Three Ways of Telling Local History

A brief history of the Whakatāne, Ōpōtiki and Kawerau museums

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How has local history been collected, preserved and interpreted in the Eastern Bay of Plenty? This article discusses the varied histories of the Whakatāne, Ōpōtiki and Kawerau Museums. It is a brief overview of their quite distinct trajectories, not a comprehensive history.

The three museums are perhaps the most publicly visible institutions where locals and people from elsewhere can engage with stories of the past, social and family histories, the development of local industries and the environment in the Eastern Bay. However, various archives, heritage trails, monuments, historical societies, trusts, as well as wāhi tapu (sacred places) such as Te Ana o Muriwai (Muriwai's Cave) and whare taonga including the Mataatua meeting house in Whakatāne, are equally important custodians of the historical memory of the local communities, iwi and hapū. Understanding these institutions' past and present role in interpreting local history would be worthwhile researching for a separate article.

The historical museums in Ōpōtiki, Whakatāne and Kawerau have had not only quite distinct beginnings; as will be shown below, each has also taken a different direction in terms of its operations, collections, and exhibitions. What the three museums do have in common is their foundation in a European model of 'institutions that preserve and interpret the material evidence of humankind, human activity, and the natural world'. According to Encyclopaedia Britannica, the word museum (from Greek mouseion, originally 'a temple or shrine of the Muses'), was being used in Europe by as early as the 17th century to describe collections of curiosities'.[1]

Whakatāne Museum

At the Whakatāne Museum's exhibition space, once through the door of the modern building that also functions as the Whakatāne library the visitor is greeted by two amo (upright carved wooden figures) on either side of the entrance to the museum's heritage gallery. They are 'from the meeting house Awanuiarangi which was constructed in 1883 and given by Ngāti Pūkeko to Te Kooti, to commemorate his pardon by the Government'.[2]

Te Kooti Arikirangi Te Tūruki's message of peace and unity, founded in the Ringatū faith that he developed, perhaps sets the tone for the museum gallery that the visitor is about to enter. The 'journey of discovery' starts with a presentation of the principal landmarks of the Whakatāne district and their Māori origin stories. Further along the gallery room also features a glimpse into Te Kōhika, the nationally significant archaeological discovery of a well-preserved 17th-century Māori village in the Rangitāiki Plains to the west of Whakatāne in the 1970s. Relevant artefacts, historic images and texts further provide the basics of local history such as the Treaty of Waitangi and the arrival of European traders, boat building and the history of Whakatāne and its harbour. A display of a surveyor's chain addresses the alienation of Māori land and the 1866 confiscation of much of the Eastern Bay of Plenty by the Government.

Among the European artefacts is Reverend John Laughton's writing desk. Laughton was a missionary and contemporary of the remarkable Sister Annie who is also acknowledged in the display. Ann (Annie) Henry, as she was known prior to being ordained a missionary of the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand, taught and gave pastoral care in Te Urewera from 1917 to 1948. For many years the only permanent resident Pākehā at Ruatāhuna she also acted as doctor, midwife, nurse, dentist, lawyer, carpenter, plumber, policewoman and social worker. She is remembered as a highly respected woman who

[1] 'Museum, cultural institution', https://www.britannica.com/topic/museum-cultural-institution, accessed: 1 September 2025

[2] Explanatory label, Whakatāne Museum, personal observation 31 October 2024

built close relationships with Tūhoe and became good friends with Rua Kenana.[3]

The Whakatāne museum's heritage gallery is confined for space. Despite the limitations of one large room however the gallery covers a great diversity of local people and events in the rich history of the district. In the three adjacent galleries changing exhibitions engage with themes of the local past and present through contemporary art. This winter, for example, in 'The Stones Remember' Whakatāne-based, award-winning artist Sarah Hudson (Ngāti Awa, Ngāi Tūhoe, Ngāti Pūkeko) explores her connection to Moutohorā (Whale Island) and how landscapes remember using historic photographs and stones.[4] Together the heritage and art galleries provide a starting point to a more in depth understanding of the rohe o Mataatua and Whakatāne District.

Whakatāne Museum today houses over 600,000 items in its collections. This includes significant examples of Taonga Māori, a comprehensive collection of archival material from the Whakatāne District and the Bay of Plenty region, fine art, a reference library and an extensive photographic collection covering the physical and social history of the past century. At the museum's research centre in Boon Street and through the museum's online collections there are ample opportunities to engage with the museum's wealth of material. For Kieran Hudson, Tumu Kohikohinga Taonga/Collections Lead at the museum, facilitating access to the taonga is more important than their retention.[5] Guided tours are available for groups up to ten people. School and other groups can connect with their heritage by interacting with artefacts behind the scenes. Work is currently undertaken to digitise more of the collections so they are accessible to a wider audience.

Image of Whakatane Museum, post 1978. Photo: Whakatāne Museum archives]

The split of the Whakatāne Museum over two premises is a relatively recent development that was initiated by the Whakatāne District Council who has been operating the museum since 1978. The redevelopment of the museum began with the construction of Te Kōputu a Te Whanga a Toi, the Whakatāne Library and Exhibition Centre in Kākahoroa Drive which opened in 2012, and was completed in 2018 with the opening of Te Whare Taonga o Taketake, the new collections storage and research facility in Boon Street. The Boon Street location is indeed the original site of the museum but the original building, opened in 1972, was no longer fit for purpose nor did it offer sufficient space for research.

Whakatāne Museum was the first of the three local historical museums covered in this article to be founded. Its history began with a group of passionate local historians led by Dr JC Wadmore, founder and secretary of the Bay of Plenty Maori and Historical Research Society established in August 1933. He and fellow historians Hira Hotene and Father van Beck visited and photographed historic sites in and outside the district, including in Te Urewera, and wrote up their stories.[6] A

[3] James Veitch, 'Henry, Annie', Dictionary of New Zealand Biography, first published in 1996. Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand, https://teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/3h16/henry-annie (accessed 6 September 2025).

[4] 'Next Suite of Exhibitions: Sarah Hudson, Whararangi Turnbull, and He Tāwharau Mātaatua, a group exhibition', https://www.whakatane.com/events/next-suite-exhibitions-sarah-hudson-whararangi-turnbull-and-he-tawharau-mataatua-group, accessed: 6 September 2025

[5] Kieran Hudson, Tumu Kohikohinga Taonga/Collections Lead, Te Whare Taonga o Taketake - Whakatāne Museum Collections and Research, Te Whare Taonga o Taketake Facebook post, 28 March 2025, https://www.facebook.com/taketakemuseum

[6] Shearer, Ian, 'A tribute to James Christopher Wadmore, 1878 - 1938. Founder of the Bay of Plenty Maori & Historical Research

reference library was begun and historic records such as Captain Gilbert Mair's correspondence and a 1867 map of the district formed the first items of todays sizeable collection. The Society promoted the retention of both Māori and European history in public memory. In October 1933, for example, the Society wrote a letter to the Whakatāne Borough Council pointing out that 'few Maori words of beauty or of historical significance were employed in the naming of streets in Whakatāne'. The *Dominion* also reported that the Society '*urged that, when the time came to name the dedicated roads on the Hillcrest estate, opportunity should be taken of the many Maori names suggesting themselves'*.[7] The Society was instrumental in securing the site of the military redoubt that formed part of the Papaka pa in the 1860s which was subsequently vested in the Whakatane Borough as a reserve.[8] The reconstruction of a Māori pa was also suggested by the group.[9] The Society's membership rose to about 70 and included honorary members such as Rt Rev H Williams, bishop of Waiapu, politician Sir Apirana Ngata, and historian James Cowan.

At the outbreak of World War II the Society fell into recess and it was not until 1952 that Harold David 'Jack' London and Bernard Sladden, the only 'survivor' of the first Society, and others established the Whakatāne and District Historical Society.[10] A committee with the aim of building a public museum was formed in the same year.

In the next 20 years of the committee's work towards establishing a museum difficulties continued to arise from a lack of a suitable facility, funding, and some pressures from outside the district, as well as at times dwindling committee members.

In 1953 the Society had inherited 'already many artifacts of maori and pakeha origin' that had been donated to its predecessor and promised further material.[11] It was soon realised that the collection needed more than a room in an existing building. Various options were considered over the years until the centennial celebrations planned for 1967, celebrating 100 years of European settlement in Whakatāne, provided another opportunity to call for a public museum. The mayor Rex T Morpeth,

Image: Jack London examining objects…
Whakatane Beacon clipping, Whakatāne Museum archives

local politicians, Jack London from the historical society and others rallied behind the 'Whakatane District Museum Appeal' in late 1966. The late Sir Peter Henry Buck, also known as Te Rangi Hīroa, and former Governor-General Sir Bledisloe, both quoted in the museum appeal's pamphlet, had expressed their support at an early stage:

The association of Whakatane with Toi is very definite… What is needed is an archaeological survey of suitable sites under the auspices of a society, which will preserve the objects discovered as the property of the public, and to save them from mere curio-hunters. Any building should take the form of a local museum where such material would be better housed and more accessible to the public. - The late Sir Peter Henry Buck, Director, Bernice P Bishop Museum, Honolulu.

Society, *Historical Review*, Whakatāne & District Historical Society, Vol. 60, No. 2, November 2012, p. 39

[7] *Dominion*, 14 October 1933, p. 16

[8] 'Society to collect material for museum', undated newspaper clipping, Museum scrapbook #1, Te Whare Taonga o Taketake, Whakatāne District Museum And Research Centre

[9] *Auckland Star*, 14 October 1933, p. 13

[10] Shearer, Ian, 'A tribute to James Christopher Wadmore, 1878 - 1938. Founder of the Bay of Plenty Maori & Historical Research Society, *Historical Review*, Whakatāne & District Historical Society, Vol. 60, No. 2, November 2012, p. 44

[11] 'Space sought for museum in memorial centre', *Whakatane Beacon*, 23 January 1953, Museum scrapbook #1, Te Whare Taonga o Taketake, Whakatāne District Museum And Research Centre

There is no part of the Dominion whose ancient history is more important, interesting or romantic than that of the Bay of Plenty and it is right and proper that the young people of the district should be brought up to know all about it and develop a pride in it. - The late Viscount Bledisloe, former Governor-General of New Zealand.

Eruera Manuera, the outspoken and influential Ngāti Awa leader, also endorsed the plans for a museum. He encouraged Māori to support the appeal for a museum that to him was an opportunity to remember and instil a sense of pride in people in Whakatāne as the landing place of the Mataatua waka 600 years ago.[12]

In addition to financial support, the public was invited to make donations to the museum but Jack London and the historical society had a clear vision that the *'museum will not be a dump for old curios*'.[13]

The museum appeal failed to reach its target of £40,000 but the Whakatane District Centennial Museum Committee decided to go ahead anyway.[14] The foundation stone for the dedicated museum building in Boon Street was laid by Sir Governor-General Bernard Fergusson in April 1967.[15] After 20 years of lobbying and fundraising the Whakatane and District Museum officially opened on 26 February 1972, likely as the first museum Bay of Plenty.

At the opening ceremony Ngāti Awa representative Manu Paul said that '*he was very proud to see the history of two cultures standing side by side*'.[16]

He also urged us to regard the museum as a '*living thing'*, quoting a traditional proverb saying that the bird can only fly when it has grown its feathers. The new president of the Whakatane and District Historical Society, Dave White, was also of the opinion that the museum would *'never be finished'*.[17] Dave White was key to the Whakatane & District Historical Society setting up of the museum and preparing the exhibition for the opening in 1972. He became the Society's longest standing president, from 1972 to 1992. In 1970 he had joined the Whakatane & District Historical Society as a representative of the Opotiki Historical Society.[18]

The Whakatane & District Historical Society ran the museum for the first four years of its operation. The museum came under Whakatāne District Council control in 1978 with continued support from the Historical Society.[19] All work for and in the museum continued to be done by volunteers until Anton van der Wouden became the first paid curator in 1976, a position he held until 1992.[20] Tiena Jordan was a fully trained librarian when she started as a volunteer at the museum in 1973.[21] She later trained in archives and has been Whakatane & District Historical Society's president for many years, as well as serving on the museum's advisory board that oversaw the management of the Museum and Art Gallery from 1971 to about 2017.[22] With the transition of the museum's administration and operations to the Whakatāne District Council in the 1980s came a growing professionalisation, more staff and funding. Specific funding allowed for extensions to the museum premises in Boon Street.[23] The

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[12] Whakatane District Museum Appeal', pamphlet, Museum scrapbook #1, Te Whare Taonga o Taketake, Whakatāne District Museum And Research Centre

[13] Museum will not be a dump for old curios', *Whakatane Beacon*, 10 June 1966, Museum scrapbook #1, Te Whare Taonga o Taketake, Whakatāne District Museum And Research Centre

[14] 'First stage of museum building this year', *Whakatane Beacon*, 6 May 1968, Museum scrapbook #1, Te Whare Taonga o Taketake, Whakatāne District Museum And Research Centre

[15] 'History retraced at short ceremony', *Whakatane Beacon*, April 1967, Museum scrapbook #1, Te Whare Taonga o Taketake, Whakatāne District Museum And Research Centre

[16] 'Tributes paid at museum opening', *Whakatane Beacon*, 28 February 1972, Museum scrapbook #1, Te Whare Taonga o Taketake, Whakatāne District Museum and Research Centre

[17] Ibid.

[18] 'Henry George David White (Dave) 1923-2009', tribute by Kevin Jones, NZAA (NZ Archaeological Association), *Historical Review*, Whakatāne & District Historical Society, Vol. 57, No. 2, November 2009, p. 44

[19] Whakatane District Council, 'Whakatāne Museum and Research Centre Feasibility Study',
prepared by Giblin Group, March 2014, p. 13

20 Whakatane & District Historical Society website,
https://whakatanehistorical.org.nz/whakatane-historical-society-home/whakatane-scholarship-trust/

21 'Henry George David White (Dave) 1923-2009', tribute by Tiena Jordan, *Historical Review*, Whakatāne & District Historical Society, Vol. 57, No. 2, November 2009, p. 40

22 Whakatane District Council, 'Whakatāne Museum and Research Centre Feasibility Study', prepared by Giblin Group, March 2014, p. 13; 'Annual reports', Whakatāne & District Historical Society website

23 Whakatane District Council, 'Whakatāne Museum and Research Centre Feasibility Study',
prepared by Giblin Group, March 2014, p. 13

Whakatane & District Historical Society continues its operations until today, engaging in research, publishing the bi-annual *Historical Review* and organising talks and field trips for its members.

Ōpōtiki Museum

An Opotiki Historical Society had apparently also been established in the early 1930s. The history of this Society requires further research but in July 1936 the *Poverty Bay Herald* briefly noted that such a society had been founded by, among others, Robert John Irwin, descendent of one of the early European settlers in Ōpōtiki.[24] The newspaper then also reported the Society had decided that 'a tablet or appropriate monument will be erected to the memory of the pioneers of the district and that the monument also will record the early arrival of the Maori race in the Bay of Plenty by the canoe Mataatua, from Hawaiki'.[25] Similar to the Whakatāne society, it too likely fell into recess during the two world wars.

Image: Opotiki Museum before its extension, late 1980s to 1990s, Opotiki Museum archives

The next mention of the Opotiki Historical Society appears in connection with Dave White. In 1961 Dave White had returned to the family farm in Ōpōtiki and developed a great interest in local history and archaeology. According to his daughter Kay McLeod, he was a '*connecting person'*, working closely with Whakatōhea and Tūhoe elders, as well as with many other historians. He was a hands-on historian, recording pa sites and organising archaeological digs, rather than a writer. He travelled the world, visiting museums, including their storage facilities, to see what they had from New Zealand.[26] Judith Binney and Gillian Chaplin wrote in 2009: '*Dave White was a unique man: a man of this place who farmed the land, and loved every part of it. He taught himself about the history of it - both Maori and Pakeha experiences. He made sure Maori views were respected at a time where too often they were not'*.[27] In addition to being a stalwart of the Whakatāne Museum for many years, he was also a member of the Opotiki Historical Society, possibly from 1966 to 1994. He also chaired this Society for some years.[28] Before Ōpōtiki's historical society was disestablished in 1994 it had changed its name to Opotiki Historical & Museum Society.[29] The name change indicates that a museum was envisioned by its members.

The Opotiki Museum first opened in 1985 and was the result of the work of the Opotiki Heritage and Agriculture Society, an offspring or an organisation that evolved in parallel to the older historical society. Alan Rowe, a local farmer and councillor, and other members of the community, including Harold Bridge, became involved with setting up a museum following a public meeting in 1981. A steering committee was tasked to 'investigate the feasibility of getting a museum for the town' and the Opotiki Heritage and Agriculture Trust was established.[30] The Opotiki Heritage and Agriculture Society (OHAS) was incorporated in April of the following year with Alan Rowe as chairman.[31] From that time 'the committee set

24 *Poverty Bay Herald*, 4 August 1936, p. 14
25 *Poverty Bay Herald*, 24 July 1936, p. 4
26 Personal communication with Kay McLeod, daughter of Dave White, October 2024

27 'Henry George David White (Dave) 1923-2009', tributes by Judith Binney and Gillian Chaplin read at Dave White's funeral, Historical Review, Whakatāne & District Historical Society, Vol. 57, No. 2, November 2009, p. 40
28 Ibid., pp. 42, 44, tribute by Kevin Jones
29 Ibid., p. 44
30 Dorothy Anne Wilson, Opotiki Museum, personal communication, 8 September 2025; 'Heritage and Agricultural Society Trust', pamphlet, Opotiki Museum archives
31 'Certificate of Incorporation', Opotiki Museum archives

about the collection and restoration of machinery using volunteers and P.E.P. labour, with a focus on the agricultural history of the area. The Society first used various premises for its restoration work such as the old A &P Show building and former wharf sheds but the need for its own premises became increasingly apparent. By 1984 the collection had grown to the extent that it was considered worthwhile for display.[32]

The building that soon was regarded as most suitable for a museum was historic itself. The original building at the northern end of Church Street in Ōpōtiki's historical centre had functioned as the livery stables for the stage coach connecting Whakatāne and Ōpōtiki in the 19th century when the only overland route to Whakatāne was via Ōhiwa. It subsequently became a Royal Mail depot and then, until the early 1980s, the Road Services bus depot. $60,000 were required to purchase the building.

The Society raised at least $15,000 towards this sum but ultimately the building was secured by going into an agreement with the Ōpōtiki District Council that acquired the building on the Trust's behalf.[33] In March 1985 the Trust moved formally into the old bus depot. The first museum in the then one level building opened to the public at Easter that same year.[34]

In the late 1990s the museum's financial situation changed radically when Elvira Sundell generously bequeathed $500,000 to the museum and enabled the museum trust to proceed with a long envisaged new museum building project. The extension of the existing museum to a three storey building began in 2002 based on a building concept developed by one of the museum volunteers, Peder Undrik Hansen. Dorothy Anne (Dot) Wilson started as a museum volunteer in 2000 and became the museum's manager in 2007, a position she held until 2023, remembers that the '*collection had been amassed over the years and was in different places (sheds etc) with much pushed into the old bus depot in a rather haphazard manner*'.[35]

The new Ōpōtiki Museum, Te Whare Taonga O Te Moana a Toi, opened in 2007 and houses an 'eclectic accumulation of historical archives and social history of Opotiki and the surrounding area. Visitors come from far and wide. Local people mostly visit to research whanau and agencies often request information regarding historic matters'.[36] The museum consists of the main, three storied building and, a few doors down the road, the Shalfoon and Francis Museum, retaining one of the country's oldest Four Square stores. Food tins are sitting on 100-year-old shelves in the grocery section and in the hardware section the nails and screws are still in their boxes. The Shalfoon Brother's shops operated commercially until 2000, after which the property was acquired by the Opotiki Heritage and Agricultural Society for use as a museum. The building complex has since been registered with Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga.[37]

On the ground floor of the main museum building

Image: Shalfoon and Francis grocery store

Newspaper clipping, October 2008,

32 Ibid.; '$45,000 still needed for museums project', The Opotiki News, 18 October 1984

33' Heritage and Agricultural Society Trust', pamphlet, Opotiki Museum archives

34' Heritage and Agricultural Society Trust', pamphlet, Opotiki Museum archives

35 Dorothy Anne Wilson, personal communication, 10 September 2025

36 Judy Forbes, Opotiki Museum manager, personal communication, 10 September 2025

37 'Shalfoon Brothers Shop Buildings (Former)', https://www.heritage.org.nz/list-details/807/Shalfoon Brothers Shop Buildings (Former)

visitors are warmly greeted by one of the volunteers on duty before entering a large space with an extensive collection of implements and vehicles related to the agricultural and industrial past of the once booming town. A line up of tractors, horse carts, bikes, boats and machinery are overlooked by local Te Riaki Amoamo's hunting trophies, including the head of an Alaskan Brown Bear. Further displays highlighting the former dairy industry, the hospital, a saddlery, printing, candle-making, shearing, and a barbers shop complete the ground floor. Some days volunteers are working away in the back of the large ground floor, restoring collection items.

Image: Agricultural machinery; Opotiki Hospital display. Photos: Tanja Rother

Up the first flight of stairs on the mezzanine floor some of the museum's extensive photographic collection is on display, showing early Ōpōtiki and people, shipping, geological rocks, New Zealand and Pacific Island money, wood burs, and Post office history. Visitors can also learn about important community projects in the more recent past, such as the Ōpōtiki Youth Murals.

The museum's third level, the Elvira Sundell floor, combines both the Whakatōhea Research and Archives Trust's display, among them important taonga such as carvings from the original Tanewhirinaki house (which is currently being rebuilt by Ngati Ira), and an eclectic mix of European items ranging from twelve small heritage rooms to a 1970's lounge and ginger jar collection. It also features a display honouring men from the district who went to the two world wars. In 2007 Opotiki Museum hosted Auckland War Memorial Museum touring exhibition 'Ko Tawa. Taonga from our Ancestral Landscapes, Collection of Captain Gilbert Mair' as much of the taonga then on display had whakapapa relationships with the Eastern Bay of Plenty rohe.

The current representative of the Whakatōhea Research and Archives Trust at the museum, Gerardine Jefferies (Ngati Patumoana, Te Whakatōhea), explains: '*When the museum was built, level 3 was designated for Māori cultural artifacts and displays. Kaumatua would volunteer each day to be present on level 3 either weaving, working or assisting in some way so that our taonga were not left alone. I remember Wallace Parkinson would be working on his korowai on level 3 and the dining room was available for those to have a cuppa sit and chat. The place was alive with laughter and kōrero*'. She adds, '*I was motivated and encouraged by Josie Mortensen, Aunty Muriel [Kelly-Smith] and by my kaumatua to assist with updating the cataloguing and digitising material held in storage at the Whakatōhea Trust Board. Since I've begun at the museum the Whakatōhea Research & Archives has seen many kaumatua pass and the Trust has yet to find new members to replace them. Our Māori presence has diminished due to the above but also so has the space on level 3'*.[38]

For Gerardine the 'museum has an important role retelling the stories of our families to our community, the changes that have influenced our life today and hopefully regain the wealth of the past'. Now that the new entity of Te Tawharau o Whakatōhea is established she hopes 'to see more involvement by Whakatōhea to ensure more displays exhibit our history and our perspective - through the eyes of our three iwi, our culture, and our identity'.[39] About the museum generally Gerardine says it has 'a rich, incredible array of material that illustrates our community from the settlement of early days in Ōpōtiki, to the east

38 Gerardine Jefferies, Whakatōhea Research and Archives Trust, personal communication, 24 August 2025
39 Ibid.

coast of Whangaparāoa, Te Waimana and back from Whakatane'.[40]

The museum's extensive collection and wealth of research material makes the everyday running of the museum and future planning a demanding task for everyone involved. Apart from the part time manager the large museum is entirely run by volunteers. They are cataloguing, fundraising for grants, responding to the many research queries, guiding school and other groups, and are also involved with the digitisation of the large photographic collection, as well as running the museum's second hand shop. In 2022 Opotiki Museum had one manager/curator and 12 volunteers who each gave three or more hours a week.[41]

Local historian Lorna Aikman began volunteering at the museum after her retirement as a teacher. She also serves on the museum committee. Initially, access to research material spurred her interest: '*I have always been interested in history, especially New Zealand and local history. I remember taking my class to visit the Museum back in the late 1990s, when it was a one level building. I also remember back in the early 1980s, welcoming family off the Road Services bus at the depot, which is now of course the site of the Museum. I first became involved in volunteering at the Museum, when I began researching for the first book I compiled, "The Upper Otara Valleys". I have found volunteering at Opotiki Museum to be an absorbing and rewarding experience on many levels, especially when helping others with their research and being able to connect them with their family, and the town's history*'.[42]

Judy Forbes, the museum's current part time manager, sees the museum's present and future role in Ōpōtiki in providing *'a place where the past and future history of Ōpōtiki can be stored for future reference and research'*.[43]

Kawerau Museum

The Sir James Fletcher Kawerau Museum opened in 2003. The museum is located in the centre of the small town and part of the library complex built in 1963, in what used to be the town's cafeteria. It is therefore the Eastern Bay's most recently established museum in Kawerau's most historic building. Art historian and the museum's curator Damian Skinner describes Kawerau as an *'invented' town*,[44] as its history began in 1953 when the township was established to service the processing of timber from the nearby state-owned Kaingaroa Forest. Geothermal steam was readily available as a power source for the Fletcher Group's Tasman Pulp and Paper Mill the town's major employer. At the time, the Tasman Mill was New Zealand's largest industrial operation and ranked globally as one of the biggest of its kind.[45]

Kawerau Museum & Library in May 2025. The mural honours James Fletcher, the industrialist whose commercial interests initiated the creation of Kawerau township, and Ken Walter Moore, the most well-known local historian. Photo: Tanja Rother]

According to the present museum and library manager Susan Harris, as early as the 1970s people started to bring into the library personal or family

40 Ibid.
41 'About the museum info sheet', Opotiki Museum archives
42 Lorna Aikman, Opotiki museum committee member and volunteer, personal communication, 24 August 2025
43 Judy Forbes, Opotiki Museum manager, personal communication, 10 September 2025

44 Interview with Damian Skinner and Susan Harris, 20 August 2025
45 McClintock, W., 'Resource Community Formation & Change: A Case Study of Kawerau', Working Paper 6, Taylor Baines & Associates, 1998, p. 2

items that they found historically valuable and wanted to be kept for future generations. A push for a more organised way of storing and collecting the young town's history and memories did not come until the late 1990s, as a direct response to changes in the town's main sponsor, the Tasman Mill. In 1999 the company announced it would sell the mill and in the process started to transfer much of its archives to their premises in Auckland. A huge number of photographs, taken by the publicity department in the company's heyday, were thrown into skip bins. Workers on site were horrified that this photographic material was just being dumped, notes Harris, '*so they collected it all out of the skip bins and put it into little boxes and dropped it down to the library.*' Susan Harris further comments, 'it made people realise how easy it was going to be to lose all this history'.[46]

Kawerau is very unusual in that the history of the town is so intimately connected to the industrial activities if the Fletcher group of companies, and it was at great risk of disappearing with the closure of the mill.[47]

At that point, a group of local women, including Anita Moore, Zita King, Maureen Laugesen, and Lois Pook, came together in response to a growing concern that because of the changing direction of the Pulp and Paper Industry and its effect on the Kawerau township, the history of the town's establishment was in danger of being lost to the present and future generations. They formed a steering committee who would meet in committee members' houses to investigate the establishment of a museum. In February 2000 Anita Moore became the first chairperson of the Kawerau Historical Museum Trust.[48]

Many of the women's husbands had worked at the mill, similar to Anita's husband Les Moore who had worked there for 30 years.[49] They then created the Kawerau Historical Museum in the unused Plunket

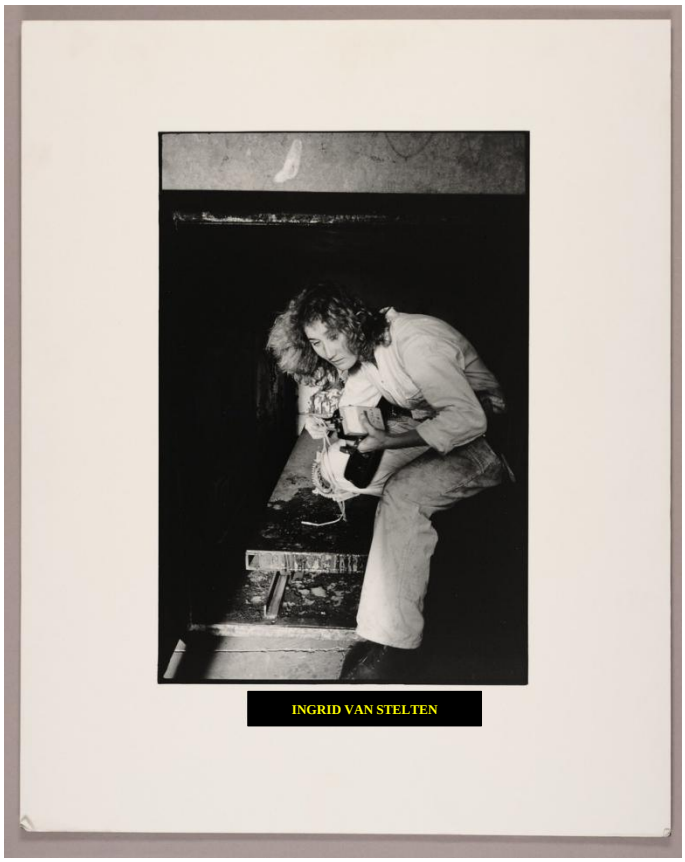

Image: Ingrid van Stelten, an apprentice electrician at the Tasman mill, photographed by Brian Brake in May 1986.

This particular print was part of a touring exhibition of mill workers called 'Tasman Portraits'. Published in Our People at Work: Brian Brake and Tasman Mill (Kawerau Museum, 2024). Sir James Fletcher Kawerau Museum 2023.151]

Rooms which were later opened up into the Kawerau District Library. The goal was and still is to collect, preserve and communicate the history of the Kawerau community and surrounds.[50] In 2003 the name of the Kawerau Historical Museum was changed to Sir James Fletcher Kawerau Museum.[51] Sir James Fletcher (1914-2007) was Chairman of the Tasman Mill's first Board of Directors. The museum had received valuable support from the Fletcher Trust and in recognition of the history of the Fletcher family and the

46 Interview with Damian Skinner and Susan Harris, 20 August 2025
47 Ibid.
48 Susan Harris, Kawerau Museum and Library manager, personal communication, 20 August 2025
49 Susan Harris, Kawerau Museum and Library manager, personal communication, 20 August 2025; https://collection.fletcherarchives.co.nz/objects/71466/tasman-pulp-paper-co-ltd-tradewind-mar1997-p7-les-moore-30-years-service-with-his-wife-anita

50 'About The Museum', Kawerau District Council website, https://www.kaweraudc.govt.nz/services/museum/about-museum, accessed: 12 September 2024
51 Susan Harris, Kawerau Museum and Library manager, personal communication, 20 August 2025

community of Kawerau, the Museum Trust named the museum in his honour.

The early years were dominated by setting up the museum and learning about systems around donated items that were brought in by members of the community. The museum volunteers worked closely with staff from Whakatāne Museum and participated in professional development courses run by Te Papa Tongarewa. In 2004 local hairdresser Irene Sandle started as a volunteer for the Museum Trust and soon '*realised a lot more was needed for the museum than what a small group of volunteers could do*'.[52] The Trust raised funds and Irene was employed for 20 hours a week as well as continuing to do volunteer hours. By 2008 the Trust had accumulated about 25,000 items. Trust members increasingly recognised that the management of the museum and its collection was beyond its scope. It consequently requested the Kawerau District Council to take on its management which it did in January 2009.

Susan Harris, who was already managing the library, took on the role of museum manager. Irene was employed as the museum curator, a position she held until her retirement in 2018. In 2010, the Trust disbanded and the Kawerau District Council continued to grow the museum, particularly with the purchase of the Vernon museum management software that allowed the digitisation of the collection to be immediately started and the purchase of the building at 16-18 Jellicoe Court for a dedicated Council Archives and Museum Storage space in 2017.[53]

For Damian Skinner, who started as the museum curator in June 2024, the collection is a reflection of the embeddedness of the timber processing industry in the town's community. The great majority of the archival material, photographs and items from people's personal and family lives are connected to Kawerau's industry and companies involved, to an extent that is extreme compared to other places. The museum also responded to major events such as the Ministry of Education's consolidation of the local primary and intermediate schools in 2011/2012 and the shutting of the then Norske Skog's paper mill in 2020. Each time museum staff worked closely with the relevant institutions to retrieve what were considered relevant documents and objects, including the paper machines and Brian Brake's photographs of the mill.

The strength of the collection consequently lies in its documentation of a distinct period and place in New Zealand's history. It is also unique in terms of the way so many different cultural communities blended together with tangata whenua, to work in the town. These were large numbers of Māori from elsewhere in the country, Finns, Canadians, US Americans, Pacifica women and Filipinos.[54] In contrast to Ōpōtiki and Whakatāne Museums Kawerau Museum's focus lies on the town's rather than the area's history or pre-history. The museum does not have any taonga Māori and current staff do not see a need to compete with the expertise iwi and Whakatāne Museum have in this regard.

In terms of allowing people more access to the collections, which now contains about 40,000 items, Damian Skinner envisages a shift in the next five years from a period where the museum was principally collecting and preserving to serving the various, different communities of Kawerau.[55]

The current museum has no permanent displays aside from 'Kawerau. The story of our community', highlighting important moments in time of the community and its industry, a photographic display in the main library room. Rather its focus has been on changing exhibitions. Since 2006 about six exhibitions have been held annually in the small gallery, the library foyer and in the windows of the museum's storage facility opposite the library. Themes have ranged from Kawerau's early residents, the Kaingaroa Forest, the First Finnish Families (who were brought in as experienced timber workers), the Edgecumbe Earthquake, to the Tasman paper machines and portrayals of the local schools, rugby and Rotary clubs, and community events. Another exhibition featured

52 Interview with Damian Skinner and Susan Harris, 20 August 2025

53 'About The Museum', Kawerau District Council website, https://www.kaweraudc.govt.nz/services/museum/about-museum, accessed: 12 September 2025

54 Interview with Damian Skinner and Susan Harris, 20 August 2025

55 Ibid.

Rautahi Marae, where the multicultural meeting house Te Aotahi was opened by Mōnita Eru Delamere in 1985.[56]

This year (2025) the main gallery showed works by Billy McQueen whose paintings engaged with the artist's connection to the Kāingaroa forest through found imagery from the Fletcher Trust Archive collection. Another recent exhibition titled 'The Rise and Fall of the Kawerau Speedboat Club' brought to light a piece of local history that, 'like many local stories, has largely faded into obscurity'.[57] For the more recent exhibitions the museum has produced booklets that allow people to engage with the exhibitions' stories beyond the museum space. Curator Damian Skinner thinks the time has come where the museum has the ability to be more mobile and more actively reaching out to the many different communities that make up the township. To him there is not one Kawerau community but 'communities that are not all interested in the same things, do not occupy the same places' and require different ways of communicating Teenagers, for example, are not reflected in the current museum collection but Damian sees a real opportunity and very interesting challenge to connect them to the museum's documents and objects, so they speak to them too, as well as expand the collection so that their histories and stories are present.[58]

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[56] 'Rautahi: the vision that became reality', unidentified newspaper clipping, Papers Past, https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/imageserver/periodicals/P29pZD1UVVRBTkcxOTg1MDYwMS4xLjE4JmdldHBkZj10cnVl

57 Dredge, Shaun, 'The Rise and Fall of the Kawerau Speedboat Club', exhibition booklet, Sir James Fletcher Kawerau Museum, 2024

58 Interview with Damian Skinner and Susan Harris, 20 August 2025

[Image: Members of the Kawerau Sauna Club play volleyball outside the sauna, which was built by the Finnish community with materials provided by Tasman mill, 1960s. Photo: Sir James Fletcher Kawerau Museum 2015.42.5]

Image: A large crowd watch as speedboats wait to race in a large regatta hosted by the Kawerau Speedboat Club on Lake Pupuwharau, 1960s. Published in The Rise and Fall of Kawerau Speedboat Club (Kawerau Museum, 2024). Photo: Sir James Fletcher Kawerau Museum 2018.58