

West Dartmoor U3A

Meeting Report for September 2021	Prepared by: David Jowett
Speaker: Clive Charlton	Subject: NewZealand – Plymouth Connections

Our first live meeting since lockdown was addressed by Clive Charlton, a former geography teacher, who gave us a very interesting talk about the links between Plymouth and New Zealand, especially New Plymouth.

The Maoris had been in New Zealand since 1300 at the latest and had established sophisticated tribal societies. James Cook's three voyages in the 18th century, starting from Plymouth, were instrumental in opening up the early 19th-century settlement of New Zealand by the first colonists: whalers, sealers and traders, especially in supplies, metal and guns. The last were bought eagerly by the Maoris, who indulged in frequent inter-tribal warfare.

By the late 1830s there was increasing pressure for colonisation. The Plymouth Company of New Zealand was set up in 1839 and had an office in London. By the Treaty of Waitangi land purchases, some legal and some corrupt, were arranged with the Maoris around Mt Egmont (Taranaki) on the west coast of North Island and the settlement of New Plymouth was established, with William Hudson as the first governor. The emigrant ship "Tory" sailed from London in 1839, calling in at Plymouth, under the auspices of Edward Gibbon Wakefield, an enthusiastic organiser of colonisation.

All this was facilitated by the fact that in the early 1830s one Richard ("Dicky") Bennett had gone to Taranaki, married a Maori woman and learnt the language, so could act as an intermediary. He negotiated land purchases with local chiefs, who did not always have an interest in the land they were selling. This caused friction with Maoris who had fled the area or been enslaved by their enemies further north and who now returned to find that they had lost their land.

Frederic Alonzo Carrington, surveyor for the Plymouth Company, laid out the town plan for New Plymouth. He soon left New Zealand but returned in 1857 and became a politician. He was hailed as the Father of New Plymouth. Vice-president of the company at one stage was Thomas Gill from a family with connections in Tavistock, for example, the hospital.

Between 1840 and 1842 six emigrant ships left Plymouth for its namesake, carrying a total of 897 people. There was a rural depression in the 1820s, which provoked several family groups from different areas in Devon and Cornwall to take this step. 100 to 300 people were cooped up on the long voyage south; there was sickness and a few deaths. The colony had a shaky start, with food shortages and a lack of employment. Crucially, there was no harbour but this was later remedied by the building of a breakwater. There were some protests and a few departures but things had improved by 1845.

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Among the noteworthy names to make the journey were Charles Armitage Brown, a friend of Keats and publisher of some of his work, who lived in Laira from 1835 to 1841. Edwin Harris, from a family of painters, decorators and engineers, went out as a farmer and surveyor. His daughter Emily, baptised in St Andrew's church in 1837, was the first female professional artist in New Zealand.

During the 1860s were the Taranaki Wars, sparked by the discontent among Maoris over land loss. Some of the tribes, however, fought on the side of the colonists. Among the casualties in these wars was Hugh Corby Harris, Emily's brother. William Odgers sailed on HMS Niger and led the storming of a Maori fort but accounts vary as to whether it was occupied by a large force or one old man! He was awarded the VC and returned to become the landlord of the Union Inn in Saltash.

New Plymouth eventually became a regional centre. Its heritage is recent but cherished and it has a fine museum, Puke Ariki (Hill of the Chiefs).

The speaker briefly touched on other connections in New Zealand with the Plymouth area: Devonport Naval Base in Auckland and the emigration depot in Plymouth (Baltic Wharf), important from 1835 to 1891. Devonport was the port of arrival for troopships in the First World War. 32,000 troops landed on their way for training on Salisbury Plain and subsequent dispatch to the front. These included the ten who died and the two seriously injured in a tragic accident at Bere Ferrers station. They mistook a signal halt for a place to disembark for refreshments and were struck by an oncoming train. The ten are buried in Efford cemetery and the two were treated in Tavistock Hospital, never actually going to France.

The speaker had shown us a picture of many street names in New Plymouth with echoes here, for example, Tavistock Street, and concluded by suggesting that Plymouth might return the gesture with a few Kiwi street names.