

Footprints of three centuries stamped out ancient trail

THOUSANDS of footprints left by old-time Maoris, some hurrying in war parties, some fleeing from tribal warfare and many proceeding in peace, help to stamp the trail which became the Whaka ahurangi track, one of the most famous of New Zealand's ancient pathways. It was the main Maori highway in Taranaki between Kairoa Pa (near Lepperton) and Ketemarae Pa (near Normanby) from the 16th until the 19th century.

The unveiling today of a plaque provided by the Taranaki regional committee of the Historic Places Trust at a point on the track near Stratford identifies for present and future generations a Taranaki "through route" which needed no special identification for the Maori travellers of other ages.

Nothing of the track exists now. Progress, in the form of farming, roading and even bridging, has engulfed the old pathway, although it would have disappeared when the

bush was burnt off and the need for a clear route avoided.

Once, however, it was the only recognised passage from coastal Taranaki in the north to South Taranaki if travellers wished to avoid the Taranaki tribes. It was an inland pathway, about 3ft. wide and well identified.

Travellers who used it constantly bent twigs or nipped buds of overgrowth as they hurried along.

War parties were the exception. They sought to maintain a speed of

at least six miles an hour, although on occasions they have been recorded as making a pace along beach routes of up to 20 miles an hour in emergency. The peaceful traveller kept to a speed of about three miles an hour, enabling him to contribute his quota to keeping the track clear without undue effort.

Men, women and children used the Whaka ahurangi track, and it was a woman, Ruapu-tahanga, who could have given the route its name.

She was a much-married chieftainess of the Ngati-Rua-nui tribe of Patea who journeyed to Kawhia to marry one Whatihua. He agreed, but later gave his wife from Patea cause for complaint and she promptly left him, about 1560, to return to her own people. After tarrying at Mokau, where she temporarily engaged another husband, Ruapu-tahanga continued her journey along the Whaka ahurangi track.

When her party reached a place, identified by the historian and surveyor Percy Smith, as the modern town of Stratford, she camped for the night. She lay on her back with her face to the sky, to give the name Whakaahu (to turn towards)—rangi (the heavens) to her resting place and the track.

The actual site has been disputed in a note left by W. H. Skinner, who says the site was near the town of Midhirst. His correction is now generally accepted.

Yet another authority, James Cowan, says the name alludes to "the gradual ascent to the heights as the eastern ranges of the mountain approach."

Party of 2000

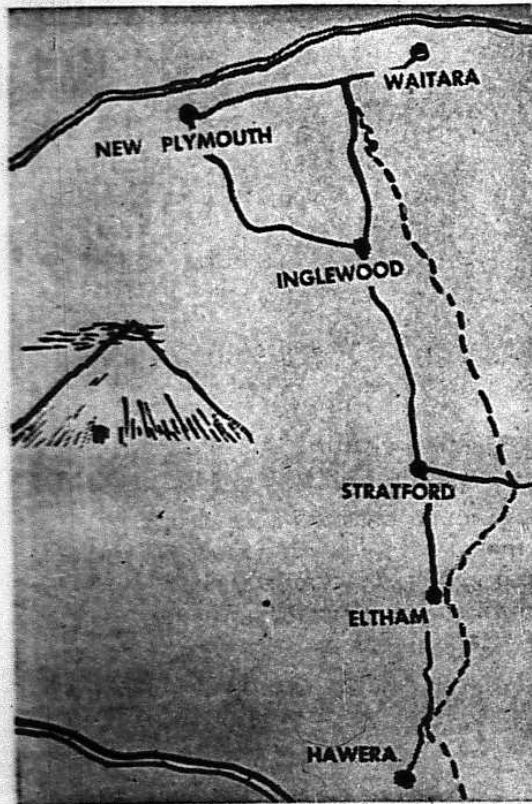
However the name originated, the track was widely known. Several large hekes from Auckland and Waikato used it. Te Rauparaha brought what must have been the largest party when, about 1820, he led 2000 men, women and children of the Ngati-Toa tribe from Kawhia to take possession of Kapiti Island.

The going was often hard, with no bridges over the many streams and several rivers which had to be crossed. Often it must have been muddy and wet. Yet it was generally recognised as being a safe route and the difficulties of passage were not so very different from those challenging the capacities of the Maori traveller on other major trails.

The track had fallen into disuse on European settlement but, in 1842, Wickstead, the resident agent of the New Zealand Company in New Plymouth, employed the Nairn brothers to cut a bridle path along its route. The work was completed, in spite of considerable opposition from what E. J. Wakefield called "the great body of the natives on the Cook Strait side" and "by a Wesleyan missionary named Skevington." Maori labour was used by the Nairns.

It became overgrown during the Taranaki Wars, when the Maori fighters managed to keep Europeans out of the bush areas until Major-General Trevor Chute led a mixed force from Ketemarae to New Plymouth in 1866.

He selected the old trail and found it almost obliterated by growth. Halts were frequent, to allow swamps, gullies and streams to be bridged, but a passable road was cut, to re-establish the old north-south link.



THE WHAKA AHURANGI TRACK from near Waitara to Normanby is marked by the line of dashes, with the present main road at the left to indicate how closely the modern route followed the old. The plaque provided by the Historic Places Trust is on the Stratford-Ohura Road near where the track cuts across it.

TOM TIDDLER'S GROUND

Photo Finish

The cockies held their meeting
In the way that cockies do;
They exchanged a friendly greeting
And they swapped a moan or two;
For, to them, a moan's essential,
Be it taxes, rain or drought,
And now, with the differential,
They had something to moan about.

So they voiced their indignation,
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