

A Journey of Faith- The Irish Benners Journey to New Zealand

The journey to New Zealand, and young and unproven land must have been an awesome prospect, but not without it's challenges

In 1873 Albert Benner, a young postal telegraphist from Kerry left Gravesend on the ship Dunfillan, and arrived 4 months later in Port Chalmers on the 15th January 1874. He was 20 years old. Albert travelled to Wellington and joined the Post Office. He was immediately sent to Bowentown, beginning a relationship with the Bay of Plenty that lasted to his death in 1934.

In 1890 Albert was joined by his brother John Henry who had married Charlotte Green in Gibraltar. John Henry Benner was the eldest of twelve children of Henry Arthur Benner and his wife Sara nee Worrell of Tralee, County Kerry, Ireland. He married Charlotte Green while serving with the South Irish Division Militia as Quarter-Master Sergeant in Gibraltar and their first two children were born there. The family returned to Woolwich where William was born and then to Clonmel, Tipperary, Ireland where the rest of the family were born.

Second son, Arthur Edward known as Ted was said to be the first European settler to live at Pongakawa. He came to New Zealand onboard the Ionic arriving in Auckland on the 21 November 1888. He then settled on the block of land at Pongakawa that had been selected by his uncle Albert Benner.

John Henry Benner and his family came to New Zealand on the SS Rimutaka which arrived in Auckland in November 1890. The family made their way on to Tauranga by boat and then coach to Maketu. The Bay of Plenty Times for the 17 November 1890 noted that "...Mr Benner, brother of the Maketu postmaster, has arrived in Maketu with his family of eight persons, and has taken up his residence there in Mr Matraver's house". The family lived in the cottage at Maketu until Albert James Warmington built a house for the family on the farm at Pongakawa. While in Maketu it is said that a local Maori woman taught Charlotte how to make bread using a camp oven. Charlotte had never kept house before and had always had servants. Once the house was ready the family moved to Pongakawa and named the farm, and later their Jersey cow stud, Clonmel. On the 15 May 1891 the Bay of Plenty Times reported on a visit to Kaikokopu where they noted that "Mr Benner's property is a large one, he had fenced it in and a quantity of it has been sown with grass".

When the Bay of Plenty Co-operative Dairy Association Limited was formed in June 1902, the Benner family were amongst the first suppliers. A creamery was built at the same time at

Kaikokopu for the benefit of the dairy farmers in the area.

The four girls and their brother Albert were first day pupils at the Pongakawa School when it opened on the 22 February 1892. John Benner was a member and later secretary of the Pongakawa School committee from its inauguration until his death in 1910. He was also a member of the Pongakawa Domain Board from its inception in 1906 until 1910. At one stage with further education of his daughters in mind, John Benner arranged for a Fraulein Emma Lobeck to be their governess. She was a very strong minded woman for her time, and was very musical and proficient in several languages. Her teachings are said to have rubbed off on the Benner girls and they became a formidable team. The sisters all married Pongakawa farmers and all four were foundation members of Te Puke Lyceum Club. They were also much involved in local life in Pongakawa.

Henry and Ted Benner both worked on the clerical staff of the Waihi Gold Mining Company. Henry Benner was elected to the Otorohanga Native Town Council on 9 January 1913 and continued as a Councillor until 14 September 1922. Bill farmed at Paengaroa and later worked for both the Farmer's Auctioneering Co-op Ltd and the NZ Loan and Mercantile Agency as a stock drover. Albert (Bert) ran the home farm at Clonmel and was a member of the Te Puke Mounted Rifles. After Germany invaded Belgium, Britain and its dominions of Australia, Canada and New Zealand declared war on the 4 August 1914 (5th August in New Zealand). Captain W A Bennett immediately called the members of the Te Puke Mounted Rifles together and many of them signed up immediately. The first farewell to Te Puke troops was held on the 14 August and when the Main Body sailed on the 16 October, Albert Benner was with them. He served with the Auckland Mounted Rifles and died of wounds received at Gallipoli. After his death the farm was split between his sisters Maud, Amy and Millie. Millie later sold her part of the farm. The old Clonmel house has since been demolished but members of the Hickson family are still on the original Benner farm in 2009.

Sources: Gary Benner, Paul Hickson, Brittain, G E (ed). Getting it Made – the Pioneer Women of Te Puke. (Te Puke: Te Puke Lyceum Club (nd)), Bay of Plenty Times, Christine Clement (Te Puke).