

# Molesworth Station

## Chisholm Tracks Interpretation Panel

### BILL CHISHOLM AT MOLESWORTH 1942–1978

The name Chisholm is entwined with that of Molesworth Station. On June 1st 1942 a young couple Bill and Rachel Chisholm were welcomed, from a buggy that sat in half-a-metre of snow, into a rough cottage. Their hosts for that night were two rabbiters who served them their first meal on the job as the new Molesworth manager and his wife – a rabbit stew cooked in billies over an open fire. This simple occasion was the beginning of a new era for Molesworth Station.



Bill and Rachel's daughter Ann on Ward Pass. Ann's husband Don Reid became manager on Bill's retirement in 1978 and stayed on until July 2001.

In the 36 years that Mervyn Mackie (Bill) Chisholm managed Molesworth, the station underwent a huge change. From an eroding, "white elephant" of a sheep-grazed landscape and financially bankrupted operation, taken over by the Crown in 1938, the Chisholms slowly rejuvenated the properties under their management into a going concern – namely Molesworth, Tarndale and later St Helens and Dillon Runs totalling around 450,000 acres (182,100 hectares). The decision to stock only cattle had been made in 1940 and Bill Chisholm, former Department of Internal Affairs deer culler and field officer, proved to be the right man at the right time. Rabbits and other noxious animals were brought under control, grasses were sown, weeds controlled, cattle grazing managed throughout the seasons, herds increased, staff trained, access tracks maintained, roads built, buildings, cattle yards and fences erected, pastures established and thousands and thousands of trees grown. Bill Chisholm's work was acknowledged with the award of an M.B.E. (Member of Order of the British Empire) in 1966.



1978



Bill Chisholm on the job.

1946



Rachel, Bill and Bruce in the mid 1940s.

1960



*The Weekly News* often covered Molesworth in its photographic assignments; this one featured on 16 March 1960.

The Chisholms moved from a Molesworth era with horse-only access, to a place traversed by 4WD vehicles, cars, aeroplanes and helicopters and a place in touch via modern technology to the rest of the world. Horses and foot travel are still used by today's stockmen but the extreme isolation once experienced by the Chisholms and all who worked on the station has disappeared. However, as a traveller through the dry and dusty vast geography of the central South Island's high country today, you can experience a sense of what that isolation was like for the people of the past.

## THE TRUSTY NIBBIE

In an earlier era, nibbies or mustering sticks were one indispensable tool to the men who worked the high country on foot. Notched and sometimes inscribed with the names of stations worked, the wooden nibbie had immense versatility. Like the hikers' walking pole of today it was used for balance, in the case of the musterer essential for crossing shingle scree. It was a life saver on a frozen hillside, being used on the uphill side to push out and keep one's feet in a more horizontal position.

Unlike the walking poles of today, the nibbie was multi-functional. It was good for taking a boiling billy off the fire; jamming it into the ground for use as a dog tether in a land of few trees or to hang a slaughtered sheep in camp. They were handmade from a straight length of tough manuka or lancewood. Nibbies are still used today when mustering cattle, especially around the yards.



Molesworth musterers pose with their wooden nibbies. Jack Tomlinson is second from right, back row.



## SNOW TOTARA

Scree covers the sides of Mt Chisholm. The most obvious native plants on the more stable of these scree are the large circular, relatively flat snow totara *Podocarpus nivalis* "trees". These shrubs are related to the tall totara of the forest but have adapted to grow horizontally in the harsh sub-alpine environment they are found in.



Historical information obtained from *Molesworth*, L. W. McCaskill, 1969; *Remembered Trails*, J. E. Tomlinson, 1968 and *Musterer on Molesworth*, Bruce Stronach, 1953. Photographs – Ian Mitchell; *Weekly News*, Marlborough Museum and Historical Society; Don and Ann Reid Collection; Jan Clayton-Greene; Rob Suisted [www.naturespic.com](http://www.naturespic.com)

# Molesworth Station

## Mt Augarde Track Interpretation Panel

### ISOLATION AT RED GATE

Augarde and Red Gate are names that share a place in a Molesworth story of isolation and bloodshed.



Red Gate – Presumably named for a red-painted gate that sat near the junction of the Severn and Acheron Rivers, Red Gate and the nearby Fingerpost became key waypoints during the horse track era of Molesworth Station. Duncan Rutherford built the first hut at Red Gate in 1913. The present hut dates from about 1957. It has been upgraded over the years and is one of several present-day station huts used by stockmen. **Red Gate Hut is not for public use.**



Red Gate Hut. The tall post by the fence is the old fingerpost that originally stood at the junction of the Severn and Acheron Rivers.



A lack of firewood, especially in winter, was always a problem for those staying in old station huts and tent camps. Thousands of trees were planted in the Bill Chisholm era of management and today Molesworth huts feature shelter-belts and handy supplies of firewood.



An earlier Red Gate Hut with stretched rabbit skins drying on the fence.



Pack horses crossing Robinson Saddle.

## IVANHOE AUGARDE

Ivanhoe Augarde was a foreman working for the Clarence Run in the 1860s, based at a homestead at the junction of the Acheron and the Clarence Rivers. On horseback or foot were the only travelling options. Young Ivanhoe, 24 years of age, was in love with Kate Gee who lived many miles away in the Upper Wairau Valley. Kate communicated that she wished the relationship to end. Ivanhoe wrote her a heartfelt plea, begging her to change her mind. With no postal service to hand, and in a desperate state of mind, Ivanhoe asked a worker known as German Charlie who was travelling north, to deliver the letter.

As he travelled, German Charlie shared the contents of the letter with other men. When news eventually reached Ivanhoe that he had been ridiculed in public, he planned revenge. He confronted Charlie at the Saxton homestead near Bowscale Tarn and a fight ensued. The fight was broken up and Ivanhoe was left unsatisfied. Some time later, after writing letters to his and Kate's family, he borrowed a rifle and set out to find Charlie. On the 29th January 1868 Ivanhoe found Charlie at the Tarndale property and shot him. The murderer then set out to return to the Clarence Valley. At Red Gate he turned the gun on himself. Ivanhoe Augarde is buried between Red Gate Hut and the Severn River. A mound of river stones marks his grave. An inscribed headstone was placed on the grave by Augarde descendants in the 1970s, around the time Mt Augarde was named.



## KEA

Kea can be seen soaring over the vast tracts of Molesworth hill country. Today they are a protected species. In earlier times when this was predominantly sheep country, kea were considered a menace as they could land on a sheep and kill it for a feed of mutton. Musterers and rabbiters were paid for each beak collected and they would cook the bird into a tasty stew; the double reward made a bird kill very worthwhile. The technique was to wait until the bird was stationary, on a sheep's back or resting near the ground, then make a quick, downward strike to the head with a musterer's nibbie or stick.

Historical information obtained from *Molesworth*, L. W. McCaskill, 1969; *Remembered Trails*, J. E. Tomlinson, 1968 and *Musterer on Molesworth*, Bruce Stronach, 1953. Photographs – Malborough Museum and Historical Society; *Molesworth*, L. W. McCaskill; Archives New Zealand; Jan Clayton-Greene; Rob Suisted [www.naturespic.com](http://www.naturespic.com)



## DWARF BROOMS

The track passes through a cluster of the tiny dwarf broom, *Carmichaelia nana*. This is a woody plant adapted to the harsh dry conditions; a tiny shrub which generally has no leaves and uses its flattened stems to convert sunlight and moisture to food. A second dwarf broom *Carmichaelia monroi* also occurs on Mt Augarde.



# Molesworth Station

## Pudding Hill Track Interpretation Panel

**ROBERT JOHN BODDINGTON**

The view from the top of Pudding Hill is typical of the sight Molesworth musterers in the 1930s would have encountered on a top beat. When the station was a sheep run, tent-camp musterers awakened to the clanging of the cook's tin spoon at 3 am. After two mutton chops and a billy of tea the men would be out mustering beats on the hill country. The Boddington and Rachel Ranges were worked on foot. In blistering dry heat or on frozen slopes the shingle scree were traversed by teams of men and dogs, each gully flushed out and the sheep mustered to the nearest station yards.



Bob Boddington (second left) at the Rainbow Accommodation House with a pack team. The packman's job was to pack in equipment and supplies to the tent camps of the high country. With musterers constantly on the move, a team of pack horses accompanied each mustering party. Packmen set up the tents and organised camp. Hawkers were the men who brought in supplies from the towns to sell to the musterers, shearers and other workers at the station homesteads. Today's access roads, 4 wheel drive vehicles, helicopters and cattle have changed the character of station life.

One such worker was Robert (Bob) John Boddington, whose name lives on in the nearby range. Bob arrived at Tarndale as a 14 year old fleece picker during the shearing of 1881. He stayed on, learning the skills that eventually made him manager in 1890. At that time Molesworth, which also included the Tarndale and Rainbow runs, was leased by William Acton Adams. After Adams sold in 1911 Boddington managed for successive lessees Duncan Rutherford and William Nichols. Bob Boddington spent 38 years on Molesworth. At various times he was cowboy, butcher, packer, rabbit-poison mixer, musterer, stockman, head stockman, head shepherd – through all these roles he grew to know the property intimately.



**1890**



Station workers on nearby Langridge with Fred Whittle centre and Jack Dalziel on right.

Mutton was the mainstay of a station worker's diet; and that of the dogs – musterers were allowed a quarter sheep for tucker for their four dogs every second night. Butchering was an essential skill for most men and 'dressing-down' times were sometimes used as a recreational wager. Deer and wild duck were a welcome respite from mutton.

**"The menu for musterers was merino mutton and mutton from merino."**

Bob, one of four brothers from Belgrove, was a lifelong bachelor. Always attired in riding trousers and leggings and almost glued to his horse, Bob was a man of legendary energy and endurance. One story relates that he shod eight packhorses in a day, then after tea rode "over the hill" to Lake McRae and led the muster at daybreak. As they said, "Bob was a real man". His habit was to use two hacks and alternate them – one being ridden while the other led. This allowed the big man (108kg) to rapidly cover the ground without exhausting his horse. Although he was a man of variable moods – he could ride all day without conversing with his companions – his staff described him as 'a fair boss who gave a young chap a chance to make good'. Bob left the station for a break in July 1919 and two weeks later died in Nelson from heart failure.

The nearby Rachel Range is named after Rachel Chisholm, wife of another of Molesworth's stalwart managers, Bill Chisholm.

**1930**



Molesworth musterers (left to right) Joe Maxted, Alan McLean and Bill Marshall with dogs Heather, Ross and Sergeant.

**1930**



Mustering in the snow.

**1960**



Sheep were replaced with cattle in the 1940s. The few sheep run in Molesworth today are destined for the cookhouse and for dog tucker.

Chances are you will walk to Pudding Hill in the heat of summer. It might be hard to imagine but Molesworth in the winter can be covered in metres of snow. Huts were few and far between and much of the time musterers and rabbiters had to camp out in hard frosts, snow, blizzards and relentless rain.

Land of rocks and rivers deep  
Lousy with dogs and merino sheep  
Squatters' paradise, musterers' hell  
Molesworth Station, fare you well.

Musterer's Rhyme

Historical information obtained from *Molesworth*, L. W. McCaskill, 1969 and *Remembered Trails*, J. E. Tomlinson, 1968. Photographs – Marlborough Museum and Historical Society; mychillybin Ltd.



## HEALING THE LAND

Due to a lack of environmental understanding the first European occupants of the Molesworth region overgrazed the lower hills and valley floors. This, coupled with an explosion of rabbits, removed much of the natural plant cover. A dramatic change of land use in the 1940–1950s including the change from sheep to cattle and lower stocking rates encouraged natural healing of the environment and allowed the woody vegetation to return. Where native shrubs still hung on, they have expanded and spread. In other areas plants such as briar rose have become the dominant woody species. It has been observed that with time and a suitable seed source the natives can spread and colonise through the briar cover.

