

Historic Information  
DOC Fact Sheet  
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# Great Barrier Island Historic Heritage

Great Barrier Island (Aotea) has a rich history dating back to the initial settlement of New Zealand by the East Polynesian ancestors of today's Maori population. From the 1840s, the island's natural resources attracted European settlement and a number of 'boom and bust' industries, which exploited the island's forests and minerals, and the migrating whales in the surrounding oceans.

## *Maori heritage*

The Ngati Rehua, hapu of Ngati Wai, who live on the island today, trace their association back over many centuries. Evidence of this long history are the island's many archaeological sites, generally found in coastal locations. They include pa (earthwork fortifications) with extensive defence and habitation features, terraced agricultural and settlement sites, groups of storage pit depressions, middens (food waste deposits), and stone-working sites. Some of the middens date to the earliest period of occupation, and provide information on the past environment and food sources.

## *Extractive industries*

Copper was discovered in the remote northern part of the island in 1841 and New Zealand's earliest mine workings were established at Miners Head in 1842. Extraction of copper ore has created an impressive chamber 75m long, 25m wide and 50m high inside a coastal headland. The mine and related features can be visited by boat, though access to the main chamber is restricted for safety reasons.

Gold and silver were discovered in the 1890s and numerous shafts and adits are located in the Okupu/Whangaparapara area and elsewhere. Remains of the 1899 Oreville stamping (ore crushing) battery at Whangaparapara, with its massive stone walls above and below the road, are an impressive reminder of the mining era.

Great Barrier's kauri forests were largely intact until the arrival of Europeans, but were logged with increasing intensity from the mid 19th to the mid 20th century. A few areas of original kauri forest survived, and much of the remainder has since regenerated, with the

help of 150,000 kauri seedlings planted by the NZ Forest Service between 1976 and 1987.

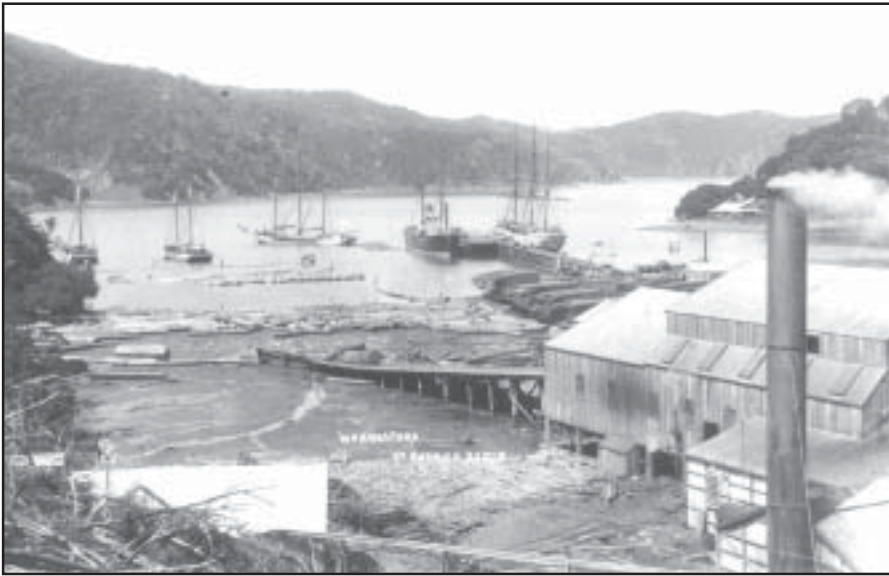
One of the island's best known historic landmarks is the Kaiarara main dam on the Kaiarara Stream below Hiramata (Mt Hobson). Built in 1926 by George Murray of the Kauri Timber Company, its dimensions are impressive (40m wide by 14m high) and it is one of the largest of the 3000 or so timber dams built in New Zealand. Kauri driving dams were erected to drive large quantities of kauri downstream. Designed and built on the spot they provided a barrier against many tonnes of water and quantities of kauri logs and were able to withstand the combined force of these when the dam was tripped and the logs were driven downstream through the gate.

*Oreville stamping battery and  
workmen's houses, 1900.*

*H. Winkelmann photograph,  
Auckland Institute and Museum.*



Department of Conservation  
*Te Papa Atawhai*



*Whangaparapara timber mill, early 1900s. Auckland Institute and Museum.*

Another reminder of the logging days is the ruins of the Kauri Timber Company sawmill (1909-14) at Whangaparapara, which include a steam tractor, cast iron chimney stack, concrete foundations and stone walls. This large sawmill once processed logs rafted by sea from the Coromandel and Northland as well as from the island. Some of the walking track routes in this area follow the early tramlines used by the logging industry.

The remains of New Zealand's last-established whaling station can also be seen at Whangaparapara. Whaling began in New Zealand waters in the 1790s and peaked in 1839, when 150 American and 50 other whaling ships were recorded in and around New Zealand waters. Depletion of whaling stocks and a more protective approach towards marine mammals have led to the banning of whaling in New Zealand's waters. The Whangaparapara station was built as recently as 1955, but had closed by 1962.

## ***Early settlers***

The Harataonga Homestead (c.1906), managed by the Department of Conservation but privately leased, is one of a few surviving early homesteads on the island. Nearby is a small cemetery where members of the Alcock family, one of the early European settler families on the island, are buried, although a headstone to a Dr Hanson is an anomaly. Dr Hanson, the black sheep of a well-to-do family in England, worked at the mining camp and is said to be buried above the Oreville stamping battery, his workmates having drunk away the burial money sent by his family. When a headstone later arrived from England it was set up in the Alcock cemetery for convenience.

## ***Shipwrecks***

A number of ships have been wrecked on Great Barrier's rugged coastline. One of the worst shipwrecks in New Zealand's maritime history was that of the *SS Wairarapa*, which struck rocks near Miners Head just after midnight on 29 October 1894. About 140 drowned and Great Barrier Island's remote location made the job of rescuing the survivors difficult. Most of the dead were brought back to Auckland, but some remain buried on the island in two small cemeteries that can be visited at Onepoto and Tapuwai historic reserves.



*Harataonga homestead. Chris Young collection.*