

“Te Kuititanga” – the closing in

For many of us, the trip to Taumaranui on Friday 13th April, at the start of our King Country expedition, meant making our own way there, but we gathered together at the Alexander Spa Motel for a short walk for dinner at the RSA Club as planned. There had been rain about and cooler temperatures, so none of us had driven top-down: 16 cars – Jaguars, Triumphs, MGs and a couple of more modern saloon cars were the team.

At the RSA we were welcome by the locals, delighted to share with us, in their darkened, silenced room, portraits of the Queen highlighted, as we stood to attention to the playing of the Last Post. This was followed by the singing of the National Anthem, a wonderful way to start another Club Journey, and remember those who had safeguarded this freedom of ours.

At about 9.00am on Saturday, after a good catch-up and lining up along Marae St, Taumaranui, we got on the road again, all in one team. We turned right out of Taumaranui, then left onto the Okahukura Saddle Road where we noticed the rail-golf carts waiting to start their journey on the Forgotten Railway. We continued on the 48 km journey to Ohura through beautiful scenic roads, with acres of native bush interspersed with patches of busy dairy farms.

We arrived at Ohura and proceeded to settle ourselves down with deck chairs on the footpath, in the main street, outside the Memorial Hall, with our deck chairs and thermoses. A delightful woman, Hazel Wilson, a resident (since 1945!) of Ohura (population 150), strolled across the road with the assistance of her walker, on her way to clean the one and only public toilet – her voluntary role in this tiny community, and chatted to us about her life in her favourite place! Shortly after, a gentleman, introducing himself as Stuart wandered down the street to strike up conversation with us also and to offer the opportunity to visit the town’s museum, which has established itself in the former Newton King building. What a friendly little town, once home to 700 people who provided business, schooling and community services at a time when coal mining and back country farming thrived.

We left after a leisurely cuppa and a wander through the museum, turning left via Hihi St and into a stunning drive of 45 – 50kms of astounding scenery and a narrowing and winding metal road over the Waitanga Hills. The topography of this massive area was challenging, both to the passenger, trying to absorb the profound vastness of the landscape, and to the driver, who soon learnt it was time to become at one with one’s vehicle and the rough road beneath, preventing the scraping of the bottom of one’s car, while at the same time avoiding the corrugations on the tight corners, ensuring nothing was coming in the opposite direction! An awesome drive! But if one could dare to gaze momentarily at that landscape, it wasn’t long before one realized it was quite unique display of land formations formed by volcanic activity of Mt Ruapehu over the last 200,000 years. Te Kuititanga – the closing in – perfectly describes the steep cliff-like hillsides, narrow winding gorges and slump like small areas of land seemingly sunk into the deeper earth. King Country land formations are the reason why there are a number of coal mines and still a region of underlying active faults. This impact of Mt Ruapehu’s volcanic activity has impacted on the landscape some distance from the mountain and Tongariro National Park. Meanwhile, in the last few hundred years, the native rainforest has thrived and remains supreme.

Our next stop was at Mt Damper falls, where we parked our cars and most of us walked cross-country for about 15-20 minutes to view a stunning water fall which fell from its tree covered stream some 75 metres into the depths of a fern tree hidden pool. A lovely walk rewarded by great photo opportunities. Once the falls were viewed, we travelled on via Mangapapa Road with equally challenging twisting corners and rough roads where we saw evidence of previous strong winds having stormed through, leaving masses of leaves and fallen trees, some having been chopped and sawn to retain an open road. On this amazing road, we came across the historic Moki Tunnel (preceded by a sign which instructed drivers to turn on their lights!) built in 1935, made with wooden trestles, unlined, showing the rock walls, and the wet earthen track through it. Water dripped heavily onto the cars as we drove through. Later, continuing on through this high country road, we were grateful to a few bikers who on passing us, warned of wandering cattle around the corner, who seemed somewhat miffed at their road being inundated with cars.

Once off the Mangapapa Road, we turned right onto the Forgotten Highway to travel to the pub at Whangamomona for lunch. It was here that we were completely outnumbered by motor cyclists, but we all enjoyed lunch and a coffee or beer together (the beers being enjoyed mostly by the cyclists!) After a leisurely lunch we travelled on 17 kms until we arrived at Junction Road at the top of the Pohokura Saddle, another gravel road, with many animals observing us with curiosity as they grazed along the roadside: cows, horses, sheep, goats, pigs, turkeys, pheasants and ducks. Shortly after, we turned right onto the Otaroa Road, where found yet another earthen tunnel, the Tarata Tunnel, built in 1904 at a cost of £315?

At this stage our leaders Robin and Claire were having some problems with their car, and fortunately with Sandy and Trevor driving a 4wd and owning their own tow rope, they were able to keep on the road. The following morning, the sickly car was towed to a garage for repair.

Sometime later we turned onto Bertrand Road on which the historic suspension bridge, built in 1897, Taranaki's oldest suspension bridge crossing the Waitara River. The roads improved as time went by, and the wider sealed roads made for simpler driving but more traffic, then we found ourselves on SH3, north of New Plymouth. Before long we were all installed at the Flamingo Motel, a regular haunt for the Club when staying in New Plymouth.

For dinner, it was agreed that we should hire taxis to get to the Mongolian restaurant, Gengy's, thus avoiding the problems of parking numerous cars. For some, this dining experience was yet a different kind of challenge – one had to select the ingredients for one's own dish to be cooked by the wonderful team of chefs standing around a giant hot plate. Meals were delicious and the company great.

We all enjoyed a good night's sleep, and given Robin's desire to get away to repair his car, John Edwards Carlene, and Larry and Diane were put on barbeque duties. Breakfast was yummy – hashbrowns, bacon, eggs and toast. Many thanks to you all for stepping up to the mark and providing a delightful and satisfying breakfast.

At about 9.00am on Sunday we left the Flamingo Motel, having learnt that the lotto ticket Des had bought the night before for us all, had not been successful, so we hadn't become millionaires, but all were focussed on this new day of travel. While Robin was away with his

car, Alec Good lead the group as we left southwards out of New Plymouth and travelled to the Pukeiti Rhododendron Trust Gardens, where the avid gardeners among us were keen to wander through from landscaped garden to landscape garden to see, to touch, to know all the beautiful plants they could find, but time didn't allow for that. Actually, one could spend all day there – Pukeiti was established in 1971 in the magnificent native rain forest on the lower slopes of Mt Taranaki. Last year the amazing new building including café and seminar rooms was opened by the Governor General last year. Our trip following this visit took us up and down tight valleys, narrow, tar sealed roads with rich overhanging native rainforests of Mt Taranaki.

Finally out of the forest, venturing into the open spaces of Taranaki Dairy farmland, and the home of various gas and oil production plants, we travelled on to Kaponga where we met up with Robin and Claire whose car was now fully road-worthy. It was an opportunity to look through a private collection and stop for lunch before travelling on more straight undulating country roads until we joined SH3 which became our regular route. Once reaching Kai-iwi, west of Wanganui, we turned left onto Rangitatau Rd and continued on to Brunswick Road. At the Casual Café, we gathered together having lost some of our roadies along the way as they turned for more direct routes to their homes. We enjoyed a lovely last coffee together before we all took our own ways into Wanganui and onto our own respective destinations. 700kms travelled – stunning scenery, awesome roads and great company. Many thanks to Robin and Claire for a superb well organised journey. Thanks also to John and Carlene, Alec, Larry and Diane, and Sandy and Trevor for their support in guaranteeing the weekend's huge success!