

SHELTER FROM THE STORM

THE STORY OF NEW ZEALAND'S BACKCOUNTRY HUTS



The original Routeburn Flats Hut, pictured early in the twentieth century.
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THE STORY OF NEW ZEALAND'S BACKCOUNTRY HUTS

SHAUN BARNETT • ROB BROWN • GEOFF SPEARPOINT

craig potton publishing



Lee Stanton-Barnett, Kaweka Flats Biv,
Kaweka Forest Park, Hawke's Bay, 2010.
PHOTO: SHAUN BARNETT/BLACK ROBIN PHOTOGRAPHY

Dedicated to Arnold Heine for his inspiration and vision;
and to all those people who have built, maintained and
continue to look after our backcountry huts.

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PREFACE

Readers might be surprised to find a 364-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 its fan – someone 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 storm. 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. Trumper Elsie K. Morton expressed this during her 1950s visit to Douglas Rock Hut, on the West Coast's Copland Track:

Of all the hundreds 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 material, the loads of iron and timber; glass for the windows, frames for the bunks; pots and pans, axes, saws, and even a grindstone for sharpening them, over nearly thirty miles of forest track, river-bed and boulders, up mountain 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

FOREWORD

In New Zealand we are lucky to have such a diversity of natural landscapes, and fortunate indeed that the people who have built our country over the years had the foresight to protect many of these wonderful places.

That foresight is also evident in the efforts made to provide ways for people to enjoy our unique natural heritage in a simple, egalitarian way. Nothing illustrates that better than the provision of backcountry huts. We owe it to future generations to pass this inheritance on for them to enjoy.

When I think of my own journeys into the New Zealand backcountry and mountains, I think of not just of the forests, tussocks, peaks and wildlife, but also of the wild weather and of the relief of reaching a backcountry hut at the end of a long day.

Also special are memories of people I have met and discussions I have had with others also out enjoying what is special about New Zealand. Our backcountry huts are places to meet, talk, and reflect. They have important cultural values – making them far more than mere refuges in the wilderness. They are places where people from all walks of life come together – usually humbled by the weather and landscape they have just been in. They are buildings that have always had an unfailing ability to get to the very core of what it means to be a New Zealander from the moment one walks in the door.

Our backcountry huts uplift our spirit. We feel better when we walk into them. The comradeship they engender makes an impact on us. For all these reasons and more, New Zealand's humble backcountry huts are a vital part of our country's cultural heritage.

Rt Hon. Helen Clark
Tramper, avid ski-tourer, Prime Minister 1999-2008

Nothing has more strength than dire necessity.

That observation captures in many ways the story behind the network of huts that are scattered across the backcountry of New Zealand. There was no grand plan but little by little the necessity of, for example, farming and mustering remote valleys and high mountain pastures saw huts both very basic and more enduring, of all shapes and descriptions find a home away from the eyes of those who only travelled the easy roads.

In other instances they emerged for the desire of others who, while trapped in cities for work, were driven to seek different experiences within nature's grand masterpiece, observing a scale of diversity and beauty that no mortal architect could design. These huts were, in the main, built by tramping clubs who – again driven by the necessity of having a safe place to rest before tomorrow's adventures – overcame the odds to make their contribution to those who seek to explore and enjoy the beauty of the backcountry. Others were built to permit more organised enjoyment of nature's beauty. All serve to enable us and our visitors to experience the emotional liberation of being in vast open spaces or viewing the grandeur of high mountain peaks.

The people who built huts and those who enjoy them are an important part of what makes New Zealand a special place. All societies have myths and the myths that emerge from the huts of New Zealand, the stories that are told and retold, are part of us, whether we have personally experienced the camaraderie of spending time in a hut or not, and they help explain our story.

We will all gain a slightly different insight as to who we are from reading *Shelter from the Storm*.

Rt Hon. Jim Bolger ONZ
Farmer and tramper, Prime Minister 1990-97

If I had to select one image that summed up tramping in New Zealand, it would be the basic hut. Beech leaves, an edelweiss flower or a rushing river might come close, but only the basic tramping hut is truly ubiquitous. Whether you are tramping in Northland, Stewart Island/Rakiura or anywhere in between, you are sure to encounter one.

This is no accident. Trampers and climbers have been building huts ever since they started heading to the hills. The extremes of weather that we all love in the New Zealand mountains make them a necessity, not a luxury. Huts are not just about the weather though. More than any other country in the world, New Zealand has developed a culture that prizes our mountains as a place for quiet enjoyment, rather than viewing them as a place to fear. Humans have created this culture over generations, with the hut at the heart of the interaction. Whether tucked against the bush edge on a river flat, high on an exposed tussock ridge, or anchored to the rock above a glacier, the hut forms the centrepiece of most trips. They are the place where modern-day legends are handed down, where friendships are forged and the fire to explore is kept burning.

The story of the Federated Mountain Clubs of New Zealand parallels the story of huts in New Zealand. Since 1931, the Federated Mountain Clubs have been at the forefront of advocacy for our wild places. Our member clubs have been at the forefront of building, maintaining and caring for our hut network.

We are delighted to contribute to this book. It is the least we can do to keep the stories alive.

Richard Davies
President, Federated Mountain Clubs of New Zealand



In 1987, the fledgling Department of Conservation inherited responsibility for managing a unique network of public backcountry huts that must surely be the most extensive and impressive in the world. DOC gladly shares this responsibility with enthusiastic and dedicated individuals and outdoor clubs throughout the country. DOC values their help, and that assistance will be even more desirable in the years ahead.

These huts belong to the people of New Zealand and outdoor New Zealanders love them. DOC, too, is committed to huts and many DOC staff value working on huts above all other tasks.

Over the years, DOC has done its best to listen to what people want for their huts and has developed 'service standards', committing itself to an ongoing inspection regime and a regular maintenance programme. DOC has worked with others to ensure a sensible and innovative approach is taken to designing new huts, to meeting the required legislation, and to managing risks to huts and people in them, including fire and geological hazards.

In the twenty-five years since DOC was established, a number of huts have come and gone (not always without controversy), but the backcountry hut network is still remarkably intact and in good heart. DOC is delighted to be able to contribute to the publication of a book dedicated to huts. It's a story that deserves to be told.

Brian Dobbie
Recreation and Historic Unit, Department of Conservation





INTRODUCTION

The Value of a Backcountry Hut

Mountain Hut

Rain eases down
Like a gentle strum
On the roof
All wet and dripping
In the forest
Snug and warm are we
In our mountain hideaway
Waiting the passing
Of the storm
Roaring fire
Licks blackened billy
Chasing 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.

McGregor Biv and the Waiohine Valley from near McGregor, Tatarua Forest Park, Wairarapa, 2011. PHOTO: SHAUN BARNETT/BLACK ROBIN PHOTOGRAPHY

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 more thought to huts than to the trash I tossed into the adjacent 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 bedding available.

In his book *A Trumper's Journey* (2004), Mark Pickering says that unlatching the door of a backcountry hut at the end of a day's tramping feels 'like a homecoming'.¹ 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,



Pell Stream Hut, Lewis Pass National Reserve, May 2008. PHOTO: GEOFF SPEARPOINT

along with a slightly musty smell – no one has been here for a while. I shed my pack onto a bunk, open the window a fraction and haul out the burner for a brew. Then it's time to peruse the hut book. Who has been here before me? What adventures did they record?

Every hut has its own story, its own questions. Who built it? Why? How? Did anyone maintain it, or was it simply left to rot once its main purpose had faded? Who visited? What did they do here?

Shelter from the Storm

People go into the bush and mountains to tramp, hunt, fish and climb, or any number of other reasons, not necessarily just to stay in a hut. So why do huts captivate people so? Perhaps it's because they symbolise the wider experience of the outdoors: they provide a waypoint on a journey, a link with other trampers, a destination in their own right, a refuge where you can hang up your boots for a while and watch the weather.

First and foremost, people appreciate huts because New Zealand's climate is extremely tempestuous and frequently wet, particularly so in the mountains. The Cropp, a tributary of the West Coast's Whitcombe River, holds the record for the highest annual rainfall in New Zealand: 18 metres, making it one of the wettest places in the world.² It's not the only wet place in New Zealand though – Fiordland, Mt Taranaki and the Tararua Range also receive extraordinary amounts of rainfall. Even in the drier eastern mountains of the South Island, the weather can turn very nasty very quickly: the coldest parts of the country are up in the central Otago ranges. New Zealand's highly changeable climate increases the value of a hut immensely.

For some, the combination of poor weather and scenery on such a grand scale can seem forbidding, as trumper Elsie K. Morton found during a trip up Westland's Copland Valley in the 1950s:

Almost terrifying in its utter loneliness and isolation was this high, remote valley, yet not so terrifying at a second glance, for there, just ahead, was a little wooden cottage with a wide, hospitable fireplace that bespoke warmth, good cheer – and the immediate promise of cups and cups of good, hot tea! Never was the site of a mountain hut more happily named than Welcome Flat.³

For mountaineers, the shelter offered by huts is often not just a matter of comfort, but sometimes the difference between life and death. During the 1970s, renowned climber Bill Denz made a habit of establishing bold new routes, often in the coldest months of the year. He was the first to venture into the Hooker Valley of Mount Cook National Park in winter, where the original Empress Hut stood, dwarfed by the giant ice-festooned face of Mt Hicks. The hut may have been small and rough, but after a stormy descent from Mt Hicks in 1974, Denz found salvation there:

We brave the sand-blasting wind to peer down the South Face, our next objective. Phil [Herron] is thrilled by its steepness and oppressive air. Our abseil down from the saddle, in darkness and blinding wind, is an eventful one, but soon we are at Empress Hut – that damp, cramped little shack, our haven away from it all, where we lie under a pile of heavy blankets and sip our fifth cup of tea.⁴

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 tents, and could use blankets in lieu of a sleeping bag.

People value huts as shelters, but that's not the whole story. Tents provide shelter too, but during a storm you can exist in a hut with a degree of comfort that is simply not possible in a tent. Mountaineer Paul Powell summed this up superbly:

There's nothing so pleasant as preparing the meal in a back-country hut. You're relaxed and you know that for a few hours at least you're free from important decisions. Let it rain, thunder or snow. Provided the roof stays on the hut and the cooking-pots keep bubbling you don't worry. You don't care if the river floods or the wind blows itself inside out. The worse the weather, the more you revel in your temporary home. Like small boys safe from the bullies in a favourite hideout, you rejoice all the more.⁵

Tararua Tramping Club member John Gates also expressed this simple quality of huts in the 1961 club annual *Tararua*:

Ignoring the purist who can bypass a hut even in bad weather for the philosophical comfort of a wet tent or melting snow cave, let us be human and admit that the rest of us would rather cross a welcoming threshold when the alternatives are rain, wind and cold as tempting bed companions.⁶

Although Gates enjoyed the shelter of a hut over a tent, he didn't want too much luxury. Writing during the 1960s, he always rated Cone Hut above its nearby alternative down the valley, Tauherenikau Hut: 'Cone, being smaller, darker, and further from the road, contrasts more with our homes and offices.'⁷

Huts then, are about shelter, but many trampers and hunters don't want them too flash. The outdoor experience provides a welcome contrast to our daily lives, and that's why so many people value simple, basic huts. That's not to say a rustic hut appeals to everyone. For many older trampers and family groups, there is no doubt that some of the modern, warm DOC huts serve a valuable purpose in enabling them to enjoy their experience more.

Huts also offer a destination for the curious. In her 1993 Masters thesis *Back-country Huts, More Than a Roof Over Your Head*, Lincoln University student Robin Quigg identified huts as a motivating factor for people to go into the mountains. As one trumper stated, 'If I know there is a hut there then I'd go there because it is like a stopping point drawing you in.'⁸

Huts as a Social Experience

Huts also provide the important social nucleus of the outdoor experience. Over the course of a tramp or hunt, people disperse over the track or mountainside

How Many Huts?

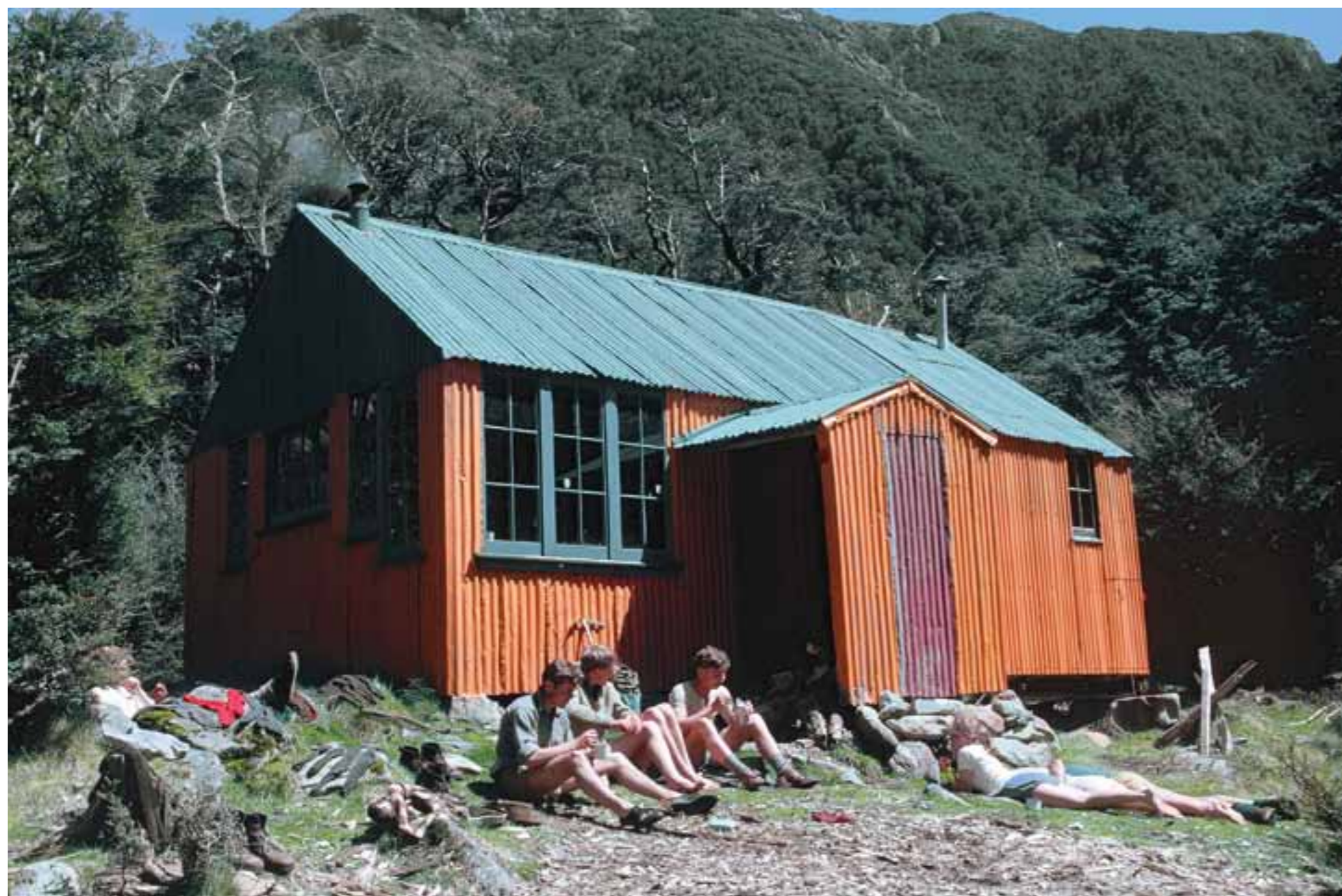
DOC has close to 1000 backcountry huts on its records: about 700 in the South Island and about 300 in the North Island. Trumper and hut enthusiast Mark Pickering reckons another 400 to 500 huts lie on pastoral lease stations in the South Island. The exact number of DOC huts changes from year to year, as high-country huts are added from tenure review, old huts become derelict, new ones get built, and some burn down or are washed away in floods. Fire is a persistent threat to huts, and on average one burns down every year.

After DOC, the New Zealand Alpine Club manages the next largest number of huts: seventeen, including base huts. The Canterbury Mountaineering Club, the Tararua Tramping Club and the New Zealand Deerstalkers' Association also have fine records of building and maintaining huts. A myriad of clubs have just one or two huts – Hawke's Bay's Heretaunga Tramping Club maintains the popular Howletts Hut in the Ruahines, while the Canterbury University Tramping Club manages Avoca Hut in Craigieburn Forest Park.

A surprising number of private huts are also secreted on conservation lands, some known only to those who built them, but others legally sanctioned. The fifty or so club ski huts at Iwikau Village on Mt Ruapehu are one example, and Caroline Hut, near Ball Pass, is another. Other locked club huts exist in the Waitakere Ranges, but by far the largest concentration occurs in the Orongorongo Valley in Wellington's Rimutaka Forest Park.

but come together again at night within the confines of the hut. With people inside it, a hut develops a personality. John Gates recalled the tramping days of the 1950s in a crowded Tararua hut with everyone cooking, talking and singing: 'Te Matawai Hut is never quite the same as when chock-a-block with dripping, steaming trampers secretly cooking breakfast straight after tea in order to be first away for a "northern" [crossing]. Empty it is quite a lonely, chilly place.'⁹

Public huts, by their very nature – unlocked and open to all – encourage some degree of egalitarianism. In any hut, particularly the accessible ones on the Great Walks, large groups of trampers gather in the evening after a satisfying day's walk and rub shoulders with people from all branches of society. At night, after everyone dosses down in their sleeping bags, all must endure the rumbles of the snorer, the rustles of those reorganising their gear or the patter of rodents. The communal nature of sleeping in a hut is rather like staying on a marae; indeed, the term 'Maori bunks' is sometimes used for a sleeping platform.¹⁰



This egalitarianism has been a feature of huts since New Zealand's early colonial days, as Jock Phillips wrote in his 1996 book *A Man's Country?* Although 'major contrasts of wealth, power, and lifestyle' existed in colonial New Zealand, the backcountry provided a levelling effect:

Yet when men left settled society and entered the frontier world of tents and huts, it became increasingly difficult to maintain the symbols of class distinction. 'Posh' clothes were an encumbrance or quickly became dirty; there was simply no chance of being served fine food or living in splendid style. The itinerancy and lack of specialisation of frontier labour broke down hierarchies within the working class.¹¹

Phillips notes, for example, that Charles Money came from English upper-class origins, but in the Canterbury high country found himself among a wide variety of men. 'But in the men's hut, where Money preferred to mix, his social status counted for little. There his willingness to share a pipe around the fire was the level of expectation.'¹²

Early hut designs also reflected issues of gender and social etiquette. Many of the first climbing and tourism huts built in the Southern Alps during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had separate quarters for men and women simply as a matter of privacy, in keeping with the social norms of the time. During the 1920s, however, tramping clubs often dispensed with this formality as it was simply too impractical to build huts that way.

Most clubs welcomed both men and women, but not all. For instance, the Canterbury Mountaineering Club (CMC) did not at first allow women to join as they felt that doing so might restrict not only men's activities but also their behaviour. While tongue-in-cheek, this comment by club stalwart Nui Robins reflected the views of some CMC members in the 1920s and 1930s:

Twenty six people emerged with their impedimenta from the train at the Bealey corner and struggled as fast as riding breeches and ill-fitted puttees would allow up to Carrington [Hut] in order to get a bunk. Twenty five failed to arrive in time and had to bed down on the floor. That was not the worst. Two more people arrived – one a woman who despoiled the purity of our monastic organisation by entering the hut. Horrid thought, it appeared she might even stay the night. She didn't, thanks to her brother's kindly provision of a tent which he pitched for her just outside the adjective range of the hut.¹³

Today, the CMC has moved on, and includes women presidents and top female climbers in its ranks.

The early tramping, climbing and hunting clubs knew only too well the value of huts for shelter, as precious few existed during their early forays into

Trampers at Carrington Hut II, Arthur's Pass National Park, 1960s. PHOTO: RICK WATSON

mountain country. Clubs also soon learnt that building a club hut united members 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. Through hard toil and a great sense of accomplishment, hut building forged strong clubs and lasting friendships.

Cameron Hut in Canterbury's Hakatere Conservation Park provides an example of this extraordinary effort. CMC members built the hut over three weekends 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 crosstrees of timber or iron could be seen floating up the river bed, bobbing along the flats and dumping themselves heavily when the human 'uprights' collapsed for a breather ... With shoulders sore, backs screaming, sunburn tingling and sweat constantly running into their eyes they scrambled on. Steep short climbs, traverses, slippery snow grass and large boulders were very nearly the last straw and the packers were very tired when they finally 'collapsed' at the site.¹⁴

While some packers performed such impressive feats to establish backcountry huts, they usually didn't do so out of any perverse sense of pain or pride. If alternative means of transport – packhorses or trucks – were available, people used them. After the Second World War, a number of huts were even built using ex-Army Bren gun carriers.¹⁵

Huts like Cameron remain as symbols that the mountains are not just empty scenery, but places of effort and activity, of human endeavour 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, retreating to an environment where the world is more natural and we can re-create ourselves. Huts are not essential 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



Cameron Hut, built by the Canterbury Mountaineering Club, pictured in 1952.
PHOTO SUPPLIED BY RAY CHAPMAN

River Hut, an abandoned mining hut in remote south Westland, in 1980, and has even raised a family there with his wife, Catherine Stewart.

Yet others have sought refuge in huts for different reasons, even to escape the law, like suspected murderer James Ellis, who hid in the Ruahine hut that

now bears his name. During the Second World War, the occasional deserting soldier also tried to evade authorities by hiding in huts. And at least one pair escaped to a mountain hut for love. The extraordinary Chaffeys of Asbestos Cottage lived in their prospecting hut for over three decades, after both escaped failed marriages.

Hut Diversity

Diversity is another important aspect of New Zealand huts, which reflect a range of designs and settings. A hut's style often speaks of the era in which it was built and the purpose for which it was used. Huts come in all shapes, sizes, colours and locations. Some are ugly; others are works of art. While a few bivs are so small you can only crawl into them, some of the large Great Walks huts sport flushing toilets and separate warden's quarters. Opinion on design and colour is, of course, varied. Some people love the classic orange of the old Forest Service huts, while others find green and brown a more acceptable backcountry tone. While opinions differ, everyone appreciates the diversity.

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:

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, snugly set 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.¹⁶

Early huts were not usually salubrious. Some made up in character for what they lacked in comfort, but others fell well short. Glazebrook Hut, on Marlborough's Waihopai Station, failed to charm Wildlife Officer Ken Francis during the winter he spent there in the 1930s:

Made of corrugated iron and unlined, it had an earth floor which froze if the fire went out for too long. The fireplace was huge and would take small logs, and there were bunks for three men, made of sacking, and the 'mattresses' were tussock grass. We added deerskins for additional warmth and soon got used to the smell. There was only one small window so, unless the door was open, the interior was rather dark. Water was drawn from the adjacent creek and manuka firewood from the hillside.¹⁷

Huts resulting from club efforts were not always works of architectural brilliance either. One bush poet described Heretaunga Tramping Club's Kiwi Saddle Hut (built in 1946) with this ditty:

This here shack must be about the roughest;
In the whole of the Kaweka Range,
Strictly designed for the toughest,
The architecture is rugged and strange.¹⁸

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

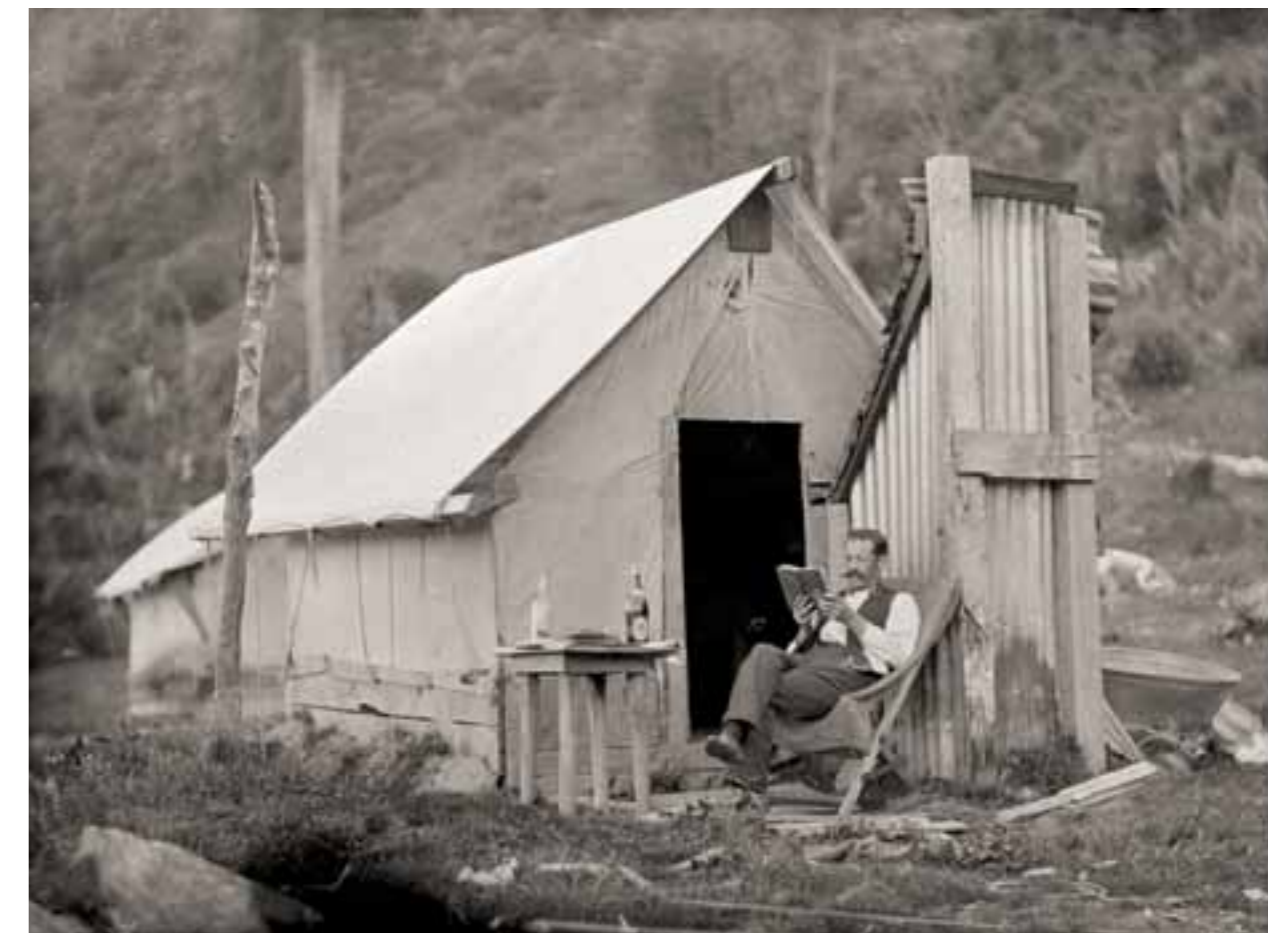
Perhaps the least acknowledged quality of huts is their ability to act as a depository of backcountry knowledge and stories that might otherwise be lost. Older huts gather stories according to the changing use to which they have been put. They may, like Hideaway Biv (in Canterbury's Ahuriri Conservation Park), have begun as a mustering hut on a station, then been abandoned after sheep grazing became uneconomic, and finally became sufficiently venerable to attract the attention of DOC heritage specialists. Some of these huts feature the scrawled 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 shelter. Yet other huts become so strongly identified with a particular individual that their name is for ever associated with it. Other huts form monuments to those who have died: Fenella Hut in Kahurangi 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

Huts as Home

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



Huts as home: a man outside his canvas hut, probably Ohingaiti or Rangitikei.
PHOTO: EDWARD GEORGE CHILD, ALEXANDER TURNBULL LIBRARY, WELLINGTON, A G-32338-1/2

quickly and efficiently using whatever materials were on hand – tree bark and fern fronds served particularly well. Of more permanent huts, ethnographer Elsdon Best wrote this description:

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 his hut a warm retreat in winter on account of his lack of *kaka moe* (sleeping-garments), but comfort in other ways he never evolved; the native 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 fire was a source of great discomfort – or at least it would be to us.¹⁹

New Zealand's earliest European building was erected in the 1790s in Fiordland's Dusky Sound by sealers.²⁰ Later, European settlers often lived in huts

greater good. Providing open huts, freely available to all-comers, also helped clubs to recruit new trampers.

Government Huts for Deer Cullers and National Parks

Coinciding with the golden age of clubs in New Zealand in the 1930s was the beginning of deer culling by the Department of Internal Affairs (DIA). One scientist described it as the ‘biggest control campaign against large mammals ever undertaken in the world’, and it lasted more than forty years.²⁵ Hut building was not a priority at first, but later on the DIA did build a significant number of huts and also pioneered the use of planes to air-drop materials.

Between the 1950s and 1970s, a great hut-building boom swept New Zealand, instigated by the New Zealand Forest Service (NZFS) when it took over deer control from the DIA in 1956. It was the NZFS that populated the backcountry with its now classic six- and four-bunk designs.

During the 1960s and 1970s, the Department of Lands and Survey, through the national park boards, augmented the number of facilities by building huts in the national parks it managed, which were often larger than the huts built by the NZFS. The impact of all these new huts on outdoor recreation, together with the construction of attendant tracks and bridges, was nothing short of transformational, and helped drive a second tramping boom in the 1970s.

After commercial helicopter hunting took over from ground culling in the late 1960s, the Forest Service – somewhat in rivalry with Lands and Survey – built larger huts too. Some, like the twenty-bunk Holdsworth Lodge, built near the road end in Tararua Forest Park, were aimed at school groups and signalled that the NZFS was now taking provision of recreation facilities very seriously.

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 huts. Unfortunately, DOC received only limited government funding at first, despite having even greater responsibilities than its parent departments. Consequently, some facilities – including huts – went through a period of neglect. As always, however, passionate DOC staff made do on shoestring budgets and undertook some superb maintenance work in many backcountry areas.

The changing nature of New Zealand’s population, combined with the increasing numbers of tourists visiting the country, also had implications for backcountry huts. Up until the 1970s, the backcountry was still very much the domain of New Zealanders. During the 1980s, however, when cheap international flights became available, a growing tourist backpacker movement discovered New Zealand’s tracks. The trickle of overseas visitors suddenly became a flood. Many enjoyed long stays in New Zealand, with huts providing the cheapest form of holiday accommodation possible. Recognising this trend early

Wilderness: A Backlash Against Huts

If any single measure exists of how successful the combined Forest Service and Lands and Survey hut-building programme was in changing the nature of the New Zealand backcountry, it is the counter-culture ‘wilderness’ movement that reached its crescendo in the early 1980s. Forest Service ranger Athol Geddes, whose team built nearly two dozen huts in the Tararuas between 1960 and the mid-1970s, recalled, ‘Sometimes we copped a bit of flak from the tramping clubs. They said we were making the Tararuas too safe!’²⁶

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 parts of 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. 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 Molloy. Molloy’s early life was strongly shaped by trips to remote places like the Olivine Ice Plateau, and he firmly believed that New Zealand needed some places free from all 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.

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 more, the Raukumara and Tasman (Northwest Nelson), although these were not finally gazetted until 1988. Since then, six of the ten areas identified in the book have been gazetted as wilderness: places where trampers can meet nature purely on nature’s terms, without even a track to lead them there.



Forest Service deer cullers G. Savage and H. Maunder in a hut, 1964.
PHOTO: JOHN JOHNS, NZFS COLLECTION, ARCHIVES NZ, WELLINGTON, M9756

Hut Fees

Many trampers believe the introduction of hut fees coincided with the formation of DOC in 1987. They have, however, been around for much longer; DOC merely initiated a consistent nationwide fee policy. Charging for the use of huts was not a new idea: tourist tracks like the Milford imposed fees right from their beginning in the late 1890s, and the same applied to the first huts established in the Aoraki/Mount Cook area.

In the early years of the Tararua Tramping Club in the 1920s and 1930s, it decided not to charge for the use of its huts, viewing this as a reciprocal arrangement with other clubs. However, during the Depression fees provided essential revenue for other huts. In 1930, for example, the Mt Balloon Scenic Reserve Board charged 1 shilling for Flora and Salisbury huts in Northwest Nelson,²⁷ and at the same time the cost of hut fees was a major point of contention in the Aoraki/Mount Cook area. During the 1940s, a 1-shilling fee also applied to the Port Levy Saddle Hut in Canterbury.

The New Zealand Alpine Club has charged overnight fees right from when it built its first hut in 1931. At the same time, the Mt Egmont Alpine Club charged modest fees for an overnight stay at Syme Hut. During the 1970s, Syme's fees rose to \$1.25 for non-members and \$1 for members, and included a 10¢ day-use charge.²⁸ 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 1960s, national park boards charged modest fees for most huts in national parks, including Nelson Lakes and Abel Tasman. This was a small attempt at some cost recovery from the boards, which did not have the resources of the Forest Service. Geoff Spearpoint, who was working in national parks in the 1980s, remembers that charges 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 Routeburn huts doubled to \$4.'²⁹

Forest Service huts were free, a fact not lost on either Lands and Survey or the fee-avoiding public. The working plan for Northwest Nelson Forest Park in 1965–70 clearly stated: 'No charge shall be made for use of any huts in the park, but donations may be accepted and used towards the upkeep of huts.'³⁰ However, by 1979 hut fees were accepted in principal by the Northwest Nelson State Forest Park Advisory Committee,³¹ and were finally introduced to the park in July 1986, the year before DOC was formed.³²

In 1989, DOC introduced the first nationwide hut fee system, based on hut standards: the more facilities, the higher the fee. A brief history of DOC published in 2007 recorded: 'The fee system for national park huts and DOC campgrounds was extended to forest park huts in 1989 and 1990, to general public outcry at having to pay \$4 a night, and later grudging acceptance.'³³ The fee for a basic hut has since risen to \$5.

Although some grumbled at the charges, and complained that they had already paid for huts through their taxes, no one could deny the enormous cost to DOC of maintaining such a large network. Later, an annual hut pass was introduced, to cover all but Alpine, Category 1 and Great Walks huts. Hut fees help offset 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 \$51.10/night for the Milford Track in 2012. However, in 2008, after protests from Federated Mountain Clubs and others that the cost to families had become prohibitively high, DOC promptly abolished fees for under-eighteens.³⁷



The NZAC's Murchison Hut, Aoraki/Mount Cook National Park, November 1977. PHOTO: BRUCE POSTILL

on, DOC gave 'front country' areas more attention and developed the concept of Great Walks, making use of popular tracks like the Heaphy, Tongariro Northern Circuit, Milford, Routeburn, Lake Waikaremoana and Abel Tasman.

For a while the increasing use of huts, fuelled in part by the growing numbers of overseas tourists, created something of an arms race over hut size. The greater the use of huts, the more pressure to build ever-bigger designs. This perhaps culminated in the decision to build the Pinnacles Hut in Coromandel Forest Park in the early 1990s, which at eighty bunks remains New Zealand's largest hut. Crowded huts can be unpleasant, and DOC wanted to avoid criticism by catering for the increased demand. But larger and larger huts create their own catch-22, tending to attract even more people. Traditional New Zealand trampers tended to react negatively against the bigger huts, with not unjustified accusations that they were soulless and that taxpayer dollars were effectively being used to subsidise the tourist industry.

DOC has also had to contend with hut and fire regulations, which have imposed sometimes draconian standards that are suited more to urban situations than backcountry huts. Often DOC has been able to negotiate sensible decisions, such as the requirement for only those huts exceeding ten bunks to need a second fire exit. But Occupational Safety and Health regulations have sometimes added a layer of the ridiculous to this, occasionally provoking exasperated comments from trampers like Barry Dunnett, who on discovering a fire exit sign in a two-bunk hut wrote, 'Come on DOC! In some huts highlighting the fire exit is a useful safety feature, but in many smaller huts – especially bivs – they are totally redundant.'³⁵

After a period of cutbacks, DOC gained additional funding for huts and tracks in 2002–03, which marked the beginning of a new era of hut building to DOC designs.

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 blueprint or plan. The style of architecture used in any one era 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



Interior of Bealey Spur Hut, Arthur's Pass National Park, 1993. PHOTO: SHAUN BARNETT/BLACK ROBIN PHOTOGRAPHY

used without a great degree of architectural variation in many high-country stations, while stone served in other, treeless, 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 imply any master architectural plan is overstating the case.

Similarly, club huts built in the forested ranges of the North Island were often 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 over time 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 a bygone era. The more individualistic a hut, the more it speaks of its human character, of those who built it, maintained it and used it. For this reason, some despise larger, newer huts, and this opinion is not always confined to locals. On a visit in 2006, English hiker Stephen Pern made this comment in the NZFS-built Mid Waiohine Hut in Tararua Forest Park: 'At last – a proper

Hut Nuts

In recent years, a certain type of trumper has become obsessive enough about huts to ‘collect’ them. ‘Hut baggers’ will make strange and seemingly pointless deviations from their route just to visit an extra hut. They record their growing tallies, sometimes keeping photo albums of every hut they’ve visited, much as a twitcher might check bird observations from a list. The hut bagger places a higher value on the remotest huts, just as a twitcher does with a rare bird.

Hut bagging is not quite as eccentric or pointless as might be imagined. The number of huts visited does reflect a level of tramping experience. Marton’s Rangitikei Tramping Club offers an annual prize for the member who has bagged the most huts. Other clubs, such as the Hutt Valley Tramping Club and Palmerston North Tramping and Mountaineering Club, run bagging competitions.

Self-confessed hut bagger Brian Dobbie, a keen trumper for thirty-five years, is DOC’s national officer responsible for hut and track standards. He’s visited more than 600 backcountry huts and says that to ‘bag’ a hut, a trumper must ‘darken its door with [their] shadow’. The differences between huts interest him: ‘I’m just intrigued by the decision to build a hut in a particular place, the way in which it is constructed, how it fits with the particular landscape ... I love seeing huts with character, ones that have a little something extra.’³⁶

Almost undoubtedly, the record for the most number of huts visited belongs to Christchurch trumper Mark Pickering, author of *Huts: Untold Stories from Back-country New Zealand* (2010). He has visited over 1150 backcountry huts, most of them on the public conservation estate but also a couple of hundred high-country mustering huts. In addition to mustering huts he particularly likes old Forest Service huts, but large modern huts leave him cold. He rates the Kepler Track’s Luxmore Hut as New Zealand’s ugliest.

Visiting so many huts led Pickering to write eloquently about them in *A Trumper’s Journey* (2004): ‘I confess to a deep affection for mountain



As one the least-visited huts in the country, the West Coast’s Sir Robert Hut, photographed here in 1991, is something of a holy grail for hut baggers. In 2007, the hut book recorded the visits of just 61 people since 1983, an average of two to three people per year. The hut’s popularity peaked in 1993, when eight people visited, one of them writing: ‘Great hut! ... maybe 1993 marks a revival in popularity.’ It was a premature hope: the next entry came three years later. PHOTO: GEOFF SPEARPOINT

huts. They are durable and vulnerable, a bit like the people who use them I suppose. A few get blown to oblivion but most hang on in there, and even with years of neglect they can still manage to do the job they were set down on this earth for.’³⁷

have, 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 lit huts, sometimes with sinks and running water – from a tap, not just a nearby stream.

Undoubtedly, the new DOC hut designs have been aimed at encouraging

less experienced people to enjoy the hills by providing some degree of comfort, including double glazing and insulation. Soulless they may be, but practical and popular? Definitely. The reasons behind the appeal of a hut’s design are as wide-ranging as the reasons why people enjoy the outdoors, and 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 demonstrate the wonderful diversity of huts in New Zealand, and the fascinating history they represent. Retaining diversity across historic eras is important. Hut standards serve a necessary purpose, but if they are too regimental they stifle any design creativity. Somehow, regulation needs to make allowances for individual or regional designs, yet still maintain a basic standard to ensure low-maintenance, long-lasting huts.

The role of older huts in the story of our backcountry heritage is slowly becoming accepted – even celebrated. Indeed, DOC has in recent years identified many huts worthy of historic status, and many of the oldest huts have been assessed for their heritage value. DOC’s Jackie Breen and Steve Bagley have been at the forefront of this effort, along with conservation architect Chris Cochran and historian Michael Kelly. Clubs have celebrated their huts in their journals, too, and since 2001 the Federated 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.

Though falling short of Buckingham Palace, these simple structures embody so many backcountry stories. Through the cycles of neglect and care huts also echo the wider political context. For ultimately, although on the surface they may seem to be just four walls and a roof, at their core huts are about people.

Perhaps no one has described the worth of huts better than mountaineer Paul Powell:

It came to me what shelter means in the mountains. Huts, tents, shelter rocks, were more than stops along the way – places where men stayed to eat and sleep, leaving them to hunt deer, cross passes or cut transient steps up summit ice.



McCormack Hut at Luncheon Rock, Westland Tai Poutini National Park, about to be engulfed by the advancing Fox Glacier, July 1985. The hut was dismantled and removed, and now forms part of other huts. PHOTO: BRUCE POSTILL

Shelter in the hills meant more than cleaning a rifle, mapping the cross-country tramp, or resting for the climb. In huts or under bivvy rocks men were relaxed ... By the fire they bragged like Norsemen, argued like Jesuits, sang like minstrels, and dreamed like poets ... Such hospices were the beginning and the end of mountain life with the minutes of action sandwiched in between.³⁹

SHAUN BARNETT



MORE THAN TIN AND TIMBER PASTORAL HUTS

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 snowy 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 held for me.’¹

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.²

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 mustering huts there are on each. Historically, the South Island has had just over 300 high-country leasehold stations.³ Most of these stations have between one and five mustering 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 hut, 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 mustering 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, many of these mustering 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 mustering 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 just a cook, packie and possibly the manager, leaving the mustering gangs to use tents. Most of these are in the South Island, but the North Island has its share too. Ngamatea Station, near Taihape, could in the 1970s claim to be the largest sheep station in the country. It mustered the southern Kaimanawa Mountains 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 have now

Bealey Spur Hut in 2010 (also known as Top Hut, it was built in 1925).
PHOTO: SHAUN BARNETT/BLACK ROBIN PHOTOGRAPHY



Blue Lake Hut in March 1994, Glenaray Station, Garvie Mountains, Southland. PHOTO: GEOFF SPEARPOINT

become part of the public hut network through changes in tenure. The Avoca Homestead, once the main house on the Avoca run, is in the Korowai/Torlesse Tussocklands Conservation Park. Further north, in Abel Tasman National Park, the historic Whariwharangi Hut dates back to a time when this area was farmed. Both of these buildings retain many of their original features, giving modern-day users an insight into the lives of early settlers in hard, often marginal farm country.

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

Understanding how high-country huts developed requires a broad overview of how New Zealand came to be settled, our farming history and, in particular, the history of merino sheep.

The Crown had acquired the bulk of the South Island high country exceedingly cheaply from the dominant South Island iwi, Ngai Tahu. How much of

this land, mainly in the high country, came to be leased rather than sold fee-simple has complex origins that date back to the earliest days of the Wakefields' New Zealand Company settlement of the Canterbury Plains. Much of the farmland close to Christchurch had been sold in fee-simple title at the 'sufficient rate' of £3 per acre. The Wakefields hoped that pricing land this way would make their settlement venture pay for itself, leading to a 'civilised' society. They set prices at a level they hoped would discourage speculators – and the riff-raff. In Canterbury, the New Zealand Company administered these sales with the Canterbury Association, but the number of investors was not sufficient to keep it solvent. Eventually, in 1853, all but bankrupt, the company surrendered its Canterbury mandate.⁴

The Canterbury Association had anticipated difficulties, and started offering leasehold land in 1851. As the offers got cheaper, there was a fear that New Zealand would slip into the 'squatting' arrangement that had occurred in Australia. To head this off, New Zealand Governor George Grey set down nationwide regulations for pastoral leasing. The annual rental was based on the sheep numbers, and runs were let for fourteen-year terms.⁵

Grey's policy was aimed at encouraging people to invest in stock and improvements, and was

intended to be affordable for the small farmer yet prevent speculation. In reality, the policy achieved only the first of these. Some got in quickly and transformed themselves from squatters into respectable run holders. The most notorious of these was George Duppa, who made a fortune from his Birch Hill Station in Marlborough's upper Wairau Valley, and later St Leonards near Culverden. A squatter from the early days of the New Zealand Company, Duppa pioneered a route from his station through the Molesworth country to the hills near Cheviot. Through persistence, he secured legitimate rights to this vast parcel of land, and after selling out in 1852 for the reported fortune of £150,000, he returned to his native Kent to a life of some luxury.⁶

By 1855, most of the Canterbury Plains had already been taken up by immigrant farmers. Some of these plains farmers did very well indeed in the first years of the settlement. Possibly the wealthiest sheep farmer of all was Robert Heaton Rhodes, estimated to be worth £521,241 when he died in 1884 – an enormous sum for the day and more than the value of the entire North Island

provinces combined.⁷ This was at a time when a head shepherd with dogs could earn £60–80 a year. Heaton Rhodes and his brother George owned most of the country inland from Timaru, a vast 60,700-hectare farm called Levels.

New arrivals were already exploring the harder high-country terrain closer to the Southern Alps. This land carried the risk of harsher weather and poorer soil quality, as well as being in the rain shadow of the mountains and so susceptible to dry years during westerly weather patterns. But the land here was cheap and readily available. A new arrival simply had to find a piece of vacant high-country land and apply to the Waste Lands Board for a run. At a cost of £1 per 1000 acres (400 hectares), a man with capital could lease land from the government and set about developing and stocking it.

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 head 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.

V-huts – what we would call today an A-frame – were a common design for the early settlers of Canterbury. Butler described their simplicity: 'The V hut is a fait accompli, if so small an undertaking can be spoken of in so dignified a manner. It consists of a small roof set upon the ground; it is a hut, all roof and no walls.'⁸

In June 1860, Butler built his little V-hut on a terrace above Forest Creek on the present-day Ben McLeod Station. His version of the hut was basic and constructed largely from wood cut from the nearby beech forest. It was barely comparable with the more solid V-huts he had seen on the Canterbury Plains and not always weatherproof:

I had left the V hut warm and comfortable, and on my return found it very different. I fear we had not put enough thatch upon it, and the ten days' rain had proved too much for it. It was now neither air-tight nor water-tight; the floor, or rather the ground, was soaked and soppy with mud; the nice warm snow-grass on which I had lain so comfortably the night before I left, was muddy and wet; altogether, there being no fire inside, the place was as revolting-looking an affair as one would wish to see: coming wet and cold off a journey, we had hoped for better things. There was nothing for it but to make the best of it, so we had tea.⁹

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.

Stocking the Land: Merinos and Boundary-keepers

Stocking the high country required a breed of sheep that could manage the coarse fodder of tussock grasslands. The most suitable was the low-mainte-



Samuel Butler's Cottage, Mesopotamia Station, Rangitata Valley, Canterbury, circa 1870s. PHOTO: SOUTH CANTERBURY MUSEUM, TIMARU, P1933

nance, hardy merino, a breed originating in Spain. New Zealand's high-country story is essentially the story of merino sheep.

Captain James Cook had attempted to bring some merinos with him on his second and third voyages, but few survived the trip and those that did never established themselves. Missionary Samuel Marsden had a small flock in the Bay of Islands and was probably the first to export wool from New Zealand. In Canterbury and Otago, where the breed would thrive, it was William and John Deans and Johnny Jones, respectively, who first imported merinos.¹⁰

At the time of Canterbury's settlement, Australia already had a well-established flock of outback merinos. The fastest means of building up a New Zealand flock was to buy sheep from South Australia, where they were already experimenting with cross-breeding. The traditional Spanish merinos were thought to be a little on the small side for this part of the world, and were generally crossed with English breeds like the Lincoln and Leicester to bolster their size. To increase wool quality, New Zealand farmers also bred Australian merinos with the best stock from Europe. One example of this was the importation through Lyttelton of twelve ewes and two rams from the best German flocks on 5 February 1853.¹¹ Eventually, through careful breeding, New Zealand merinos became bigger and more robust than their Australian counterparts, were more resistant to footrot and had even finer wool.

In the early years, as the nation's merino flock was improved, the price per head escalated and provided run holders with a healthy income on top of the wool clip. In 1862, Samuel Butler at Mesopotamia offered to sell six tooth rams to his neighbour John Acland at Mt Peel for £2 per head.¹² Ewes were worth less – about 35 shillings a head – but either way, any animal with the potential to turn tussock into money commanded a high price in colonial New Zealand.

Old Manson Hut c.1950 KAWEKA FOREST PARK, HAWKE'S BAY

Like the Iron Whare, the Old Manson Hut owes its existence to the sheep-grazing era of the Kaweka Range.

Of the several sheep stations that had grazing on the Kaweka 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 chunk of elevated land west of the Kaweka Ranges and south of the Kaimanawa Mountains, it comprises numerous flat tussock plateaux dissected by a number of substantial rivers. For a period after Molesworth Station converted to cattle during the early 1970s, Ngamatea could even lay claim to being the largest sheep run in the country.¹ One wit wrote of the station 'It's not a farm; it's a bloody province.'²

Not surprisingly for such a large area, the station required a number of huts to shelter musterers working in the remote backblocks. Between the 1930s and 1960s these were Golden Hills, Boyd, Kaimanawa (or Te Apunga), Mangamingi, Burglars, Hawkins, Log Cabin and Peters – and the Old Manson Hut.³ Many of these huts no longer exist, and of the survivors, the Old Manson Hut remains the best preserved.

Situated on a grassy slope surrounded by manuka and beech forest, the hut lies about twenty minute's walk below a high ridge typical of the terrain in this western part of the Kaweka Range. Nearby is the Tapahiwhenua Stream, a tributary of the Ngaruroro River.

The shelter's precursor, the original Manson Hut, was probably built by David Lumsden, who leased this part of the Kawekas from the government between 1906 and 1920 and ran sheep from his base at Kuripapango. Beech pole framing supported cladding made entirely with malthoid. From

photographs taken during the 1940s, it seems this hut occupied the same site as the newer NZFS hut, up on the ridge crest.

In his 1971 book *Sunrise on the Hills*, Christopher Lethbridge wrote of mustering on Ngamatea during the early 1950s and recalled that the Manson, so remote from the Ngamatea homestead, was considered the worst to muster. He described the hut as 'a little black malthoid shack beside a clump of shaggy beech trees'. However, he continued, '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.'⁴

Another musterer recalled, 'The Manson hut was the least like home. It leaked and the floor turned to mud; the boys wore their gumboots inside.'⁵ Despite the sometimes damp interior, dry weather wasn't welcomed either, as it created an-

other problem. Built on a steep hillside, the hut lay unusually far from a water source, and a series of steps led steeply down to the creek below. During a mustering stint, anyone venturing outside was given billies and told to bring them back full of water. One thirsty musterer burnt a message into a beam with a poker 'Was the bastard who built this hut man or camel?'⁶

Legendary hunter and yarn-teller Barry Crump recalled a deer-culling stint at the hut during the 1950s in his autobiography, writing, 'It was a view I never got tired of. The Kaimanawa and Kaweka Ranges, their sides streaked with great grey shingle-slides, and the cold green Ngaruroro crashing down through the gorge between them, three thousand feet below.' Of the hut, he wrote, 'The fireplace was big and smoky, no matter where the wind was blowing from. There was hardly any firewood at



Trampers Jason Roxburgh and Bruce Postill in the Old Manson Hut, 2011. PHOTO: SHAUN BARNETT/BLACK ROBIN PHOTOGRAPHY

that altitude and the nearest water was a tiny trickle about three hundred feet down the side of the ridge that had to be bailed into a billy with a mug.'⁷

When Mavis Davidson and a Heretaunga Tramping Club party stayed in the original hut during 1957, she remarked, 'It is an old malthoid structure, soon to be replaced.'⁸ It seems her party were unaware that hidden down below, in a clearing in the beech 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 the late 1940s, a decision was made to construct this second Manson Hut at a site closer to water. By chewing out valuable sheep-grazing land, deer and rabbits had become an increasing menace, and so Ngamatea Station and the Hawke's Bay Rabbit Board combined resources for the hut project. Rabbiter Les D'Ott and Internal Affairs culler Jack Wire, both based at Ngamatea, built the hut – probably in the early 1950s.⁹ Like its predecessor, this hut also used beech poles with a malthoid roof, but the exterior walls were instead a split slab construction made from totara and probably also beech.¹⁰ It had no piles, a dirt floor, and a large open fireplace with an exterior chimney. Materials from the original hut were possibly recycled, the remains of which were still standing as late as 1957. The new 'Old Manson Hut' served for more than two decades, but by the time the Manson tops became part of Kaweka Forest Park in the 1970s, Ngamatea had long ceased farming it. The poor grazing, bad erosion, rough country and isolation all made it marginal sheep country at best. When the Forest Service built one of their standard six-bunk huts in 1972, they placed it on the ridge crest above at the same site as the original Manson Hut. This time, the hut had a water tank!

Somehow, the Old Manson Hut survived for another two decades, but by the early 1990s the rotten roof left the interior exposed to rain. Conservation architect Chris Cochran examined the hut in December 1993 to evaluate its historic status. Cochran described Old Manson as 'an excellent example



Old Manson Hut in December 2011. PHOTO: SHAUN BARNETT/BLACK ROBIN PHOTOGRAPHY

of bush carpentry' and noted that it is an unusual design even for a slab hut, with the slabs acting solely as exterior sheathing, rather than forming a structural part of the walls. As a result of Cochran's report, DOC staff undertook restoration work during 1995-6. Rotten slabs were replaced with freshly hewn totara, and the roof made watertight. Then, in 2008, a team led by Dave Heaps installed a new malthoid roof. In subsequent years, DOC teams also built a new corrugated-iron chimney, and put fresh sacking on the bunks.¹¹

Old Manson Hut is also a good example of a hut intended for multiple purposes: rabbiters, deer cullers and musterers all used it. For modern-day trampers, a night in the hut provides an experience of a past era: dirt floor, smoky interior and all.¹²

SHAUN BARNETT

The Manson Country in Winter Time – Anon, from the original Manson Hut logbook, October 1941¹³

My Creditors have sent me here
To make a living shooting deer
How I'll do it I don't know
The place is cursed
with rocks and snow.

It nearly makes the squatters weep
It takes five acres to a sheep
And each year sees smaller flocks
For sheep don't thrive
on snow and rocks.

The weather could not be much worse
Tis under God's most bitter curse
The driving sleet cut like a sabre
Since God has leased this
To his neighbour.

Glenorchy Scheelite Mining Huts WHAKAARI CONSERVATION AREA, CENTRAL OTAGO

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 eras remain in good condition today: McIntosh, Wallers, Heather Jock 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 Wakatipu Scheelite Company was

formed, aiming to export tungsten to Germany.¹

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.²

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 Germany. The work was hard and sometimes dangerous, usually requiring deep underground shafts, and the area was isolated,³ 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 worked a claim high on nearby Mt Alaska.

On another mountain, north of Mt Alaska, 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 this 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 £6000. Although war stopped tungsten exports to Germany, demand from Britain for use in armaments almost doubled the price.⁴ 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 flattened tin drums, the hut makes use of rock weights hanging off the side to help fend off the full force of the nor'westerly winds.



LEFT Jean Hut in February 2012. OPPOSITE Heather Jock Hut in February 2012. PHOTOS: ROB BROWN

Old Waihohonu Hut 1904 TONGARIRO NATIONAL PARK

All will for many years think of [Waihohonu Hut] with affection as our little home for a little time in the Mountains of the North Island of New Zealand.
– Ruapehu Ski Club souvenir diary, June 1915

Turoa and Whakapapa ski-fields sprawl over Mt Ruapehu's southern and western flanks, making it hard to imagine that once, a century ago, it was the mountain's eastern side that drew tourists and skiers.

Between the 1890s and 1908, Waihohonu was a staging post on a grand tourist route that took adventurous tourists through the heart of the North Island. After a paddleboat passage up the sinuous Whanganui River to Pipiriki, travellers embarked on a stagecoach trip across the Central Plateau and through the Rangipo Desert to reach Tokaanu, where a steamer ushered them across Lake Taupo. En route across the desert, they stopped at the staging post near the Waihohonu Stream, where horses were rested and billy tea brewed over a fire. This staging post was at first a basic camp, but later became a roadman's hut, described in an 1894 newspaper article as a 'slab whare in a natural clearing surrounded by towhai [silver beech] bush'.¹



While this sort of travel was adventurous enough, those wanting extra challenge could divert off the main route and take their horses over what is now part of the Tongariro Alpine Crossing and Northern Circuit, past Waihohonu and Ketetahi. Large cairns marked the route, some of which still exist, now covered in moss. Presumably the route was popular enough for the new Department of Tourist and Health Resorts to build a hut at Ketetahi in 1901. During the summer of 1903–04, the department erected a second hut at Waihohonu.²

Pit-sawn totara sourced from Mt Pihanga provided framing for the building, while corrugated iron served as both cladding and a roof. Unusually for the times, however, thought was given to insulation – pumice sandwiched in the wall cavity. Situated beside a tongue of beech forest, the hut provided welcome refuge. Beyond, the prow of Ruapehu glistened with snow, or sulked behind cloud.

In those days of greater formality, the sexes were divided among the hut's two rooms: men enjoyed the larger space, with its open fireplace, while women were confined to the smaller, colder quarters. Bunks provided accommodation for about fourteen, although the tussock-stuffed hessian mattresses did not meet with approval from all.³ The chimney, added in 1906, smoked 'abominably' – one skier, who spent several wet days beside the fire, subsequently recalled that he'd seen no smoke go up the chimney at all.⁴ Consequently, most preferred to cook in a nearby shelter.⁵ Skiers and trampers at the hut watched more distant smoke in 1909, when Ngauruhoe erupted.

Despite the rather primitive conditions, the popularity of the 'Grand Tourist Route' increased until 1908, when the main railway trunk line finally

Horse-drawn carriage and group outside Waihohonu Hut, February 1910. PHOTO: GEORGE LESLIE ADKIN COLLECTION. ALEXANDER TURNBULL LIBRARY, WELLINGTON, PAI-O-003-105

penetrated the interior. From then, Ruapehu's eastern side began to lose popularity, but not before Waihohonu became the base for the first ski expedition on Ruapehu.

In 1913, mountain enthusiasts Bill Mead and Bernard Drake imported skis from Switzerland – the first in the North Island. One newspaper article reported, 'In other lands these enormous "strides" are known as "skiis"'.⁶ In July of that year, the pair based themselves at Waihohonu Hut for a few days. They were impressed with the ease of ski travel on the snowy slopes, which would have been difficult to cross on foot, and soon gained enough confidence to make a ski tour around the nearby Tama Lakes and across to the Whakapapa Glacier. They posted a notice on the hut wall, inviting others to join the 'Ruapehu Ski Club'.⁷

For the next six years, Ruapehu Ski Club members used the Waihohonu Hut as their base. One 1915 party recorded:

This was the first experience on Ski for five of the party, but all went merrily, tangle foot being fairly frequent at first, much to the amusement of those not involved in the tangle. It was soon found by the ladies that the limited skirts would not do, especially for what was termed the 'kick turn' and one lady was heard to say to another 'we are going to have a ripping time' and so they did. For thereafter the skirts were slit skirts – or may we say 'slit kilts'.⁸

The club grew, surviving the loss of members during the First World War, and Waihohonu became popular enough for plans to extend the hut's capacity by two more rooms. However, funds were instead directed to improving road access to Whakapapa, which slowly developed as the centre of North Island skiing.

As early as 1911, Waihohonu Hut was used as a stopover for climbers embarking on traverses over Mts Ruapehu and Ngauruhoe from Rangataua to Ketetahi. An article in the *Wanganui Chronicle* advised that the traverse over Ruapehu to 'Waihohonu Government Hut' was 'a hard day, and most of the ladies require a rest day before proceeding'.⁹ Not so the intrepid Jane Thomson, then in her fifties, whose party traversed Ruapehu from a bush camp above Rangataua to Waihohonu Hut in a single long day in 1911.¹⁰

Ronald Algie, secretary of the Ruapehu Ski Club, recalled visits to the hut from Waiouru in 1916–17. Entry to the hut at the time was, he remembered, from the '19 mile' road peg, and the 4 miles (6 kilometres) to Waihohonu 'almost trackless'. The hut was 'comfortable, while firewood and water were good and plentiful'.¹¹

Waihohonu briefly became a mustering hut for shepherds grazing sheep in the area, and recreational use declined. Nevertheless, improvements to the hut in 1927 and 1928 by the Ruapehu Ski Club included a wooden floor and new bunks.¹² However by 1935 the Federated Mountain Clubs complained about the hut's 'unsatisfactory state of repair' and demanded the Tourist Department use the hut fees it received in 'large sums' to make amends.¹³

In the 1950s, the Department of Lands and Survey took over responsibility for the hut, and the growing number of trampers enjoying Tongariro National Park rediscovered the Waihohonu area.

After Lands and Survey built the 'new' Waihohonu Hut in 1968, a Lockwood construction on the other side of the Waihohonu Stream, the old hut was relegated to a museum piece. In 1995, however, it received a welcome make-over, when DOC and the Tongariro Natural History Society replaced rotten timber and repainted the cladding.¹⁴ A small shelter nearby, installed during the hut's centenary year, houses good information panels about the hut's history.

For a brief period in 2010–12, three Waihohonu huts from each era remained: the historic 'old' hut,



the 1968 Lockwood hut (due to be removed at the time of writing), and a brand-new, palatial twenty-seven-bunk hut built by DOC.

Old Waihohonu Hut provides modern-day trampers with a glimpse of a time past, when travellers braved long, rough journeys on horseback and riverboat, and when skiers were willing to cope with rudimentary gear and poor access. Over the years, many of these skiers carved or etched their names into the hut's woodwork, and signatures as early as 1918 still remain.

Although it had only a brief heyday between 1904 and 1908, the Old Waihohonu Hut remains significant as one of New Zealand's oldest surviving huts built for tourism.¹⁵ Certainly it is Tongariro's most venerable building, and appropriately has a Category 1 listing with the Historic Places Trust.

SHAUN BARNETT



TOP Old Waihohonu Hut, pictured in 2011.
BOTTOM Interior of the men's quarters in the Old Waihohonu Hut, 2011, showing Ruapehu Ski Club memorabilia.

PHOTOS: SHAUN BARNETT/BLACK ROBIN PHOTOGRAPHY



THE FOREST SERVICE TAKES OVER NEW ZEALAND FOREST SERVICE HUTS

... 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.

– Mark Pickering, *Huts: Untold Stories of Back-country New Zealand* (2010)

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’.¹ NZFS managers, notably Assistant Director Lindsay Poole (a botanist), firmly believed that control of wild animals preserved vegetation, thereby conserving soils and preventing erosion in key catchments.²

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 cre-

Mungo Hut, Hokitika catchment, West Coast, in 1991. PHOTO: GEOFF SPEARPOINT

ate the impression that something extra was being done. It was rather reminiscent of a supermarket chain taking over the village grocer’s shop.’³

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 his place Ron Fraser took charge of deer-culling operations.⁴

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 packhorse.’⁵

Initially, however, NZFS hut design centred on fixed-wing plane transport. Jock Fisher 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 Auster era where we dropped rolled up flat iron and four-foot lengths of framing timber from inside the plane. The Cessna era 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.⁶

Initially, the use 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 Hawke’s Bay experimented with a design using a bolt-together Dexion aluminium frame in the Kaweka Range. In 1957, it constructed two four-bunk Dexion huts: Makahu Saddle and Back Ridge. Jock Fisher recalled that Popeye Lucas, a major aviation figure in New Zealand who was heavily involved in air-drops, was the agent for Dexion, and so possibly influenced this decision.⁷ Unfortunately, no extant records indicate how many Dexion huts were built, but the two surviving Kaweka huts are important examples of this brief flirtation with the framing.⁸



TOP Bernie Coggan with packhorses at Jervois Hut, Canterbury 1956-7. PHOTO: JIM DAVIS
 BOTTOM An NZFS airdrop in the Richmond Range, Nelson 1956. PHOTO: BEN GIBBS

Culler Ron Turner began to work for the NZFS under Jock Fisher in 1956, serving in both the West Coast and Nelson–Marlborough conservancies. He recalled:

The Forest Service, with its vastly different attitude towards the welfare of their shooters, started to improve operational standards, and I was part of that new hut building effort. This attitude is not surprising as most of the field officers were former shooters with the old Internal Affairs Department. The push for better huts was repeated in many of the backcountry valleys where shooting operations were carried out.⁹

Indeed, the regional hut-building efforts begun by DIA staff on the West Coast spawned a major development centre for NZFS hut design. At first, the Forest Service had a rather decentralised structure, meaning that regional conservancies often led the way in hut design.¹⁰ 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:

Initially, on the West Coast, and after completion of the Wilkinson Hut [an early hut built in the Whitcombe Valley during 1957], we built some of the early bivouacs or ‘bivvys’ ... Being in a snow zone meant the bivvys had to be water-and-moisture-proof and have a dry wooden floor for sleeping on. Food and ammunition would be dropped in by arrangement, also fuel for the kerosene stoves as there was no timber or alpine scrub nearby. These bivouacs may not have attracted a ‘star rating’, but when the weather suddenly turned foul they were just great.¹¹

At first, these bivvies were very basic indeed, comprising not much more than a tent-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 bivvies were more like small stand-up huts with bunks, and sometimes even boasted fireplaces and chimneys (see p. 228).

Helicopter Huts

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 design and building efficiency.¹²

With summer and autumn fully occupied by actual culling operations, winter and spring became the default hut-building and track-cutting seasons. In the spring of 1958, NZFS Nelson Conservancy building overseer Phil McConchie erected the first hut in New Zealand built using helicopter-transported materials.

Snow Corboy, the NZFS senior field officer in Nelson, engaged a Bell 47 helicopter to transport pre-cut framing for four new huts in Northwest Nelson



Loading hut building materials, Styx Base Camp, Hokitika, May 1959. PHOTO: JOHN JOHNS, ARCHIVES NZ, M3264

(now Kahurangi National Park): Mid Matiri, Luna, Kakapo and Karamea Bend. The huts were a basic four-bunk model, differing from the later NZFS standard S81 design, and another example of how regional offices led hut development before national standards came into force. Materials for all four huts were stacked at Karamea before being flown onto site by the Christchurch-based Braziers Air Works. To save flying costs, the helicopter was transported to Karamea by trailer, but this ‘did more damage to the helicopter than the actual flying’.¹³

Ron Turner was employed to help McConchie, and recalled that all did not go smoothly with the first of the planned huts, Mid Matiri, in September 1958: ‘There were two trainee hunters with me and my objective was to prepare a landing site for the helicopter, to ready a smoky fire to indicate both the landing zone and wind direction, and to clear the construction site. It rained, and rained, and kept on raining for days with low cloud.’¹⁴



Interior of Back Ridge Hut showing original Dexion framing, 2004. PHOTO: SHAUN BARNETT/BLACK ROBIN PHOTOGRAPHY

After running out of food, Turner returned to the base hut at Murchison, only to be reprimanded by Snow Corboy for abandoning his post. Happily, Turner got to fly back in with the helicopter,

although it remained cloudy, and he remembered having to ‘wipe moisture from inside the Perspex bubble’. He continued:

My flight was really exhilarating but noisy, lasting some 11 or 12 minutes. It was so easy compared to the wet, miserable hours of struggle and slippery rocks endured the previous day. The first load of timber and iron were placed on site, undamaged, with my pack.

The particular method of construction of these huts called for the flooring to be put down extending to the outer edges 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