

The Importance of Placenames

Kathleen Stringer



Placenames are sometimes overlooked as a valuable tool in research. Obviously, they can pinpoint a location, but they also provide information on that location and its history. Placenames also can connect the area with a person, activity or event.

I applaud the efforts of Ngāi Tahu and their cultural mapping project Kā Huru Manu. If you haven't visited it yet, it's a great resource and full of fascinating stories. I am certain with the introduction of Aotearoa Histories, (now next year) it will be a 'go to' resource. It is hoped that

the example of Ngāi Tahu will encourage other iwi to share their stories.

The problem however, of an iwi focussed repository is just that, it only tells one story. It is not uncommon for other iwi to have ingoa noho for the same area. An example of this situation is where I have my home. Now incorporated into South Oamaru, the area's post office was referred to in European publications as Kaiarero (Walter Mantell spelt it Kariarero). This name is not on the mapping project, so may well be Waitaha. Such omissions, and the misspelling of many Māori placenames by early anthropologists and historians, reveals a need for an inter-tribal atlas.

That atlas is a long way off. However, what are we as gatherers and disseminators of history doing to record and preserve placenames in our rohe?

Back in the glorious days of PEP and TEP employment schemes, the then North Otago Museum (now Waitaki Museum and Archive) developed a comprehensive placenames database. Locations from the local authorities from files, maps and other sources were entered, given the GPS coordinates, alternative names / spellings and history. Any time a new farm name or location was found it was added. It was a very interesting tool to learn more about the area and certainly helped researchers who had no idea where the location mentioned in letters or other archives was.

The importance of such a register was brought up again when I was talking to my partner, who was born in Nelson. I was explaining that Oamaru's hospital was once on a hill (to isolate the ill from the well and because it was thought the wind would blow the bugs away). It is now on the flat.

Anyway, I was explaining how Oamaru people of a certain age would know the phrase 'Up the Hill' meant the person spoken of was in hospital. I added that that was totally different from 'going down the line', which meant going to Seacliff Lunatic asylum (as it was called). This was because the most usual means of transport to the asylum was by train. I pondered what people below Seacliff used as a euphemism. My partner responded that in Nelson people referred to people with mental illness as being on the green bus, as a bus of that colour took patients for drives and was a common sight.

Are terms such as these being recorded? It would be a shame if they weren't as they are part of the culture and history of a community. Perhaps, as part of the Aotearoa Histories, we could encourage children to record the placenames of their generation. Terms do change, although sometimes we don't know why. Again using an Oamaru example, an oft used track to get the old swimming baths in Oamaru was always referred to as 'Dead Man's Gully' when I was a child, yet in the 1920's it was called 'Lover's Lane'. No one could tell me the reason for either name, or when and why it changed.

As the landscape changes and the holders of local knowledge become fewer, we need to consider compiling a list of placenames and descriptors of areas before they are lost. It could become an intergenerational and multicultural project that the entire community could participate in. It's yet another task for busy archivists, but one that could reveal an exciting aspect of a community's heritage.