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THAMES ORPHANAGE AND TRAINING SCHOOL (TOTS), KAUAERANGA VALLEY 1879–1893

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Introduction

The Thames goldfield opened on 1 August 1867. During the early years living conditions were harsh, medical treatment fairly rudimentary and mortality rates were high; among miners undertaking highly dangerous work, women giving birth, and new-born children. As a result, significant numbers of young children ended up as orphans, and there was no dedicated Government-funded welfare system to support them as there is today. Perhaps as a result of the growing concern in the community several welfare initiatives were commenced by the local borough and county Councils; albeit funding was usually provided by a mixture of public (i.e., central government and Council) and private donations. A local Charitable Aid Board, consisting of elected members, was formed, to manage this function.

The Thames Orphanage and Training School was one such welfare venture, and it provided care for local orphans from 1879 until 1893, when it was decided that there would be considerable savings to board orphans with separate families, rather than operate a centralised institution. It was estimated that 118 children lived in the TOTS facility during this 14 year period.

The orphanage was located on the prominent ridgeline south of the Kuaeranga River, immediately above the swimming hole known locally as “the big pool” and a farmhouse on the south bank that was owned and occupied by Mr Ian Smith and his family in the latter part of the 20th century. Ian Smith was the grandson of Robert Nisbet Smith, who was the original owner of the farm, and one of the main contractors who built the Thames water race in 1875–76. According to Bill Vant (pers. comm. 2011, nephew of Ian Smith), the Smith family were connected to the Murdochs, who gifted the land for the orphanage (and, later, for the Kuaeranga School), by marriage.

The authors researched and surveyed the TOTS site over the period 2011–2013. This included interviews with members of the Smith family, and

two site visits. Although little remains, in terms of above-ground archaeology, there are almost certainly still plenty of features remaining below-ground. Also, the social history of the institution is closely representative of the welfare systems of the time (well before the days of the Welfare State) and the site is therefore of considerable interest in that regard.

History

The history of the orphanage is well summarised by Allan Berry's book *The Kuaeranga Valley* (2007). In 1878 the Thames Borough Council set up a Charitable Aid Board and considered Old Men's and Women's Refuges and an orphanage. The fund allocated £250 of the £1,400 per annum for destitute children. Mr. Murdoch donated eight acres of land, sufficient to graze dairy cows and grow vegetables. There was no progress in the building of the home until 1879, as timber which had been ordered from the mill had not been supplied. A large building in "Semi Elizabethan style" costing £680 was completed by 2 October 1879 and 300 attended the opening on 13 October. Fifteen Thames orphans moved in from the Industrial and Orphans Home in Auckland. Mr. and Mrs. Fulljames, who together received £100 per annum, managed the home. They had one servant and three men from the Old Mens Home (at Tararu), who grew vegetables and collected firewood from the creek.

Sir George Grey visited the home in February 1880 and was rowed across the river. In October of the same year¹ a suspension bridge was completed. In his report to the Charitable Aid Board in April 1892 Mr. Fulljames reported that he had fed the orphans for four and three quarters pence a day and that the orphanage had produced £45 worth of milk and butter during the year together with an abundance of potatoes and vegetables. The main purchases were for meat and groceries. The Committee praised Mr. Fulljames for his efforts.

Another useful historical reference is Killip (1995: 23–24), and much material can be obtained from the Papers Past web site (included in the New Zealand Archaeological Association site record).

The TOTS opening on 23rd October 1879 was marked by only a couple of brief paragraphs in the Thames Evening Star. However, the next day's edition carried a much more detailed article. An excerpt from Mayor Mr William McCullough's speech gives good insight into the economic and social rationale for construction of the facility:

¹ Articles in the Thames Star indicate the bridge wasn't completed until 1889; however, it had been several years in the planning stages, and there were several delays.



Figure 1. View of TOTS buildings, (indicated) on top of ridge-line; looking approx south east, down the Kauaeranga Valley towards the sea. Date unknown, but likely to be 1880s-early 1890s (Alexander Turnbull Library).

...I will, however, mention some facts which will account for the action taken by the Council, and perhaps show the authorities have done all for the best under very peculiar circumstances. In the first place, through the liberality of Messrs Murdoch Bros., the land on which the building is erected, some eight acres in extent, was given to the Council for charitable purposes. This present had something to do with determining the site for the school; again the desirability of having Thames children, on the spot and under the control of a local committee was a strong inducement; but the principal reason was one of economy. From the subsidy granted to the Borough by the general Government, some £1920, no less than £1100 was deducted in the years 1877 -8 for the maintenance of the sick, the destitute, and the orphan children of the district; and believing that a saving might be effected the Borough Council, in November of last year, whilst Dr Kilgour was Mayor, decided to undertake themselves the maintenance of the orphans, the poor, and the sick of the Thames.

In carrying out that policy the Borough undertook to find any deficiency in the amount required for the support of the Hospital and Old Men's Home, and had also erected the structure in front of which they were then standing [TOTS]. The Cost to the Borough for the maintenance of the children during last year was from £220 to £260, and as that amount went to the Homes in Auckland, those institutions received a like sum from the Government, who, under their managements, agree to pay pound for pound to all managing local bodies who undertake the distribution of charitable aid in their several provincial districts. It was estimated the cost of maintaining the children in this Orphanage would not entail an expense on the Borough greater than £140 per annum, which under the circumstances was a considerable saving on the amount previously paid ...

In the mid-to-late 1800s New Zealand did not have the extensive government-funded medical and welfare services that were to eventuate later². When the Provincial system of government was abolished in 1876, the new central government soon discovered that the management and funding of medical and charitable services (previously a provincial responsibility) were ad hoc, and the services themselves disparate and widely fragmented. It took some time for a proposed model for the provision of such services to be designed, and for agreement to be reached with local Councils, who were expected to undertake a major share of the responsibility:

The Hon. Mr. Ballance to the Chairman of the County Council of Vincent.

Colonial Secretary's Office, Wellington, 15th March, 1878.

Sir:

The Government on taking office found that the hospitals and charitable institutions throughout the colony were being managed upon no fixed principle or system, and that it was absolutely necessary to place them on a more satisfactory footing.

Up to the end of December, and till the new Financial Arrangements Bill took effect, it was impossible to change the existing state of things, but from that date the principle Government have endeavoured to bring into operation is one which is at once comprehensible, uniform, and practical. ...

² The Education Act (1877), which provided for free and compulsory education for children up to the age of 12, can probably be regarded as the first of many Government social initiatives. However, centrally-funded medical and welfare support didn't eventuate until the early 20th century.

A proposal has been made to the Municipalities of the larger towns to place the hospitals and charitable aid under the direct control and management of the Borough Councils, and to subsidize them to the extent of 20s. [shillings]. for every 20s. of paid-up subscriptions and of moneys contributed from the borough fund and to make no deductions whatever from the subsidies; and the Government propose to offer similar terms to County Councils, if they will undertake to manage hospitals in country districts, many of the patients admitted being resident outside the boroughs. (Ballance 1876)

Initially, the legal basis for the provision of hospital and welfare services by local councils was Section 190 of the Counties Act (1876):

The Council may from time to time. on such terms and conditions as may appear expedient, appropriate such portion of the County Fund it thinks fit to erect, establish or maintain, or contribute to the cost of the erection, establishment or maintenance of, any asylum, hospital or other charitable institution, ... for the relief of such poor persons as through age, infirmity or accident are unable to help themselves.



Figure 2. View towards TOTS area from Kauaeranga Valley Rd (approx same point where Fig 1 was taken). The house on the skyline is built on the site of the original TOTS house.

This was eventually expanded by the Hospitals and Charitable Institutions Act (1885), which mandated the establishment of Hospital and Charitable Aid Boards in specified Districts, to oversee the provision of appropriate services. The Thames district covered the Counties of "...Thames, Ohinemuri and Piako, and including all Boroughs within." Coromandel was constituted as a separate District. However, it appears the Thames and Coromandel Charitable Aid Boards worked as a combined organisation (Thames Star 13 January 1886).

The 1885 Act reiterated local government responsibilities for provision of hospital and welfare services, and Section 15 provided for central Government subsidies; mostly on a 1:1 basis, for all revenue contributed by the local council or through local subscriptions (the subsidy was to be 1:2 for bequests; i.e. money left in someone's Will for charitable purposes). Existing hospitals and charitable institutions (including Thames hospital and orphanage) were retrospectively included in the provisions of the new Act.

While it appeared that, overall, the community supported welfare initiatives such as TOTS, there were some reservations held within the local populace, and there were mixed views expressed at times in the local newspapers. For example, the Thames Evening Star of 18 November 1879 contained two Letters to the Editor concerning a recent orphanage picnic, held by the river. One correspondent, pen-named "Rachel", stated: "My impression, from what I saw and heard, was that the hearts of the matron and the master [presumably Mr and Mrs Fulljames] were not in their work. The rule and control was by loud calling and scolding, not by love ...". A second correspondent, "An Auckland Lady Visitor", stated: "I too saw the orphanage inmates and think, with 'Rachel', the management of the children by the Matron and Master lacked kindness to an especial degree ..." A counter-view was expressed the following day by "Play Fair":

It seems to me that, concerning the Orphanage and its Matron, Rachel is unreasonably exacting and censorious. Surely the Matron has other duties to perform besides nursing this one baby and playing with the children and dancing attendance on this lady-visitor, who seems to have gone there for the sole purpose of finding fault. ... I, too, have visited 'the Orphanage, and found the children happy and contented, and seemingly at home with, and attached to their foster Matron. Instead of cross words and angry looks, I found kindly feeling and great good management. ... There are two sides to any question, and if next time Rachel visits the Orphanage, she will try to fancy herself in the Matron's place, she may be able to form a more correct judgment.

In June 1882, the TOTS outbuildings caught fire during the night and were destroyed (Auckland Star 20 June 1882). It is assumed they were rebuilt; however, details were not obtained. The main house was unharmed.

Another notable episode took place in June 1889, when an orphan by the name of Selina Eayrs suffered injuries while in the care of a Mrs Williams (apparently, older orphans were often placed with families or firms by means of an employment training opportunity). Mrs Williams was charged with cruelty and mistreatment of the child; the charges being dismissed by the JPs who heard the case. This prompted a highly critical Editorial in the Thames Evening Star of 19th June 1889, which stated:

It seems hardly credible, but unfortunately it is a matter of fact, that the Bench decided to dismiss the case on the grounds that 'the punishment administered might appear severe, but some children required more severe punishment than others' and that there was no evidence to show that the bruises had been inflicted by Mrs Williams. The Bench overlooked the fact that the girl herself stated that they had been inflicted by Mrs Williams, which was corroborated by Dr Williams [apparently not related to the accused Mrs Williams], Mrs Dodd and Mr Fulljames ...

There was also national comment on the case, including an article in the Auckland Star of 20th June 1889, and a long, scathing article challenging the court's decision in *The Observer* of 29th June 1889. The *Observer* correspondent stated:

I have decided to send you a plain and unvarnished statement, showing with what gross brutality orphans may be treated at the Thames, while the merciless beings who are guilty of such inhumanity are allowed to escape that punishment they so richly deserve. ... the two dunderheads who occupied the bench drivelled out something to the following effect. It was evident that the girl was a very bad girl, Mrs Williams might have punished her too severely, but some children require more severe treatment than others. There was no evidence at all to show that the bruises were inflicted by Mrs Williams, and the case would be dismissed. ... We have printed the 'evidence' very fully, and we defy any sane man to arrive at the same conclusion as these two sapient Justices.

A Thames Star report of a meeting of subscribers to TOTS held 29th October 1889 emphasised the dual purpose of the institution:

The Secretary (Mr Mason) then read the following report:—[signed by Mr Louis Ehrenfried, President]

The ladies and gentlemen forming the Committee of Management of the Thames Orphanage and Training School have the satisfaction

when submitting their first report to the subscribers to its funds, to be able to say the charity has proved a success, and is doing good work in a direction not heretofore attempted in the district.. The institution is dual in character, being an industrial school (or the reception of neglected children-committed for various terms or years by the Magistrates, and also an orphanage in which children who have lost one or both parents may be placed by their friends upon payment of the small sum of £10 annually.

Following the President's report, a list of names of some 77 "subscribers" followed (these representing monetary contributions), including the names of very prominent local identities, plus also individuals or groups of less modest means:

... Thames Borough Council £50, ditto second subscription £28, His Honor Mr Justice Gillies £10, teachers and pupils Kauaeranga School £6, Sir George Grey, K.C.B. £5 5s, J. E. Macdonald, District Judge £5, workmen at Mr Marshall's £2 2s, H. Kenrick RM [goldfields warden and Residential Magistrate] £2 2s, J. McGowan [local MP; later a cabinet minister] £2 2s, L. Ehrenfried [brewery owner] £2 2s, workmen Mr Ehrenfried £2

There followed a list of "donations" (goods or non-monetary items), including:

Mrs Veale, a cheese; Wm. Wilson, hats for children; M. Whitehead, boots; Miss Mason, clothing; Mr. McCaul ironmongery; W. Stephenson, cricket bats and ball; Mrs May, socks and caps; W. Laurie, artificial leg; M. Maroney, boots; ... T. Crosbie two pigs and potatoes; W. Deeble, potatoes ...

The wide variety of individuals and groups that contributed to TOTS indicated that it was regarded as a community institution, and that the community as a whole supported it, conceptually and financially.

The report also mentions improvements, including: "Considerable improvements and additions have been made to the out-buildings. The grounds have been laid down in permanent pasture, and a very substantial bridge erected over the Kauaeranga-River." Prior to the erection of the bridge, access to the orphanage required wading across the river.

Although the depression of the 1880s was nearing its end the Borough Council was thinking of reducing salaries and there was a move to amalgamate the orphanage and the Old Mans Home, or to board the children at £10 per annum, a considerable saving of the £27-£30 per child at the orphanage. Despite the apparent good works done at the Orphanage, and the strong community support, the Thames Borough Council moved unanimously to close the orphanage and the children were boarded out on 29 December 1893 and

the orphanage was closed two days later, and the land and buildings put up for tender. This is somewhat surprising, considering that the land was a gift from the Murdoch family: in such circumstances, it would be usual for ownership to revert to the donator. However, Smith family members state that the land was eventually re-acquired by their father, Ian Smith, some time during the 20th century, although the exact circumstances are unknown.

Mr. Fulljames reported at the closing: “Since 1879 one hundred and eighteen children have found it a refuge, and a home and many have expressed gratitude.” The Borough Council took over the property and the eight acres in January 1894 and the furnishings were removed and taken to the Old Mans Home to a new position in Tararu described as the “Country”; the previous site was near the hospital. It was noted in the *Thames Star* of 18 August 1905 that “The old orphanage site was rented for two pounds ten shillings a year for a place to put his horse by the schoolteacher F.N. Smith.”

Site Visits

From the photo at Figure 1, a few other historical photos that were obtained, and verbal information from locals, the likely site of TOTS was fairly obvious; on top of the ridge on the south side of the “big pool”, as the prominent swimming hole is known locally. After gaining permission from landowners in the area, a brief survey was carried out by the authors in December 2011. Another visit was made in 2012, when discussions were held with Marion Thompson (nee Smith), who owns the small dwelling immediately west of the orphanage house site.

The area previously occupied by TOTS has been used for farming since the institution was closed down, and the general area has been substantially modified. The only possible above-ground archaeological feature that was discovered on the orphanage site was a section of concrete foundation (with iron reinforcing rods) protruding from under the eastern side of the modern house that has been erected on the knoll above the Big Pool. According to locals, this modern house was erected on the site of the TOTS dwelling house. However, discussions with Laetitia Duggan (nee Smith) revealed that the modern house was built by her husband c. 1997, and that the section of foundation is modern (i.e., a construction “bloop”). Also, her belief is that the orphanage was slightly north of the current house on the site. No remains of buildings were located; however, as noted previously, the area has been farmed since the closure of TOTS. There is still plenty of open ground for hundreds of metres surrounding the main building site, and it is likely that features would be located below-ground.



Figure 3. Remains of suspension bridge abutment on northern bank of Kauaeranga River (WP 557).

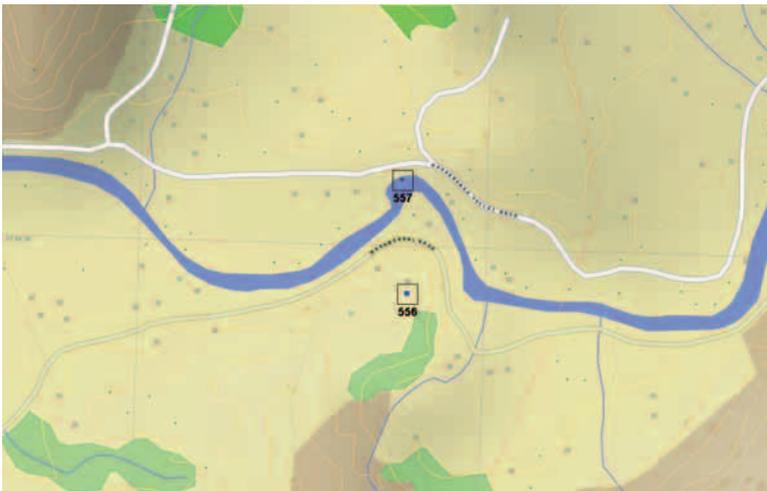


Figure 4. TUMONZ vector map showing waypoints (556 is the site of the main orphanage building and 557 is the remains of the northern abutment and anchor-point of the suspension bridge).

Marion Thompson and Laetitia Duggan are daughters of Ian Smith, the last Smith family member to own the farm by the Big Pool. Both gave what information they had on the orphanage, but nothing of significance relating to artefacts or layout was obtained.

The northern end of the suspension bridge built as access to TOTS is still in place (a concrete abutment with steel anchor points). According to locals, this is the third bridge built at that site (by the Smith family, who owned the farm house immediately across the river through most of the 20th century). The bridge became derelict around the 1970s–80s and was dismantled shortly afterwards.

References

- Extracts from NZ Statutes are from the Auckland University Law School *Early NZ Statutes* site at <http://www.enzs.auckland.ac.nz/>
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