

# **Colonial Whale Fisheries: “Waiopuka Fishery” The First Shore Based Whaling Station in Kaikoura, South Island of New Zealand, 1842 by Ann McCaw.**

## **Background**

Famous today for tourism sparked by the whale watching of sperm whales, the seaside town of Kaikoura on the east coast of the South Island of New Zealand began its European life as a whaling station. Whilst there is debate as to when shore based whaling first began in New Zealand, it was certainly almost 30 years after ship based whaling, and believed to be two South Island stations that were the first. Te Awaiti in 1827 in Tory Channel, Marlborough and Preservation Inlet at the bottom of the South Island in 1828.

The much later Kaikoura station, backed by John Wade a merchant from Wellington and established by Robert Fyfe in 1842, was the first in this area. The southern right whales entering the waters around the Kaikoura Peninsula drew Fyfe who with hard work and good crews soon became the owner of Wade’s Kaikoura station the ‘Waiopuka Fishery’.

By the time Fyfe arrived in Kaikoura it was after the peak years of shore based whaling, numbers were depleted but this area still offered whales as the cows and calves came into the bays on the peninsula as they made their way to North Island waters. Fyfe had almost seven steady years of oil and baleen production before the collapsing population drove him to financially depend on his developing sheep farm and established trading route. He and his whalers became the first European settlers, the site of his Waiopuka whaling station the first European settlement.

## **Landing in the Territory of Ngati Kuri and Bringing Change**

Kaikoura has been the home of three different Maori tribes. The first were the Waitaha arriving over 900 years ago followed by Ngati Mamoe and then 350 years ago Ngati Kuri who are the areas tribal authority today. After negotiations with Kaikoura O Whakatu the chief of Ngati Kuri, Robert Fyfe was able to set up the first of two whaling stations on the Kaikoura Peninsula; ‘Waiopuka’, and later what became known as ‘South Bay’ on the peninsula’s southern side. Whakatu had dealt with a few passing Europeans but this was the first to want to stay.

Waiopuka is the safest bay on the Kaikoura peninsula, most protected from the southerly winds, in choosing this bay Fyfe also chose the tribes favoured bay. From its sandy beach their wakas [canoes] could be launched, seafood gathered, they could swim in the sea and bathe in the freshwater springs in the sand. It is questionable whether Ngati Kuri realised the full extent of the impact of this European venture. That this whaling station would mean the end of their normal activities as the bay became putrid, the water contaminated by rotting carcasses and the stench of rotting flesh and trying out of the blubber.

## **The Waiopuka Whalers**

In the autumn of 1843 Fyffe engaged a full crew of 40 whalers to man his four boats, making their homes in tiny rough whares [huts] in the Waiopuka bay. Described as a cosmopolitan lot the list for this season included men from; England, Ireland, Scotland, Australia, Europe, the U.S.A, one from India and another from Jamaica. From pulling hands to boat-steerers their descriptions sounded impressive but often keen to get away from somewhere to somewhere new, their titles were sometimes used creatively. The youngest Dan Hatfield claimed his age to be 18, the oldest Leonard Dark 50, from Sydney.

Maori had no tradition of whaling, for many tribes including Ngati Kuri whales are considered ancestors, however should one wash up it was seen as an offering and they used every part, the meat, the bone and baleen. Despite that, after the 1843 season a number of the local tribe were employed by Fyfe as whalers. Having a tradition of seafaring, knowledge of the reefs, currents and understanding the winds made them valuable crew and in return they received goods and trading opportunities.

## **Southern right whaling at ‘Waiopuka Fishery’**

Roughing the cold conditions and big seas from May to October Fyfe and his crew hunted the southern right whales as they came to rest in the bays on the Kaikoura Peninsula. Attracted by the shallow waters they had been following this route up the east coast from the cool southern waters where they had been feeding to the northern waters to breed, for generations. But the southern right whale numbers were declining, not only from hunting by on-shore boats, but also ships at sea who had entered New Zealand waters as early as 1792. Although working the deeper waters for sperm whales, many of these ships took the opportunity to catch the southern rights as they headed into sheltered bays for supplies. From the 1830's 'bay whaling' had also begun, this was the peak decade of whaling in New Zealand waters and some ships took the advantage of the southern right whales by anchoring in the east coast bays and harbours of the lower South Island catching the cows and juveniles as they passed through.

However Fyfe's station flourished in its first formal season - 1843 - with 130 tons of oil taken even while an event between Te Rauparaha a North island chief and Europeans at Wairau at the top of the South Island left many unsettled with some crew leaving the area for safety.

The southern right whale population was in severe decline but hunting still continued and records show that of 33 parties whaling from 29 stations in New Zealand waters in 1845, Fyfe was still profitable and also that year the most successful of all parties with 110 tons of oil. This success and that, though limited, which followed meant that Robert Fyfe was reliant on a shipping service to get his oil and bone to his agent in Wellington. European settlements were scarce in the South Island; shipping services were inadequate and expensive which led Fyfe to purchase his own boat the 'Fidele' a small craft of 8 tons. Using the 'Fidele' Fyfe developed a coastal trading route, bringing back supplies after delivering his own goods, not realising this and the 35,000 acres of farmland he purchased soon after arriving in Kaikoura, would support him and help develop the town.

## **The Beginnings of a Settlement**

The location of the Waiopuka Fishery on the northern side of the Kaikoura Peninsula made it safe from the southerly winds driving up from the Antarctic, bearing massive seas and cold conditions. This made it the natural place for the development of a wharf and later the hub of the port complex and town.

Eventually it become known as Fyfe's Cove and today Armers Beach, it is the location of Kaikoura's first wharf which began its life as a pile of rocks and some planks where the casks of oil were rolled out to the waiting boat. Slowly the area and the wharf was developed - more whares for the crew, 'Mr Fyfe's Cottage' - right beside the try works, a coopers workshop and some sheds.

This development made necessary by Robert Fyfe's enterprise was continued after his death in 1854. He and his crewman Tane drowned whilst the 'Fidele' with a cargo of whale oil and other goods, ran aground on its way to Wellington. His business ventures were taken over by his cousin George who to the site added a homestead and further sheds, this cluster of buildings later came to be known as 'Fyffe's Village' and became the commercial and social hub of the area. Travellers went there for shelter and whalers, run-holders and fishermen relied on the stations store for provisions and this area became the beginnings of the European town of Kaikoura.

## **Bibliography**

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