

Molesworth Station

Cob Cottage Interpretation Panel 1

Molesworth Station has grown from a group of neighbouring runs into New Zealand's largest farm. Its history of farming, battling introduced pests and climatic extremes in a big, challenging and fragile landscape has shaped the character of both the land and the people who have worked here. It has come to typify the large scale pastoral farming enterprises, which began in Marlborough with the Flaxbourne Run in 1847 and became the mainstay of the New Zealand economy and a strong influence in a New Zealand 'identity'.



MĀORI TRAILS

The Molesworth country was one link in the Māori trails developed throughout the high country of Te Waipounamu (the South Island). The trails, resting places, mahinga kai (food gathering resources), burial sites and stories relating to the trails are recorded in Ngai Tahu traditions and are of immense significance to Ngai Tahu today. William Travers, who owned the Lake Guyon Run at the headwaters of the Waiau River, described his men finding stone tools, paua shells, remains of eel baskets and other articles left along the line of a route to the West Coast.



THE DIRECTOR OR HIS YOUNGER BROTHER?

Molesworth was possibly named after a director of the New Zealand Company, Sir William Molesworth; or perhaps his younger brother Francis Alexander Molesworth. The names Molesworth Moor and Molesworth Creek appear on the first topographical map of the Acheron Valley, made by Joseph Ward and Cyrus Goulter in 1852, but it was most likely the pioneer of New Zealand pastoral farming Frederick Weld who named these features. Weld explored the upper Awatere in 1850 and discovered Barefell Pass. Francis Molesworth was his friend.



Sir William Molesworth.



Frederick Weld.



A young Francis Molesworth.

FROM A SIX WEEK EXPEDITION TO A SIX DAY JOURNEY

In the 1850s, driven by the desire for more pastoral lands and a practical overland route to the new Canterbury settlement, the first European explorers probed the mountains for rivers and passes to the south of the Wairau River and beyond the head of the Awatere River.

Captain W.M. Mitchell and runholder Edwin Dashwood, with a whaler named Harris, travelled to the head of the Waihopai River, over into the Acheron (which they named) and followed it to the Clarence River. They then picked up the Hossack River which led them to the Hanmer Plain. The trip from north-east to south-west took them six weeks and was fraught with dense matagouri, loss of their compass, storms of sleet, hail and snow and numerous river crossings. Mitchell's memorandum noted that in the future their route could easily be accomplished in ten days.



Fording the Upper Wairau River 1855. Painting by Frederick Weld.

In December of the same year Frederick Weld, with Lovegrove, found Barefell Pass at the head of the Awatere River and followed the Guide River down to the Acheron, but mistakenly thought he was in a different place and that he could see the Waiau River in the distance. This proved costly when he ordered 700 sheep through his route to Canterbury and the flock had to be abandoned when his shepherds could find no way out of the Clarence, despite Mitchell's party having managed it through the Hossack River. In 1852 Edward Jollie and Edward Lee drove sheep through Frederick Weld's Barefell Pass route and successfully took them through to Hanmer via a new route (Jollies Pass). A viable stock route from Marlborough to Canterbury had been found.

In 1855 Frederick Weld and Alphonso Clifford followed the Upper Wairau River and found the expansive grassland of Tarndale Basin. Weld then joined McCabe and travelled up the Clarence to Lake Tennyson and over Island Pass. They then retraced their steps and walked out to Canterbury. Thanks to these men, by 1855 travellers and stock drovers could now travel via Tophouse and Tarndale, or via Tophouse and Island Pass, from Nelson to Christchurch in six days while stock drovers took three to four weeks with flocks of up to 4000 sheep. In 1857–1858 over 24,000 sheep were driven from Nelson to Canterbury.



1880



1960



MOLESWORTH RUNHOLDERS

Following the stocking of the easier front-country, the less accessible land of the upper Awatere, Clarence and Wairau was taken up around the mid to late 1850s. Many names are associated with the runs that were formed, amalgamated, developed or lost as fates and fortunes waxed and waned.

1854

Dr James Robertson first took up the land that was to become Molesworth and called it the Barefell Run. Upon his death the land was transferred to Charles Elliott in 1863. By 1860 the burning of tussock was a widespread farming technique. It was usually done in spring to promote new grass which was more palatable to sheep than tussock. Soils were left exposed and vulnerable to erosion. Burning had ceased to be a major management practice on Molesworth by 1919.

1864

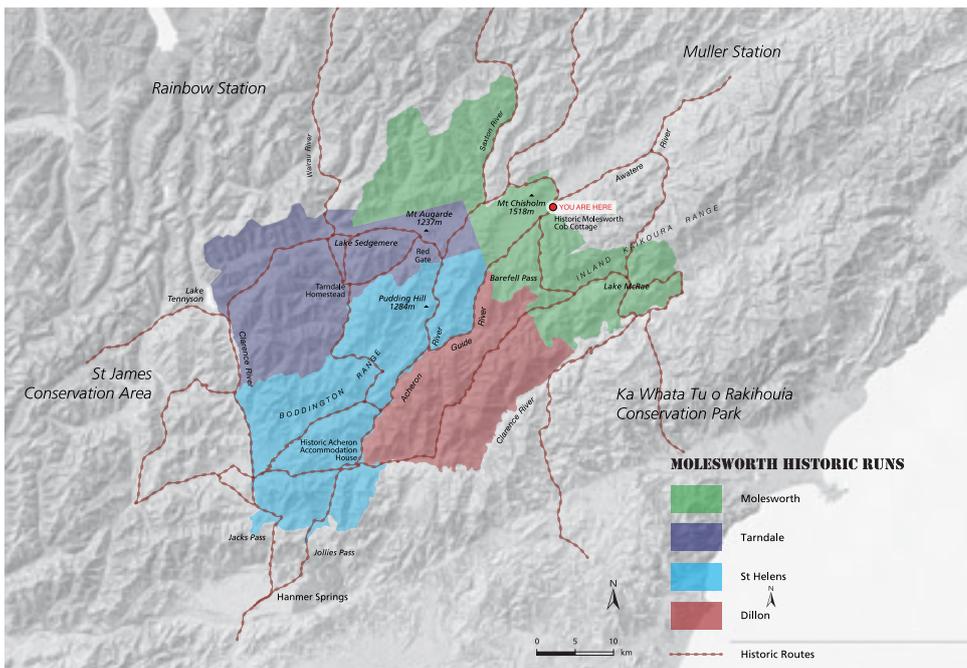
The southern portion of Charles Elliott's land was purchased by Thomas Carter who held the Clarence Run. The Clarence Run was later incorporated into the St Helens Run.

1865

John Henry Caton purchased the remaining 73,000 acre (29,500 hectare) lease of Elliott's Barefell Run and named it Molesworth Station. He engaged Cornelius Murphy as manager. Murphy built the first room of the cob cottage you now stand in.

1870

William Atkinson took over from Caton and added land around Lake McRae. The 1870s saw the arrival of rabbits. The more open grassland following burn-offs suited rabbits and their numbers increased rapidly.



Charles Elliott.



William Atkinson.



Left to right: William Thornber (Molesworth clerk 1915–1920), one of the three Boddington brothers who worked on Molesworth and Wally Messinger, outside the Homestead.

MOLESWORTH RUNHOLDERS CONT...

1878

Herman Fuhrmann and Charles Willis became Molesworth Station owners and engaged Thomas Fowler as manager. Fowler made roads, built the first woolshed, introduced rabbit poisoning and planted trees for firewood. He planted a waggon load of willows from Altimarloch Station and later made a plantation of cork elms. In a few years there was an abundance of firewood around the home station.

1884

New owner W.S. Taylor, with manager James MacNaughton, built the present Molesworth Homestead in 1885. They left the run in 1890 with substantial losses.

1890

William Acton-Adams, owner of Rainbow and Tarndale Runs, amalgamated those properties with Molesworth Station to create a pastoral giant of 320,000 acres (129,500 hectares). Acton-Adams sowed English grasses, particularly cocksfoot. At their peak his properties were stocked with approximately 50,000 sheep. By 1900 there were approximately 95,000 sheep on the combined properties, including St Helens, that make up Molesworth today.

1911

The Rainbow and Tarndale Runs were transferred to Duncan Rutherford while Molesworth Station transferred to his wife Eva Lydia Rutherford; this enabled the couple to circumvent the Land Act 1908 (which limited the number of runs one person could own). Long-serving Robert Boddington was their most capable manager. Duncan's death in 1917 forced the family to sell.

1918

William Nicholls and son William H. Nicholls enjoyed a short ownership before the father died. The properties were taken over by Robert Lochhead and son John who operated them on behalf of the New Zealand Farmers Co-operative Association.

1921-1938

Thomas Leighton was appointed manager for the NZ Farmers Co-operative Association. The Great Depression, an increasing rabbit problem, the long history of firing the land to promote pasture growth (but which encouraged soil erosion), saw deterioration of the runs and an increase in mortgages.

1938

The NZ Farmers Co-operative Association auctioned off all stock and surrendered their license and properties to the NZ Government. The Department of Lands and Survey took over Molesworth Station and Tarndale Run and leased out the Rainbow Run. They decided to stock only cattle. Mervyn Mackie (Bill) Chisholm was appointed manager. Burning-off was stopped on the station.

1948

Initial ground control of rabbits was followed by aerial poisoning that commenced in 1948.



Tarndale yards and buildings.



A crisp winter morning.



Drafting cattle.



1936–1937 Last shearing gang at Molesworth Station

MOLESWORTH RUNHOLDERS CONT...

1949

The neighbouring St Helens Run and Dillon Run reverted to the Crown and were added to Molesworth. By 1952, aerial poisoning was the principal means of rabbit control.

1953

Aerial oversowing with cocksfoot and clovers commenced.

1963–1966

Some 37,000 hectares of land were seeded.

1978

Don Reid, Bill and Rachel Chisholm's son-in-law, took over as manager of Molesworth. Current levels were reached of about 10,000 head of cattle wintered. Sheep were grazed for home kill only.

1987

Department of Lands and Survey and then Land Information New Zealand controlled Molesworth Station. The Crown leased Molesworth Station to Landcorp Farming Limited. Covering 180,476 hectares the station was and remains today New Zealand's largest farm. Around 30% is ungrazed.

2001

Jim Ward was appointed manager. The annual muster of cattle continues to be a major job and relies on horses; in summer about 50 horses are used on Molesworth and up to 40 working dogs.

2005

The Department of Conservation was given responsibility for overall management of Molesworth with Landcorp managing the farm as leaseholders.

Historical information obtained from many sources including *Molesworth*, L. W. McCaskill, 1969; *Remembered Trails*, J. E. Tomlinson, 1968 and *Musterer on Molesworth*, Bruce Stronach, 1953. Photographs – Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, NZ; The Nelson Provincial Museum; Canterbury Museum; Don and Ann Reid Collection; Marlborough Museum and Historical Society; Rob Suisted www.naturespic.com



Murray Bush of Bush's Honey.



Stockman Gary Hollister in the smithy.

Molesworth Station

Cob Cottage Interpretation Panel 2

Life for the managers and the woolworkers of the four high country runs that would become Molesworth was centered on the homesteads, but the life of the station hands had a nomadic component. Long months were spent in tent camps and outlying huts as stock was managed and rabbits controlled.



Musterers at Burnt Whare in the upper Acheron River, on the neighbouring Muller Station. Muller Station and Molesworth Station musterers often helped each other out when working neighbouring blocks of land and many stories relate to friendly rivalry at celebrations such as Christmas Day or at the end of a season.

THE DIARY OF FRED CRAWFORD

The 1933 diary of Frederick Harold Crawford tells of the variety of life at the home station. Fred cycled in two days from Blenheim to Molesworth, which impressed the manager enough to offer Fred a job in the shearing shed. Fred then rotated through helping the blacksmith, harvesting the homestead's crops, weeding the carrots grown for rabbit bait and mixing up the phosphorus rabbit poison. He was later appointed as cook to a musterers' hut and proceeded to deliver mutton chops, mutton stews and mutton broths with very few additional ingredients. In the winter of '33 they were trapped for 10 days in a snowstorm, with only a corrugated iron hut and three tents to protect them from the elements. Fred took photographs on Molesworth in 1933.

As a general rule the station was closed for a month during winter and the staff paid and free to go on holiday. Spending the hard-earned cash on booze was a popular pastime. One stationhand never made it past the first pub down the Awatere in 17 seasons.



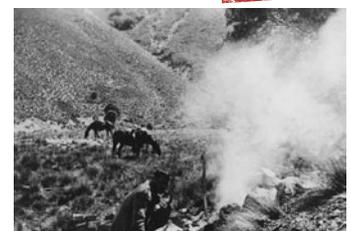
Shearing, classing, scouring, pressing and packing wool brought the station to life in the summer months. Returning musterers would complain that the home station accommodation had been taken over and that they were reduced, once again, to setting up camp beside the cookhouse. Christmas was also a lively time, with one day of rest, a big meal prepared by the station cook, a couple of barrels of beer, cases of whisky and a few disagreements as well! Whisky was not allowed at other times but many musterers have convoluted tales of sneaking in bottles when returning from holiday and failing to resist the temptation to drink and ride.

1890



Mail coach leaving Molesworth.

1933



Musterers' fire on Robinson Saddle.

CATON, MURPHY & COB

Well known and colourful Canterbury cattle dealer John Henry Caton was the station runholder when his manager, Cornelius 'John' Murphy built the first cob hut on Molesworth – half of the present cob cottage you now stand in.

Caton is believed to have been born in Smithfield, London and went to Sydney in 1849 and then to Canterbury in 1853. He established himself as a butcher in Lyttelton and was at one time owner of the Canterbury Hotel. He was a cattle dealer and drover who also acquired a number of land holdings. He was described by one who knew him as a 'well built, fairly powerful man and a rough customer'.

In 1865 Caton acquired the Barefells Run from Charles Elliott. He renamed the property 'Molesworth Station' and put Murphy in as manager. Murphy appears to have been the first to live on the run, built the first cob hut and described taking cattle from the Station to the West Coast and Christchurch several times a year. He also over-wintered, which he described "as a sort of Esquimaux's life; we were shut up (by snow) sometimes for four to five weeks". Murphy told the Railway Commission in 1882 that he had lived at Molesworth from January 1866 until April 1869.

In March 1869 Caton and Murphy drove a mob of cattle (which had been held at Molesworth) from Canterbury to Otago on behalf of William 'Cabbage' Wilson. Instead of banking the £3,300 received from the sale in Dunedin as instructed, Caton and Murphy conspired to 'lose' the money (held in a carpet bag) on the route back to Christchurch. Due to suspicions of others on the drive, Caton and Murphy were arrested and the money was found in Caton's possession. Both were found guilty of attempting to defraud Wilson. Murphy, who had attempted suicide while in custody and was described by the Judge as 'Caton's tool', received three months imprisonment while Caton received three years with hard labour.

Caton was declared bankrupt in June 1869 and the trustee sold the occupation rights to Molesworth to William Atkinson. Murphy lived in Blenheim after his release and Mt Murphy on the northern side of Saxton Pass is believed to be named after him. Caton later went to Australia and is reported to have drowned in the Lachlan River, New South Wales.



A hydraulic wool press compressed two bales into a "dump" for carting. Twenty-five dumps (or 50 bales) was the load for an eight-horse wagon. Gosling's truck could take 19 bales.

1933



The woolshed photograph taken by Fred Crawford 1933.



Leaving the Molesworth woolshed.



Leaving the Molesworth woolshed.

THE FIRST COB HUT

The first one room hut was built in 1865, followed some years later with the addition of a second room by runholder William Atkinson to create Molesworth Station's first 'homestead'. This served the station until 1885 when a new cob homestead, the present one, was built just over the terrace behind this cottage.

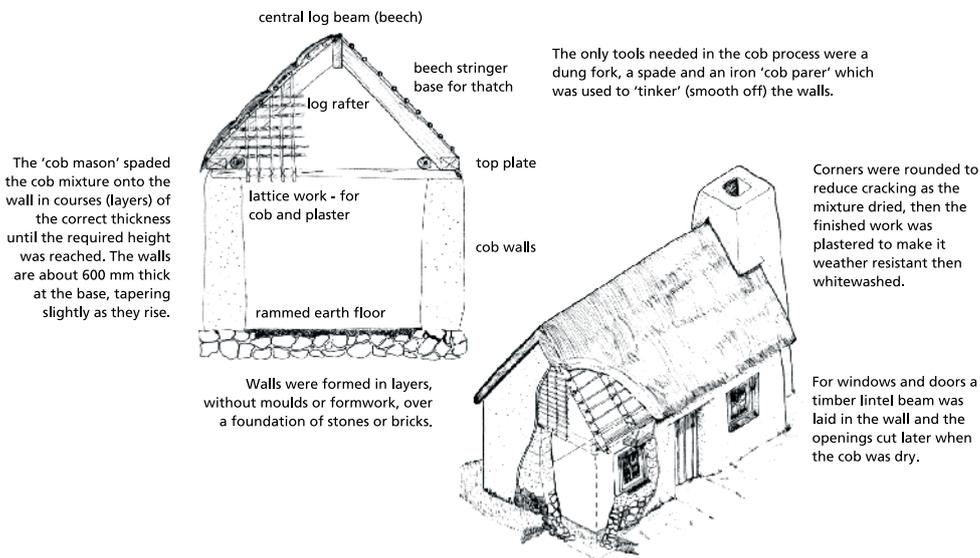
This cottage has been used over the years as accommodation for station workers such as musterers and rabbiters, and since the 1950s as a store shed. At some stage the original thatch was replaced with corrugated iron.

The cottage was restored in 1993 from a state of disrepair. Rotten windows, doors and floorboards were replaced and cob work supervised by a specialist 'cobbler'. The fence around the cottage keeps out cattle that like to lick the natural salts that are contained in the earth walls. The cottage is now managed by the Department of Conservation.

COB CONSTRUCTION

Timber was scarce in inland Marlborough. The fires of moa-hunting Māori and European explorers and farmers had destroyed many dryland forests. Cob, a mixture of clay, straw or tussock and animal dung proved an inexpensive and practical building material for early settlers; many were familiar with cob techniques. It also has good thermal insulation qualities.

Cob sets hard when dry and a coat of whitewash helps keep the walls weatherproof. A foundation of stones prevents rising damp and a timber framework supports the thatch.



Bush Gully outstation.



Returning to Tarndale.

Molesworth today has three outstations: Red Gate, Bush Gully and Tarndale, and station huts and bivvies. The station is traversed with a network of 4WD roads, there are 6 airstrips, 7 water supply schemes and communication with the outside world is only a phone call away. Only a few hundred sheep are now stocked on today's cattle farm – mutton for staff and dog tucker – compared to the 95,000 sheep stocked at the station's peak merino era. But one aspect of station life has not changed, the role of horses and dogs. Both are still used in working and mustering cattle.

Molesworth Station

Cob Cottage Interpretation Panel 3

Dominated by Mt Chisholm and almost hidden in summer behind the willow trees of Molesworth Stream, the corrugated iron roofs of Molesworth's home base create a colourful mosaic. The 180,000 hectare Molesworth Station is managed to combine a profitable cattle farm with conservation. A rotational grazing system is used to minimise grazing pressure while maximising production. Maintaining soil and water values are key management tasks alongside weed and pest control and the preservation of historic and natural features. Activities here at the home base change with the seasons, supported by outstations at Bush Gully, Tarndale and Red Gate.

Molesworth Station's manager and family live at the homestead. Other permanent staff include a stock manager, machinery operator and station cook. Stockmen are employed for an August–May season and are based at Molesworth, Tarndale and Bush Gully. Staff use horses for stock work and these are bred and broken in on Molesworth; around 50 horses are run. 4WD trucks are used to position horses, dogs and supplies for stock work; up to 40 working dogs can be in use. The station has airstrips and uses fixed wing planes for aerial topdressing and over-sowing pasture; helicopters are chartered to assist with mustering.

Today the main homestead enjoys power and telephone, internet and television connections with the outside world, but Molesworth is still isolated. Children of permanent staff are home-schooled and then attend boarding school. The mail truck comes once a week to Molesworth and the town centres of Hanmer and Blenheim are just a few hours' drive away. The outstations rely on diesel generators for power with woodburning stoves and LPG used for heating and cooking.



The Homestead photographed about 1920.



The Woolshed 1908 viewed from the south-west.

THE HOMESTEAD

Built in 1885 by legendary cob builder Ned James, this home is registered Category 2 under the Historic Places Act.

THE WOOLSHED

Built by William Acton-Adams around 1890, soon after he acquired Molesworth, using iron from the boiling-down plant at Tarndale. It is registered Category 2 under the Historic Places Act.

MT CHISHOLM

You can walk to the top of Mt Chisholm, look down on the small red dots of the station buildings and enjoy panoramic views of the surrounding mountains and valleys. The peak was named in honour of 1942–1978 manager Bill Chisholm whose foresight and ability helped turn Molesworth from a severely eroded sheep run into a profitable and sustainable pastoral beef farm. The nearby Rachel Range is named after his wife.

THE COOKHOUSE

In the early days of Molesworth the fare was “merino mutton with mutton from merino”. Archived farm books have provision lists for packmen that include tea, sugar, flour, salt, pepper, potatoes, jam, onions, curry, spice, raisins, egg powder, butter, vinegar and rice ... but no green vegetables. Musterers started the day with two chops and a billy of tea and ended the day with mutton, potatoes and if lucky, a chocolate pudding.

Today’s menu is more diverse. The station sports a ‘short-growing-season’ vegetable garden and supplies are regularly brought up from supermarkets. However, the job of station cook – that can involve up to five meals a day – would not suit everyone. As cook Shirl Hewlett explained to journalist Harry Broad: breakfast is bacon and eggs and porridge, sometimes sausages; mousetraps or scones for morning tea; chops with roast veggies for lunch or sandwiches if the boys are away; sometimes an afternoon tea; for dinner a roast and a chocolate pudding or apple pie. If the boys have been shooting we have venison. I make my own preserves and pickles.

“I can’t see a younger generation wanting to do the sort of hours I put in here. I had a younger woman come in who said it must be lovely to finish off at five and I said no that’s when it starts getting busy. And what time did I start? Well sometimes it can be 4 or 5 in the morning ... and she said bugger that.

I like the uncertainty of Molesworth. You never know how many are coming”.



Molesworth Station smithy with flaming forge.



The Cookhouse and vegetable garden 2012.

Molesworth Station

Cob Cottage Interpretation Panel 4

Tapuae-o-Uenuku is the result of rapid uplift of the Inland Kaikoura Ranges. It is the highest peak outside the Southern Alps and is sacred to Maori.

MOLESWORTH'S CLIMATIC EXTREMES

Rainfall on Molesworth varies from about 670 mm per annum in the east to 2000 mm at the western boundary. Some interior areas receive only 300 mm. Snow can fall at any time throughout the year and it is not uncommon for winter snow of up to 45 cm to remain for up to eight weeks. Jack Tomlinson recalls in his book *Remembered Trails* that snow one year was so heavy and deep at the Acheron Accommodation house that the horses walked over their fences and wandered over to munch on the building's thatch roof. Mutton for dog tucker was thrown into the snow where it remained frozen until the thaw.

Frosts can occur throughout the year and average 230 days per year. Summer temperatures can be extremely high bringing a high fire risk during autumn. Bruce Stronach, author of *Musterer on Molesworth*, noted that during extreme temperatures when musterers were high on the tops, they would place a stone in their mouths to relieve thirst.

Molesworth altitudes range from 600 m to 1800 m. Here at the home station you are at 890 m. Situated at 1000 m, Tarndale is thought to be New Zealand's highest homestead.



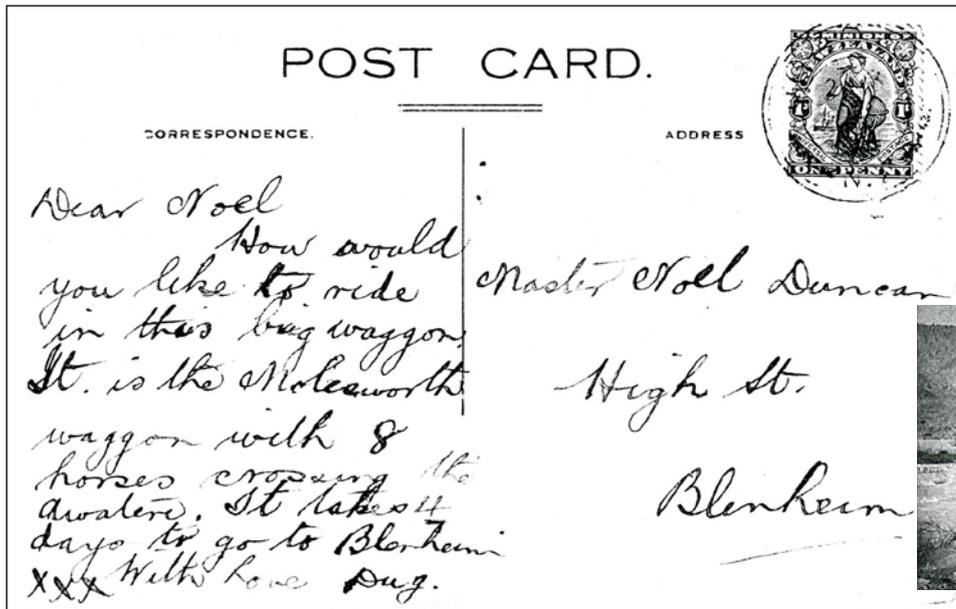
1920



1950



Mail truck being towed out of the Awatere River at a ford; thought to be the Castle Creek crossing. The driver is Frank McKinley.



1911



Blenheim-Molesworth. Those riding the eight-horse wagon over rough track, and through riverbed, over a 4-day journey from Molesworth to Blenheim had a different ride to that of today. Such drama warranted a picture postcard sent proudly by one survivor to his friend.



OVERVIEW OF LANDSCAPE AND PAST VEGETATION PATTERNS

The underlying landforms of this landscape are a result of tectonics (faulting and uplift) and fluvial action (rivers and water flow). This area is dry with a low rainfall and extreme temperatures. The first human visitors to this part of Molesworth would have encountered a mosaic of forest, scrub and tussockland. The forest would have been mountain beech towards the north and west and totara and mountain ribbonwood in the east and south. The extent and composition of scree and rocklands were probably comparable with those of today.



UNIQUE ADAPTATION

The screes visible on many sides from this viewpoint host a suite of specially adapted plants. One of these, the scree harebell *Wahlenbergia cartilaginea* (1) is only found in South Marlborough.

Others, such as *Lignocarpa carnosula* (2) and *Epilobium pycnostachium* (3) are well adapted to the high country of Molesworth.



1.



2.



3.