



But for an upset tummy . . .



The mystery ship, briefly uncovered on Fitzroy Beach in January 1980.

In January 1980, at the time of some of the worst erosion to have affected Fitzroy Beach, the ribs of an old wooden ship suddenly appeared from beneath the sand just a few metres east of the pathway leading down from the surf club building.

The remains were visible for only a few days before the shifting sands reclaimed them, and they have not been seen again since. There was barely enough of the wreck visible for any firm conclusion to be reached as to the ship's identity, but the general consensus among historians is that the wreck is that of the two-masted brig George Henderson which was driven ashore in that general area in August 1860.

If the remains are in fact those of the George Henderson, they would have an interesting link with the death of a member of the Taranaki Rifle Volunteers whose grave may be found in St Mary's churchyard, close to the south wall, and marked with a stone that tells the passerby he was 'killed by rebel Natives' on August 17, 1860.

Had it not been for an upset tummy, Ephraiam Coad might have ended his days as did most other veterans of the Taranaki Wars, the proud possessor of his silver campaign medal and a bottomless pit of stirring tales to be told and retold until his dying day.

But for the need to help defend his own community, Coad would not likely have chosen soldiering even as a part-time pursuit. A brewer and hotelier, he was a small and physically unimpressive man who, at the age of 43, would surely much rather have spent the cold winter

nights at his own fireside than walking a sentry beat or manning a draughty blockhouse somewhere around the perimeter of the town.

Even when he found himself in uniform, rifle in hand, Ephraiam Coad would never have thought of himself as someone who would find any sort of a place in the pages of history other than for his role in the commercial life of New Plymouth. But fate is something which may never be taken for granted.

August 16, 1860, was a Taranaki winter's day of the worst sort, with an icy rain being driven straight in off the sea by a gale force wind. In the open roadstead off the mouth of the Huatoki the brig George Henderson, which had arrived on the previous day to evacuate local women and children to Nelson, strained frantically at the anchors as her crew fought to keep her turned into the wind.

It was a losing battle. The anchors dragged and finally broke free. At the mercy of wind and waves the ship drifted up the coast and was finally forced ashore at the mouth of the Te Henui River, which, in those days, entered the sea, after a meander parallel with the beach, near the site of today's Fitzroy Surf Life Saving Club headquarters.

The ship's progress along the coast had been followed by a party of bluejackets, from the local Royal Navy garrison, and they were right on the spot to help the crew get ashore almost dryshod.

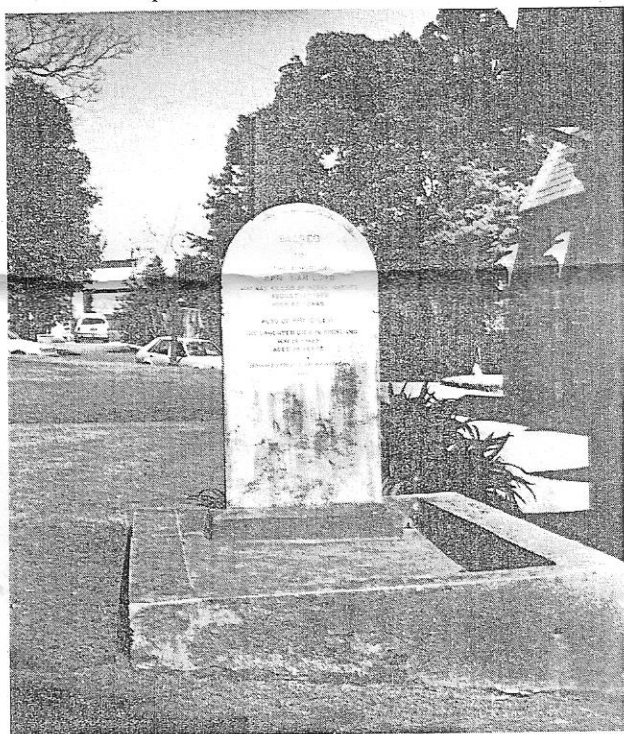
With the George Henderson having been deposited on the sand apparently without having struck any



rocks, it was assumed that refloating her would be a simple matter. But that was something to be looked at tomorrow. Right now it was getting late in the day, and the only immediate concern was for the ship's safety and security during the night - not against further storm damage, but against looting by parties of Maoris who had been stripping and burning houses in the Strandon/Fitzroy (Henui Village) area over recent nights.

It was decided to picquet the ship with a party of Rifle Volunteers from the garrison at Fort Stapp (better known as Fort Misery), a blockhouse sited on top of the cliff near what is now the RSA Bowling Club greens.

The selected men (including Private Coad) were given an early supper prior to being sent out on their unwelcome errand. However, immediately after the meal, just as the picquet was about to march off, Coad became ill. One of his friends immediately stepped forward and volunteered to take his place on the condition that when the rest of the Fort Stapp garrison were served their supper, someone brought his out to him at the ship.



Coad's grave at St Mary's Church. Close by are the graves of fellow volunteers and militiamen who fell victim to ambushes around the outskirts of the town during the war.

Coad's tummy upset proved to be only a short term discomfort, and by the time the evening meal was ready he declared himself ready and able to accept the job of delivering it to his substitute on board the *George Henderson*. Wrapped in his greatcoat against the driving wind and rain, and with the hot stew sealed and blanket-wrapped in a billy, Coad hurried off into the gathering darkness.

On the town side of the Te Henui River, on the corner of Gill and Hobson Streets, stood a house which, like most others in the area, had been temporarily vacated by its owners for the safety and shelter of the town area.

With the excellent view that it had down over the river mouth, the house had been taken over as an outpost of Fort Stapp. In order for his lone figure to avoid becoming a sentry's target in the gloom, Coad made a detour up to the house to let the outpost commander, Lieutenant McKellar, know what he was doing.

McKellar decided that he would like to see what was going on at the wreck site and went along with Coad. However, when they reached the river, the place where they usually crossed, near where the river now empties into the sea, was deepened by flood waters. At that point McKellar decided that there was no need for him to get his feet wet if he did not have to, so as Coad continued his journey, the officer settled down out of the wind behind a big driftwood log to await his return.

Coad duly delivered the food to the ship and set out to return immediately to Fort Stapp. As he reached the ford and was about to splash his way back across the river, a volley of gunfire slashed out at him from the tangle of scrub just a few metres away. Seated behind his log a mere stone's throw away on the other side of the river, McKellar was blinded by the flash from the volley and was narrowly missed by the swarm of bullets and pellets that came in his direction.

Even though he was unarmed, McKellar held his post for several minutes, and when Coad failed to make an appearance he headed off back to his men.

In the meantime on board the *George Henderson* the officer in charge of the picquet, Major Herbert, was about to lead a detachment out to investigate the shooting when some Maoris appeared on the beach, fired a few defiant shots at the ship (one man was injured by a splinter struck off the ship's rail by a bullet) and then disappeared into the scrub. Herbert wisely decided that such a challenge was clearly designed to draw him and his men into a planned ambush, so he reluctantly gave up any plans for going to Coad's aid.

A search was made next morning at first light, but it was not until several forays later in the day that the unfortunate man's body was found floating in the great lagoon that filled the area behind the sandhills to the west of what is now Nob's Line.

He had been hit by six bullets and a number of shotgun pellets, and judging by the lack of coup de grace tomahawk blows, he died instantly.

As for the *George Henderson*, all attempts at refloating her failed, and it must not have been very many years before the shifting sands had all but obliterated all signs of the ravaged hull.

They were in the open sea in the middle of winter and the nearest land was the West Cape of New Zealand's Fiordland some seventy miles away.

They lashed a couple of oars together to form a mast on which they rigged an old sail which they had brought from the sunken brig. The wind turned to the south and it took them three days to reach Bluff, their feet so swollen and frostbitten that they could not even walk along the Bluff wharf. Such was the end of the *Prince Edward*.¹¹

The George Henderson

After handing over command of the *Breadalbane* in Sydney in July, 1858, Captain James made his way back to Nova Scotia where his father-in-law, Levi Eaton, a noted shipbuilder, was building his last ship, the 171 ton brig *George Henderson*, at Pugwash, west of Pictou. The purpose of the vessel was to take the Eaton family and others to a new life in Australasia and in John James they found an experienced captain for the voyage.

The Mate was Captain James' brother-in-law, George Eaton (son of Levi), while the crew consisted of the Second Mate, Hugh Kennedy, and seven ordinary seamen - William McKenn (probably McKean), Richard Leadbetter, George Page, Thomas Severn, Archibald Dawson, Thomas Dawson and Albert Eaton (the other son of Levi).

Instead of a steward the *George Henderson* carried a stewardess, Isabella McLennan. On a British North American vessel it was not uncommon to have a stewardess rather than a steward, their functions being to keep the cabin tidy and organise the food - not all that different from a boarding house mistress or housekeeper ashore.

As can be seen it was very much an Eaton family affair with the owner and his wife, their two sons, their two daughters and their son-in-law. There were two other Eatons on board (Messrs. J. and S.W. Eaton) as well as five Bigelow relations of Mrs. Levi Eaton (nee Bigelow) - Annie, Sarah, Anna, John Bigelow and John Bigelow (jun).

John Bigelow (senior) was a shipbuilder of American descent who, shortly after arriving in Auckland, was employed in John McLeod's shipyard at Onehunga where he built the steamer *Blue Nose* for the ship yard's owner. By 1868 John Bigelow was

working on his own account, building and repairing ships from his yard in Customs Street, Auckland, which was then the foreshore. Among the vessels he built were the schooners *Kate McGregor* (1874), *Minehaha* (1876) and *Welcome* (1882). In 1868 he repaired the clipper *Maori*, which had been damaged and dismasted in a cyclone. He fitted her with a new mainmast – a seventy foot long kauri spar that had been cut at Waipu.

The *George Henderson*, after taking on her passengers as well as 40 barrels of salt and 2,800 bricks that would be unloaded in Auckland, left Pugwash on 4th December, 1859 – four days after the *Ellen Lewis* – and passed Cape Canso the following day.

On her second day at sea she struck a “strong breeze from the south-west so, with flowing sheet, the good brig bade poor old Nova Scotia and her wintry blasts a final adieu”.¹²

On 23rd December she picked up the north-east trade wind in latitude 17° North and longitude 35° 35 West. The equator was crossed on 30th December and she passed within ten miles of Pernambuco on the tip of Brazil – a very westerly route but a fast one, taking advantage of prevailing winds and currents.

The *George Henderson* reached Simon’s Bay at the Cape on 6th February, 1860 – a full month before the *Ellen Lewis*. There she took on another twenty-eight passengers while three from Pugwash chose to stay in South Africa.

She sailed out of Simon’s Bay on 20th February and took the good, windy route far to the south of Australia, sticking mostly to latitude 45°. After rounding Tasmania she sailed up the coast of the Australian mainland and into Sydney harbour on 1st April.

By now news of the fighting in the Taranaki was reaching the outside world and this, coupled with the attraction of Australia’s goldfields, persuaded forty-five of the passengers to disembark in Sydney.

The *George Henderson*, with her remaining passengers, left Sydney on 11th April, 1860, “with a pleasant breeze, veering from north-west to south-west during the five succeeding days”¹³

Strong winds were encountered at the top of the North Island of New Zealand and a poignant scene took place ten miles north-west of Cape Brett at 10 a.m. on 25th April when the *George Henderson* passed the now whaling ship, *Prince Edward*, and colours were exchanged between these two North American built vessels.

The *George Henderson* arrived in Auckland harbour on the morning of Friday, 27th April, 1860 (two weeks before the *Ellen Lewis*). Auckland's *New Zealander* newspaper gave a list of passengers which is as incomplete as it is brief. For what it is worth I shall list them but to the list should be added the other members of the Eaton/Bigelow clan (supra) as well as at least nineteen others (including George Page but excluding the rest of the crew). Listed were Mrs. **Stratford** and her three sons, Mr. **de Blaquier**, Captain and Mrs. **McKinnon**, Doctor **Morris**, Mr. and Mrs. L. W. **Eaton**, their son George **Eaton**, Miss (Sarah) **Eaton**, Mr. and Mrs. **Chipman** and their three children, Mr. J. **Fulton**, Miss **McEacheren**, Mr. **Christopher** and Mrs. Anne **James** (wife of the captain) and their son.

Levi Eaton became an auctioneer in Auckland while his son, George, was Master of the schooner *Victoria*, ferrying supplies between Auckland and New Plymouth for the Commissariat during the Taranaki war. Shortly afterwards George died at sea while on a voyage between Auckland and Napier.

Twelve days after depositing the North Americans in Auckland Captain James left on 9th May for Newcastle with his wife and son on board as well as another passenger, Mr. Thomson. At Newcastle the ship took on 255 tons of coal and 300 bags of maize and set out for Auckland on 9th June. The start of the voyage was difficult "against a strong gale and with such a heavy sea that she lost part of her bulwarks".¹⁴ The storm then gave way to "fresh breezes and light weather" and she reached Auckland on 24th June.

With the worsening war situation in the Taranaki the government engaged the *George Henderson* to take stores to New Plymouth for the Commissariat which had to house and feed the growing number of troops plus some of the civilians whose farm houses had been burnt by roving gangs of Maoris.

The ship left Auckland with a cargo of 53,000 feet of timber, 170 blocks, 8,000 shingles, 7 cases of zinc, 234 sheets of zinc, 16 pieces of spouting, 19 kegs of nails and 2 cases of iron. Upon unloading this at New Plymouth she was to be chartered by the Government to take some of the women and children of New Plymouth to safety in Nelson and she had been fitted up for this purpose.

At New Plymouth the *George Henderson* was anchored in the roadstead when, on 3rd August, 1860, a storm threatened and she was ordered to put to sea but for some reason did not do so.

Then one of her cables parted and she drifted towards Henui Beach, about a mile north of the town, with her ensign hoisted "Union Down" – a sign of distress. With the waves breaking right over her, Captain James realised that nothing could save her and so, to save the crew, he headed for the beach at the mouth of the Henui River.

There she grounded in the sand, the waves continuing to hurl themselves over her. Captain James put a rope ashore and the crew were pulled in on it by soldiers and civilians who had gathered on the beach. In the finest tradition of British seamanship Captain James was the last to leave the ship.

The next morning twenty carts arrived with an escort of soldiers to collect her guns, canvas, rigging and as much of her cargo of sawn timber as they could salvage.

During the night a picket of soldiers had been posted at the wreck to stop the Maoris stealing things from her. In an act of kindness Lieutenant McKellar and one of the Volunteers of the citizens' militia, Mr. Ephraim Coad, went to the wreck to take some food and a warm blanket to one of the Volunteers who were guarding her. Mr. Coad, the landlord of the Marsland Hotel, was a long established settler of New Plymouth.

While they were there they were fired upon by some Maoris. Mr. Coad was killed and his dog wounded but Lieutenant McKellar escaped.

The next day Mr. Coad's body was found in the Henui River with four bullet wounds. Also on that day the Maoris burned down the houses of half a dozen settlers in the Henui area.

By 21st August the *George Henderson*, completely waterlogged, had been stripped of all her rigging, masts and other movable gear and was abandoned completely. Such a short life for such a fine vessel.

Among the salvaged materials was some of the old rigging of her sails; these were taken back to Auckland in the *Kiwi* by Captain Alexander McGregor (later of the McGregor Steamship Company).

The Sea Gull

The next immigrant vessel to sail from the Maritime Colonies to Auckland was "a fine looking vessel of 126 tons register", the *Sea Gull*, which had been built of hackmatack (red American larch) in New Brunswick in 1859. This wooden schooner