

S.C. Brees view of Wellington depicting a Taumata (view point).

When S.C. Brees principle surveyor for the New Zealand Company drew this sketch of Wellington from Kaiwharawhara Hill he included in the right foreground a section of the old track which connected Wellington and Porirua Harbours. As a surveyor he would have appreciated that ancient tracks such as the one depicted were a great blessing when it came to sizing up the land. At this point the track runs through open country. This has resulted from the vegetation being burnt over the centuries. However immediately behind the artist's vantage point the track disappeared into the bush. The high ground in the foreground was a taumata. This was an open spot where travellers could call a halt in their journey to have a rest, take in the view and observe the weather signs.

After Porirua the conditions changed. From here, apart from incursions inland whenever the terrain dictated, travelling was by way of the coast until Kawhia. West Coast rivers would also be an obstacle in the way.

Roads are designed to meet the needs of society they serve. After European settlement tracks such as the one Brees painted on the Te Wharau ridge had little or at the best limited use. Better travelling could be had from changing to surveyed roads. Travelling along the ancient pathway that ascended from Wellington Harbour was not abandoned over night. The track following the crest of the Te Wharau ridge was still of use, as under the New Zealand Company's policy whereby every tenth country section was reserved for the Maori, some hundreds of acres in the vicinity of the left foreground were designated native reserves, so that the track served a purpose as a latter day right of way well after Brees had recorded this scene.

ahead. Over time the tracks became well beaten and Earle remarks how in areas where the soil was light the "pathway resembled a gutter more than a road". Joel Polack in the 1830's remarked how in open fern country these narrow and beaten paths were discernible at a great distance. Earle in his painting depicting his approach to Kerikeri places on visible record confirmation of Polack's comments.

There were exceptions to the rule however about Earle's statement that it was impossible to miss the way, for when the track descended to swampy valley floors keeping to the road posed problems for the uninitiated.

William Yate, who in the early 1830's was a member of the Church Missionary Society wrote of how he met both men and women on these tracks with loads on their shoulders that averaged ninety pounds. This is a terrific weight to bear and causes great strain on the spine, lungs and heart. This burden is all the more terrific when Yate further comments, "that these poor unfortunate carriers have to travel 12 to twenty miles for a day's work".

The 1830's saw a pronounced change in the roading pattern take place. This was when the members of the Church Missionary Society commenced the construction of a cart road between their stations at Waimate and the Bay of Islands. At the same time obstacles in the form of fallen forest giants which impeded travelling were removed. With increasing European settlement taking place from 1840 onwards, this improvement in roading proceeded apace. Being surveyed routes that followed contours, the new cart roads rough and ready as they were, were also a boon to the Maori communities and in the settled parts of the country the ancient pathways were progressively abandoned.

Today it is still possible to trace some of these tracks which served an important role in Maori economics. Back in February 1981 while climbing a hill behind Wharehunga Bay (Cook's Grass Cove) on Arapawa Island, I was conscious that the pasture directly ahead was thinner than the grass on either side of the crest of the ridge. On closer examination it could be seen that over the centuries pounding feet had compacted the clay soil. The possibility that it was a sheep track was ruled out through its very directness. Its line could be made out some 50 metres ahead and the only time that this section of a seven kilometre track which led to Tory Channel faded from view was when it was obliterated by a latter day rockfall. Although narrow, keeping on the track

was not as difficult as Earle had made out. There were differences however in that I was able to pick my own pace and that due to agricultural practices controlling the fern, the way ahead was in open country.



Augustus Earle — "In open country".

The artist Augustus Earle sketched this scene so that his return to the Bay of Islands from Hokianga Harbour would be recorded. As an historical record it is complementary to the descriptive comments made in his journal of what travelling overland entailed in the New Zealand of earlier times.

Earle was an astute observer of Maori ways and customs but for all his insight he failed to comprehend why the tracks were in the state they were.

The artist found the narrowness of the tracks made travelling an irksome experience. He also found the manner in which a party became strung out during the course of a day to be rather unsociable as he would dearly have appreciated a companion to converse with.

To appreciate Earle's description of the journey a person needs to go back to the society of those days when the only means of overland travel was on foot and that due to the absence of beasts of burden the tracks were narrow. Earle found that through "their pathways not being more than a foot wide walking for a European was a painful experience". According to Earle the Maori did not suffer any inconvenience in this regard as they walked pigeon toed (feet turned in). It is not surprising that Earle's gait caused amusement and earned him some good natured banter. Other early travellers also had to put up with this teasing as part of the price to pay, their fellow travellers.

In open country a keen eye could make out the line of the pathway a long way ahead. When in 1835, Charles Dawin the naturalist to the Beagle observed this sea of fern he had cause to remark that in New Zealand no one need starve because part of the staple diet was so abundant. Depending on the fertility of the soil fern could soon present an effective barrier and frequent burning was necessary to keep a track open.