

Alexandra Redoubt

By Janet Pates

Tuakau's Alexandra Redoubt is the best preserved and most original of the Waikato redoubts built by the British forces during the New Zealand Land Wars.

On July 10th 1863, three hundred men of the 65th regiment under Col, Wyatt, began the march from Drury to Tuakau. There is a story that the men were given their three days rum ration when they left. As most of them considered the best way to carry it was internally, their progress was somewhat less than orderly. Never the less, they reached Tuakau three days later and set about constructing a redoubt to protect General Cameron's right flank and to keep watch over the river during the planned invasion of the Waikato. Named Alexandra after the popular Princess of Wales of the day, the redoubt was said to be the first position occupied by British troops on native land in the Waikato.

It took just a fortnight to clear the ground of scrub and fern and complete the main construction. Built to the plans of Lt Hurst of the 12th regiment and covering around one third of a hectare the rectangular fortification features flanking bastions on diagonally opposite corners all surrounded by a three to six metre high parapet and ditch. Stone cobbled paths were laid around the inside space and a well dug in the south eastern corner. A flight of 365 steps was built to bring supplies up from the river 300 feet below. At the base of the steps, the troops erected a cross made of three blocks of sandstone on which was carved the 65th's regimental arms and the inscription ; India: Arabia.

With the main construction completed half of the troops were withdrawn leaving the rest on garrison duty under Captain Swift. Canoes patrolled the river and at night, a string of lanterns flickered across the river.

On 7th September 1863 a detachment from the redoubt was involved in the well documented Camerontown incident which made military history when two VC's and five military medals were awarded to a body of only fifty men.

The only instance we know of the redoubt coming under fire happened five days after the Camerontown incident when the sentries were fired on by a group of Maoris for about half an hour. But they didn't linger as they were on their way to attack the Pukekohe East Church.

There has been mention of two 63 pounder cannons being set up in the bastions and on one occasion firing on Maori canoes. No weapons of that calibre appear on official lists but the Encyclopedia of NZ describes the redoubt as 'a small fort armed with a heavy gun ' and in recent years, a cannon ball has been found there, just under the surface of the earth.

Within a few months the 65th regiment had moved on and the redoubt was occupied by the 1st Waikato Militia regiment. Buildings were erected for an officers' mess, mens' accommodation, hospital and bakery. Later, the redoubt was garrisoned by various detachments and also from time to time used , by the Forest rangers.

The site owes its good state of preservation to having been surrounded by a cemetery virtually from the time of its military occupation. The first burial there was that of Pte Stephen Grace, killed in the Camerontown incident. His grave is one of a group of three situated in the far right corner as viewed from the present entrance. The other two are of James Berry a veteran of the Waikato Militia who drowned in the river in 1871 and John Williams a member of the Imperial forces who also drowned in the river in 1874. In 1915 these three graves were concreted by the NZ Government and in 2007 the Ministry of Culture And Heritage identified them with small marble headstones. For many years, Esau Gale another veteran of the 65th regiment operated the punt which provided the link with Tuakau and those areas across the river. After his death in 1915 he was buried next to his wife and the Government added his name to her head stone. Unfortunately the stone was badly damaged and repaired but the section bearing his name was not recoverable.

In 1916, largely due to the efforts of Miss Edith Statham, inspector of war graves for the Dept of internal affairs, a monument was erected at the redoubt.

1963 saw centenary celebrations held at the redoubt and the erection of the first information board. In 2013 a kauri tree was planted by the Tuakau Museum Society to mark its 150th anniversary and in 2015, a diorama and a lookout were erected under the auspices of the Tuakau Development association to commemorate the arrival of early settlers on the Ganges and other ships of the Waikato Immigration scheme. .

There have been periods during the redoubt's 150 year history when the redoubt has become neglected and overgrown, grave fences and wooden headboards lost. But of latter years the site has been well cared for by the local council and a new information board erected while the monument and the three old military graves are looked after by the NZ Dept of Culture and Heritage. To the left of the parking area is the entrance to walking track through the surrounding bush reserve.

Tuakau's most historic site is one which is visited and appreciated both for its local and its wider New Zealand historical significance.

