

The Kuaotunu School used to stand on the top of a small hill at the turn off to Waitaia Road. It was built 1892-93. There was a school house on one level, the school on another and the Catholic Church on the level that is now occupied by Ian Websters workshop.

Half the school was shifted in the early 1940's, it is now the Kuaotunu Hall. The Church was shifted to Tairua in the 1950's, it has been shifted again since to another site in Tairua. The other half of the school was shifted to Mercury Bay Primary in School Road and was used as a Hall.

When the Primary department shifted to South Highway, the ex Kuotunu half school was shifted, and taken over by the Mercury Bay art group.

The school house remains on the original site and is administered by DOC.

There are four Kauri trees on the northern slope below the school level. The two lower ones were planted in 1937 and the two nearer the school site were planted in 1969 by R.A. Simpson. The two later ones did receive some fertiliser and are far better specimens. For anyone interested it is a good example of Kauri growth rates. Out further from the 1937 Kauris there are two Rimu which were also planted about 1937. Lower down the hill again there are some Totara and two Swamp Cypress which were planted in 1910 by a relieving teacher, Mr. Ormiston.

When I attended the Kuaotunu School these trees were well below the view line and you could see all the valley, beach and out to sea. My first teacher was a Mr. Bark 1937-40. There was only about 14 pupils, just about one in every class.

I remember he used to shout at the bigger kids when he was trying to get the message across. But us little jokers got on and filled our blackboards up with every letter in the alphabet. When doing school work in those days, as soon as you could write every page had the date on it. 1939 is the first year I can recall. That was the year the war broke out, everyone got into war mode. Morning talks were conducted by the teacher in front of a map of the world, we pupils would have to contribute some war news. You can imagine it was fairly difficult for five kids from one family to produce something different. In the late 1940 Mr. Bark was enlisted to the armed forces. Sadly he was a casualty and his wife left with a young family.

Suddenly there was a teacher crisis. To replace Mr. Bark, a teacher with a family took up residence in the school house., We thought he could have a wooden leg because he walked with a limp and didn't bend at the knee. He was always threatening to strap for bad behaviour or effort. As long as you bawled loud enough you could get off with a light sentence. I can recall once he called out Zena Courtney one of the bigger girls- Right out in front of the class (hold out your hand), Zena moved in and with both hands took a viselike grip of the strap. An absolutely silent struggle took place. When the teacher finally wrestled his strap free it was immediately returned to his desk drawer. They both ended up with very red faces.

I recall a young chap only about seventeen took up residence in the school house with his sister. I don't think he was a teacher probably more of a child minder. We didn't take him very seriously.

There was a semi square stock proof gate at the bottom of the hill into the school grounds, a few days after he arrived we left school to go home and he was in a hurry to get down to the Post Office. We made a little crowd and packed into the gateway, probably the whole 7 of us. When he arrived to go through you could see his face light up, he plucked us out one at a time and biffed us one. After that incident we took little more notice of our school work.

He probably did not stay more than a year and I believe he went into the navy. I wonder whether that was his sister?

2 About 1941-42 the war was really taking its grip and any able bodied men were getting the call up. Those that didn't front up were deprived of their freedom and it was up to the police to make the arrests. One such person known to us as Huka had his own plan of escape. When the Whitianga constable came to take him in he climbed up a big tall macracapa tree and the law had to go home empty handed. We kids thopught he could have been quite useful in close combat as we were about to experience in the next while. Kuaotunu had a lot of plum trees etc on old house sites, being fairly familiar when each tree would be right for picking we were fairly successful. A group of us were up on Pumpkin Flats a plum tree loaded with fruit and a nice little stream running by. It was located in a paddock with large kanuka and patches of blackberry and surrounded by a barbed wire fence I should say Huka had a very dubious tenancy to it. About 5 of us boys had eaten as many as we could and were washing our faces and hands in the stream, next thing Huka leaps among us with a roar and a great big axe held aloft. We scattered in all directions. The only way to breach a barbed wire fence is over the top and that did slow us down a bit, it took us a while to regroup. When everyone was accounted for the only damage was a bit of skin and trousers left on the top wire.

To this day that tree is still known as the big axe tree.

Being invaded must have been fairly possible in the minds of adults. A shelter was made ready down in one of the old mines down behind the school. And now and then there was a drill to see how fast we could get down there.

There was also a plan of action should there be a landing on our coast, an old hand with some experience of explosives was to blow up all the bridges. Just as well there were no false alarms. At one stage one of the watches saw a dark shadow not far off shore - a submarine. He got one volunteer, the plan was to row out in a clinker built dingy powered by two oars, blow out the lens of the periscope with a double barrel shot gun and lob a couple of sticks of gelignite down the tube.

Luckily for all concerned it turned out to be a very large drift of sea weed.

As I said earlier during the war finding teachers for a small school such as ours was a bit of a problem. During this period several Aunty's had a go at "closing the gaps" but discipline got a bit out of hand. I don't want to give children any ideas but a couple of things I will disclose. Breaking branches across the track the teacher used to use to get to and from school. Asking to go to the toilet and seeing how from the school you could get, for a start we were just going a bit up the Waitaia Road or down to the Cemetery Road, then someone got access to a bike and I think the record was around to Kuaotunu West. Perhaps fortunately we moved to Mercury Bay and the school closed a year later.

During the war years or a little after it was common practice for people to set fire to roadside vegetation and it was a practice used by farmers to keep their properties clean. About 1943-44 a few chaps were recovering steel from off the old mining sites up the Waitaia. The day they took the last load out the hills at the head water of the Waitaia were set alight. So the re-generating vegetation is nearly sixty years old.

January and February 1946 was hot and dry, some of us were down on the beach below where the Turners baches are. That seemed to be our most favoured swimming spot. There was a fresh sea breeze coming in from the North/West. A horseman rode up the Blackjack Road, next thing there was a raging fire ripping and roaring through the scrub and not so many pines then. I can still see Jim Courtney, a boy of fourteen, with his arms folded proclaiming "What a crime! What a Crime!" For many years after that you could see right down to the foreshore and the seaweed patches out from it. Quite a spectacular view. Now a drive over the Blackjack only reveals a wall of pine trees.

Now for a clangour If ever a fire starts on the Blackjack, no need to risk life and limb. Make a stand to protect the pockets of native. When everything is black again, just be vigilant with snipping off every seedling pine that appears.

I mentioned before about the Kuaotunu Post Office, in 1946 our brother Richard, just back from secondary school was the Post Master. Then followed Zena Courtney whom I mentioned before was the last Post mistress when it closed in 1947. Richard has to teach her everything she needed to know! You can imagine it had not been a hive of activity in the later years, the main functions were sorting the mail and telephone services. The mail used to arrive by the cream lorry about three times a week. The Mizens from Mercury Island used to collect their mail about once a week, they would come across on the Mercury Bell, I recall being very impressed by this freshly painted 55-60ft blue hull, white gunnels, motor vessel anchored just outside the breakers. In earlier times you could buy confectionary and soft drinks at the Post Office, Richard or Zena never had to register a birth, death, or marriage in their time of employment.

In the 1946-47 years returned servicemen were starting to queue for resettlement. It was about then that Martin Hodge arrived in the district. A strong, hardworking, honest man with a robust appetite. He was originally in the line to buy a farm at, Opito now owned by the Vela's. He spent about a year there working for food and lodgings. Anyway the owner decided otherwise about selling him the farm. But by that time Martin had got to like the district. He did work for other farmers in the area and decided to set up a firewood business. There was an old batch on the roadside of the stream that runs through Angela Ansins place, no one else lived near that area at the time apart from a bach that did appear on the creek side of the road opposite Paul Reilley's garage.

Martin set up his firewood docking saw on what is now Irish town Road, he lived in the bach beside his work place. His first truck was a pre-war model. He acquired it from Fanny Crosbie and it had been stored in a shed unused for a few years, he called it "Molly."

From this small beginning he has left his marks and memories on the district, from the firewood he aquired a bigger truck and started carting metal, sand and shingle. It was about that time that Gwen arrived on the scene. Gwen's grandmother was one of the first European women to live in Kuaotunu, and lived at the foot of the Kuaotunu Hill. One of the first methods Martin had of loading his truck with beach metal and sand was a scoop and wire rope which was attached to a winch over the back of the truck. It was a two person operation well worth an ear and eyeful. The quarries were in operation at the time as well. Martin could operate that on his own. By that time he had acquired a bulldozer and a front end loader. The quarries were at the boat. ramp and in front of Daly's property.

There was quite a lot of material to remove to get at the blue metal. Martin would take a load of top material every time he went home, it was deposited around the fire-brigade area all around and across the road from the Kuaotunu motors building and on the reserve down past the shop. Quite a lot of that material was also deposited on the beach side of the road in front of the Hilldale area.

I purchased my property at Kuaotunu from Alf Chapman in 1957 coming to build a house and live there in 1966. Kuaotunu was connected to state power in 1961.

Getting back to the influence Martin and Gwen Hodge had in Kuaotunu. 1963 had them well established in the contracting and freight business this included the cream run from the Kuaotunu area to Mercury Bay butter factory which is now the site of the museum, this contract also included mail and goods delivery. Later they took on the same contract for the TeRerenga to Coromandel run. Both these contracts were continued up to 1975-76 when the milk tanker service took over, this gave way to the delivery services as we know them today.

About 1963 Gwen and Martin engaged Trevor Street from Whitianga to build the Kuaotunu Motors. All the concrete base and floor are from material off the beach, the roof has concrete tiles on it which were manufactured in Whitianga. Martin had to have it finished by Christmas and Trevor and his men found themselves finishing the job on Christmas morning. Once the building was in place, the next thing much to the convenience to everyone was the installation of petrol pumps etc.

Of course when Martin and Gwen were out on jobs, there was no way anyone could get petrol. The keys for the pumps were left in a place all the customers knew. If you wanted petrol any hour of the day or night, you would get the key, do your own refuelling and then sign the amount in the book. This worked very well as long as everyone returned the key to the proper place. The biggest hassell seemed to be remembering to put the keys back. A person living at Matarangi at the time was guilty of that. Luckily he signed the book. With the advancement in civilisation this honesty practise was discontinued some time later.

In July 1966 there were record rainfalls in the Kuaotunu area. The bridge collapsed with two council trucks ending up in the river, both drivers has a lucky escape. Rain continued to fall for about a week after the bridge collapsed. The road to Whitianga was blocked by a couple of very large slips. Dane Simpson and Martin decided to go and have a look. Down the other side near where there is some white railings there was a particularly slushy slip, they decided to go over it, to see if there were any more.

Dane leading ! suddenly the whole mass started moving. Dane managed to gain the safety of the other side but Martin had disappeared. Next, from down further a voice yelled "could you give us a hand"! Dane slithered down the side of the slip, and here is Martin, with only his head sticking out, his whole body and limbs were caught in mud and trees. Next the slip starts running again, and it was only Dane's agility that saved him. Looking back there was just a slurry of mud where Martin had been. Dane had horrible moments of thinking Martin was lost. Then the voice again " Hi I'm Down here!". Martin had been carried with trees, mud, and luck right down to the gully floor, and spewed out clear of everything. As you can imagine he was a bit the worse for wear, broken ribs, dislocated shoulder and internal injuries. He spent some time in hospital but physically he never really recovered.

In the Christmas of 1979 Martin and Gwen sold the petrol /diesel to the partnership of Christine & David Wight , Dougal & Barbara Hoyland. In 1982 they built the shop that is there now.