 the Kauri Timber Company took over an earlier operator and began harvesting timber on a commercial scale, systematically stripping the island of trees over 30cm in diameter. A stand near the inaccessible summit of Mt Hobson, the island's highest peak, was virtually all that escaped destruction. The company built the southern hemisphere's largest mill, in the 'free port' of Whangaparapara, serviced by a kauri wharf said to be a quarter of a mile long. Timber from as far away as Northland was processed there before being shipped directly to Australia and Europe.

The rugged ranges that form the island's spine were laced with tramways as straight as Roman roads. These hauling lines, almost vertical in places and with a two-metre gauge, were used to take out the massive kauri logs. The routes can still be followed today-the tramways are now part of a network of walking tracks on the island. The company also made use of water power for moving timber, and massive kauri dams built across the headwaters of the Kaiaraara stream still stand, fitting monuments to an era of enviable resourcefulness.

The largest dam was last breached in 1927. Around that time Whangaparapara was made a dutiable port, setting the seal on an operation that had grown uneconomical and outdated. Later, logs were towed directly to Auckland for milling. In its 50-year life, the Kauri Timber Company milled around 90 million feet of timber and supported a settlement 200 strong.

Whangaparapara was the site of another fleeting extraction industry: whaling. As early as 1829, Barrier whalers from Port Fitzroy had chased the leviathans-humpbacks, fin and sei whales-as they followed a migratory path that cut in through the feeding grounds of the gulf not 10 kilometres from the island.

In the 1950s there was a resurgence in whaling, centred on a newly-built station in Whangaparapara. After record seasons in which up to 110 whales and 1300 tons of oil were processed, trouble struck. Chasers were forced further and further out in search of the humpbacks, the result of decimation by Russian and Japanese whaling fleets. Now the concrete slab of the processing plant has joined Barrier's impressive list of ruins.

Fishing has always been important to the Barrier's economy, and one local remembers the days when upwards of 60 mulleties and keelers could be found sheltering in Whangaparapara.



Great Barrier was renowned for its huge packhorse crayfish-a variety of lobster which can reach 25 pounds. Locals tell of catching the enormous crustaceans by tying paua to the end of a flax stick, poking the stick in the water, then withdrawing it slowly. The cray would be grabbed by the base of the antennae as it



followed the bait up to the surface. The introduction of air travel by flying boat in the 1950s made the commercial exploitation of packhorses possible, and led to a crayfishing boom on the island. Amateur divers such as Mike Gardiner (below) and Dennis Markson (above) were still bringing up 15-pound packhorses in the late 1960s, but the species is now rare. (Photographs courtesy of Mike Gardiner)

Another, Bill Owen, began lifting packhorse crayfish in large numbers in the 1950s, taking advantage of a new amphibian air service to fuel an insatiable demand in Auckland. Now, overfished seas have hit the fishermen hard, and a recently introduced licensing system is seen as a last chance to help the embattled industry.

As with many fond hopes for prosperity, island dairy farming limped through setbacks and depression into patches of relative prosperity, always dogged by uneconomic transport links and infrequent service. These days, farmers are turning to subdivision, selling off the family silver, as it were, to realise something from years of hard labour. They are criticised by many for following a dead-end road, but alternatives are hard to come by.

The Barrier, by and large, has indifferent soil, and distance drives up the cost of everything, from machine parts to toothpaste. Alternatives are being tried—macadamias, biodynamic horticulture, mussel farms, even vineyards. But so far the island has failed to sink its economic taproot beneath the level of pioneer settlement.

With fast boats now cutting travel time to the island to under 100 minutes, talk is turning to tourism. But for that to be lucrative, the island needs upgraded roads, hotels and public amenities: For some, the social cost of that is too high to contemplate.

Gold, silver and copper mining all had a part in Barrier's history. Right: Below right: copper pyrites stains the rocks around a disused shaft at Miners Head. (Photograph Kennedy Warne)

