

Green Expectations: Hamilton in the 1890s

Matthew R Grant FNZIA

ABSTRACT: In August 1889, Hamilton celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary of European settlement. A public holiday was declared, flags flew from several flagstaff, and the old Fourth Waikato veterans paraded. Despite the fanfare, expectations were low for the decade ahead. Prosperity in Hamilton was hampered by its inland isolation, the lack of profitable natural resources, and poor returns from land investment. The town's establishment was as a military outpost and its strategic advantage offered little to settlers who struggled to make a living. Hamilton's main street had the unflattering appearance of an American Frontier Town. Waikato soil was naturally unproductive. Farming in the Waikato had originally been a mixture of grain and other crops, cattle for its meat, and sheep for wool. Waikato's reputation for abundant and profitable dairy was some years away. The fortunes of Hamilton would change for the better in the late 1890s. Scientific breakthroughs in soil research, new farming techniques, the introduction of refrigerated freight, and improved global prices for meat and dairy products, would all lead to prosperity in the region.

This paper will examine the context and circumstances that shaped Hamilton's difficult years leading up to the 1890s, influenced for better or worse by its landscape, and the prosperity that would eventually arrive by the end of the decade.

In order to understand the landscape of the Waikato it is necessary to first appreciate the geology of the region. Settlement in the Waikato, both before and after European contact, has been fraught because of it.

The Waikato Plains, sometimes referred to as the Waikato Basin, consist of low-lying lands which are essentially the alluvial plains of the Waikato River.¹ The plains can be divided

roughly into the Middle Waikato Plain (or the Hamilton Basin) which extends in all directions around the city of Hamilton, and the Lower Waikato Plain, which is nearer the river's mouth in Taupō.

The Hamilton Basin is a roughly oval-shaped depression around 80 km north to south and 40 km wide. The Basin is predominantly flat and is formed through the deposit of sediment over a long period of time from the higher central plateau.

The Waikato River brings to the Hamilton Basin, among other more beneficial things, an abundant supply of silt, gravel and clay in its fast-flowing current. This material creates high embankments which over time dam

tributary streams. Once cut off from the river these streams become small lakes. Sometimes the lakes drain back into the river, but often not, and so these shallow lakes become swamps or bogs. Over many years, aided by flooding and heavy rainfall, these wetlands become very large. For instance, the Kopuatai Peat Dome northwest of Hamilton is the largest intact bog in New Zealand, consisting of over 10,000 hectares of wetlands, with peat in places 12 metres deep below ground.

Pre-European Waikato was isolated, with vast areas of impassable swamps that covered millions of acres. Deep peat bogs, lakes and swamps surrounded by mānuka, and flax groves were sometimes several kilometres across. Passage through this vast wetland was

¹ An alluvial plain is a largely flat landform created by the deposition of sediment over a long period of time. This is caused by one or more rivers coming from highland regions, from which alluvial soil forms. Deposits show that the Waikato River was in the Waikato Basin 21,800 years ago, with the present course of the river largely formed about 17,000 years ago. McCraw *The Wandering River* p 19.

mainly confined to canoe, and only local Māori knew the few safe walking tracks and trails through the area. Several early European explorers disappeared without trace while attempting to survey the region. Even Māori from outside the area knew better than to venture beyond the fringes without a guide.²

Naturally, this kind of land is difficult to cultivate. European settlers were perpetually frustrated by the Waikato's often wet, and typically unproductive, peat-riddled land. The river frequently flooded, turning what little flat and dry land was available into wet paddocks, useless even for stock to graze on. Early European assessments of the Waikato landscape was unsurprisingly negative.

Some of the earliest contact between Waikato Māori and Europeans came with the establishment of mission stations by the Church Missionary Society in 1834. After an initial exploration of the area, the Rev AN Brown and James Hamlin reported that "the land was worthless and the natives generally impoverished."³ When New Zealand became a British colony in 1840, the lands of the

² Middlemiss *The Waikato River Gunboats* p 8.

³ *Expanding Hamilton* p 7.



Figure 1: Kirikiriroa Pā: Heavily fortified Pā at the height of the Musket Wars, around 1820. Today it is located roughly between Bryce Street and London Street on the western side of the Waikato River. Just outside the palisades are numerous kūmara gardens, beyond these gardens is mānuka scrub sheltered by tall kahikatea and rimu forests. Past the trees are large swamps and lakes created over time by tributary streams and frequent river flooding. (Computer Generated Illustration, Supplied by and used with permission from: www.stantiallstudio.co.nz)

Waikato were left in Māori hands.⁴ All this would change in 1861 when Governor George Grey looked to expand European settlement into the Waikato.

⁴ *Expanding Hamilton* p 7.

When the first European missionaries and traders made their way into the region, they found three large, fortified villages; Te Rapa Pā, Pukete Pā, and Kirikiriroa Pā, along with

more than a dozen other smaller villages.⁵ The original name of the area, Kirikiriroa, meaning "long gravel" is probably a reference to the riverbed. It could also point to the fact that this was a location of early gardening activity by Māori in the region. Māori too were frustrated by the low productivity of the soil but did take measures to improve it. Miropiko Pā, located on River Road in Claudelands, contains large hollows and depressions which contain sand that had been added to the earth to lighten the soil for cultivating kūmara.⁶ Other settlements show that sand and gravel were dug from embankments and mixed with mānuka charcoal and rotting vegetation for kūmara gardens.⁷

As a means of securing the Crown's advances in the region and of protecting the fledging settler communities that were sprouting along the banks of the river, military posts were established in the Waikato. A special regiment of militia was recruited for this purpose in Australia, mainly from Melbourne and Sydney. The recruiting officer in Sydney was Lieutenant W Steele and the volunteer group he enlisted became the 4th Waikato Regiment

⁵ Moon *The Waikato* p 77.

⁶ Fitz-William *Life at the Oaks* p 29.

⁷ Miles and Moon *The River* p 69.

commanded by Lt Colonel William Moule.⁸

The 1st, 2nd and 3rd Battalions were sited at Tauranga, Pirongia, and Cambridge, respectively. The site chosen for the 4th Battalion was the deserted Māori village Kirikiriroa. Kirikiriroa was, by the initial stages of the colonial period, the only significant Māori settlement between Karapiro and Ngāruawāhia.⁹

For those who enlisted in the 4th Battalion of the Waikato Regiment, there had been the promise of material gain if they secured a victory over "rebellious" Māori. The grants of land that soldiers received in the Hamilton region depended on their rank; and regardless of rank each member of the regiment would be allocated a one-acre section in the proposed town as well as wood to build a house.¹⁰

⁸ *Expanding Hamilton* p 7.

⁹ The reason for such low presence of Māori in the Waikato Basin was due primarily to the protracted period of warfare between Ngāti Hauā, Ngāti Raukawa, and Waikato tribes that reached a peak at the start of the nineteenth century. Moon *The Waikato* p 264.

¹⁰ Each field officer received 400 acres, each captain 300 acres, the surgeon 250 acres, each subaltern 200 acres, each sergeant 80 acres, corporals 60 acres, and privates 50 acres each. Moon *The Waikato* p 268.

In theory this should have been a quick and inexpensive way for the government to reward these men for their service, establish a settlement, build something of a local economy, and provide some protection for other settlers in the area. The problem however was these men were not farmers. They had not the capacity nor the capital to clear the land.¹¹

The landscape encountered by the advance guard of militia settlers who stepped ashore Hamilton in August 1864 was unpromising to say the least. The area was described as wild, desolate, and comfortless. From river terraces settlers could see some distance, and within the projected township and beyond were clumps of forest, which was wet underfoot. There were areas of fern and mānuka scrub, but this vegetation was intermittent. Deep and wide gullies marked the immediate landscape, and clearer places were either swamps or bogs.¹²

¹¹ Moon *The Waikato* p 272.

¹² Gibbons *Astride the River* p 39. The differences between swamps and bogs are important to understand in assessing the Waikato landscape, as each type of wetland frustrated settlement in different ways. Swamps are forested wetlands, and typically on lower land, while bogs are not forested and are generally higher than the surrounding land. Swamps receive water from rivers or

The first structures to be built in Kirikiriroa were military redoubts on both sides of the Waikato River. These were located at what are now the sites of St Peter's Cathedral and the Hamilton East end of Anzac Parade. The earliest substantial buildings were for defensive purposes, clustered around these redoubts. Timber huts were built for barrack-type accommodation, stores, and medical facilities, alongside tents which were eventually replaced with more permanent structures.¹³

When the Militia arrived, they began to work on the settlement on a community basis directed towards houses for families rather than cultivating their own land for farms. Different companies laid out town sections on either side of the river near the redoubts, hence Hamilton East and Kirikiriroa/Hamilton West, with canoes transporting people between the two.

streams and have some drainage, while bogs receive water from precipitation (rain) and have no outflow. Swamps are characterized by standing water and often covered by trees and other vegetation, while bogs are characterized by stagnant water and dominated by peat moss. Only with significant draining of both these wetlands could the Waikato begin to be productive.

¹³ Gibbons *Astride the River* p 40.

Few soldiers were given 50-acre sections that had dry land and contours that were easily and readily cultivated. Most had land that was difficult to access, was swampy, too steep or had sour earth. A few ended up with sections that were entirely under water.¹⁴

There were protests of the poor quality of land which went to regimental commander William Moule and then further up. Moule's recommendations that some lands were totally unacceptable, entirely unfit for occupation, and that the militiamen should be given further opportunity were generally confirmed by the military authorities. A regimental board of enquiry was established, and they found that of the first 400 or so sections provided for the Hamilton militia, over 100 were entirely unsuitable, either because over half the area was swamp, or there was no access.¹⁵

These soldiers were for the most part men from English cities who had gone to Australia to seek prosperity at the goldfields. Tempted by the offer of free grants of land in New Zealand they knew little of how hard they

¹⁴ Gibbons *Astride the River* p 43.

¹⁵ Gibbons *Astride the River* p 44.

would have to work the land to get anything out of it. The Waikato landscape was for the most part unproductive, and without agricultural training or trade experience, no capital, and very little in the way of tools, most militia settlers were bound to fail. Army rations were only available for the first year of settlement, as it was assumed that after a year their land would be cleared and productive. 50-acre sections were too small to provide a living from grazing, and the sale of produce to Auckland was a three-day journey one way. The cost of living was very high in the settlement, and when gold was discovered in Thames in 1867, many soldiers simply abandoned their land to seek fortunes elsewhere. Those who did managed to sell got as little as £5 for 50 acres, which was around two weeks wages for a Private.¹⁶

Most militia land was sold, locally to pay off debts, to Auckland speculators (which returned little to the vendor), or some to genuine settlers who cultivated the land into something productive. This landscape led to a stall in the region's prosperity and population growth, especially compared to other regions in New Zealand at the same time. Even as late

¹⁶ *Expanding Hamilton* p 9.

as 1873 a traveller approaching Hamilton from the south observed that for twenty-five or thirty miles over good country barely a dozen settlers were seen.¹⁷

In June 1867, the Auckland newspaper the *Daily Southern Cross* reported that the government had "miserably failed"¹⁸ to carry out its promise to support and develop new settlements through government assistance. Many families were living in inadequate shacks and barely surviving on government rations of salt beef and hard biscuits. The government did not respond to requests for assistance, and it looked as though the Waikato would become entirely deserted.¹⁹

In 1868 Hamilton's population, which was about 1,000 in 1864, dropped to 300 as farmers left. The town was isolated and the land difficult, and in many cases impossible, to farm. Nearby Thames had an estimated population of 15,000 in 1870. Thames benefitted in all the ways Hamilton did not; a coastal town with easy access to transportation and both gold and kauri to extract for wealth. Even after the gold rush

¹⁷ Moon *The Waikato* p 270.

¹⁸ "The Waikato and its Prospects" p 4.

¹⁹ Miles and Moon *The River* p 79.

had passed its peak, Thames still had a population of 4,500 in 1881.²⁰ Hamilton's population in 1886 was barely 1,200.²¹

In 1874 Hamilton was described as a "small, bedraggled township"²² and visitors to the town in the 1880s commented that there was "not much to see in Hamilton."²³ Hamilton's newly built Commercial Hotel on Victoria Street was advertised in 1886 as a convenient and pleasant break in a long journey.²⁴ Hamilton was not a destination place, and far from flourishing.

A Waikato Lands Agency office opened in Auckland which assisted the sale of allotted lands owned by unhappy settlers. The land could be sold to the Agency which were then offered for sale on favourable terms to speculators, mainly from Auckland. Land titles were aggregated into vast blocks, pouring borrowed capital into draining and developing the estates, many of which were over 4,000 hectares. Woodland's Estate, just

²⁰ "Thames, New Zealand" np.

²¹ "Hamilton, New Zealand" np.

²² Drummond *Early Days in the Waikato* p 21.

²³ Drummond *Early Days in the Waikato* p 22.

²⁴ "Barton's Commercial Hotel, Hamilton [advertisement]" p 3.

out of Hamilton, was 32,000 hectares. However, during the 1880s Depression, many of the land development schemes crashed. One good outcome for the Waikato was that smallholders bought the productive land that was fit for farming, and it was these smallholdings that eventually led to the Waikato experiencing success through butter and dairy.²⁵

Smallholders had taken up land that had been drained and developed by the big estates of the 1870s and eked out a living, but it was scarcely more than subsistence. Their dairy herds were rarely more than 10 cows, milked by hand in the paddock. At the time, the dairy industry was small-scale and confined only to local markets. Henry Reynolds, a Cornishman, bought milk from these farmers, put it through a large separator, and then returned the skim milk to the farmers for pig feed. He built a butter factory in 1886 on the riverbank of Pukekura just downstream from today's Karapiro dam. Reynolds developed his business further by setting up a chain of creameries so that by 1888 he packed 13 tons of butter into tins and kegs (refrigeration transport was not available until the 1890s)

²⁵ Miles and Moon *The River* p 80.

and sent it downriver to Auckland for export to London.²⁶

The Depression of the 1880s hit the Waikato hard. In the early 1890s land was almost unsaleable in Hamilton and there was no money available for investment. Most banks, in particular the Bank of New Zealand had lent too heavily on farming property, and now found these investments returning no income and unrealisable.²⁷ JC Firth,²⁸ an Auckland merchant with significant land holdings in Matamata had to close his roller mills owing the New Zealand Loan and Mercantile Agency Company £7,000. He attributed his failure to the large reduction in agricultural values. His Auckland Flour Mill was valued at nearly £40,000 but was called in by his mortgagee for £5,000. Firth did eventually pay all his creditors.²⁹ FA Whitaker, a practicing lawyer in Hamilton, was not so fortunate. Whitaker was a former owner of *The Waikato*

²⁶ Miles and Moon *The River* p 70.

²⁷ Norris *Settlers in Depression* p 216.

²⁸ Josiah Clifton Firth (1826-97) was a farmer, businessman and politician who was notable as the messenger between Te Kooti and the New Zealand Government during Te Kooti's War. He is responsible for the construction of the Firth Tower (1872) in Matamata.

²⁹ Norris *Settlers in Depression* p 192.

Times, as well as an MP for Waikato (1876).³⁰ It is likely Whitaker's political commitments meant his legal practice suffered which prompted unwise land investments to improve his situation. These investments lead to heavy losses, and he committed suicide in Auckland in 1887.³¹

Most investors of cheap Waikato land wanted rid of their "huge boggy estates."³² Land companies were typically undercapitalised, as the swamps were expensive to drain and there was little interest in buying the improved land. Captain William Steele held shares in one company that on face value was worth quarter of a million dollars but was worth far less than that. When share capital was called up, he became insolvent.³³

The Waikato in its early years did enjoy some success in two areas, commercially grown flour and commercially grown flax, although both were short-lived. European missionaries taught local Māori new agricultural skills, new crops, and the use of new tools and equipment. It is probable that the cultivated

³⁰ Gibbons *Astride the River* p 330.

³¹ Gibbons *Astride the River* p 88.

³² Gibbons *Astride the River* p 88.

³³ Gibbons *Astride the River* p 88.

land around Kirikiriroa was extended especially for wheat and other grain crops.³⁴ From the early 1840s to the late 1850s, 29 flour mills were built by iwi or hapū in the greater Waikato, although not all were operating successfully.³⁵

John Morgan was appointed resident missionary to the Te Awamutu area in 1841 and has been credited with introducing Waikato Māori to European style farming.³⁶ By 1847 around 300 acres of wheat had been sown in the district and by 1849 this had increased to nearly 1000 acres. Morgan arranged for flour mills to be built, with four completed by 1848, producing six tons of flour that year and around 150 tons by 1851. Flour was sold in markets in Auckland, Sydney,³⁷ and as far away as California.³⁸ However, flour production would lose profitability due to draughts affecting water-powered mills, and low prices for wheat in Auckland and Australia.³⁹

³⁴ Norris *Armed Settlers* p 6.

³⁵ Fenton "List of Flour Mills" p 134.

³⁶ Barber *Frontier Town* p 30.

³⁷ Middlemiss *The Waikato River Gunboats* p 9.

³⁸ Verco *Bow Waves on the Waikato* p 19.

³⁹ Williams "A Thematic Review of the History of Hamilton" p 216.

Flour mills frequently burned down, and many were not repaired as essential machinery was expensive to ship to the region and install. The Hamilton Flour Mill was established in Urlich Avenue in 1872 but was in liquidation by 1874.⁴⁰ Flour milling would continue in Hamilton, but never to the same extent, due in no small part to competition. In 1887 there were large areas of wheat and grain crops produced in the Waikato however the moist atmosphere meant longer drying times before threshing and insects affected many farms. In 1888 wheat was returning only 2s 10d⁴¹ per bushel when 4s per bushel was expected, which was a loss of around £10,000 to the district. In 1889 there were good harvests in the Waikato but southern growers from Canterbury undersold the Waikato farmers, which contributed to the Ngāruawāhia flourmill closing that year.⁴² In 1890 enormous wheat yields in America further depressed prices.⁴³

One of the first industries in Hamilton was flax harvesting as the product was abundant

⁴⁰ Williams "A Thematic Review of the History of Hamilton" p 238.

⁴¹ 2 shillings (s) and 4 pence (d)

⁴² Norris *Settlers in Depression* p 184.

⁴³ Norris *Settlers in Depression* p 191.

and readily available. Flax was a crop often turned to when times were bad for landholders, and as it was superior to European hemp it was frequently exported with some success.⁴⁴

Māori in the area were gathering and processing flax on their own account for clothing and trade from the 1840s until the Waikato War. After the War, many were employed by European businessmen. The industry had booms and busts over short time periods. It was profitable in the 1870s until the depression of the 1880s when flax milling all but ceased, and profitable again in the 1890s with an increase in flax prices until the early 1900s when prices again dropped.

In 1888 a ton of flax was selling for £40 in London. Local Māori were asking £1 per ton of green flax delivered to the factories in Hamilton.⁴⁵ In 1889 Isaac Coates and Henry Metcalfe established a large flax mill on the lower river terrace by River Road [Memorial Drive], just downstream from Victoria Bridge.⁴⁶ In 1895 Coates bought out Metcalfe's share and the whole of the milling plant was

⁴⁴ Norris *Settlers in Depression* p 188.

⁴⁵ Norris *Settlers in Depression* p 189.

⁴⁶ "Messrs Coates and Metcalfe's flax-mill" p 2.

put up for sale.⁴⁷ The sale was unsuccessful, and it seems Coates began milling again in 1898, after a rise in the price for dressed flax.⁴⁸

Rope made from New Zealand flax was of a higher price internationally but considered inferior compared with rope made from sisal.⁴⁹ Competition and a lack of demand in London meant that the flax industry in the Waikato would by the end of the 1890s cease to be a significant industry.

Agriculture in the Waikato had originally been a mixture of grain and other crops, as well as cattle for slaughter, and sheep for wool. As late as 1896 the Waikato was still regarded as "healthy sheep country" and capable of turning out a considerable number of sheep in prime condition.⁵⁰ Nationally wool accounted for at least a third of all New Zealand exports from 1883-1913.⁵¹

Cattle raising and sheep farming were the main occupations of farmers in the Waikato

⁴⁷ "Preliminary Notice" p 3.

⁴⁸ "The Ohinemuri Gazette and Upper Thames Warden" p 2.

⁴⁹ *Expanding Hamilton* p 15.

⁵⁰ Norris *Settlers in Depression* p 214.

⁵¹ "Factors in Pre-1914 Prosperity" np.

especially of the large landowners.⁵² Sheep flocks in Waikato and Waipa counties in 1884 numbered 47,090. By 1891 they were 114,723.⁵³ Dairying was an occupation for the small farmers, and for some it was a good source of cash income,⁵⁴ but little more than that.

Although refrigerated freight for export commenced in New Zealand in 1882,⁵⁵ it did not impact the Waikato until much later. The Waikato was inland and transport out of the region to main centres was long and arduous. Road and rail conduits to Auckland arrived in Hamilton in 1867⁵⁶ and 1877⁵⁷ respectively. Rail allowed travel from Hamilton to Auckland in a mere six hours, instead of more than two days by steamer and stagecoach.⁵⁸ Daily collection of milk from Waikato farms was hampered by poor roads until after the First World War, when roading, increased motor vehicles and rail connections improved

⁵² Norris *Settlers in Depression* p 206.

⁵³ Norris *Settlers in Depression* p 187.

⁵⁴ Norris *Settlers in Depression* p 182.

⁵⁵ "First frozen meat shipment leaves New Zealand" np.

⁵⁶ "Hamilton, New Zealand" np.

⁵⁷ The first train arrived from Auckland on 17 December 1877 and was met by a crowd of around 300 people at the station in Frankton. "Frankton History" np.

⁵⁸ Miles and Moon *The River* p 77.

significantly.⁵⁹

Newspaper advertisements appeared in 1885 offering refrigerated transport by rail to Auckland and thereafter overseas markets.⁶⁰ Exciting news for Waikato farmers, however this did not mean prosperity. The world price for produce reached their lowest level in the 1890s; especially butter (1894-95), cheese (1895-96), and meat (1897-98).⁶¹

For several years after the first cargo of frozen meat reached London in 1882, failures were common. It took time to fit out ships for the new trade, and to build and staff the freezing works, and so costs were only gradually reduced over time.⁶² It was not until the start of the nineteenth century that dairying made strides due to good returns.

As farming became more productive, small holdings increased. Large areas of unproductive land were broken into farms of under forty hectares, creating an intensification of the rural population. This

⁵⁹ "Factors in Pre-1914 Prosperity" np.

⁶⁰ "New Zealand Frozen Meat & Storage Company, Limited" p 2.

⁶¹ "Factors in Pre-1914 Prosperity" np.

⁶² "Factors in Pre-1914 Prosperity" np.

was a relatively new style of farming in the Waikato which required a new technology and new goods and services. Methods of enriching the unproductive Waikato soil with manure was largely ineffective up to that point. In fact, Waikato soil was still generally regarded as inferior to soils elsewhere in New Zealand.⁶³ In 1894 Mr JA Pond advocated the topdressing of grasslands with superphosphate, with impressive results.⁶⁴ This experimental work would lead to the establishment of Ruakura Research Centre, still operating in Hamilton today.

A need was realised very early in Hamilton of fertilisers which initially consisted of manure, and occasionally offal. Thomas Dinsdale farmed on Hamilton's outskirts, which today is the suburb of Dinsdale. His 100-acre farm was described in 1880 as well tilled and

despite the land being not first-class quality ... good crops are ... grown of wheat, oats, mangolds, carrots,

⁶³ In 1880 two farmers from Lincolnshire, England, toured New Zealand and reported that the land from Papatoetoe to Ngāruawāhia was very poor. In their opinion the Waikato soils did not look likely to produce the magnificent crops which they saw on them, and all seemed inferior to the soil in England. Gibbons *Astride the River* pp 182-183.

⁶⁴ *Expanding Hamilton* p 17.

and other produce, showing what may be done by skilful working and the application of manures."⁶⁵

Work to improve the productivity of Waikato soil began in 1886, when the Government acquired 137 acres at Ruakura in what would become Number 4 Dairy. In 1888 the Waikato Agricultural College Model Farm Act vested the land in the Waikato County Council

subject to be used as and for the purposes of an agricultural college and model farm, where the inhabitants of the said county and the adjacent or neighbouring counties may acquire knowledge in practical farming.⁶⁶

Ruakura was established in 1901 when the 137 acres were amalgamated with a further 690 acres from Isaac Coates, an enterprising farmer, and early Mayor of Hamilton. The new centre was called the Ruakura Experimental Station and in the first reported experiment, superphosphate was assessed in terms of hay cut from top-dressed and non top-dressed areas. Trials in feeding and breeding dairy cows were also carried out.⁶⁷ As typical for the Waikato, the site of the

⁶⁵ Williams "A Thematic Review of the History of Hamilton" p 217.

⁶⁶ Waikato Agricultural College Model Farm Act s 2.

⁶⁷ Scott *Ruakura* p 7.



Figure 2: A Bit of the Gully at Silverdale (1890s) (Source: Hamilton Central Library Heritage Collection: HCL_00446 - Hamilton City Libraries)

Ruakura farm was not in good shape. It needed to be drained, ploughed, fenced, sown

in grass, and planted out with shelter belts.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Gibbons *Astride the River* p 140.

In 1893, despite world-wide financial uncertainty, the New Zealand Loan and Mercantile Agency Company built a large commercial building on Victoria Street with a façade in the Graeco Italian style. Shortly after its opening, attended by the Mayor of Hamilton, the company's head office in London went into liquidation. News of the reconstruction of the company shortly afterwards was received in Hamilton with considerable relief.⁶⁹

In the 1890s Hamilton struggled with the municipal needs of a growing community. Sanitation was a perpetual concern. Reports of the Loan and Mercantile building's opening noted its sanitary arrangements, which were "the best we have seen in Hamilton." The reporter noted that "this is an important matter which has been locally so lamentably neglected."⁷⁰

Where the people of Hamilton were low in number and spread out the problems of disposing rubbish and human waste was not significant. Typically, waste was disposed on one's own allotment. However, the block

between Victoria Street and Anglesea Street was densely populated, containing a mixture of commercial and residential premises. The problem was the open drain running through the centre of the city block which was far from adequate. It collected food and sewage waste from Victoria Street, Hood Street, Collingwood Street, and Anglesea Street. In wet weather the drain filled and seeped beyond its banks.

People complained to the borough council about it frequently with limited success, and as late as 1906 the *Waikato Times* reported on the "slimy Spirogyra in the gutters of Victoria-street."⁷¹ Under such conditions, and especially during hot summers typhoid flourished in Hamilton, occasionally resulting in death.

In addition to the poor sanitation Hamilton business owners in the 1890s were frustrated with the near continuous presence of livestock in the centre of town. By day sheep and cattle were driven through Victoria Street to saleyards in Frankton near the train station, leaving droppings and damaging the road

surface. Cattle, pigs, and dogs frequently wandered, both day and night, and were a nuisance in Hamilton East especially.⁷² Livery stables (where horse could be hired) were located in Victoria Street next to the Commercial Hotel, and typically held up to forty horses at a time. Horses were still the most common form of transport in Hamilton,⁷³ but they attracted flies and were often startled by machinery creating a danger to pedestrians.

Added to these concerns was Victoria Street's unsealed surface. It was so heavily used that dust was common, and there was no water cart to lay the dust or nearby piped water to spread on the road. During summer dust and odour filtered into every business on Victoria Street, affecting places that sold food the most. During winter applications of metal to the

⁷² Poison was laid for stray dogs in Woodlands Estate north of Hamilton throughout the 1890s. Refer "Notice: Poison is being laid" (2 January 1890) p 4 and "Notice: Poison is being laid" (18 March 1899) p 4. Stray dogs were a nuisance throughout the Waikato as well as in Raglan.

⁷³ Horses were very much a part of everyday life in Hamilton, and everyone who could do so, owned one. Farming could not be carried out without horses, and they were a consistent feature in advertisements in local newspapers. Norris *Settlers in Depression* p 202.

⁶⁹ Norris *Settlers in Depression* p 217.

⁷⁰ Norris *Settlers in Depression* p 217.

⁷¹ "The Waikato Times, Thames Valley Gazette and Kawhia Advocate" p 2.



Figure 3: Victoria Street South (1890s) (Source: Hamilton Central Library Heritage Collection: HCL_00129 - Hamilton City Libraries)

road surface with infrequent and inadequate.⁷⁴

Attempts to beautify the public areas of the township were fitful. Along the roadsides, in

⁷⁴ Gibbons *Astride the River* p 107.

empty sections and in the reserves grew a tangle of gorse and weeds such as buttercup and blackberry vines. Around the lake and especially toward Hamilton West the original mānuka scrub still stood. Garden Place hill was still largely scrub until the late 1880s. Not

until 1894 was it was planted with trees.⁷⁵

By the end of the 1890s the buildings in Victoria Street looked a lot more substantial than at the start of the decade. Some of the structures were deliberate investments such as the Loan and Mercantile building, and the Innes Brewery which opened in 1897 on the corner of Anzac Parade and Tisdall Street. Many though, were replacements for buildings destroyed by fire.

In 1895 the Hamilton Gas Company was established and in September gas lighting for the town was inaugurated. This civic amenity was of dubious benefit, as in December that year a fire destroyed six buildings on Victoria Street, and in July 1898 another fire destroyed 15 businesses. In October 1899, a fire destroyed the Post Office.⁷⁶

Fires were frequent in Hamilton for several reasons. Most commercial buildings were built of timber, there was a lack of adequate water supply,⁷⁷ there was no fire brigade,⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Gibbons *Astride the River* p 108.

⁷⁶ *Expanding Hamilton* p 21.

⁷⁷ It was not until after 1900 that the borough council supplied water to Victoria Street, Anglesea Street and Collingwood Street, by local water reservoir. By 1903

nor was any firefighting equipment available. When buildings were engulfed by fire they were simply left to burn, with only an occasional brick wall and buckets of water any defence against loss of property or life. Illumination and heating were by candles, lamps, and open fires in wooden buildings. Stores were often crammed full of flammable goods, requiring only the smallest spark to kindle a large fire.⁷⁹

In 1894 the Royal Hotel in Hamilton East was burned down killing a servant Mary Coghlan who slept above the kitchen where the fire started. She called for help but was unable to be rescued.⁸⁰ One person was rescued, Thomas Green, who was asleep in the room next to Coghlan. Unfortunately, he later died of his injuries. The fire also destroyed the Innes Brewery behind the Hotel. There was no wind that night otherwise the Pearson Soap Factory (1874) on the opposite side of the

there were 80 water connections on the western side of the river, and by 1908 nearly all the western side had municipal water available. Gibbons *Astride the River* p 129. The Frankton Water Tower was not opened until June 1913.

⁷⁸ A volunteer fire brigade was established in Hamilton in 1904.

⁷⁹ Gibbons *Astride the River* p 108.

⁸⁰ "Fatal Fire" p 4.

street would certainly have burned down as well.

The 1898 fire on Victoria Street was so large that it set alight the Hamilton Hotel on the opposite side of the street, destroying it. The flames could be seen as far away as Te Aroha and Ōhaupō.⁸¹ In that fire the brick walls of the *Waikato Times* building stopped the fire spreading, which it did in the fire of 1895 as well. This prompted the borough council to enact a bylaw requiring new buildings in the central business area to be constructed of permanent materials. The most imposing was the new Post Office building (1901) on Victoria Street opposite Hood Street, designed by government architect John Campbell. It has concrete floors and brick walls.

There are only three pre-1900 commercial buildings still standing in Hamilton. These are the Pearson Soap Factory (1874), on Cook Street in Hamilton East, the former Bank of New Zealand building (1878) on the corner of Victoria Street, and the Waikato Brewery (1897) on the corner of Tisdall Street. Only the Pearson building is made of wood. It would be fair to say that Hamilton's slow start to

⁸¹ "Disastrous Fire at Hamilton" p 2.

commercial prosperity (and commensurate commercial structures), a tendency to build in timber, and frequent fires have all contributed to so few buildings of this era remaining.

As the landscape changed from natural to municipal, further challenges became apparent. The Borough of Hamilton was established in 1876, formed with nine members, of which the mayor was Mr JR Vialou (an architect). The first Council Chambers building consisted of two former military huts placed together and fronted by two wooden columns at the entrance. This building was in service from 1878 to 1898.⁸²

One of the first tasks of the Council was to connect by bridge the two halves of the town: Hamilton East and Hamilton West. Up to that point the only connection was a ferry, and crossings were frequently perilous. The "Union" bridge was opened in 1879 and tolls were in place until 1883 to cover its cost. Built of timber and becoming increasingly rickety this traffic bridge would eventually be replaced with today's steel structure in 1910.

The next task of Council was to improve the

⁸² *Expanding Hamilton* p 13.

railway connections with another bridge, which would be the Waikato end of the Thames-Waikato line. Construction began in 1880 at the river crossing where the Claudelands bridge is located today. Test bores were sunk into the banks of the river, but unfortunately not in the bed of the river. The contract price assumed solid rock would be found at 40 feet below the riverbed. However, when work commenced it was found to be more than 80 feet before rock was found, and the government had to take over the contract for the work to be finished. The bridge was not completed until 1884.⁸³

For much of the rest of the 1880s and the 1890s there was little else of significance achieved by the Council. There was little money available for works and what was available was quickly soaked up by maintenance work on the streets. Most developments in the town apart from roadworks came from voluntary special purpose groups, such as the establishment of the Waikato Hospital Board in 1886.⁸⁴

By 1900 Hamilton was still a small town, hampered by the world-wide Depression of

the 1880s and lack of investment locally which persisted throughout the next decade. The 1902 *Cyclopaedia of New Zealand* gave the following summary of Hamilton:

Hamilton is the chief town of the Waikato. It is built on both banks of the river of that name and lies partly in the county of Waikato and partly in that of Waipa. The town ... stands on high ground and is extremely picturesque. Two fine bridges span the river at Hamilton—one the railway, and the other the ordinary traffic bridge. ... The town possesses a brewery, cheese and butter factory, soap factory, brick and pottery, and other industrial works. There are several fine buildings and public parks in both parts of the town. ... Hamilton has two newspapers, four churches, two public schools, a public library, lodges, courthouse, police station, and post and telegraph offices, and the Bank of New Zealand has one of its largest branches in the town. The surrounding country consists of fine agricultural land.⁸⁵

Any suggestion of uniform progress would be inaccurate. The author describes a small village in a remote location, existing almost despite the landscape surrounding it. It did not illustrate the struggles the townspeople faced but was an accurate portrayal of the urban landscape.

The end of the Depression dates from about 1895 and from then until the First World War,

New Zealand exports increased sharply and almost continuously. This favourable movement has often been linked with the upward trend of world prices which characterised the world economy from the mid-1890s to the early 1920s, however butter, cheese and meat prices all reached their lowest levels in the 1890s. Wool continued to decline fitfully but substantially until 1901-2, and since wool was the most important single export nationally, the index of all export prices did not move upwards until wool had passed its nadir. From the late 1890s until about 1902, therefore, the explanation of the recovery of New Zealand's export earnings is due primarily to rising volumes of the principal exports; rather than rising prices, which occurred around 1902.⁸⁶ This is most evident with the export of butter and cheese from the Waikato, due to soil and herd improvement.

The improved testing for butterfat content which evolved in 1890⁸⁷ made possible the payment for milk on the basis of its butterfat content, thus giving a major stimulus to herd improvement in the Waikato. Of even greater

⁸³ *Expanding Hamilton* p 13.

⁸⁴ Gibbons *Astride the River* p 96.

⁸⁵ "Hamilton" pp 738-739.

⁸⁶ "Factors in Pre-1914 Prosperity" p 4.

⁸⁷ "Factors in Pre-1914 Prosperity" p 4.

significance for butter production was the development of hand-separators in the later 1890s, which enabled the cream to be separated on the farm, and not, as was common, in the factory. This development not only saved the expense of transporting the whole milk to the factory, but by widening the area from which the raw material could economically be collected, also facilitated the amalgamation of smaller dairy factories into larger cooperatives, thus achieving considerable economies of scale.⁸⁸ Soil improvement in the Waikato was long regarded as crucial to productive farming. When export prices for dairy started to rise in the early 1900s, the experiments and innovations conducted at Ruakura in the 1890s would finally bring financial reward to Waikato farmers.

Around 1890 the smallholders who had taken over from the vast estates began to move from subsistence farming to producing other marketable goods such as pork, wood, and grain. They came to Hamilton for their supplies which included ploughs, sleds, harnesses, timber, fencing, clothes, and food.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ "Factors in Pre-1914 Prosperity" p 4.

⁸⁹ Miles and Moon *The River* p 81.

Hamilton was beginning to grow through supplying the demand for these services.⁹⁰

Local and regional farmers moved into the Hamilton retail and general supply trade with the formation of their own company; the Farmers' Auctioneering Company (FAC), in 1906. The FAC joined the already established Loan and Mercantile Agency as a stock and station firm, with Dalgety and Company making the third such firm in Hamilton in 1908.⁹¹ Other commercial enterprises were established after the turn of the century, such as Isaac Coate's brickworks in Collingwood Street (1903), Ellis and Burnand sawmillers and timber merchants (1905), and the Firth families' concrete company (1910).⁹²

Prior to 1900 there were no full-time real estate agents, but that changed as land started to improve in value, with the earliest agent George Boyes establishing his firm in 1905. Land transactions also created a demand for legal services needed for conveyancing, and lawyers quickly became the first large group of professional people in Hamilton.⁹³

⁹⁰ Norris *Settlers in Depression* p 124.

⁹¹ Gibbons *Astride the River* p 141.

⁹² Gibbons *Astride the River* p 142.

⁹³ Gibbons *Astride the River* p 143.

Commercial and industrial activity in Hamilton quickened and expanded after the turn of the nineteenth century due to the upturn of agricultural development.⁹⁴ Many of the new industrial developments in and around Hamilton were directly related to increased farming activity⁹⁵ such as milking stations (Tuhikaramea in 1907) and freezing works (Horotiu in 1916).

When Europeans settled at Kirikiriroa in 1864 they had little knowledge of the struggles that lay ahead. Hamilton's unique position as an inland settlement was far from transport corridors, which were still poorly formed even by 1890. The Waikato River did provide an early access to Auckland markets, but the journey was long, and land was difficult to work. With few exceptions farming profits were hard to come by. Early settlers were frustrated by the unproductive soil, and the work needed to drain and clear the scrub. It took decades for the settlement to become prosperous, and only through experimentation and innovation was the land able to make farmers wealthy. This eventual success attracted other framers from outside

⁹⁴ Gibbons *Astride the River* p 138.

⁹⁵ Gibbons *Astride the River* p 138.

the district so that from the early 1900s the region would begin to experience significant population growth. Hard work and perseverance would eventually provide the riches the earliest settlers had longed for.

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