

Ripapa Island – History In Every Stone

Ripapa Island, Lyttelton Harbour – Maori pa, quarantine station, prison and fort – this tiny outcrop of volcanic rock has had an action-packed history.

The island, which can only be visited on organised tours, lies just a stone's throw from the southern shores of the harbour. Both Maori and European saw its military possibilities.

The Maori developed a fortified pa on Ripapa in the early nineteenth century and there were several skirmishes on it between warring tribes until the 1830s, when the great tribal leader, Te Rauparaha, overran it.

The island lay abandoned until 1872-73, when European settlers established a quarantine station there. Those buildings were adapted and used as a prison from 1880.

During the 1880s New Zealand became increasingly fearful of invasion by Russia. Throughout the country, coastal defences were developed. Like the Maori before them, the European settlers recognised Ripapa's strategic value and, in 1885, in response to the "Russian Scare", built Fort Jervis on the island. This fort, now carefully preserved complete with two Armstrong disappearing guns, is the most complete Russian Scare fort in New Zealand.

The guns were never fired in anger but the fort was once again taken over for military purposes before the First World War. In 1913, as New Zealand geared up for conflict, it was used a prison for thirteen young Canterbury and West Coast men who refused to take part in

compulsory military training. Their imprisonment caused huge debate, especially in Canterbury. Ten of the boys were released after some weeks but three were imprisoned on Ripapa for three months, until the authorities, partly in response to public pressure, were forced to rethink their strategy.

The island's last moment in the limelight was in 1918, when it was home, briefly, to New Zealand's most famous prisoner of war, German Navy commander, Count Felix von Luckner.

Nicknamed, the Sea Devil, Von Luckner, had been plundering Allied shipping, and was captured near Fiji. He and his lieutenant, Lieutenant Kirscheiss, were sent to Ripapa after a failed escape attempt from a North Island prison.

Ripapa was not to the Sea Devil's liking – he complained of boredom and contemplated escaping by hiding in a water barrel and being tossed into the sea by his lieutenant. However, von Luckner is said to have liked the prison commandant too much to make trouble for him and never put the plan into action. The pair were later transferred back to the North Island.

During the Second World War New Zealand defence forces again occupied the island and now it's a historic reserve, managed by the Department of Conservation.