

OHAWA ARTIST DIED WITH A HATCHET IN HIS SKULL

Ohawa harbour in 1896 drawn by James Forsyth, who lived, and died so horribly, in a cottage near the Ohawa Hotel, by the harbour entrance at the top left of the drawing.

WHAKATOHEA ISLAND IS NOW BEING SUBDIVIDED

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Ohakana Island, claimiest and most northerly of the green contingent on Ohawa Harbour, has been subdivided and offered for sale to the tired city businessman, who desires to "get away from it all" and enjoy the peace of an island in the sun.

A Bay of plenty authority on early Maori lore writes of the island that before Whakatohea and Ngatiawa waged a long and bloody war for its possession, the Mataatua people who wrested it from their more primitive neighbours enjoyed an idyllic existence on its shores and island promontories.

KUMARA

This was the time when the crescent-shaped island became celebrated for its kumara crops, which, according to ancient chants, were the largest and finest in Aotearoa. The western slope north of the magnificent seven-tiered plateau was supposedly the champion cropping ground, till Hape, skipper of the Rangimataru canoe, carried off the "mauri," or the reproductive or life-giving essence of these important vegetables.

Legend has it that Hape went to the South Island after the elusive greenstone children. When the crops continued to fail, it was his son Tamarau, the famous flying-man of Maori legend, who set out to find his father and restore the precious "mauri" to Ohawa. When he returned triumphantly to Ohawa with the magic talisman he had learnt to fly and lived on Ohakana Island in a cave which is still to be seen today, though somewhat extended by a curious pakeha who lived nearby in recent years.

There are three well-defined points and a very tiny one situated on the western side straddling a miniature peninsula, with only a couple of kumara pits still traceable.

WHAKATOHEA

As the tribes spread out and occupied the new land, we hear of Waitakara's grandchildren living at Ohawa and occupying Ohakana. Also of intrigues and arguments that finally gave rise to the war between the sister tribes of Mataatua, and resulted in Whakatohea ousting the people of Ngatiawa descent and holding the harbour against all-comers.

There are records to show that

Whakatohea eventually ruled the coast along the full length of Ohawa beach and that most of the grass-pastures that crown the hills today were erected by the energetic fighting tribe that grew up at Opotiki.

For something like two and a half centuries the prized inland harbour was the recognised property of the Whakatohea people, who prospered and grew to become the mightiest in the Eastern Bay.

RECENT

It was they who founded the pa on Ohakana, with most of the fortified villages dotted around the harbour fringes. New settlements were founded and eventually the Ohawa population was greater than that of the mother tribe at Opotiki, with a special conference island established on Ikihianga Island. Ohakana played a prominent part for its southern pa, which is now covered by a dark mantle of pine. It was the strongest in the harbour and stood opposite the entrance ready to challenge any invaders from the sea.

TUHOE

A period of fifeal struggle followed, the Tuhoes from the mainland, the Urewera refusing to pay tribute for the right to help themselves to the scaffold so abundant in Ohawa and waging ceaseless guerrilla warfare to obtain a foothold on the foreshore, which they could garrison and provide safe passage for the calorie-starved forest dwellers.

But Whakatohea were too strong. They never succeeded, though stories of Te Rupa and Tamaikoha are still cherished in the chert of the Whakatohea elders.

The grandest of all these stories belongs to the year 1847, and concerns the 17-year-old heroine Mareira, who actually put a slop to an imminent battle — in reality a massacre — and by her bravery threatened to kill her own child unless the fighting stopped, was enacted on the mainland, opposite the pool of sharks on the island's most northerly point.

MISSIONARIES

No one who visits Ohakana can be unimpressed by this dramatic little figure of Maori history for the tiny beaches were crowded with spectators who witnessed the scene and could never forget it.

Missionaries, too, ventured through the sand-heaped heads in the 30s, but left hurriedly at the sight of freshly butchered corpses on the shores of one of the islands of which they did not know the name. It could have been Ohakana! In these days the harbour was the base for the battle fleet of the Whakatohea federation and the same heads must have witnessed the packed war canoes leaving on their raids to the Cape and to any other part of the bay, where their enemies might be surprised and destroyed. One historian has described Ohakana as a stronghold of brown-skinned pirates.

Who was James Forsyth, who was found lying dead in bed in his Ohawa cottage with a hatchet buried in his skull?

Was it really suicide, as the coroner declared it to be? Or was it murder most foul, and was robbery the motive, as James Forsyth's few friends believed it to be?

The answer will probably never be known, because the morning that James Forsyth's body was discovered was way back in 1896, and no-one with personal knowledge of the tragic affair is alive today.

Some evidence of James Forsyth's existence at Ohawa remains, however. In the scrub of the holiday houses, lies the tombstone which his friends erected over his grave.

Today the tombstone is broken, the victim of a bulldozer paving the way for subdivisional development, but the Opotiki and District Historical Society recently asked the Opotiki County Council for permission to repair the tombstone and re-erect it.

DRAWINGS

In the office of Mr. Les Abbott, the manager of Opotiki Transport, hang a pen and ink drawings done by James Forsyth in the last year of his life.

They were given to Mr. Abbott's grandfather, Mr. R. F. Abbott, a well-known

bridge builder of the time who was a friend of Mr. Forsyth.

The drawings show the ravages of time and neglect, for they are torn and moth-eaten and stained brown in places, but through the blemishes the eastern Bay of Plenty as it was 78 years ago comes with clarity, obviously enhanced by a considerable artistic ability.

Mrs Dorothy Du Pontet, who arrived in the Wairoa Valley a few years after James Forsyth's bizzare death, heard a lot about the man as a child — memories she retains to this day.

REMITTANCE MAN She told the MIRROR that James Forsyth lived in a cottage near the then Ohawa Hotel, which was on a sandspit inside the harbour entrance, adjacent to the Ohawa Wharf.

"We presumed he was a remittance man, sent to New Zealand by his English relatives and given an allowance, provided he stayed here," she said. "I fancy he drank a bit — so many did in those days."

Mrs. Du Pontet said Forsyth apparently used to wander around the district with his sketch pad, pen and ink bottle, completing drawings and selling them or trading them to eke out his remittance.

To make a drawing of early Whakatohea, he has a boatman row him across the Whakatohea River to the sandspit opposite the wharf, where the boatman waited while James Forsyth made his sketch.

completed work is one of the four which hangs today in Mr. Abbott's office.

VICAR REFUSED Because the coroner returned a suicide verdict, the rather straight-laced Anglican vicar of the time would not allow James Forsyth to be buried in consecrated ground, said Mrs Du Pontet.

So his friends arranged for him to be buried on the Ohawa sandspit, in a small cemetery reserve which had been used only by the Maori people until then. "How anyone could commit suicide by burying a tomahawk in his own head is beyond me," said Mrs Du Pontet.

"I did hear that some money was missing from the cottage, but the official verdict was suicide, and that was that."

As a youngster Mrs Du

Pontet had a spirited part-Timor pony named Puck, short for the Maori word Pukapuke, which meant small.

PONYJIBBED She often rode Puck across to the Ohawa sandspit, and several times tried to ride him close enough to James Forsyth's grave to read the words on the headstone. But the high-spirited pony, perhaps sensing something evil, would not go anywhere near the headstone, she said.

Although Mrs Du Pontet has lived in the area for nearly 70 years, and has yet to examine James Forsyth's headstone closely, she hopes to have the opportunity of doing so when the historical society restores the stone to its original condition.

The death of James Forsyth, Englishman, remittance man, artist of considerable ability, perhaps a little addicted to alcohol will forever be a mystery. But his grave and his works remain to prompt the questions — why and how, and who?

SUICIDE VERDICT QUESTIONED



Forsyth's pen and ink drawing of Whakatohea in 1896. The boatman waits patiently on the river-edge for the artist to finish the drawing.