

A passport into our history

Pamela Wade ticks off her Northland Passport with visits to the settlements of missionaries from the 1880s

It's the wrong sort of water. When I wake in Paihia, I'm expecting to hear the gentle lap and hiss of little waves on the sand along the edge of a turquoise bay, not the patter and gurgle of rain on the roof. It's steady, and clearly here to stay, but today I'm on a mission — literally — so hunkering back down under the covers isn't an option. Soon I'm driving through the wintry pre-dawn gloom, headlights shafting through pockets of mist, the road ahead wet and empty.

A lightening landscape reveals bush-clad hills, clumps of dripping toi toi and sodden green paddocks grazed by cattle. Scattered wooden houses stand back from the road, each with a woodpile beside it, smoke hanging low above the chimney, a dog in the yard. Off the highway, the road bends around swamps spiky with flax and raupo, squeezes across a river on a one-lane bridge and skirts a row of houses built on piles over water that gleams pewter in the dull light.

A man wrapped in a blanket stands on his veranda and watches me pass. Finally I swing on to a dirt road and into a driveway up a green slope past a little white church.

Here is what I've come to see: Mangungu Mission House. Pretty, white and wooden, it has two dormer windows on the grey shingled roof and a green-painted door dead-centre on the veranda. It has a wide view over the inner Hokianga Harbour, where mist hangs over the water, the hills beyond black against a sulky sky. Caretaker Queenie brings the big key and we go inside. The room is dim, the air slightly musty, the furniture elderly. On a mahogany table under the window is a laminated copy of something most New Zealanders should recognise instantly.

"That's the Treaty of Waitangi," she says. "This was where it had its second and biggest signing, on that table. About 80 chiefs came together on February 12, 1840. That was a rare thing. It's a very significant event for the Maori of the Hokianga."

We contemplate this for a solemn moment. Then she adds brightly, "Honey bees were introduced to New Zealand here at Mangungu. And it had the first-ever Post Office." She's on a roll. "The first pub, too, though it wasn't licensed. And the first ship-building yard. And that over there," she continues, pointing to a low island out in the harbour, "is where New Zealand's first executed man is buried."

This is today's first tick on my Northland Passport: I'm collecting the set of mission houses. These are the buildings that remain from settlements established in the early 1800s by the missionaries, men who were necessarily as

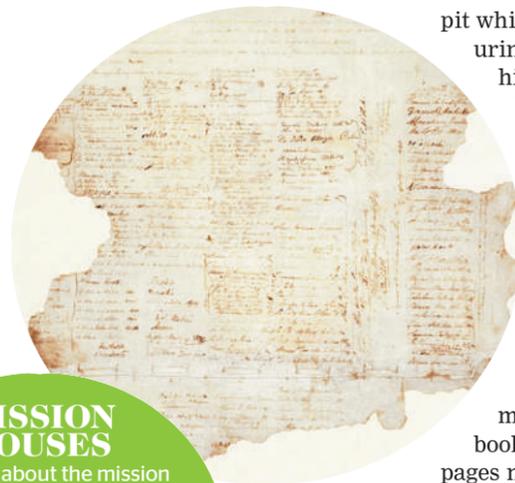


Tourists gather outside Te Whare Runanga at the Waitangi Treaty Grounds, in the Bay of Islands; below, page one of the Treaty of Waitangi.

practical as spiritual. John Hobbs here at Mangungu — in his photograph a strikingly good-looking man in a George-Clooney-with-spectacles kind of way — built the house with his own hands: his tenon saw is displayed inside.

Over at Waimate North is another, grander, house that in the 1830s was surrounded by a busy village with blacksmith, brick kiln, watermill, homes and schools. Now there's just a garden and hedged paddocks rolling away to the hills: a green and pleasant landscape and the only bit of New Zealand that appealed to Charles Darwin, who evidently had remarkably narrow tastes for a scientist. The house's small furnished rooms even now have a sense of life; nearby St John the Baptist church is quiet, although its organ promises a joyful noise. Outside, gravestones dot the grass and I wonder about Hoera Haira's memorial, "erected by his Pakeha and Maori friends", which is nice, but including his nickname "Dummy", which isn't.

Across the bay at Russell, Pompallier House breaks the pattern. Inside this distinctive and very French rammed-earth building is a factory for spreading the Word: it's a printery, tannery and bindery. Here, three Marist brothers produced 40,000 religious books over eight years to give away to local Maori. Kate shows me around, though I skip stirring up the dehairing



MISSION HOUSES

For more about the mission houses (and everything else) visit www.northlandnz.com, and for the Northland Passport — entry to five properties for the price of two — see the Historic Places Trust at www.historic.org.nz

pit which used the townspeople's urine to do the, er, job on the hides. The tanning pits are black and smelly, too, and in the compositing room the trays of type set both back-to-front and upside-down make my eyes cross — but I heave willingly on the proof-printing press, producing a sticky black etching of an identical machine from medieval times. A finished book, bound in leather, the pages neatly trimmed, leaves me full of admiration for Jean Yvert and

his colleagues who sweated and strained, not only physically but intellectually, translating the *Bible* from church Latin, via French, into Maori. Up at Kerikeri there's another side of the missionary story upstairs in the sturdy Stone Store, the country's oldest building. Clergyman John Butler lived next door at Kemp House where rambunctious local Maori regularly stormed in demanding food from his quivering wife.

The day is over, and I've ticked four out of five: Clendon House will have to wait. Across the road is The Pear Tree offering food, warmth and even some history in the country's oldest fruit tree. It's a cosy place to sit and listen to the rain.

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