



The East rests in the West

By Margaret Mattock

From Ruatoria, on the East Coast, we followed the highway for several kilometres before turning down a winding, gravel road. It weaved its way through a sheep and cattle station, past the remains of an old school towards Whareponga, and the coast.

Being an ignorant pakeha, my first meeting with John Whitford was memorable.

"You must see my kumara-rua," he said. A kumara-rua? Was it a long-keeping kumara, as a rua was a long-keeping potato? No, John's kumara-rua was a rather unique pit in the ground meticulously packed with dried manuka leaves, and filled with lovely kumaras. On top was a thoughtfully designed lid for protection from the weather. The kumara-rua was the Maori's way of storing kumara as it was part of their staple diet in years gone by.

John Whitford is an eighty-one year old retired shepherd living alone in a caravan at Whareponga with his old dog, and two skewbald horses, Cherry and Trampers, for company. He has lived there in retirement for the past four years, but first came to Whareponga seventy-six years ago as a lad of five. As a young man, he married Darki Tamati's sister, and became one of the family. He

worked for years as head-shepherd for Maori Affairs at Whareponga at the Te Araroa and Tamati Sheep-Stations. Even today, at eighty-one years old, John rides his two horses to the coast to set his crayfish pots. John has eight children and seventeen grandchildren, and his wife lies at rest up on the hill next to the marae at Whareponga. I commented that her grave-stone was tended with loving care. His reply was that she deserved that.

As John and I talked, we settled ourselves on the steps of the little church opposite the marae. Without John's help, the Whareponga story I am telling now would never have taken shape.

Whareponga was one of the loveliest Maori Pa on the East Coast of the North Island, New Zealand. Never had the pa fallen to an attacking tribe, until the Ngapuhi taua landed up coast, and moved its way across the country.

The Ngapuhi were brandishing the unknown deadly firesticks against their

Ngati Porou local opponents, and literally mowed them down, totally overpowered. It was never to be forgotten.

Life at Whareponga was full and busy, and houses numbered around thirty in the 1920's. The people who lived there were very friendly and unselfish; and welcomed any visitor with open arms and a cup of tea. It was the days of survival, and if your garden was bare, you were always welcome to your neighbour's kumara-rua.

When I stayed there at Whareponga, in March 1985, that warmth and hospitality was evident even then.

The marae is set in forty acres. A 1km walk from the marae was the beach, hidden by a small hill. In years gone by, the strip of beach had been the stirring headquarters of a whaling station.

The pa at Whareponga was not meant to be built there at all. Because of poor visibility and no view of the beach from the pa, it should have been at Paipainui on the hill. There, they could see, but there was no landing place for boats, so the pa came to Whareponga.

When the Maori took the area around the pa over from Williams (approximately 1900), Tutu Ngarimu ran 3000 acres with sheep on. Eventually, the Maori sold a lot to the Government. After that time, old Tutu used the