

BY THE OLD HISTORIAN

As it Was

James Cook in the Endeavour circumnavigated New Zealand in 1769-1770 and the coastline was surveyed. Thus the coastline appeared complete on the world map. The coast is rugged and stormy and a hazard to sailing vessels. Cook's chart lacked detail of harbours on the west coast of the North Island which were essential for commerce. Captain Thomas Wing in the schooner Fanny charted a number of such harbours in 1835-1837.

Thomas Wing was born on 19th June 1810, either at Ipswich in Suffolk or Harwich, Essex. His family had been seafarers for generations. Wing's grandfather was a sail maker and his great uncle, John, owned a fishing smack. At the age of fourteen Wing went to sea and shortly after reaching the age of eighteen he signed on the Ferguson, which was chartered to transport convicts from Dublin to Sydney. During a brief stay of the Ferguson in Sydney, Wing probably met and conversed with fellow mariners and heard talk of New Zealand. He then returned to England on the Ferguson.

After his return, Wing is believed to have joined the Admiralty Hydrographic Service. Although no positive evidence of this has been forthcoming, Wing's eldest son Edward stated as much in 1897 in a letter to Dr T.M. Hocken. In support of this claim it is clear that Wing had acquired the fundamental skills of marine surveying, as portrayed in the charts that he compiled of North Island west-coast harbours. These charts were probably compiled from surveys conducted in less than ideal conditions.

In 1832 Wing received an enticing offer of employment with merchants J.R. Clendon and S. Stephenson at the Bay of Islands, where they had established a joint business venture. Within a month of his arrival at the Bay of Islands Wing was in command of the Fortitude, the vessel belonging to the firm, and he made the first of six voyages across the Tasman Sea. Because business was good, Clendon and Stephenson ordered a caravel-built schooner of 41 tons from the Horeke Shipyard in 1834; the vessel was named Fanny and was ready for sea at the end of January 1835. Wing was in command for the maiden voyage to Sydney which took two weeks. Wing's next voyage in the Fanny was to Tauranga and trading stations on the east coast of the North Island; this proved to be a combination of trading and marine surveying.

Kaipara Harbour on North Island is the largest in New Zealand; it is a formidable place and demands the greatest respect. The entrance has a succession of sandbanks with several channels through which the tide flows at between four to six knots. These channels are very susceptible to the effects of heavy westerly gales and river freshes that can alter the configuration of the banks and channels, posing a hazard to shipping.

On 31st December 1642 the Dutch vessels Heems-kerck and the Zeehaen commanded by Abel Tasman sailed past the entrance to the Kaipara, unaware of its entrance. On 4th January 1770 the Endeavour commanded by James Cook sailed past the entrance, likewise unaware of its existence. Two French vessels, the Mascarin under the command of Marion du Fresne and the Marquis de Castries commanded by Ambroise du Clesmeur, noted the inlet of a big cove - in fact the entrance to Kaipara Harbour - on 31st March and 1st April 1772.

Samuel Marsden, a missionary, made two journeys to Kaipara in 1820. Attempts by him to survey the harbour's entrance with Maori assistance met with little success. He sounded the depth of water near South Head and recorded a depth of 15 fathoms but attempts to reach the mouth of the harbour failed and a hill view of the entrance could not be obtained. One Maori told Marsden that a channel ran to the southward free from breakers and was 20 fathoms deep.

A second attempt by Marsden, accompanied by three other Europeans, won them only limited information on the harbour entrance. Kaipara Harbour was shown on two French charts: Baron Jules de Blosseville's 1824 chart Carte de L'île Ika-na-Mauwi and Victor-Charles Lottin's 1827 chart Carte Générale de la partie de la Nouvelle Zélande. The information on which the charts were based came from Samuel Marsden's notes.

On 6th January 1836 Wing, accompanied by three other Europeans, employed his nautical and navigational skills in working the Fanny into Kaipara and spent three days surveying the harbour. Wing compiled the first known sketch chart of the harbour's complex and sandbank-strewn entrance and compiled the first harbour entry directions and other interesting general remarks.

Arriving off the entranceway, Wing dropped anchor a short distance off North Spit in order to determine if there was a passage through the seemingly unbroken line of surging white-capped breakers which lay ahead. Surveying the scene from the masthead he saw an opening and, when the tide was full, gave the order to proceed. In his words recorded on the chart: "The Fanny passed over the North Spit at the top of high water ... at this time of tide there were less breakers here than on any other part of the spit."

Once over the spit the Fanny entered what proved to be the harbour's then main channel (the middle channel), with a depth of ten fathoms and shortly afterwards made her historic entry into New Zealand's largest harbour, coming to anchor overnight. As Wing's chart shows, the Fanny was forced to do a considerable amount of tacking against a strong westerly wind as she worked her way out of

the harbour via the middle channel on 9th January, heading for Manukau.

Te Tirarau Kukupa was a rangatira (chief) of Ngati Whatua and Nga Puhi iwi tribal descent. He drew a chart of the entrance to Kaipara Harbour circa 1833-1839. The names and comments on the chart were probably written by James Busby, then British Resident at the Bay of Islands. The chart shows the principal features in the harbour entrance and environs. Note the broken indelible pencil lines, possibly suggesting that Te Tirarau Kukupu had not used a pencil before and was understandably hesitant in using such an artefact.

Wing was a prolific surveyor. In the Fanny he surveyed Tauranga Harbour in June 1835; in January 1836 he surveyed the harbours of Kawhia, Whaingaroa and Manukau. He surveyed Hau Ridi Harbour (Ahuriri, Napier) in August 1837 and Foveaux Strait in the Deborah in May 1844.

In March 1857 Wing was appointed Pilot for the Port of Manukau and Harbour Master for that port. In his new appointments Wing was responsible for numerous services and equipment necessary for the safety of ships and mariners: the pilot boat, surveys of the Manukau Bar after each storm, pilot and boat crew, signal masts, flags, buoys and moorings, houses at pilot station, beacons, etc.

His name is indelibly linked with H.M.S. Orpheus, a steam corvette, which sank at the entrance to the Manukau Harbour on 7th February 1863 with the loss of 189 lives. The tragedy and the subsequent, predictable, inequitable treatment received by Wing and his eldest son Edward at the hands of an officialdom which quickly closed ranks, left a deep scar on Wing and his family.

Wing ceased his duties on 30th April 1888 after thirty years of service. He died on 19th August 1888.

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