

The Tale of the Two Te Kowhai Villages

Graham McBride

Overview:

There are eighteen known Maaori living areas in the Te Kowhai area. These were mainly river-based paa and kaainga. The interior area away from the river was largely swampy and was used predominantly for seasonal food gathering. The close of the 1863-1864 Waikato Land Wars saw the rapid entry of both European and Maaori militia settlers into the Government's Western Confiscation Zone, of which Te Kowhai was part of. Then came the river-settlers; people of relative affluence who accumulated land and consolidated along the river-terraces. As a community, 'Te Kowhai' was associated with the Waipa River; basically in the area that is now Collie and Bedford Roads. In time, the central area of the district was settled and with it came demands to shift facilities to where the village is today. For the river-settlers, this gradual 3-mile migration of the village to where it is today was a challenging process, which was fought by the river-settlers with fury.

'It was the unwillingness of the settlers along the Waipaa River to accept the fact that the centre of Te Kowhai was no longer on the west but was moving eastwards towards Horotiu, that caused so much bickering and dissension with regard to a school site'

Te Kowhai 1890-1990 Jubilee publication.

The Settlement of Te Kowhai

Europeans coveted the Waikato lands and were determined to acquire them by any means. This led to the Land Wars. Thus the Waipa Valley received considerable military attention as General Cameron's troops and navy progressed up river in early 1864. Some of the militiamen of the third Waikato Regiment and von Tempsky's Forest Rangers were stationed in Te Kowhai during this period.



'The Sinking of The Avon' from the Illustrated London News in 1864. This incident was in February of that year, on the Waipa River at Te Kowhai, during the Land Wars. It held up

General Cameron's advance into the upper Waipa valley for 5 weeks while the Avon was refloated.

The next settlement era in Te Kowhai involved militiamen who were allocated a land area based on their military rank in the Land Wars. However, much of the interior land was swampy and inhospitable. Many of these allotments were completely unsustainable and most soldiers soon abandoned their properties or sold to land speculators.

The period after the Land Wars saw the introduction of commercial steamers on the great Waipa river-road. The third 'wave' of settlers began to build homes facing the Waipa River; Collie and Bedford Roads was the epi-centre of the community. These western settlers consolidated the Te Kowhai 'village' or precinct – they built two churches, two schools, the first store; even a commercial fellmongery and a creamery. The settlers across the Waipa River at Karakariki (at the northern end) and Te Puroa did not have their own road accesses, so crossing the river by boat or punt to Te Kowhai for school or church or supplies or socials was just part of their everyday life.



Paddle steamer near Ngaruawahia.

As crude roads were formed around the Te Kowhai district, gradually the Waipa river-road became obsolete. This was not an abrupt event, rather a slow and grudging decline. This change away from the river-road was paralleled, or perhaps driven, by the slow shift of Te Kowhai away from the river, to where it is today.

The catalyst for the gradual move away from the western river-village took a number of forms:

River transport. The high cost of transporting goods by river steamer and reliability issues caused by floods, droughts and the rampant willow trees and spars blocking the river-channel;

Early roading. The Newcastle Road Board was established about 1868 to develop roads for Te Kowhai, Rotokauri and Whatawhata. It was run by local farmers and the focus in Te Kowhai was on the settled areas in the west around the Waipa River. As farms began to be developed away from the river, there was a shift in the growth of the population. In time, the elected members of the Road Board changed to farmers

located in the more central areas. Efforts to improve access into the interior followed this change;



Titled 'On the way to the creamery, Te Kowhai' this shows the County or Main Road in 1909. The first hall is on the rise at rear. The road was formed with clay.

Auckland War Memorial Museum photo

The Dairy Factory. The building of the New Zealand Dairy Association's Te Kowhai Dairy Factory in 1893, near today's hall, was undoubtedly the defining moment for the siting of the new village. Henry Reynolds, of Reynolds and Co. (of the famous Anchor Brand) met the settlers on 30 June 1892 to discuss a proposed new creamery. The farmers assembled 'at Te Kowhai'; at the intersection of Collie and Bedford Roads. Alfred Corbett, of Collie Road, offered a free site for the creamery at 'Corbett's Corner' to the crowd. Reynolds objected to the Te Kowhai West site as it was not central to Newcastle. He was looking for a site on the new Main (or County) Road; half way between Whatawhata and Ngaruawahia. He spoke of the interior being 'more thickly settled' in time and urged the settlers to think of the future. A map of the district was produced and a spot was identified as being central. Peter Kay stated that he had a section a few chains south of this area and would donate the land for a road to connect to the Main Road (the Hall end of Bedford Road) for easy access to a creamery, should it be built.



The second Te Kowhai Creamery in 1909. It opened in 1892.

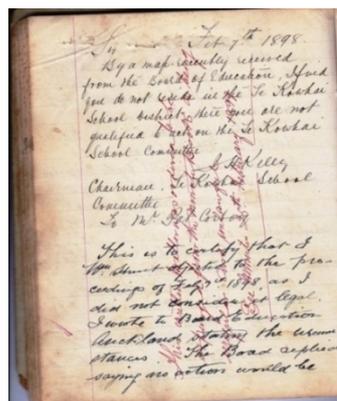
Auckland War Memorial Museum photo

Schools. Te Kowhai School opened with seventeen pupils in 1890 in the former Bycroft private creamery on the northern end of Bedford Road. In 1892 the owner of the school building died and the Auckland Education Board was asked to find another site. Offers were made by a number of land owners and astute politics from the western settlers saw a 2-acre (0.8 ha) site chosen on the corner of Bedford Road and Richards Road (north) on land donated by Peter Kay. The Education Board then built a one-roomed school and a teacher's house. The school opened in November 1893. Almost instantly, settlers from the interior of Te Kowhai realised the site was unsuitable. They petitioned the Board shift the school building.

'It would save fifteen to twenty children a two-mile daily walk across dangerous creeks – some of which were crossed on a plank' (one was over the Te Otamanui Stream, immediately below where the Hall is now). The Bedford Road flats were too swampy in the winter months and children had to walk over a clay track, through gorse, over Bonfrey's Hill' (via what is now Richards Road).

This request caused huge angst, indeed 'unabated fury' between the original settlers in the west and the newcomers in the east and petition and counter-petition were sent to the Board in Auckland.

This saw an acrimonious six-year battle to get the Auckland Education Board to re-site the school buildings. Central land owner Emma Bycroft offered land for the new school site (where it is today) and in time George Hartman contributed two acres of land for a paddock for the children's horses (now the playing field). The school room was finally removed to the central area in 1899, and the school teacher's house followed about 1903;



'Expunged' pages from the 1986-1904 School Minute book tell of the tactics to keep the school near the river-settlers. Some of their School Committee decisions were retrospectively cancelled 'as being irregular and unlawful' by the incoming central committee. 'Westie' Alfred Corbett even enlisted women to attend and vote in this matter. The Minutes show:

'This caused much misunderstanding and confusion' at the meeting. However, the west 'was put to flight'.

Te Kowhai Store. The first store was on Collie Road and the next on the southern end of Bedford Road. The third store (where the current store stands) was opened adjacent to the central dairy factory in 1904.

The Hall. The erection of the district's first public hall in 1905 was on the hill where the Te Kowhai War Memorial Hall is now. This was on part of the allotment that the dairy company was built on in 1893;

The Te Kowhai to Te Rapa Road through the huge Harakeke Swamp was finally opened in 1907 after years of lobbying of Waipa County, Hamilton Borough, the Crown and considerable fund-raising and road building efforts by Te Kowhai-ites. This important new access to Hamilton and the rail station at Te Rapa opened up the interior of the district and saw a number of previously no-exit roads linked to it;



In 1909 Bessie and Walter Simmons started cutting a farm out of the Harakeke Swamp between Exelby and Duck Roads. This was after the new road was formed to Te Rapa.

Syd Worster photo

The church relocation. The St Stephens Church was erected on Collie Road in 1903. In 1950, Archdeacon Wheadon recommended that the church would be better suited for use if it was shifted from its lonely near-river location to the central area of the district. Victor and Ethel Henton made available a half-acre of their farm land to the church for the potential new site. The final death-knell for the original western village was the uplifting of this church by truck from Collie Road in 1955 to where it stands currently.



The Collie Road church arrives in the central village area in 1955.

Te Kowhai's central village of today was not planned; it just grew up around the dairy factory. In fact, if one was planning a green-field site now, siting the township in a location bisected by multiple gullies, as it is, would be unlikely when there are abundant areas of better land nearby. The dreams and aspirations of the early settlers for a river-village out west were thwarted by the slow migration of the centre of interest to where it now rests. In fact, to really 'rub salt into the wound', the Newcastle Road Board Minutes from 1910-1914 show the creation of a new road across 'Bonfrey's Swamp' (the Bedford Road flats by Kempthorne Transport) left the Te Kowhai West settlers having to pay off a thirty six year loan of £300 (\$600) to get adequate access to the new village.

The story of Te Kowhai Village is not complete. Discussions began in 2015 between Waikato District Council and the Te Kowhai Community Group about the expansion of the village. It included a plan for the gradual release of forty-four hectares of land for new residential housing. The fifty-year vision suggests Te Kowhai will be a self-contained township with many essential facilities therein. The journey from scattered pā, to the river-village, then the central village, and eventually to a town, will be a long one. However, in reality it is only about three kilometres 'as the crow flies' from where it all started.

Our people:



*From left to right: **Peter Kay**: donor of land for the road to the new creamery from the west and possibly also donor of the factory land. He also gave land for the second school and the 'New Bedford Main Road' (about 1914). **Emma Bycroft**: donor of land for the third school (along with George Hartman). **Ethel** and **Victor Henton** donated land for the new central St Stephens Church site.*

Kay, Bycroft and Henton photos from descendants.