

FEATURE



Continuing his series on some of Taranaki's "forgotten places", **DAVID BRUCE** visits Mokoia

IN the 1940s they agitated for a pedestrian crossing on the main road at Mokoia.

With the dairy factory on the seaward side, along with the general store/post office, and the railway station and a scatter of railway and factory houses down Beach Rd and along the Old South Rd, there were a lot of kids wanting to cross the road to school in the morning and again in the afternoon.

Crossing the road to the new school. The new brick school with its tiled roof that had replaced the cold, old, wooden one with its sloping floor that raised the kids in the back row above the ones in front so they couldn't hide from the teacher when they didn't have the answer.

The old school had been built in 1904 when the district's growing number of kids was putting too big a burden on the schools at Whakamara and Manutahi and the private home of Mr Hawken where 20 of them had been going for lessons.

The Mokoia school had enjoyed a chequered life until Prime Minister Mickey Savage paid it a visit in 1938 and said its condition was not good enough. During the 20s it had been regularly closed while epidemics of measles, chicken pox, whooping cough, mumps and diphtheria swept through the district. Electricity had not been installed until 1933 and toothbrush drill shared space on the curriculum with the visits of school agriculture instructor Rod Syme.

Mitchell Fraser remembers the old school and "watching the trickle pass under my desk when a kid in the back row wet himself".

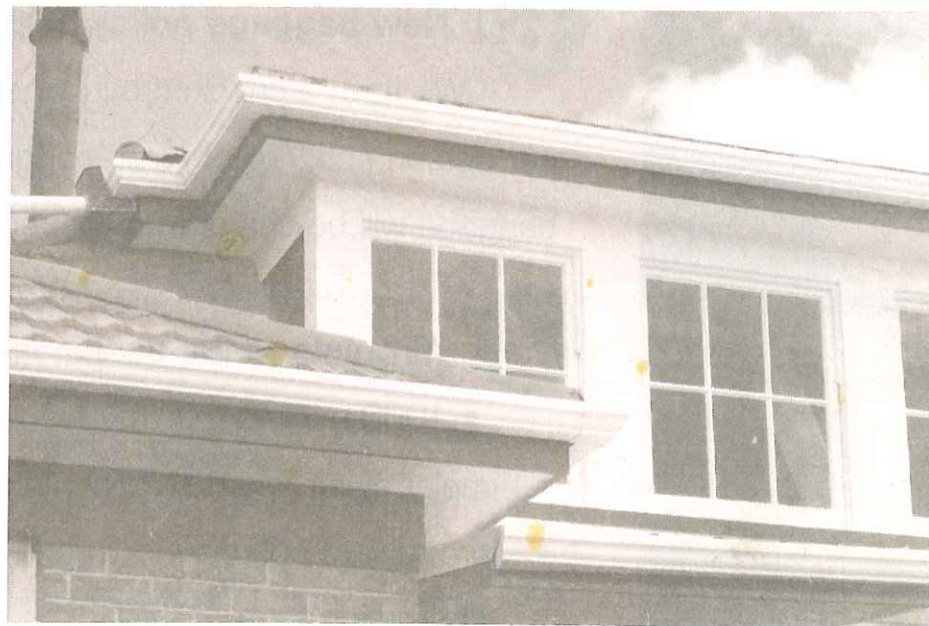
The Prime Minister was dead and the country had been at war for 3½ years before work started on the new



HOUSE OF WORSHIP: The little brick church of St Johns has stood at Mokoia for more than 75 years.

Photos: DAVID BRUCE

Bricks and Mokoia



school. And, in a time of wartime austerity, surprisingly the school was built of brick and tile. Or maybe it was not such a surprise — corrugated iron was at a premium and military endeavour had first call even on sawn timber, especially as New Zealand's focus had moved increasingly towards supplying American demand here and in the Pacific.

Brick seemed right in the little town as well. Over the road from the school the Presbyterian community had built the brick church of St Johns in 1925 on land given by the Duirs family. The Duirs, who were early settlers at Whakamara, had also chipped in handsomely to pay for it. Alongside the school the pretty brick Anglican Church of St James, a gift in 1905 to the district from Francis Charlotte Lysaght in memory of her husband James Richard Lysaght, was tucked in behind its attractive brick wall.

James Lysaght was one of the district's early settlers, taking up a 252-acre block on the landward side of the road at Mokoia in 1876. By the time of his death in 1899 his holdings had swollen to 5000 acres and 30 shepherds were employed to muster his sheep for shearing in the waterwheel-powered woolshed he built near Hunts Rd.

On the seaward side of the main road and surrounding the village sections surveyed in 1867, George Bayley held a similar-sized holding. Bayley bred horses and cattle as well as sheep on his holdings, both graziers killing stock from their properties at an abattoir built near the railway line that had cut through the village in 1885. Fresh killed carcasses were then railed to Wellington for freezing and processing or rendered down on the site for tallow.

A condition of James Lysaght's will was that his farm be cut into economical dairy units and sold. The auction took place in 1904. Mitchell Fraser and his son Gordon now farm land that once was the Lysaght property, the site of the old homestead still marked by ancient trees. George Bayley's holdings were bought by Mr O. Hawken and, despite part of the property being subdivided to provide farms for ex-servicemen after World War II, some of the original farm is still farmed by the Hawken family.

The industry of Lysaght and Bayley was nothing new to the district — a



BRICK WORKS: Lifetime Mokoia resident Mitchell Fraser at the local school, built in the 1940s and carrying on the brick theme of the village.

view from above will show the area studded with pa sites. On opposite sides of the Manawapou River mouth the earthworks of Thacker's and Inman's redoubts can also still be seen and just south of the town the Okautiro redoubt. This was built during the survey of the district and abandoned in September of 1868 when Titokowaru swept all before him on his way to Nukumarau.

Moved now to the Patea Museum, the millstones are all that remain of a flour mill built and operated by local Maori under the instruction of missionary the Reverend Woon. Maori were known to carry sacks of flour to Wanganui for sale to the early settlers.

THE new century saw new industry in Mokoia. The Mell's creamery opened in 1904 to accept the produce of five suppliers. By 1908 it had grown to become Mell's Co-operative Dairy Factory with a capital of £3000 and "a commodious and well arranged factory".

Its plant included a 17-horsepower Tangye boiler and a 10hp Tangye engine, a three-ton Humble and Sons ice-making machine, two 440-gallon DeLaval separators, a Sabroe cream hoist and a Primus pasteuriser. Two 300-gallon vats, two half-ton churns, a six-foot Topliss butter worker, cool and freezing chambers and a testing room rounded out the facilities that employed four assistants as well as the manager and drew cream from two other creameries for an annual butter production of 150 tons. Later in 1913 the factory would expand for cheese-making and in 1923 would begin producing casein.

But it was not industry that on November 26, 1908, made Mokoia international headlines. The bulk of the meteorite that flashed across the night sky and exploded 5000 feet above Mokoia with a boom that was heard from Stratford to Bulls crashed into the sea off Wanganui, but Mokoia was showered with fragments including two large chunks, the size of a man's fist, which are now in the Wanganui Museum. Other pieces found their way into other hands and, in the mid 1960s, Mokoia's meteorite again had the astrophysical world sitting up and taking notice when researchers believed they had found "complex organised micro-matter, some resembling unicellular organisms" hitchhiking in its carbonaceous chondrite crevices.

The knockers jumped pretty hard on that theory, bungling contamination, even fraud — but you never know!

What we do know is that brief international attention made little difference to Mokoia. The cows still had to be milked, now with machinery powered by petrol, kerosene, waterwheels, water rams and, on one farm, a horse



SLOW DEATH: Mell's dairy factory opened in 1904 and became a victim of amalgamation in 1970.



HORSE POWER: Hayden Muggeridge (16, left) and Daniel Johnson (16) with Clydesdale horses Rochelle and Ben, two of Mokoia's largest residents.

whim. To keep old Neddy up to the job as he plodded his endless circuit, the farmer would take a pile of small stones into the milking shed ready to shy at him if his pace slackened.

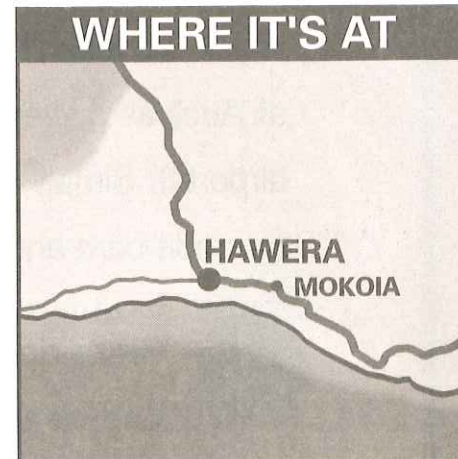
The blacksmith set up shop on the corner of Beach Rd and in 1912 the village hall was built. They built changing sheds down at the beach that year too — and then watched them erode away out to sea. By 1919 the postmaster had spread his wings and opened a general store on the Beach Rd corner.

Life went on and Mokoia was subjected to all the ups and downs of a small rural community. The 1930s would see the building of the tennis courts and the swimming pool, the establishment of a branch of the Women's Division and the foundation

of the Mokoia Social Club. Gymkhanas, wood-chopping, catching the greasy pig and race meetings enlivened summer carnivals.

IN the 1940s there was the building of the new school. Wartime saw trenches dug and logs piled on the side of the road ready to be dragged across as road-blocks in case of invasion. The butcher from Manutahi still made his rounds, his van powered by gas produced from the coke burner mounted on the running board. At school, Mitchell Fraser and his classmates practised air raid drill in the slit trenches in the field below the school.

"After the war, Dad was mowing that paddock with two horses pulling the mower and one of them went into one of those trenches, just lay there



quite comfortable, making no effort to get out. Dad pulled an armful of carrots from the teacher's garden and bribed it out of there."

The 50s introduced the bowling club. High school students still went to school in Hawera by train and a road trip to New Plymouth shopping was a day-long event only possible when the cows were dry. In 1960 the dairy company re-amalgamated with Whakamara and in 1961 the first tanker replaced the trucks and trailers that had carried milk cans to the factory. In 1962 a light-hearted community staged a Seldom Anygood quiz show as a fundraiser for the school.

In 1970 the factory closed — the little community it had supported drifting away, the decline in population reflected in a falling school roll, the closure of the village's clubs. The old factory began a new career serving as a workshop and storage shed. By 1990 the general store went too, transformed into a pet shop. With the store went the post office and petrol pumps! Two years later St James Church was dismantled and shifted to Hawera, to be reassembled as an entrance/reception area to St Mary's Church. Over the road, still on its own site, St Johns became a private home. Only a few months ago the old hall, beyond its use-by date, was demolished.

December 1999 saw the beginning of a new era. Down almost at the end of Beach Rd, 5026 metres beneath the pasture George Bayley had sown more than a century before, the Rimu A1 well struck oil. By February 2002 a further eight wells connected to Swift Petroleum's facility were flowing 1525 barrels of oil and 4.8 million cu/ft of natural gas per day.

It is a road of contrasts. At the seaward end, Beach Rd Mokoia is glistening hi-tech, humming power, a blaze of night-time light. In the remains of the village the factory crumbles quietly, blocks of concrete and old gateposts tell of what has been. The red brick school, the church wall, 21 Clydesdale horses and four foals watch impassively as progress rushes past. □



NEW AGE: The Rimu production station at Mokoia.
Photo: SUPPLIED