

## Wanganui, the town, and Whanganui, the river

*For the visitor Wanganui has a genteel feel. Its heyday was in the past and its early twentieth century liveliness is echoed in its restored main street.*

*The Whanganui River offers an even greater contrast between one hundred years ago and the early twenty-first century. True it still supports tourist traffic but the scale is much reduced.*



The river was one of the most important early tourist attractions in New Zealand. The advertisements called it the Rhine of New Zealand or the Rhine of Maoriland and it is said that 12,000 tourists a year were being transported

on the river through the 239 rapids in its navigable length. There were stops at a magnificent hotel isolated in the backblocks, lit by electricity, and at a similarly appointed Houseboat.

The Wanganui/Whanganui story is one of interaction, sometimes cooperative, sometimes warlike, between Maori and Pakeha as the Pakeha push for economic development conflicted with the Maori sense of place.

A trip along the Whanganui River road provides some small insights to this story.

## Whanganui River – Scenic Route

While the intrepid may wish to take a few days and experience the Whanganui River by canoe, a riverside road along the lower 80 km provides an experience for car travellers.

This route can form a round trip from the town of Wanganui or it can be the way to reach Wanganui from the Tongariro National Park.

The round trip is to travel up the river to Pipiriki, then take the road through Raetihi to meet SH 4 and return to Wanganui.

If you are travelling from the centre of the Island (Tongariro National Park) take the road from Raetihi to Pipiriki and then travel down the river.

The river road is narrow, winding and unsealed for much of the way. With stops for sightseeing and refreshment you should allow 4 to 5 hours for the Raetihi-Pipiriki–Wanganui section.

If you don't have a car or simply want an alternative means of travel, you can join the mail run. (Rivercity Tours ph 06 344 2554).

The DayOut website has a link to the attractions you will find on the route, as well as three that are in the town. Visiting these before or after your trip will make it more rewarding.

These three attractions are:

- The Wanganui Information Centre, which has a 3-D model of the region
- The Riverboat Centre
- The Whanganui Museum, which has an excellent display of taonga (Maori treasures) and canoes.

## History

### An Important Thoroughfare

New Zealand's longest navigable river starts near Mount Tongariro. Much of its winding journey to the sea near Wanganui (the town) is through the Whanganui National Park.

By the time the river was opened up for navigation by Pakeha over 3000 Maori lived along the river banks - they were considered a great tourist attraction on "The Rhine of New Zealand".

The development of the river is largely attributed to one person, Alexander Hatrick, who started the first regular steamer service in 1892 and by 1903 had services running right through to Taumarunui, where they would eventually connect with the rail services and with coaches to Rotorua. At the height of the riverboat service there were twelve steamers and motor vessels, as well as motorised canoes for use in times of very low water levels.

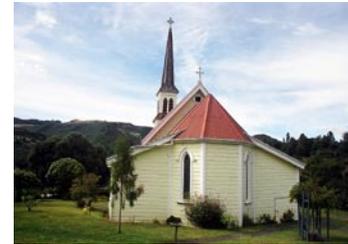
The main riverboat trade ceased in the 1920s, owing to the development of better roads, a main trunk railway and other tourist attractions, although riverboats were still operating in the late 1950s.

### Maori Concerns

River navigation has been restricted (a source of grievance to Maori) as water flows were reduced in the 1970s by the diversion of headwaters for use in the hydro power stations on the Waikato River, though the extent of the diversion has since been reduced, following a Planning Tribunal decision. Maori efforts to assert their rangatiratanga over the river have recently been reported on by the Waitangi Tribunal and are now (2003) the subject of negotiations between iwi and the Crown.

## Places Along The River Road

### Jerusalem



Missionaries were an early European influence along the river.

Names given by a missionary to settlements along the river were transformed into Maori equivalents, e.g. Corinth

became Koriniti, Jerusalem became Hiruharama Athens became Atene and London, Ranana.

Jerusalem, or Hiruharama, was once the largest kainga (village) on the Whanganui River, in the middle of a populous district. It was known as a meeting place for korero (discussion). The Catholic Mission was first established in the area in 1854. Jerusalem was where Suzanne Aubert founded the congregation of the Sisters of Compassion in 1892.

In the 1970's, embodying the hippie spirit of the times, the New Zealand poet the late James K. Baxter lived there and many of his followers joined him, also forming a community. Baxter (Hemi) is buried at Jerusalem

### Kawana Flour Mill



The Kawana Flour Mill was one of several mills given by Governor Grey in the 19th century. It operated for 50 years. It has been completely rebuilt – including its waterwheel - by the Historic Places Trust. The miller's colonial-style cottage has also been restored. The mill is unattended; you can walk around and read the informative notices.

## Moutoa Island

By 1864, many Maori tribes were desperate to resist the confiscation and occupation of their land by European settlers. Te Ua Haumene of Taranaki founded the Pai Marire or Hau Hau faith. Success in an ambush of troops and military settlers led to a confidence that the beliefs and practices of the religion would prove effective in war against the Pakeha.

Members of Upper Whanganui tribes were converted to the new faith and resolved to attack the town of Wanganui. However, they were opposed by the Ngati Hau who were joined at Ranana by other tribes from the lower river. A challenge was issued to the Pai Marire war party. "If you attempt to force your way down river we shall fight you on Moutoa."

It was agreed to fight on the morning of 14 May 1864. The Hau Hau came down the river in their decorated war canoes the night before the battle.

In the early morning hundreds of supporters of the two sides, mostly Maoris, watched from opposite banks of the river. Challenges were exchanged for some two hours before the first shot was fired. After some initial success the Pai Marire (Hau Hau) force lost ground, suffering in total 50 dead and a similar number wounded.

The Ngati Hua had defended their mana and authority over the lower river though they suffered 15 dead and 30 wounded. Their success benefited the European settlers in Wanganui who, in December 1865, erected New Zealand's first war memorial in the Wanganui riverbank park known as Moutoa Gardens or Pakaitore. The memorial lists the local Maori killed at Moutoa.

*You can see Moutoa Island from the road north of Ranana.*

## Pipiriki

At Pipiriki there are DOC camping facilities and a DOC information centre. There too is the site of the luxury hotel that burned down, and a restored colonial cottage.



You can also see one of the old river boats used on the upper reaches of the river, the Ongarue. She is awaiting restoration and access is restricted but you can see how her design allowed her to cope with shallow water. Below the water line she has a single screw, protected in a tunnel. Extending from the stern are twin long rudders either side and, in the front, a winch to pull her up the worst rapids. In service, she had a draft of 12 inches, although she is 60 feet long and could carry 45 people at an average of 7.5 mph. She was designed for the upper reaches, from Pipiriki to the Houseboat and on to Taumarunui.

Ongarue, the last of the riverboats, was launched in 1903 and operated until 1958.

## Bibliography:

*YOUNG, David. "Woven by Water – Histories of the Whanganui River". Hui Publishers, 1998.*