

Protecting, preserving  
& celebrating our heritage



**Winter 2024**



*History in the making - the 39<sup>th</sup> Annual Bull Sale at Earnsclough Station*

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[www.heritagecentralotago.org.nz](http://www.heritagecentralotago.org.nz)

# ABOUT US

The Central Otago Heritage Trust, established in 2008, comprises member groups within the local heritage community. The role of the Trust is to represent the collective interests of these groups in protecting, preserving and celebrating our unique heritage. It is governed by trustees nominated and elected by members.

The Trust is the founding organisation of **Heritage Central Otago**. Our community-based initiatives are represented under the Heritage Central Otago identity.

## OUR TRUSTEES

David Ritchie (Chair), Marco Creemers, Russell Garbutt, Lynda Gray, Warwick Hawker, David Hurd, Pene Morris & Ross Naylor. Ann Rodgers (CODC Liaison). Maggie Hope (Heritage Coordinator).

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Cover image courtesy of Stephanie Sommers

# HERITAGE MATTERS

## FROM THE CHAIR

We've had a very busy few months. It was great to see many of you at our recent Heritage Talks on Prehistoric Lake Manuharekia. Honorary Professor Daphne Lee from Otago University delighted audiences at the booked-out events at Central Stories and Clyde Museum.



We also enjoyed the recent Heritage Talk at Cromwell Museum, where Sean Brosnahan from Toitū Early Settlers Museum explored the changing nature of marriage in New Zealand society. These three Heritage Talks were the first in a series to showcase some of the fascinating museum objects chosen for the Central Museums 100 Project. Keep an eye on our website for the next talks in this series.

On behalf of the Trustees, I'd like to welcome our new Oral History Manager, Joanna Leigh. Joanna brings a wealth of experience working with young children and adult learners in the education sector, in New Zealand and overseas.

The Oral History Project has just received another funding boost with \$9,500 received from the Lotteries Environment and Heritage Fund. This is additional to the recent funding we received from the Central Lakes Trust.

In late May, we reported back to the Council on the progress we have made over the last 12 months. The work we do to support our members and enhance community appreciation and understanding of Central Otago's heritage is only possible through the funding we receive from the Council's contestable Community Fund. We recognise that competition for funding is fierce, particularly given the context of rising costs. If you have a heritage project that needs funding, please get in touch as we may be able to provide a Letter of Support to accompany your funding applications.

We have much work ahead of us. It has now been 12 years since the 'Towards Better Heritage Outcomes' consultation document was developed. It is now time to go back to the community to refresh our collective aspirations for heritage. We are hopeful that the consultation process, needed to update the heritage provisions in the CODC District Plan later this year, will help inform our strategic direction. We'll keep you posted on this consultation timeline.

I hope you enjoy this winter edition. Stay warm!

David Ritchie, Chair - Central Otago Heritage Trust (COHT)

## THE CHANGING FACE OF FARMING AT EARNSCLEUGH STATION

I had the pleasure of attending the annual Earnscleugh Station bull sale in early June. Amidst the buying frenzy, I tried to imagine what the original station owner, William Fraser, would have thought of the auction 162 years on. For me, it was history in the making.



Bidding started just after 1 pm with 120 bulls up for auction, including Herefords, Angus and composite breeds. I was out of my comfort zone amongst the 300-plus bull-buying fraternity. To avoid attention, I quietly made my way to the furthest corner of the sheep shed, where I met Tim Molloy from Sefton and his father Max from Ashburton. They had come to the auction with only one bull in mind: Lot 65 - a Hereford bull.

The Molloy's weren't the only ones interested in Lot 65. A bidding war ensued, with the Molloy's finally relieved to have won this bull at an eye-watering \$20,000 - the largest amount paid for any bull that day. Max Molloy commented wryly, "It's a lot of money for two testicles." The prized bull will be put to good use improving genetics on their 800 ha family farm.

"To the layperson, it looks just like any other Hereford bull. But it's the genetics that make this bull right for us," says Tim Malloy.

The 127-page buyers' guide was full of complex terms, numbers and acronyms about genetics, 'breed plan,' and 'breed object index' - information that only a seasoned breeding specialist would understand.

I had expected a more traditional style of auction, where each bull would be brought into the sales yard with swift bidding until the hammer came down. However,

bidding in this bull sale used the 'Helmsman' style of auction. This means that all the lots on sale are open for bidding at the same time. Paper-based bids were transferred to a large screen after being processed by the efficient auction team. The auction finished once a two-minute interval had passed without any new bids on the 120 bulls.



*Lot 65 - Purchased by Tim Malloy*



*Winner of Lot 65, Tim Malloy (left) with Duncan Campbell*

This silent style of auction gave farmers the opportunity to catch up with fellow farmers and friends. A continuous lunch was served, featuring the obligatory cheese rolls, freshly barbequed steak sandwiches, biscuits and Speights. The loud throng of chatter only dissipated when bidding slowed and the anxious two-minute no-bid period approached.

The Campbell family took over the historic station in 1981 and has been running 'Earnsclough Station High Country Genetics' for 39 years. Duncan Campbell was very pleased with how the day went.



“It’s been a tough year for farmers, but we had better clearance than last year - it was brilliant,” says Duncan.

Getting ready for the auction is a family affair, with Duncan’s wife, Amanda taking on some of the marketing work. “It takes Amanda two to three days to get all the filming done for the buyers’ guide.” Each bull features in its own unique video that can be viewed via a QR code or on their website.

“It’s a harsh environment up here. We think we do a pretty good job of getting the best out of our stock by taking a strong commercial approach to our management and breeding programme.”

Maggie Hope - Heritage Coordinator

## **A short history of Earnsclough Station**

The Earnsclough Station was established in 1862. William Fraser ran the station between 1862 and 1893, first as farm manager and later as owner-operator. When miners arrived at the Dunstan Goldfields in the early 1860s, many gathered at Mutton Town on the banks of the Clutha River, to buy the station’s meat at a shilling per pound.

In 1902, Stephen Thomas Spain took up the lease on Earnsclough Station, a 28,000 ha run of abandoned sheep country, its bare hills swarming with rabbits. These introduced pests made the runholder his fortune, initially by selling pelts and then, during World War 1, building a cannery to supply rabbit meat to the domestic market and soldiers overseas.

By 1919, Spain had amassed a fortune worthy of a castle. He commissioned Edmund Anscombe, one of the top architects of the time, to design a 21-room manor, complete with servants’ quarters, stables for his racehorses and a coach house. But Spain ran out of money and the building was never completed. Britain’s market was flooded with canned meat in the 1920s and the rabbit-canning factory closed in 1924. The subsequent Great Depression also hit Spain’s investments, and the rabbits abounded once again. Stephen Spain died in 1940.

The Spain family sold Earnsclough Station in 1948 to the Mulvena family who made a good fist at turning the rabbit-infested land into a working sheep station and orchard. In 1981 Alistair Campbell took over the Earnsclough Station lease. The station underwent tenure review in the 1990s with 8,660 ha transferred to the Department of Conservation. The land surrounding Earnsclough Castle was subdivided from the station at this time. The Campbells purchased further land and today Earnsclough Station comprises 22,000 ha, running a stud for both merino and cattle.

## A GLIMPSE INTO OUR PREHISTORIC PAST

Mites, nematodes and spiders fossilised in amber are tangible connections to the life and landscape of Central Otago 20 million years ago. They provide an insight into the region's animals, plants and climate, according to University of Otago honorary professor and palaeontologist, Daphne Lee, who spoke at two sell-out talks hosted by the Central Otago Heritage Trust.

“The presence of kauri resin (amber) indicates the kauri was widespread 20 million years ago, suggesting it was a lot warmer here than it is today,” she said.

Professor Lee highlighted the significance of the amber fossils recovered from coal dug up near Roxburgh before she moved on to the main topic: The shallow and vast Lake Manuherekia, which submerged the region around 19 to 16 million years ago. While there is no definitive time frame for how long it existed, it likely lasted “several million years,” during which it would have “waxed and waned in size.”

At that time, the landscape was low-lying. The uplift of the ranges that dominate the Central Otago landscape today, only began a few million years ago.

The 5,600 km<sup>2</sup> lake extended from Ranfurly, possibly into the Waitaki Valley, over to the Nevis Valley, to Roxburgh and towards Middlemarch. It was a huge body of water covering a greater area than all of New Zealand's present-day lakes put together. However, judging by the fossilised remains, it was quite shallow and relatively warm. The lake once teemed with water birds, fish and crocodilians, and was surrounded by forests of ferns, palms, conifers, beech and she-oaks which created a vibrant ecosystem in a climate that mirrored the subtropics.



*Lake Manuherekia imagined by artist Chris Gaskin*  
Source: Te Ara

Some of the best fossils came from the Fern Gully area of Bannockburn, where, as the name suggests, beautiful, fossilised ferns were discovered along with palm fronds. These were among the first plant fossils found in New Zealand during the late nineteenth century.

Another significant fossil find around Bannockburn was a large freshwater fish, probably a Macquarie perch.

“Lake Manuharekia would have had lots of fish and would not have been ideal for humans because of the crocodiles.”

Over many years of meticulous lab and fieldwork, teams of geologists and students have discovered all manner of animals and insects. Fossilised bones revealed an array of bird life, from tiny kiwis to massive moas, but mostly ducks. Also detected were insects, tiny land snails and galaxiids. An important find was a fossilised tuatara jawbone.

“Nobody knew how long tuatara had been present in New Zealand, but finding a fossilised tuatara jaw indicates they were here at least 16 million years ago and probably much longer.”

The collection and research of fossils provide important glimpses into our prehistoric past. “Since the settlement of New Zealand by humans, many of the birds, lizards, insects and other forms of life have become extinct. This loss is a wake-up call to look after what remains. We really need to treat with great respect what we have left,” she said.

**Honorary Professor Daphne Lee** with a stromatolite fossil, one of 20 objects chosen by Central Stories for the Central Museums 100 project.

This stromatolite grew along the edge of Lake Manuharekia near St Bathans, about 18 million years ago. These ancient, layered rocks hark back to the pre-Cambrian period three-and-a-half billion years ago.

Daphne explained that “stromatolite needed very particular chemical conditions to form. They are precious and rare and need to be treated with the greatest respect.”





## BIOGRAPHY OF CROMWELL'S FAMOUS SON

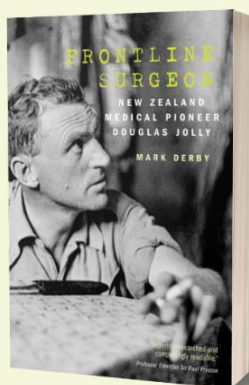
Spain is as far from Cromwell as it's possible to go, but one dedicated doctor made that journey in 1936 and later became an internationally acclaimed pioneer of emergency medicine. The amazing story of how that happened will be told on 10 July, when the book is launched in Cromwell.

Doug Jolly was a grandson of the founder of the Jolly General Store in old Cromwell (now the Grain & Seed Café in the historic precinct.) He went to Cromwell Primary School where his mother Elizabeth (née Waddell) had been a teacher. Doug then attended Otago Boys' High as a boarder. He was accepted into Otago University Medical School in 1924 and proved to have a special gift for surgery.

After graduating, Doug Jolly left for Britain to study for a fellowship in surgery. When the Spanish Civil War broke out in 1936, he chose to volunteer with the Republican Army's medical services. There he carried out thousands of life-saving operations, as close as possible to the front line and sometimes within range of falling bombs. He was said to be the only surgeon in history who "personally operated upon almost a thousand gunshot wounds of the abdomen."

He drew on that unique experience to write a manual, 'Field Surgery in Total War', published in 1940. It became an instant bestseller and was still used by military surgeons 25 years later, during the Vietnam War. By then Jolly had served throughout World War II with the Royal Army Medical Corps. He ended his career as chief medical officer of Britain's largest orthopaedic hospital.

The influence of this courageous and innovative doctor is seen today in the work of organisations like the International Red Cross. Historian Mark Derby will talk about his new biography of Doug Jolly, 'Frontline Surgeon', when it is launched at the Presbyterian Church Hall in Cromwell. If you are interested in attending this book launch, RSVP at [www.heritagecentralotago.org.nz/events](http://www.heritagecentralotago.org.nz/events). The book will be available from PaperPlus Cromwell from July 11.



Massey University Press invites you  
to the launch of Mark Derby's new book

### Frontline Surgeon

*New Zealand medical pioneer Douglas Jolly*

Wednesday 10 July 2024, 5.30pm  
Cromwell & Districts Presbyterian Church  
10 Elspeth Street, Cromwell

Launched by Central Otago mayor Tim Cadogan and  
Doug Jolly's step-grand-daughter, Bidda Jones



## HERITAGE TALKS

Take a look at the next two events coming up in our Heritage Talks programme. Entry to these events is by koha-donation, with proceeds going to the host museum - think of it as the price you would pay for a coffee. These talks have become very popular. Book your place at [www.heritagecentralotago.org.nz/events](http://www.heritagecentralotago.org.nz/events).

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### Night Skies of Central Otago

Dark clear skies, unique celestial features and otherworldly landscapes make stargazing in Central Otago a magical experience.

Night sky photographer, Andy Davey, explores the cultural and astronomical aspects of the night skies unique to our Southern Hemisphere.

**Date: 6:30 pm, Tuesday, 20 August**

**Location: Central Stories Museum & Art Gallery**

This Heritage Talk also celebrates the launch of the museum's Winter Stellar Exhibition.



*Photo courtesy of Andy Davey*

### The Life and Times of Vincent Pyke

Pyke St, Dunstan Hospital's Vincent Ward, the Vincent Community Board are names we're familiar with, but from whom did they originate? Meet Vincent Pyke: draper, miner, politician, writer, explorer and nineteenth century go-getter.

**Date: 6:30 pm, Wednesday, 25 September**

**Location: Clyde Museum, Blyth St**

Russell Garbutt highlights some of Pyke's lesser-known activities in the Dunstan region.

This talk is the third in a series showcasing some of the fascinating items chosen for the Central Museums 100 project.



*Image courtesy of Hocken Library*

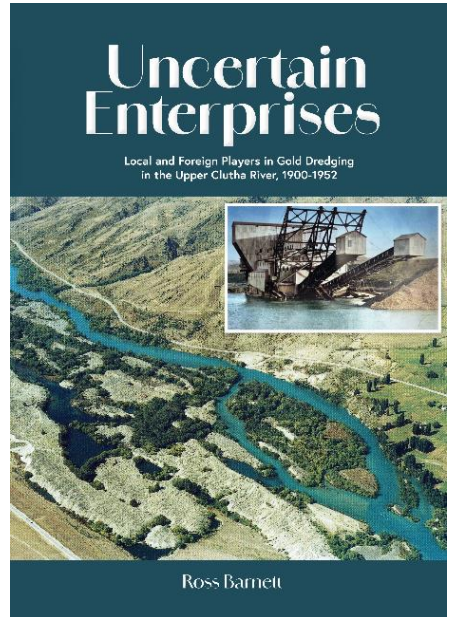
## BOOK REVIEW: UNCERTAIN ENTERPRISES

**Author: Ross Barnett**

**Published by Cromwell Museum**

This book was simply begging to be written. Central Otago heritage enthusiasts should be inordinately grateful to Ross Barnett for his research into this largely ignored facet of our history and prosperity.

**Uncertain Enterprises** is a beautifully constructed book - first and foremost in that the layout and quality of the printing was designed to last. It has the 'feel' of quality and the Cromwell Museum should be very proud of their finished product. Secondly, it is refreshing and helpful for the author to set out in the preface what the purpose of the book is and to detail what each chapter will concentrate upon. This will make the task of future users of this book a lot easier when referencing specific aspects of the gold dredging era.



Ross sets out in clear terms the origin of the gold in Central Otago. Teasing out the geological complexities would not have been an easy task, but clearly those early gold prospectors were skilled at reading the landscapes they encountered when they arrived in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Gold from the region's quartz rock was concentrated in the riverbeds. It was this 'easy' gold that Hartley and Reilly found near Cromwell, using the simple shovel and pan method. News of their discovery started the Dunstan Gold Rush.

The early development of simple spoon dredges, some powered by the flow of the current in the river, often lost more gold than they recovered. It took a combination of capital, engineering skills, knowledge of the geology and unwavering vision to finally develop, construct and operate a variety of dredges capable of reaching that elusive wash where the gold was concentrated. There is no doubt about it, for some, it was a rewarding endeavour.

Ross' main geographic focus is the history of dredging in the Upper Clutha - that is above Cromwell - although activities on the Kawarau River, near Cromwell are also included. I was intrigued to see the number of companies that were set up in this area which, on the surface, appeared as dredging companies, but were nothing other than ways of extracting venture capital out of the pockets of shareholders or investors and into the pockets of Directors and Sharebrokers. Selling dreams was

their business and this detail made me curious to learn more about these unscrupulous businessmen, often sitting in their warm offices in Dunedin.

Dredges were not easy to construct. The hugely heavy components had to be transported from the new associated industries either in Dunedin or in Central Otago and assembled on the banks of the river.

Fuel, in the form of coal was sourced close by and transported from mines to the shores of the river, or to the ponds created by the dredges themselves. When in operation, the wear on the heavy machinery was immense. Often the teeth on the buckets were ripped off by the large 'Chinamen'\* boulders or the buckets would be forced off the tumblers when heavy ground or a 'false bottom' was encountered.



*Coal Delivery to the Rise & Shine Dredge  
Image courtesy of Cromwell Museum*

This was dangerous and often fatal work. Ross details many examples of fearful injuries when men were enmeshed in revolving machinery, drowned in the fast-flowing rivers when unloading coal, or hit by falling machinery.

The kings of the dredges were the dredge masters. It is easy to see why they were so highly valued by the dredge owners as the success or the failure of the ventures were usually in their hands.

The 116-page book is filled with meticulous research highlighting gold yields returned from the various companies and dredges, the different styles of dredges and equipment and so much more. This detailed information will serve future researchers well for many years.

Ross raises valid questions about the heritage values of these early endeavours. These were gigantic machines that were dismantled, moved to other sites, or abandoned in situ. It is surprising how very little of these goliaths remain. Ross also raises very pertinent questions on why, and how, these stories can be told without the structures themselves. This is a book to be treasured.

Available at Cromwell Museum - \$50

Russell Garbutt - COHT Trustee

*\*Large quartz boulders stained yellow by leaching minerals were called 'Chinamen' boulders.*

## LOVE AND MARRIAGE IN EDWARDIAN BANNOCKBURN

Tight S-bend corsets, high necklines and two-piece ensembles were the hallmarks of the fashion that flourished during the reign of King Edward VII. The long, elegant two-piece ensembles made from expensive silk, lace and taffeta eventually found their way to Bannockburn in the New World.

A recent Heritage Talk at Cromwell Museum explored the life and times of Mary Lavinia (Polly) Hancock, her marriage to Robert Toms at Bannockburn in 1911, and her exquisite Edwardian wedding dress.

Guest speaker, Sean Brosnahan, from Otago Toitū Early Settlers Museum, juxtaposed the glamorous Edwardian costumes against the harsh Central Otago landscape and the early settlements that developed after the 1860s Dunstan Rush.

“At that time, it was a man’s world - men doing it tough, working in rugged and often dangerous conditions using primitive tools in search of gold,” says Sean.

Between 1853 and 1871, approximately twelve thousand young, unmarried women arrived in New Zealand on assisted or free passages provided by the provincial governments. They were recruited to supply the demand for domestic servants and to balance the disproportion of the sexes in the settler population, encouraging miners and other male settlers to form families and establish roots in the regions. Social institutions, such as churches and schools, began to flourish as the community stabilised and grew. This was also the case in Bannockburn.

Making the long and rugged journey to Dunedin from Bannockburn to buy clothes was very unlikely. Up until 1874, crossing the Kawarau River from Bannockburn was only possible via a rudimentary river chair or punt. The first Bannockburn Bridge\* would have been a godsend, giving locals much easier access to Cromwell, Clyde and the world beyond.

*\*The first Bannockburn Bridge was destroyed by the great flood of 1878, with subsequent bridges built thereafter.*



### ***Polly's Wedding Dress***

*This exquisite four-piece Edwardian wedding ensemble was worn by Mary Lavinia "Polly" Hancock for her marriage to Robert Toms in 1911.*



"Women's fashion brought a civilising influence to remote gold mining settlements, despite the significant challenges posed by primitive infrastructure, harsh living and working conditions and the difficulty of travel," Sean explains.

By 1867, a few drapers' shops had emerged in Clyde and Cromwell, with newspapers advertising the latest fashion designs.

Judging from family photos, the Hancock women of Bannockburn embraced the latest styles from London and Paris. "The Hancock ladies were definitely stylish dressers."

In their everyday lives, women would not have worn silk taffeta dresses. However, for church, weddings and funerals they wore their very best.

Many women would have also made their own clothes. Dressmaking skills would have been essential for women beginning their lives in New Zealand as housemaids or mothers.

With only a small pool of prospective spouses in the village, Polly and Jean Hancock didn't have to look far for marriage partners. The school, church and sporting activities in this close-knit community would have provided many social opportunities to get acquainted.

In small communities with large families, it wasn't uncommon for siblings from one family to marry siblings from another. And so it was for the Hancock and Toms families. Brothers Robert and Bill Toms married sisters Polly and Jean Hancock. Jean married Bill in 1900 and Polly tied the knot with Robert ten years later.

Marriage in Bannockburn at this time was a community celebration. At Jean and Bill's wedding, "Fifty people sat down to the wedding breakfast. After justice was done to the good things provided, the happy couple started on their honeymoon trip to the Lakes amid showers of slippers and rice." (Dunstan Times, 28 Dec 1900)

*Polly and Jean Hancock's wedding dresses are on display at Cromwell Museum and will be included in the Central Museums 100 Project, launched in spring.*

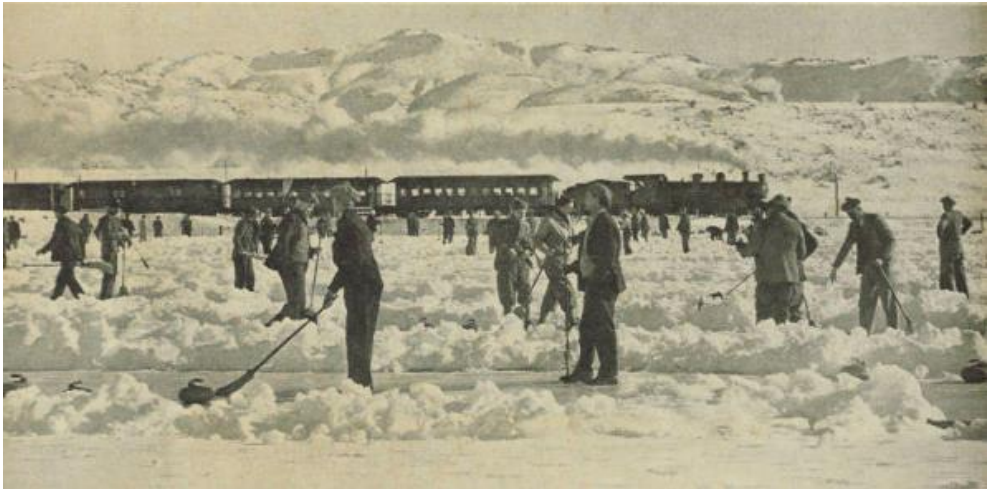


*The Hancock women in their Sunday best  
Image courtesy of 'The Bannockburn Project'*

## OUR ENDURING HISTORY OF THROWING THE STONES

New Zealand's long history of curling makes it one of the oldest winter sports in the country, with the Otago region dominating the sport. It was first introduced by Scottish gold miners, with the first reported game in Maniototo on 6 July 1878. Using the natural ponds and miners' dams to play their native sport, curling provided a way to pass the time during the long cold winters when outdoor work was difficult.

The Central Otago irrigation dams, built in the twentieth century for irrigation storage, provided excellent opportunities for both ice-skating and curling in the winter. Since 1932, the Idaburn Dam, near Oturehua, has been home to numerous 'Bonspiel' or curling tournaments. This dam was once the largest and most easily accessible expanse of ice in Australia or New Zealand. However, due to lack of ice, the last Bonspiel took place there in 2012.



*Bonspiel at Idaburn Dam, 20 July, 1938*

*Source: Auckland Council Libraries*

The right conditions for curling involve consecutive frosts, and a hoar frost or two also helps. The recommended ice depth to hold the weight of players is just over 10 cm. The recent development of curling rinks at Naseby and Alexandra enables keen players to finesse their skills, while also allowing new players to try out 'throwing the stones'.

Naseby is the country's curling capital with the Southern Hemisphere's first international and Olympic standard indoor curling rink. It is also home to members of the New Zealand Olympic curling team. The indoor rink is open all year round, with the summer months of February, March and April being the busiest. Outdoor curling is also available in winter at both Naseby and Alexandra.

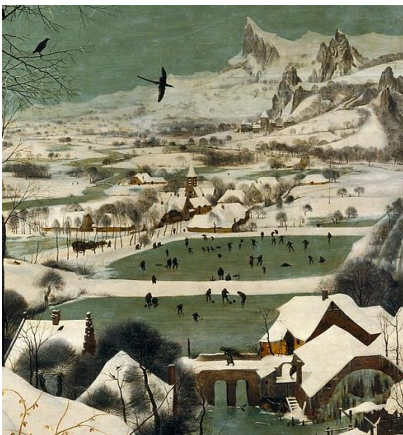
## The basics of playing the game

Black end, button, eight-enders, hacks, sweeping and burning are just a few of the many terms used to describe the finesse and skills needed to play the game. Curling is a complex sport based on a very simple idea - slide your stones along the ice and get them closer to the 'house' (target) than your opponent's stone. But, the game also involves physical strength with each curling stone weighing around 20 kilograms.

Our two Central Otago curling rinks provide all the information you will need to give the ancient sport of curling a go this winter.



*Indoor curling at Naseby  
Source: Tourism Central Otago*



Curling, often referred to as 'The Roaring Game' due to the sound of the stones sliding on ice, has its origins deeply rooted in Scotland. The earliest documented evidence of curling dates back to the early 16th century. Paintings from this period, including this one by Pieter Bruegel (the Elder) in 1565, depict peasants curling on frozen ponds. Curling spread internationally in the 19th century, largely due to Scottish immigrants, and the sport was included in the first Winter Olympic Games in 1924.

# PROTECTING & PRESERVING OUR HERITAGE

## INTRODUCING OUR NEW ORAL HISTORY MANAGER

### **Central Otago Heritage Trust welcomes our new Oral History Manager, Joanna Leigh.**

Joanna brings a wealth of experience in education and communication, making her an excellent fit to collaborate with our team of volunteers in capturing and preserving our stories.

After graduating with a history degree, Joanna embarked on an overseas adventure, first spending a few years in the UK and then teaching English in Japan. Returning to New Zealand, she trained as a primary school teacher and enjoyed teaching in Wellington.



It was time for another change of scene after ten years in Wellington. This time the destination was the United Arab Emirates. Initially, Joanna worked for a New Zealand education company implementing school improvement programmes. Then followed a nine-year stint in the aviation industry, working at an Abu Dhabi training facility for air traffic control. During this time, she qualified as an examiner in aviation English and earned a Master's degree in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), focusing on sociolinguistics.

The opportunity to move to Alexandra was a dream come true for Joanna. She has loved the region since she was a little girl and spent holidays with her grandparents in Wānaka. Recently, she has been working from home as a contract learning designer for the Open Polytechnic.

Joanna started her new role in early May and has already made her mark. She is particularly interested in sound engineering and improving the listenability of recordings that are published on our online repository. She is also looking forward to working with the volunteer team to develop podcasts on themes that celebrate Central Otago's history and heritage.

"The work the volunteers do to obtain oral histories reflecting the unique nature of Central Otago is so valuable. The recordings will be fascinating for future generations. Imagine if we could hear the voices of Jane Austen's dressmaker or a sailor on Captain Cook's ship; it's like looking through a window to the past and seeing everyday life as it really was. I admire the dedication and foresight the volunteers show by being active in the project," says Joanna.



## THE ALEXANDRA COURTHOUSE TURNS 145 YEARS OLD

The old Courthouse on Alexandra's Centennial Avenue officially opened on 16 June 1879 and has stood the test of time for 145 years. It is one of the town's oldest stone buildings and once played an important role in the life and administration of the Central Otago goldfields, housing both the Warden's and Magistrate's Courts.

Registration and enforcement of miners' rights were dealt with in the Warden's Court. Disputes often arose over claim jumping, forgeries, water races, roading and between partners of a joint claim. Another role was the granting of business licences to traders operating within the goldfields. The Magistrate's Court dealt with the more general legal matters.

In 1972, the courts moved to a new building and the old building became home to other government departments. It was also a temporary library, Plunket Rooms and Information Centre.

The Courthouse is a Category 2 Historic Building and a Department of Conservation reserve. It is managed by the department and, as part of that responsibility, in early 2006 a major renovation project was undertaken, which included the complete repainting of the exterior and renovation of the chimneys.

Although the Courthouse has just turned 145 years old and is a fully protected historic building, it is still being used daily and is leased out as a café.

Department of Conservation - Te Papa Atawhai.



*The Courthouse Café, Alexandra*



## TRAGEDY ON MT NOBBLER

On a recent visit to Dansey's Pass, we paused at the Kyeburn Diggings Cemetery and discovered the harrowing tale of a tragedy on Mt Nobbler.

Brothers James and Thomas Meikle, aged 19 and 12, worked as rabbiters on Mr W J McCready's station near Kyeburn Diggings. It was a beautiful sunny morning on Thursday 30 July 1891, when the brothers set out for a day's rabbiting on the far side of Mt Nobbler in the Kakanui Range.

After a successful day of rabbiting, the boys started their descent down the mountain. Despite their father's wise counsel to always stick together, the brothers separated when Thomas went back to retrieve his skinning knife. James continued on to the hut they shared at McCready Station.

However, Thomas did not return. Seeing a snowstorm coming in, James gathered a blanket and food and went back up the mountain to find his brother. The smell of a tussock fire led James to Thomas, however he was now too weak to make the descent. Early the next morning, James left Thomas in the shelter of a rock and trudged back through the thick snow to get help.

By mid-afternoon, James had arrived home to get his father. The pair immediately headed back up the mountain; James' third ascent in 30 hours. Halfway over they were forced to take shelter from another snowstorm. James was now suffering from frostbite on his hands and feet. His father, seeing the situation as hopeless, decided to return home.

Early the next morning James and eight other local settlers and miners went back up the mountain knowing they would be lucky to find Thomas alive. While traversing a steep gully at the head of Shepherd's Creek, the entire snow slope suddenly gave way. James, Robert Blanchard, and Alphonso Beer were carried 400 yards down the gully and over two waterfalls into the creek bed. It was an avalanche that no one could survive. The remaining search party members briefly continued their search before returning to the Diggings to raise the alarm.

At first light on Sunday, 2 August, a large rescue party of over 100 men set off. After a monumental effort they recovered the bodies of Blanchard, Beer and James Meikle, buried under 15ft of snow. It was too late in the day to continue their search for Thomas.

The following day, a small team ascended Mt Nobbler once more. Barking dogs guided them to where Thomas' body lay. One dog lay protectively over Thomas's body and was reluctantly persuaded to let the search party recover the body.

A jury found that Thomas (12) had died from exposure, while James (19), Robert (23), and Alphonso (28) had perished from injuries sustained in the avalanche. All the bodies were interred in the same grave, overlooking the valley to Mt Nobbler on the Kakanui Range.



*The newly constructed gravestone honouring the four young men who died on Mt Nobbler in the winter of 1891  
Photo courtesy of David Crutchley*

The day I visited the cemetery, the large Mt Nobbler stone monument, marking the communal grave, lay in the grass in several pieces. Thanks to the many donations given to the Kyeburn Diggings Cemetery Trust, including a contribution from a Meikle family descendant, the restoration of the burial site is near completion. This gravestone is a poignant reminder of the young men who lost their lives in New Zealand's first recorded avalanche fatality.

Russell Garbutt - COHT Trustee

### **What is a Nobbler?**

The term 'nobbler' literally refers to something that grabs hold of you, but it was also a colloquial term for a double shot of whiskey, usually served in a short, heavy glass. During the gold rush, many deals were likely to have been sealed over a nobbler.

## A SHORT HISTORY OF KYEBURN DIGGINGS

Not to be confused with Kyeburn on State Highway 85, Kyeburn Diggings is located on the Naseby side of Danseys Pass. As the name implies, Kyeburn Diggings was one of the many goldmining sites that sprung up in the Maniatoto in the 1860s. Good colour was found in the upper branches of the Little Kyeburn and Kyeburn Rivers. Men of many nationalities came in droves in their quest for gold - they were mainly Scottish, Irish, Welsh and Chinese.

After the initial gold rushes of 1862-63, the Otago Provincial Council invited Chinese miners in Victoria to work the Otago goldfields. Renowned businessman, Choie (Charles) Sew Hoy, was one of the young Chinese miners to take up this offer, initially working at Kyeburn Diggings before moving to Dunedin to start his various business enterprises as a merchant and gold dredging pioneer. By the 1870s, nearly one-quarter of mining applications were by Chinese miners. At one stage up to 600 Chinese were reported to have worked the diggings. They mainly camped in the upper reaches of the Kyeburn River and had their own store there.



*Chinese gold miners and Reverend Alexander Don at the Kyeburn Diggings*  
*Source: National Library of New Zealand*

Kyeburn Diggings once boasted a public school with up to 60 children, a library, a butcher, a baker and a hotel. Little now remains of this thriving mining settlement except for its cemetery sitting as a sentinel to the past on the road to Danseys Pass below the Kakanui Range. About 129 burials are known to have occurred at Kyeburn Diggings Cemetery but, due to fire, only 73 records remain.

The cemetery continues to be in use today and is administered and maintained by the Kyeburn Diggings Cemetery Trust.

# THE CARDRONA HERITAGE TRAIL PROJECT

Preserving the stories of Cardrona Valley reached a significant milestone earlier this year with the launch of The Cardrona Heritage Trail website. The project began in earnest in 2023 by the Cardrona Heritage Trust. However, this has been a long journey, with years of gathering information, having discussions and checking facts to get to where we are today. The Trust commissioned this project with a simple goal: to digitise and share the rich history of the Cardrona Valley with visitors, residents and historians alike. The funding they received from the Central Lakes Trust made this possible.

For decades, families in the valley have been collecting stories about our community’s history. Some of these have been handed down through generations, while others come in the form of documents and photos.

Originally, the Trust considered building a physical museum to share the stories of the Cardrona Valley community. However, with the rise of digital media and mobile devices, we decided it made more sense to create a ‘digital museum.’ This online portal allows people to explore specific topics, browse photo archives and listen to stories told by some of our older community members. Now, anyone, whether in the valley or anywhere in the world, can dive into the fascinating history of the Cardrona Valley. Take a look at this treasure trove at [www.cardronahistory.com](http://www.cardronahistory.com).

The Cardrona Trail Project is more than just a website. QR codes have been placed throughout the valley, making it easy for both locals and visitors to learn more about each historic site. Scanning the code with a mobile device takes you to more detailed information, stories, and photos about the location.



### Cardrona Valley timeline

Explore the history of the Cardrona Valley via our interactive timeline. Scroll through history and take a deep dive into events, topics and people that interest you the most. Great if you want a quick scroll – and we’ll keep adding updates!

View the timeline



### Cardrona people

Meet some of the families and individuals who make up the history of the Cardrona Valley community – many of whom still live in the valley. Farmers, miners, publicans, shopkeepers and school children, to name a few.

Meet our people



### About this project

Learn more about the Cardrona Heritage Trail project. Find out why we are digitising the history of the Cardrona Valley, and what it has taken to get to this point. You can also find out how you can contribute to this great project.

Find out more

*A screen shot from the Cardona Heritage Trail website*

# CONNECT WITH US

## Become a member

We can help you and your heritage organisation with:

- Applying for and accessing funding and grants
- Identifying opportunities for collaboration and resource sharing with other heritage organisations
- Promoting your project and initiative in the community
- Providing advocacy to members through our participation in heritage decision-making forums.

## Share your heritage news and events

Send your news and events to our Heritage Coordinator, Maggie Hope, for our website or next newsletter: [maggie@heritagecentralotago.org.nz](mailto:maggie@heritagecentralotago.org.nz)

## Our website

Get the latest news and events at: [www.heritagecentralotago.org.nz/events/](http://www.heritagecentralotago.org.nz/events/)

## Our newsletter

You can find archives of our quarterly newsletter in the library section on our website.

## Follow us on Facebook

[www.facebook.com/heritagecentralotago](http://www.facebook.com/heritagecentralotago)

# OUR SUPPORTERS

Heritage Central Otago acknowledges the generous support from the following organisations:







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