



Ornate symbols of a new era.



The Masonic Hotel's elegant gas lamp.

For a few weeks in the autumn of 1880 New Plymouth had what might be termed a new tourist attraction.

Its advent attracted no comment from anyone living outside New Plymouth's immediate environs, yet its impact was such that when rural people came to town it was one of the first things they wanted to see.

Those visitors who were able to stay overnight were the ones who got the full benefit of the attraction, but even for those whose trips to town had to be confined to daylight hours there was at least the heavily ornate cast iron pole and lamp outside the Masonic Hotel to stand and gaze upon in awestruck admiration.

Gas lighting had come to New Plymouth.

More than two dozen outside lamps were lit for the first time on the night of Saturday March 6, 1880, but it was the Masonic's light, glowing so proudly atop its own standard on the Brougham and Devon Streets corner, that provided the most obvious and ostentatious celebration of the town's new age.

To the pioneer who had known New Plymouth from the time of its birth the sheer magic of having gas 'on tap' would have been yet another confirmation that his or her brave little settlement had really come of age.

In the 49 years since the pioneers had first set foot on Taranaki soil the town had jogged its way rather quietly past a succession of milestones — the coming of the telegraph, coach travel, the arrival of the railway and the steamship, just to name a few. Now there was this marvel of lighting that just glowed on and on without anyone having to replenish the fuel source.

There was nothing new about the use of gas, of course. The first gas lamps had been lit in London as long ago as 1802, and there had been experimental work going on in England for many decades prior to that. However most of those who had migrated to New Plymouth as original pioneers had come from rural areas and had never seen gas lighting. And neither, of course, had those who had been born here.

In New Zealand the first gasworks had been built in Auckland in 1862, and by the end of that decade gas was also lighting up Wellington, Christchurch and Dunedin.

Even in New Plymouth the new age had not really been an overnight arrival. There had been people talking about the manufacture of gas in Taranaki for about a decade, with only the lack of a harbour being an inhibiting factor. Gas needed coal, coal had to be imported, and the prospect of having to bring it ashore on surfboats on New Plymouth's open roadstead tended to set people's hair on end.

But counter-balancing those fears was the knowledge that every gas company so far formed in New Zealand had proved to be extremely successful. And so, with good profits in view, the New Plymouth Gas Company was formed in 1878.

At the time of the company's first annual meeting in July 1879 negotiations were under way for the purchase of a site on the corner of Molesworth and Liardet Streets for the construction of a gasworks. It was also announced that the necessary plant had already been purchased in Glasgow and was on its way to New Zealand at that very moment.

Residents who can remember the gasworks before they were rebuilt and modernised in the 1960s would agree they would have taken no prizes for good looks or cleanliness. But the product that they created was more important than the presentability of the creator, and when the town's first 25 gas lamps were lit on that March night in 1880, those who had never seen (or smelled) anything other than a candle or a lamp fuelled with whale oil would have been ready to forgive the plant any of the ugliness, the windblown smuts and the strange smells that it produced.

Although the Taranaki Herald remarked on that day that "the lighting of the town with gas is a marked stride in its progress," neither the Herald or the News carried any later comments on how this "marked stride" had been received by the townspeople. It is only from conversational reminiscences in years gone by of people who had been here at that time that we can gauge the public's reactions.

To recent arrivals who had grown up with gas lighting in big English cities, or who had come across it in other parts of New Zealand, it was all very ho-hum, but there were many, many people who stood in absolute awe of it all, and who didn't mind being caught staring with mouth agape at the sight of a lamplighter having to do nothing more than turn on a tap to get his illumination.

By the time of the second annual meeting in 1880 the company was able to report a steady increase in business, with the installation of 86 gas meters, the laying of nearly three kilometres of gas mains and the arrival of stocks of gas cookers.

The gas stove of the day was a simple cast iron appliance, a far cry from the attractive and highly sophisticated cookers of today, but it was another of the wonders of the age to people who had never known anything other than wood and coal fuelling.

Thereafter the gas business continued to grow at a steady rate, with the only notable milestones in the next few decades being the opening of the breakwater in 1881 and the resulting sheer luxury of being able to unload coal in a more civilised manner, and the subsequent provision of a wharf which improved things even more.

If 1880 was the big year for the gas consumer, the 1920s was the first big decade. In 1925 a 100,000 cubic foot gas holder was built to attempt to cope with the increase in the number of gas



consumers at a rate of about 60 a year. This was quite a remarkable achievement for the company in view of the parallel growth in the borough's electrical services and the amount of trouble that the company had been having, and was still having, with fluctuations in coal supplies and the general inefficiency of the gas-producing techniques of the day.

Even with the advent of the new gas holder, these ongoing problems effectively kept a rein on any massive growth in gas usage. In a newspaper interview in 1969, Mr C L Healy, for 40 years a meter reader for the New Plymouth Gas Company, recalled how difficult life had been for him, having to set out on his rounds knowing that he was going to have to bear the brunt of complaints from one annoyed housewife after another about the erratic nature of the gas supply. It was only made worse when he would arrive home on many occasions, tired, hungry, physically and mentally exhausted, only to find himself facing a cold tea and a further selection of non-complimentary opinions on the gas service from his own wife.

By the 1930s gas usage had levelled off, and now showed no signs of ever again keeping up with electricity, although the

engineers at the Egmont Oil Wells refinery at Moturoa agreed to try out one of Mr Blackman's ideas for an anchor system which would separate the gas from the oil at the bottom of the well rather than at the top where so much of it was being lost.

That idea worked, but then came a new problem. An analysis of the gas showed it to be of too high a calorific value for coal gas appliances to cope with. Mr Blackman solved that problem too, by devising a gas plant that could dilute the natural gas to the required calorific value.

The three oil wells then operating at Moturoa provided an initial 20 percent of the New Plymouth gas supply. The successful tapping of those wells in 1952 was a big achievement for New Plymouth, yet it was something that went almost unrecognised.

At the time of his retirement in 1972 Mr Blackman recalled how he, his wife and his four-year-old son Jim were the only observers at Moturoa to watch the turning of the valve that would start the flow of natural gas. They then drove to the gasworks to await the arrival of the gas along the pipeline.



Gaslights in Brougham Street — a standard lamp of very modest proportions stands outside the town hall building, and a very ornate swan's-neck light overhangs the door of J Quigley's chemist shop.

wartime and immediate postwar years, with their power restrictions, saw gas cooking facilities enjoy a halcyon but all too brief period of time as a most desirable commodity. Even so, there were some in the industry who were still unshakeable believers in gas. One was Athol Blackman who came to New Plymouth in 1951 as engineer-manager of the NP Gas Company. Apart from an interest in what could be done to effectively market manufactured gas, he also had a more than passing interest in the natural variety.

Mr Blackman was not the first person to recognise that a valuable fuel resource was going to waste in Taranaki. Natural gas from local oil wells had been drifting away on the breeze ever since wells had first been dug here in the 1860s, but the technology had not been found to be able to trap enough of it to warrant its use.

That subject had long interested him. Through his persistence

Major repairs and rebuilding operations were carried out at the New Plymouth gasworks to make the most of the supplemented gas supply. Old retorts were replaced, the big gas holder was re-sheathed with new plates to reduce what had been a considerable degree of leakage, a new boiler system was installed for production of high quality tar for Ministry of Works roading purposes and a new horticultural naphthalene plant was built.

In 1959 the first well was spudded in at Kapuni. The Government decided to use Kapuni gas as a premium fuel and Taranaki made a spirited leap into a new era, with New Plymouth becoming the first community in the country to enjoy high-pressure gas reticulation.

In 1961 the New Plymouth City Council bought the Gas Company's assets and created the City Gas Department.

The old gasworks were demolished in 1977.