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HMS Endeavour in the Waihou River, 1769

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Based on public talks given by the author in Thames and Paeroa, November 2019.

This story briefly examines the travels and landmarks of James Cook's ship *Endeavour* in the Waihou River area during November 1769. Cook named the Waihou as 'River Thames' as it reminded him of the Thames in England. He regarded the Firth of Thames as part of the river. The name 'Waihou' came back into common use during the 20th century, but the name for the firth has endured. During the gold rush of the 1860s, the Hauraki - Coromandel area became known as 'The Thames', as a result of Cook's legacy. The modern town of Thames also owes its name to Cook.

On 21st November 1769, Cook, Banks and a party of about 10 others made a trip from the Te Puru anchorage, up the Waihou River, in two small ship's boats. They record that they saw, and visited, an occupied pa site a short way up the river. The historical information relevant to this site is as follows (Hawkesworth 1773):

'...we entered with the first of the flood, and within three miles found the water perfectly fresh. Before we had proceeded more than one third of that distance, we found an Indian town, ... as soon as they saw us, thronged to the banks, and invited us on shore. We accepted the invitation...'

This pa site is now generally agreed by historians and archaeologists as being *Oruarangi* (recorded as archaeological site T12/192), on the (then) true right bank of the Waihou, close to Matatoki (Figure 1). Further evidence which supports Oruarangi as the pa site visited comes from the Journal entry regarding the return down-river to the ship:

'...the inhabitants of the village where we had been ashore, seeing us take another channel, came off to us in their canoes...'
(Hawkesworth 1773).

In 1769, the Waihou River was split into two channels, around Tuitahi Island, adjacent to the site of Oruarangi pa. A natural change in the course of the river meant that this channel had largely disappeared by 1886. A 1908 map of the

Hauraki Plains shows Tuitahi Island still existing at that time, although the channel to the east of it had significantly narrowed (Figure 2).

A memorial to Cook and his party was erected near the original Kopu Bridge (opened 1928) to mark the approximate site of Cook's first landing on the Waihou River, to visit a pa. It appears the memorial site chosen was more related to visitor access than historical accuracy (which is considered reasonable).

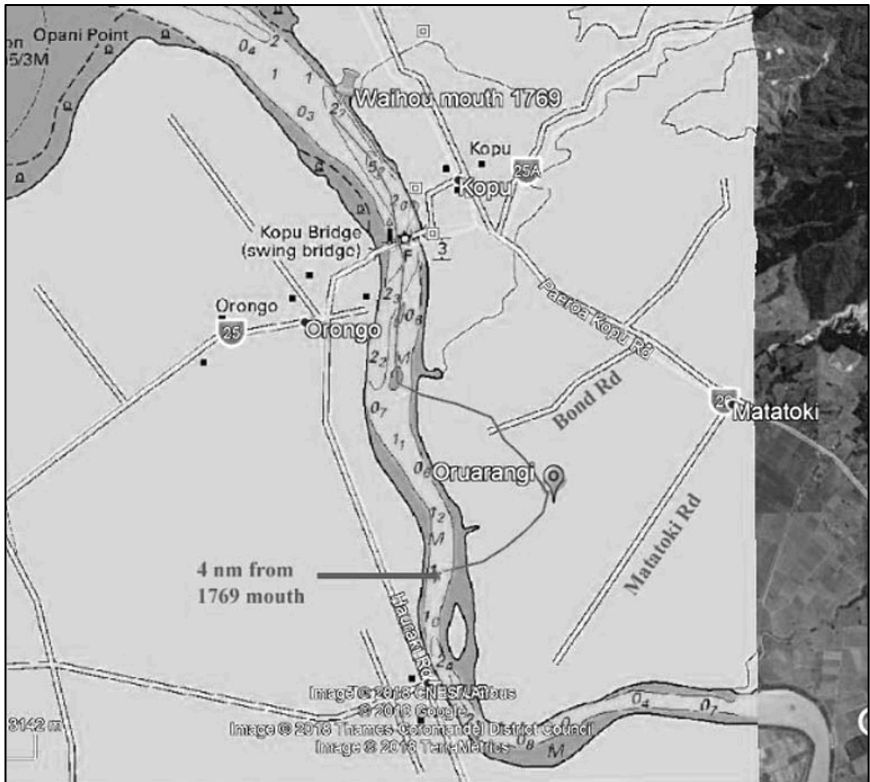


Figure 1. NZ Chart 533 superimposed on Google Earth. Oruarangi pa is marked at the recorded GPS waypoint (as per the archaeological site record) and is about 3.2 nautical miles (by river) from the mouth.

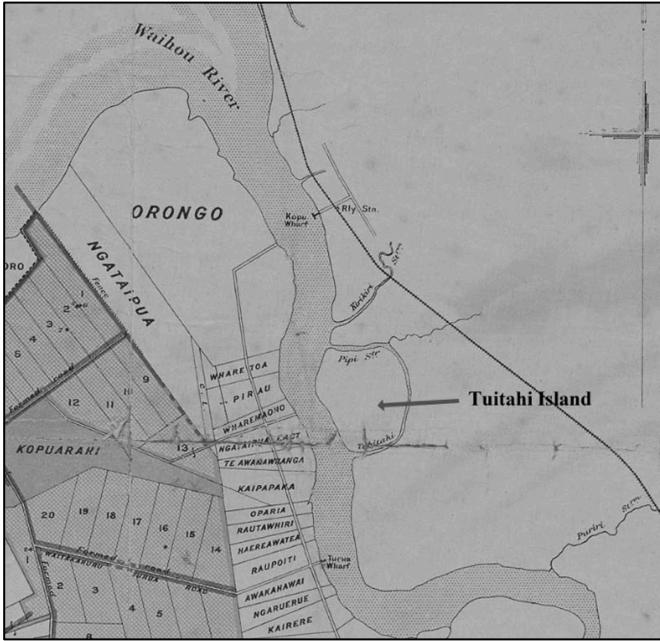


Figure 2 (above). Extract from NZ Map 4335, Hauraki Plains (1908) showing remains of Tuitahi Island – the channel to the east of it has almost disappeared (<http://www.mapspast.org.nz>).



Figure 3 (left). View of memorial in its original position, north-east of the 1928 Kopu Bridge (Ohinemuri Regional History Society <http://www.ohinemuri.org.nz/>).

The memorial was moved to a site near the Kopu Hall in 1970 (*Thames Star* 12th March 1970). The hall was demolished c. 2014 and the memorial placed in storage. It was re-sited close to its original position on the river bank in May 2020. It is well sited, being accessible to motorists on SH25, walkers, and riders on the Thames-Paeroa cycle trail. Re-siting it on, or closer to, Oruarangi pa would not be particularly logical, as the pa site is now very difficult to access, and is on private property. However, a small plaque along the cycle trail, in the vicinity of Oruarangi, may be appropriate.

Kahikatea Measured - Waihou River

At, or about, the furthest limit of the Endeavour party's voyage up the Waihou River, they measured a large kahikatea and took some samples of what is now believed to be a matai. This site is of at least national importance, as Cook's measurement of the kahikatea, and report of vast timber resources, was the catalyst for the prolific ships' spar and kauri timber trades which followed his return to England. The relevant historical information relating to the site where the tree was measured is as follows:

‘We proceeded up the river till near noon, **when we were fourteen miles within its entrance**; ... we landed on the west side, to take a view of the lofty trees which every where adorned its banks. They were of a kind that we had seen before, though only at a distance, both in Poverty Bay and Hawke's Bay. Before we had walked an hundred yards into the wood, we met with one of them which was nineteen feet eight inches in the girth, at the height of six feet above the ground: having a quadrant with me, I measured its height from the root to the first branch, and found it to be eighty-nine feet: it was as strait as an arrow, and tapered but very little in proportion to its height; so that I judged there were three hundred and fifty-six feet of solid timber in it, exclusive of the branches’ (Hawkesworth 1773).

Cook's Journal is slightly more specific regarding distance from the river mouth:

... we landed on the West side in order to take a View of the lofty Trees which adorne its banks, being at this time **12 or 14 Miles within the entrance** and here the tide of flood run as strong as it doth in the River Thams below bridge.
(<http://southseas.nla.gov.au/journals/cook/17691120.html>)

Local anecdotal evidence puts the site near the small town of Netherton. However, a measurement of 12-14 nautical miles from the 1769 mouth indicates the site

was somewhere between the mouth of the Hikutaia Stream and the junction of SH2 with Hauraki Rd (known locally as *Sarjant's Corner*). An article in the Ohinemuri Regional History Journal by Tony Barker (1969) suggests that the tree measured by Cook was known to local iwi, who regarded it as sacred. The article recounts a river journey taken by the local historical society in 1969 to commemorate the importance of the Waihou River to local history.

‘Having the foregoing in mind as well as the fact that over the years our river has played an important part in the development of Ohinemuri, members of the Paeroa Historical Society decided to arrange a river excursion. ...

In the vicinity of Netherton the left bank particularly interested us, primarily because of ‘Cook’s Tree’. For many years this was regarded by the Maoris as ‘Tapu’, hence it survived as a living memento of the famous explorer. Eventually milling interests had it cut down, but the stump [which was hollow] remained for many more years and was photographed by the late Mr. Courtenay Kenny [early surveyor in Paeroa]’ (Barker 1969).

The article included a photo of what purports to be the original kahikatea, after it was felled (Figure 4).



Figure 4. ‘Captain Cook’s tree’ as published in the ORHJ (1969).

Whether this was the tree actually measured by Cook is debatable. An obvious issue is how was it known and remembered, in an area where there would have been numerous kahikatea of the same age and size. However, it is possible that iwi members followed Cook's party and observed the tree being measured, or the crew 'cruised' the tree (i.e. cut an upward-pointing arrow in it) with an axe, to mark it as HM property. Investigation by the author revealed two historical sources that state that Cook (or his crew) marked trees with the name of the ship and the date: Beaglehole (1955 p. 204) re a tree at Mercury Bay, and Kitson (1911) re a tree on Norfolk Island.

Additional local historical accounts obtained by the author all support the premise that the measured tree was at the end of Captain Cook Rd. However, there is an alternative theory that the measured tree was actually downstream of the Hikutaia Stream junction.

Archaeologist Caroline Phillips reconstructed the environment, in particular the width and course of the river as it was prior to 1800, based on soils, early survey maps, aerial photography and excavation data. She then measured the route, taking into account the bend around Tuitahi Island to visit Oruarangi. Based on this analysis, she concluded that they landed downstream from the Hikutaia Stream junction, in the fairly straight stretch before the Hikutaia bend. This is corroborated by Cook's chart of the river which ends at about that point, implying that was how far upriver the party went. Additionally, both Caroline Phillips' reconstruction and William Wilsons' 1801 chart show that the Waihou River narrowed considerably upstream of the Hikutaia Stream junction, and Cook and Banks commented that the width of the river had not changed significantly where they landed. This is shown in Figure 4.

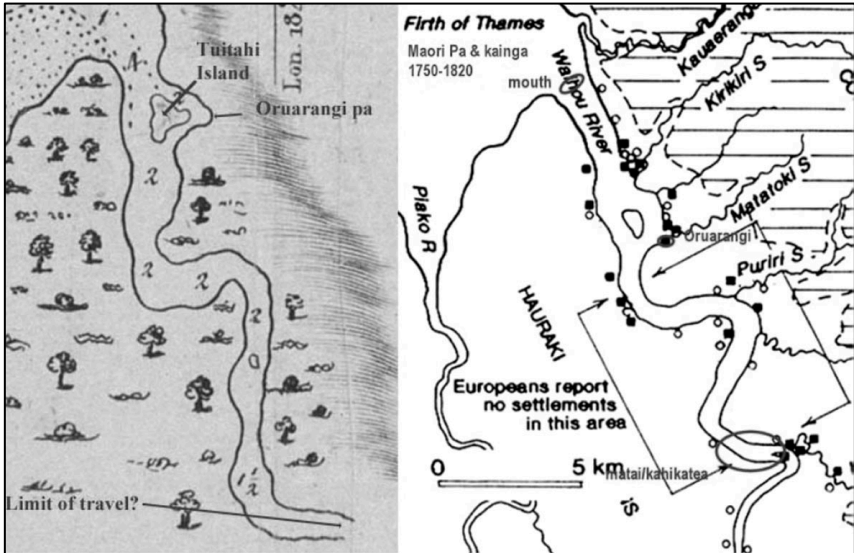


Figure 5. Left: Cook's chart of lower Waihou River, showing limit of travel (or at least limit of charting). Right: Phillips' interpretation of the same section of river.

One of the points put forward by Caroline Phillips which supports her theory is that the nature of the river would have changed from around the Hikutaia stream mouth (particularly, it would have narrowed). This may just be a matter of the level of detail that was recorded; however, Banks' Journal entry is relevant, and states:

‘As far as this the river had kept its depth and very little decreased even in breadth; the Captn was so much pleasd with it that he resolvd to call it the Thames. It was now time for us to return, the tide turning downwards gave us warning so away we went and got out of it into the bay before it was dark.’

In essence, theory O (for orthodox) based on the historical record primarily relies on Cook's estimate of the measured tree being 12-14 nm upstream from the river mouth, while Theory P (for Phillips) relies on Cook's chart covering the river journey completely, and terminating before the Hikutaia - Waihou junction. Although there is considerable historical evidence supporting Theory O, most of it is secondary, circumstantial and/or relies on oral tradition. In the author's view, either theory could be correct, and it may not be possible to resolve the issue

without some new evidence coming to light. Often, archaeological evidence fulfils this function. While the probability of archaeological evidence of the stump remaining is small, it is not impossible.

Even if the kahikatea site is not identified exactly, the full range of possible sites (from about 1 nm downstream from the Hikutaia junction to the downstream end of Captain Cook Rd) is still only about three kilometres of river bank (or about 1.5 km² total area), and any memorial which states: ‘ in this vicinity ...’ is still factually correct. There should be no need to re-write local histories, nor move any memorials. If memorials are sited primarily for public access, they are going to tell their story much better than at sites which may be historically correct, but unreachable by visitors!

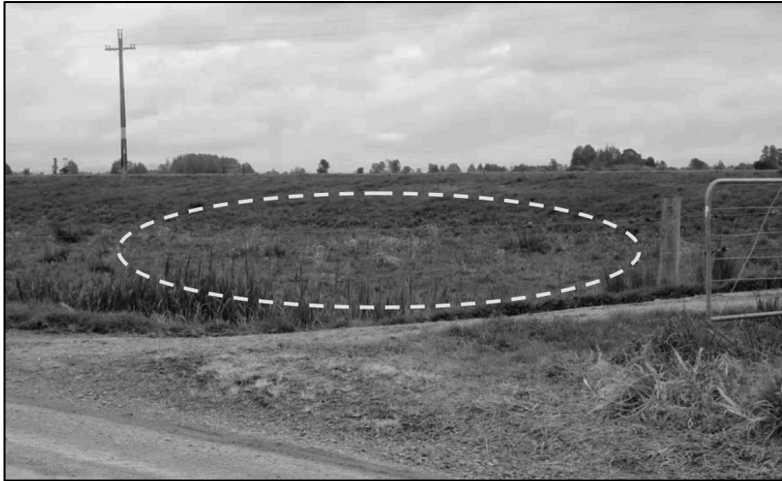


Figure 6. Area opposite re-sited memorial considered by local historians to be the site of the tree Cook measured (WP 190). There was reported to be a depression, visible some years ago, but this is no longer evident, nor any other above-ground evidence.

The approximate site of the kahikatea measuring has been memorialised, in two separate locations (in 1975 and 2011). The 1975 memorial, originally at the junction of SH2 and Hauraki Rd, was disruptive to traffic, has been re-erected (minus anchor, but with the bolts previously used to mount it) along Captain Cook Road, at the site considered to be close to the tree that Cook's party measured. In 2011 a new memorial, based on a large ship's anchor, was erected at the junction of Hauraki Road and Captain Cook Road.



Figure 7. 1970s memorial (from Sarjant's Corner) re-sited near the end of Captain Cook Rd.



Figure 8. 'Anchor' memorial for Cook's visit to Nethererton area (completed in 2011).



Figure 9. Google Earth view of the Waihou River showing the main sites discussed in this paper.

Acknowledgements

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