

KEBBELL: JOHN

Known as John

Born: 8 Sept 1840, Ilford, Essex, England

Married: 4 July 1878, Foxton, New Zealand

**To: Mary Grace Ray (or Rae) b. 1859, Bathurst, NSW, Australia
d. 26 Jan 1953, Levin, New Zealand**

Died: 10 June 1931, Levin, New Zealand, aged 90

Buried: Rangiataea Church cemetery, Otaki, New Zealand,

John Kebbell's parents were:

John Kebbell (b. 1 Sept 1810, Bromley Common, London
d. 21 Feb 1879, Wellington, New Zealand)

and

Anne Randall Kebbell, (nee Mayo) b. 4 Oct 1817, Somerset, England,
d. 20 Feb 1894, Wellington

John had one brother.

George Mayo Kebbell b.14 March 1842 in Yeovil, Somerset, England

John and Mary had six children:

Katherine Mary b. April 1879 d.22 Jan 1890 (drowned Ohau River, aged 10)

Dorothy Anne b. April 1881 d. 22 Jan 1890 (drowned Ohau River, aged 8)

Gertrude Emma b. 1886, d. 5 March 1967 (married Guy Kingdom)

Marjorie Grace b.27 Nov 1889 d. 16 Jan 1980 aged 90/1 buried Levin Old Cemetery,
(married Norman Kirkcaldie) 1911, he died 30 Mar 1918 in Wellington,
from self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head)

John Randall St John ('Jack') b.23 February 1892, d.30 May 1915 of wounds

at Gallipoli, Turkey, buried Beach Cemetery, Anzac, Gallipoli

Ann Alison Louisa b. 30 September 1899 d. 12 March 1977

(married Lewin Graham Mackworth Taverner b.1896 d.1981);
buried Clifton cemetery, Bulls)

First Links with New Zealand

John Kebbell was an Englishman, born in Ilford, Essex in 1840. His father, also John, and uncle Thomas Kebbell, left their families the following year and sailed for New Zealand aboard the '*Mandarin*'. They were among the earliest colonists, buying land from the New Zealand Company at Haumaroa Reach on the north side of the Manawatu River opposite the Te Paiaka settlement (between Foxton and Shannon). They brought with them a sawmill plant and the first steam engine imported into New Zealand.

With this equipment they set up a sawmill at Haumaroa. Shortly after, they added a flourmill that processed locally-grown wheat. The mill and machinery were to be damaged beyond repair in a heavy earthquake in 1854.

Young John comes to New Zealand

John Kebbell senior returned to England to purchase new equipment and this is where the subject of our interest, John Kebbell junior, really enters the narrative. While his father had been away, young John had been educated at Lord Weymouth's Grammar School, in Warminster, Wiltshire (today known as Warminster School). When John senior set sail for New Zealand again, on the '*Philip Laing*', not only was his new machinery on board but also young John, now 16, his younger brother George, and mother, Anne Randall Kebbell. They reached Wellington just before Christmas 1856 (23 December).

Wellington became the new site of the Kebbell brothers' flourmill (Messrs J & T Kebbell, flour millers), on Manners St. But John junior was dispatched to the old site up the Manawatu River. At age 16 he was in charge of that property which continued to produce wheat, using the local Maori workforce. The grain was transported in laden canoes down the river to the coast and transferred to sailing craft that took it to Wellington.

After seven years in this role, John moved south to Canterbury in 1863 where he studied sheep-farming for two years then worked on a big sheep station on the plains for two further years. He was clearly preparing himself for a move into this line of business, and on returning to the Haumaroa mill in 1867, he began to drain the land and transform it into pasture for grazing. Milking and butter production followed.

As a further personal development, John was drawn into the military as a volunteer when trouble flared up with the Maoris. The Foxton members of the militia formed a volunteer company and elected John as their captain, a position he maintained until leaving the Manawatu in 1872. Records state that he took his military duties seriously and coached himself in manuals and drill.

The Move to Horowhenua

It's at this point his close and influential relationship began with Horowhenua. In 1874, he partly-bought and partly-leased nearly 3000 acres of land at Ohau, on the north side of the Ohau River. It was at first mostly leased from its Maori owners, but freeholded as opportunity offered. His property extended from the coast to the first right-hand bend of the present Muhunua East Road, including all of the Ohau terrace. Heavy bush with good timber stood on this terrace, but it was destroyed before it could be milled when a neighbour was burning off and the fire spread. Later this land was sold and John continued to farm the more westerly portion.

Initially he erected a pit-sawn hut on the western, beach-front boundary of the property. The doorpost was a sideboard of a Maori canoe. This would be commemorated when his homestead was built and named *Te Rauawa*. Close by John had constructed workshops, staff quarters, and a stable brightly lit by a powerful acetylene gas lamp. All were reported to have been kept immaculately. For water supply, a windmill and 2000-gallon tank were installed. Gardens and lawns were laid out around the house as well as an orchard and these were protected from coastal winds by well-trimmed hedges.

Beyond, scrubby dune was cleared and marshes drained to create pasture for around 4000 sheep (mostly Romney Marsh) and a herd of shorthorn cattle.

John Kebbell married a 19-year-old Sydney girl, Mary Grace Ray (or Rae), in Foxton on 4 July 1878. She was a sister of Mrs Frances Robinson, who had earlier married into one of the two main land-owning families in the Foxton area (Her father-in-law, Francis Robinson, had emigrated to New Zealand on the same ship as John's father in 1840!).

Only a month later John would be elected to Manawatu County Council as the sole representative of the Horowhenua riding. He took the place of Hector McDonald, the old whaler and trader who had pioneered the sand country of the district for sheep grazing. McDonald had died suddenly of a heart attack in Otaki's main street (see separate biography of Hector McDonald on this website).

Local Political Life

John proved to be a dedicated and effective local politician – 'a man more easily respected than liked; haughty, austere, formidable in opposition' (A.J. Dreaver, *Horowhenua County and Its People* p.131). He served as a Manawatu councillor for 3 years, during which time he also became a Justice of the Peace.

While on the Manawatu Council, his focus was on road-building for the Horowhenua riding, and he commanded attention through holding the balance of power between 4 members from the west and 4 from the east of the county. He tried to find a way through Muaupoko objections, particularly with regard to employment of Maori in felling and clearing an inland track, but to no avail. After his term was up, further attempts for a main road through Horowhenua appeared to have been abandoned.

This would no doubt have led him into joining a small group of pioneering gentlemen farmers lobbying persistently for Horowhenua to become a separate county from Manawatu. He wasn't the most active member of this 'Separation Movement' but his support would have borne weight, and the new county of Horowhenua came to fruition in early 1885. John was one of the original seven Horowhenua County Councillors. Before the end of that year, he was council chairman, for a brief term, and then continuously for 7 years, from 1888 to 1895. He left the council in 1902 only to return for a further term from 1911-1914.

The Need for Roads

During this time roads continued to be a priority for him. In the early 1880s there were no roads worthy of the name, making the district extremely difficult to traverse. The only practicable route was along the beach. This was taken regularly by a mail coach which dropped off and collected mailbags and general supplies for 'Kebbell's boy' at a point on the Ohau foreshore. There was a little office window in one corner of the Kebbell homestead's living room to facilitate these transactions.

John got himself appointed onto the Otaki Roads Board and Whirokino Roads Board. With fellow board member John Davies, he conducted a survey and recommended where roads should be built. His good working relationship with Otaki Maori helped in the process of land being granted.

Equally, his determination to extract government loans for road construction, against the wishes of some fellow county councillors (who wanted outright grants!), eventually provided the necessary finance for the county's main road to go ahead. This was mostly completed by 1896 with the section from Otaki to Levin being laid ahead of such a link connecting Levin and Foxton. Bridges across the main rivers followed between 1897 and 1903.

Other Community Activities

John was a founding trustee of Foxton Racing Club when the racecourse was set up in 1869. He was also a member of Horowhenua A & P Association, and the Romney Marsh Council.

His other public duties included his election as first chairman of the committee of Ohau School, whose construction in 1891 he had taken an active part in. A passionate advocate of children's education, he also joined the Wellington Education Board in 1900 and served for more than 10 years.

He granted the land next to Ohau School for the construction of a church – St John the Baptist Anglican, built in 1904, consecrated in 1906. Weekly services are still held in this perfectly preserved building.

He was the first President of (what is now) Levin Cosmopolitan club.

Tragedy

It's within this church that one is starkly confronted with an image portraying the tragic side to John Kebbell's life. The large stained-glass window over the altar commemorates his two daughters, Katharine Mary and Dorothy Anne, who drowned together in Ohau River in 1890, aged 10 and 8. At the foot of the window is a citation describing the death of his only son, John Randall St. John Kebbell, who succumbed to wounds while fighting at Gallipoli in World War I with the 6th Manawatu Squadron in May 1915.

An utterly macabre postscript to this sorrowful sequence was that on the very same day the girls drowned at Ohau, 22 January 1890, John's uncle Thomas drowned in Wellington harbour. He was competing in a yacht race in his own boat, the *Florence*, which was leading after the second circuit of the course, when he fell overboard. Despite their best efforts, his crew, including son Cecil, were unable to recover him alive.

The Surviving Three Daughters

There would be no male heirs for the Ohau pioneer settler, but John and Mary Grace had three surviving daughters. Gertrude Emma, born in 1886, was at the river on the day her two older sisters drowned. Aged just three, she was believed to have witnessed the recovery of their bodies by a Maori farm worker who had taken them there, and endured the painful journey by bullock dray, with the bodies, back to the homestead. Gertrude married Guy Kingdom quite late in life, lived at Grey St, Feilding, and had no children.

The next daughter, Marjorie Grace, was born in 1889, and lived to 91, passing away in 1980. She married into the Kirkcaldie family (of Wellington's Kirkcaldie and Stains department store). With her husband Norman, she lived in Levin at '*Kowhai*', a large home at lower Queen St West, close to Lake Horowhenua. They had 4 children, and there are direct descendants living in this line of the family (they are great-grandchildren of John Kebbell, one of whom is Denis Kirkcaldie of Kelburn, Wellington).

Ann Alison Louisa (Alison) was the last born, in 1899, and lived until 1977. She ended her days in a rest home in Feilding and is buried at Clifton cemetery, Watson St, Bulls. She married Lewin Graham Mackworth Taverner, and has two children still living – these are John Kebbell's grand-children. They are: Graham Taverner, who lives in Church St, Palmerston North; and Gil Hanly, aged 86 and living in Auckland.

Gil is an interesting person in her own right. She was born in Levin in 1934. She was always interested in minority rights and became virtually the sole photographic documenter of the women's rights movement in 1970s and '80s New Zealand, while working for the long-running feminist magazine, '*Broadsheet*'. Her photographs of other protests and social movements like the 1981 Springbok tour, the sinking of the Rainbow Warrior Greenpeace vessel, the protest at Bastion Point and the 1984 land hikoi, are regarded as critical contributions to the archives of these events. She was actually on board the Rainbow Warrior the evening before it was sunk in Auckland Harbour. Her husband was the eminent artist, Pat Hanly.

John's Later Years

So, what of John Kebbell himself in his later years? According to his grandson Graham, John lost all heart in *Te Rauawa* following his son's death at Gallipoli. In 1920, the estate was broken up into 11 blocks and auctioned on 15 June on the account of F.S. Easton. Initially, five were sold and six passed in, their reserves having not been met.

John and Mary moved into Levin, purchasing from the Kirk family a grand villa at 74 Winchester Street, with a workshop in the yard and surrounded by substantial grounds with some fine trees. It was named *Naumai*, and still stands today. An extensive and colourful garden, well maintained, was for many years one of Levin's show places. It's now entirely surrounded by new smaller homes lining Winslow Place which was built on the homestead's southern side.

John passed away in 1931, aged 90, and was interred at Rangiatea church cemetery, Otaki.

At this time, Gertrude and Alison were still living with their parents at *Naumai*. They went on to marry after John's death. Following World War Two, Marjorie (Kirkcaldie), who had been widowed early, came to *Naumai* to look after her mother (Mary) until her death in 1953. Mary is remembered as a demanding, somewhat fearsome, matriarch who suffered from diabetes. Marjorie stayed on at *Naumai* until 1971, when she moved to Cambridge St north, and the family home was sold to Mr R McKenzie.

One might wonder why Otaki was John's final resting place? One reason might be that the county council office was originally in Otaki before moving to Levin in 1897.

References works included:

Anthony Dreaver: '*Horowhenua County and Its People, A Centennial History*'
'*Levin, the Making of a Town*'

G. Leslie Adkin: '*Horowhenua*'