SHELTER FROM THE STORM
THE STORY OF NEW ZEALAND’S BACKCOUNTRY HUTS
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SHAUN BARNETT • ROB BROWN • GEOFF SPEARPOINT
CONTENTS

PREFACE 7
MAPS 8
FOREWORD 10
INTRODUCTION 12

PASTORAL HUTS: More Than Tin and Timber
Sutherlands Hut 28
Iron Whare 44
Old Mason Hut 46
Midway Biv 48
Blenis Hut 50
Ellie Hut 54
Borland Hut 56
Meg Hut 58
Braquet/Makeovers Mustering Huts 60
Beech Hut 62
Alpine Railway Hut 66
Waitahaunui Hut 68
Arnica Homestead 71

MINING HUTS: Refuge Among the Riches
Ballindale Hut 70
Dynamo Hut 80
Adhesion Cottages 82
Cecil Rings Hut 84
Grapple Hut 87
Glencorrie Shackles mining Huts 92
Wangaroa Forks Hut 96

HUTS FOR TOURISM & CLIMBING: The Mountains of Opportunity
Old Waihohonu Hut 112
Earnslaw Hut 114
Mueller Hut 116
Godley Hut 122
Chancellor Hut 125
Amer Hut 128
Pioneer Hut 132
Flora Hut 136
Sign of the Puddlew 139
Rangitata/Hakakere Mustering Huts 150
Beech Hut 152
Bullendale Hut 168
Dynamo Hut 171
Asbestos Cottage 173
Cecil Kings Hut 174
Urquharts Hut 178
Glenorchy Scheelite-mining Huts 180
Waingaro Forks Hut 184

CLUB HUTS: Forging an Identity in the Hills
Old Waihohonu Hut 190
Earnslaw Hut 192
Mueller Hut 194
Godley Hut 197
Chancellor Hut 199
Amer Hut 202
Pioneer Hut 204
Flora Hut 206
Sign of the Puddlew 209
Rangitata/Hakakere Mustering Huts 212
Beech Hut 214
Bullendale Hut 216
Dynamo Hut 218
Asbestos Cottage 221
Cecil Kings Hut 223
Urquharts Hut 227
Glenorchy Scheelite-mining Huts 229
Waingaro Forks Hut 231

CLUB HUTS: Forging an Identity in the Hills
Old Waihohonu Hut 112
Earnslaw Hut 114
Mueller Hut 116
Godley Hut 122
Chancellor Hut 125
Amer Hut 128
Pioneer Hut 132
Flora Hut 136
Sign of the Puddlew 139
Rangitata/Hakakere Mustering Huts 150
Beech Hut 152
Bullendale Hut 168
Dynamo Hut 171
Asbestos Cottage 173
Cecil Kings Hut 174
Urquharts Hut 178
Glenorchy Scheelite-mining Huts 180
Waingaro Forks Hut 184

CLUB HUTS: Forging an Identity in the Hills
Old Waihohonu Hut 190
Earnslaw Hut 192
Mueller Hut 194
Godley Hut 197
Chancellor Hut 199
Amer Hut 202
Pioneer Hut 204
Flora Hut 206
Sign of the Puddlew 209
Rangitata/Hakakere Mustering Huts 212
Beech Hut 214
Bullendale Hut 216
Dynamo Hut 218
Asbestos Cottage 221
Cecil Kings Hut 223
Urquharts Hut 227
Glenorchy Scheelite-mining Huts 229
Waingaro Forks Hut 231

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Godley Hut 122
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Sign of the Puddlew 139
Rangitata/Hakakere Mustering Huts 150
Beech Hut 152
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Dynamo Hut 171
Asbestos Cottage 173
Cecil Kings Hut 174
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Glenorchy Scheelite-mining Huts 180
Waingaro Forks Hut 184

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Dynamo Hut 218
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Readers might be surprised to find a 548-page book of stories about New Zealand backcountry huts. On the outside huts may seem to be just timber and tin, but through providing shelter, these simple structures act as a focal point for people in the backcountry. Unlike a peak, campsite or river valley, huts collect stories over time like a layered overcoat. The history of building the hut becomes enmeshed with the stories of people and adventures and place.

Selecting ninety huts to profile seemed at first an easy task; after all, this represents less than 10 per cent of the total public huts in the country. But as we compiled a list, we soon came to realise that every hut has its story and almost every hut has fans – sometimes for whom it may be their most treasured retreat in the world. To help us narrow down our selection, we carefully chose huts that we felt best represented the full range of age and purpose, right from early farm huts to the latest Department of Conservation designs. These individual hut chapters are arranged in rough chronological order, placed in several sections representing distinct hut-building eras. The timescales spanned by the sections overlap, but together we hope they tell a reasonably coherent story of hut development in New Zealand, while allowing the stories of our selected huts to shine in the individual chapters.

The broad themes of these sections reflect each hut’s purpose – who built it and why. Categories include huts built for farming, mining, tourism and climbing, deer-culling, outdoor clubs, scientific research and as monuments. Many huts, of course, were not originally intended to be huts: some were homes, workplaces or hideouts, but have since been retired from their original purpose to become backcountry huts. We decided early on not to feature many private huts, nor ones unavailable for overnight accommodation, but a few are so important from a historical perspective that we could not resist including them.

The tremendous support we have received while researching and writing this book reflects the great affection people have for backcountry huts. So many people shared stories and photographs, and helped with information, that we feel sure our efforts will be worthwhile. We’ve tried to adopt a thorough, rigorous approach to our research, while retaining a conversational story-telling text. Most facts are referenced through endnotes.

This book, we hope, serves as a monument to the extraordinary efforts of the New Zealanders who built these simple structures in our mountains as shelter from the storms. We’ve been building huts for over 200 years, and often we’ve taken them for granted, not recognising the enormous effort required to establish and maintain them. Tramper Elsie K. Morton expressed this during her 1950s visit to Douglas Rock Hut, on the West Coast’s Copland Track:

Of all the handshakes who during the coming years would find warmth and comfort at Douglas Rock Hut, how many, I wondered, would give a thought to the men who packed all the building materials, the loads of tin and timber, glass for the windows, frames for the boxes, pet and paws, saws, axes, and even a grindstone for sharpening them, over nearly thirty miles of forest track, river-bed and boulders, up mountains slopes and down, everything having to be packed on the backs of men for the last six miles from Welcome Flat.1

Graham McCallum and Mavis Davidson at Douglas Rock Hut, Copland Track, in the 1960s. PHOTO: MAVIS DAVIDSON COLLECTION, HOCKEN LIBRARY, UNIVERSITY OF Otago, MS-2985/373

Greetings

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Greetings
null
The Value of a Backcountry Hut

Mountain Hut
Rain beats down
Like a gentle strum
On the roof
All wet and dripping
In the forest
Soggy and warm are we
In our mountain hideaway
Waiting the passing
Of the storm
Roaring fire
Licks the blackened billy
Chase the damp from our socks
While we contemplate
Our next brew …

Simple delights
In a simple world

I wrote this poem in January 1993 during four storm-bound days in Pell Stream Hut, near Lewis Pass. I’d been surveying kiwi in the area with two companions, when a persistent nor’wester swept over the country. Not able to survey in the wet conditions, and unable to get down the flooded Pell Stream, we simply waited out the tempest at the hut.

Pell Stream Hut, a standard six-bunk Forest Service design built in 1961, eight years before I was born, was a bit rusty, a bit run down, but adequate enough for shelter. Rain fell with a relentlessness I’ve rarely witnessed for such an extended period, but to us it didn’t matter much. Inside we played cards, read, slept, ate and generally enjoyed life at a slow, contemplative pace. For a few days, the simple shelter became our entire world, and by the time the storm passed and we could head out, I’d grown rather fond of the hut.

I started tramping in the mountains of Hawke’s Bay during the mid-1980s. Back then, Kaweka Forest Park huts simply meant shelter to me, places to doss down for the night before trudging on. The four walls and a roof of huts allowed tramping without the need to lug a tent. The Kaweka Range boasted about thirty huts, mostly built by the Forest Service, which then still managed the area. Beyond that, I didn’t give much thought to huts than to the track I trod into the eden of rubbish pits.

Twenty-five years on, I have an appreciation of huts that extends far beyond their value as shelters from the storm. Huts mean many things: destinations, incentives to get out into the hills, repositories of outdoor history and stories, and monuments to various styles of backcountry architecture, from the spartan to the elaborate.

Other countries also have hut networks, but there is probably nowhere else in the world with such an extensive collection of simple public huts as New Zealand. Australia has a good smattering of huts in Tasmania, Victoria and the Snowy Mountains, but the vast extent of the continent has very few. The European Alps and Norway’s mountains also have large hut networks, but their huts are usually run more like hostels, with a permanent warden and often with food and building available.

In his book A Tramper’s Journey (2004), Mark Pecking says that unlatching the door of a backcountry hut at the end of a day’s tramping feels ‘like a homecoming’. I, too, love arriving at a backcountry hut. Imagine the scene: the hut lies on the far side of a clearing, a square orange shape. Behind it, slopes rise to open scree summits, while tongues of beech forest stretch down from spurs on either side. A small stream burbles its way through the clearing and past the hut.

By its colour and shape, the hut contrasts strongly with its surroundings. Yet at the same time, it’s perfect in this landscape – its small size serving to better define the scale of the surrounding mountains. It forms a potent yet humble symbol of human endeavour in the otherwise natural setting.

Although I’ve never been here before, it’s somehow familiar and reassuring. Hundreds of others like it exist in the backcountry, each one slightly different. The setting, the position and little design details all make each hut distinctive. I stride across the clearing, shrubs brushing my gaiters, and reach the hut. I snip back the bolt and slip inside. The aroma of past fires filters into my nostrils.
People value huts as shelters, but that’s not the whole story. Trees provide shelter two, but during a storm you can sit in a butt with either that is simply not possible in a tent. Mountainair Paul Powell summed this up simply:

It’s no exaggeration to claim that huts enabled the climbers of the 1970s to launch themselves up unclimbed faces once considered impossible. By staying in the huts, they didn’t have to carry tarps, and could be blanketed in ease of a sleeping bag. People value huts as shelters, but that’s not the whole story.

Tararua Tramping Club member John Gates also expressed this simple quality of huts in the 1940s:

Shelter from the Storm

Pell Stream Hut, Lewis Pass National Reserve, May 2008. Photo: Geoff Spearpoint

Almost everyone, even tourist huts and shelters, was made of wood. The weather here was such that a wood hut could be a viable solution, giving you comfort while remaining almost windproof. The Cropp, a tributary of the West Coast’s Westland’s Copland Valley in the 1950s:

Ignoring the pest who keeps you in a bed in bad weather for the philosophy of a tent and not seeking out, but in fact taking the opportunity to do so, is a most valuable habit, no matter how severe the weather, the more water you need in your temporary home. Take plenty of warm clothing in the huts and be prepared for impromptu huts, you stay up all the time.”

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land, the backcountry provided a levelling effect: ‘major contrasts of wealth, power, and lifestyle’ existed in colonial New Zealand, as Jock Phillips wrote in his 1996 book *A Man’s Country?* Although trampers at Carrington Hut II, Arthur’s Pass National Park, 1960s. Photo: Rick Watson
climbers in its ranks. Today, the CMC has moved on, and includes women presidents and top female level of expectation.’12 counted for little. There his willingness to share a pipe around the fire was the of men. ‘But in the men’s hut, where Money preferred to mix, his social status origins, but in the Canterbury high country found himself among a wide variety of men and women. ‘Posh’ clothes were an encumbrance or quickly became dirty; there was simply as it was simply too impractical to build huts that way. hut building creates something for the common good, allowing people to gather scenery, but places of effort and activity, of human endeavour and enterprise. Hut building creates something for the common good, allowing people to gather through untracked terrain, a hut provides a level of comfort. Yet when men left settled society and entered the frontier world of tents and mountain country. Clubs also soon learnt that building a club hut united men more than virtually any other activity. It created a different sort of camaraderie to tramping or hunting together, the shared purpose and sense of developing the backcountry ensured club members took deserved pride in their huts. Theough hard toil and a great sense of accomplishment, but building forged strong clubs and lasting friendships. Cameron Hut in Canterbury’s Hakatere Conservation Park provides an ex- ample of this extraordinary effort. CMC members built the hut over three months ends in 1953. On the first weekend, a group of six, led by Nui Robins, packed material up to the hut site, dumped their loads, then walked out for three hours, before repeating the procedure with fresh loads the next day. Another member of the hut-building party, J. Walton, described the weekend’s efforts: The packers were well spread out and crouched of timber or iron could be seen floating up the river bed, bobbing along the flats and dumping themselves heav- ily when the human ‘uprights’ collapsed for a breather … With donkeys sure, backs aching, surfaces rutting and more constantly running into their rows they scrambled on. Tents and stoves, Ravens, dipper new gone and large broken, were on the last loads and the packers were very tired when they finally ‘collapsed’ at the site. While some packers performed such immense feats to establish backcountry huts, they usually didn’t do so out of any personal sense of pride. It alternative means of transport – packhorses or tracks – were available, people used them. After the Second World War, a number of huts were even built using ex-Army Bren gun carriers.10 boats were even built using ex-Army Bren gun carriers. Huts like Cameron remain as symbols that the mountains are not just empty scenery, but places of effort and activity, of human endeavor and enterprise. Hut building creates something for the common good, allowing people to gather and enjoy the bush and mountains. A Refuge from Urban Life For many people, huts are not just a refuge from mountain weather, but also a refuge from the commerce and busyness of our everyday lives. We go into the hills to escape from the pressures of urban life, returning to an environment where the world is more natural and we can re-create ourselves. Huts are not es- sential to this need by any means; many people seek the remoteness and solitude of a wilderness camp. But for those without the skills or inclination to travel through untracked terrain, a hut provides a level of comfort. Some people have even found huts to be a permanent refuge from society. Robert Long, also known as Beansprout, sought an alternative life – not away from people, but away from what he viewed as the evils of society – and wrote about it in his bestselling book *A Life on Gorge River* (2010). He began living in Gorge

16

17
Huts have served as shelter ever since Maori first stepped onto the shores of Aotearoa. Temporal shelters were used as seasonal bases for hunting and fishing expeditions to the coast and mountains. Maori used rock shelters or caves wherever they existed, and elsewhere made an art form of erecting temporary shelters quickly and efficiently using whatever materials were on hand – tree barks and fern fronds served particularly well. Of more permanent huts, ethnographer Elsdon Best wrote this description:

The term ‘huts’ comes naturally to the point of the pen, but in many cases native habitations can only be described as ‘huts’. The Maori strove to make the term ‘house’ come naturally to the point of the pen, but in many cases native habitations can only be described as ‘huts’. The Maori strove to make native habitations. The term ‘house’ comes naturally to the point of the pen, but in many cases native habitations can only be described as ‘huts’. The Maori strove to make native habitations. The term ‘house’ comes naturally to the point of the pen, but in many cases native habitations can only be described as ‘huts’. The Maori strove to make

Many backcountry huts have expansive views, while yet others lie tucked away in tiny forest clearings. Whatever their location, these mostly simple shelters help to define New Zealand’s outdoors, distinguishing it from other mountain areas of the world.

The Accumulation of Stories

Perhaps the least acknowledged quality of huts is their ability to act as a depository of backcountry knowledge and stories that might otherwise be lost. Older huts sometimes accumulate stories according to the changing use to which they have been put. They may, like Dusky Sound Hut (in Canaan Valley) or Mabel Hut in Kaikoura National Park, have begun as a mustering hut on a sheep station, then been abandoned after sheep grazing became uneconomic, and finally became sufficiently reasonable to attract the attention of DOC huts specialists. Some of these huts feature the scattered names of visitors etched with pencil or penknife onto their roof and walls, written before the idea of hut books became widespread.

Even historic huts are not simple museum pieces, but living structures that still have a function as a shelter. Yet other huts become so strongly identified with a particular individual that their name is forever associated with it. Other huts form monuments to those who have died: Fenella Hut in Kaikoura National Park and Colin Todd Hut in Mount Aspiring National Park are examples. Through the hut logbook, stories accumulate over time, providing a sense of ongoing community.

A Brief History of Huts

A final scramble over the rough ice of the lateral moraine, a stiff climb up the shingly hillside, and we reached a little track leading up to a clearing in the bush, and to Defiance Hut, stuffed yet on a narrow ledge, with Mount Moltke rising dark and high above, and the frozen waves of the glacier plunging down into the valley below.

Some huts boast spectacular settings, which were chosen expressly for their ability to impress. For example, Cape Defiance Hut was built in 1913, during the early days of tourism, on the lower slopes of a bold headland jutting out into the Franz Josef Glacier. Elsie K. Morton was suitably awed by its location during her 1950s visit:

This here shack must be about the roughest; yet it was a pleasant retreat on account of its location.

Like the Cape Defiance Hut, built by the Canterbury Mountaineering Club, pictured in 1962 above the Waihopai Station, failed to charm Wildlife Officer Ken Francis during the winter he spent there in the 1930s:

The interior was rather dark. Water was drawn from the adjacent creek and manuka had to be used to filter it. There was only one small window so, unless the door was open, the hut was a cheerless abode. The lack of a chimney meant that merely a small fire could be kept burning, and that the smoke from such a fire was a source of great discomfort – or at least it would be to us.”

New Zealand’s earliest European building was erected in the 1790s in Fiordland’s Dusky Sound by sealers. Later, European settlers often lived in huts.

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A Brief History of Huts

Huts as Home

Huts have served as shelter ever since Maori first stepped onto the shores of Aotearoa. Temporal shelters were used as seasonal bases for hunting and fishing expeditions to the coast and mountains. Maori used rock shelters or caves wherever they existed, and elsewhere made an art form of erecting temporary shelters.
Hut Logbooks

Walks or bridges, huts hold a record of the visitors who pass through them in the form of hut logbooks, which include details of past trips, events, people and experiences. This informal record provides a sort of cultural history, particularly for lesser used huts, where logbooks may span a decade or more. Honeke’s Bay hut and bush poet Lester Menter knew the value of his logbooks for recording events, and in the 1950s transcribed logbooks and holders in several Ruahine huts; the one for Ellis Hut learned two scriptures on the cover. He brainlessly summed up their purpose with this duty: ‘Ahhh, Grasshopper, so much Anger.’

Mature hut occupants, not infrequently, note in their logbooks, ‘Don’t be an idiot. Don’t leave your rubbish around this nice hut.’ The next entry read: ‘Worry NOT tired of Yoda from Richmond Forest Park. One disgruntled tramper made this plea: ‘Please hine Tramping Club’s logo by Fred Lemberg. Gates has also collected much graffiti pre- scribed to building a few huts in certain centres of [the] Southern Alps’.24

It’s difficult to pinpoint which hut was the first erected purely for recreation. Club members toiled to build roads and railways along with their locations on the more easterly (drier) side of the Southern Alps.

Hut logbooks can be a rich source of informal backcountry history, but until recently there has been little consistency over preserving them after their occupants have left. Some of these huts in ways that are now almost unimaginable. Even after planes began flying over the backcountry in a single day’s flight.

Hut logbooks on Stewart Island/Rakiura make frequent references – and where you’ve been. ‘Please write down brief what you have seen, and where you’ve been, and have fun’. The last entry read: ‘Worry NOT tired of Yoda from Richmond Forest Park. One disgruntled tramper made this plea: ‘Please hine Tramping Club’s logo by Fred Lemberg. Gates has also collected much graffiti pre- scribed to building a few huts in certain centres of [the] Southern Alps’.24

Before helicopters arrived in New Zealand, club members tackled to build roads and railways along with their locations on the more easterly (drier) side of the Southern Alps.
greater good. Providing open huts, freely available to all-comers, also helped drive a second tramping boom in the 1970s.

**The DOC Era**

After Lands and Survey and the Forest Service were disbanded in 1987, the Department of Conservation (DOC) was formed, marking the first time a single body, rather than several, managed New Zealand’s conservation lands—and the DOC’s responsibility for the backcountry was significant. With the construction of attendant tracks and bridges, was nothing short of transformational, and helped drive a second tramping boom in the 1970s.

As early as the 1950s and 1960s, wilderness areas were established within Arthur’s Pass and Tongariro national parks, but these were small and inadequate. In 1974, Lands and Survey had already responded to the call for larger wilderness areas by establishing two (the Glaisnock and Pembroke) in Fiordland National Park. After the FMC conference, the Forest Service responded positively with two responses. The book identified ten such areas, ranging from the Raukumara Range near East Cape to the Pegasus area of Stewart Island/Rakiura.

The DOC’s wilderness programme continued with the establishment of ‘wilderness areas’ culminated in a landmark 1981 conference hosted by FMC at Lake Rotoiti Lodge, Nelson Lakes National Park. Participants included not only tramping and climbing club members, but policymakers, Forest Service and Lands and Survey managers, and politicians. Two years later, FMC’s influential book *Wilderness Recreation in New Zealand* appeared, edited by articulate wilderness advocate Les McMillan. McMillan’s early life was strongly shaped by trips to remote places like the Otiria Ice Plains, and he firmly believed that New Zealand needed some places free from human infrastructure, including huts, tracks and bridges. The book identified ten such areas, ranging from the Raukumara Range near East Cape to the Pegasus area of Stewart Island/Rakiura.

**Wilderness: A Backlash Against Huts**

If any single moment exists of how successful the combined Forest Service and Lands and Survey hut-building programme was in changing the nature of New Zealand’s backcountry, it is the culture ‘wilderness’ movement that reached its crescendo in the early 1980s. Forest Service ranger School Guides, whose teams built nearly two dozen huts in the Tararua between 1960 and the mid-1970s, recalled, ‘Sometimes we got a bit of flak from the tramping clubs. They said we were making the Tararua too safe!’ As early as the 1960s, some people within the Federated Mountain Clubs felt there was a very real danger that all these huts and tracks would erode the very wild and remote nature of the many mountainous parks in New Zealand’s backcountry. Calls for the establishment of ‘wilderness areas’ culminated in a landmark 1981 conference hosted by FMC at Lake Rotoiti Lodge, Nelson Lakes National Park. Participants included not only tramping and climbing club members, but policymakers, Forest Service and Lands and Survey managers, and politicians. Two years later, FMC’s influential book *Wilderness Recreation in New Zealand* appeared, edited by articulate wilderness advocate Les McMillan. McMillan’s early life was strongly shaped by trips to remote places like the Otiria Ice Plains, and he firmly believed that New Zealand needed some places free from human infrastructure, including huts, tracks and bridges. The book identified ten such areas, ranging from the Raukumara Range near East Cape to the Pegasus area of Stewart Island/Rakiura.

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were finally introduced to the park in July 1986, the year before DOC was burying huts in Northwest Nelson, and at the same time the cost of hut fees. Mt Balloon Scenic Reserve Board charged 1 shilling for Flora and Salisbury huts. Hut fees helped other maintenance costs, but by no means cover it. Compliance at many huts is often disappointingly low, except where resident hut wardens enforce payment. Costs for staying in Great Walk huts rose steadily during the first years after they opened, but escalated: ‘Setting the fee was a bit arbitrary; there wasn’t much alignment between costs and charges. During this time the $2 fee for use of any hut was doubled to $4.’

The New Zealand Alpine Club has charged overnight fees right from when it built its first hut in 1913. At the same time, the Mt Egmont Alpine Club charged modest fees for an overnight stay at Syme Hut. During the 1930s, those fees rose to $1.25 for non-members and $1 for members, and included a 10¢ day-use charge. Most tramping clubs, however, didn’t charge fees, although sometimes club parties would deny access to private hunters, but only if the hut was full. In the 1950s, national park huts charged modest fees for most hut use in national parks, including Nelson Lakes and Abel Tarns. This was a small contribution to some local revenue from the board, which did not have the resources of the Forest Service. Geoff Spearpoint, who was working in national parks in the 1990s, remembers that changes were nominal when introduced, but escalated: ‘Setting the fee was a bit arbitrary; there wasn’t much alignment between costs and charges. During this time the $2 fee for Rotoura huts doubled to $4.’

Forest Service huts were free, a fact not lost on other lands and Survey of the feebly available public. The working plan for Northland Forest Park in 1965–70 clearly stated: ‘No charge shall be made for use of any hut in the park, but donations may be accepted and used towards the upkeep of huts.’ However, by 1979 hut fees were accepted in principal by club huts in the forested ranges of the North Island were of- ten constructed using timber sawn on site. Fixed-wing planes used for air-drops have helped encourage the general drift towards larger huts.

Many New Zealand trampers have a clear preference for older-style huts, probably for several reasons: their simplicity, their small size, and the nostalgia associated with remote and isolated spots. Hut architect Tony Ryan, who lived in Coromandel Forest Park in the early 1990s, created something of an arms race over hut sizes: DOC wanted to avoid criticism by catering for the largest hut. Crowded huts can be unpleasant, and many of New Zealand’s oldest huts were put together without anything resembling a plan or blueprint. The style of architecture used in any one site was often simply dependent on the means available for transporting materials, and the type of materials readily to hand. For example, corrugated iron and timber were used with a great degree of architectural variation in many high-country structures, while more solid in cedar, trunks, parts of Otago and Canterbury. Although on a superficial level many of these huts do resemble one another, this is mostly the result of practicality, and to initiate any major architectural plan is a massive task.

Similarly, club huts built in the forested ranges of the North Island were of- ten constructed using timber sawn on site. Fixed-wing planes used for air-drops could carry only limited lengths of materials, so huts were designed accordingly. Helicopters expanded the possibilities of using different materials, and even today many huts help encourage the general drift towards larger huts.

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Although some grumbled at the change, and complained that they had already paid for their use through taxes, no one could deny the enormous success for maintenance costs, but by no means cover it. Compliance at many huts is often disappointingly low, except where resident hut wardens enforce payment. Costs for staying in Great Walk huts rose steadily during the first years of the twenty-first century, to $11.50 per night for the Milford Track in 2012. However, in 2008, after protests from Federated Mountain Clubs and others that the cost to families has become prohibitively high, DOC promptly abolished fees for under-eighteens.

Hut Architecture
The words ‘hut’ and ‘architecture’ perhaps seem mutually exclusive. Indeed, many of New Zealand’s oldest huts were put together without anything resembling a plan or blueprint. The style of architecture used in any one site was often simply dependent on the means available for transporting materials, and the type of materials readily to hand. For example, corrugated iron and timber were used with a great degree of architectural variation in many high-country structures, while more solid in cedar, trunks, parts of Otago and Canterbury. Although on a superficial level many of these huts do resemble one another, this is mostly the result of practicality, and to initiate any major architectural plan is a massive task.

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Hut Nuts
In recent years, a certain type of tramper has become obsessed enough about huts to ‘collect’ them. Hut baggers will make strange and seemingly pointless deviations from their route just to see an extra hut. They record their growing tallies, sometimes keeping photo albums of every hut they’ve visited, much as a twitcher might keep bird observations from a list. But the hut bagger places a higher value on the remotest huts, just as a twitcher might on unusual species. 

Hut bagging is not so eccentric or pointless as might be imagined.

Almost undoubtedly, the record for the most number of huts visited belongs to Christchurch tramper Mark Pickering, author of Huts: Untold Stories from Back-country New Zealand (2010). He has visited over 1150 huts, including some of his country’s ugliest.

He’s visited more than 600 backcountry huts and says that to ‘bag’ a hut, a tramper must ‘acknowledge its’ existence, then find it, then spend some time with it. For many, the hut is a place of worship, a home away from home. 

This growing interest in, and appreciation of, huts is extremely pleasing. The Federation of Mountain Clubs (FMC) has run regular ‘Huts as Heritage’ features in its quarterly FMC Bulletin. This growing interest in, and appreciation of, huts is extremely pleasing.

Somehow, regulation needs to make allowances for this interest. 

A few get blown to oblivion but most hang on in there, and over the past twenty-five years, tried to provide a range of facilities to suit differing needs, and this is reflected in the types of huts provided. The trend has largely been for more comfortable, better insulated and better fitted with a warm, dry, new hut. And over time, of course, there is no doubt that many trampers much prefer a warm, dry, new hut. And over time, of course, these new huts will develop their own stories and personalities.

Throughout this book, we’ve tried to document the wonderful diversity of huts in New Zealand, and the fascinating history they represent. 

Paul Powell:

It came to me what shelter means in the mountains. Huts, tents, shelter rocks, tents, shelter rocks, tents, shelter rocks, tents, shelter rocks, tents, shelter rocks, tents, shelter rocks, tents, shelter rocks, tents, shelter rocks, tents, shelter rocks, tents, shelter rocks, tents, shelter rocks, tents, shelter rocks, tents, shelter rocks, tents, shelter rocks, tents, shelter rocks, tents, shelter rocks, tents, shelter rocks, tents, shelter rocks, tents, shelter rocks, tents, shelter rocks, tents, shelter rocks, tents, shelter rocks, tents, shelter rocks, tents, shelter rocks, tents, shelter rocks, tents, shelter rocks, tents, shelter rocks, tents, shelter rocks, tents, shelter rocks, tents, shelter rocks, tents, shelter rocks, tents, shelter rocks, tents, shelter rocks, tents, shelter rocks, tents, shelter rocks, tents, shelter rocks, tents, shelter rocks, tents, shelter rocks, tents, shelter rocks, tents, shelter rocks, tents, shelter rocks, tents, shelter rocks, tents, shelter rocks, tents, shelter rocks, tents, shelter rocks, 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The Romance of High-country Huts

For backcountry enthusiasts, it is hard to think of anything more romantic than a rustic corrugated-iron hut set beneath a backdrop of snow-capped mountains among the billowing tussocks of the high country.

For the farmers who built them, these huts were also more than just shelter during farm work and the annual muster. David McLeod, run holder at Cora Lynn Station between the 1930s and 1970s, summed up the feelings of many high-country farmers: ‘My trips to Top Hut [Bealey Spur] were becoming melancholy now. The track unbearably beautiful and unspoilt; the horses and dogs and the whole procedure of an autumn muster unchanged and full of the deep romance it has always had for me.’

Change, however, has also been a constant companion of high-country farming, and McLeod’s nostalgia was somewhat tempered by the new generation:

But each year widened the gap between me and the men who really do the job. They still talk of horse and dog and station and the men of the community but, horror of horrors, they bring transistor radios in their swags and drown with shrieking American cacophony the limpid drops of pure music which the mock-ies [moccasins] let fall around the hut.

Nobody quite knows how many huts associated with farming are spread throughout the New Zealand high country. A rough calculation can be made by estimating the number of stations and making an educated guess as to how many muster huts there are on each. Historically, the South Island has had just over 300 high-country leasehold stations. Most of these stations have between one and five muster huts, giving a nationwide total of at least 300 to 400 huts. By adding a fudge factor for the huts on freehold farms, plus the remaining ones in the North Island, the total could be as high as 500 – possibly about one-third of all New Zealand’s backcountry huts.

There were, of course, no standard designs for farming huts, but they roughly fall into three broad categories. The very first huts, built as early as the 1860s and often made of stone, were associated with ‘boundary keeping’ on some of the vast high-country stations of the time. Some of these early runs in Otago and Canterbury covered more than 100,000 hectares and carried as many as 40,000 sheep. This made fencing the entire run largely impractical, so instead huts were established around the station perimeter for boundary keepers, shepherds who ensured the flock did not stray into the neighbour’s run.

Rabbiting huts, built for men trying to keep the rabbit plagues under control, form a second distinct category. The largely self-inflicted problem of rabbits eventually required an entire government apparatus to rescue the high country from disaster, and farmers and the government spent millions of dollars killing the pests. Huts built specifically for rabbiting were often small, in most cases having the footprint of a tent. Once the rabbiting finished, farmers often found little use for these huts, and left them to fall down. Now rare, early rabbiting huts date back to the era when rabbit control simply meant one man, his gun and a dog.

The final broad group of huts, and by far the most numerous, are muster huts. The larger high-country runs penetrated deep into the mountains, where sheep were left to graze in the summers. The autumn muster could take days, and the shepherds required shelter. Often simple corrugated-iron buildings, most of these muster huts remain an integral part of New Zealand’s high-country heritage. Despite the lack of a standard design, pretty much the same basic layout and construction was adopted by many farmers. Form follows function, and with five to six musterers, the owner/manager and a packie or cook, many of the huts had eight bunks spread around the inside walls, a simple table in the centre and an open fire at one end.

Many of the surviving muster huts were built during the boom years of farming after the Second World War, although some are much older. Before this, smaller huts usually housed a cook, packie and possibly the manager, leaving the muster gangs to use tents. Most of these are in the South Island, but the North Island has its share too. Ngamaata Station, near Turangi, could in the 1970s claim to be the largest sheep station in the country. It mustered the southern Kaimanawa Mountain and western Kaweka Range, but was by no means the only large station in the vicinity.

In addition to these broad groups of huts, some farm homesteads now have the 1900s and early 2000s. Huts were built during the boom years of farming after the Second World War, although some are much older. Before this, smaller huts usually housed a cook, packie and possibly the manager, leaving the muster gangs to use tents. Most of these are in the South Island, but the North Island has its share too. Ngamaata Station, near Turangi, could in the 1970s claim to be the largest sheep station in the country. It mustered the southern Kaimanawa Mountain and western Kaweka Range, but was by no means the only large station in the vicinity.

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become part of the public, her network through changes in tenure. The Arca Homestead, once the main house on the Arca run, is in the posco/Toitoua Toiwhakauna Conservation Park. Further north, in Ahuatua National Park, the historic Wharariki Hut dates back to 1951 before being moved to its current site in 1959. The mountain area between these two sites forms part of the South Island Chatham Range which is part of the Southern Alps of New Zealand.

Seeking Land: the Beginnings of New Zealand High-country Farming

At the time of Canterbury’s settlement, Australia already had a well-established flock of merino sheep. The fastest means of building up a New Zealand flock was to buy sheep from South Australia, where they were already established. However, in the early years, as the nation’s merino flock was improved, the price per head dropped. In June 1860, Butler built his little V-hut on a terrace above Forest Creek on the present-day Ben Milford Station. His run was close to bottomland and constructed largely from wood cut from the nearby beech forest. It was barely comparable with one that had been seen on the Canterbury Plains and kept always waterproofed.

I had left the V hut warm and comfortable, and on my return found it very dirty. I had to stretch a chain through the open window to keep the wasps out. I had left the V hut warm and comfortable, and on my return found it very dirty. I had to stretch a chain through the open window to keep the wasps out.

Standing Settlers: the Beginnings of New Zealand’s History of Merino Sheep

In the early years, the rights to the run came cheap, stock was more expensive. By the end of the year Butler had purchased Mesopotamia and built a solid cottage on the run. While the rights to the run came cheap, stock was more expensive. By the end of the year Butler had purchased Mesopotamia and built a solid cottage on the run.

Before registering a run, some spent time assessing the land’s suitability for supporting merinos. Samuel Butler was one who spent a winter exploring the land of the Rangitata River. As a young twenty-four-year-old with a degree in classics, Butler came to New Zealand to escape a dysfunctional relationship with his father, and for his first winter camped in a small hut in Forest Creek, which he named the ‘V’ hut.

When – what we would call today an A-frame – was a common design for the early settlers of Canterbury. Butler described his simple hut: ‘The V hut is a far sturdier and more than the value of the entire North Island

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At the time of the Canterbury settlement, Australia already had a well-established flock of merino sheep. The fastest means of building up a New Zealand flock was to buy sheep from South Australia, where they were already well-established. Immigration to New Zealand occurred in the mid-nineteenth century, largely as a result of the gold rushes in Australia. The first major influx of migrants occurred in the early 1850s, with the establishment of the Wakefields’ New Zealand Company settlement of the Canterbury Plains. Much of the farmland close to Christchurch had been sold to the squatters of the 1840s.

By 1855, most of the Canterbury Plains had already been taken up by immigrants. The Wakefields’ New Zealand Company settlement of the Canterbury Plains. Much of the farmland close to Christchurch had been sold to the squatters of the 1840s.

Three years prior to the Wakefields’ settlement of the Canterbury Plains, much of the farmland close to Christchurch had been sold to the squatters of the 1840s. The Wakefields’ New Zealand Company settlement of the Canterbury Plains. Much of the farmland close to Christchurch had been sold to the squatters of the 1840s.

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Old Manson Hut

Like the Iron Whare, the Old Manson Hut owes its existence to the sheep grazing era of the Kauêka Ranges. Of the several sheep stations that had grazed on the Kauêka Range and surrounds during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, only one has survived, Ngamatea Station, one of the few places in the North Island where the term ‘high country’ seems appropriate. Located in a great depression of the land, it is remembered for the heavy and prolonged summer rains that reduced this part of the Kauêka Forest Park, Hawke’s Bay, New Zealand to a sea of mud. The most famous of these was the Kaimanawa (or Te Apunga), Mangamingi, Burglars, Hawkins, Log Cabin and Peters – and the Old Manson Hut.

In his 1971 book Pastoral Huts, Christo-pher Lethbridge wrote of mustering on Ngamatea in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, ‘the hut seemed like an oasis in a desert. We barely paused to notice the piles of debris left by several generations of vermin in the sack bunks.’ Despite the sometimes damp interior, dry weather wasn’t welcomed either, as it created an unnatural monsoon in the hut. ‘The fireplace was big and smoky, no matter where the wind was blowing from. There was hardly any firewood at all, and the nearest water was a tiny trickle that altitude and the nearest water was a tiny trickle at a distance of three hundred feet from the side of the ridge that had to be hauled into a billy with a mule.’

When Maria Dagenham and a Stamina Tramping Club party stayed in the original hut dur- ing the late 1940s, ‘it was an old malthoid hut, new, to be replaced.’ It seems her party was unaware that the hut still exists, in a sheltering on the bush forest, the new hut – what is now known as the ‘Old Manson Hut’ – had already been built. When the original Manson Hut became run down in the late 1940s, a decision was made to con- struct this second Manson Hut at a site closer to the nearest water source. By chewing out valuable sheep-grazing land, deer and rabbits had become an increasing menace, and Ngamatea Station and the Hawke’s Bay Rabbit Board combined resources for the hut project. ‘Behind Lee POE and Interior Affairs cullers Jack Wire, Fred Hume, and Barry Crump, the hut had been built in a mere 1957, Talladega gum poles and an open fireplace with an exterior chimney. Mantle paper from the old hut was possibly recycled, the remains of which were still standing as late as 1977. Most of the hut, its log walls and – the old Manson Hut! – had long since disappeared. The roof left the interior exposed to rain. Conservation architect Chris Cochran examined the hut in December 2011 and found that the historic hut also used beech poles with a malthoid roof. In subsequent years, DOC teams have restored it.

The place is cursed
How I’ll do it I don’t know
My Creditors have sent me here
To make a living shooting deer
But I’m a sheepstalker and a rabbit culler
And each year sees smaller flocks
It nearly makes the squatters weep
To make a living shooting deer
To his neighbour.

The Kauêka Country in Winter Times – Anon., from the original Manson Hut logbook, October 1941
Early gold miners in the Glenorchy region were annoyed to find a material called calcium tungstate, or scheelite, embedded in some quartz veins of the Richardson Mountains. This soft, heavy rock, thought to have little value, clogged up the riffles of their sluice boxes.

Scheelite is, in fact, an ore of tungsten, a hard metal with a very high melting point. The metal had limited commercial use until the late 1860s, when metallurgists produced a steel–tungsten alloy capable of withstanding great temperatures that was extremely useful for making machine tools and armaments. The associated demand for tungsten led to the development of several scheelite mines in the Buckler Burn catchment of Otago’s Richardson Mountains. No less than seven huts associated with the main scheelite-mining era remain in good condition today: McIntosh, Walls, Hunter Jack and McIntyre huts, which are open for overnight stays; and Jean, Boozer and Bonnie Jean huts, which serve as living museums.

Three shareholders of the Invincible Quartz Mining Company, formed to mine gold in the Rees Valley, were probably the first to discover a scheelite reef, on Mt Judah, in 1884. Shortly after their discovery, the Waiakara Mining Company was formed, aiming to export tungsten to Germany. In the mid-1880s, the company succeeded in extracting at least 20 tons of scheelite by stripping out the easy veins. However, they encountered difficulties soon afterwards, not helped by the collapse of the German tungsten market, and went into liquidation.

Little more scheelite mining happened until 1906, when a new enterprise, the Glenorchy Scheelite Company, began working the Mt Judah mines after renewed demand from Austria. The work was hard and sometimes dangerous, usually requiring deep underground shafts, and the area was isolated, but that didn’t stop others mining here too. Harry Birley, first to climb Mt Earnslaw (see p. 114), was one of a group of men who staked a claim high on nearby Mt Aoraki.

On another mountain, north of Mt Aoraki, William McIntosh discovered scheelite while sheep mustering in 1910. McIntosh started a company to mine the mountain now named after him, and sledged scheelite from the lode down an astonishing 1500 metres to the Glenorchy Battery for processing.

Shortly before the First World War, the Glenorchy Scheelite Company produced 63 tons of scheelite, valued at £4000. Although war stopped tungsten exports to Germany, demand from Britain for use in armaments almost doubled the price. One of the surviving huts from this period is Jean Hut, lowest of those in the Bonnie Jean Valley, a tributary of the Buckler Burn that drains the northern slopes of Mt Judah. Clad in corrugated tin drums, this hut makes use of rock weights hanging off the side to help hold off the full force of the nor’easterly winds.

\[\text{Jean Hut in February 2012, opposite: Heather Jack Hut in February 2012.}\]
While this sort of travel was adventurous enough, those extra challenges could almost seem trivial when one considered Ruapehu’s potential as a ski area. Indeed, when the mountain erupted in 1911, Waihohonu became the base for the first ski expedition on Ruapehu.

In 1913, mountain enthusiasts Bill Mead and Blarneystoke took up skiing at Waihohonu and reportedly spent a day skiing in the snow, but were forced to retreat by bad weather. Despite the rather primitive conditions, the pair claimed to have had a good time, and subsequently reported in the Tongariro Alpine Crossing that Waihohonu was ‘a good day, with a bit of snow’, and that they ‘had a ripping time’. Their observations were widely reported, and the mountain became an increasingly popular destination for skiers and trampers. The Waihohonu Hut was used as a base for many ski expeditions on Ruapehu, and it received a welcome make-over, when DOC and the Tongariro Alpine Crossing undertook a project to upgrade the hut’s facilities. In 1995, however, the old Waihohonu Hut was relocated to a new site on the Tongariro Alpine Crossing, and a new hut was constructed at Waihohonu, which became the base for the first ski expedition on Ruapehu.

The new hut was built in 1968, and it received a welcome make-over, when DOC and the Tongariro Alpine Crossing undertook a project to upgrade the hut’s facilities. In 1995, however, the old Waihohonu Hut was relocated to a new site on the Tongariro Alpine Crossing, and a new hut was constructed at Waihohonu, which became the base for the first ski expedition on Ruapehu.
... it was the New Zealand Forest Service that had the structure, the money, the clout and the will to scatter orange huts across the wilderness like Jaffas sent rolling through the landscape.


By the mid-1950s, deer continued to persist in New Zealand despite the combined efforts of meat hunters, recreational deerstalkers and a sustained twenty-five-year culling programme by the Department of Internal Affairs. The word ‘extermination’ no longer peppered the department’s annual reports, and it measured success largely in terms of numbers of deer shot – an increasingly meaningless figure. After its quarter-century deer-killing campaign, the DIA lost responsibility for deer control to the New Zealand Forest Service in 1956, a change that was to have far-reaching implications for hut development in New Zealand.

Ever since it lost its bid to control deer to the DIA in 1930, the NZFS had maintained that it was the logical choice to manage culling operations, for two main reasons. First, the NZFS managed many of the areas where deer were considered to be a problem. And second, the Forest Service was better resourced, with trained foresters and scientists who – it hoped – could research and understand the deer problem more thoroughly. The Forest Service argued that shooting deer was all very well, but were culling efforts focused in the right places? Deer, the NZFS believed, most needed controlling in the erosion-prone catchments of major towns and cities, and it had long advocated the policy ‘Look after the catchments and the rivers will look after themselves’. NZFS managers, notably Assistant Director Lindsay Pode (a botanist), firmly believed that control of wild animals preserved vegetation, thereby conserving soils and preventing erosion in key catchments.

A new statute passed in 1956, the Noxious Animals Act, made the transfer to the NZFS official, and the takeover came on 1 April that year. Some of the DIA old hands saw this as the worst of April Fool’s Day jokes. Mike Bennett, author of *The Venison Hunters* (1979), had a sour view of the change: ‘It was not that the Old Firm had been exactly static over the years, but in the tradition of new brooms everywhere, dust had to fly and something had to happen to create the impression that something extra was being done. It was rather reminiscent of a supermarket chain taking over the village grocer’s shop.’

In one sense, little changed. Virtually the whole of the former DIA staff – including some fifteen field officers, 100 hunters and support staff – transferred en masse to the Forest Service. Yerex, soon to retire, stayed on at the DIA, and in its place Ron Fraser took charge of deer-culling operations.

But in another sense, particularly with regard to huts and tracks, revolution was afoot. Not long after the NZFS took over deer culling, it embarked on the greatest hut building programme ever undertaken in New Zealand and, possibly, the world. Mike Bennett summed it up: ‘the Forest Service early took on a comprehensive campaign of hut building; contract carpenters were employed and larger parachutes were used for dropping off pre-cut timber. Later, the helicopter completely took over the role of the aerial packhorses.’

Initially, however, NZFS hut design centred on fixed-wing plane transport. Jack Faber was one of those who had worked for Internal Affairs and was transferred to the NZFS in 1956. He oversaw hut building for both outfits, and recalled:

I always look back on the hut building as three eras. The Austers where we dropped rolled up flat iron and four-foot lengths of framing timber from inside the plane. The Cessnas where we dropped rolled up iron and wing loads of six-foot lengths of timber from the wing racks. Then the Helicopter era where we carried in all components for huts. A new statute passed in 1956, the Noxious Animals Act, made the transfer to the NZFS official, and the takeover came on 1 April that year. Some of the DIA old hands saw this as the worst of April Fool’s Day jokes. Mike Bennett, author of *The Venison Hunters* (1979), had a sour view of the change: ‘It was not that the Old Firm had been exactly static over the years, but in the tradition of new brooms everywhere, dust had to fly and something had to happen to create the impression that something extra was being done. It was rather reminiscent of a supermarket chain taking over the village grocer’s shop.’

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Instead of fixed-wing planes had a disadvantage in that the length of any materials transported had to be limited to what could fit inside the fuselage. For this reason, the NZFS in Harko’s beer experiment with a deal using a belt together Doocey aluminum frames in the Konuka Range. In 1957, it contracted two four-hank Doocey vans. Makahu Saddle and Back Ridge. Jack Faber recalled that Pecary Lucas, a major aviation figure in New Zealand who was heavily involved in air drops, was the agent for Doocey, and so possibly influenced this decision. Unfortunately, no exact records indicate how many Doocey vans were used, but the two surviving Kaweka vans are important examples of this brief flirtation with the framing.
Ron Turner began to work for the NZFS under Jock Fisher in 1956, an NZFS airdrop in the Richmond Range, Nelson 1956. Photo: Ben Gibbs

The Forest Service had been decentralised, meaning that regional conservancies often led the way in their design. Some of the earliest huts built by the NZFS were two-person bivouacs, as they solved the problem of accommodation on the tops. Ron Turner wrote:

At first, these bivouacs were very basic indeed, comprising not much more than a conical-shaped shell on piles, with a door at one end and a window at the other. In essence, the tent camp had evolved into a bivouac, with flat iron replacing canvas. The dimensions were essentially the same: 3 metres by 2 metres. In the late 1950s, this basic biv design changed rapidly, and by the 1960s bivs were more like small stand-up huts with bunks, and sometimes even boasted fireplaces and chimneys (see p. 228).

While air-drops from fixed-wing planes enormously increased hut-building efficiency, helicopters ushered in a complete revolution. From mid-1950s onwards, commercial helicopters began to operate more widely in New Zealand. Although the first choppers were not particularly useful – culler Jack Lasenby called them ‘unstable dragonflies’ – helicopters rapidly ensured a transformation in hut building. While air-drops from fixed-wing planes enormously increased hut-building efficiency, helicopters ushered in a complete revolution. From mid-1950s onwards, commercial helicopters began to operate more widely in New Zealand. Although the first choppers were not particularly useful – culler Jack Lasenby called them ‘unstable dragonflies’ – helicopters rapidly ensured a transformation in hut building.

In the spring of 1958, NZFS Nelson Conservancy building overseer Phil McConchie and spring became the default hut-building and track-cutting seasons. In the late 1950s, this basic hut design changed rapidly, and by the 1960s huts were more like small stand-up huts with bunks, and sometimes even boasted fireplaces and chimneys. The dimensions were essentially the same: 3 metres by 2 metres. In the late 1950s, this basic biv design changed rapidly, and by the 1960s bivs were more like small stand-up huts with bunks, and sometimes even boasted fireplaces and chimneys (see p. 228).

The particular method of construction of these huts called for the flooring to be put down extending to the outer edge of the building prior to erecting the walls. This was an effort to prohibit the entry of any rats, mice and possums, and to cut down on cold draughts. At the entrance end of the hut there was a covered-in area for firewood and a place to store our backpacks. A ‘new’ insulating material (sisalation) was provided and we actually

The Forest Service, with its vastly different attitude towards the welfare of its shooters, wanted to improve operational standards, and it was part of that new hut building effort. This attitude is not surprising as most of the field officers were former shooters with the oldInternal Affairs Department. The push for better huts was repeated in many of the backcountry valleys where shooting operations were carried on.

The first load of timber and iron were placed on the loading hut building materials, Styx base camp, Hokitika, May 1959. Photo: ECONOMICS ARCHIVES MINISTRY OF WORKS AND SCIENCE

Indeed, the regional hut-building efforts begun by DIA staff on the West Coast and Nelson–Marlborough conservancies. He recalled:

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