



*Prime Minister* — artist Sir William Fox painted this early view of the Hutt Valley with a train on the bridge over Carrington Street. (Alexander Turnbull Library)

# TARANAKI'S FIRST RAILWAY



Trains across Devon Street

by A.B.SCANLAN

Other books by A. B. Scanlan:  
Mountain of Maoriland.  
Pukekura Park and Brooklands.  
Egmont: The Story of a Mountain.  
100 Years of Firefighting.  
Hospital on the Hill.  
Historic New Plymouth.  
Harbour at the Sugar Loaves.

The author's grateful thanks are expressed to Mr Ron Lambert, director of the Taranaki Museum, Mr R. J. Avery, editor of *The Daily News*, Mr G. Koea, editor of the *Taranaki Herald*, and Mr I. G. Holland, publicity and advertising manager, New Zealand Railways, for assistance in the research and illustration of this book. The ready help of the photographic section of the Alexander Turnbull Library is also greatly appreciated.

Cover Picture: A train crosses Devon Street, a view from near Currie Street showing the old Imperial Hotel on the left. In the distance is the Convent building completed in 1884.

# TARANAKI'S FIRST RAILWAY

by  
**A.B. SCANLAN**

NEW PLYMOUTH

Published by the Author  
Taranaki Archives @ [www.newplymouth.info](http://www.newplymouth.info) by Masterprint Press



## INTRODUCTION

Today when men have shot into space and set foot on the moon it may seem a very humble thing to trace and remember how the first railway came to Taranaki over 100 years ago. But Taranaki's early trains, evolving as they did to the "Blue Streak" diesel railcars, helped to change the life of a whole province. Because 1977 saw their withdrawal, thus cancelling out all passenger rail services from New Plymouth south to Wellington, the story has gone "full circle" and should be told.

Right from the outset there were the inevitable controversies, the successes and the mistakes – and along with them a full measure of human incident, tragic, comic and ironic. Among the strangest of the stories with all the qualities of legend is one that tells how the railway changed the whole future of a seven-year-old girl. Who would have thought that, because her father undertook a contract connected with laying the line, an innocent child would lose her own family and find a new one and a whole new world?

The town's hardworking horses were also deeply affected by the new phenomena. When an engine whistle made one horse bolt (pursued by a constable with a big stick) the horse did not stop until it reached the top of Mt Eliot where it surveyed the approaching train in a state of shock. The shock would have been even greater if the moment could have been moved forward in time, for the horse would then have stood on top of a Mt Eliot that was no longer there. It was the coming of the railway that brought "the first bite to the hill", today delineated only by a stream and leaving a host of memories of other days.

NZ 993.482  
SCA

Taranaki's first railway, coming only a few years after the Maori land wars and before the establishment of a provincial roading system, stirred the population out of an isolated and often humdrum routine. With no safe port, bogged down in winter mud, relying on bullock drays for heavy transport, the province greeted the public works-railways-immigration policy of that great borrower, Julius Vogel, as the millenium.

The first Cobb's coach to reach New Plymouth had brought Prime Minister William Fox in January, 1871. It left Hawera at 3.30 a.m., took the only available route, via Opunake, and did not reach New Plymouth until 9.15 p.m. — an adventurous journey that so exhausted the Premier he could not attend the celebratory dinner that evening. Obviously the isolated



Before the Trains Came – Above: A footbridge crosses the Huatoki River, N.P., looking west along Vivian Street. Below: The same area looking south. The 1976 Viaduct now crosses high above the river. (Taranaki Museum and Turnbull Library Jephson Collection)



settlement needed a more direct and reliable land route than this. Soon came rumours that the Government, as the first step in communications, was considering building a railway line between New Plymouth and Waitara but outside the province there was opposition and sarcasm. "We suppose the Government propose to run one train a month from the magnificent Port of Waitara to that busy hive of industry, New Plymouth!" exclaimed the Wanganui Herald. The Hawke's Bay Courier, though more distant from the scene, was not to be outdone.

"Taranaki absolutely lives on the Central Government . . . its railway will never pay for the grease on the wheels of the engine . . . sleepy and unenergetic, its people just lie and wait for Government plums to drop into their mouths."

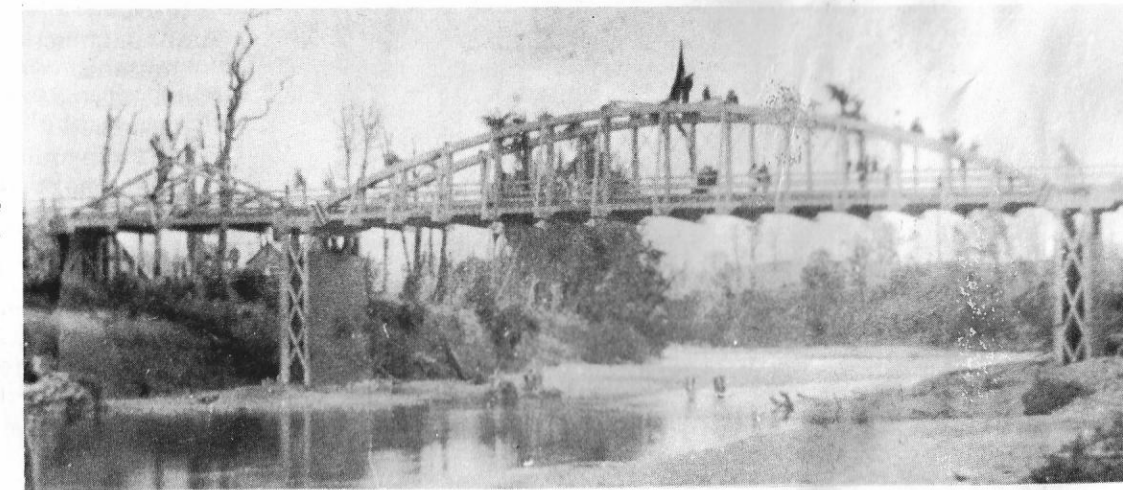
Plums or not, the Fox-Vogel Government had no intention of excluding Taranaki from the national scheme of expansion. The General Government's Railways Act of November, 1871, provided for the building of a New Plymouth-Waitara railway as the first part of a line intended later to reach Wanganui.

Approximately 11 miles were planned at a cost of £50,000. Octavius Carrington, brother of the "Father of New Plymouth" (Chief Surveyor F. A. Carrington), carried out the surveys and completed them by June, 1872, as mentioned in the report of the engineer-in-chief, John Carruthers. A seaward route about a mile from the coast was rejected in favour of an inland route more convenient for a later extension to the south. The famous British railway construction firm of John Brogden and Sons, whose New Zealand responsibilities sometimes included immigration and land settlement, contracted to construct for £41,000 11 miles 13 chains of Taranaki's first railway, completion date to be April 1, 1875.

This was something to celebrate and a public holiday was declared at New Plymouth on August 21, 1873. The Devon Street intersection was decorated with an evergreen arch and inscriptions such as "Speed the Railway", "Vogel and Progress", "Advance Taranaki" and "A Good Time Coming". And, of course, a procession was necessary, from the Freemasons Hall in upper Brougham Street to the end of the same street facing the sea. "Turning the first sod" was the lively task that was performed for the



Above: A later view of the Huatoki railway bridge with children standing on the Vivian Street crossing. (Alexander Turnbull Library. Crompton-Smith collection)



Right: The first railway bridge across the Waiwakaiho River. (Taranaki Museum)

The 1875 Railway bridge crossed both the Huatoki River and Carrington Street. Notable is the large willow tree brought by Mr James Webster from Napoleon's grave on St. Helena Island. (Alexander Turnbull Library)





Above: Looking north, the old railway line curves above the Huatoki River before passing under the Powderham Street bridge. Macky Logan's Warehouse (built 1906-07) in the background. (Turnbull Library)



Below: The same view today along the grassed walk below Broadcasting House.

event by Mrs Henderson (daughter of F. A. Carrington and wife of Brogden's representative); she lifted it into a wheelbarrow specially made from Taranaki ironsand and with due ceremony wheeled it a short distance. The deputy Provincial Superintendent, W. M. Crompton, gave the keynote speech. "Do not suppose," he said, "that a railway from this to the Waitara will suffice. True, it will relieve us of the piteous sight of four great bullocks with a few hundred weights behind them crawling through the mud in winter, or panting in the heat and dust of summer, progressing at a speed of a mile or so an hour . . . The railway must be carried round the foot of yonder mountain and northwards to Alexandra (the early name of the Waikato settlement Pirongia) and along the Waipa Valley to Auckland." In full approval the crowd cheered lustily, the signal cannon fired from nearby Mt Eliot and the band struck up the National Anthem. The evening was capped with two balls, double ticket for the affluent costing fifteen shillings for a "Subscription" celebration at the Freemasons Hall, and entry for a more modest sum being obtained for a "tradesman's" ball at the Oddfellows Hall. To the air of "Brave Old Oak" an inauguration song went echoing through the night:

Hurrah! Hurrah! The railway car shall roll across the land

And commerce smile upon the isle of gold and ironsand.

Fair hands today have dug the clay and cut the first queen sod

For the iron route, that shall lead out where the foot of man ne'er trod.

Workmen, contractors and timber suppliers welcomed the opportunities at a time when work was scarce and difficult. The long aftermath of the Maori wars had left an imprint, dismally described by a Canterbury writer who said of New Plymouth: "The stores are half empty and dirty, the streets untended and but little traversed by vehicles. Everybody looks out at elbows and desponding." Now there was a new vitality: early railway advertisements called for the delivery of 25,000 feet of mixed puriri, kauri, totara

and matai and 8,000 puriri posts for fencing. The line's construction would not be easy with nine bridges over rivers and streams, four overbridges, 68 embankments and 69 cuttings — but it was a challenging task.

The most interesting (and later most contentious) part of the route lay through New Plymouth (see plan on pages 14 and 15). From almost sea level in front of Mt Eliot the train ran along the west bank of the Huatoki Stream, crossed Devon Street on a level crossing, went under a narrow road bridge in Powderham Street, curved east to cross Vivian Street on to a wooden bridge over both the stream and Carrington Street. This was a rise of one in 35. Then, after going under a Liardet Street bridge, it continued along the valley of a small stream (where the Y.M.C.A. Gymnasium is now), reached Leach Street near the junction of Gover Street, ran along Leach Street to the first station at Eliot Street, then under an overbridge carrying Hobson Street and crossed the Henui Stream by a bridge near the present Girls' High School. (In fact, the old railway bridge served Waiwaka Terrace until it was replaced by the present bridge in 1960.) What the route lacked in convenience it made up in scenery. Many visitors later wrote enthusiastically of the trees and shrubberies passed by incoming trains before they swept across Devon Street down to the seaside station. Sir William Fox was one of the several artists who painted the train passing the wooded valley of the Huatoki with Mt Egmont in the distance. Here a notable sight was a large willow tree brought to New Plymouth as a cutting by an early settler, Mr James Webster, from the famous tree at Napoleon's grave on St Helena. This tree came to be regarded as the parent willow tree of North Taranaki.

But, as construction of the line continued, an extraordinary happening depicting Maori-pakeha relations at that time changed for a whole lifetime the life of an innocent child. The bodies of some Maoris killed in the land wars of the early 1860's lay buried on part of the planned railway route and it was necessary to move them. William Perrott of Lepperton took the contract and, although he spoke Maori, he

attached little importance to the words of the Maoris when they told him they were surprised he would undertake such a task, in view of what he knew of Maori "tapu". This nonchalance was to cost him his daughter. In the first week of January, 1874, when Perrott was away from home on another contract his daughter Caroline (Queenie), only seven years old, disappeared, apparently into the nearby bush at Lepperton. Careful searches, at times by 150 people, failed to find even a trace. At the end of the month the child's mother (whose maiden name was Mary Ann Hurlstone) wrote to the papers stating her fear that the Maoris had taken Caroline into bush territory inland. All efforts her husband made to obtain news from the Maoris failed.

What really happened to Caroline? How often the family must have thought of her and grieved over the loss. Was she alive and was she well? Fifty-five years



Before the Days of Bulldozers pickaxes and shovels were the only means of digging railway cuttings. (Railways Publicity)



later, by a strange coincidence, members of the family who were still alive were to find out.

In July, 1929, Mrs F. J. Hayward, daughter of one of Caroline's sisters, was visiting Taneatua in the Bay of Plenty. Suddenly she stopped, and looked again. There, among a group of Maoris, was a white woman. What was it about her that was so very different, so very special? Mrs Hayward noticed an unmistakable resemblance to her own family and her breath caught with excitement. Could there be any link here with the past of her own family for this "white Maori" had no knowledge at all of her origins. Mrs Hayward's mother (Mrs Kay) travelled to Taneatua and was able to identify the person known as Mrs Sarah Ngoungou without any doubt. She was her long lost sister. Caroline as a baby had fallen from a chair on to a hot fireside bar and imprinted on her neck was a lifelong scar — and yes, the scar was still there.

It must have been a poignant occasion when those two sisters met, both born into the one family but with lives lived so completely apart. Sarah told her sister, speaking in perfect English, that she had no memory of her childhood apart from "crying a lot when I was small." Her most vivid recollection was of crossing the sea in an open Maori canoe to gumfields north of Whangarei. For years she had never been allowed to mix with pakehas but had been well treated by the Maoris. When she was about 16 she married a chief by whom she had two children before he died. At 20 she married again and came south with her husband to the Bay of Plenty but without the two children who had been adopted by northern Maori relatives. Her second husband, Ngoungou Hiketene, had land at Poroporo, three miles from Whakatane. By him she had seven children, but only three (all boys) had survived. In 1929 when she was reunited with her sister her husband was a well-to-do farmer living on his own land in their comfortable home.

"No, I don't want to live among the white people," Sarah said to her sister when she was asked. "I am quite happy where I am among my family. I understand the Maoris and they understand me." In later years she was a well known identity when she came

into Whakatane to shop with her Maori friends and relatives. Among the bright colours they wore with such joy Sarah was conspicuous in a neat black dress and small black hat; her complexion was fresh and fair, her large eyes a clear light blue, and her hair snowy white. On the day she disappeared so many years before she was described as being "a very pretty child with dark hair" — only age had transformed her appearance which still clearly showed her true heredity.

At Sarah's request she was given a copy of her birth certificate. She continued to keep in touch with her long lost family, or those of it who remained. Maori "utu" or revenge and a railway line had changed her whole life. Mrs Ngoungou outlived her husband and died at Poroporo in July, 1943 in her 77th year, her sons then being aged 56, 50 and 40.

But, of course, in spite of the disappearance of Caroline who became Sarah, work on the railway inevitably went on. There were other problems: local timber was proving too soft and so timber had to be imported for sleepers and bridge parts, and the target date of April 1, 1875, slipped past. By mid-1875 the two locomotives, named "Fox" and "Ferret" two large and three small passenger carriages and a variety of goods wagons, had been unloaded at the Waitara end. Workshops erected at Sentry Hill had completed the rolling stock. The locomotives were 11-ton engines built by Dubs and Coy, Glasgow; one railway historian later described them as "veritable toy locomotives" but time was to prove their calibre in New Zealand and the worth of their Scottish engineering.

As opening day approached there was lively activity at the New Plymouth end where a station had been built on the ocean side of Mt Eliot, with a goods shed at the bottom of Brougham Street. One problem had been the raising of the level of central Devon Street and the construction of a higher level road bridge across the Huatoki. March, 1875, saw this successfully accomplished, together with the raising of the town's largest hotel, the Masonic, on the corner now occupied by the Bank of New Zealand. The two-

storeyed hotel was raised approximately three feet in a gradual and carefully co-ordinated use of jacks, a fascinating procedure. By September the curbing and channelling of the raised Devon Street was ready. A bridge over the railway line and river in Powderham Street was hastily completed and sleepers and rails laid.

Then came a momentous occasion. On the evening of September 2, soon after the last spikes had been driven, the first engine was cheered across Devon Street. What an event for this so-called sleepy town. That night a load of sleepers was taken back to Waitara. But the town's hardworking horses were, by now, suffering something of a nervous breakdown. Work trains in the next few days scared the wits out of them. One bolted when an engine whistled and was pursued by a constable with a big stick — a comic cartoon in action. The horse did not stop until it

reached the top of Mt Eliot where it turned and viewed the frightening spectacle of an approaching train. Horse power was threatened — a new locomotive age with all its possibilities had begun. The whistle of an engine proclaimed a new future.

At last the official opening came, later than expected, it is true, but perhaps even more festive for that. It took place on October 14, 1875, and New Plymouth, Waitara and stations along the line threw their caps in the air. The first of the four trains to travel to Waitara and back was the ceremonial one with invited guests. Festooned with flags and evergreens the locomotive "Fox" was christened by Miss Jane Carrington who grasped the bottle of champagne attached to the engine by cords and released it when it broke in a shower of froth amid celebratory cheers and hatwaving. Pulling out with three carriages "Fox" reached Waitara 43 minutes later. Here at the station

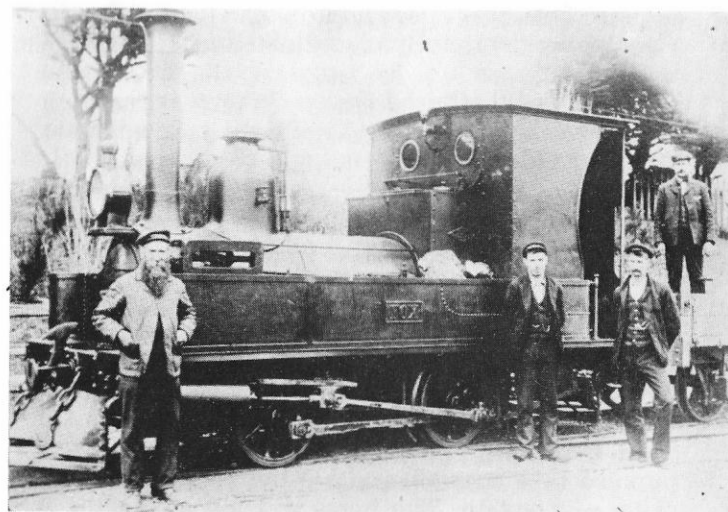


The first New Plymouth - Waitara train at the official opening. The gay scene on October 14, 1875, as Miss Jane Carrington prepared to break a bottle of champagne on the locomotive "Fox". (Taranaki Museum)



entrance it broke a ceremonial cord stretched across the line and Waitara's champagne was uncorked. The train then returned to New Plymouth. The second train needed both locomotives to draw four passenger carriages and five open goods wagons, all crowded with people taking advantage of the free ride. The fourth train of an eventful day arrived back at New Plymouth about 7 p.m. Next day the regular service started with one train a day each way, two on Saturdays but none on Sundays — not yet. Way stations were at Eliot Street, Smart Road, Egmont Road, Henwood Road, Corbett Road, Kaipakopako, Sentry Hill and Waitara Road before the train descended the one in 40 grade to the valley of the Waitara and the township then known as Raleigh.

After the gala enthusiasm came some stocktaking. It was no mean pull up to Liardet Street which meant that loads would need to be limited; even on opening day one of the afternoon trains, too heavily laden, came to a wheezy stop and had to take the station to build up steam to take a faster run to top the incline. Often in later years a shunting engine had to push the trains from behind.



Above: The veteran Scottish-built locomotive "Fox" photographed in 1902 while serving on the Sanson - Foxton line.

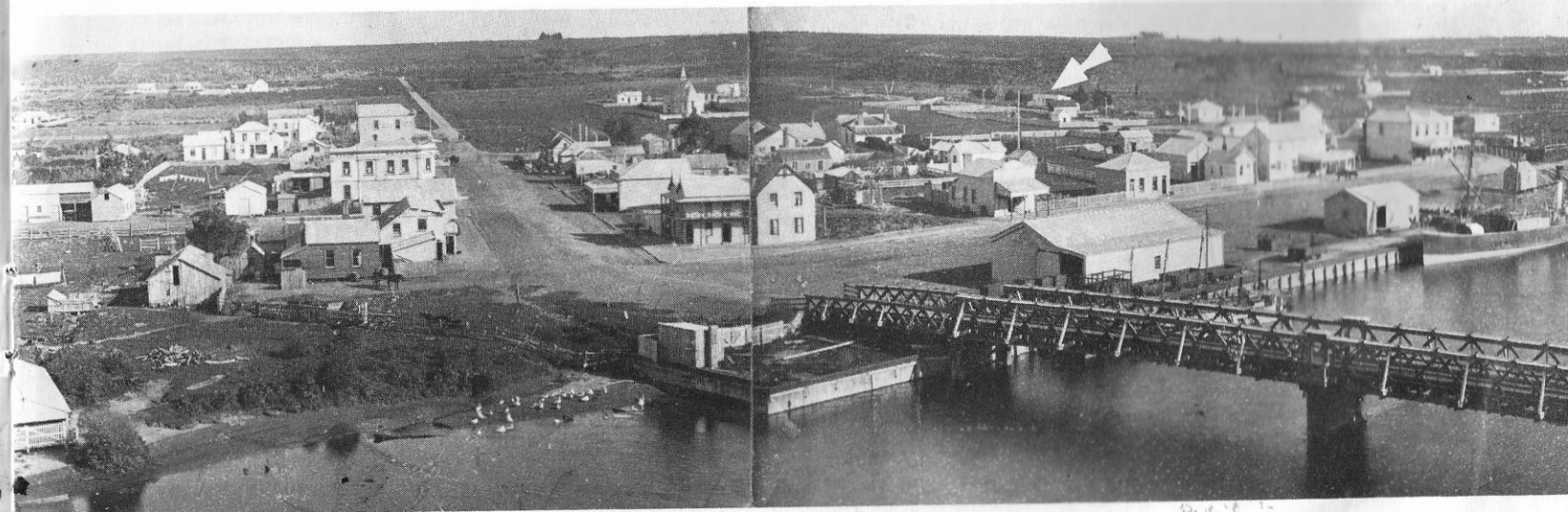
Below: Waitara soon after the line was opened in 1875. The railway station is arrowed. (Taranaki Museum)

The public were also to find that the comings and goings of trains through the heart of the town were not compatible with the lackadaisical habits of the horse and oxen. These animals no longer reigned supreme; they were challenged by a fire-breathing monster which ignored their rights and charged forth with piercing sounds, undeflected from a fixed course.

Summary justice had to be dealt out as well when young miscreants were tempted to cross the cattle-stop on to the rail bridge above the Huatoki and Carrington Street. Within two days Police Sergeant Duffin was escorting a youngster to the lock-up to teach him a lesson. A man rushing to rescue a child from the same bridge had a narrow escape from being crushed by an approaching train. The Press suggested that the magistrate might discourage larger boys by "giving them a few hours in gaol".

But one of the most vexed issues was the Devon Street level crossing. It was to fray tempers and ruffle dignity for the next 32 years. An early by-law required that vehicles and horses were not to be driven or

ridden over the crossing faster than a walking pace, so police became the forerunners of today's traffic officers. If life was dull at the police station there was always a way of livening it — the level crossing could be patrolled! Not "to exceed the walking pace" was asking too much at times — and so the police had a ready haul of victims. In 1885 the many culprits charged included personalities such as Dr P. J. O'Carroll, Newton King and a former Mayor, A. C. Fookes. The first two were fined five shillings plus costs. Fookes' fine was reduced to a shilling plus costs when he submitted that his offence occurred on a Sunday when no trains were running anyway! The same month five of seven mounted Maoris who had no knowledge of the by-law took fright and galloped away on being challenged by a constable. Waikato visitors complained to their local paper that a New Plymouth policeman had warned them they could be fined £50 for "not stopping and looking out for the engine" — the truth was that the maximum fine was £10 but the law was obviously emphasising the point.



This View of Waitara of the middle 1890's shows the town's progress. A small steamer is tied up at the neat quayside and building is developing in the direction of the railway station (arrowed).

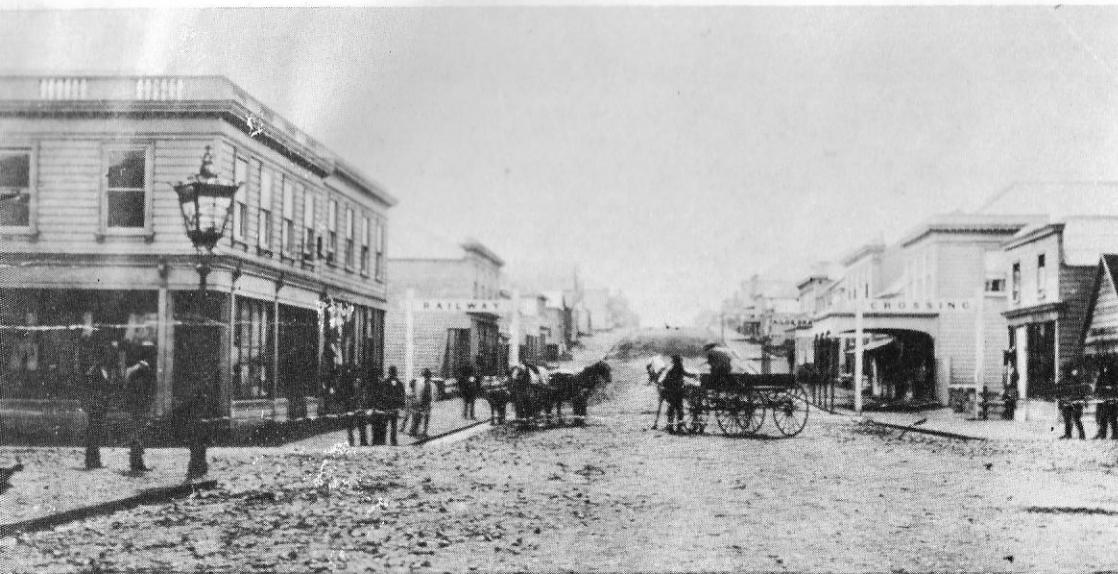


By 1890 the New Plymouth Press was describing the by-law as tyrannical after Judge Kettle showed his attitude by fining a man a shilling for riding too fast over the crossing. A. Hood, in a newspaper letter, declared: "It has now at length come to this; that many country settlers have become timid in venturing with saddle horse or vehicle into the heart of the town, naturally no doubt apprehensive that inadvertently they may at any time infringe on some by-law, drawing police interference — such in usual sequence winding up with loss of time, as well as that which perhaps can worst be spared — the loss of a few hard-earned shillings by way of redemption."

The only blessing the crossing conferred on the town was in May, 1885, when a strong northeast wind fanned a fierce blaze along the southern side of Devon Street. Between the Imperial Hotel (on the corner of Devon and Currie Streets), which escaped with a scorching, and the railway line, 18 buildings were destroyed. The gap of the Huatoki Stream and the railway line alone saved Brougham Street buildings. Staff had emptied cash and securities out of the



Above: New Plymouth's horse traffic was disturbed by the first trains crossing Devon Street. The Fitzroy horse bus was a feature of the town.



Left: The Devon Street crossing initially bore large signs. Looking east from the Brougham Street intersection. (Taranaki Museum)

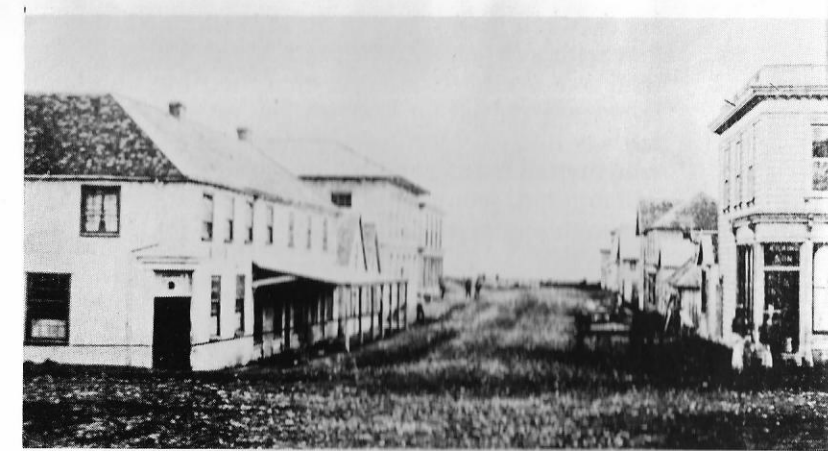
National Bank to the safety of the Bank of New Zealand while firemen and willing volunteers, with axes and ropes, demolished and dragged away a workshop that might have spread the flames.

The crossing issue, however, was not the first or greatest controversy set alight by the coming of the railway. New Plymouth of the middle 1870's already was sharply divided over whether the breakwater at the Sugar Loaves should be built by convicts brought to a prison proposed to be built at Moturoa by the Central Government; the voices of bigotry warned that the morals of New Plymouth would suffer.

The same voices were also raised in alarm when Sunday trains to and from Waitara began in May, 1876. A public meeting was told by the Rev. M. S. Breach of St Andrew's Presbyterian Church that "pleasure parties going out on Sundays were the Devil's travellers", while Taranaki News editor, Benjamin Wells, declared that the trains had been asked for by a "coterie of unbelievers". Solicitor Arthur Standish, soon to be the town's first Mayor, was also active in encouraging 273 persons to sign a petition to the Government praying that Sunday trains be discontinued. But the Herald was more tolerant. "There is a large number of persons in this place who are neither 'disbelievers' nor 'infidels' yet see no harm in going by train to Waitara on Sunday . . . without coming under the denomination of 'Devil's travellers'."

Outside Taranaki The Wellington Evening Post entered the fray. "A pack of bigots and fanatics in New Plymouth are striving to stop the running of trains on Sundays. The Rev. F. W. Isitt heads the movement while his lieutenant is a Mr B. Wells who denounces 'all who go by rail on Sundays as infidels'. Happily Mr Wells will not in these modern days be permitted to have his way." In fact, the Government remained unmoved.

Others were finding the railway opened entirely new vistas of travel. Sixty-seven-year-old Dr St George, who specialised in midwifery and veterinary skills, wrote to the Press telling how he had been detained all night at Bell Block at a lingering midwif-



Above: Brougham Street before 1875, giving a clear view to the sea. Left is the Masonic Hotel, now the site of the Bank of New Zealand.

Below: After 1875 the railway goods shed straddled the end of the street. (Taranaki Museum)

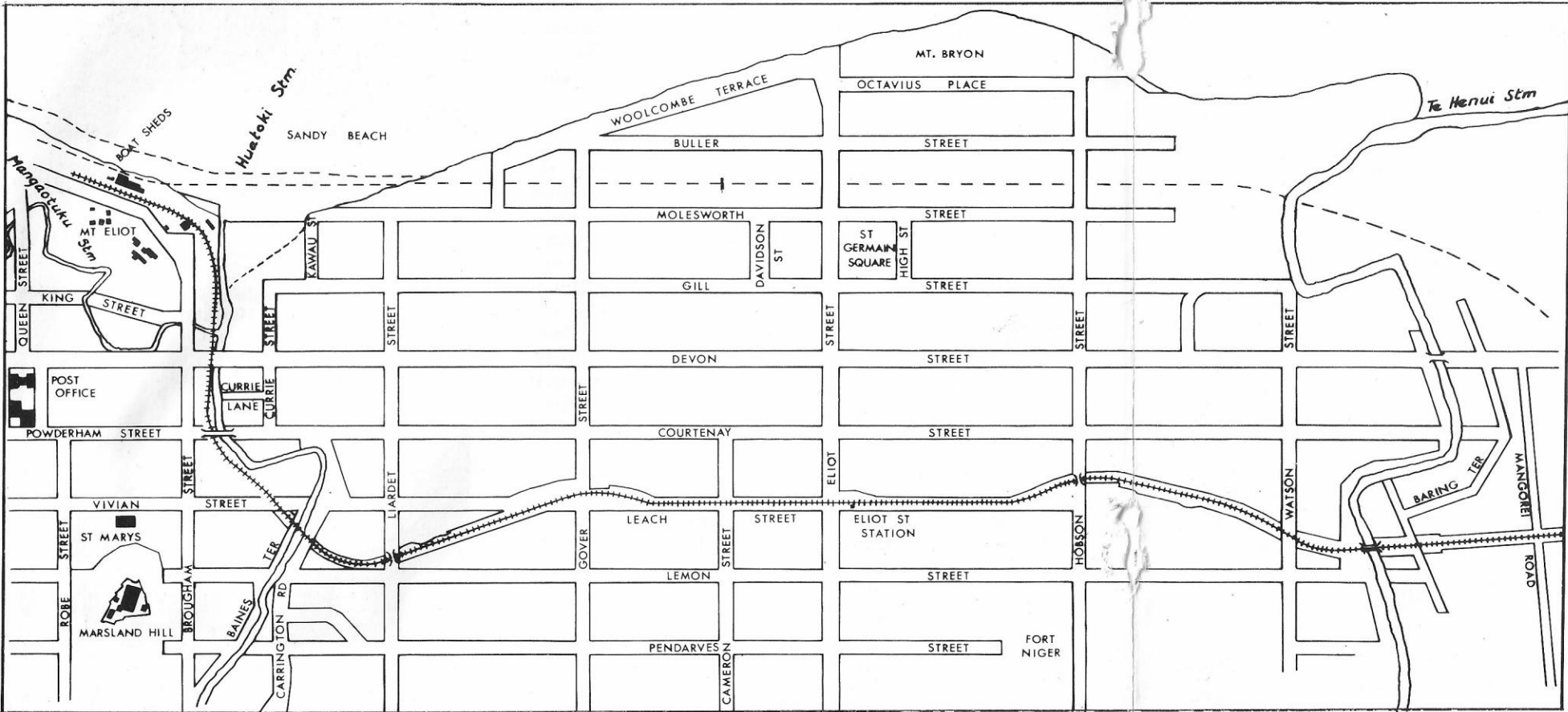




ery case and then was sent for at Waitara: "I thought that with a little smart riding I might 'kill two birds with one stone'. Therefore, next morning I took my horse and started for Waitara, but on arriving at the railway line . . . I fortunately met with a kind friend, who invited me to go with him by train. I immediately dismounted, secured my nag in the road, jumped on the engine, took my place near the driver (for it was

raining in torrents), got to the Waitara Station in fifteen minutes (about six miles), stayed 25 minutes and, after visiting four patients, returned to Bell Block in 15 minutes more, in time to attend my patient there with satisfaction and success to my trip, the first." But, as the town grew and rail traffic increased, the danger and inconvenience of the Devon Street crossing became a civic nightmare. "A glaring monstros-

ity of a railway crossing" was how a writer in 1891 described it. "There could not very well have been established a piece of work more beset with unsafety, even if it had some evil genius in the exuberance of its malignity planning the like." The Railway Department did its best to reduce the risk. Train speeds over the crossing were restricted to 6 miles an hour, the engines gave warning whistles and a porter with a red



This Map, based on T. K. Skinner's plan of 1880, shows how the railway line, from 1875 to 1907, crossed Devon Street to reach Leach Street and the present Waiwaka Terrace. Also shown is the present railway route (opened in 1907) which used reclaimed land across the mouth of the Huatoki to reach a deep cutting between Buller and Molesworth Streets.



This Train is about to cross Devon Street before running down to the seaside station. The old Devon Street bridge across the Huatoki is seen on the left. Right foreground is the small railway bridge over the Mangaotuku stream. (Taranaki Museum)

flag moved to the centre of the crossing before the train arrived.

In 1890 a man was struck and killed at the Vivian Street crossing. Then came the "black week" of 1901. Within a space of 10 days three lives were lost, one at Watson Street, the second in Devon Street, and the third at Moturoa. (The line to the port had been opened at the end of 1885) The second death especially deeply shocked the community. It was that of Charles Brown, who had come to the infant settlement in 1841 to set up in business with his father, Charles Armitage Brown, the famous friend of the poet Keats. Within a year the father had died, but the 21-year-old son remained to win an honoured name in Taranaki. At 33 he was elected the Provincial Government's first Superintendent in 1853, and four years later helped to establish the Taranaki News, becoming its owner. At the outbreak of the Maori War



*Left: For 32 years this was a common scene in the heart of New Plymouth as a mixed train held up traffic.*

*Below: After the old route was abandoned this gap remained until 1927, when King's Building replaced the old wooden structure and extended across the river. Upstream May and Arrowsmith's tearooms (now Smith & Brown) closed the southern gap.*

in 1860 he found himself in the unaccustomed role of soldier; before the war ended he rose to the rank of major. Parliamentary honours followed and in 1901, at the age of 81, he was still serving the community as a Maori interpreter.

On September 2, Brown was walking to the horse-drawn bus for Fitzroy when he noticed the fishmonger, who occasionally opened his stall along the stone parapet of the Huatoki Bridge. Brown turned back to make a purchase, and then absentmindedly went to cross the railway line a second time. The train whistled again but it was too late and he died under the wheels of the Hawera-bound afternoon train. Porter Howlett, on duty at the crossing, courageously tried to save him, narrowly escaping being knocked down himself, the engine actually brushing his clothes. The horror of this tragedy, seen by so many in the busy main street, brought pent-up feelings to a head. Something must be done! The borough council called for action. J. B. Connett told a public protest

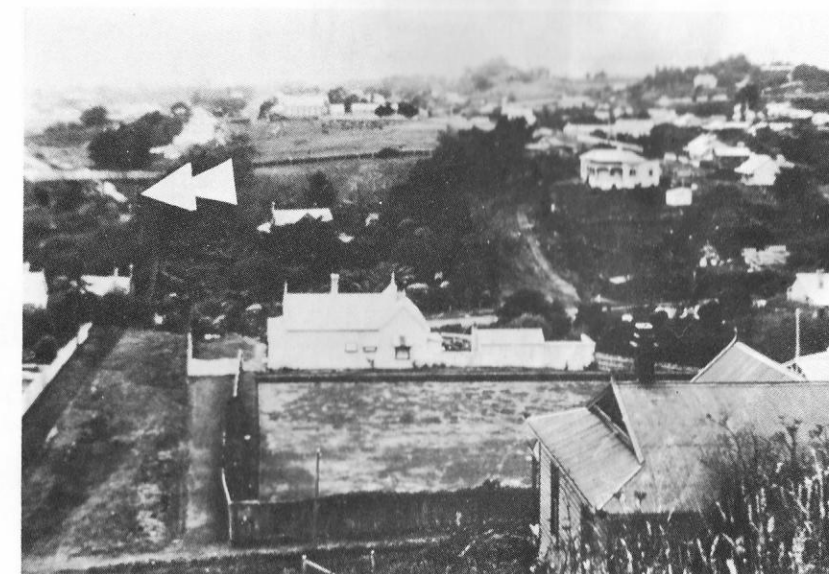


meeting that he could never understand why the line was ever run on its present route. A better grade could have been secured along the coast and at a cheaper rate. The bitterness was greater because the Government had stilled criticism by talking about an alternative route while vacillating on action. By the year of Brown's death the original New Plymouth-Waitara line had extended into an important link in North Island communications. The railway's step by step progress had brought it to Inglewood in August, 1877, Stratford in December, 1879, and Hawera in August, 1881. A through rail service to Wellington was established in December, 1886, when the Government line linked with the Manawatu Railway Company's Longburn-Wellington line. By 1901 thousands of passengers were travelling between Auckland and Wellington each year via the Onehunga-New Plymouth steamer service and the New Plymouth-Wellington railway.

But, in spite of the agitation over Brown's death, it was to be six more years before this "monstrosity of a crossing" was removed. In 1904 the borough council

proposed that the department (1) run a new line along the foreshore, (2) build a marine parade 40 feet wide along the seafront and (3) allow Molesworth Street to be carried through the station yard to join St Aubyn Street. The council was prepared to contribute £2,000 towards the cost. The proposals were rejected in favour of a route with deep cuttings between Buller and Molesworth Streets. This began a second lively controversy and, as late as February, 1906, the town was still pressing to have the line taken round the beach, but the Government quietly proceeded with its own plan. This involved over two miles of track, five chains shorter than the old route, cut the rise in grade by half and had easier curves before it joined the old route near the eastern end of Waiwaka Terrace. Gone would be the suburban station of Eliot Street but Fitzroy would have a station close to where the new line went under Devon Street at Strandon. Without any fuss or ceremony the deviation was opened for traffic on December 16, 1907. For the first time in 32 years no trains crossed Devon Street, but the rails remained there for another two years. Seven years

*Right: This view looking east from Marsland Hill shows the train crossing under the Liar-det Street bridge (arrowed) with Central School in the background. In the foreground is the first green of the New Plymouth Bowling Club with Hempton Street on the left. (Taranaki Museum)*







Old Mt Eliot, before removal gave widespread views. The military barracks stand on top of Marsland Hill with St Mary's Church at the foot of the hill. A bullock wagon is a feature of Devon Street, while on the left peeping between two buildings is part of the Ship Inn, replaced by the Criterion Hotel in 1880.

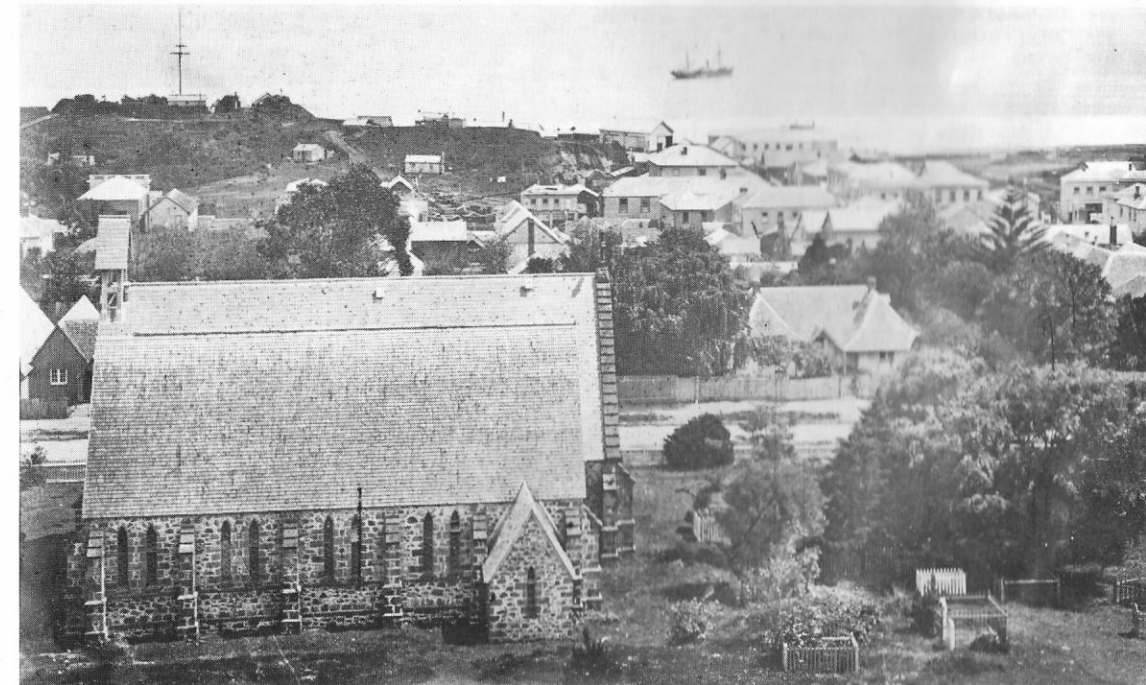
after they were removed other rails ran along but not across the street; they were for the town's tramway service between Fitzroy and the Port. The motorcar-tramway age had arrived.

While the railway controversies had raged intermittently for over a generation a manmade erosion was inexorably altering New Plymouth's face at its front door. With scarcely a murmur of protest Mt Eliot, once the great Maori pa of Pukeariki, was being removed, to leave ghosts that haunt the city centre to this day. The historic hill named after Lord Eliot (prominent in establishing the New Zealand Coy) straddled the entrance to the town from Queen Street to the Huatoki and back to Devon Street. At its northern foot the sandy beach was the landing place where the surfboats were housed before the breakwater was built at Moturoa. On the crest of the hill, once noted for its kumara pits, ranged the early town's

administrative buildings — the pilot house and flagstaff, signal cannon, Maori hospice, Government offices (Superintendent, Survey, Lands and Deeds and Treasury), the gaol, customs house and meteorological office. In 1866 Mt Eliot was declared by the Provincial Council to be a harbour trust, together with the mouth of the Huatoki Stream.

When the first railway was being planned Mt Eliot had already lost some of its administrative buildings, and the green sward, dotted with trees, was let for grazing. Its crest gave early photographers wide views of Mt Egmont and the coastline. The coming of the railway brought the first bite to the hill, its seaside slopes being cut back to provide room for the passenger station and engine and goods sheds. Lower Brougham Street was extended to the west to service the station and link with St Aubyn Street. In 1882 an expanded scheme required the road round the hill

Mt Eliot As seen from Marsland Hill. A steamer is at anchor off the town's landing place (served by surfboats), and the signal mast is prominent on top of Mt Eliot. The first railway station is hidden by a ridge of Mt Eliot but the goods shed is prominent almost in line with the steamer. (Taranaki Museum)





Above: The first station, the beach and foreshore before reclamation was carried out. (Taranaki Museum)

being incorporated into the railway yards, a new road being excavated from the hill and provision made for extending the railway to the port, this line being completed three years later. A photograph of the resultant station shows Mt Eliot cut back in two terraces that rose in height towards the western end.

The next railway expansion, begun 17 years later, marked the end of the sandy beach in front of the town and the beginning of the end of Mt Eliot itself. The New Plymouth Harbour Board was the active collaborator in this exercise, permitting the department to take rock from Fishing Rock quarry near the base of Paritutu in order to construct a seawall for station reclamation. A few months later, in 1900, the department sought nearly 80,000 yards as fill behind the seawall, 40,000 yards to come from the Mt Eliot reserve. The proximity of the earth supplies was too tempting for the Railways Department while the harbour board saw worthwhile revenues from levelled leaseholds of the area. There were complaints

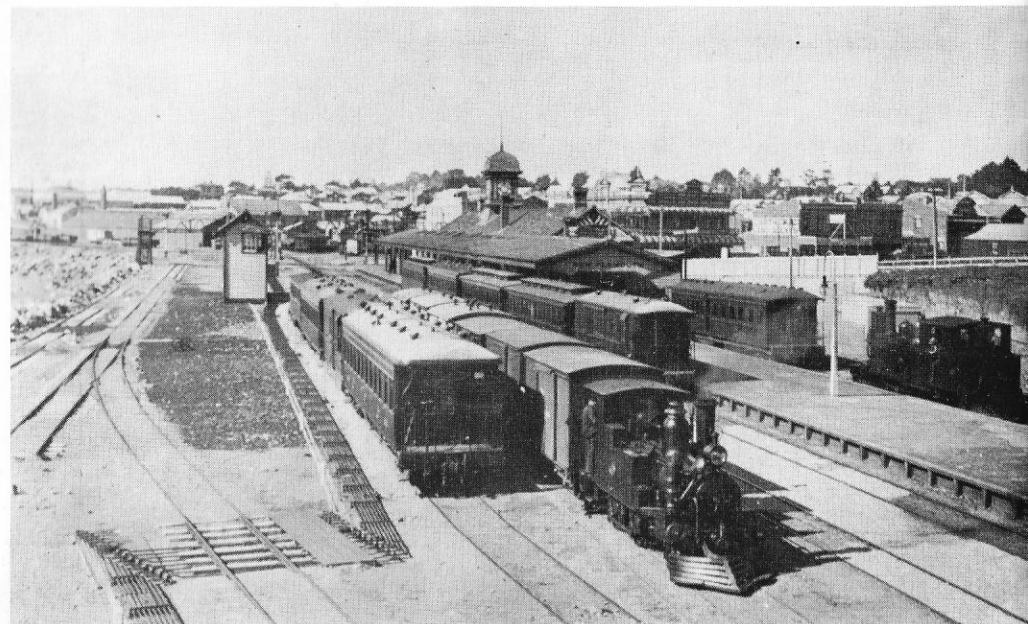
about the department taking large rocks that the harbour needed for its own breakwater extensions but with certain assurances the work went on, a final 9,000 yards of rock being required in March, 1901. By then an entirely new threat to the existence of Mt Eliot had come from borough and harbour board co-operation. A new street, named Egmont, had been cut through the heart of the hill. This was the beginning of the final removal of a picturesque feature that oldtime Maori and pioneer pakeha alike had used to advantage.

Its passing, which entailed also the narrowing of the mouth of the Huatoki Stream and its emptying into the sea by a straight channel, was regretted by many. Alexander Black, born in 1851, wrote nostalgically of what had been. The replacement of the sandy beach by outer rock walls, he said, had affected the climate of central New Plymouth; the sun-heated sand had a warming effect in summer both day and night, and even the winter temperatures were lower with the hill gone. Sir Joseph Ward, acting Premier while Seddon was overseas, came to New Plymouth in 1902 to open the new station and yards, and regrets for the end of Mt Eliot and the beach had no place in departmental politics. The Government had spent more than £25,000 in reclaiming the beachfront from the Terminus Hotel (near the site of the present Tasman Hotel) to Gover Street, building a new passenger station (which was to last for the next 59 years), widening the marshalling yards along the seafront and shifting the locomotive sheds to Morley Street. Two footbridges to the sea were a compromise for the public but the sand never came back.

The ghost of Mt Eliot remains in the oft-forgotten stream named the Mangaotuku. Draining a large part of Western New Plymouth it was checked from emptying into the sea by a long, low ridge stretching from the harbour to the Huatoki. The Mangaotuku finally meandered round the southern slopes of Mt Eliot until it flowed into the Huatoki near where the first railway crossed Devon Street. And there to this day the stream remains, almost exactly delineating the shape of the old hill. And this ghost can rampage



Above: The end of New Plymouth's beach at its front door. This rock wall (under construction) permitted the Railways Department in 1900 to reclaim land and widen its marshalling yards.



Right: Extra lines and a new station followed the reclamation. The station with its clock dome was a feature. (W. W. Stewart Collection)

Below: Rough seas damaged the temporary line of rails along the rock wall. (Taranaki Museum)

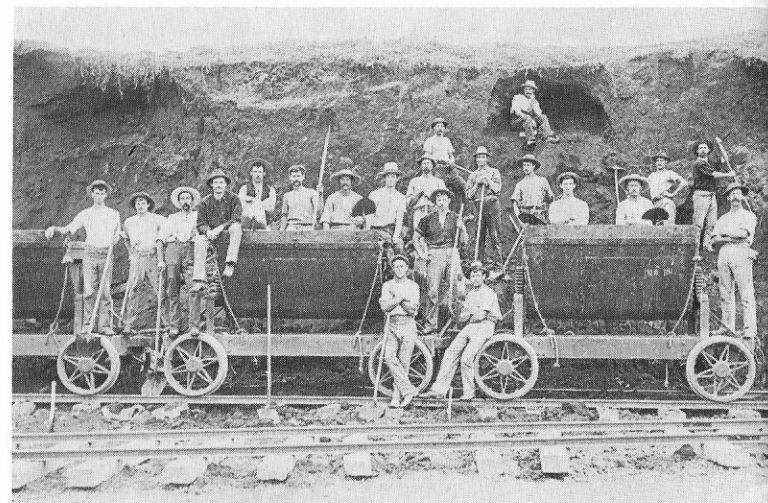






Left: Cut from the heart of Mt Eliot, Egmont Street gave direct access to the second railway station seen in the background. The festive occasion was a welcome home to Colonel R. H. Davies from the South African War in 1901.

Below: Digging away at Mt Eliot early this century was hard graft with long-handled shovels. (Taranaki Museum)



with destructive fury when floodwaters, merging under the commercial heart of the city, periodically damage and endanger property.

When the trains "disappeared" into the deep cuttings of the 1907 route they left a host of memories and legends. Two days before New Plymouth's Central School opened in May, 1884, four small boys set fire to the Mt Eliot station. Brought before the magistrate, their names were published and they were ordered to be whipped by their parents in the presence of a police sergeant. One may speculate either that corporal punishment may have a longtime effect, or the Central School pointed the way of civic duty, for one of these boys grew up to give a lifetime of service to the volunteer fire brigade. It was near the Eliot Street station in April, 1907, that New Plymouth's M.P., E. M. Smith, the famous advocate of



Bullock wagons played their part as the last corner of Mt Eliot was removed in 1905. This view is from approximately in front of the railway station with Egmont Street on the left.

the smelter of Taranaki's ironsand, was fatally injured in a fall from the train.

Speeds reflected the improvement in engine power and the condition of the track. In 1879 the department announced plans for a train leaving New Plymouth at 7 a.m. to enable travellers to reach Wanganui at 8 p.m. Using brown charcoal instead of coal it speeded between Sentry Hill and Inglewood at a dashing 18 miles an hour. This train could then reach only as far as Stratford and horse-drawn travel bridged the gap to the south before the train for Wanganui could be boarded.

That same year a woman appeared at a flag station between New Plymouth and Inglewood and the guard signalled a stop. But he found he was not confronted by a would-be passenger, but by a woman calmly asking if he could oblige her with change for a one pound note!

A daring traveller made the headlines early in 1880 after a record journey between New Plymouth and Wellington. He left New Plymouth by train on Monday morning, reached Wanganui the same evening, caught a steamer going south and arrived in Wellington before nine o'clock on Tuesday morning — a journey of about 26 hours.

Closer home the initial slow speed of the outward train was cunningly used by the evening paper, the Herald. If printing was delayed and the 3.45 p.m. train departure likely to be missed unorthodox procedures were applied. As recalled by veteran printer Hercules Moon: "We would rush out into the street and wave to the old cabbie Dick Honeyfield. He would rush to the Devon Street crossing and ask the engine-driver to give us an extra five minutes. We had the engine-driver squared — he wanted to look at the Herald too — so he would slow the train down until it reached



New Plymouth's "Cabbies" wait hopefully near the two main hotels. The Masonic Hotel (on the right) was demolished in 1885 to be replaced by the Bank of New Zealand. Across the street the Criterion, built in 1880, was an impressive addition to the town's Victorian architecture.

the Eliot Street station. By making a hand gallop for the station we would be saved."

The railway also provided other unusual services. Trains were chartered as buses are today. In 1876 40 New Plymouth Freemasons travelled on a "special" to Waitara for the opening of a new lodge. Toasts followed the dinner and the report stated: "Shortly before eleven o'clock Bro. Smith left the table, and as it was known that the train was under his charge, the meeting was soon brought to a conclusion." Three years later, as the Te Whiti troubles spread, the Waitara train took out Armed Constabulary and a "special" brought back 25 Maoris arrested for a token ploughing and potato-planting on William Jury's Tikorangi farm. As the confrontation with Te Whiti at Parihaka came closer the Taranaki railway took on a frontier appearance. Surveyor E. S. Brookes recorded how "a precaution had been taken to have the

baggage (goods) sheds of Stratford and Midhirst loopholed in case of emergency so that any retreat of the natives in this direction could be cut off should the attempt be made." Alfred Trimble of Inglewood was more explicit: "The walls of the Inglewood railway goods shed were rough-relined up to about six feet from the floor. The walls were loopholed and spaces between the lining and the weatherboards filled in with gravel, the idea being that women and children should use it as a refuge." Happily, this did not prove necessary.

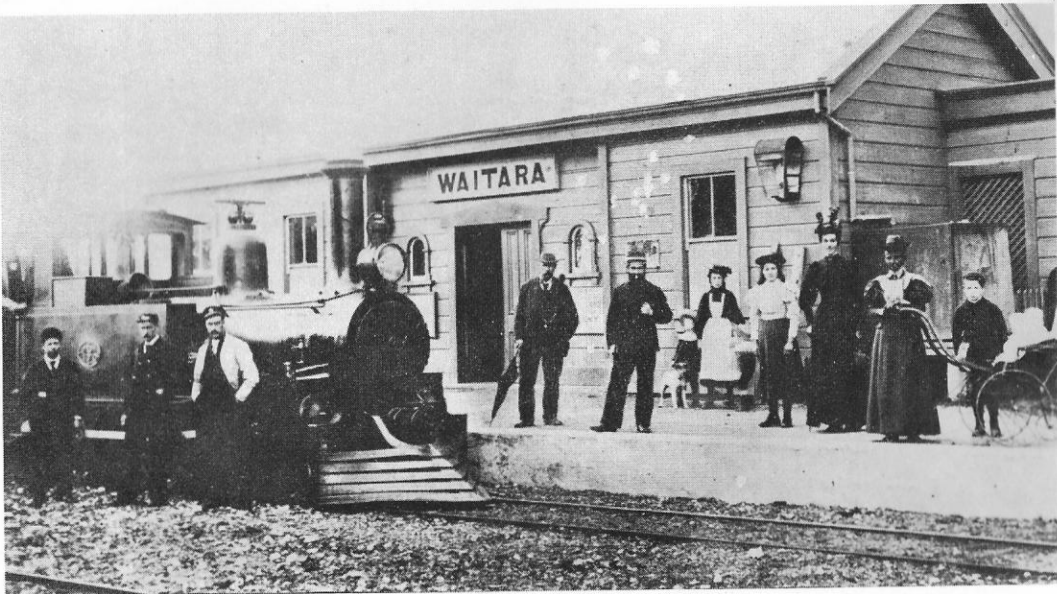
It was well known that early Taranaki rail tracks, constructed before sufficient road metal was available to defeat wintertime mud, were used as pedestrian routes. Rail bridges were also more convenient than scrambling up and down the steep sides of Taranaki's streams. At one stage this practice was so common the railway authorities had to post men to warn the public against obvious dangers.

The hiring of "special" trains often had political or parochial motives. A public meeting at night at Waitara on the controversial topic of rating for the New Plymouth harbour brought the passengers whose votes defeated a pro-Waitara resolution, leading the Wellington Evening Post correspondent to complain of the "meeting being swamped by New Plymouth residents who came down like Assyrian cohorts on the defenceless Waitarians and smote them hip and thigh." Another harbour special brought about 100 New Plymouth citizens and a handful from Waitara to Inglewood. A meeting was held on the station platform and a resolution passed before the train returned. The "Inglewood" meeting was certainly not of local residents.

Politics, however, were quickly set aside when a real emergency occurred. Exceedingly dry conditions in the first week of January, 1886, resulted in menacing bush fires; Stratford was in peril. Firefighting and relief trains left New Plymouth and Hawera. Twenty-three members of the New Plymouth Volunteer Fire Brigade with their hand-pumping engine found the Stratford Town Hall destroyed and they took over from the exhausted Stratford men. The flames were a



Right: Waitara's first station stood on the northern side of the line. This photograph, probably from the late 1870's, shows a Class C engine built by Neilsons of Glasgow in 1873.



Left: The second station was built on the other side of the line. This 1900 photograph shows Stationmaster Pattle and members of his family. (Railways Publicity)



few feet from Tutty's Hotel, the Curtis store and the railway station. Water was pumped from the station supply with good effect. The pump was then moved to the river to send up enough water to save Hare's store and its uninsured stock. Next day the brigade took train for New Plymouth only to find the wind had swung to the south to endanger Midhirst where some people were lying in the gutters for relief from the dense smoke. Telegraphic advice to New Plymouth had alerted the bellman and his street calls soon brought 60 more volunteer firemen to join another special train for Midhirst. Altogether 30 families had been burnt out, free railway passes were granted and trains took sufferers to New Plymouth to be billeted in the old Maori War barracks on Mars-

land Hill. Gifts of money, food and clothing poured in. Many had smoke damage to their eyes; "some children had no boots or anything on them but what they went to bed in."

There were emergencies of a much less serious consequence. Celebrating a Taranaki Rugby victory over Wellington in 1895 an inebriated young man set out from Devon Street to "walk along the railway track to Wellington." A few yards from the crossing he toppled into the dark waters of the Huatoki. He might have drowned had a police constable not plunged in after him, the rescue being impeded by the river's pavement of broken bottles. Finally, the shivering inebriate was dragged through the side window of a shop overlooking the river and he slept it off in the lock-up. The constable lost his watch, caught a chill and spent a period in bed.

The variety of services the trains gave was shown on New Plymouth's first Arbor Day in August, 1892,

when many people travelled by a "special" to the port for tree and grass planting at the base of Paritutu.

Since those first little trains began running in 1875 the railway has been woven into the history of the province. Memories remain of the often apprehensive travellers between Wellington and Auckland who changed from train to steamer; of the "mail" trains with many passenger carriages and a busy mail van where mail had been collected, sorted or exchanged along the route from Wellington; of the later "Wanganui Flyer" with its quick acceleration; of the "Ranfurly Shield" specials with their jubilant-cum-dejected followers; of the jam-packed railcars of the war period; and, finally, of the smart but aged "Blue Streak" railcars whose tendered refreshments were a thin reminder of the old, plush dining car days or of the sit-down, three-course, eat-up-quickly lunch room at Marton Junction.

In 1904 the rail journey between New Plymouth and Wellington took a testing 12 hours 10 minutes. In 1925 the time was down to nine hours 38 minutes; the diesel railcars in 1939 notched seven hours 15 minutes. The Blue Streak, when in the mood, cut it down to six hours 33 minutes, almost half the time taken in 1904. And now not one passenger for Wellington or south goes by rail; after 102 years history has turned full circle.

The railwaymen of the past should have first place in any history, summed up by A. T. Gandell, general manager in the department's centennial year (1963) when he wrote, "No railway is a mere thing of wood, steel and concrete. Human beings are the most important component of any railway system." This was recognised in 1902 when Lawrence Duffin, son of the police sergeant who 27 years before faced the problems of New Plymouth's first train service, was

*A photograph of New Plymouth's seafront before the railway was established in 1875. Prominent across the mouth of the Huatoki river are the boatsheds and the Terminus Hotel (near the site of the present Tasman Hotel).*



*The Last Railway Link between Taranaki and Wellington was in August, 1977, when the Blue Streak railcar service ended. Here one of the railcars is about to enter the station enclosure. Compare this with the photograph on the opposite page to show how reclamation completely altered New Plymouth's seafront.*



shunting on the new reclamation where the sleepers had not been ballasted. He slipped and the wheels of a freighted wagon passed over him, almost severing his right arm and crushing his left leg. He was carried to hospital in the only ambulance available, a horse-drawn express wagon. Surgeons amputated his arm and lower leg and feared he would not survive. But survive he did — and with an artificial leg served the railways for the rest of his working life.

He was given sole charge of the small Himatangi junction where one of New Zealand's private railways, the Manawatu County Council's Sanson Tramway, joined the Government line to travel in and out of Foxton. At Himatangi Duffin's cheerfulness and efficiency became a byword in the service. And by a quirk of history the Sanson tram was being drawn by the old Taranaki "Fox", purchased by the county

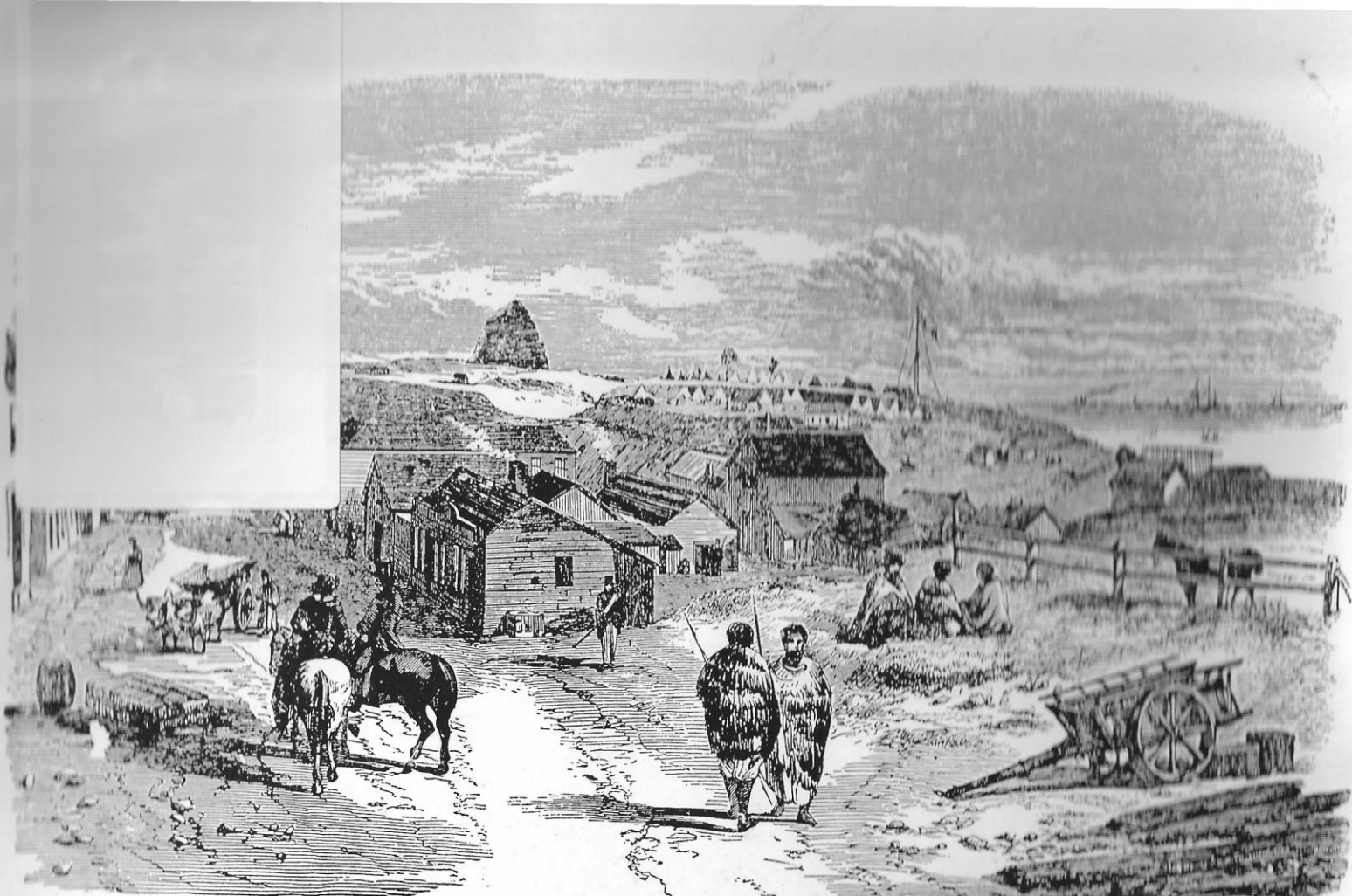
in 1888. It served for the next 22 years and as late as 1960 "Fox's" boiler and copper firebox were noted still lying behind the council yards at Sanson by the historian of the tramway, K. R. Cassells.

A few glimpses of the old railway route remain at New Plymouth. A grassed walk from Powderham Street into Central Park below Broadcasting House reveals the solid rock masonry walls of the rail embankment that curved to the east beside the Huatoki Stream. The walk can now be extended to Vivian Street. A short distance away in the bed of the stream is the historic Maori rock Paitawa, cracked by explosives 40 years ago when council men were clearing the bed of the stream and saved from complete destruction by historian W. H. Skinner. Here something of the old-time charm of the Huatoki Valley survives.

Copyright — all rights reserved



Cracked by explosives 40 years ago, the historic Maori rock called 'Paitawa' is a feature of the Huatoki River bed, a short distance upstream from the surviving concrete foundations of the 1875 railway bridge.



When the Troops camped on Mt. Eliot. A contemporary drawing on August 20, 1855, the day after the "Duke of Portland" landed Imperial Army units at New Plymouth. The soldiers' tents can be seen to the left of the flagstaff on

Mt Eliot. The original narrow bridge in Day is shown. This was replaced by a wider bridge in 1875, the year of the first railway in Taranaki.

**NEW PLYMOUTH  
DISTRICT LIBRARY**