

## Te Kahe Te Rau o Te Rangī, Kapiti Island

### A bicultural whaling village

Pre-1840, New Zealand attracted a polyglot mix of adventurers and entrepreneurs, the sealers, whalers, stowaways and their Maori compradors forming Alan Grey's 'robber economy'. The early industries, sex excluded, were extractive: flax, timber, seals and most important of all, whales. Pelagic or ocean whalers entered the Bay of Islands from the early 1800s. Shore whaling began twenty years later and was predominantly southern in its concentration, around Cook Strait and the East Coast of the South Island.

These European ships drew Ngati Toa chief, Te Rauparaha, to Kapiti Island. His tribe had fared badly in the Musket Wars but the unscrupulous, treacherous and violent Te Rauparaha was also very intelligent and adaptable. He knew that the European ships passing through Cook Strait that he could see from Kapiti Island were the key to getting trade goods such as guns. In 1823 Ngati Toa seized the island, which they defended next year in the bloody Battle of Waiorua. Kapiti, centre of a canoe-crafted empire, gave Te Rauparaha both a fortress and a trading base.

Trading vessels began calling in 1827 and, by the time the trade peaked in the mid 1830s, there were five whaling stations on the island: Waiorua, Rangatira, Taepiro, Wharekohu and Te Kahe Te Rau o Te Rangī. Te Rauparaha encouraged traders and whalers, providing land, houses, pigs, potatoes, dressed flax and women in return for guns, tobacco and alcohol. Chris Maclean describes 1830s Kapiti as 'a wild frontier, a meeting point of two cultures without the restraints of laws or government' but, despite Te Rauparaha's occasional acts of thuggery, two cultures united in greed got along surprisingly well. Europeans and Maori lived side by side and trader and whaler John Niccol followed age-old practice by marrying into the local real estate, wedding Kahe Te Rau o Te Rangī, daughter of Ngati Toa chief Te Matoha.

The whaling trade faded away in the 1840s and Te Rauparaha, his influence waning, moved back to the mainland. Whalers and Te Rauparaha are just part of Kapiti's history. It has also been a farm and a pioneering site for conservation. The government acquired most of it in 1897 and Richard Henry was one of the earliest keepers. Now predator-free, Kapiti is an important bird sanctuary. Nature is reclaiming the village site, but boats take visitors out to Kapiti and at Te Kahe Te Rau o Te Rangī you can still see terraces, a trypot stand and a whaler's grave, as well as Maori middens.

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Kapiti Island, 10-km long, lies some five kilometres offshore of Paraparaumu, on the west coast of the southern North Island.

**Further reading:** Chris Maclean, *Kapiti*, Whitcombe Press, Wellington, 1999.



