

Tekapo in the 40's, 50's & 60's – by Hugh Hunter-Weston

The construction of the powerhouse and dam started just before the 2nd World War started with not much done during the war. Construction started in earnest when the war finished.

My first memories are of it consisting of two main camps. No 1 camp was situated to the south of SH 8 on the East bank of the river. About where the old Ministry of Works road gang houses were. This consisted of several rows of houses in which the Public Works Department workers lived, most of whom worked drilling the tunnel and building the dam. A second camp, No3, was in the area immediately above the terrace on the West side of the road to the powerhouse, known as Siberia, as there was no shelter of any sort there. These workers dug the tunnel from the powerhouse end and built the Powerhouse. There was also a large shed or factory, at the bottom of the terrace, about where you turn left to go to the powerhouse where the blocks that were used to line the tunnel were made. The office workers lived round in the bay, No 2 camp, roughly where the Office for the motor camp is now. The engineer in charge, Mr. Bert Ritchie, lived in the house on the left of the present road to the bay and skating rink before you drop down to the camping ground. This house is still there. The road to the skating rink went straight down to the lake from the main road turn off (this has not moved) and ran along the lake shore, beside the tunnel intake and followed along the shore in front of No2 camp to the skating rink. There was a large shed beside the tunnel entrance which held the generators that provided the power before the large transmission line from Timaru was built. The office administration building (later to become the Tekapo Store) was on the corner of the skating ring turn off, about where the squash courts are. Along where all the cottages, crippled children's etc., are, where the workshops were. The school, two blocks of classrooms, together with the headmaster's house were on the flat you first drive across on the present road to the bay. To the best of my knowledge Mr Lud Mahan was the first headmaster. His son Peter was a great mate of mine. The School was moved up to its present site during the 1950s. There was also a large YMCA hall and cafeteria/store, which was sometimes used as a classroom and for pictures and dances. Mr Cuth Knight from Geraldine, used to come and show the pictures. I remember seeing the Overlanders, a well-known Australian film, about moving cattle down from the Northern Territory in case the Japanese invaded. After Mr Looney there was Noel Crawley, Harold Dephoff, Neil Congdon, Ross Gibson and Alf Stiven, I do not know who followed on from Alf.

The road in those days came down the hill by Mt John Homestead and on to Takapo House just beyond the big pine trees at the entrance to the river above the dam, over the bridge, in front of the Church and along Pioneer Drive and up Cowans Hill. There was a road between the church & river that gave access to the No 1 camp. The only houses along the lake front on Pioneer Drive were Penscroft and Cobanuisgeach just past the

church. Cobanuisgeach was owned by the Burnett Family and was burnt down in the late 50's or early 60's There were about two or three batches roughly on the corner of Pioneer Drive and the present main road by the dam. The only buildings on the west side of the river other than the PWD ones, were Takapo House and the buildings of Mt John. Tekapo Station homestead was on a peninsula round in the bay on the left as you go up Cowans Hill. The house was burnt down and a new one built. This was shifted down to Rollesby when the lake was raised. You can still see the remains of the foundations when the Lake is low. The nearest pub that served alcohol was at Burkes Pass as in days gone by Mr TD Burnett purchased Takapo House and let the license lapse.

The tunnel was dug from both ends, you had to climb down into it at the lake end, but you could walk straight in from the powerhouse end. Every school holidays I used to go in and see how far they had got. Years later when the NZED had shut the power house down and drained the tunnel, I went to go and get into the tunnel beside the surge chamber, but there was a rickety ladder going down into it, so I chickened out, as it looked too far down for me.

The South Canterbury Farmers Co Op (CFCA) had a grocery and knickknack store in each of the main camps. Hec Coutts, the Fairlie Butcher, used to come up once a week in his red van, with a very loud horn, and drive round the camps selling meat. My father and Gerald Murray from Glenmore also had a butchers shop on the Hill beside Mt John, about where the entrance to Blue Waters is now, where they sold their meat from. They employed a butcher called Jack Rule to run it. I don't think they ever made much money out of it. The killing was done in a building up behind the woolshed at the end of the row of pine trees. The Green Grocer from Fairlie also used to bring his truck up from Fairlie once a week. The District Nurse, who lived near the administration building, looked after the medical needs of the community. The Fairlie Doctor used to come up once a week also. The football field, the first paddock between the Mt John Homestead and the school was used as the local football field, and matches were played on a regular basis. I had a tree hut in a couple of larch trees out in front of the bedroom from where I used to watch the matches. It was also used sometimes for cricket during the summer, but was never satisfactory as a cricket field,

Some of the things I remember. The clearing sale at Takapo House was one. The auction was conducted by Mr Austin Morton a well-known auctioneer, from Timaru, who knew most of the local run holders. Anything he could not sell he would knock down to someone who caught his eye "10 bob the lot" Some lucky person finished up with about two dozen hot water bottles. I know that we finished up with all the chook houses. All the guest rooms instead of being numbered had the names of the various stations on them. Prior to the auction the names all disappeared off the doors. We still have Mt John.

The telephone exchange for the district was in Takapo House and the P & T were not prepared to replace it when it was closed, so the run holders got together and purchased the old administration building from the PWD. They were going to move it to a new site where the Godley Motor Inn is now, but it fell off the poles that they were moving it on so they left it on its present site. It was turned into a store with accommodation for the store keeper, there was also a tea rooms, but it was never used as one and petrol pumps. The telephone exchange was incorporated into the store. The complex was leased out, one of the conditions of the lease was that they had to operate the exchange, from 8am to 7pm. One of the first operators was Anne Don, Kath and Andrew Don's daughter from Sawdon, Rob Allan's late wife. Dad used to go down in the evenings sometimes to give the operator a night off. I know he used to get annoyed when someone would ring up for a toll call at about five to seven, and Dad would have to wait for the call to come through before he could come home. Tolls calls did not go through straight away in those days, you had to wait your turn in the queue. In those days when you rang up we did not ask for the number but asked Anne for, Glenmore, The Wolds, etc. Often Anne would say "they have just gone down the road, so they won't be home. The first store keeper was Bob Brookland, followed by Roy Dockrill, Bert Dale, and then Peter Maxwell, who demolished the old building and built the present one. It was quite a good business and everyone did quite well there.

The generator for the powerhouse arrived up to Fairlie by train, and then had to be transported to Tekapo and across the river. I think from memory it weighed about 40 tons, which was quite a load in those days. It was put on a tank transport trailer in Fairlie and pulled by a Scammel ex-army tractor type vehicle and was accompanied by a large Allis Chalmers bulldozer to Tekapo. It was too heavy to go across the Tekapo Bridge, so they had built a Bailey bridge across the river just downstream of the old bridge. There was great excitement when they went to cross the river, first the Scammell and bulldozer were taken across the Bailey bridge then a wire rope from the winch on the Scammel was attached to the trailer and it was slowly winched across the Bailey bridge, while everyone held their breath and hoped the Bailey bridge would hold the weight. It made it safely across. Next problem was the steep hill it had to be pulled up out of the riverbed. A Cat D7 was hooked onto the trailer and the Allis put on in front. About halfway up the hill the Allis slipped out of gear, but the D7 just kept going. We (all the young boys) watching all agreed that the D7 would of pulled it up by itself. This was exciting stuff when you were about 10 or 11. There was great debate as to how the intake for the tunnel was going to be built, and someone came up with the idea that a big hole should be dug, (in front of the Youth Hostel) on the lake shore and it be built in the hole, then the hole opened up and the intake be floated along and into place. So all one winter they dug this enormous hole with about six D8's pulling scrapers, no motorized scrapers in those days, worked 24 hours a day in the freezing cold, no cabs on bulldozers either. In the end they drove steel sheeting round where it was to go and built it on site. The hole was eventually filled in.

The Hydro Village was started about 1951, it was built on land acquired from Mt John. If I remember correctly all the land on the East of the road that runs down to the powerhouse, was a separate short term lease, and when the land for the village was taken, the balance was put into the Pastoral Lease of Mt John. Most stations in the McKenzie had a few acres of freehold land around the homesteads, for some reasons Mt John did not have any. The first Superintendent was a bloke Miller, then followed by George Scott. I am not sure who followed George, if anyone. Other families were, Clarke, Empson, Smith, Thompson, Wheeler, Wright, Williams, and Quinn, to name a few. The powerhouse was operated by an operator and an assistant, who worked in shifts, 8am – 4pm, 4pm – midnight, and midnight – 8am. There were also one or two staff who did maintenance, grounds etc. They were a good bunch of people. We were very lucky with having the Power House as they had a very good workshop, and very generously George Scott let us use it for any implements that got broken

Also the Highways Dept. had a depot in Tekapo, which was on the right when you cross the dam, heading to Fairlie. They looked after the main road, graded it, and cleared the snow off it. I first remember that you struck the shingle at the railway crossing at Cave. Gradually the seal crept towards Fairlie, then on to Kimble (Initially the seal from Fairlie to Kimble was only a very narrow strip and to pass anyone you had to put one wheel onto the shingle, it did not stay like that for very long before it was widened to two lanes) up Burkes Pass to Tekapo in about 1960. Names that come to mind are Stevenson, Pickworth, Mitchell, Gardner, McKenzie, and Patterson. Banjo Patterson was the best known. He started off driving a truck for the Mt Cook Co in Fairlie, then moved to Tekapo, where he drove a grader for many years. In latter years he drove a big Champion grader which had a blade on the front. He used to wind the grader up and traveled down the road clearing the snow at about 30 mph. It was quite spectacular with the snow flying off the road. Initially the road was cleared of snow with graders, then they put snow ploughs on the front of the Bedford J5 trucks they used (they put a pole onto the front of the deck with a wire rope attached to the top and down onto the front of the snow plough. By raising the hoist the plough was lifted off the road. We always knew when it had snowed during the night, as the snow plough woke us up going up the road. They put in many long hours keeping the roads open during snow times. No 8 to 4.30 hours in those days. The biggest snow I remember was in November 1967, when there was four feet. The main road to Fairlie was blocked for a couple of days as the MOW did not have anything that would handle that amount of snow. Eventually the NZED, who had an ex-army GMC 6 wheel drive truck with a snow plough on it managed to punch their way down to Fairlie. The County had a grader based in Tekapo with a snow plough on it, but it struggled, so it went down to the Fairlie district and the county sent their crawler tractors that had ploughs on to clear the up country roads.

When in 1953 the powerhouse was finished, they had the big switching on ceremony. Invited guests were asked inside while the rest of us waited patiently for the water to come rushing up out into the tail race. Nothing much seemed to happen and eventually the wife of the project engineer came out onto a balcony gave us a wave and went back inside. It turned out that they had only turned the generator over very slowly once or twice and shut it down again. What an anticlimax. George Scott was the superintendent of the Power House for many years. He was very community minded and I am sure there were lots of projects that went on in Tekapo, involving NZED staff and machinery that the bosses in Wellington did not know anything about. I know that we spent a lot of time getting bits of machinery fixed at the power house, as the nearest garage was Jones Motors in Fairlie. We also took bits and pieces over to Irishman Creek to Bill Hamilton's workshop. (The home of the Jet Boat)

Mum & Dad usually had a big bonfire in the horse paddock on New Year's Eve, which a lot of the workers came to. I have recollections of going down to Burkes Pass and getting several large stone jars filled up with beer for the occasion. When we went to town we always stopped to see Claude & Myrtle Kilgour at the pub. Myrtle always came out to the car with a glass of lemonade for the kids -, that is if we were not in the bar. When one of the projects was completed there was always a Ball to celebrate the achievement. Being away at boarding school, I missed a lot of the happenings, which was a pity. It was always good to come home for the school holidays to see what progress had been made.

Takapo House was owned by the Rodman's, who also ran the ice skating rink. The telephone exchange and also the post office were in the hotel. It did not have a liquor license, but that did not stop all the skaters who stayed there having a good time. Instead of the guest rooms being numbered, they were called after the Stations in the district. After the Rodman's left it was run by a Bill Newall who remained there until it was demolished, before the lake was raised. Doug Rodman was also one of the builders of The Church of the Good Shepherd.

The Church of the Good Shepherd, foundation Stone laid on 15th of January 1935 by the Duke of Gloucester and opened on 3rd of August 1935, was not the tourist attraction it is today. Services were held twice a month and well attended, by run holders and several of the families who worked building the powerhouse. The big services were at Christmas and Easter when it was full to overflowing. There was a very active Anglican sewing guild, who did all the cleaning and generally looked after it, did the flowers for services weddings and funerals. Some of the ladies were the Murrays, Smiths, Browns and my mother. After Gill and I were married, the next generation continued, while not so much sewing, but cleaning and doing flowers. They used to meet on a regular basis and as the name suggests used to do sewing, knitting for various charities. The roof was originally wooden shingles, but they have been replaced with slates. In the late 70's the church had

a major makeover as the grouting round the stonework was all falling out as well as the inside plaster. The grouting was replaced and the plaster inside redone. One of the amusing incidents happened when the Rev Alban Purchas was preaching a sermon, he was standing in front of the altar on which the candles were burning. He was so involved with his sermon, that he started swaying backwards and forwards, sure enough he went back too far and set his surplice on fire from one of the candles, much to everyone amusement.

Andrew Mackintosh was one of the first policemen in the area. Based in Fairlie his beat was from Cave to Pukaki and Mt Cook. He used to ride on horseback. He retired in 1945 to Tekapo. After the war there was a policeman stationed at Tekapo. The first was Ted Trappitt, who lived in the front row of the houses on the east side of the river. He was followed by Bill Greene who lived in the same house for a bit then moved to Penscroft on Pioneer Drive, he was the first occupant of the new (present) police station. Then came Cliff Cruickshank, and John Rowe, who was only there for a short time. Next came Jim Lester who had been at Otematata, then Bill Apes. By the time Bill came, rules for policemen had been relaxed and he took a major role in community affairs, School Committee and Fire Brigade a good and respected country cop.

The first houses, other than the few very old ones near the church, were built on the terrace opposite the school in front of the Guild Room. The area was covered in broom, so the NSED bulldozer cleared it. Ken Andrews who was editor of the Timaru Herald, built one there. He built it himself, working at the Herald then coming to Tekapo and building his house after work. After he left the Herald he came and lived there and became a well-known resident artist. There were also a few houses built alongside the road to the East of the MOW houses.

The next area to be built on was known as the "Subdivision". This is situated behind the old MOW houses to the East of the river and up to the pine trees. For years there had been pressure on the Lands Department, who owned the land, to make land available for houses to be built on. It was I think about the early 70's. Everyone who wanted a section applied for what they wanted. The names were then all put into a hat and there was an afternoon in the hall when the names were pulled out. There was great excitement in Tekapo that day. The council then took the area over and opened up more sections.

Once the main workforce moved from Tekapo and the buildings removed, there was no local hall. However we did have the "Tin Shed", which was roughly where the pub carpark is now. It was what it was called, a tin shed. Every Saturday night there were pictures shown in it. Felix Williams, who ran the NZED Hostel with his wife, used to choose and show them. It had a great atmosphere, being small and cosy. They were always well attended by village people and folk from the local runs. When the Hydro Hall was built,

they were shown there. When Felix left, I and one or two others took over showing them. It was never the same though, in the Hall. I never remember the Tin Shed being used for anything other than the pictures, but I presume it may have been

Also of interest is that in May 1920 the first flight to Mt Cook took place from Fairlie, with a Avro Bi-plane piloted by Captain Euan Dickson, the passengers from Christchurch to Fairlie were R L Banks (who I think was the County engineer) and R Wigley (founder of the Mt Cook Co.) Passengers to Mt Cook and return were T D Burnett MP and G Pearson. On the return flight to Christchurch were my grandfather Reginald and father Gould Hunter-Weston.

Once the Power House and Dam were completed, Tekapo went through a dormant stage, but gradually more houses and business's started up. The MOW established a road gang to look after the roads, their camp was on the South East corner near the dam. Murray White started to build what is now known as The Godley. He started with two blocks of Motels with about three units in each. Over a period of years the complex was extended to what it is today. The new hotel was built in the late 50's or early 60's by a Bert Rapley. Bill Crossman then took it over and ran it for several years before Claude Mortimer who came to Tekapo from the Bottom Pub in Fairlie took it over. Nick Weusten started the garage up and Robin Muir opened Robbins Nest, which was a fish and chip shop (he used to also do a yummy mixed grill which was very useful when batching) in a corner of the garage. Nick sold out to Andy Green, who ran it very successfully for a number of years. Andy was also very involved with St John and established a small emergency response unit in Tekapo.

In 1970 a group of local business people got together and proposed that we approach the Mackenzie Council for help to set up a fire fighting party. A committee, which I was elected chairman, was established and we set about getting some equipment and Godley Peaks station had a trailer pump which they lent us. The council gave us a little money with which we bought some hose and other equipment. The Council also gave us a Thames Trader truck which was surplus to their needs. We took the tip deck, which we sold, and purchased a thousand gallon tank which we mounted onto the Thames. The first fire we went to was at the NZED Hostel. The equipment was kept at Mt John until the present fire station was built. From a fire party under the Council, we progressed and became an official volunteer fire brigade with the NZ Fire Service. I was the Fire Chief for 18 years until we left the district in 1988. It was a privilege to be able to work with such a dedicated team of men and women.

The old skating rink was established before the war by Doug Rodman who ran Takapo House. It was just above lake level round a bit from where the present rink and spa complex is. It was a good source of income for the Rodman's as skaters used to come and

stay at Takapo house and go skating. Several well-known skaters learnt to skate on the Tekapo Rink, Winks Buchanan, Rosemary Murray and Ron Hosken, to name a few. The Lake Tekapo Ice Skating Club was established and held Championships senior & junior each year. It also had an ice hockey team, the Tekapo Tigers, who were for many years the holders of the Erewhon Cup. Once the lake was raised, it flooded the rink, but once the lake dropped in the early winter the Rink was usable. The season usually ran from mid-June to the end of August. Once Takapo House was demolished (to the best of my knowledge, the nearest the lake ever got was the tennis Courts out the front, it has never flooded the actual site of the building)

Murray White, who owned a sports shop in Timaru, took over the running of the rink. It would have been in the early 70's before the old rink was shut down. One of the things the rink was known for was the Bluebird, which was used for clearing the ice. It was built by Bill Hamilton at Irishman Creek after he had built a prototype for clearing the ice at the skating rink at Irishman. It was basically a large motorbike wheel with a chain on the tyre for grip, attached to a metal A frame with two sharp skids on the front. The skids were steered with a tiller. Between the seat in front of the wheel, and the front steering assembly was a Briggs & Stratton engine. There was an angle blade about 8ft long attached to the front of the machine and on the back was an angle revolving brush, so that the ice was left without any snow. There was also a large plane which could be fitted, this was used to plane off any rough surface on the ice. Doug Rodman was a perfectionist in looking after the ice, after every session the ice was swept with the Bluebird, and any cracks had hot water poured into them from a very large teapot. After a fall of snow the Bluebird pushed the snow off the ice, then the snow was shoveled up onto the bank. The trouble was that if there was a snow fall at the beginning of the season and you were unable to get onto the ice to get it off, it then turned to snow ice which was not nearly as good as the Black Ice., as it was much softer and you were unable to get a nice smooth surface on it.

Tekapo Sale was always one of the highlights of the year. It was originally held in the Mt John sheep yards, then moved over to the present ones. This sale was held on the first Saturday in February and was where the local sheep stations sold their surplus stock. It was a great gathering of all the local run holders and the school always had a fundraising stall where they sold all sorts of produce. It was a good source of income. A lot of the sheep were driven to the sale, the ones on the west side of the river were driven down through the township and over the dam. I do not remember them being driven over the old bridge, but they must have been. I would have been away at school anyway. When the sale finished, all the Stock Agents used to shout for their clients around the boot of usually the managers car. It was a very fitting end to the day.

MT JOHN

Mt John, Run 95, was subdivided from Run 79, Glenmore in 1911. It was balloted on Friday 22nd December at the Assembly Rooms, Timaru. Was described as:-
Small Grazing Run No 95 (formerly part of Pastoral Run 79 Glenmore Station) 15,500 acres, principally tussock country. Rental, 250 pounds per annum. About twenty eight miles from Fairlie Railway Station by motor road. The run has frontage to Lakes Tekapo and Alexandrina. Elevation above sea level, 2,500 ft. to 3,400 ft. There is good wintering country on the slopes of Mt John. Approximate value of improvements, 122 pounds.

Mr. Walter Black was the first leasee and he sold it to my Grandfather Reginald Hunter-Weston in 1928.