

# Early missionaries to Bay of Plenty took life in their hands

[Compiled by the Whakatane Museum]

"We landed at Ohiwa on the beach near Onekawa bluff and were horrified to find a large number, some 60 or 70 freshly slain Maoris lying on the sand."

This was the scene in the Bay of Plenty in 1828 when three members of the Church Missionary Society settlement at Paiaha visited this area on the schooner "Herald" with the aim of establishing a mission station.

The recent issue of a set of six postage stamps featuring early New Zealand sailing ships, brings vividly to mind many aspects of Bay of Plenty history as two of these vessels have historical associations with Whakatane. They were the schooner "Herald" and the brigantine "New Zealand-er."

Rev Samuel Marsden  
The Church Missionary Society was formed in London in 1799 and soon had missionaries working in many fields, Canada, India, Africa, West Indies and Australia. In 1810, the senior chaplain at New South Wales was the Reverend Samuel Marsden who decided that New Zealand would be a fair field for missionary work. But it was not until 1814 that he arrived in New Zealand to set up a mission station at Paiaha, with him Thomas Kendall and William Hall, a carpenter.

In 1824, the missionaries at Paiaha were finding it difficult to feed the large numbers of people at the station, their families and the local Maoris. The Rev Henry Williams decided that the answer to the problem was to build a trading ship. The others were against the idea, but the failure of the mission to make itself self-supporting was a sore point. Eventually he had his way and it was decided to build a schooner. Williams planned to use the ship to bring supplies from New South Wales and scout along the Auckland coast, buying pointers and pigs. Williams and Gilbert Mair (father of Capt Gilbert Mair NZC of Maori War fame) built the schooner which was 60 feet and was to be of 55 tons burden.

**Hostile Maoris**  
Timber for the building of the ship was felled at Kawakawa and floated down river to Paiaha. The "Herald" was ready for launching on January 25 1826, and on this day a large crowd of 3,000 Maoris and others gathered at Paiaha to witness the ceremony, which was to cause a sensation. The local Maoris had been speculating and haggling over the money they would earn when the ship had to be dragged from the water. Their jubilation was soon dispelled when, at a signal from Williams, the chocks were knocked aside and the ship slid into the water. No canoe had ever been so launched before.

The ship justified Williams' claim for her need and soon proved very useful. In all, the "Herald" made three trips to Sydney, four to the Bay of Plenty and several round the top of New Zealand to Hobson.

**Savage Race**  
When the "Herald" made her first trip to the Bay of Plenty, on board were three members of the Paiaha mission station, Williams, Hamblin and Davis. They had high hopes of setting up a new station. Also on board was a Ngati whakauae chief, Pango, whom they were returning to his people at Kotorua.

Arriving first at Tauranga they found an enormous population, estimated by Williams to be about 10,000 people. They were divided into three groups, Otumotai, Te Papa and the Mount. These three pas could probably muster 2,500 fighting

Leaving Tauranga they landed Pango at Maketu, the "Herald" then proceeding to the Whakatane River. Little did the missionaries guess how close they came to an unpleasant end. Te Ngarana, chief of the Ngati Awa decided to "take" the schooner as a prize, but his father, Toehau, prevailed against such impetuosity and the missionaries continued on unawares.

The next stop was at Ohiwa when, after landing on the Onekawa sands they saw evidence of a recent battle, with the bodies of many slain warriors lying about.

In command of the "Herald" on this and other voyages was Capt Gilbert Mair Sr. It was he who rowed the boat ashore at Ohiwa. He recounted the incident to his famous son. Mair said it appeared that the Ngati Awa after slaying some 60 or 70 of their opponents (the Whakatane from Opotiki) were so overcome with grief at the loss of their famous young chief, Te Ha-mai-waho, son of Apanui, that they fled to Whakatane with his body, leaving their opponents fleeing in the opposite direction towards Opotiki.

**Prudent to Return**  
After seeing the scene on the beach Williams and his companions deemed it prudent to return to the ship. They were just in time, as no sooner had they boarded the schooner than a fleet of canoes was observed approaching from the direction of Opotiki.

The wind had dropped and the canoes soon drew alongside, where they remained from the forenoon until the evening, all the while maintaining an ominous silence. Towards evening the schooner gradually drew off towards White Island, and to the relief of all on board, the canoes finally turned and made for shore.

**Annihilation**  
A northwest gale forced the "Herald" to seek shelter and the little ship bore away and ran into Tauranga harbour.

Here, another unpleasant surprise awaited the missionaries. Although away only 10 days, during that short period grim destruction had descended upon the Te Papa pa, and the unfortunate inhabitants, nearly one third of Tauranga's population, had been wiped out.

The "Herald" lost little time in returning to the security of the Bay of Islands and thus ended a remarkable voyage on a portion of the New Zealand coastline, the inhabitants of which were particularly ill-disposed towards Pakeha invasion.

It could not have been many months after this voyage to the Bay of Plenty that the final chapter in the short life (just over two years) of the "Herald" was played out.

On May 26, 1828, the schooner was totally wrecked at Hokianga Heads. Arriving from the Bay of Islands, the "Herald" had to wait for 2 days before attempting to enter the harbour. Just before sunset on the fateful day, the schooner stood in with a fair wind. Suddenly, just as she crossed the bar, the wind dropped. The "Herald" was carried by the breakers on to the rocks, and with the turn of the tide and the freshening of the wind, was cast high on the shore.

Although badly damaged by the heavy seas, even worse was to follow as the local Maoris after helping the crew safely ashore, suddenly turned upon them and stripped them of their clothing. They were extremely lucky to survive. In those far off days there were many small sailing ships that fouled around the NZ coast. Many of their crews were robbed, killed and eaten.

**Not Deterred**  
The early missionaries were "men of oak"; they had foresight and were not deterred so easily. It was not too many years before they were back in the Bay of Plenty and had set up their mission stations: Rotorua about 1835, Opotiki 1840, Tauranga 1838, Hicks Bay 1846, Te Whaiti 1847, Taupo and White Pine Bush (Whakatane) in 1853.

The history of these missions, their successes and failures are an indelible link with us today. But that is another story.

The next time you mail a letter, study the stamp, most nowadays commemorate centennials or such like and you have in your hand a portion of the history of this country which you probably had never heard of or seen before. Stimulate your mind. "Come Alive" and not only enjoy the country you live in but enjoy its history.