

THE BRIDGE TO NOWHERE

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Bejtjeman, Ward, Tester, Quin – the names are clearly marked on small wooden plaques at the sides of the track, every mile or so, like headstones. The tangled mass of New Zealand bush winds around every hand-hewn log, smothering the few lonely specks of orange aubretia. On the horizon, an avenue of cedars stretches above the native bush in a conspicuous line. A tall chimney stack stands 50 yards from the muddy track behind a network of bush and trees. A few rusty relics are in the fireplace – a separator, a pot, a small press.

A silver plaque is nailed to the bricks. "Those named on this plaque came to the ill-fated Mangapurua Valley to celebrate the 100th birthday of Fred Bejtjeman, 70 years after he arrived as a settler and 47 years after he was forced to leave. When they were asked they gave so much; when they in turn asked they received nothing."

So what and where is this deserted Mangapurua Valley? It is an increasingly popular 20-mile-long remote valley branching off the Whanganui River, 20 miles above Pipiriki, in the south west of New Zealand's North Island. One would think of this as just another of the beautiful, lonely valleys in the area, until these intriguing reminders of man's failed attempts to subdue nature catch the eye. These are all that remain of a settlement that in 1917, moved into, and cut down, the virgin bush. The most stunning reminder in the Mangapurua Valley is the sudden shock sight of a massive concrete bridge across a deep gorge, in a seemingly trackless patch of pungas, brush and manuka – the Bridge to Nowhere.

At one time just fewer than 40 men, most of them married, called this home. The valley was one specially opened up for them by a grateful Government as a reward for their military service during the First World War. The scheme was the last large-scale back-country pioneering development in New Zealand. One by one the disillusioned settlers walked off their farms, abandoning their holdings to erosion and regenerating bush. By 1942 all but three of the farmers had left the valley, and they were forced out when the Government refused to maintain the treacherous access road. It is possible to walk through the valley on what was once the 12-foot-wide road from the Mangapurua Landing on the Whanganui River to Whakahore. I did so at Easter weekend in 1993 with the Heretaunga Tramping Club and found myself, not only in beautiful bush, but in the depths of a history book.

The Whanganui/Taranaki area, like the west coast of Scotland, is known for its rain. It can be torrential and so it was on Good Friday when we drove through Ohakune and Raetihi to Pipiriki on the "great, grey green, greasy banks" of the Whanganui River.

Saturday dawned damp and the river was full and muddy, with logs and branches swirling downstream. The rapids were covered by an extra 16ft of flood water, so the jetboat trip upstream was relatively smooth. Our river trip was scenically stunning – high cliffs where the Whanganui has gouged deep into soft land; grasses, rushes and creepers hang in clumps to the steep cliffs and drape over the gaping mouths of caves. Despite the area being a Maori stronghold, none settled in the 15-mile stretch from Tangarakau to Parinui, in the centre of which is Mangapurua. There were no canoe landings, no flat land capable of cultivation near the banks, and there was the evil presence of a taniwha named Okuarei which was said to attack hunters.

The area was first surveyed in 1914 but not opened up until the Returned Soldiers Settlement Act of 1916 pressurised the Government to provide land for the British Empire's forces. A poet once wrote: "When war is over and wrongs are righted, God is forgotten and the soldier slighted."

In 1916 there was no thought that this would be the complaint 30 years' later. Sale plans of the valley were hurriedly written describing the "undulating to steep, hilly country, soil fair to good, resting on sandstone and papa formation". The price was £1.10 an acre and holdings ranged from 1800 acres of poorer land to 500 acres of better quality ground.

There are records that a ranger did write to the Commissioner of Crown Lands warning against use of the farms, but the reply was that discharged soldiers were advised to inspect the land before purchase and had bought them of their own free will. News spread fast through hospital wards and clubs, and the valley began to fill. There was enthusiasm and dedication, but sadly, many settlers lacked the knowledge of how to farm this fragile land. Expert advice was not available but the New Zealand pioneer spirit was running high. A ferry boat carried people from Wanganui to Pipiriki. A large hotel housed everyone for the night and huge breakfasts were eaten before the upstream tug left at 5.30a.m. to convey travellers farther to Taumaranui. It was a struggle, and strong cables were attached to the banks to haul the craft over the rapids. When the settlers arrived, one by one, they found the valley densely covered with a forest of tawa, kamahi, rimu, miro, totara, kahikatea, matai and beech. The main stream was deeply gorged, in some places to a depth of 200ft.

Our first day on the track was one of showers. It was dark and dank in the bush. Our packs were heavy but the path was quite clear, though there were few signs of the 12ft road which once cut through the area. Our trip is not comparable to Jack Ward's in 1917: "Having decided what our first load would be – blankets, bread, a few spuds and enough tucker in tins to keep us going until we pitched camp. (A tarpaulin would have been included in this first load and, although heavy, was soft and pliable to carry.) We get sorted out, each with a load on his back, an axe, slasher, billy and camp oven in hand. All told, it seemed to weigh about half-a-hundredweight when we started and half-a-ton when we finally got there six hours' later. My memory is of that

large camp oven and the grindstone being just the worst things I know to lug along through a bush track.”

It takes about 45 minutes to reach what is now a monument and one of the highlights of the trip – the Bridge to Nowhere, a concrete, arched edifice, cracked, dying and surrounded by thick bush. It was opened in 1936, the valley having coped with a swing bridge since 1920 and prior to this a cage in which settlers pulled themselves across the 136ft-wide gorge. The 130ft drop below was most unnerving, especially as the crossing wire was only four lengths of No. 8 fencing wire. This was soon strengthened to six wires and sides were put on the cage.

Jack Ward, an early settler relates: “Ken walked over to get a closer view of the cage. As I looked up to him, he had his eyes on me and said: ‘Do you think I’m going over on that bloody thing? To hell with you and Bill Massey and everyone concerned. Why, I would rather be back in France facing the Jerries than have that thing on. Have you any money? Let’s call the whole thing off and get the hell out of this’.”

As Jack had only a few bob, having spent all his money getting to Mangapurua they had to continue. “I get up and push it away from the bank and it tears out into the middle, then it stops and sways. I remember looking down and this is not what one is supposed to do. Instead, I should have grabbed the rope and started pulling myself the rest of the way across, but I felt ill with sheer fright and yelled to Ken to pull me back. I staggered off the thing feeling weak, nauseated and looking as pale as a lily.”

The remnants of the 1920 swing bridge are still visible on the upstream side of the Bridge to Nowhere.

Another spectacular sight on the first day is Battleship Bluff. One looks over the stream to an impressive clear papa face called the Battleship. When it was finally agreed to widen the road from 6ft to 12ft, the most difficult area was the road around Battleship Bluff. Looking today at the cliffs, the poor soil is obvious and one wonders why people ever contemplated farming it. The removal of scrub and trees left the earth exposed. It baked rock hard in the sun and slipped in huge earth slides during the storms which frequently swept through the area.

We spent our first night at the site of Fred Betjeman’s farm. It rained, but we managed our own celebrations for a member’s birthday around our gas stoves and tents, the miserable fire of damp wood only hissing and sizzling. We ate cake after our routine dehydration rations and yarned into the night, with our hoods turned up against the drizzle and drips. Food in the 1920s was freshly-baked bread using a treasured culture of potato yeast, and tins of meat. Pork was caught wild, and although pig hunters still frequent the area, the signs of rooting boars are plentiful. Eels could be caught in the Mangapurua stream. The only mention of vegetables and fruit are as onions in stews and vegetable gardens cultivated by the women. A lemon tree was found at one house and a redcurrant bush by another. The house cow provided milk.

Women began to arrive in the valley about 1923. There are a few awesome tales of women reaching the ferry landing, being hoisted on to horseback and led along the track to their new homes. There was not much steep track when we walked through, but Mrs Tester certainly found one stretch. Her horse slithered down from top to bottom, where it came to an abrupt halt. The unskilled rider did not stop, but carried on and a valiant attempt to catch her only broke her fall. Ahead, the pack horse's saddle had loosened and in the struggle to regain its balance, had fallen over the bluff to its death 100ft below. Alf Tester was obviously relieved on eventually reaching home: "On arrival, my wife, to my amazement, instead of bursting into tears and demanding to be sent back to Scotland immediately, sat down on a chair, looked at me and smiled. I kissed her and said that she was a heroine."

There were parties for the men as they married, and although the wives did much for the stability of the area, their arrival was regretted by some of the bachelors. The continuation of the comradeship of the war years, the strictly male world liberally stitched with drinking, late nights and rough humour, soon changed. The sight of women is still novel it seems, as a party of pig hunters whom we met were amazed that half our party were female and carrying our own rucksacks. Many of the settlers worked on the road, mostly on a contract basis. It was essential work as it was the only ready source of cash for the purchase of necessities. The rest of the year was planned round the felling of bush in winter and spring; the burning in high summer (February), and the immediate sowing of grass seed by scattering it evenly over the burned ground at the rate of 32lb to the acre. There are wires projecting through the gnarled trunks of trees and a sheep race at the McDonald site where the gate till swings. Sheep were bought, ferried upstream, grazed and sheared, but the Depression affected wool sales.

We walked in sunshine admiring the scenes. We passed the site of the school which survived from the late 1920s until 1939. The teacher's salary was £90 based on a £15 capitation fee per pupil, and an estimated average of six. However, in 1935 there were as many as 13 pupils in the single school room. We climbed to the only view point in the valley, the Mangapurua Trig. The track here is still wide and is one of the few stretches where one can imagine the vehicles straining up the road. At the top we lunched in sunshine along with the strong smell of potent billy goat, and could see the clouded tops of Ruapehu in the central plains and Taranaki on the south-west coast. The road was wet and great puddles lay on the clay or raced downhill, creating furrows and making walking difficult. We spent the second night at the site of the Coutts' house. Two chimney stacks remained standing, one stark and lonely on the rough grass that was once a cleared paddock, the other nestling in some rhododendrons. The latter was being used as a wall for a hunters' shack, as pig and goat hunting is plentiful. We built a fire in the chimney and brought warmth into the ruins and dark valley.

As we walked out of the valley three days' later, we thought of the end of the Mangapurua community. The first seeds of doubt appeared as early as 1920 when an article was published in the "Returned Services Association" magazine. However, it was some time before Government granted any more money. The right to additional funds was assessed by junior rangers and was on the basis of work done in the section. Young men, particularly bachelors, were walking off their land. The married settlers found themselves tied. They had put all their savings into the land and so had no money to move. No one wanted to buy the holdings. A recovery in farming during 1925 meant the valley was carrying about 18,000 sheep and 1000 cattle. Some 360 bales of wool were gathered annually and taken to Raetihi once the road was metalled. The much-used wool press at the river landing, which had kept men and horses busy, was then no longer required. However, 1926 led to 1927 and the full bitterness of the Depression.

Twenty years of farming began to take an unexpected ecological effect – landslides. Heavy rain and floods continually blocked the roads with slips and washouts, and destroyed the steeper slopes of farmland. Many of the slips which scar the hills today date to the 1936 flood. The hair roots on main tree roots hold the soil together, even after clearance. However, as the hair roots die and lose their grip on the soil, the whole land becomes unstable. Wild pigs exacerbate the problem. The land was generally found to grow good grass for three years, but thereafter reverted to fern and scrub. Settlers downstream were affected by altered flow and navigability of the Whanganui River as erosion increased and logs and mud were washed from the gorges. There were many floods during the 1930s, and the result can still be seen in the many slips which scar the landscape. The final blow came in January 1942 with one unprecedented downpour of almost six inches between 9a.m. and noon. The authorities refused to continue repairing the road. All remaining families were asked to abandon their properties. The road would be opened for them to remove their livestock and chattels. Mrs Betjeman was among the last family to go, and left the area as she had arrived, on horseback. Pleas from the remaining farmers that they could maintain the road if it was repaired for the final time, were ignored. Meagre finance was provided for resettlement.

We walked out down the steep-sided gorges and on the narrow track, completely unrecognisable as a road until we reached inhabited farmland. Our walk ended at the old Whakahora school, which is now a visitor centre and hostel. As we climbed wearily into our truck to return to Hawkes Bay, rain clouds obscured the sun and the weather closed in. Maori legend indicates that falling rain and misty low cloud shows the presence of the spirits of the dead. The 25 years of settlement is now a fading memory and the valley is being reclaimed by nature. The last large-scale pioneering farming effort in New Zealand ended in failure. The bush and fern will soon recolonise the whole of the valley. The scenes of its rise and fall will be in our memories only, but the story must be remembered – the story of this valley of abandoned dreams.