



Spanning time: The bridge over the Waiwhakairo River in Fitzroy, upgraded over the years, needs to be replaced again, because the industrial area has expanded northwards, and the residential area of Bell Block has continued to grow.

Photo: FAIRFAX NZ

Turbulent river destroys first Waiwhakairo bridges

The recent release of plans for the upgrade of New Plymouth's northern outlet prompted **Graeme Duckett** to look at the early history of the root cause of the troubles - the Waiwhakairo Bridge.

Today's motorists crossing the Waiwhakairo Bridge should spare a thought for the pioneers who first sought to tame the turbulent river.

One of New Plymouth's city fathers, Frederick Alonzo Carrington, raised the need for a structure across the river during his first stint as chief surveyor with the New Zealand Company in 1842-43.

Chains were bought to build a suspension bridge over the lower reaches, but it wasn't long before those chains wore through the puketea timber supports. Carrington's brainchild soon collapsed, fell into the river and was washed away.

Years passed before there was any further bridge action. There was continued loss of life as settlers took on floodwaters in desperate crossings.

This led to "heightened agitation" directed at the Government for something to be done.

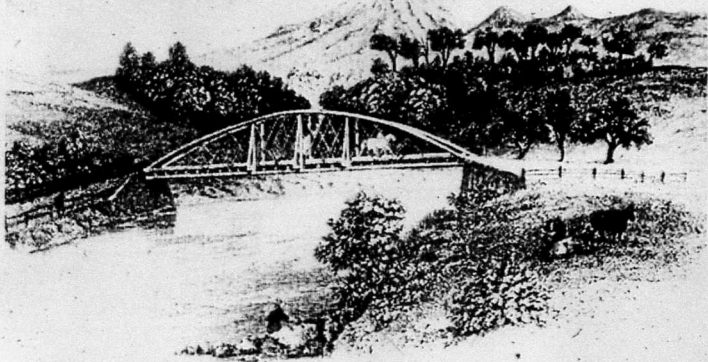
Finally, in 1856, the call went out for the design of a one-span bridge to be built. Such a construction was deemed necessary to prevent any damage by the large quantity of felled trees which washed down each time the Waiwhakairo waters rose in flood.

A British army sapper and miner named Jones received £200 for his successful design, which involved a 35-metre span. Rundle, Brooking and Clare's successful tender of £2200 was duly signed in June 1857, with the puriri timber construction to be completed by the end of 1858.

Clare and Rundle, who were living at Bell Block, oversaw the felling of large puriri trees growing on land mainly around the Smart and Egmont road areas. Once felled, the trees were pit sawn. Then William Rundle and R Street hand-axed the 8m by 1m by 1m logs into shapes. Rundle's men included Joseph Street, James Harvey, Richard Rundle and Samuel Rogers, while Clare's crew comprised Thomas Wheeler, John Lander, E Shaw, Bill Jones and a man called Smythe. Brooking undertook the laying of the foundation walls, while Street did the blacksmithing.

It was finished on time and officially opened in early February 1859, but lasted only four years, before a heavy flood washed it away to a downstream island.

Rundle secured the contract to replace it with a design change using cylinder supports. During construction, contractors had to send to Australia for



Old school: This 1875 photo shows the last wooden bridge that served as the main Waiwhakairo crossing. It was eventually replaced in 1907 by a ferro-concrete structure.

the ironwork, because foundries in Auckland and Wellington could not make what was required.

The bridge was opened just before the outbreak of the land wars on March 3, 1860, but the army lost control of it for a week, when Maori had control of Fitzroy.

The commanding officer in New Plymouth, worried that the bridge had been burnt down, signalled volunteers from the Bell Block stockade to check the rumours. A small party of men rode into Fitzroy from Bell Block as far as the Mangoane hill and returned with the news the bridge was safe.

In 1867, however, a heavy flood washed the entire structure away. It was dismantled and transferred back, but the cliff had made the river 10m wider, so additional foundations were needed to fill the gap. That structure served until it was replaced in 1907 by a ferro-concrete bridge, which was opened by Mr Brown, chairman of the county council.

Many of the old settlers who had helped erect the old bridge were present.

The new bridge was designed by county engineer J Skinner. Clerk of works was H Clare and J Goller was foreman for the contractor, LG Spencer.

The structure comprised four arches,

two of 10m span and two of 20m, with a 7m iron carriageway and two footways. The iron weighed 20kg a metre. More than 32 tonnes of steel were used in the construction.

A display by cabinet-makers Riddle and Johnston included a beautiful large sideboard made of puriri taken from the old bridge. Some decorative, inscribed walking sticks were fashioned from the timber and given as souvenirs to those still living, who had been involved in the building of the old bridge.

These included J Lander, J Harvey, R Street, William Rundle, S Rundle, H Faull, T Inch and William Brooking. Mrs Skinner, mother of Mr J Skinner the engineer, Mrs Black, an aunt, and Mr J Skinner himself, who 50 years earlier had been over the old bridge in a bullock wagon, crossed the new bridge in the latest conveyance, a new car.

Members of the county council followed in a bullock wagon drawn by two oxen, followed by a constant stream of traffic all afternoon.

A public luncheon was held at Waikakaho, followed later by a ball at the Masonic Hotel.

A nasty accident occurred on the bridge in 1908. The first of two cars racing each other, turned a horse on the bridge. It reared, panicked sideways and was collected by the second car.

The rider was shaken but unhurt. Unfortunately, the horse broke a fetlock and was destroyed.

One of the cars was a new model being delivered from Auckland to Newton King's agency in New Plymouth.

The two rather embarrassed motorists landed in court charged with dangerous driving.

In 1916, warm rain on Mt Taranaki caused the snow to melt to an unusual degree and, mixed with heavy rain downstream, pushed the level of the Waiwhakairo River to 1.5m above normal.

The strong current caused severe erosion to the first tier of piles and the approaches to the eastern side. Ten metres of the eastern bridge structure fell into the river and was snapped clean off at a point close to the second tier of piles, causing the entire structure to shudder and sway.

A temporary wooden structure was needed to span the missing section and that served light traffic until full repairs were completed.

In more recent times, the bridge was replaced with a wider one to cope with the increasing demands of road transport, but that is inadequate now with the rapid growth of the industrial area north of the town and the expansion of the residential area at Bell Block.