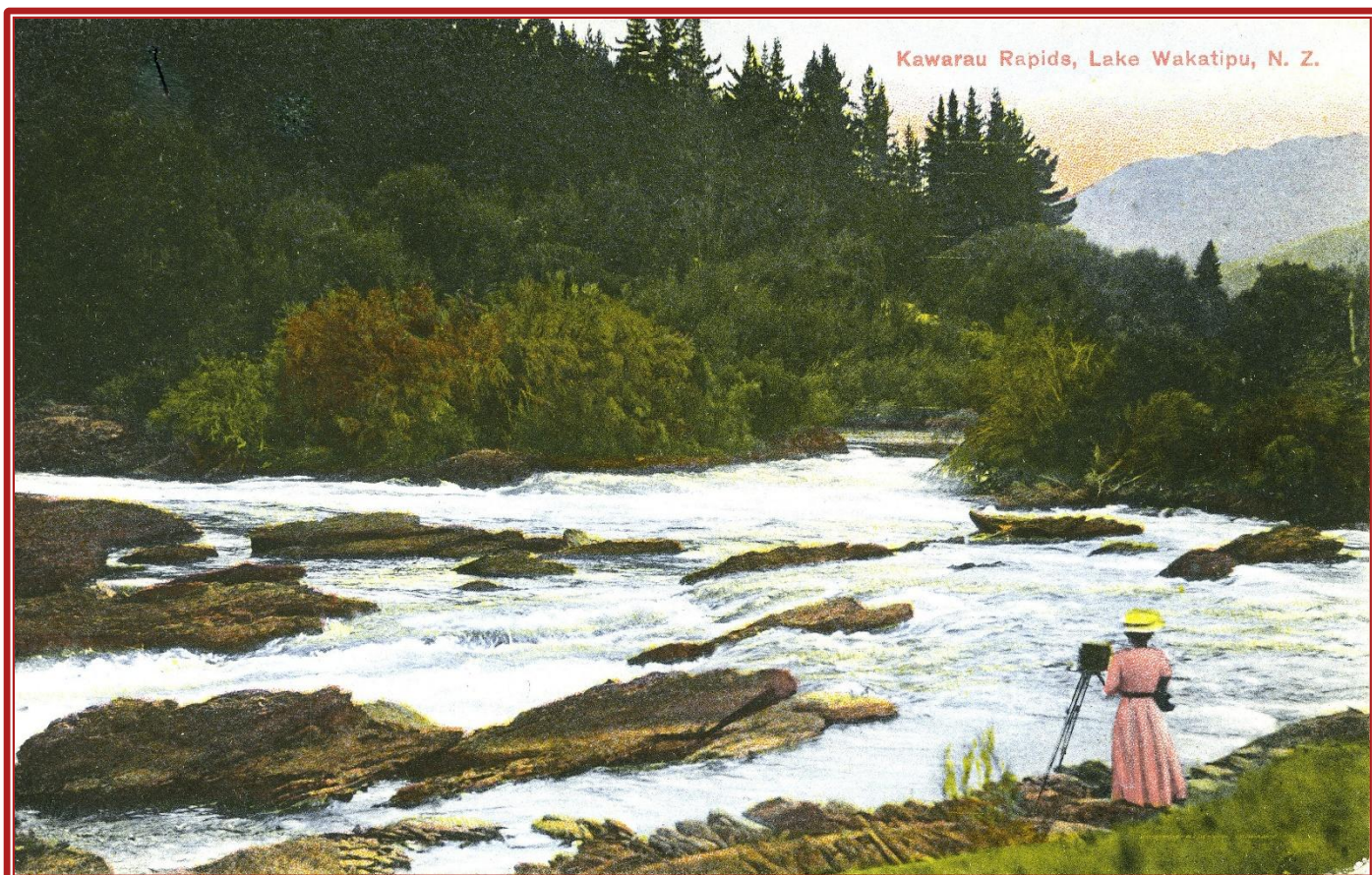


THE QUEENSTOWN COURIER

WINTER 2026

Issue 115



**Postcard showing Kawarau Falls, Lake Wakatipu
with a woman photographer in the foreground**
Hand-tinted photograph about 1900
Lakes District Museum EL7710

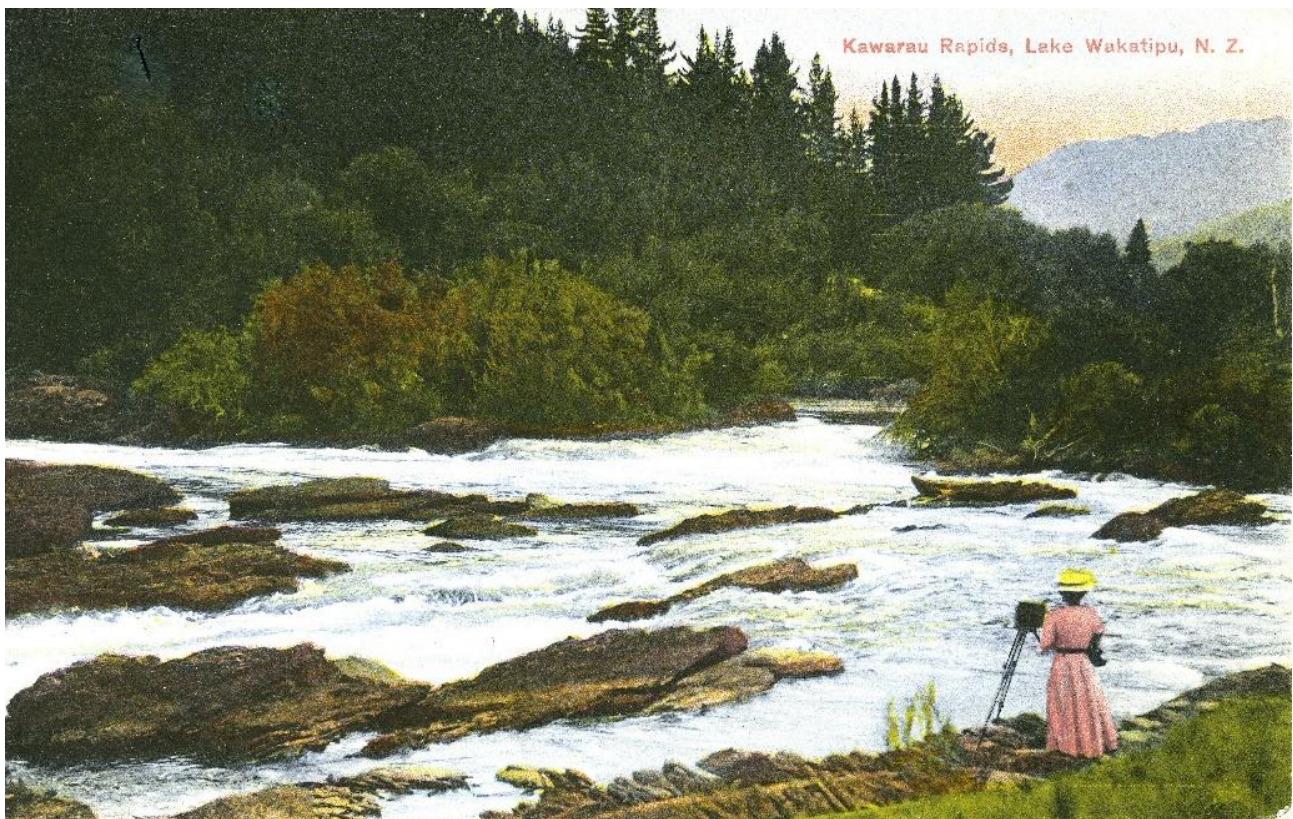
PUBLISHED BY THE QUEENSTOWN & DISTRICT HISTORICAL SOCIETY INC.

www.queenstownhistoricalsociety.org.nz

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Cover Image: Kawarau Falls



When William Rees and Nicholas von Tunzelmann first explored the area early in 1860, they came to this spot. Rees wrote: 'The level of the lake was about 10 or 12 feet above that of the river, and the rush of such a body of water over the masses of black rock in the stream below was one of the most beautiful sights we had ever seen in the colony.' (*Otago Witness* 31 March 1860)

Subsequent visitors agreed. The Falls became a tourist attraction and were photographed for postcards such as this. The era of hand-tinted postcards lasted from about 1900 to 1914. The tinting was done in Europe, usually in Germany, by women who, never having seen the sites, had to guess the colours.

Centenary of the Kawarau Falls Dam Bridge (1926)

Compiled by Marion Borrell



Photo-postcard by Henry Brusewitz, early 1900s (*Lakes District Museum EL5854*)

In August this year the Kawarau Falls Dam Bridge - that's its correct name with an unfortunate pun - will be 100 years old. It's a survivor of the changing activities of the district and is now semi-retired.

Many local people now may be unaware that it is a Category 1 Historic Place with both Heritage NZ and QLDC for many reasons – social, aesthetic, engineering and architectural, historical, traditional and landmark. Let's celebrate our Dam Bridge!

The Falls area - Ōterotu in Te Reo – was the site of seasonal **Māori** habitation in a very important historical landscape. Unfortunately, much archaeological evidence was destroyed by the building of the dam.

The first European settler here was William Gilbert Rees who had to shift the base of his sheep station from Queenstown in 1863 to make way for the town. He built his **Kawarau Falls Station** homestead on the south bank of Frankton Arm just above the Falls. (There are historical information panels beside the lake where the last remaining structures of the farm have been restored.) Access was by rowing in small boats provided by the station owner. Horses and other livestock swam. However, not every

traveller survived the journey. In 1864 one of Rees's workers lost his oars and was swept through the rapids to his death. In 1880 a staff member returning late at night from the Antrim Arms Hotel near Frankton Wharf left his clothes in a building at the jetty and swam. Although he was known to be a strong swimmer, he drowned. In 1916 an accident in a rowboat at night cost three farm workers their lives.

This postcard from the early 1900s makes the row across the lake above the falls look idyllic for the well-dressed and well-armed occupants. Note that the ladies are womaning the oars. (*LDM EL5829*)



The power of the water was harnessed in 1867 by the **Brunswick flour mill**. It was decommissioned in 1904 and later demolished. (*LDM EL0177*)

In 1881, after the construction of the Kawarau Suspension Bridge (the ‘Bungy Bridge’), the punt which had been at Morven Ferry was surplus, so the Lake County



Council moved it upstream to cross below the Falls at the horseshoe bend. The ferryman until 1896 was William Peterson, a Dutch ex-seaman with rings in his ears and a rolling gait. From about 1908 the punt was in an increasingly rotten and dangerous condition and ceased operating in about 1914. (LDM EL0786)

The Falls as a Tourist Attraction

Like William Rees, quoted above, visitors were always impressed by the rushing, roaring rapids. As tourism developed, launches would come from the hotels in Queenstown to admire them and have picnics on the beach or Devonshire teas at Mrs Southberg’s house (see *Courier 114*). Many photos were taken and postcards produced such as the ones in this article.

A Bridge? In 1911 Daniel McBride, the run-holder of Kawarau Falls Station, offered to contribute £100 (later raising this to £300) towards the construction of a bridge at the Falls. A design was drawn by the Public Works Department, but the Council balked at having to find half the £3,200 required when the main beneficiary of the bridge would be Mr McBride, so the idea lapsed. In **1922**, despite greatly increased costs, the Council decided to go ahead with the bridge, and work was begun, but later ceased and dismantled in favour a much more ambitious plan.

The Dam from Pipe Dream to Action

(Information mainly from the NZ Historic Places Registration Report 1999).

In 1867 when the Kawarau River was very low, rich un-worked gold deposits were exposed below Kawarau Falls. Hence the idea of damming rivers completely to enable access to gold in the riverbed. In 1889 Prime Minister Julius Vogel, a proponent of ‘Think Big’, wrote a science fiction book (said to be the first in New Zealand) about the idea entitled *Anno Domini 2000, or Woman’s Destiny*.

But it wasn’t until 1922 that the Kawarau Gold Mining Company was formed for the purpose of building a large concrete dam designed to empty the riverbed. The scheme was proposed by an engineer, E. J. Iles, who was well-known in Central Otago and gold-mining circles. He won support and the backing of a group of businessmen who established the company and floated it on the sharemarket with 200,000 shares. The estimated cost of the dam was £30,000 and would take five or six months.

The whole scheme including the damming of the Shotover and Upper Clutha had three objectives: to win gold, to prevent floods thus safeguarding the town of Balclutha and similar places, and to control the water to make it available for hydro generation.

The company promoted the plan in glowing terms in a booklet 'Kawarau Gold' (45 well-illustrated pages). It's a very persuasive document. All obstacles are easily countered, and Mr Iles's plan, simplicity itself, would result in incredible riches being available to the claimholders and the shareholders. The company obtained a government concession to mine the whole of the Kawarau River. And the river was divided into 128 quarter-mile claims, leasing each for £1000 plus 20% of the gold recovered. This was an extraordinary mining gamble. Shares rose from 1 shilling to £2 in a matter of days.

Government engineers endorsed the scheme, and doubts vanished before the mass of evidence in support of the scheme. Dams were also to be built on the Shotover River, and the crowning achievement was to be the damming of Lakes Wanaka and Hawea, thus drying up the Clutha River as well. Imagine the riches that would be revealed!

This was a very significant event not only locally. The application to the Wardens Court in Queenstown received strong objections from the locals. Some objected because the falls were a tourist attraction. But the dam would necessitate the demolition of the islets – the desecration of a scenic beauty. Other locals were sceptical of the prospects of gold returns. Downstream objections came from the Public Works Department, Balclutha Borough Council, Clutha River Board, Cromwell Development Company, and the Southland Hospital Board. The concerns included the effects on river navigation, hydro-power generation, and the risk of increased flooding on the margins of Lakes Whakatipu, Wānaka and Hāwea.

The Public Works Department wanted to build a bridge, and eventually this became a condition for granting the licence, i.e. that the dam should carry a roadway the width of a standard bridge.

After a year of hearings (there was no fast-tracking then) in January 1924 the licence for the dam incorporating a bridge was granted, fulfilling the desire for both a road bridge and a gold-mining dam. As the costs would be met by the Kawarau Gold Mining Company, the Public Works Department and the Lake County Council were relieved of any financial obligation to provide a bridge, so no wonder they looked favourably on the venture. So did the Dunedin Stock Exchange.

Rush to Invest in the Kawarau Falls Dam! Fortunes assured!

The newspapers extolled the importance of the scheme, the *Otago Daily Times* (3 December 1923) writing: 'An enterprise such as the Kawarau scheme must be regarded as one of national importance, ... one that not only vitally concerns Otago and New Zealand, but the Empire also, when gold is badly needed to bring back the rate of exchange to its pre-war level.'

The *Lake Wakatipu Mail*, under the heading 'A Great Enterprise' trumpeted the granting of the licence with pomposity and mixed metaphors: 'What has yet to be unfolded when the giants of enterprise set the machinery of the undertaking in motion lies in the bosom which is pregnant with potentialities of vast importance to this district,

this province, and this fair Dominion of ours....The scheme is rich in promise.... [We are] on the threshold of the great future which lies ahead.' (22 January 1924)

Gold fever is a highly contagious condition. Would you have invested at 1 shilling a share? Or bought shares to on-sell as their value rose exponentially in the first 2 months?

The Building of the Dam Bridge

On 22 November 1924 G.J. Anderson, Minister of Mines, fired the first shot before a crowd of about 2000 people. All the speeches reflected the high regard in which the Company was held and great financial optimism. Work began on the estimated three-month £30,000 project.



The first shot. (*LDM EL0904*)

It's not only small boys who are fascinated by seeing men and machinery at work. No doubt the locals of all ages watched in awe as the dam formed over the torrent.

It consists of 10 concrete spillways. Each sluice-gate, imported from England, can be lowered to rest on the sill using a manual winch (still housed under the silver-painted covers on the bridge.) The piers had to be bedded far underwater, so wing dams were built of sandbags.



A wing dam being built at the site of No 10 pier beside the south bank (*LDM EL6720*)

The machinery used, while outdated by modern standards, was the best available. A 15-ton Aveling & Porter steam traction engine drove the compressor for the pneumatic drills. Two large concrete-mixers had their own petrol engines. Several Fordson tractors operated the centrifugal pumps and did the hauling. For night work, a small generator provided flood-lighting.



A Fordson tractor pumping out No 4 pier site (*LDM EL6517*)

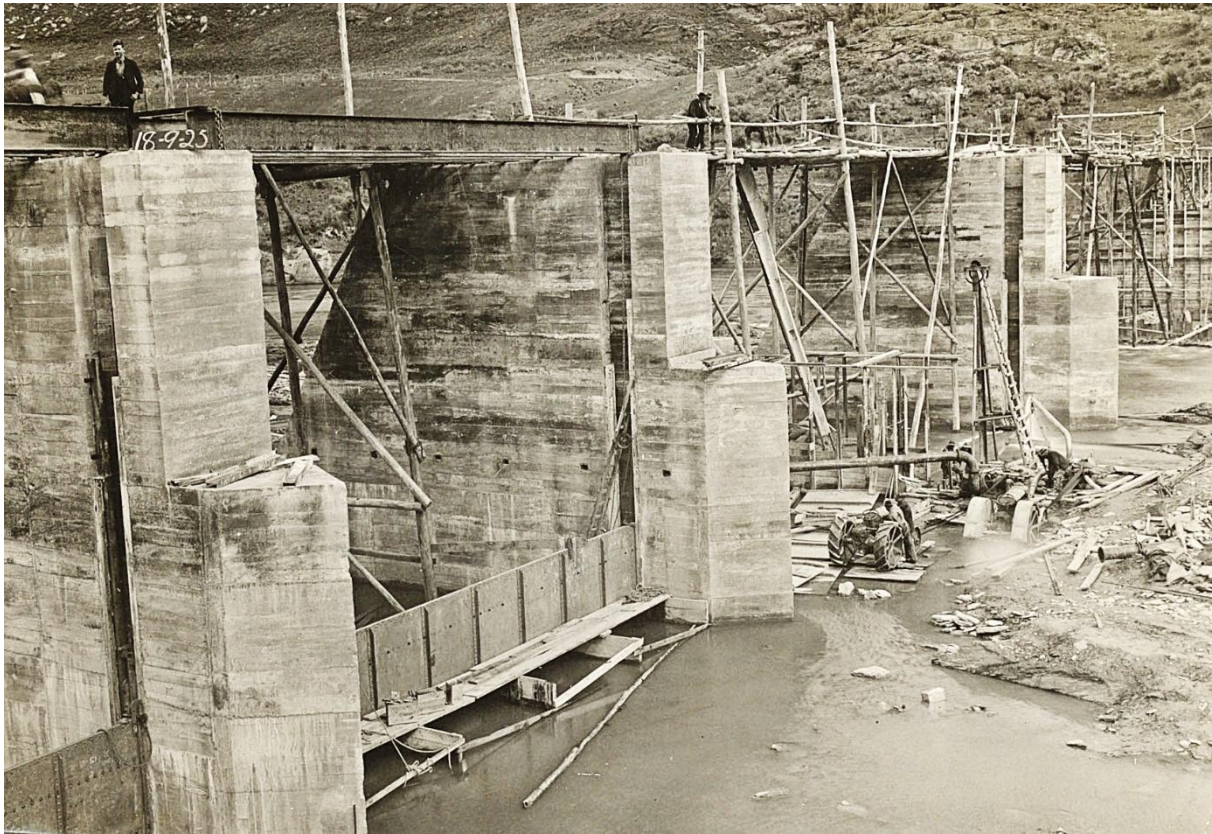
Apart from these machines, everything else was powered by pick and shovel, toil and sweat. The men moved thousands of tons of rocks by hand and often worked up to their knees in water. ‘Stretcher-bearers’ carried larger rocks on wooden litters. They manhandled sandbags. The rushing water was a formidable opponent and constant danger especially in the main channels which were over 4 metres deep in places.

Three professional divers were employed – strange, helmeted creatures who casually disappeared beneath the water. The diver here is Andy Miller, preparing to work at the bottom of the 10th pier.

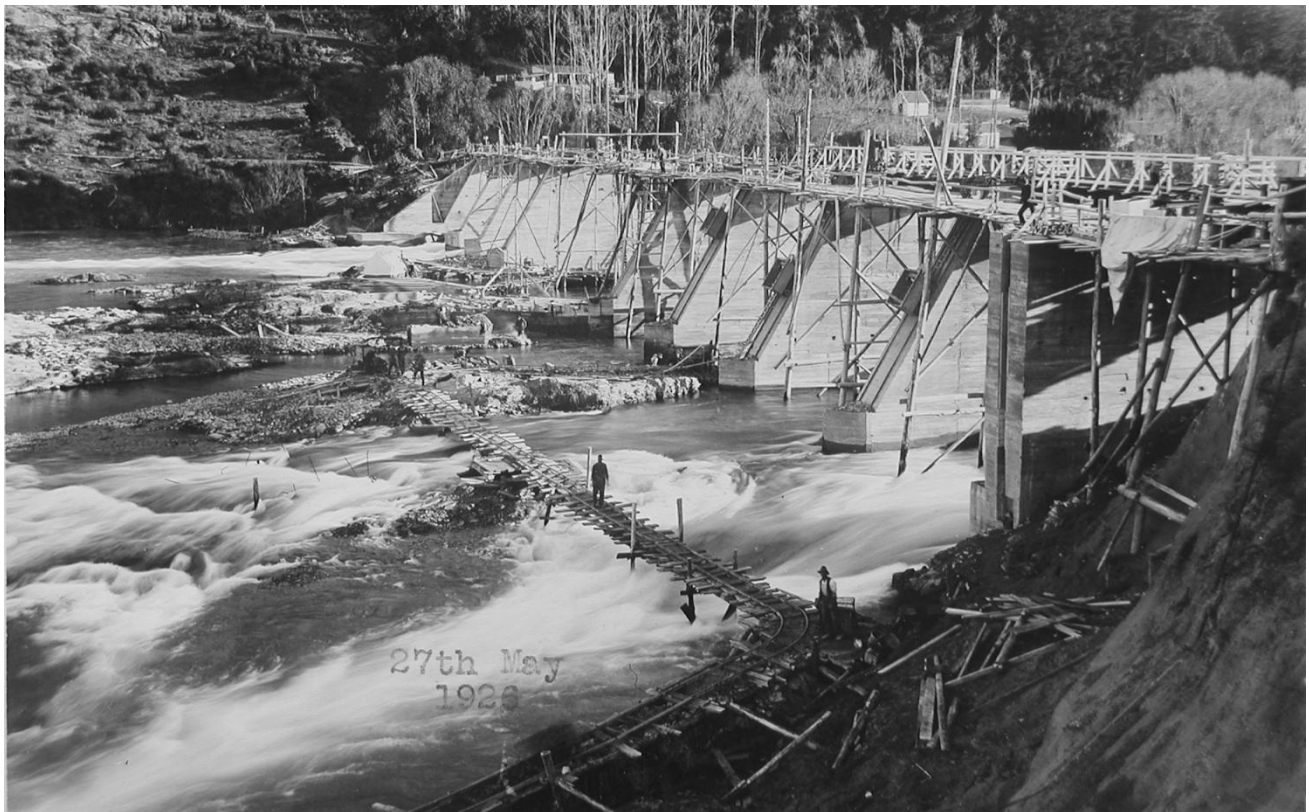
(*LDM EL6710*)



Works in Progress



18 September 1925, upstream side. Note the slots for the gates. (*LDM EL1867*)



27 June 1926 the downstream side from the Frankton end.
Note the rail tracks and the high excavation on the right. (*LDM EL8815*)

The Dam Builders



Excavating the base of a pier with picks and shovels, October 1925 (Hocken Snapshot)

A workforce of 100-200 men assembled. The best account is in a 13-page typed article received from Ray Clarkson. The unknown writer was clearly on-the-spot at the time and either was a worker or knew them very well. These are his words (pp 6-7):

There was always an adequate labour force available, particularly of the unskilled type. Many of these men, without training in any trade but nevertheless muscular and versatile, found a ready market for their services in the various construction projects and Public Works schemes in progress at the time. They did, in fact, constitute a distinct social class, leading a rather nomadic existence, stopping not for pasture for their flocks but where manual work was offering. Obviously, they preferred the rigours of camp life to the comforts of towns. Some of these men were well past the normal retiring age but it was apparent that they would toil on until infirmity called a halt. A motley crowd maybe but an interesting field for any student of human nature. Men of classical education, the almost illiterate, fugitives from family responsibilities, hopeless alcoholics, the taciturn and the garrulous, they toiled side by side as members of the various labour gangs, reduced for the time being to a common level.

In a separate class were the local farmers and their sons who were glad of the opportunity to earn a little extra during the slack periods on their farms. ...

The carpenters, fitters and other qualified tradesmen were drawn from far and wide, several from as far distant as Auckland. These men were specialists in their work and constituted a permanent staff nucleus distinct from the ever coming-and-going labourers.

In the practical field, however, pride of place must be given to that all-important member of the staff, the blacksmith. No doubt the right man in the right place was Mr John Percy His smithy was always a hive of industry, and no job, however difficult, seemed to be beyond his capabilities. Mr Percy had behind him a lifetime's experience in mining and dredging problems and his contribution towards the smooth running of the construction was a substantial one.

Another very important figure was the man in charge of the blasting operations, one Jim McGregor. This work required experience and sound judgment in the placing of charges, and the quantity of gelignite employed. His predecessor's record had been an unfortunate one and when Jim took over a sigh of relief came from many local residents. The previous man's charges had been far too heavy and too shallow, and several times daily a wide area around the dam site had been bombarded with large jagged pieces of rock, to the grave danger of life and property. On several occasions slabs of rock weighing about half a hundred-weight landed in the back gardens of the two private residence on the Frankton Flat, many hundreds of yards from the source of the explosion. Complaints became so numerous that the offender was relieved of his post.

An incident which could easily have ended in tragedy occurred during the blasting away of the main group of upstream islands. A series of about a dozen holes had been drilled in the rock on the side facing Frankton, the charges with their fuses attached had been inserted and tamped and all was in readiness for the big shot. The whistle sounded the usual warning three blasts and all hands knocked off and took shelter. Jim McGregor leisurely rolled a cigarette, took a few puffs and walked along the line of fuses projecting from the rock, igniting each from his cigarette butt. He then rowed to the mainland and took cover. A second or two later, to everyone's horror, several workmen appeared on the far side of the island and proceeded to stroll towards and mined area. They had been excavating practically at water level on the far side, so near to the roar of the rapids that they hadn't heard the warning whistles. Those on the banks shouted and waved and the whistle blew frantic blasts. Providentially the men on the island seemed to realise their predicament and they hurriedly scrambled back under a ledge of rock, still only a few short yards from the charges and only just in time to avoid annihilation. There was the usual series of ear-slitting blasts and hundreds of tons of rock flew skyward. As the smoke and dust cleared away more than a hundred anxious-faced men peered across the waters at that shattered island. Slowly several head appeared from behind the rock ledge and a great shout of relief went up from the hillside. A boat was promptly despatched to bring the unharmed but badly shaken men ashore. They were allowed the rest of the day off, 'to do the washing' as one of them wryly remarked.

There were two deaths, which was probably not a bad record for the times before OSH set the safety regulations. One young man, Laurence Walsh, lost his footing on the temporary bridge, fell into the rapids and was sucked into the notorious whirlpool below Gate 10 (at the Kelvin Peninsula end), where warning signs are still placed. His body was recovered a month later, and as he had recently arrived from Ireland and had no

family in NZ, the men clubbed together to give him a decent burial in Queenstown cemetery with a small marble plaque.

The second fatality was due to simple high jinks. On a frosty morning while waiting for the starting whistle, two young men were having a friendly wrestle when they slipped on the frozen slope and slid into the torrent under Gate 1. One man managed to grab a length of wire and was pulled to safety, but Ian Kane was swept away and drowned. A fellow workman stripped off, liberally smeared himself with engine-oil, and at great personal risk dived in and recovered the body.



(LDM EL6722)

Many in the workforce lived in a labourers' camp established on the racecourse which later became the airfield. This photo was taken outside the former grandstand (built 1864) that still stands beside Lucas Place. The huts as shown on the right of the photo consisted of a wooden floor and framework with canvas over them with tent-flies. Each had an open fireplace with corrugated iron chimney, but they can't have been cosy in winter. They were furnished with a bunk frame with wire netting stretched across it, a rough table, a chair or two – or boxes or drums – a cupboard of sorts and plenty of nails for hanging clothes, and little else. There were several married couples who, by joining two or more huts together and lining the interiors, made quite comfortable quarters for their families. Hearty meals were provided at 25 shillings a week by an excellent hotel chef, Tom Austin. Other workers lived in Queenstown and travelled in two ancient (pre-WWI) Darracq buses hired from the Mt Cook Motor Company. Such were the men who worked through all weathers to build the dam that eventually enabled road transport between Kingston and Queenstown. They did it the hard way.

Slow Progress

In 1924 when work began on the dam it was expected to take three months, but in fact it took 21 months and incurred huge cost overruns. These were not good omens, but they were largely ignored except that *Otago Daily Times* noted that local residents had been regarding the scheme ‘somewhat oddly and critically.’ With good reason.

More information about the construction, including the article by the unknown writer and a comprehensive series of photos, is available at the Lakes District Museum.)

As soon as the gates could be operated, though there was still much work to be done, it was decided to hold the official opening in August 1926. At that stage the largest mining company, Consolidated Kawarau Claims (Ltd), was ready to begin prospecting with 40 men, 38 huts built and several chairs across the river.



The Grand Opening, August 1926 (*LDM EL2852*)

Note that because the gates are lowered, the lake is still, creating reflections where there is usually rushing water.

Expectations were high as a crowd of 2000 people, hundreds of motor cars and several launches gathered for the festive opening of the bridge and lowering of the dam’s gates. People came from as far afield as England, Sydney and Auckland for the event. Local memory has it the one well-dressed lady was seen to be carrying a bucket and spade. Cameramen, including a party from a Dunedin theatre with a moving picture outfit, were in abundance, and speeches lauded the engineering skill which accomplished ‘a great national work’.

From the *Auckland Star*, 30 August 1926:

‘The gates of the stupendous dam across the egress of Lake Wakatipu were closed this morning. With the sounding of the whistle, the ten winches on the bridge were set in gear, the gates slowly closed to block off the waters of the lake, and flags were unfurled above the dais on the left bank. ...

‘August 30 will go down in mining annals as the opening of a colossal venture to disclose the bed of the turbulent Kawarau, one of Nature’s great sluice channels, and one of the richest gold rivers in the world. ... Will Kawarau’s banks and bed be another Klondike? ... Gold is in the river, but who are going to be the lucky holders of the rich claims?’

Many people had invested, and many mining companies, including some from Australia, had taken up claims downstream. They had optimistic names such as Vogel’s Vision, Golden Bed, Golden River, Golden Gorge.

All were disappointed. Nowadays would the Kawarau Gold Mining Company be accused of false advertising and misleading investors?

Certainly, the dam as a structure functioned as intended when the gates were lowered, preventing most seepage from Lake Wakatipu, but the water level fell only until it was the same as at the Shotover delta, creating a large backwater. (Surely that was predictable. The full plan had included damming the Shotover to prevent this.) In addition, there were rock bars across the riverbed which would hamper dredging, and there was a lot of debris caused by earlier sluicing of the banks.

The Aftermath: As a mining investment, the dam was a complete failure with little gold won. The company was at first determined to believe otherwise, hoping that low water levels the next winter would reveal more gold. Or that in future a dam on the Shotover would solve the problem. But by a year later, it was clear that the scheme was a ‘washout’ and a financial disaster. Over £100,000 had been spent and there was no more money to be had to undertake another dam. In winter 1928 the dam was closed again without success. In 1932 the Kawarau Gold Mining Company went into liquidation, ironically because of too much water remaining in the river.

Since then, the dam has occasionally been used to control the flow for hydro-electric purposes.

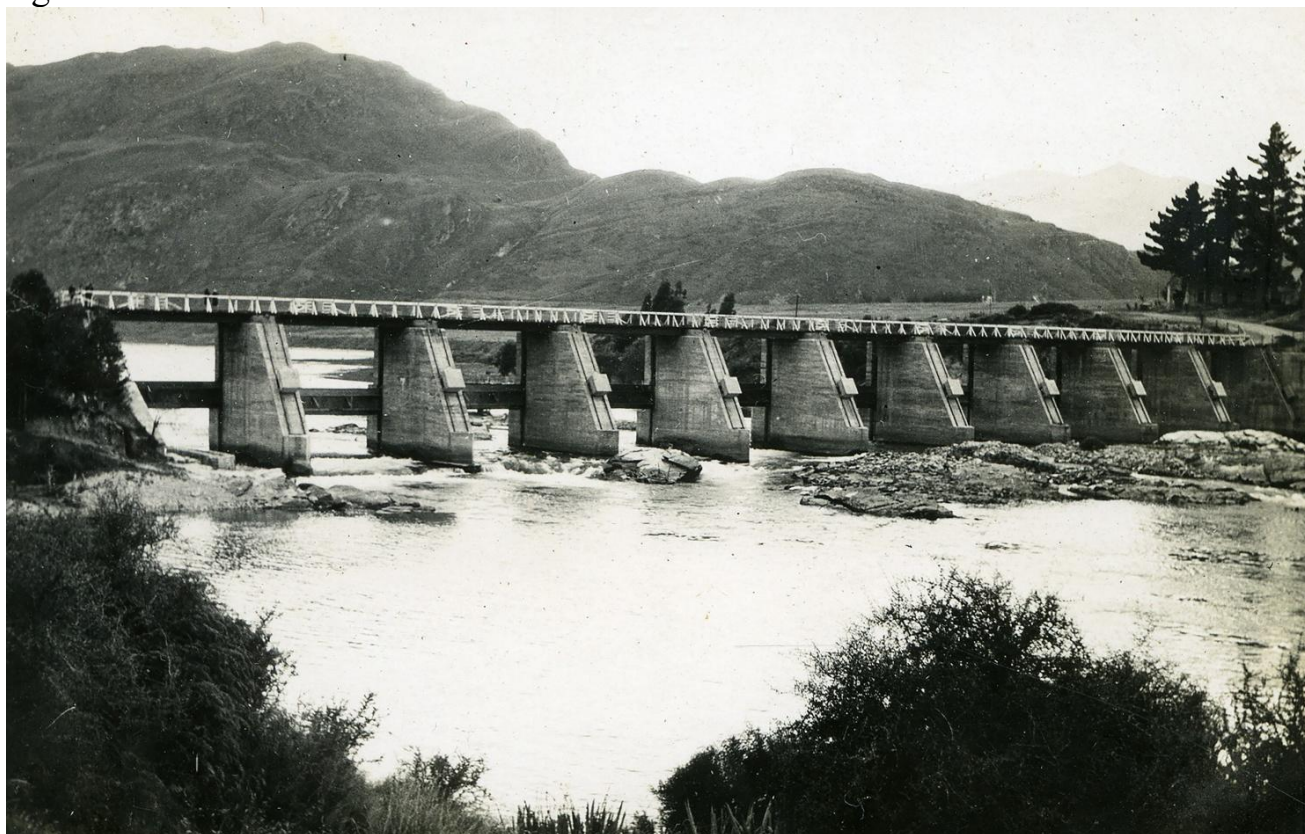
Heritage and Engineering Significance

The structure is recognised by Heritage NZ as having Category 1 regional and national significance. The Conservation Plan prepared in 2016 by Origin Consultants for NZTA considers it to have high technological, historical, social and landscape significance, and as the last large scale community mining endeavour in the Otago region which employed a large number of men and generated considerable interest and endeavour over a period of years. It is also considered a significant engineering structure by the Institute of Professional Engineers of New Zealand (IPENZ). In respect of the structure itself and in fulfilling its purpose of damming the outlet of the lake, it was a success.

The Bridge Remains

Until 1936 the bridge led mainly to Kawarau Falls Station. Once the road to Kingston was completed, the bridge was the land link between the Whakatipu and Southland until the current new bridge was opened in 2018.

What now? As the dam bridge is no longer part of the roading network, it is classified as a local road and is part of the walking/cycling trail. The dam itself belongs to MBIE. However, understandably, neither MBIE nor QLDC wishes to be responsible for the maintenance of an unreinforced concrete dam, nor liable for the seismic risks. But wouldn't it be great if there could be on or near it the interpretive panels proposed in the 2016 Urban and Landscape Design Masterplan, explaining its unusual history and significance?



The dam bridge shortly after opening, with gates up. (*LDM EL2065*)

Sources and further reading:

Photos from Lakes District Museum, Arrowtown

Unknown writer, 'The Kawarau Dam', unpublished 13-page account and thoughts. The writer knew the area well and the lives of the workers. Now in the Lakes District Museum along with a treasure trove of progress photos taken to record the building project.

Clarkson, Ray, 'Kawarau Falls Dam and Bridge' article in *Queenstown Courier* Issue 56, 1996

De La Mare, A. J. *Wakatipu's Golden Days*, Lakes District Museum, 2000

Kawarau Gold Mining Company publication, *Kawarau Gold*

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Singleton, George, *Our Place in the Sun*, Kelvin Peninsula Community Assoc, 2013

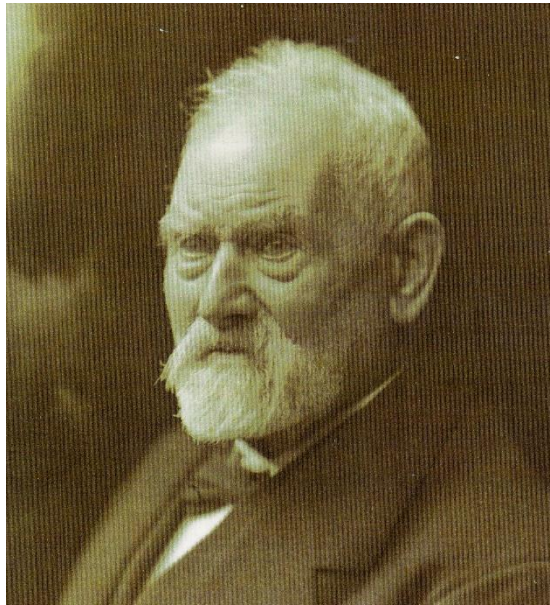
Singleton, George, *The Banks of the Kawarau – tales of the past*, self-published, 2017

Heritage NZ: Registration report of the dam in the Historic Places List

Newspapers accessed from www.paperspast.natlib.govt.nz

Frank McBride Responds to Farewell Speeches

By Tony (A.G.) Hanning, his great-grandson



Francis (Frank) McBride, 1835-1926

This is an imagined response, based on fact, presented at the Society's 'People from Our Past' event in Arrowtown Presbyterian Church Hall on 8 April 2018.

Scenario: A community farewell in the Garrison Hall in Queenstown on 18 November 1919 as Frank and his family leave for Dunedin. Nine gentlemen have made speeches including the Mayors of Queenstown and Arrowtown. Frank replies:

Thank-you for your kind words spoken on behalf of all you distinguished ladies and gentlemen gathered here tonight as I leave my dear home district of the last 57 years. Unworthy as I am to be the recipient of them, the sentiment is appreciated, your friendship reciprocated, and with heavy heart I am moved to respond.



In 1854, when as a lad of eighteen years I left my home in County Antrim in search of a better life, little did I know that waves and winding tracks would lead me to this place of multiple opportunities, in a setting of outstanding and remarkable beauty where I have experienced freedom, tolerance, friendship, and love in abundance, as well as the occasional heartache. Aye, 57 years I've been in the Wakatipu. Whatever I and my family have achieved throughout those years has been made possible and worthwhile by the support, companionship and qualities of you, and people like you, within the Wakatipu community of which we have been a privileged part. Thank-you.

After leaving home I worked in Australia for the first couple of years and it was there at Ballarook and Castlemaine in Victoria that I learnt something of the sawmilling and timber trade that was to serve me well in later years.

In about 1856, I made a short visit home to Fairhead in the parish of Cross, near Ballycastle, Ireland, and persuaded others of my brothers to come out and join me. Dan and Hugh followed me to Australia, and from that day until his sad and untimely death in 1914, Dan and I were never far apart, invariably sharing in business enterprises and projects, and he ending up at Kawarau Falls Station and me just around the corner on Antrim Farm [now Arranmore] on the Frankton Flats – river to river it was, and some of the best barley land in New Zealand with record sales to prove it.

When the call of 'Gold in Otago!' rang out in Victoria in 1862, Dan and I set off and arrived at the Skippers on Christmas Day. Waitahuna, Dunstan, Fox's [the Arrow] and the Shotover – we tried them all, and made a comfortable income too, but we knew it wasn't set to last, so turned our eyes to other more enduring things along the shores and particularly the abundant red beech at the Head of the Lake.



Kinloch Sawmill at the Head of Lake Wakatipu, 1882 painting by John H. Gibb
This cropped image shows the paddle steamer *Antrim* at the jetty. (LDM)

As life and luck would have it, fellows we had worked with in Australia were here now in the district too. Jimmy Robertson - you'll know him better as Captain Robertson, our first mayor, or as Daddy Robertson (he married my cousin Mary McBride from Lake Hayes) and Tom Hicks (he married her sister Ellen), and then there was John Patterson and my cousin John McBride.

Well, they were all thinking the same as Dan and I were, so we joined forces and before we knew it, we were into saw-milling, boat-building, flour-milling, trading and farming. Jimmy had a good business head on him and often led the way with ideas and capital, so our company was named 'J. W. Robertson & Co'. What a formidable and enduring team we made! Pity it is that with the passage of years, I am the last remaining one of them. I miss them greatly. They were wonderful friends and a most inspiring and stimulating company of men. Aye, you could not wish for better.

The mill at the Head of the Lake was a very successful industry. Several of my brothers played a big part in its life – John, Dan, Hugh, Alex, Bob and Jimmy. Sad to say the unforgiving lake claimed two of them, Jimmy and Hugh, and covered by its waters they remain. God rest them.

Old John, my brother, fought in the American Civil War on the way out to New Zealand, and although he had a good farm at the mouth of the Greenstone, he joined the rest of us at the sawmill and helped with the construction of the paddle steamer *Antrim* too. After the lake claimed Hugh in the winter of '96 life became fairly tough and lonely for John. When I said to him to come and have Christmas with us at the farm in 1897, come he did, but on Christmas Eve he died, and now he'll never be lonely again. He has all the land he needs out there in Frankton cemetery alongside others of the family – my good wife Margaret, my daughter Jane, and two of my sons Frank and Dan. In God's good time I'll join them there, and not be far from the farm, aye.

Margaret and I married in August '64 in St Mary's Church here in Queenstown. After her parents had died, she had come from Antrim to New Zealand with her brothers, John and Owen Lavery, and she was just the girl for me. For 46 years she was a wonderful wife and a devoted mother for our thirteen children.



This cradle has rocked many McBride babies. It's a precious heirloom and a symbol of the family's love of our children.



Standing: Young Frank, Maggie, Jack, Catherine (Dolly), Dan, Alex
 Centre: Frances, Frank and Margaret, Owen
 Front: Leonard, Monica, Cecil Not present: Jane and Mary (Sis). (*LDM*)

We decided in '83 that the farm at Frankton would provide a good home and a good life for our growing family, and that it did. We turned it into a good and profitable farm that produced wool and meat, as well as good crops, particularly the barley – I won so many prizes that you nick-named me 'the Barley King!' Speights would purchase my crop before the seed was in the ground, so good was the reputation. I never had trouble getting men at harvesting time. Margaret's skill in the kitchen saw to that. Mountains of egg and chive, and mutton and pickle sandwiches, fruit cake, and soda bread with cream and fresh jam – then the big family roast!

A good education is the need of every child and the desire of every parent. Lower Shotover School was an excellent school in every way. For over 30 years I served on the school committee, oft times as Chairman. Our fundraising efforts were unequalled and the needs of the school were always to the fore. One of my roles was to keep an eye on the river and ensure that the children got home across it safely whenever it was at risk of rising. I knew all too well how quickly a river could rise and catch one unawares. I could never forget the flood of '63 that took the lives of over 100 young men on the Arrow when it rose rapidly and swept all before it. You will remember, too, the flood of '78 when the lake rose past Eichardt's, and our timber yard by the shore distributed planks for miles! I made sure our girls got across the Shotover on the dray then I returned and got the boys away, too. 'Better a half holiday than a funeral,' I would say.

To both mayors present, I'd like to say how much I've enjoyed my own work on Council, aye, and on many committees in the district.

Dr Stewart and Mr Hotop, I want to thank you for your kind remarks, but, more particularly, for the dedicated service that you give to the people of this district by catering for our health needs in such a generous and professional way. Better than most, you will appreciate that by moving to Dunedin I will be closer to Leonard, my son, who now has his own practice there as an ear nose and throat specialist. With a wife and two young children, he looks forward to the help that his sisters will be when we move to live nearby. I will miss the happy times I have had with Jack and Sarah's children, Frank, Fran, Margaret, Ellen and May, and Sis and the late Morgan O'Meara's wee Reg and Janie, but I look forward to getting to know my other grandchildren in Dunedin, wee Cecil and Daphne.

The purse of sovereigns so generously given me tonight will indeed be spent on my grandchildren, as you suggested, Mr Mayor. As for the other lovely gifts, the easy chair, and the gold-topped walking stick, I could not think of anything better to be taking with me to Dunedin. Whenever I use them, my thoughts and prayers will be with you, my good friends of the Wakatipu.

Thank you, thank you, from me and my family. Now how could I conclude fittingly without this Irish wish for each of you:

*May the road rise up to meet you,
May the wind be always at your back,
May the sun shine warm upon your face,
May the rain fall soft upon your fields.
And until we meet again – until we meet again –
May God hold you in the palm of His hand.*

God bless you all. Farewell.



Tony wrote and delivered this monologue in honour of his great-grandfather Frank. We are publishing it now in honour of Tony himself as he died recently.

He was an expert in our local history and contributed to the Historical Society as a writer and a generous source of historical information.

More about his family and their times can be found in past *Couriers* on our website: www.queenstownhistoricalsociety.org. Use the search box in the Magazine Archive.

*Tony's article about Frank including the family tree: *Courier* 60, 1998 p.16

*His Cotter family and the Mary Cotter Tree: *Courier* 109 2023 p.25

*'Tell Your Story': *Courier* 109 2023 p.28. Tony exhorts us to write our memoirs.

*Thomas Hicks and the *Antrim* – compiled by Marion Borrell, *Courier* 111, pp 4-13

*About Antrim [Arranmore] Farm – Farming at Frankton, by Marion Borrell, *Courier* 86 2011 p.7.



Gift of a Significant Painting

St Andrews Presbyterian Church, Queenstown in 1968, by Alan Cooke



Recently the Society received this painting from Rosemary Parsons, the daughter of Marygold and Hugh Miller.

The church, built in 1870, stood at the corner of Camp Street and Ballarat Street. Along with the Anglican Church and Catholic Church both in Church Street, and the Methodist Church in Camp Street (later bought by the Salvation Army), this part of town in the early days proclaimed Christianity. Outside this church many notable events took place, including floods, fires, processions.



A procession on the death of Queen Victoria in 1901 (LDM EL1395)

Some of our members will remember the church, and some will have worshipped there. Ray O'Callaghan says he sat a school exam in it on the day before it was demolished in 1968. The parishioners salvaged what they could. There was much sadness as it had served the congregation for 98 years. Its replacement in Stanley Street has been sold this year, and the congregation now worships in St Margaret's Church in Frankton.

Alan and Joan Cooke were founding members of the Society in 1965 and were on the committee for 10 years. They were dedicated members who welcomed new people. At our 50th anniversary celebration in 2015 they were honoured as our senior members. Here they are seen cutting the cake.

Besides being an artist, Alan was an art teacher who also taught various other subjects including Latin. He became Senior Master of Wakatipu High School. Alan contributed an article to *Courier 90* in 2013 about post offices. Joan, who was also a teacher, was a born-and-bred local who wrote articles for the *Courier* and a presentation for People From Our Past which her daughter Jenny delivered on her behalf.



Marygold Miller could be described as the founding mother of the Society as she was an initiator and was the secretary or president from 1966 to 1975. Hugh Miller was the first treasurer from 1965 to 1969.

In 2010 Marygold was awarded Honorary Life Membership.

See *Courier 85* p.24 for her account of the battle to save the Old Library building in Queenstown.

Marygold with the painting by Alan: 'Queenstown the way Marygold would have wanted'.

Report by Marion Borrell

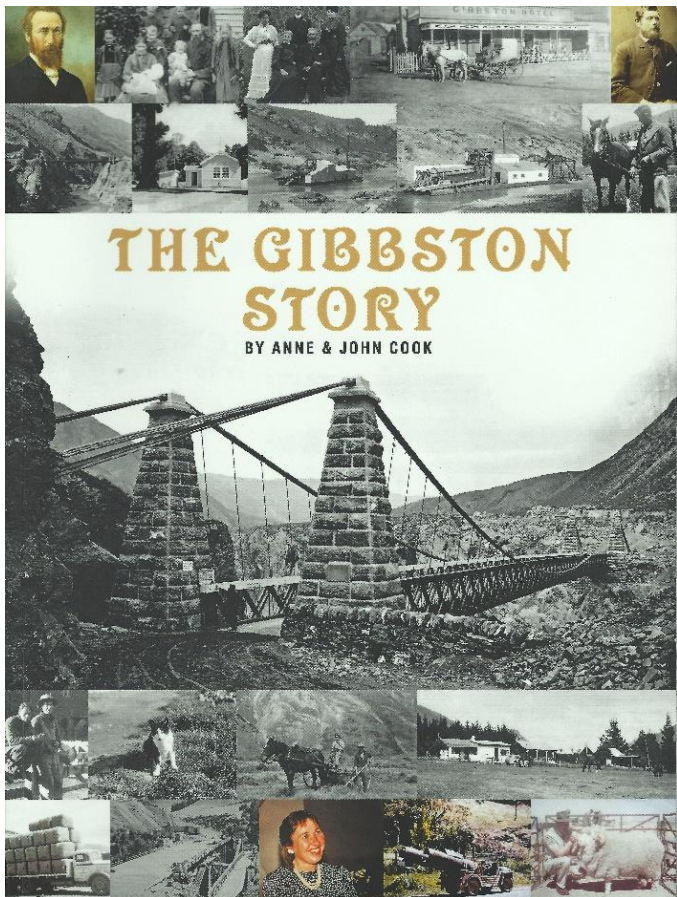
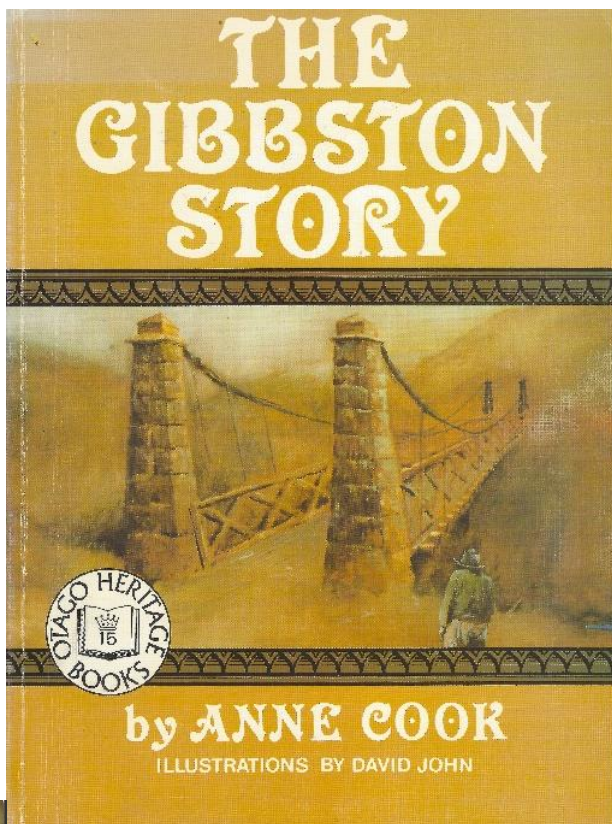
The Gibbston Story

A comprehensive new history by Anne and John Cook

In the past 40 years there have been profound changes in the Gibbston area. This new history expands on the early times and brings the story up to date.

Anne (née Pottinger), a teacher, came to Gibbston after marrying John Cook of Waitiri Station in 1978. They lived in Coalpit Road. In 1982 and 1983 Anne wrote a series of articles about Gibbston's past for the *Mountain Scene* - the events, people, community and places along the Kawarau River and on the high country runs between the junction of the Arrow River and Roaring Meg. These articles set her on a continuing path of research and writing.

In 1985 her 76-page book was published with pen and ink drawings and painted cover by David John.



Anne continued to research and record, amongst a busy life, squirrelling away much more information, and in 2015 she told John that together they would write an enlarged book. Her sudden death in 2017 seemed likely to prevent this, but during the COVID lockdown, John found stored in wineboxes and on her computer a large amount of material and ideas for the book.

John took on the task, and here is the admirable result, truly a combined effort by Anne and John, recording history up to recent developments. It has 234 pages with numerous photographs. A wonderful contribution to the history not just of Gibbston but of our whole district.

Excerpt from An Introduction to Gibbston (p.ix)

In 1985 and before, most people used to pass through Gibbstown en route to Queenstown or Arrowtown.... Now, Gibbstown has become a destination with wineries, restaurants, bungy-jumping, rafting and other activities to keep visitors occupied. Saying that, there still needs to be more visible knowledge of the early history of Gibbston. It occupies a ribbon of flat land along the banks of the Kawarau River, between the Victoria Bridge and the Kawarau [Bungy] Bridge. The high-country runs used to stretch to the tops of the surrounding mountains, but now they are much smaller after the freeholding process. No one would guess that it was once a populated district with its own store, post office, school, hotels and coal mines. The store closed many years ago and the school in 1979, and after that only farms and occasional holiday houses remained.

If you stop today to explore, participate in activities or have a glass of wine, it is surprising how much history awaits rediscovery. Who built the water races? Who lived in the tumbledown mud and stone houses? Who planted the orchards and the masses of spring bulbs? Where were the river punts, the pub and the gold workings? And what stories could the pioneering men and women tell?

Gibbston lies on the route between the former natural rock bridge over the Kawarau River [at Roaring Meg] and the moa and greenstone country around the Wakatipu area. Māori trails followed both banks of the Kawarau River, and numerous signs of Māori camps were found on the Gibbstown side in earlier years. The trail was heavily used over the centuries. ...

[Next to the Wakatipu area came the pastoralists from 1860, but not by this route as the sheep couldn't be driven through the gorge. Then came the gold-prospectors on foot or horseback - Editor.] Although Gibbston is the only flat area of any extent in the Kawarau Gorge, it is so well guarded by the surrounding rocky spurs and gorges that no roads reached it until the end of 1866.

Excerpts about Chard Road and Farm

In days gone by, this road was part of the main coach link between Queenstown and Cromwell. From as early as April 1863, the people of Arrowtown had pressed for a new road to replace the hazardous Gentle Annie track on the north side of the river. The new road, formed along the south bank in 1866 followed much the same line as the old Māori trail, which had ... followed the river through Gibbston (with a camping site at Māori Gully near the Kinross house), and along what is now Chard Road. Although a much better route than its predecessor, it was still far from trouble free. Common problems were its narrowness, sharp bends, river fog and patches of sand, made worse in winter with mud, ice and snow. Also, the constant danger of slips after heavy rain, not forgetting the sheer drop into the river. It connected with Owen's Punt at Morven Ferry, 3km upstream from the present Kawarau Bridge.

Cutting this section of the road must have tested the perseverance of the early road builders, for in those days before gelignite, holes had to be hand-drilled in the rock and then filled with black powder before being ignited. The drill marks can still be seen today. Pick, shovels, wheelbarrows and drays were used to clear the rubble. Larger rock

pieces were lowered to form a retaining wall, still visible from the main road. ... In some places, the surface had to be paved because of its sandy foundations, and a well-made stone culvert is further evidence of the roadbuilders' skills.

After the Kawarau Bridge opened on 30 December 1880, this section of the road had little public use and began to fall into disrepair. It was frequently below standard in later years. [It was by then named Chard Road after a neighbouring settler, Richard Chard, who had come to Gibbston in the mid-1860s.]

Tom and Helen Kinross had a harrowing experience not far from Few's Bluff. Returning home one night from a visit to the Chards, they encountered thick river fog. Tom became disorientated and veered too far to the left, grounding the car. His sister was ready to leap out and survey the damage but was persuaded to get out on the driver's side. The pair walked home. They returned the next day and were shocked to realise that if Helen had opened the passenger door, she would have stepped into space and landed in the river 65 metres below. ...

Chard Farm became unique because the passage of time and the influence of modern methods had little effect on this small holding which remained in the family for over 100 years. [Richard and Emily Chard had 10 children. Son Harry took over the farm in 1903, then his brother Fred who continued with the market garden and dairying and was succeeded by his son Eric in the same self-sufficient way.] As Eric said, 'We never made big money, but we were always happy and comfortable. Or as the American farmer told the income tax inspector, we don't live on income; we live on lack of expense.'

Excerpts about Waitiri Station

[Intro by the Editor: The 15,000-acre Gentle Annie Block of Mt Pisa Station encompassed the area north of the Kawarau River between Eastburn Station and Roaring Meg Creek and extended north to Cardrona (Tuohys Saddle). This block became Waitiri Station in 1924.]

The first manager of Waitiri was Alec Grant, a former Mt Pisa shepherd [who had been born at Frankton.] By 1926 the station carried 4,500 sheep....The owner, Irvine Cowie of Dunedin, sent his instructions by letter, which always began, 'Dear Grant.' In return, he expected frequent reports, at least once a week. Many of these letters have been kept, giving excellent insights into the first difficult years. Here, for example, is Alec Grant writing about the fall muster in May 1926:

'I know you will anxiously wait to hear about the sheep and country. All the sheep are safe, and there is no death rate whatsoever. We certainly had a strenuous time on Queensberry. The snow was 18 inches low down and 24 inches on top. We put a track right through with four horses low down on Tuesday and started with eight men on Wednesday. Fog set in about 2 o'clock and spoiled what I was counting on being a big day's snow raking. Three of my men got knocked out [exhausted], so I had only five the next day and six the third day. We had everything in hand on the third night. We got to Meg Yards at 10pm on Saturday. The snow drifts kept us back. Then, a heavy fog set in. We hung on to the sheep but had absolutely no idea where we were. One man had to go ahead for a few chains at a time, then strike matches to direct us. Everything here is

just a puddle. I am too tired to write anymore. We have had practically no sleep for a week.’ ...

The most exciting thing that year was the arrival of some Australian Merino rams, bought by Cowie. Grant noted, ‘They are a splendid lot, beautifully wooled and showing plenty of character. I am very pleased with these sheep; in fact, I’m prouder of them than anything else on the place, and that is saying a lot. These sheep will leave their mark on Waitiri.’

There is much in his letters to illustrate the hardships endured by this high-country farmer, but it was no less difficult for his horses and dogs. After the February 1927 muster he wrote to Cowie, ‘My dogs are total wrecks. I ran them to a standstill. The pads of their feet are worn out in places, and pieces the size of sixpences are cut right out. Anyone only has to look at these dogs to know what the work was like. ...’

In mid-1939 Irvine Cowie decided to manage the station himself... Finally he was so overrun by rabbits that when he sold out to Esmond Cook [John’s father] in 1948, the sheep numbers on Waitiri had fallen to 3,000. Esmond’s younger brother Julian (Jules) joined him. ... The Cook brothers concentrated on fencing more blocks and cultivating the lower paddocks. The wool boom of 1951 helped the development of Waitiri immensely. That year wool sold for a pound per pound.

John Cook remembers back to the 1980s: ‘Things had changed a lot since my father arrived at Waitiri. There was no longer any need for horses. Helicopters were used for mustering the back blocks, and it took only minutes to reach places that once took many hours by horse. Stock numbers had increased with various government incentives, which allowed for pasture improvement... A lot of top dressing and fencing was done over the years.’

The Cook family sold Waitiri, Eastburn and the Gibbston paddocks in 1993. ... John and Anne went to Lochar Downs on the Wanaka Road where they farmed until 2015.

Conclusion by the Editor:

These few pages are just tasters from a feast of history spanning goldmining and dredging, small-farming, run-holding, coal-mining and a close community with hotels, a school, store and post office – and good neighbours. This small area has been full of living. More recent developments in active tourism, vineyards and wine tourism and housing bring us from the past to the present. Anne and John have ensured that Gibbston’s story is well recorded and will not be forgotten.

The book is selling well. It may be available at the Lakes District Museum or Paper Plus Cromwell or from John himself via Facebook.

.....

Further reading about Gibbston in *Queenstown Couriers* (located on our website)

‘Bessie Kinross of Gibbston’ from her memoir, *QC* Issue 101, p.23, 2019

‘Peter Tomanovich: the Croatian sailor who washed up at Gibbston’ by Marion Borrell, *QC* Issue 112, p.10, 2024

‘Gibbston Trail Signage at Rum Currie’s Hut paid for by the Historical Society, *QC* Issue 85, p.4, 2011.

Elizabeth Margaret White 1878 – 1961

Nurse Lizzie White – Lake Hayes

Monologue written and presented by **Marion Borrell**, her great-niece, at ‘People from Our Past’, at the Arrowtown Presbyterian Church, September 2025.



Good afternoon, everyone. Thank-you for inviting me back to this very familiar church, my home church, to talk to you about the past.

My life wasn't notable at all. Rather typical of many of the unmarried women from modest backgrounds in those days when only primary schooling was available, and life after that consisted of being useful to the people around and learning as we went along.



I was born here, at home at Lake Hayes, and spent much of my life in this district. My parents lived in the stone cottage you can still see across from the showgrounds with Morven Hill rising behind it. My father and his cousin James Mitchell built it. They were Shetlanders and accustomed to making thick drystone walls suitable for cold climates. The house had three rooms initially. A lean-to kitchen was added later, and

the veranda much later again. Not much space for a family of eight children. The older children slept in the loft of the stable. Later, when the veranda was put on, some of the family including me slept there all year round.

We children went to school at Lower Shotover below the bridge and later at Arrowtown School – both quite a long walks for little legs. After school we were all expected to go up the hill to cut matagouri in the Saddle Paddock to clear it for ploughing. On Sundays we came here in the gig for church and Sunday School.

We had a self-sufficient way of life with never much income – and even less when the rabbit plague took hold. Fortunately, we could harvest the trout from the lake. We also had sheep and some cattle, and a large orchard some of which is still there.

As soon as we left school at about 13, we girls ‘went into service’ in the homes of more prosperous people. At best, we could hope to rise to become a housekeeper, and then to marry and look after our own households and children. As a servant and nursemaid, I worked in various houses in the district including Thurlby Domain.

But I was also keen to be independent and stretch my wings – or rather, my legs. As soon as possible I acquired a bicycle – a newfangled way to travel. In my late teens I biked to south of Alexandra to visit my aunt. That’s about 100 kilometres and the roads were very rough then. Her tiny cottage was (and still is, I think) above Fruitlands on the Old Man Range. Nearby were her cousins, the Mitchell brothers, who were goldminers. One of their well-built cottages is still there and you might have visited it.

In my early 20s, I went into business with my friend Jeanie Love from Poolburn. We had a tearoom at Temuka on the main road north of Timaru. This was at the time a local man, Richard Pearse, was trying to build a flying machine. People thought he was mad.



Photo: The Pearse memorial at Waitohi including a replica. (*Christchurch City Libraries*)

In 1903 Jeanie and I joined a small group who went to see his attempt. And yes, the machine did leave the ground, unsteadily, and crashed into a hedge. It was amazing to watch and to imagine how humans might be able to travel someday.

Soon afterwards I returned here and was the housekeeper at Macetown for the Stanford family at the Tipperary Quartz Mine. The mine closed in 1905 and I moved on to work for other families.

In 1911 my sister Ettie married Alex Grant and they lived at the Lake Hayes cottage. Ettie looked after our parents until Father's death in 1916. Mother then moved away to live with my sister Barbara.

During World War 1 everyone was very anxious for the soldiers and dreaded receiving bad news. There was one soldier, Fred Barnes, I 'had an understanding' with, as the expression goes. The best man I ever knew. He became a Lance Corporal in the Otago Infantry Regiment. But he didn't return. He was killed in action in Belgium. Because his home address was his parents' farm in North Canterbury, he's listed on the war memorial at Cheviot, not here. No fuss was made in my family about his death – in fact some of them didn't know about our relationship. My grief was private.

So many men were killed that there were many World War 1 spinsters like me. I think being single was preferable to being a widow with children even though war widows received pensions. That's what happened to my friend Jeanie who was left with a little boy to raise. Such a responsibility. Whereas I just continued to fend for myself.

I decided to train as a maternity nurse. The Plunket Society had been established about 10 years before, dedicated to improving the health of babies and mothers. New Zealand's mortality rate for both had been disgracefully high, and Sir Truby King was dedicated to bringing it down.

As well as Plunket nurses, there were Maternity Nurses. We weren't midwives - they could work alone. Maternity nurses always worked with doctors during childbirths. We were also trained to care for babies and preschool children. I trained in Dunedin, became qualified in 1926, and worked at first at Karitane Hospital.



Then I returned to Lake Hayes and set up a maternity nursing room in the little bedroom to the right of the door. (*Drawing by Audrey Bascand, 1971*) Women came to

give birth and to stay until they were fully ready to go home. Dr Ferguson from Arrowtown or Dr Bill Anderson from Queenstown attended the births – if they arrived before the baby did. During the building of the Arrow Irrigation Scheme there were families living in quite basic huts and some of the women came to me. It was a more hygienic and comfortable place for them and their babies.

One of my early patients was Flora Thomson, in 1927. Her husband was John Bell Thomson Junior, the son of the earlier Arrowtown doctor. While awaiting the birth, Flora decided to climb up the hill behind the cottage to see the full moon reflected in Lake Hayes – of course she did, and of course she went into labour up there. Getting her down was quite a performance, and she actually rolled part of the way. The baby was safely born and named Patricia. With a mother like that, I expect she led a lively life. She became Patricia Rainey, who was a member of this Historical Society and wrote a book about her grandfather Dr John Bell Thomson.

Besides nursing at home, I also worked in private homes including at Walter Peak and Mt Nicholas Stations. There I did maternity nursing and cared for mental or dementia patients when the families wished to keep them at home as long as possible. After that they'd have to go Seacliff Hospital, impossibly far away.

From 1937 for seven years I worked for the local Plunket Society, looking after the health of preschoolers. I had a schedule of clinics in Arrowtown, Queenstown and Glenorchy. Also, at my suggestion, Dr Anderson and I ran Pre-schooler Medical Check days for children from 18 months to 5 years. And I gave mothercraft talks to the girls at the schools. This was all useful and varied work.



I was living at Lake Hayes when Ettie's husband Alec died in 1941. By that time her three sons – Alan, Keith and Colin Grant, were away at the war and there was a small farm to run and the orchard to maintain.

The war brought back memories for me of the first war, and Fred Barnes seemed at times to be near me. I told Keith about him on the day he left to go overseas. Of course I was anxious for my nephews, but they all came through, and a few years later Keith returned to live at the cottage.

Ettie died in 1956, and I then moved to Invercargill to live with my sister Barbara in the Presbyterian rest-home. Five years later we died within ten days of each other.

On reflection, I feel reasonably satisfied that my life was worthwhile. I was grateful for the opportunity to be an independent nurse and grateful that I always had a home in the family's cottage at Lake Hayes.

Sources:

Keith Grant's Memories of Elizabeth (Lizzie) White

Phone call with Patricia Rainey

Local newspapers via PapersPast

To find more articles about medical services in the district and about the White family, go to the magazine index on our website.

Society News: Conferred Life Membership for Marion Borrell

By Denise Heckler

It gives me great pleasure to present this citation for Marion.

The members of the Society voted at the May meeting to make this award in recognition of Marion's selfless conscientious work and devotion to the Society which has continued under her leadership to be a well-recognised and respected organisation within the community.

Marion joined the committee in 2010 and rapidly moved up the scale to become Chairperson in 2012 when Bill Dolan left the district.

Marion has been particularly focused on sharing our history with the community and wider public. As a result of this she has overseen the publication of the *Couriers* and the presentations of 'People from Our Past' which have successfully brought historical characters to the forefront and given members and visitors a valuable insight into our history and the people who were an important part of it.

She has continued to enthusiastically support the publication of local history books and I would mention in particular Danny Knudson's history of Skippers which Marion encouraged him to have published. It has become a valuable and reliable source of information for not only the local community but the wider community as well.

Marion has ensured that the Society monitors resource consent applications throughout the Whakatipu. She led the Committee and members in challenging the consent for the Olive Leaf building in the Arrowtown Historic Zone. This was a major project and we were pleased when the application was declined on the grounds that it contravened three guard rails for buildings in the Arrowtown Historic Zone.

Marion and John have both worked hard at creating our website and keeping it current. It was established in 2011 and in 2013 John scanned all the past *Couriers* and made them freely available. We have appreciated John's input on many occasions.

When I asked Marion if there were any highlights during her time as Chairperson, she declared immediately the *Couriers* - although time-consuming, they are rewarding.

The Calendars with 'Then and Now' photos were a great source of satisfaction as well, over a period of 6 years – then we realised that people had calendars in their cell-phones, and hard copy wasn't quite the same.

Marion was always full of ideas about our daytrips and emphasised the need to include as many members as possible. Communication with the community has always been at the forefront of her plans and she assisted with overseeing the planning of our outings and our membership meetings in both Frankton and Arrowtown.

As a member of the committee, I have always been impressed with Marion's determination to 'get things right' and sometimes that involved some lengthy changes, but in the long run the results were as they should be – thoroughly planned and executed and always correct. I have enjoyed working with her.

The Historical Society has much pleasure in showing its appreciation of Marion's hard work and commitment by conferring upon her this Honorary Life Membership.



Marion with 'Waiwhakaata Lake Hayes in about 1875' showing the vegetation then. Painted by Marion Marquand for the Society's the historical panel near the Pavilion. We presented it to Marion in November 2025. It has special meaning because her great-grandfather George White settled there in 1869.

Queenstown Couriers issues 85, 2011 to 114, 2025 edited by Marion.
Indexed and readable on our website.



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Our Heritage Today – For Tomorrow

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MEMBERSHIP SUBSCRIPTIONS

Individual and Family Membership \$35

Paid Life Membership \$350

Queenstown Courier is published twice each year.

Editor and designer: Marion Borrell

Produced with the assistance of the Lakes District Museum.

Printed by Print Central, Queenstown.



