

The foreshore of
Rangihoua Bay, Northland.
IMAGE: ANN BREMNER

WALKING *the talk*

Northland's Rangihoua Heritage Park not only commemorates New Zealand's first European settlement but also holds powerful and varied meanings for its many visiting hikers

WORDS: JACQUI GIBSON

It's a warm Sunday morning in the northern Bay of Islands when Hugh Rihari greets me with a smile outside the farmhouse he shares with his wife Raewyn.

Armed with a handful of papers, including two archaeology reports published by the University of Otago, Hugh ushers me to an empty chair on the porch. We're not seated in view of the pōhutukawa-lined foreshore of Te Puna inlet just metres away, but behind us I can hear the occasional woosh of the incoming tide mingling with the warbling of tūi.

Hugh is 76 years old, slight in stature, and sports a bushy grey moustache. One of the region's most influential kaumātua (elders), Hugh is also kaitiaki (guardian) of an historic pā that was once home to Te Pahi and Ruatara – Ngāpuhi rangatira (chiefs) who traded and travelled widely in the early 19th century and were largely responsible for New Zealand's first permanent European settlement.

It's a local history that Hugh is often asked to recall. Just a few days ago, he met two busloads of Kerikeri

students and teachers and gave a history lesson on his whanaunga (relatives). Hugh traces his links to Ruatara through Ruatara's wife Rahu, and to Te Pahi through a tūpuna's (ancestor's) relationship with Te Pahi's mother.

Meeting the group at Rangihoua Heritage Park nearby, Hugh pointed to the terraced pā in the distance, explaining how its strategic position helped Te Pahi, Ruatara and their tūpuna flourish in the Bay of Islands over centuries.

“Without Rangihoua Pā, I told them, ‘New Zealand's first European settler community would've washed up on some other shore’,” says Hugh. “The 1800s were exciting but dangerous times. That pā gave Marsden's missionaries much-needed protection. And because they settled in the Hohi Valley, where it was hard to grow crops, the community gardens that surrounded the pā gave the missionaries food to stay alive.”

Rangihoua Heritage Park is a 44-hectare park on the Purerua Peninsula about 40 minutes' drive

1 A view of the Te Pahi Islands from Rangihoua Heritage Park, Purerua Peninsula, Northland.
IMAGE: ANN BREMNER

from Kerikeri and three and a half hours' drive from Auckland. Formally recognised by Heritage New Zealand as a heritage area in 2007, the park officially opened in 2014 to commemorate 200 years since the founding of Hohi Mission Station, New Zealand's first European settlement.

Planned and directed from Australia by the Rev Samuel Marsden, the mission operated under the protection of local Māori from 1814 until it was abandoned in 1832. Today it doubles as a thoughtfully designed and well-signposted heritage track that starts at a shelter called Rore Kāhu at the top of the hill and finishes on the foreshore of Rangihoua Bay.

On my visit to the park, I encounter a church group of 100 or so sodden people winding their way back up the valley through soft-falling rain. As they pass by, they cheerfully call out “Kia ora!”

A couple stops to chat. Despite the grey day, the pair tell me, they've picnicked on the grassy terraces of Rangihoua Bay where three missionary families (the Kings, the Kendalls and the Halls) came ashore in a bid to convert Māori to Christianity.

The couple has viewed the colourful exhibition signs explaining where New Zealand's first schoolhouse was erected and paid their respects to the missionaries buried at the King family plot.

From information plaques lining the track, they've learned how Rangihoua's first pioneers spent their time: building, teaching, blacksmithing and twine spinning for some of the men; sewing, cooking and raising children for most of the women.

Meanwhile, kids in wet togs trudging up the track have swum in the same ocean where a brig named *Active* safely offloaded missionaries, crew and cargo more than two centuries ago.

By the time I cross the river onto the beach, final stragglers are taking selfies with the Marsden Cross, a monument marking the country's first Christian service, before heading back up the hill.

“The power of the site,” Hugh tells me, “is that it means different things to different people. For some, it's about reconnecting to that early Christian heritage and imagining the strength and resolve it took for the families to settle halfway across the world in a difficult and dangerous place.

“For people like me, Rangihoua is the place of my ancestors. It's where two vastly different cultures tested the idea that they could live side by side. It's where this country's bicultural story first began.”

In 2003 Hugh was invited to join seven others with family or spiritual ties to Rangihoua to form the Marsden Cross Trust Board.

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RANGIHOUA: A TIMELINE

Key moments in the history of a long-established Māori pā that became a bustling trading post then New Zealand's first planned European settlement in which Māori and Europeans lived side by side.

c. 1200

Polynesians cross the Pacific Ocean and settle in New Zealand, becoming tangata whenua, the people of the land. They disperse to regions such as the Bay of Islands.

1769

Lieutenant James Cook arrives in the Bay of Islands on the HMS *Endeavour*, marking early contact between British and Māori and the beginning of trade relationships.

1790s

Sealers and whalers from around the world come to the Bay of Islands to make use of the local resources.

1800s

Te Pahi, a Bay of Islands' rangatira, gains a reputation for trade and fair dealing with the sealers and whalers from his base at Te Puna.

1805

Interested in technology and trade opportunities, Te Pahi travels to Sydney, where he meets Church of England clergyman, the Reverend Samuel Marsden. Together they plan a Christian mission at Te Puna. Another Bay of Islands' rangatira, Ruatara, begins a four-year whaling boat journey that takes him to England.

1809

Marsden meets a gravely ill Ruatara on Ruatara's return journey to New Zealand and brings him back to health. Together they plan to introduce wheat production to New Zealand.

1812

Ruatara returns to the Bay of Islands as Te Pahi dies, becoming Te Pahi's successor at Rangihoua Pā. By now, Rangihoua Bay is a major hub in the northern Bay of Islands.

1814

Marsden missionaries arrive and set up camp at Rangihoua Bay, under the protection of Ruatara. New Zealand's first Christmas Day service is carried out days after the first landing.

1815

Ruatara dies less than three months after the settlers arrive, and the mission's protection is handed over to Kerikeri rangatira Hongi Hika. The Christian Missionary Society believes it has secured the settlement, buying 80 hectares of land for 12 axes. The transaction is regarded by missionaries as the first formal transfer of land in New Zealand.

1816

The missionaries build a community of homes, gardens and workers' huts at the bottom of a steep, shaded valley called Hohi. They remain dependent on local Māori for basic food and on the mission in Sydney for other necessities. New Zealand's first school offering European-style education and Christian religion is opened.

1820s

Starvation and conflict are constant worries for the missionaries. As new settlers arrive in New Zealand, they take up residence at Kerikeri and Paihia.

1830

The Christian Mission Society decides to close the Hohi Mission.

1832

The last remaining settlers at Rangihoua Bay abandon the mission, moving a kilometre west to Te Puna.

1914

The Marsden Cross memorial is erected at Rangihoua to mark New Zealand's first Christmas Day service in 1814.

1930

The Crown takes ownership of the Hohi block for a public reserve.

1971

A monument to the King family members buried at the Rangihoua Mission is erected.

1989

A re-enactment of the landing of the first settlers is held at Rangihoua to mark 175 years since the mission was founded.

1991

A monument memorialising Thomas Hansen, the first European non-missionary settler, is erected.

Early 2000s

The Marsden Cross Trust Board is set up to develop Rangihoua Heritage Park. Over time, the trust board, Ngāti Torehina, the Rangihoua Native Reserve Board and DOC become joint managers of the park.

2012-13

Archaeological excavations are carried out by the University of Otago with support from DOC, Ngāti Torehina, the Marsden Cross Trust Board and Heritage New Zealand.

2014

Rangihoua Heritage Park officially opens to mark 200 years since the arrival of missionary settlers in New Zealand.

2015

Rore Kāhu, the park's central building positioned at the entrance, designed by Cheshire Architects, is a finalist in the World Architecture Festival.

2019

An estimated 5000 people visit Rangihoua Heritage Park every year.



1 The view to Rangihoua Bay and the Marsden Cross memorial erected in 1914.

2 Plaques explaining settler life feature throughout Rangihoua Heritage Park.

3 Rangihoua Heritage Park opened in December 2014.

IMAGERY: MARCEL TROMP

“The goal of the trust was to acquire Rangihoua and use it to tell the story of our tūpuna [ancestors] and the missionary settlement. I was 100 percent on board with that. From the outset, I hoped the park would become a place where people could learn how the two cultures of New Zealand came together.”

In 2012 a two-year archaeological dig undertaken jointly by DOC and the University of Otago revealed several clues about early life at the mission: evidence of missionary buildings, including the schoolhouses, as well as remnants of personal items, such as tools, tin-glazed earthenware and tobacco pipes.

Data collected from the dig, as well as historical information provided by Hugh, fellow trust board member John King, DOC and Heritage New Zealand, formed the basis of two major reports on the archaeology of the mission station. Both reports were later used to design the park layout and signage.

Hugh estimates that around 5000 people visit Rangihoua every year and he is happy to share stories of local rangatira and their interactions with Marsden's missionaries.

“I think it's just so important that future generations understand the full history of our country and have a balanced view about those early days. At Rangihoua, they can do that. It's a beautifully laid out park, and the stories of both Māori and Pākehā are right there, side by side, for everyone to enjoy.”

GETTING THERE

Once you reach the Hohi Road car park, walk to Rore Kāhu, the park's central meeting place, where panoramic views of the valley will open up before you. Take the path that winds down the valley alongside plaques telling the story of early Māori settlement, the beginnings of Christianity in New Zealand and the layered story of Māori and European contact.



A PERFECT DAY TRIP IN NORTHLAND

Rangihoua Heritage Park is one of nine Northland heritage sites within the Tohu Whenua programme, which helps visitors learn more about New Zealand history. Other Northland Tohu Whenua sites are Cape Brett Rākaumangamanga, Clendon House, Kororipo Heritage Park, Māngungu Mission, Pompallier Mission, Ruapekapeka Pā, Te Waimate Mission and the Waitangi Treaty Grounds. You can tour these heritage sites by downloading Heritage New Zealand's 'Heritage Trails' driving app. Select 'On a Mission' from the 'Path to Nationhood' tours to begin at Rangihoua Heritage Park. To take a smartphone audio tour when you're there, visit rhp.nz/tour.