

# Portages, Canals and Trains

Garry Law



In Auckland portages were important to Māori  
Tamaki River to Manukau at Otahuhu is the best known – Most famously traditionally used by the Tainui Canoe  
Brian Hooker (1997) documented no fewer than 16 used by Māori

**Portages of early Auckland - to and from the  
Waitemata Harbour:  
The hub of an ancient communications network**

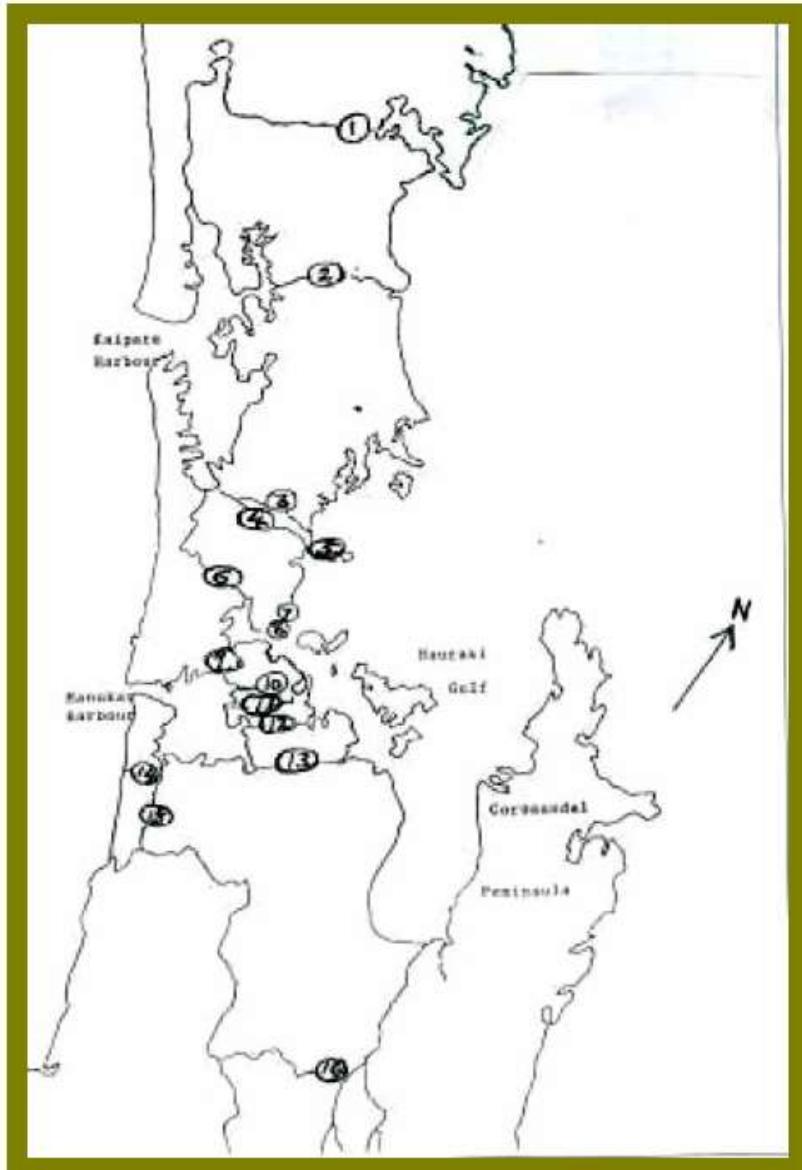
By  
**Brian Hooker**

This article was first published (with the diagram only) in the Auckland-Waikato Historical Journal No. 70 (September 1997), pp. 39-40. Copyright is the property of Auckland Historical Society Inc. and the author.

**ABSTRACT:** This article reviews sixteen early portages in, or near to the present-day Auckland region, and provides some details of the communication system north and south of Auckland. Early Maori developed a communication network that took advantage of natural geographical features. The hub of the ancient communications system was the Waitemata Harbour and although Governor Hobson declared he was influenced in his selection of the site of Auckland by the great facility of internal water communications, it was in fact Hobson's recognition that Maori had used the network over a long period of time.

Most important:

- Otahuhu
- Waitemata to Kaipara – Ngongitepata
- Waiuku to Waikato using the Awaroa Stream

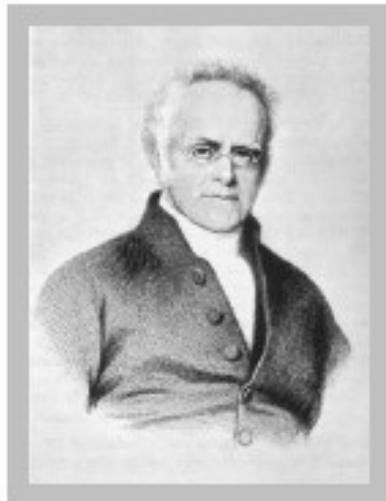


Using the Northern Wairoa, Kaipara Harbour, Waitemata. Manukau, Waikato / Waipa and via the sheltered Hauraki Gulf to the Waihou there is a vast area available to canoe transport without risking the dangerous west coast.

Lt Governor Hobson sought the advice of missionary Henry Williams as to the best site for a capital – having decided he did not want to persist with Russell (then applied to Okiato)

He advised Auckland's site because of its connectivity to the much of the North Island. He was of course referencing travel by water.

Auckland's harbours and narrow isthmus are more of a barrier to modern land transport.

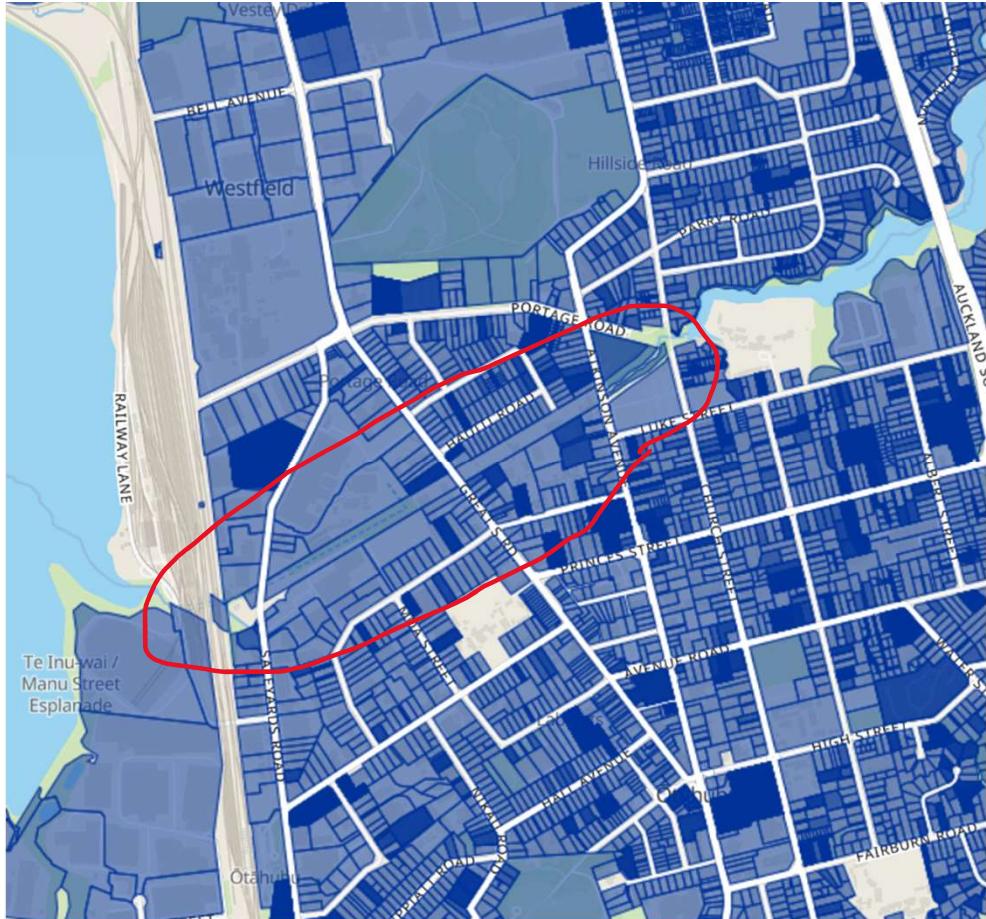


To the colonial pioneers linking the waterways must have been an obvious step.

Fairburn Purchase 1836 – one of the boundaries was the Otahuhu portage so it must have been a landscape feature then.



When he gained a land title in 1848 a strip at the portage was separated off as a Canal Reserve.



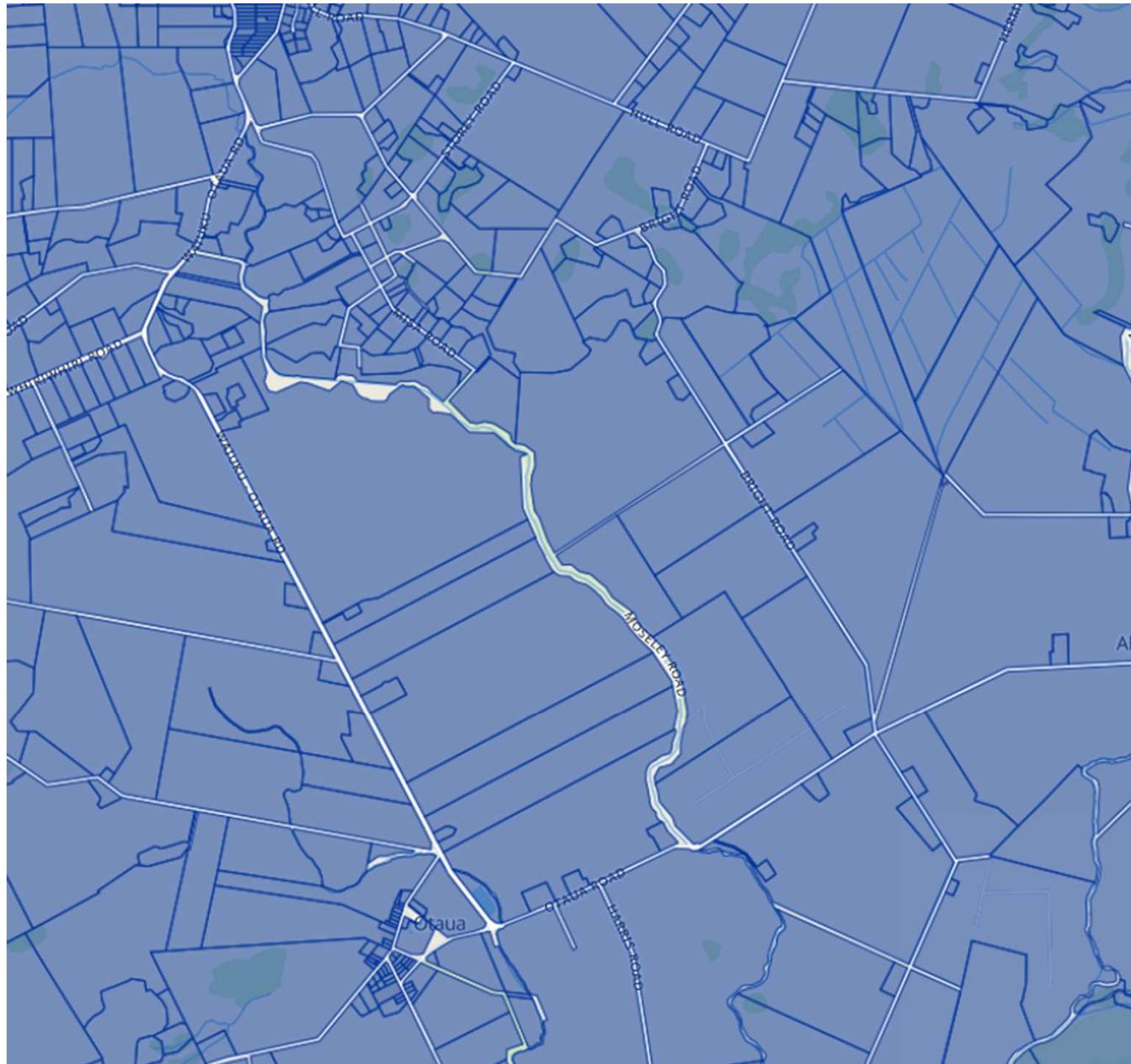
Cadastral Map

The Waikato Waiuku portage was an important route for Māori supply of produce to Auckland

The Auckland Provincial Council voted funds for clearing snags along the Awaroa stream to facilitate its use

When the land around the Awaroa was sold a strip around the stream was retained as a reserve to protect the portage

Labelled as Moseley Rd but that only runs for a short length beside the stream.



Canals were a technology of the past for colonists – railways were the thing – a vast amount of booster energy went into railways – and still does.

Auckland – Drury railway started under the Provincial Council in 1863

Canals did not entirely miss attention

Harbour Board at some times took a serious look at linking the Waikato to Auckland via two canals.

Auckland and Manukau Canal Act 1908 authorised the Harbour Board to acquire land for same – repealed 2010

Many other canal boosters over the years but they seem to have given little serious engineering considerations to it:

Strange ideas:

- Barges moved by tidal currents between the harbours
- Gates at either end of a canal rather than proper locks
- Tidal generated electricity

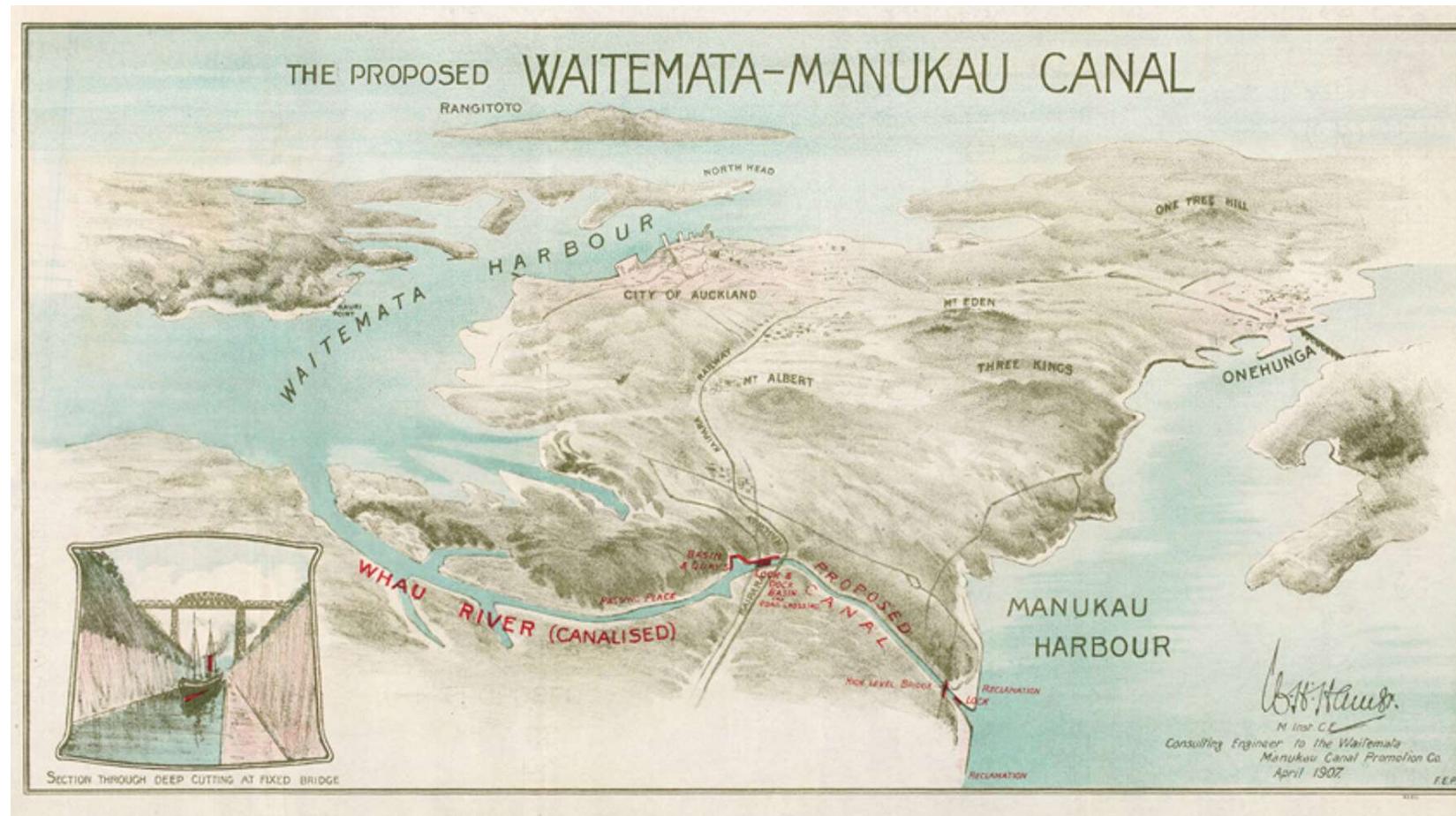


Parnell tunnel was the start of the work.  
Rail reached Onehunga in 1873

Western alternative canal – between the Whau and the Manukau – Much greater height to overcome – 400 foot height above sea level quoted by proponents - seems to have less serious consideration. The actual height is 55 m.

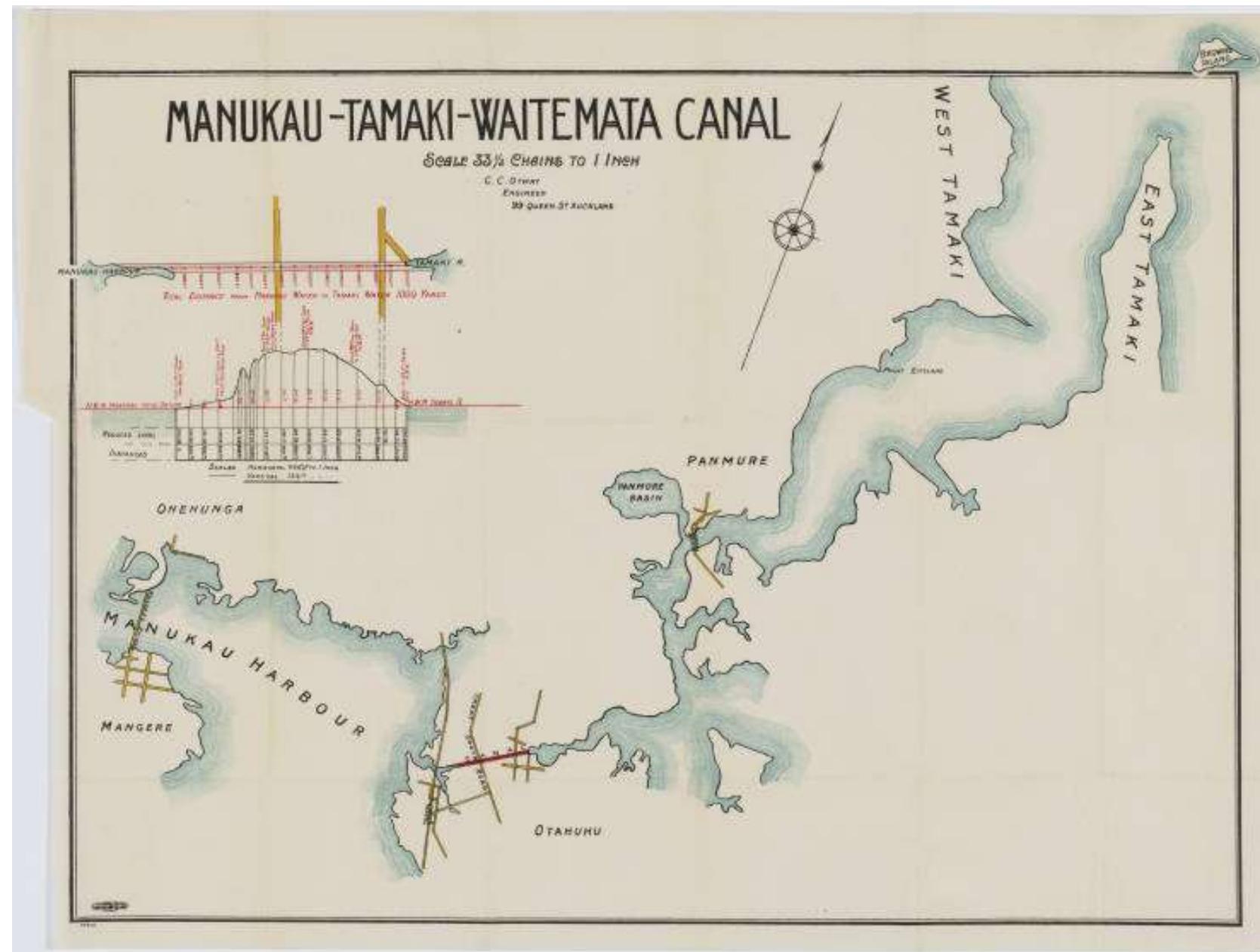
No full route was ever protected – Titirangi Golf club is a part of the route.

Harbour Board membership was an elected office Seemingly no harm for a new candidate to campaign as in favour of a canal.

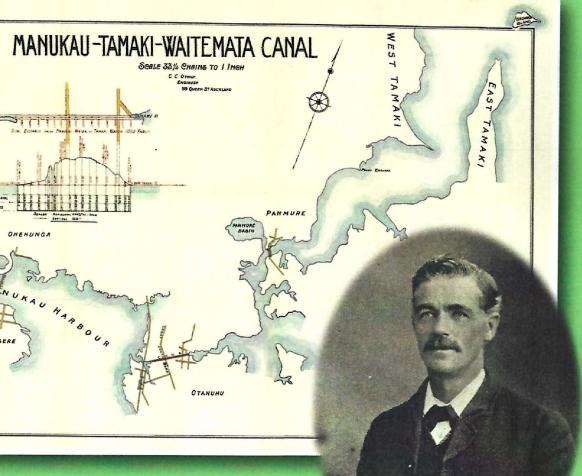


Otahuhu canal – may have got closer but Mangere and Panmure Bridges were issues

New bridges needed for Great South Rd and Railway.



# Between the Waters: A history of the Ōtāhuhu Canal Reserve



Lisa J Truttman, for  
the Ōtāhuhu Historical Society Inc  
2020

Great recent book by  
Lisa Truttman  
(Timespanner)

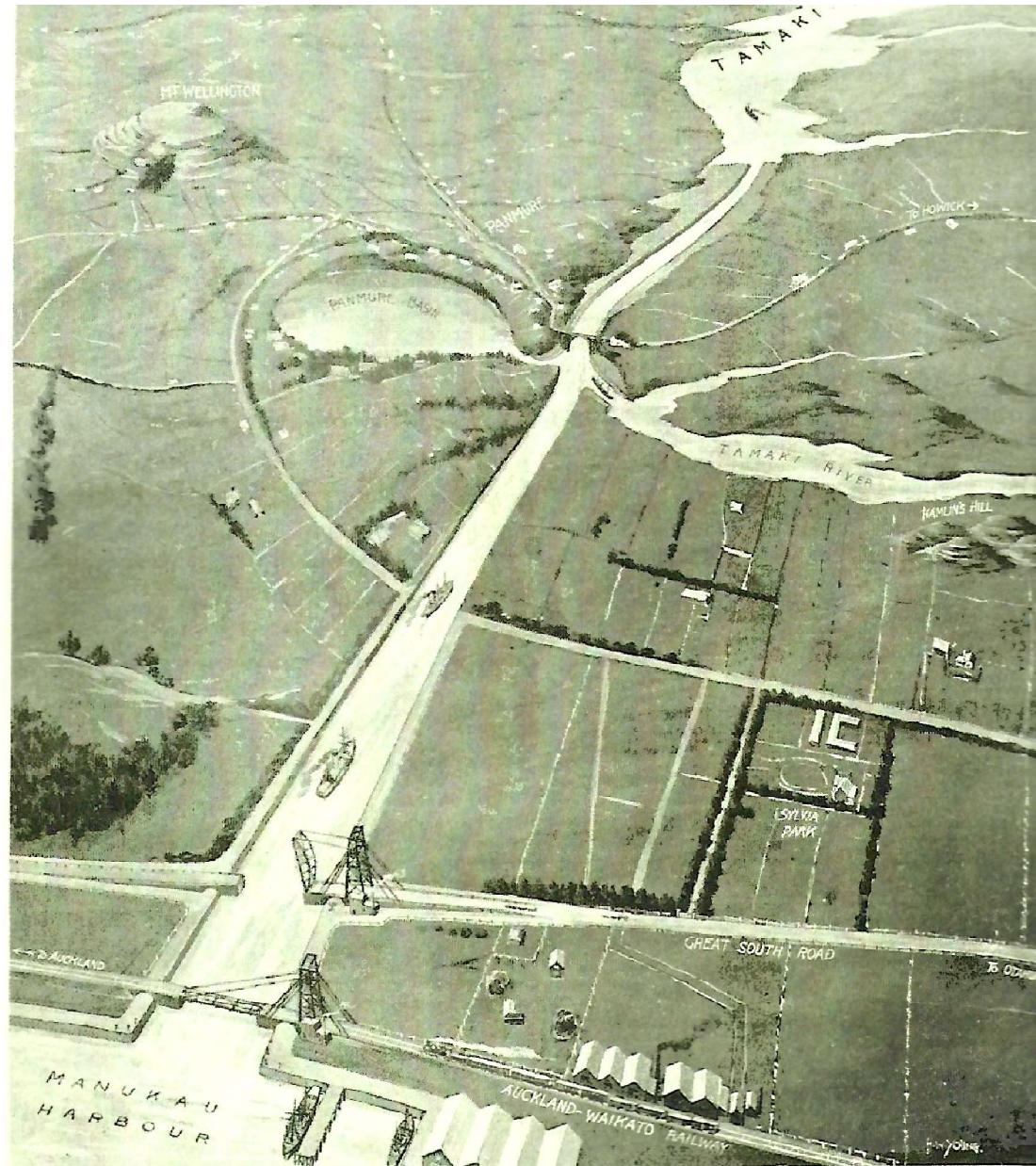


Diagram of one  
of the schemes –  
credibility not  
helped by  
placing Hamlin's  
Hill where it  
isn't.  
No locks.

During WW2 an anti-tank ditch was dug along the canal reserve – deep enough to hold water – was the closest we ever came to a canal.

The Otahuhu Borough Council had a sustained campaign to get the land transferred to them - had all sorts of urgent needs for it – but never succeeded.

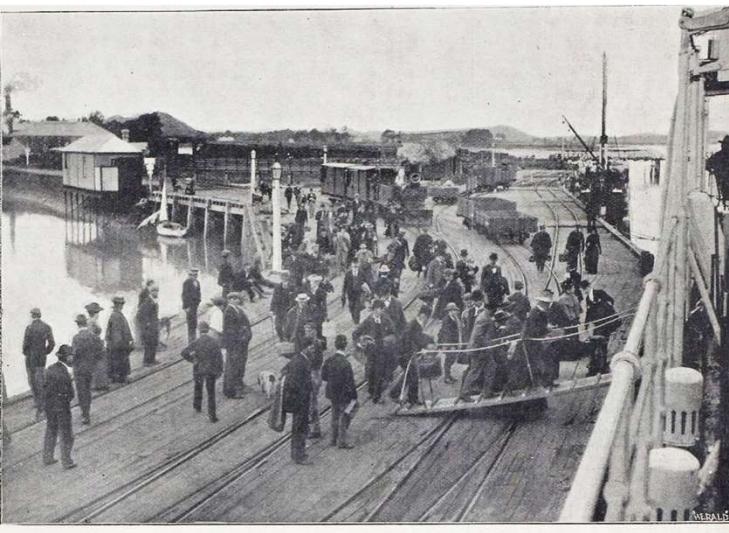




Auckland's Railways 1876



Rail reached Mercer in 1875, Frankton in 1877 so the reign of the river was short.



From Onehunga south by steamer – to New Plymouth until 1909.

### Rail beat the canal ideas

- Rail to Onehunga removed the need for an Otahuhu canal
- Rail to Mercer removed the need for a Tuakau canal
- Rail from Riverhead to Helensville was the equivalent of the Māori Ngongitepata portage

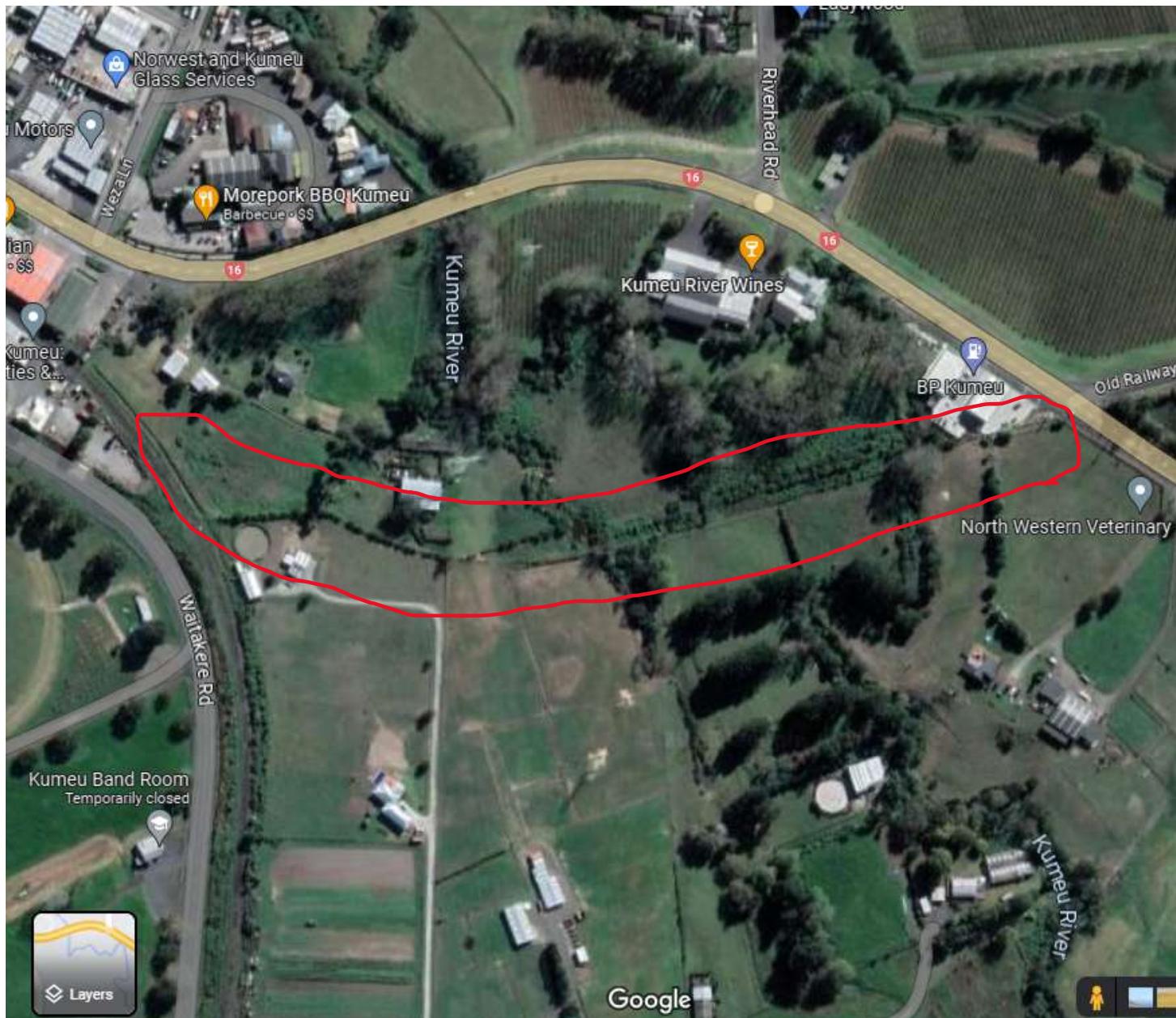


Train on Helensville to Riverhead railway. View of a railway engine, Class E, the 'Albertross', with coaches, on the Helensville to Riverhead railway, 1876.

Riverhead to Helensville line  
opened 1875

Line from Auckland 1881

Riverhead to Kumeu part then  
abandoned

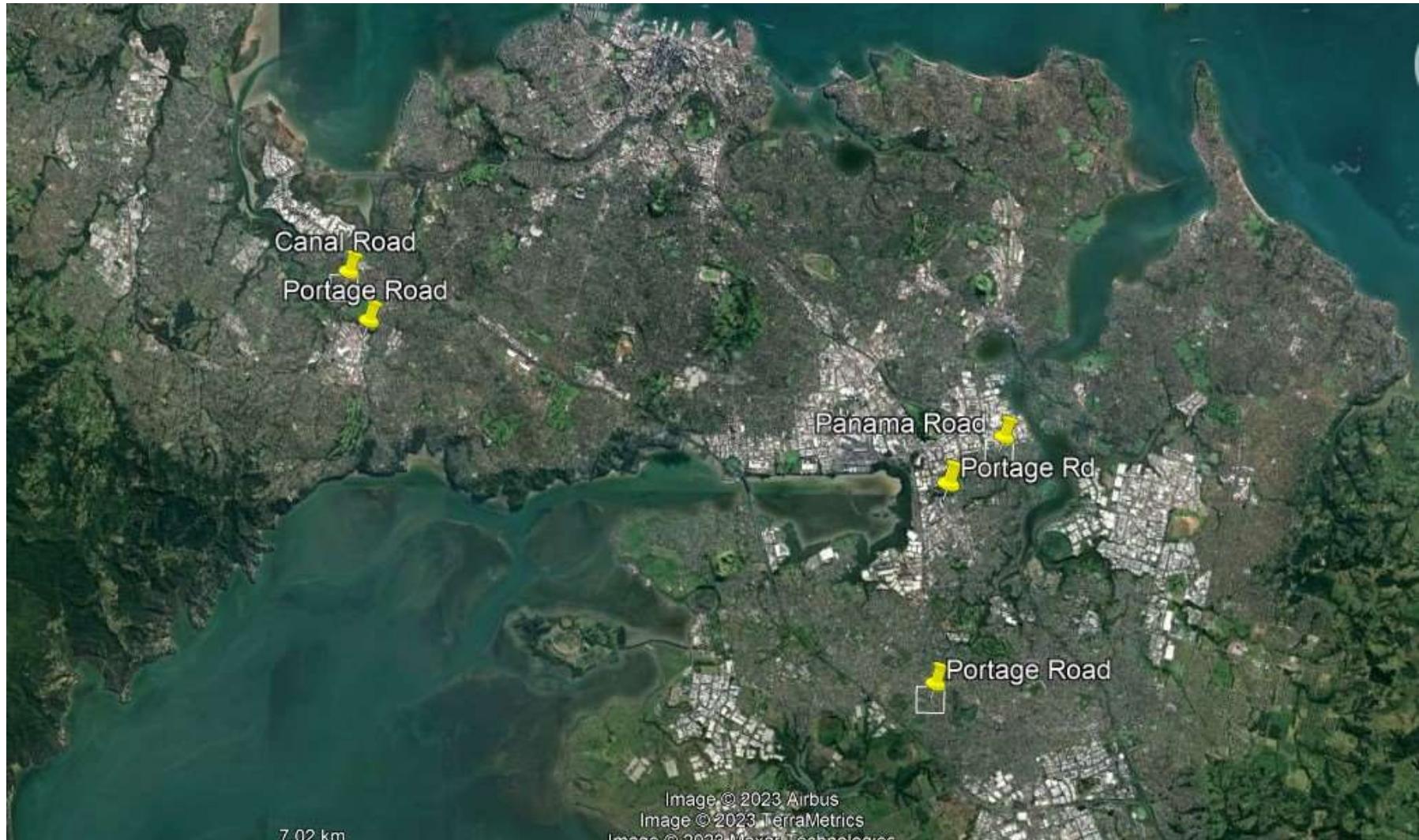


Three Portage  
Roads in Auckland

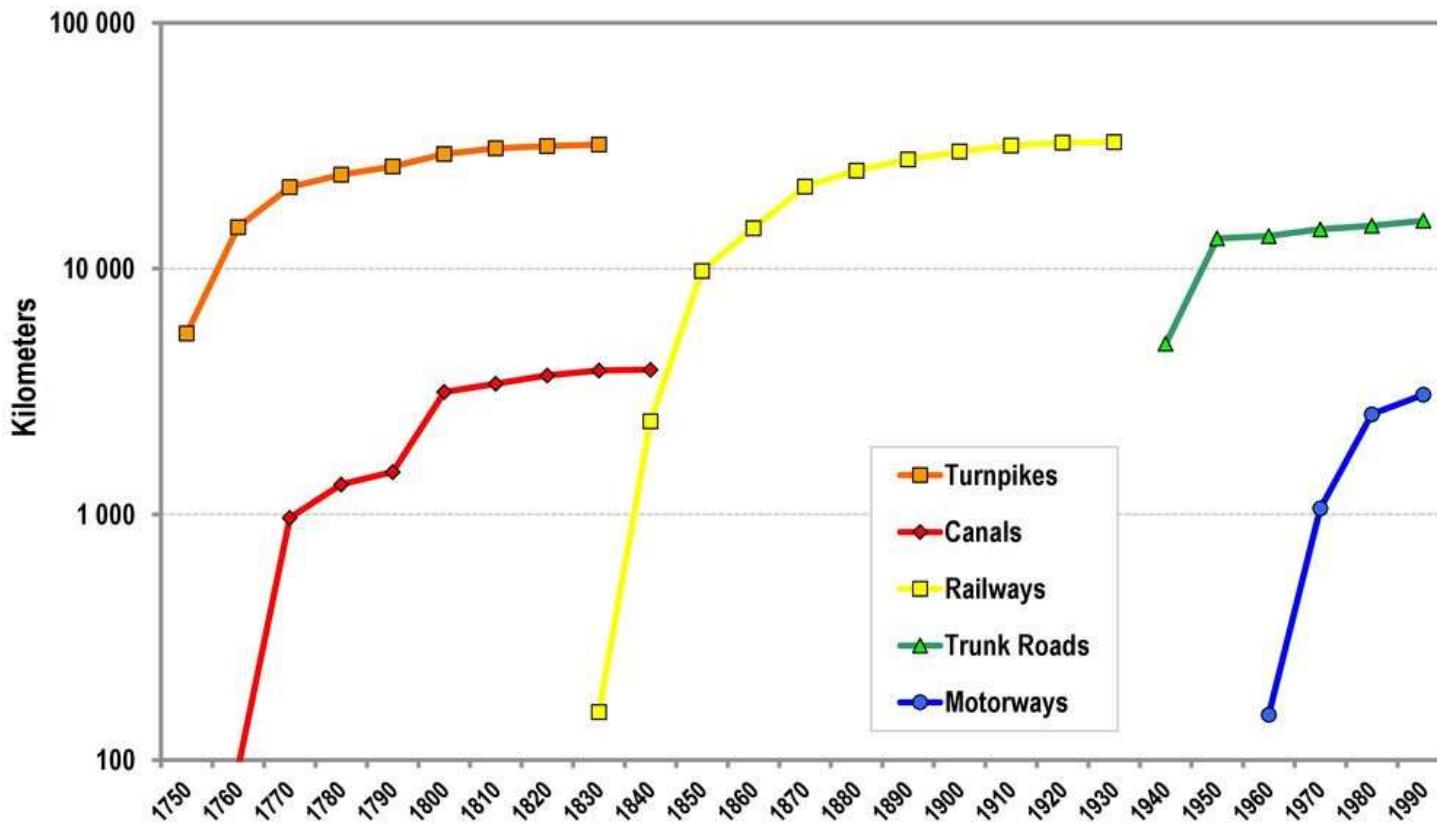
Magical Names:

- Canal Rd,
- Panama Rd.

Name them and  
they might come?



## Development of the UK Transport System, 1750-1990



Technological evolution

# Auckland Transport Evolution

Did the Hobson / Williams vision of being connected by water transport ever happen?

Peak portage use: - pre-colonisation - except Tuakau – 1850

Peak water transport – Local steamers, scows - 1910 – ended by rail which followed routes that reflected the portages

First peak harbour ferries – 1958 – ended by the harbour bridge

Second peak harbour ferries – now – driven by road congestion

First peak rail: commuter, inter-city and freight – 1960s – ended by road and air transport

Next peak rail – driven by road congestion – on its way

Peak trams – 1950 – ended by better technology

Peak petrol car - 2022. Peak car - ????

Next peak trams (= light rail) ????

Peak cycling ????

Peak canal – never started

