

Bridge to Nowhere

Whanganui



S. Jones

The Bridge to Nowhere in the Whanganui National Park is a steel-reinforced concrete bridge with a span of 34.1 metres. Building such a substantial structure nearly 40 metres above the Whanganui River within the steep ravine walls of the Mangapūrua was a considerable engineering achievement.

It is the foremost monument in New Zealand to the many ill-fated attempts made throughout the country to farm marginal land. It represents a significant chapter in New Zealand's farming and environmental history. For these reasons it was registered by Historic Places Trust in 1994 as a Category One Historic Place.

The bridge gets far more use today than when it was built. This bridge is the unofficial flagship of Whanganui National Park, an iconic symbol for New Zealand adventure tourism and a major visitor destination on the Whanganui Journey. It is still used as a trampers' bridge at the southern access point to the Mangapūrua Valley.

History

The Mangapūrua Valley was opened by a Government scheme in 1917 to provide farmland for returned soldiers. This remote valley, about 27 km upriver from Pipiriki, was divided into 40 or so bush-covered blocks, ranging from around 121 to 728 hectares. Virgin forest was cleared, and a total of 35 holdings developed. A school was opened, and for some years the valley prospered.

A timber swing bridge for horse traffic was erected in 1919, connecting the isolated valley with a river-boat landing on the Whanganui River. The steel-reinforced, concrete bridge was built in 1936 following many years of agitation by settlers for improved vehicle access. It was designed by the Public Works Department and built by private contractors Sandford and Brown of Raetihi. Aggregate for the concrete is said to have been transported from the Rangitikei River. At the height of construction activity just five people were employed in constructing the bridge. The completion of the bridge was delayed considerably due to floods, slips, and the consequent delay in the supply of materials.

However, economic hardship and problems associated with the remoteness and difficulty of access resulted in many families abandoning their farms. By the end of 1941 there were only three families left. After a major flood in January 1942 the Government declined to make further funds available for road maintenance, and it officially closed the valley in May that year.



The fine new bridge was used for only six years. This was a personal tragedy for the families who had endured 20 years of hardship for no gain. By 1946 earth and grass covered the bridge decking. The disappearing road, old fence lines, stands of exotic trees, occasional brick chimneys, and this bridge serve as the only reminders of the planned settlement of the Mangapurua Valley.

The bridge today

In recent years the bridge has become a key tourist attraction on the Whanganui River and is nationally recognised. Increasing use by trampers led to the opening of the two-day Mangapurua Track from the Ruatiti Valley in 1988, which includes the bridge crossing. Major concrete repairs were undertaken in 1996 and 2006.

The Bridge to Nowhere can be accessed by a gentle 40-minute walk from the Mangapurua Landing (Whanganui River), the two-day Mangapurua Track or by a three-day tramp from Whakahoro Hut (lower Retaruke Valley) via the Kaiwhakauka and Mangapurua Valleys.

A settler's story

The Bettjemans were among the first settlers to take up land at the ill-fated soldiers' settlement in the Mangapurua valley in the Whanganui River hinterland. They were also among the last to leave.

Under the Discharged Soldiers Settlement Act 1915, Fred Bettjeman applied for one of the sections in 1916, when the government opened up land for development by returned servicemen in the Mangapurua Valley. Realising that a road through the valley and a bridge across the Whanganui River to Taranaki were essential for full development, he visited the Prime Minister, William Massey, to get his personal assurance that these schemes would go ahead. Fred went to the valley in 1917 via the inland route, travelling by coach and packhorse. He had studied the plan carefully and wisely chosen a section in the middle of

the valley. His first job was to cut down a tree to make room to erect his tent.

Fred's dream was to establish a first-class farm in the valley. He fought passionately to develop the area and was an articulate advocate for everything affecting its progress. By 1920 he was writing to the returned servicemen's magazine, suggesting that the authorities were not doing enough long-term planning for the area. He also spoke out about farming methods used by some of the less experienced settlers, and this did not always make him popular with other would-be farmers.

His wife Nancy's nursing qualifications made her the unofficial health authority in the valley. The Red Cross provided a trunk of medical supplies and replenished it when required. She later acted as midwife if called upon. The Bettjemans' five children grew up in the valley, and in 1925 Fred started campaigning for a school. One was opened in 1926 and operated for the next 13 years.

Fred and his family struggled on through the depression, floods, erosion and a dwindling population to keep their farm going. By 1937 the county council had stopped maintaining the last ten miles of the access road at the river end and the settlers in the lower half of the valley had little option but to walk off their holdings. Only three properties, including the Bettjemans', were being farmed in January 1942 when an unprecedented downpour seriously damaged the rest of the road. In May the Cabinet passed an order closing the road because of high maintenance costs, and the settlers were notified that they would have to abandon their properties. The road was reopened in November that year so that settlers could remove their stock.

Further information

For more information about the Bridge to Nowhere, contact the Whanganui Area Office, Department of Conservation (06-348 8475).

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