

KAPITI

"BLOOD, OIL AND BONE"



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A WILD FRONTIER



Wild Frontier – Aotearoa 1820's

In the closing decades of the 18th century and into the early 19th, the islands of New Zealand were a world apart, a land of dense forests, soaring mountains and a deeply rooted Māori society. But the tides of global expansion were turning and European ships began to breach this isolation. Pre-1840 New Zealand attracted a polyglot mix of adventurers, entrepreneurs, runaway seamen and escaped convicts from Australia. They were sealers, timber merchants, flax traders and most impactful of all, whalers.

This era was described by historical geographer Alan Grey as a 'robber economy'. The early industries were purely extractive, plundering the archipelago's rich natural resources with little thought for the future.

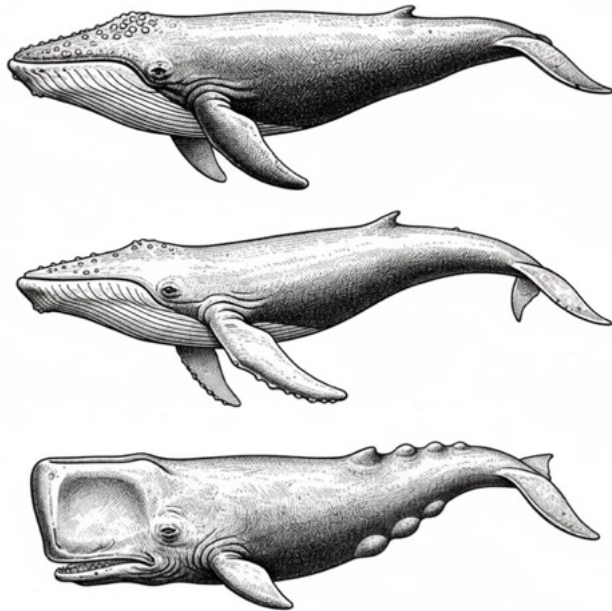
Seals were hunted to the verge of extinction, ancient kauri forests were felled for ship masts and flax was harvested for rope. It was a lawless, often brutal frontier, a meeting point of cultures driven by profit and survival, far from the reach of any government or formal law.



The arrival of Europeans marked the beginning of a turbulent era of exploitation and cultural collision on the untamed shores of Aotearoa.

THE LEVIATHAN'S CALL

A pivotal shift occurred around the 1820s with the establishment of shore-based whaling stations. This new model allowed for more systematic and intensive hunting, predominantly southern rights, humpbacks and highly prized sperm whales when the opportunity arose. Unlike the ocean-going vessels that processed their catch at sea, shore stations were permanent or semi-permanent settlements where whales were towed ashore for processing.



The three primary targets of the New Zealand whaling industry, each valued for its unique properties.



Southern Right Whale (*Eubalaena australis*)

The primary target of shore whalers. They were slow, rich in oil and floated when killed, making them the "right" whale to hunt. Females came into sheltered bays to calve, making them tragically easy prey.

Humpback Whale (*Megaptera novaeangliae*)

Known for their acrobatic breaches and long pectoral fins, humpbacks were also hunted along their migration routes, though they became a more significant target in the 20th century. Known as one of the better of the whales for eating, considerably less oily than sperm whales.

Sperm Whale (*Physeter macrocephalus*)

A deep-water hunter, prized for its teeth and bones and the high-quality spermaceti oil found in its massive head, which was used for fine lubricants and smokeless candles.

AN AGE OF FIRE AND STEEL



The introduction of the musket irrevocably altered the balance of power and the nature of Māori warfare.

The arrival of Europeans coincided with one of the most violent periods in Māori history: the Musket Wars. From the 1810s to the 1830s, inter-tribal warfare, a long-standing part of Māori society for settling disputes and contesting mana (prestige, authority), was catastrophically amplified by the introduction of firearms.

Tribes who first acquired muskets gained a devastating military advantage. They launched massive campaigns (taua) against their rivals,

who were usually armed only with traditional weapons like the taiaha (staff) and mere (club). The results were brutal, leading to immense loss of life and mass migrations as defeated iwi (tribes) fled their ancestral lands.

This created a desperate arms race. Survival now depended on obtaining muskets, the only way to get them was by trading with the Pākehā. Māori quickly adapted their economy, producing vast quantities of potatoes, pigs and dressed flax (harakeke) to exchange for the coveted firearms. This need for European trade goods would become the driving force behind the next chapter of Kāpiti's history.



THE NAPOLEON OF THE SOUTH

Into this crucible of change stepped Te Rauparaha, a chief of the Ngāti Toa iwi. Born in the 1760s, he was a brilliant strategist, a ruthless warrior, and a politically astute leader. Sometimes called the 'Napoleon of the South', his life was defined by the immense upheaval of the Musket Wars.

His tribe, Ngāti Toa, had fared badly in the conflicts. Pushed from their ancestral homeland at Kāwhia by the musket-armed Waikato tribes, they were a people in exile. In 1822, Te Rauparaha led his people on a perilous migration south, known as Te Heke Mai-i-raro (the migration from the north). They fought their way down the west coast of the North Island, seeking a new, defensible home from which they could rebuild their power and, crucially, control access to the European traders and their muskets.

Te Rauparaha was a true cultural border-crosser. He recognized that the key to his people's future lay not in resisting the Pākehā, but in controlling them. He saw the European ships passing through the Cook Strait, the vital waterway separating the North and South Islands and understood their strategic value. The ships were a mobile source of wealth and power and he, who controlled the port of call, controlled the trade.



Image of Te Rauparaha is a recreation based on a painting by: Hall, R. 1840s



THE ISLAND FORTRESS



From a distance, Te Rauparaha, a formidable leader, guided his people towards a new destiny, with Kāpiti Island as the prize.

Te Rauparaha's gaze fell upon Kāpiti Island. Lying approximately 5km off the coast, its rugged cliffs and limited landing spots made it a natural fortress.

More importantly, it commanded the northern entrance to the Cook Strait, the very channel the trading ships used. For Te Rauparaha, it was the perfect location to build his new empire.

In 1823, Ngāti Toa, led by Te Rauparaha's nephew Te Pēhi Kupe, seized the island from the Muaupoko and Rangitāne iwi.

The conquest was not without challenge. In 1824, a huge coalition of tribes—including Ngāti Apa, Rangitāne, Muaupoko, and others from the South Island—launched a massive counter-attack to reclaim the island.

The resulting Battle of Waiorua, fought on the northern shores of Kāpiti, was a bloody and decisive engagement.

Against overwhelming odds, Ngāti Toa's superior strategy and fierce defence secured their victory. The battle cemented their control over the island and the surrounding region, sending a clear message of their dominance.

RAIDS AND TRADE



With Kāpiti secured, Te Rauparaha set about transforming it into the capital of his 'canoe-crafted empire'. The island became both a fortress and a trading base. From this stronghold, he launched devastating raids on the tribes of the South Island, extending Ngāti Toa's influence and control over the lucrative pounamu (greenstone) resources of the region.

Captives from these raids were brought back to Kāpiti and put to work scraping flax, which was then traded for more muskets, powder, and other European goods.

Te Rauparaha actively encouraged European ships to visit.

He understood that his power rested on his ability to control the flow of trade. He provided whalers and traders with land to build their stations, houses and protection. In return for access to the island's safe anchorages and the rich whaling grounds of the Strait, the Europeans supplied him with the tools of power: guns, tobacco and alcohol. By 1827, vessels began calling regularly and Kāpiti quickly became the primary locus of trade in central New Zealand.

THAR SHE BLOWS!



Whales started to arrive in May, traversing the western coastline between Kāpiti and the mainland.

From lookouts posted on the high points, the cry "Thar she blows!" would signal the start of a frantic chase.

The hunt itself was a brutal and perilous affair. Crews of six men, a mix of European and Māori, would launch their small, open whaleboats, often competing with boats from rival stations to be the first to reach the leviathan.

They pursued the whales in these flimsy boats, powered only by oar and sail. The harpooner, or boat steerer, stood in the bow, ready to strike. The harpoon was not designed to kill, but to fasten the boat to the whale with a long rope.

Once struck, the whale would often sound, diving deep, or take off on a "Nantucket sleigh ride," dragging the tiny boat at terrifying speeds across the choppy strait.

Sperm whales, in particular, were known to fight back, capable of smashing a whaleboat to splinters with a single flick of their powerful flukes.



After exhausting the whale, the crew would pull alongside and the headsman would deliver the killing blow with a long, sharp lance, aiming for the lungs or heart.

In the turbulent waters of Cook Strait, whalers in small, vulnerable boats engaged in a deadly ballet with the ocean's giants.

It was a deadly dance of skill, courage, and sheer luck.

BLOOD AND OIL



During the 1830s, the shores of Kāpiti were lined with bustling whaling stations, their try-pots constantly smoking as the island became the heart of the industry.

Once the whale was killed, the arduous task of towing the immense carcass, which could weigh up to 50 tonnes, back to the station began. On the shore, the real work started.

The process of "cutting-in" or "flensing" involved men using razor-sharp spades and knives to peel the thick layer of blubber from the carcass in long strips. The deck and beach would become slick with blood and oil, a dangerous workplace where sharks often gathered in the shallows for the scraps.

The strips of blubber were cut into smaller pieces and thrown into enormous cast-iron "try-pots," set over roaring furnaces. This was "trying out"—a process of boiling the blubber to render it into oil. The fires were often fueled by rendered scraps of blubber itself, creating a perpetual, foul-smelling smoke that hung over the island.



The hot oil was skimmed and ladled into cooling vats before being stored in wooden barrels, ready for shipment to large warehouses in Sydney and London. Very little was wasted. The shore stations were industrial sites of intense, grisly labour, where the bodies of whales were systematically broken down into valuable commodities.

UNITED IN GREED

Despite the potential for conflict, the two cultures on Kāpiti, Māori and Pākehā, united in greed, got along surprisingly well. The relationship was one of mutual dependence. The European station owners needed Māori not just for their labour, but for their local knowledge, protection and essential supplies.

Te Rauparaha and Ngāti Toa provided land, houses and a steady supply of food like pigs and potatoes. Māori men were eager recruits, making up a significant portion of the workforce. They were not just labourers; many became highly skilled boat steerers and even headsmen, positions of great responsibility and status within the whaling hierarchy. Some Māori even went on to establish and run their own whaling stations.

In return for their contributions, Māori gained access to coveted European goods, money and employment. This economic partnership, built on the bloody foundation of the whaling trade, created a unique, integrated community where Māori and Pākehā lived and worked side-by-side, their fortunes inextricably linked to the seasonal arrival of the whales.

On Kāpiti, the pursuit of profit forged an unexpected and deeply interconnected bicultural community.



Intermarriage was a common practice, binding Pākehā traders to the local community and its land through kinship.

The integration on Kāpiti went far beyond the workplace. European whalers and traders formed lasting relationships with Māori women. For Māori, marriage was a traditional way to form alliances and secure a Pākehā trader within the community, ensuring preferential access to goods and trade. For the Pākehā, it offered security, companionship and a tangible connection to the land and its people.

THE PRICE OF OIL



Shore whaling was a capital-intensive business. In the 1830s, most New Zealand stations were financed by merchants in Sydney.

These financiers would front the entire operation: purchasing new whaleboats (at around £27 each), tackle and provisions like pork, flour, sugar and spirits. They would transport the entire "mob," as the party was called, to the station in New Zealand.

The payment system, known as the "lay" or "share" system, meant that whalers were not paid wages. Instead, each man received a predetermined fraction of the season's profits. A chief headsman might get a 1/18th share, a boat steerer 1/60th and a common boatman a 1/100th share.

Offshore financiers took the rest, valuing the oil and whalebone and reaping the profit on the London market. This system was heavily weighted in the owner's favour and many whalers ended the season in debt after accounting for the food, tobacco and clothing advanced to them at inflated prices.

An 1840s Station Account

The account book for Alexander Fraser's station on Kāpiti for the 1840 season shows the scale of the enterprise. Provisions included £394 of pork and £436 of flour. To establish the station, local Māori received 25 pairs of blankets, two kegs of tobacco and a hogshead of spirits, a trade valued at over £88.

A BOOMING INDUSTRY

For a decade, whaling was New Zealand's major commercial industry. In 1841 alone, the national output was 1,800 tuns of oil and 70 tuns of whalebone, worth at least £54,800 on the London market—a colossal sum for that time.



A Corrosive Influence

While the whaling era brought economic opportunities, it also carried a dark undercurrent that had profound and often negative impacts on Māori society. The introduction of alcohol, used as a trade good and a social lubricant, led to social disruption and violence. Early missionaries were frequently shocked by the behaviour of the European whalers, whom they saw as lawless rogues.

The constant demand for provisions could strain local resources and the focus on trade shifted traditional economic patterns.

Liaisons between whalers and Māori women, while sometimes leading to stable families, could also be temporary and exploitative, further disrupting the social fabric of society. Furthermore, the close contact with Europeans introduced new diseases, like measles and influenza, to which Māori had no immunity. These "virgin soil" epidemics could sweep through communities with devastating consequences, causing more deaths than warfare.

Most significantly, the industry was built on an unsustainable slaughter. The whalers initially targeted female whales that came inshore to calve. By killing the mothers and their young, they were systematically destroying the very source of their livelihood, ensuring the industry's eventual and rapid collapse.

The whaling industry, while profitable, brought disease, social disruption and environmental destruction in its wake.



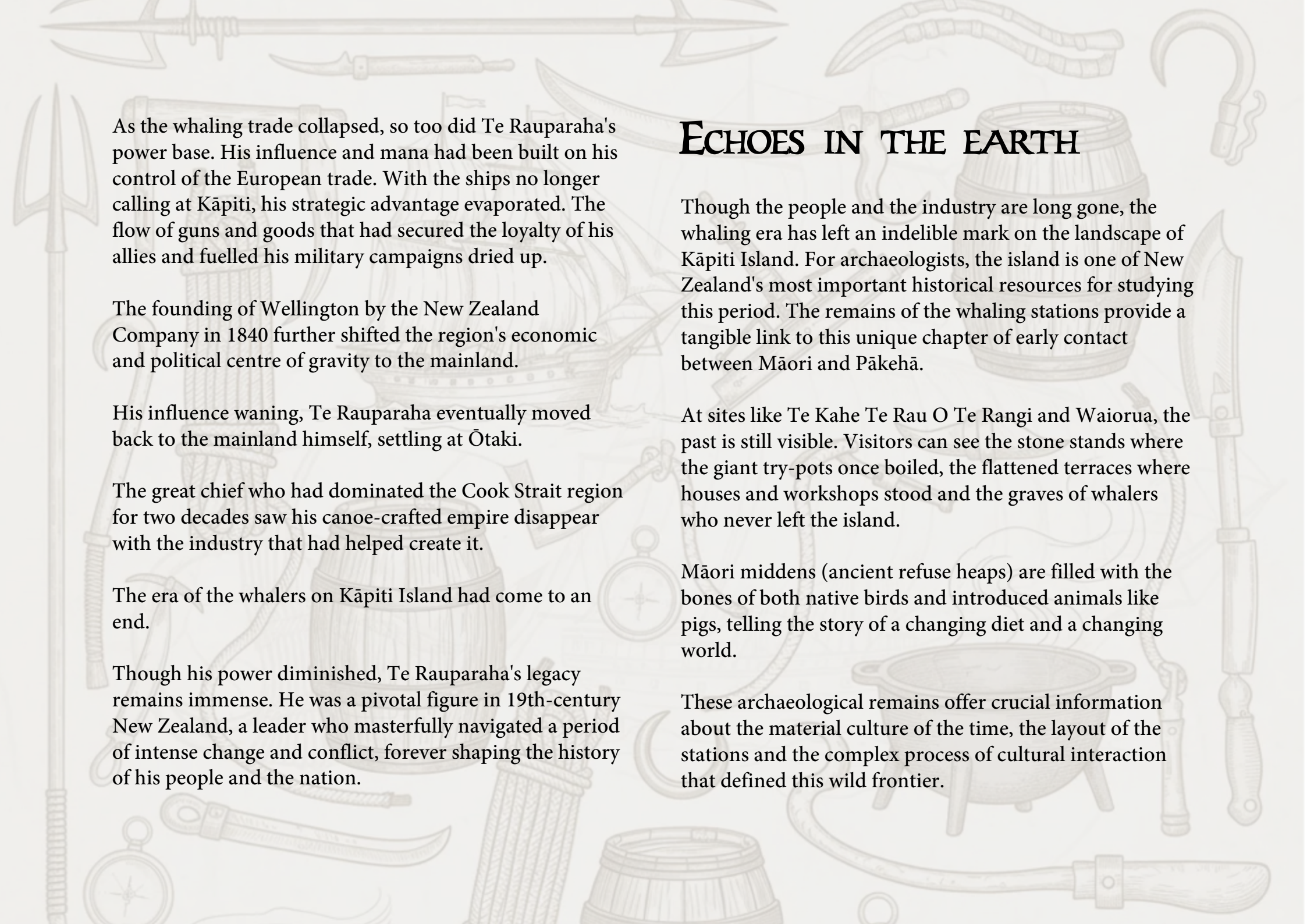
Whale numbers decline, an empire fades and disease arrives.

THE WELLS RUN DRY

By the 1840s, the smoke cleared from Kāpiti's shores as the whales vanished and the industry collapsed, leaving behind a ghost of its former self.

The boom on Kāpiti was spectacular, but short-lived. The intensive hunting of mother-calf pairs had a catastrophic effect on the whale population. The decline was swift and brutal. Production figures from whaling stations across New Zealand tell the story: the Weller brothers' station in Otago, which produced 310 tuns of oil in 1834, then yielded only 14 tuns in 1840 and closed the following year.

The same fate befell Kāpiti. By the early 1840s, the whales simply stopped coming in viable numbers. The once-bustling stations fell silent one by one. The furnaces grew cold, the buildings fell into disrepair and the whalers—both Māori and Pākehā—moved on, seeking other livelihoods on the mainland. The 'robber economy' had consumed its prize. The gold rush was over.



As the whaling trade collapsed, so too did Te Rauparaha's power base. His influence and mana had been built on his control of the European trade. With the ships no longer calling at Kāpiti, his strategic advantage evaporated. The flow of guns and goods that had secured the loyalty of his allies and fuelled his military campaigns dried up.

The founding of Wellington by the New Zealand Company in 1840 further shifted the region's economic and political centre of gravity to the mainland.

His influence waning, Te Rauparaha eventually moved back to the mainland himself, settling at Ōtaki.

The great chief who had dominated the Cook Strait region for two decades saw his canoe-crafted empire disappear with the industry that had helped create it.

The era of the whalers on Kāpiti Island had come to an end.

Though his power diminished, Te Rauparaha's legacy remains immense. He was a pivotal figure in 19th-century New Zealand, a leader who masterfully navigated a period of intense change and conflict, forever shaping the history of his people and the nation.

ECHOES IN THE EARTH

Though the people and the industry are long gone, the whaling era has left an indelible mark on the landscape of Kāpiti Island. For archaeologists, the island is one of New Zealand's most important historical resources for studying this period. The remains of the whaling stations provide a tangible link to this unique chapter of early contact between Māori and Pākehā.

At sites like Te Kahe Te Rau O Te Rangi and Waiorua, the past is still visible. Visitors can see the stone stands where the giant try-pots once boiled, the flattened terraces where houses and workshops stood and the graves of whalers who never left the island.

Māori middens (ancient refuse heaps) are filled with the bones of both native birds and introduced animals like pigs, telling the story of a changing diet and a changing world.

These archaeological remains offer crucial information about the material culture of the time, the layout of the stations and the complex process of cultural interaction that defined this wild frontier.

Nature is slowly reclaiming the sites, but the bones of the whaling industry still lie scattered across Kāpiti Island's shores and as treasures in local homes.

A NEW CHAPTER

Today, Kāpiti Island is a world-renowned sanctuary surrounded by a marine reserve, a testament to the power of conservation and a symbol of hope for the future.

The story of Kāpiti Island did not end with the whalers. After the industry's collapse, the island was largely converted to farmland. However, its destiny was to change once more. Recognizing its importance, the government acquired most of the island in 1897 to establish what has become a nature reserve, now regarded as a national asset.

This marked the beginning of Kāpiti's role as a pioneering site for conservation in New Zealand. In a monumental effort, all introduced predators like rats, stoats and possums were eradicated. This allowed the native flora and fauna to flourish once more.

Today, Kāpiti is one of the country's most important bird sanctuaries, a predator-free haven for some of New Zealand's most endangered species, including the Takahē, Kōkako, Hihi, Pōpokotea, Kiwi Pukupuku, Kākāriki, Tīeke, Tuatara, Skinks and Geckos.



The waters that once ran red with the blood of whales is now a marine reserve, where the descendants of those same whales are slowly returning.

The island that was once a centre of exploitation has become a symbol of restoration, a sanctuary for native flora and fauna, its story a powerful journey from blood, oil and bones to life and renewal.

Some interesting facts

In 1837 alone, between 25th August -12th of October the following 11 whaling/trading ships lay off Kāpiti, filling their holds with cargoes of flax fibre, oil and bone. It would have certainly been a sight to see.

Vessel	Master of the ship
Persian	Hopton
Dublin Packet	Clayton
Roslyn Castle	Richards
Marianne	Mansford
Isabella	Maughan
Caroline	Cherry
Sea Witch	Newson
Louisa	Hayward
Samuel Cunard	unknown
Bee	Gluvins
Taiaroa	Hempleman

Records from “Charles Bayley’s Journal” by Rhys Richards, provides record of his ships the Wallaby, 1841-1842, and the ship The Fortitude, 1843 – 1848, collected between them 1240 tuns of oil (approximately 1,240,000 litres of whale oil), 1400 tons of bone. The following vessels delivered cargos of oil to Sydney. These ships also carried tons of bone and vast quantities of flax fibre, with flax gathered by whaling teams when whales were not about, adding to their small portion of profits. Notably these lists of vessels reflects only a few of the many ships that came here, some never landing ashore. Many returned to fill their holds again and again, like the vessel Fortitude.

Vessel	Sperm oil	Black Oil
Cheviot	-	300 tuns
Joanna	70 tuns	300 tuns
Spoke Wallaby	70 tuns	550 tuns
Norval	2 tuns	294 tuns
Deveron	200 tuns	272 tuns

The illustrations and images within this book have been produced as artistic interpretations of historical events, intended to evoke the spirit of the era, created with AI illustration tools, directed, researched and compiled by Kāpiti resident Marco Zeeman, Chairman and Trustee of the Whale Song Charitable Trust. © 2025



"In the late 1820s, Kāpiti Island was the heart of a bloody, booming industry. It was a wild frontier where Māori chiefs and European whalers forged an unlikely alliance, their fortunes built on the bones of the great whales. This is the story of that turbulent era—a tale of warriors and whalers, of muskets and money and of a bicultural world born from the smoke of the try-pots."

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This work draws on a wide body of historical, archaeological and cultural scholarship, as well as Māori oral histories and early European records. Key sources include:

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(Early shipping records, whaling logs, colonial newspapers)
- Department of Conservation (DOC)
Kapiti Island ecological restoration and archaeological site reports.

Iwi & Oral Histories

This narrative acknowledges the importance of oral histories and whakapapa preserved by:

- Ngāti Toa Rangitira
- Te Ātiawa ki Whakarongotai

- Other mana whenua of the wider Kāpiti and Cook Strait region

These traditions form a vital counterpoint to written colonial records and remain central to understanding this era.

GLOSSARY

Blubber – The thick layer of fat beneath a whale’s skin, rendered into oil.

Cutting-in (Flensing) – The process of slicing blubber from a whale’s carcass.

Headsman – The senior officer in a whaleboat; responsible for killing the whale with a lance.

Harpooner / Boat Steerer – The person who threw the harpoon and steered the whaleboat.

Lay (Share System) – A payment system where crew were paid a fraction of the profits rather than wages.

Shore Whaling – Whaling conducted from land-based stations rather than from ships.

Spermaceti – A high-quality waxy oil found in the head of a sperm whale, used for fine candles and lubricants.

Try-pots – Large iron cauldrons used to boil blubber into oil.

Trying-out – The boiling of blubber to extract oil.

Tuns – A large unit of volume used for oil (approximately 252 gallons / 954 litres). Varied due to the size of barrels used.

Nantucket Sleigh Ride – The high-speed towing of a whaleboat by a harpooned whale.

Virgin Soil Epidemics – Diseases introduced to populations with no prior immunity, causing devastating mortality.

Aotearoa – Māori name for New Zealand, often translated as “Land of the Long White Cloud.”

Iwi – A tribe or people, made up of multiple hapū. The primary political and social unit in traditional Māori society.

Mana – Prestige, authority, spiritual power and influence.

Mana whenua – People who have ancestral rights over land.

Pākehā – A New Zealander of European descent.

Taiaha – A traditional Māori fighting staff.

Mere – A short, flat club traditionally made from stone, bone or wood.

Taua – A war party.

Te Heke Mai-i-raro – The southward migration of Ngāti Toa led by Te Rauparaha in the 1820s.





A story of
Kāpiti Island and
nearby shores,
of blood, oil and
bone, days of whalers
working with Māori,
the very beginnings
of trade out of
New Zealand.

Kāpiti lay central to
this all, a place woven
with many other
stories and decisive
moments of the past.

WHALE SONG TRUST

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