

# **A BRIEF HISTORY OF BIRKENHEAD**

## **by Coral Malcolm**

Prior to the 1840's, this area had no permanent European settlers, and was only sparsely populated by Maoris. Most of them had been driven out by marauding tribes from the North. The main pa sites were on Stokes Point at Northcote and at Kauri Point. Birkenhead was sold by the Maori in April 1841 as part of a huge block of land which stretched from the Waitemata to Mahurangi. The first recorded use of the name "Birkenhead" was on a sale plan in 1863.

During the 1860's the first European settlers arrived, and began the farming and fruitgrowing that the district was to become famous for. The land was hilly, bushclad and with clay soil gave little to its inhabitants. They found the going very tough. Clearing the bush to grow grass and crops and building fences to hold the stock was no easy task. Strawberries became a profitable crop for some and so began a tradition that was to last almost 100 years. During the 1870's the area was still very much a pioneering settlement occupied by a few settlers, a few Maoris and some gumdiggers.

In 1880, the first church was built at Zion Hill. Prior to this settlers had either met in their homes or had gone to Northcote Point. The opening of the Chelsea Sugar Works in 1884 brought workers, more houses and more settlers into the district. Gradually Birkenhead and Birkdale were surveyed and became more populated. In 1888 the Birkdale (now Beach Haven) wharf was built, the Birkenhead Borough Council was established, and the current Zion Hill Church was built. The Council meetings were held in the old church and were planned to coincide with the full moon as there were no street lights. Other services were established in the district. The first school at Birkdale opened in 1894.

The new century saw the Sugar Works still dominating the district with a third of the men working there. Most orchardists changed from apples to stone fruit because of the codlin moth which was unstoppable. Some grape growing and wine making was also tried. By 1913 there were shops and with a more regular ferry service going from Birkenhead rather than Stokes Point, the area thrived.

There were schools in Birkdale and Northcote but trudging that far on clay roads was too far for many children and they chose to go to Auckland by ferry instead. Although land for a school in Birkenhead was eventually purchased, the war prevented it being built until 1919. The first motor car came here in 1920 and as their numbers steadily increased, the Council had to impose traffic regulations. Bicycles were a common method of transport. As they went along the roads they were required to ring their bells continually to warn pedestrians and horses.

In 1923 Beach Haven was surveyed and opened for sale. Sections starting at about £40 sold quickly. Repeated pleas were made to the Council for better roads to this far corner of the Borough as cars sunk in the clay. Groceries had to be delivered by wheelbarrow.

One of the greatest milestones for Birkenhead was the switching on of electricity in 1926. This allowed the area to develop steadily. During the Depression many families suffered heavily but the Sugar Works and the fruit growing helped most to survive. The last gumdiggers looking for kauri gum worked at Verran's Corner in 1934.

In 1933 Birkenhead Transport was founded and is still owned today by the same family.

When war broke out in 1939 over 300 left Birkenhead leaving a huge gap in the workforce. Women had to farm or do the jobs of their menfolk. An ammunition store was formed at Kauri Point, a site chosen for its isolation. Locals soon got used to air raid drills and blackouts as the area was very vulnerable being between Kauri Point and Devonport Naval Yards.

Soon after the war it became obvious that a harbour crossing was necessary to cope with the growing population and vehicles. The contract was signed in 1954 and work finally began. May 1959 saw the Bridge opened with thousands walking across to celebrate. Birkenhead lost its rural fruitgrowing country atmosphere and soon developed into the beautiful and heavily populated place it is today. Thankfully large areas of bush have been preserved and we can still see and experience the type of conditions those early pioneers had to contend with. They also provide us with some fresh, healthy areas for recreation.