

Letter: William Fox to Colonel William Wakefield
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Nelson 19th January 1848

Sir,

I beg to refer you to that portion of the Proposal of the Landowners of this Settlement for its remodifications adopted by you in September last which relate to the creation of a Town in connexion with the Wairau. It has long been ascertained that the mouth of the Wairau river is altogether unsuitable for that purpose for though there is sufficient water inside for vessels of considerable tonnage it is crossed exactly at its junction with the sea by a bar which can only be passed by whaleboats or very small vessels and that when the wind happens to blow off the land which is not its most usual direction. Nor if the entrance of the river were at any time available for vessels of considerable size could they lie off it at such times as it is not available. It is in fact altogether unfitted for a Port.

Two other harbours in the neighbourhood of the district are known to possess greater advantages; Port Underwood long frequented by Whaling vessels as a harbour of refuge or refreshment, and the Waitoi at the Western entrance of Queen Charlotte's Sound which was explored by some settlers and myself in 1844 and found to have a short and easy connexion with the Wairau.

Very little being known by the settlers here of either locality the landowners determined to send a deputation to examine both, which consisted of Messrs Domett, Stafford, Greenwood, Cautley and Fell (the two last representing a large proportion of the absentees) and was accompanied by the Honourable Mr Dillon and Mr F. Moore. Mr Budge who is executing the surveys of the Wairau and myself as Agent of the New Zealand Company. A very careful examination of both harbours and much communication with the European residents on points which we could not ascertain by observation led the whole of the party to the conclusions that the Waitoi affords much greater advantages on the whole as a harbour and site of a town than Port Underwood.

Port Underwood appears upon the map and at first sight on the spot, to be the most obvious and natural harbour for the Wairau. Its entrance appears to be almost close to that district, free from all impediments and with great depth of water. Inside it presents an equally enticing appearance extending inland six or seven miles by a width of about one, surrounded on three sides by lofty hills, the spurs of which running down to the water's edge form a succession of small coves, having ample depth and excellent anchorage in every part. It also possesses the advantage of being well known to the nautical world, and has at times been as much resorted to by whaling vessels as any harbour in New Zealand, besides having long been the site of several of the most successful shore fisheries.

The disadvantages which appear to counterbalance these prominent advantages and which are at first sight not so obvious, though in practice they would be found very serious are these:-

1st the prevailing winds in Cook's Straits are well known to be North West and South East. The first of these blows directly out of Port Underwood, the other directly into it. In the first case the testimony of all the residents assured us that if the wind is fresh which it generally is during at least half the year, vessels would find great difficulty in entering the harbour, and much danger if going ashore on the Wairau beach must exist in such case. If the wind is

fresh the other way they cannot get out. The South East wind also blowing straight into the harbour creates a sufficient sea to prevent vessels from discharging, and there is not room for above one or two vessels of 500 tons to be sheltered in the only cove where it could be pretended to place a Town.

2nd. As to the site of a Town. The greatest quantity of land available for this purpose in any of the Coves does not exceed 150 acres at the outside. This is in Ocean Bay. At the head of the harbour there is a somewhat larger flat, but it is six or seven miles from the entrance, and in consequence of the numerous spurs between it and the Wairau, could only be connected with it at an enormous cost, and by a very bad road.

3rd. This objection applies also to Ocean Bay, which I have already observed is the only place in Port Underwood where it could be pretended to lay out a Town for the Wairau. For though the harbour appears at first sight and on the map so nearly connected with the Wairau there is in reality a distance of from four to five miles between its entrance and that district and at least a mile more from Ocean Bay. This space is occupied by coves and spurs the latter rocky and of great abruptness, rendering it impossible to connect the Wairau except either by a series of terraces cut along the face of the hills and rocks which would be an exceedingly expensive work or by following the spurs up to the main ridge at a great elevation forming a most circuitous and very bad road when effected. To connect even this part of Port Underwood with the Wairau would I should say cost very many times the amount requisite to connect the Waitoi, and the road when made would be an exceedingly narrow and bad one, while in the other case it would be as nearly level the whole way as possible, and of any width that might be chosen.

Now as regards the Waitoi, the only disadvantages which it seems to possess when compared with Port Underwood are:-

1st. That it is further from the Wairau being distant about 10 miles.

2nd. That it is further from the open sea, being as much as 25 miles from the main entrance of the sound.

As regards its distance from the Wairau I think that it is merely nominal and that it ought rather to be considered as a part of the Wairau itself. The connexion between the two consists of a Valley about 10 miles long by an average _____ as far as could be judged in a wooded district of three quarters of a mile wide; perfectly level with the exception of about half a mile which merely presents slight undulations; the quality of the soil in most parts apparently very good covered with first rate timber, and which it is proposed to lay out as 50 acre suburban sections in conformity with the new scheme. I cannot myself consider therefore that the Waitoi is disconnected from the Wairau, but look upon it rather as a part of it. A road could I believe be made at a very slight cost; the natives have already made one for about eight miles, along which with the exception of about half a mile a cart could now be easily driven. The remainder presents no difficulty of any consequence, and the native guide who accompanied us, told us that even such difficulties as there are may be obviated by a digression from the present line. 2nd. The distance from the entrance of the Sound. This in my opinion is the only objection to the Waitoi, and I think that it is less than it seems. We do not look to the making of a Town by the accidental dropping in of vessels running through the Straits, nor by their resort to it as a harbour of refuge. If we have produce grown in the Wairau to exchange for what they import, I see nothing in the distance from the Straits to prevent their coming up. The principal entrance to the Sound according to Cook is 9 miles wide. It gradually narrows as it approaches Waitoi, but is nowhere less I believe than one and a half to two miles wide. It is perfectly smooth water in all weathers; it has a strong tide

to help vessels up and down excellent anchorage within the heads of a hundred bays and cover, elsewhere the depth being 20 & 30 fathoms to within a cables length of the shore. The Sound itself is one of the best harbours known, constantly used as one of refuge by Ships in the Straits, and the Waitoi can always I believe be reached in less time and with much less risk than any other Port could from the Straits at or about the entrance of the Sound. Nor do I imagine that there any dangers which a vessel would encounter in making the Sound which it would not encounter in making other harbours in the Straits – while that from some it would escape is evident from the fact that the Sound is so much used for a place of refuge by vessels seeking those harbours and caught in foul weather in the Straits.

As to the advantages of the Waitoi they are very great. I have already described its easy connexion with the Wairau. It offers a site for a Town of from 1000 to 1200 acres of level land though it is not proposed to lay out one of that extent at present. The harbour lying at right angles to the Sound is above a mile deep by about half a mile to three quarters wide, presenting soundings which decreases most gradually and evenly from 16 or 17 fathom at a mile from the beach to 4½ at less than 100yds from it. An Englishman who has resided 30 years in New Zealand and two years at Waitoi assured us that in the worst weather, a 500 ton ship could be held with a whale line; and from the land locked nature of the harbour it cannot be otherwise. A second harbour, Wai Kawa, almost as good, is connected with it by a level peninsula three miles long both together affording almost too many facilities for town speculation against which it will be necessary to take some precautions.

It is impossible not to foresee that at a future period a rival town may spring up in Port Underwood, but the same objection would apply to the Waitoi, if the town now contemplated were laid out at the former place. Either may rival the other; though while the Company is possessed of both it can of course prevent any rivalry springing up, by prohibiting the location of a Town in that which is now rejected.

The Waitoi is at present occupied by a considerable number of natives of the Nga-tiawa tribe. They have a pah situated in the best part of the Water frontage, and about 50 to 70 acres of land in cultivation. But they possess great anxiety to have the white men residing there; and are as far as I could gather from themselves, and from the Europeans resident before mentioned, quite willing to leave the place for some other part of the sound. In fact they are under the impression as I was told that it was included in the Government purchase of the Wairau, and all they expect is to be paid for their cultivation and good will. There is no chief of eminence residing there, but four or five, whose names I have, who may be considered the principal residents but the Chief of the Tribe William King who I believe is at Waikanai would have to be treated with. Having while at the Wairau seen a copy of Lord Grey's instructions to the Governor directing him to retain in his own hands all negociations for the purchase of land from the natives, I did not think it proper to enter into any treaty with them, or to do more than ascertain their views; indeed from the absence of William King nothing conclusive could have been effected. As His Excellency is expected in Nelson every day, I hope to be able to induce him to take immediate steps towards procuring the district for us, but if this should reach you before he leaves Wellington, and you should concur in my views on the subject, I trust you will anticipate me in so doing. If I can facilitate the matter by coming over to Wellington or by meeting the Governor or yourself at the Sound or elsewhere of course I am ready to start at a moment's notice there being nothing to detain one in Nelson.

The Committee of Landowners have reported to that body in favour of Waitoi, but they are desirous that it should not be publicly known that they have so decided lest it should create any obstacle to the acquisition of the district. I believe it is no secret either here or at Wellington but it is perhaps prudent to keep back their report till the acquisition is made, and

I am not therefore able to forward a copy of it. It is however substantially to the same effect as I have written above. I have the honour to be Sir, Your most obedient servant, William Fox, Resident Agent.