

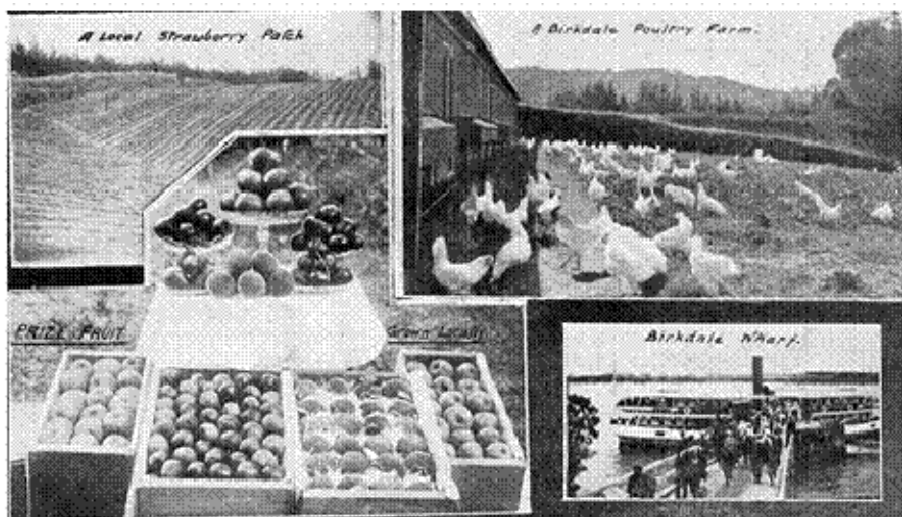
Early Birkenhead and Birkdale

Cliff Utting 1980

There seems to be little authentic records of what Birkenhead and Birkdale were like before the advent of the Pakeha. There is plenty of evidence to show that at one time the whole area must have been covered by a dense kauri forest with plenty of other native trees as well.

During the first World War as a boy scrambling through the titree scrub I can remember coming across numerous gum digger's holes and an occasional low sod wall and drains marking the sites of their "wharries". Having so much water frontage making it comparatively easy to get the logs out, Birkenhead's bush would have been destroyed very early. The method adopted in those days would be a bullock train or winch to get the logs to the nearest tidal water then float them round in rafts to the Kauri Timber Co's slipway off Fanshaw St. Tramway Road in Birkdale must have been the centre of very heavy bush as apparently a bush tramway was built complete with a passing loop in the middle. In some of the steeper and more difficult areas pockets would be left, hence the fine stands of bush in Kauri Park, Kauri Glen and Le Roys Bush. These areas, although small give a good idea of what the majority of the area would have looked like.

After the bush had been cleared, the branches, tops, etc. burnt, and before regeneration of the bush developed, the value of kauri gum became known. Hundreds of hopeful diggers with their spades and spears flocked to the North Shore and the North. The easiest way to clear the area to find gum would have been to burn off a few hundred acres of "scrub". This, of course killed off most of the new growth. This same process would probably be carried out some years later when the value of the gum had gone up and the diggers would look for smaller pieces as well.>



By the middle of the last century, large areas were being cleared for farming, mostly orchards. Many years later, especially on new land, one or two with sugar bags would follow the plough and many a bag would be filled in this way. Even in 1938 when I started farm contracting, it would be surprising how much gum was disturbed.

Kauri was the predominant timber used around Auckland until well after the turn of the century. Even the cow sheds and barns would be built of beautiful 12 x 1 boards.

Towards the end of last century, Birkdale particularly began to develop into fruit growing. At the turn of the century, strawberry beds started to appear as well as the orchards later. Birkdale became the principal strawberry supplier to Auckland, and before urban growth, was not only supplying the local market but other parts of New Zealand, then with air-freight, was developing a good export trade. One thing that plagued the growers was the amount of fruit damage and fruit lost through birds, particularly the blackbirds and thrushes which thrived in the large areas of bush and hedges. To help ease this problem, the Fruitgrower's Society offered 3d a dozen for the eggs or young of these birds. Many a Saturday afternoon was spent roaming through the bush by the boys, frequently getting over a hundred each. Apart from an enjoyable afternoon, 2 shillings or more was valuable pocket money in those days.

Strawberry picking became a major industry from the end of October to January each year, mostly by children, many of whom picked before and after school. To give them more time, play-times were shortened and school got out early, and also closed at least once a week early at the end of the year.



Sunshine Tennis Club 1930

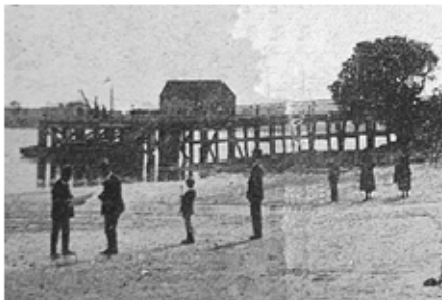
Back row: ?, Edna, Harry Utting, ?, ?, Alan Brown, Win Taylor, Gerty Warth, ?, ?, Sybil Walton, Mavis Keymer, ?, Doris Hayman, ?, June Hadfield, ?, ?
Middle row: ?, Mrs Collins, Miss Griffin, Mo Morrison, ?, ?, Mrs Usher, ?, Mrs Rainsford, Mr Rainsford, Ella Brown, Kate Dodson
Front Row: ?, ?, Grace Morrison, Doris Keymer, ? Len Usher

It was a busy life in those days and little time was allowed for sport but what one could get, the most was made of it. Having so much water and plenty of fish, fishing, boating and swimming were popular. With so many mud flats, the Lagoon off Eskdale Road was

very popular. During the summer everything stopped for an hour at high tide and a large number flocked to the Lagoon. Even the school, at times adjourned down there. With good deep water and a high springboard, diving was very popular. Imagine my dismay when I visited the area recently to be greeted by a notice which said "No Diving Allowed". Most of the land had been purchased by the Council for a picnic and sport's area, or was covered in houses. I am sure the small pools around the district do not provide the recreation and fellowship that the Lagoon provided.

Tennis and cricket were the two major summer sports. To enable these to carry on or get started, a lot of work had to be done by club members. There was no benevolent Government or Borough Council to supply these. Dances and concerts were run to buy equipment but most of the work was done by members themselves. Football was not quite so bad as they used more or less (mostly less) level paddocks that had had cows grazing on them shortly before leaving a few more greasy patches. After all in those days it was mostly the sport's teams that travelled around the suburbs and commented on them. It was no wonder that Birkenhead became known as a muddy countrified place. Shortage of metal meant that there was plenty of good yellow clay about.

Transport was a major problem until well after the turn of the century. A lot of orchards were developed with a water frontage and most had their own jetty. The old Birkdale wharf was a lot bigger than today with a large goods shed, waiting room and crane. The horses and carts used to drive right down and onto the wharf. Bradney and Binns had a regular small steamer service and when the tide was right, used to run right up to Riverhead. Hunter Bros from Greenhithe later started a more reliable launch service (not being so dependant on the tide) and proved very popular with the strawberry growers, enabling them to catch the morning market. Apart from fruit, a lot of other freight was carried as well as quite a number of passengers.



Birkdale Wharf showing the shed and cranes

Clows or Sansons started one of the first carrying businesses in Birkenhead having their stables and depot on the corner of Waratah St. Early in the 1900's, James Verran brought a team of draught horses up from Thames and set up a carrying business with a depot on the corner of Brassey Road and their main depot later at Verran's Corner. The business later became known as Verran and Sons and they catered for most of the fruit and goods for Birkdale. They had a monopoly for many years and became very independent. They had a large four horse wagon which seldom went past the corner. The fruit growers had

to have all their perishable fruit up there by half past six in the morning. This meant an early start to catch and harness the horse. Later the wagon was replaced by a heavy Dennis truck but this would also not venture past the “corner”. Strawberries were packed in crates holding 16 chips which were returnable. Verrans would bring back a big lorry load of these and just pile them in one big pile. After school the boys whose parents had empties to collect used to go up and sort out as many of their own (they all had separate brands) as possible then they would have to wait for some of the bigger growers who had not got sons at school, to come and reduce the pile.



Castleton and Hobby's truck

In the early 1930's, Castleton and Hobby started a service right around the circuit. This proved so popular that Verrans soon bought a smaller truck to “feed” the large one. As far as ordinary goods were concerned, Verrans would hold these until they had a dray or cart load before delivery.

Verran's Corner was a very important place in those days, being the junction of the two main roads, it became not only Verran's depot but also the bus terminal for many years. It is a lot different now. Verran's Depot was surrounded by large pine trees which sheltered their stables and was the home of hundreds of sparrows. Six to eight horses were usually stabled here and it was big thrill for me while waiting for the Heralds to arrive to help feed them. They were so big and friendly.



Verran's Dennis Truck at Verran's Corner

Passenger transport had many similar problems. At first a lot of Birkdale people travelled via Birkdale Wharf. Quite a few walked from Birkdale right to Birkenhead wharf and back and thought nothing of it. Most scholars at secondary school used to rely on the push bike. Special cycle tracks were formed in parts of Birkdale. Soon after the horse buses were started in Birkenhead, Birkdale was canvassed and many local people became shareholders in the Marine Suburbs Bus Company and a good bus service to Verran's Corner was provided. They gradually built up a fleet of fairly large buses with solid tyres and canvas side curtains. For years this was a pretty bumpy service and the proprietors complained of numerous broken springs. After the roads were sealed out to the corner, the residents made numerous requests to have the fares reduced but were turned down. When a separate Company was suggested, Birkdale residents supported it, in spite of most of them still being shareholders in the old Marine Suburbs Company.

Getting a new company under way was met with many problems, and needed special legislation to overcome them. In spite of these setbacks, the committee finally won. At first, as they could not get a licence, they ran a community bus. They could not collect fares but a glass container was placed by the driver so that he could see how much was donated. Dances and other activities were organised to augment their funds. This was stopped, so a fleet of taxis started up with a common fare. This was also stopped before long. The Blue Star Co eventually obtained a licence for the smaller buses to go around the Circuit. Marine Suburbs got so annoyed over this that they took their buses off the road for a fortnight expecting the other company not to be able to cater for the peak hour trade, but the new company promptly hired and bought new buses. It was the Marine Suburbs which never started up again. A couple of their drivers and shareholders bought a couple of the buses and continued a service to Albany, eventually joining up with Blue Star. After several years of ups and downs Mr Inwards was appointed manager and as the Birkenhead Transport Bus Co became one of the largest and most successful bus companies in New Zealand.



**Mr J Brooke and pupils at Birkdale
School**

Up until the early 20's, a lot of Birkdale residents used to go to town at least once a week in their horse and trap or sulky. There were two blacksmiths down by the wharf where, for a small fee you could leave your horse and what have you to be fed, watered or shod while you were in the big city.

One of the highlights of my school days was when "Brookie" the headmaster used to detail another boy and myself to catch his horse and harness it up ready for his wife and himself to get away as soon as possible after school. Of course we always made sure the horse was down the paddock out of sight of the school. We would have no trouble catching it and after a good hour's riding around, we would bring it up and harness it. A lot better than school work.

Up until quite recently, Birkenhead and Birkdale were two distinct communities. The few farms in Birkenhead were mostly dairy and poultry. Most of the early settlers were business and professional men. The opening of the sugar works in 1883, brought a lot more employment and mostly labourers to the district. There never seemed to be that close knit community spirit in Birkenhead and their ways of life seemed so different. Birkdale, on the other hand was a very close knit community, with people having similar ideas and problems. In fact, at most gatherings the main topics of conversation were the latest crops and what fertilisers were used. Birkdale was more isolated and practically all their entertainment was of their own creation and for many years they had more clubs, etc., than Birkenhead. The fruitgrowers were a strong body and they put on a very creditable agricultural show each year. A dramatic society and the Country Women's Institute flourished long before similar bodies started in Birkenhead. The old Birkdale School served for many years as the community centre. In about 1910 the first Scout group was started in a small hall next to the reservoir. Frank Finch was scout master for some years and when the First World War broke out, Mr Frank Fisher took over. Owing to financial difficulties in keeping up their capitation fees etc., they broke away from the Scout movement and called themselves Pioneers.

Mr Fisher and his two sons were very interested in native trees and native history. Many a boy learned a lot about trees particularly, which stood them in good stead in later life. A week's camp was held each year at the back of Mr Fisher's place where he not only had an excellent stand of native trees but he had constructed a large pool. This not only supplied water for his glasshouse but was also a popular swimming pool. Many a youngster learned to swim there. I can still see Mr Fisher with his rod with a length of rope dangling in front of some frightened youngster.

In 1917 after the Methodist Hall was built in Birkdale Road, a Young Citizen's League was formed and later the YMCA started a senior gymnasium class. Problems arose over leadership and after a few years, Bert Aplin, Rolly Bentley and myself used to go over to the leader's class at the Auckland YM every week. We led the junior and senior gym squads for about 10 years with an annual display and sport's day. A few years later the public hall was built on the corner of Puriri (now Beach Haven) and Lancaster Roads and we shifted down there. This provided one of the big shocks of my life. When the large culvert in Puriri Road collapsed, I reckon I was the last car to pass over it before it happened – and I had 16 boys hanging onto various parts of my car. (There were very few traffic inspectors or cars around in those days.) Imagine my horror next morning when I saw that 30 foot drop down which I and 16 boys would have plunged.



Birkdale Hall - cnr Lancaster and Puriri (now Beach Haven) Roads

Later this hall was burnt down and for a number of years the YMCA carried on in Dean's Hall in Beach Haven – mostly with table tennis. For my work for them, the YMCA awarded me Life Membership.

In the mid-twenties the Beach Haven Estate was cut up and advertised for summer baches. It became very popular with yacht and launch owners, and with a cabaret some good parties were held. Unfortunately they didn't stop there and the farmer's orchards became the target for quite a few. They weren't only content with raiding the orchards but occasionally raided the packing sheds where quite a few cases of already packed fruit were stolen. It became so bad that on more than one occasion a vigilante patrol was organised to help the lone policeman from Birkenhead. This did not improve the relations with the fruitgrowers and a third community was set up. The Beach Haven Estate from Hilder's Corner to the wharf became known as Beach Haven.

Meetings, etc. in both Birkdale and Birkenhead were usually arranged for moonlight nights. After the gas was installed in Birkenhead about a dozen street lights were installed

in Birkenhead, the last one being in the middle of Balmain Road. Mr "Shorty" Harrison used to go round at dusk on horse back, or in his gig, with a stick with a hoop on the end to pull down the chain and hope that the pilot light was still going. Then at 10:30pm or on moonlight nights when the moon rose, he would go round and reverse the procedure. Electric torches and gumboots were unheard of and hurricane lanterns and galoshes were the rule. It was a long dark walk home for many a boy after walking a girl home a couple or three miles. Even Highbury was blacked out.

In those days if one wanted any pocket money, you had to earn it. Strawberry picking and orchard work helped out. At the age of ten, I did my first Herald run, down Vermont Road and up Salisbury Road finishing at the school house – and look out if you didn't have the headmaster's paper delivered in time for him to read it before school. It was a big thrill when a couple of years later I saved up 10/- and bought a secondhand bike and started on the big run. The total papers in the whole district past the reservoir would, in 1920, be less than 50. The big run consisted of Verran's Road as it is now called, a few houses by the Anglican Church at the top of Birkdale Road, then the whole circuit finishing up at the school, picking up my bag and lunch from my mother who would be waiting at the gate. If I was 5 minutes late before I was 12 years old, "Brookie" would call me over and I would stop a couple of "cuts" from his cane. It was nothing for me to have six or seven welts or blood blisters on my left hand at the same time.

Occasionally I would have a change and do the Star run. The footpaths, where there were any, were good but the roads were still clay. I had to carry my bike across Tramway Road in wet weather. One day I rode it across and then got under the pine trees where it was dry. This was a bad mistake – the wheels were clogged up with clay and instead of cleaning them, the pine needles acted like reinforcing. It took quite a while to clean them and allow the wheels to go round.

With sealed roads and an expensive sewerage scheme to pay for, the increased rates made farming uneconomic and with a sudden jump in the value of sections after the opening of the Harbour Bridge, it didn't take long for the farms to disappear and be replaced by houses. A population of 7000 in 1960, by 1970 had reached over 20,000. It took less than 20 years to jump from a closely knit community, to a community of strangers.

As I mentioned earlier, road metal was very scarce in Birkenhead. The sugar works proved very valuable and most roads that were metalled at all, had their share of "ash" or clinker. This was used for concrete and most homes, etc. used plenty of the same material being free just for the cartage. The footpaths particularly got a good coating of rotten shell. This bleached out nice and white and was very handy on dark nights. A quarry was later started by the creek in the War Memorial Park. This was fairly good metal but transport from the quarry to the road proved difficult. The council later bought the site by Lake Pupuke and the sandstone overburden finished up on the Birkdale Roads and the back streets.