

**A HISTORY OF HONEY PRODUCTION  
ON GREAT BARRIER ISLAND**



The history of Great Barrier Island enterprises, such as kauri milling, mining and whaling, are fairly well documented. Less well known is the considerable importance of honey production for the settlers on Great Barrier. Great Barrier was the first place in New Zealand to have a commercial bee-keeping enterprise.

**Beginnings**

During the 1860's a number of settlers arrived on Great Barrier where they took up 40 acre allotments for their service in the military. Among them was George Blackwell who arrived in 1865 to 'farm' his 40 acres in the hills above Schooner Bay, Tryphena. After a few years of considerable hardship, the settlers realised that their blocks were too small for effective farming. Consequently, Blackwell, along with some others, decided to try beekeeping which might offer better possibilities for making a living.

**The Blackwells**

Success was theirs. Nine years after they had begun, the Blackwells possessed 500 hives and their flourishing business included their own saw mill for manufacturing frames and boxes for the hives. These were almost entirely of Kauri with very accurately pit-sawn planks used in the earliest years. As an example of their production, in six weeks in the 1895 season, they procured and canned 10 tons of honey, a goodly quantity of which was exported to England. Before the road from Medlands Beach to Tryphena was built, honey collected by T Blackwell was canned and carted by bullocks across the beach at the southern end of Kaitoki to a boat and often sent straight to Auckland. Adam Blackwell (born 1874) began to help with bees at the age of eight and in years to come ran his launch 'The Rosella' between the Barrier and Auckland. It became known as the 'honey boat' and people swarmed when she came into sight. Her honey was sold for 2/6d a 5 pound tin. (In later years Blackwell produce including eggs, vegetables and honey was sold at Gallaghers Grocery Shop, Victoria Street and at Nathans).

Steadily the Barrier built up a reputation as an excellent honey producing area. The Blackwells were among the first in New Zealand to import queen bees from Italy and before long were sending queens all over New Zealand and also to some of the Pacific Islands. They also may have been the first New Zealanders to import a foundation wax milling machine from the USA.

**Early Families**

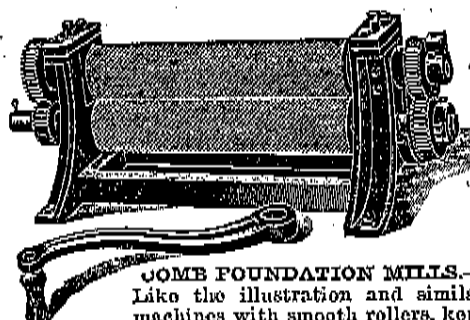
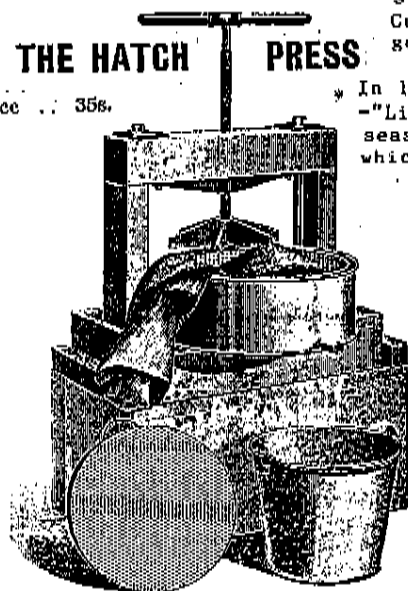
Other families to take up bee-keeping (to varying degrees) in the southern part of the Barrier included the Blairs, Malcolms, Osbournes, Alcocks, Medlands, Baileys and Sandersons. There were certainly many hives on the Barrier in earlier years. The Blackwell brothers (second generation) kept up to a thousand hives between them. Some families had their own areas for hives. e.g. the Sandersons kept a considerable number of hives at Okupu and the White Cliffs and Tom Blackwell bought Kaitoki land for 2/6d per acre primarily for bee-keeping. The Osbournes set up 500 hives in one location at Rosalie Bay. Some developed original bee-keeping practices. Two individuals made identification marks on frames to prove ownership or discourage theft. For example, Mr A Osbourne, known for his rather suspicious nature, developed a unique hive; shallow depth boxes and frames, wider boxes to take 12 or 13 frames (usually 10), special identification holes drilled into frames and concrete slabs for both base and roof.

# From the Auckland Weekly News 1880s - "Mr Blair has also a number of bees, and supplies honey for the Auckland market in very well got up tins. Mr. H. B. Morton, Custom Street, is Mr Blairs agent for the sale of his honey. The honey is very good, and thoroughly well prepared for sale."

\* In 1885 Mr. Sydney Weeton noted about the two Pakohu families living at Harstaonga. -"Like most of the Barrier settlers, they kept bees. In 1884 they had a record season, one family taking 12,000 pounds of honey from their hives, the other 8,000, which must have made a providential contribution to a meagre kitty."

**THE HATCH PRESS**

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**Bee-keeping Methods**

Hives in the bush were tended about three times each year. During the spring visit the men would sit next to small fires and place home made foundation into frames. Frames were never wired; molten wax in tins

sitting on the edge of the fire were used to attach the wax foundation to the top bar of each frame. In February the wax and honey was cut out with a knife and the large cans of raw honey were carted out by pack horse.

### Pressed Honey

G.B.I. honey was pressed rather than centrifuged and several old honey presses still exist. (This extraction process probably contributes to the distinctive delicious flavour of Barrier honey and hence its renown).

### The Osbornes

Charles Osborne kept bees earlier this century at Ruahini Valley, Medlands Beach, Rosalie Bay and on the hills between. Because of a shotgun accident as a youth he lost an arm, so using two kerosene cans and a shoulder yoke or pack, he carried honey, close to 100 lbs at a time, all the way from the hills east of Medlands Beach to the top of Rosalie Bay, then down towards Tryphena or Rosalie Bay. (One of these apiaries disappeared down a huge land-slip very shortly after a visit). He also at times used a pack-horse and he boated honey from Medlands and Rosalie Bay.

His Medlands honey-house was whisked away in 1946 after an ownership dispute. As at other Osborne dwellings and sheds, fruit trees were planted at honey-house sites. Apparently Charles carried around a small square tobacco tin — his lunch box! His usual lunch — a few cracker biscuits.

Charles managed several vegetable gardens and orchards, he could skull a boat with ease and assisted a brother with crayfishing. He also farmed sheep and built. Locals remarked - he got more work done with his one arm than most others did with two. (Charles was the last Osborne to reside on the Island and he died in 1965).

Ernest Osborne kept bees between the Sugar Loaf at Medlands and Shoal Bay where he lived. Near the Sugar Loaf he cut out honey in his shed and sledged the cans to the beach and loaded them on to a boat - likely a flat bottomed dory made by himself. Recently the writer found remains of a waxing board, kauri honey frames, nails, carrying handle, tins and a lantern glass under his collapsed shed. Apparently he stuffed the iron corrugations with newspaper to keep out bees. During visits he would stay the night. The shed was last used about 1945. Ernest pressed all his honey at his honey-house near the Tryphena Shoal Bay stream-mouth and in later years took his produce to Auckland in a launch he made. (ie from W.W.I in the 35ft launch Conran)

Gordon Osborne was also into beekeeping in a big way. He kept bees and honey sheds at Windy Hill to Cape Barrier and is remembered as a pint sized man with a fiery volatile temperament.

(Some of this Osborne information from "Great Barrier Island Guardian of the Hauraki Gulf", A Short History by Robert Bailey 1994)

### The Medlands

When Thomas Medland started farming on the Barrier east coast in the 1860's, he had a few cows and two hives of bees in kerosene cases. During the 1880's he traded meat, vegetables, butter, home-made jam and honey for kauri gum from the gum diggers at Awana, seven miles away. He sold the gum to help provide for his growing family.

His sons later sold honey with their own label.

Grace Medland, Great Barrier calls; a pioneer's daughter looks back, 1968, IMS-173.  
Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington.

### Family Participation

Activities such as wax foundation making, extraction and canning of honey usually depended on family participation. And families were generally large, e.g. Malcolm's 13 children, Osbourne's the same, Blackwell's 11 children. Wax foundation was made by quickly dipping thin, smooth and very sodden Kauri boards in a large copper of molten wax. A short time later two sheets of wax could be easily peeled from either side of a wet board, and then be fed through a wax foundation milling machine - often turned by Grandfather or a child.

### The Hey-days

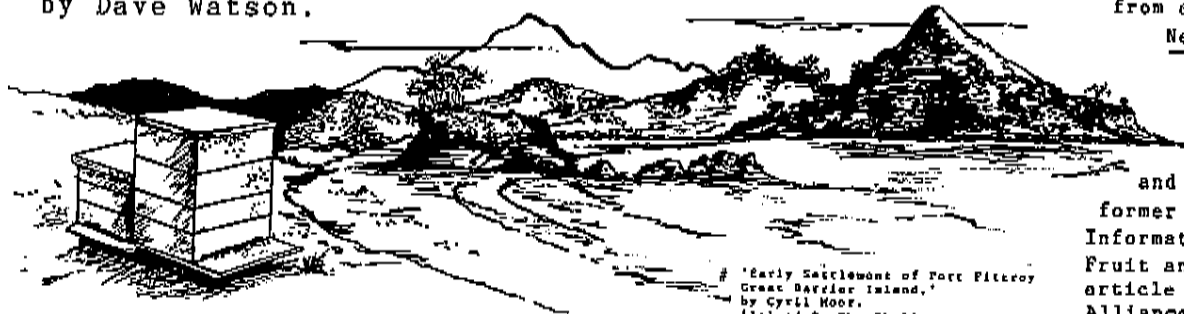
The hey-days for Barrier honey collection were from the 1880's to 1914, World War I, though considerable production continued until World War II. The long absence or loss of many menfolk, old age and lack of interest caused the industry to decline considerably.

Up until the 1960's, substantial scaffoldings of manuka poles alongside old puriri trees could be seen here and there in the bush. Beekeepers climbed the poles, pumped copious quantities of smoke into the wild beehive via a specially drilled hole and captured the escaping bees. These could be used to strengthen weak hives. As the queen was not usually captured, these structures could be used year after year.

### Abandoned Hives

By 1945 many/most Barrier beehives had been abandoned. In the mid 1960's, Les Blackwell and Hec Sanderson rediscovered an apiary belonging to a relative which had been untended since World War I, i.e. well over 40 years. Three hives were still working with the bees having to scramble through a thick screen of vines and bushes. The hives lower boxes were completely rotted away, the bees using the upper boxes. A short time later these hives were rescued and transferred to new boxes by Les Blackwell.

by Dave Watson.



# 'Early Settlement of Port Pittoroy  
Great Barrier Island,'  
by Cyril Moor.  
\* 'Island On The Skyline,'  
Great Barrier Island, A.H. and A.W. REED  
by Holly G. Elliott.

Paragraphs 2,3&9 give information  
from an article from the  
New Zealand Herald 1963

by Dorothy Wiseman.

Other information  
comes from conversations  
with Mr and Mrs L Blackwell  
and Fred Medland and other  
former and present residence.  
Information was taken from  
Fruit and Produce, July/August 1985  
article by C Rope. Illustrations  
Alliance Bee-keepers Supplies  
Catalogue 1914-15..

### A Proud Tradition

Medlands Beach Apiaries is a small local enterprise with a passion for excellence with the honeys it produces. One hundred years ago the Barrier was renowned for its fine honey ... The tradition of marketing distinctive, delicious, pressed honey continues.

Delicious pressed honey. The taste of Great Barrier Island.

