



Thomas Heath and Wife Go to Howick, New Zealand as Fencible Immigrants

Mr. Thomas Heath, who died at Howick on January 3, aged 87 years, was a native of Wiltshire. He was one of the Royal New Zealand Fencibles. Arriving with his family in this colony in 1847, he was posted to Howick. Here he served seven years with the Fencibles, and has been a resident in Howick from that time till the day of his death. Mr. Heath was highly-respected, and was for some time, a Vestryman of All Saints' Church, and he, being the last of the old Fencibles at that place, his death has created a blank in that settlement. His funeral took place on Monday, and was largely attended. The coffin, covered by the Union Jack, was followed to the grave by his children, grandchildren and many old soldiers, the neighbouring settlers also attending. The Rev. R. G. Boler was the officiating clergyman. The late Mr. Heath in his young days had seen active service in the Royal Marines, his ship, the *Hastings* (72 guns), being with the Admiral the Hon. Sir Robert Stopford in the operations on the coast of Syria, against Mehemet Ali, Pasha of Egypt, in 1840. One of the first fights of this campaign was on the 12th of July, when a frigate and two sloops attacked the strong tower of Gebail. After bombarding the place for an hour, they landed a storming party of 370 marines and mountaineers under the command of Captain Austin. The party, after scrambling over dykes and through cactus fences, arrived under the castle. Here they discovered that the strength of the enemy had been greatly underrated. When within a short distance of the castle the party became exposed to a heavy discharge of musketry from loop-holes nearly level with the ground. The assailants were now brought to a standstill, and as they could only fire on the loop-holes, it was judged necessary to retire to the boats. The British loss upon this occasion was five killed and 18 wounded. The bombardment was continued for four hours. In the night, the garrison, from want of provisions, evacuated the place. It was now found that the Castle of Gebail was sufficiently strong to have withstood the whole of the Mediterranean fleet. Amongst the wounded upon this occasion was the late Mr. Heath. He was afterwards retired from active service, receiving a pension and a silver medal for Syria.

Obituary Source: Unspecified New Zealand Newspaper, 1902

Thomas Heath was baptized at Collingbourne Kingston, 20th November 1814, the son of Elizabeth Heath.

He enlisted as a Private in the Royal Marines, Reg. No 1656. He was described as 5' 6", brown hair, grey eyes, fair complexion, age 37, and of good character, some time before 1840. He was wounded, retired from active service, receiving a silver medal for Syria and a pension. He served 5 years and 5 months and was discharged from the army with a ruptured wound in the right foot.

In 1847 Thomas Heath married Jane Bartlett from Enford. The couple left London for New Zealand with Major Gray, 40th Reg, (Commandant RNZ Fencibles) and a party of 78 Fencibles (pensioned soldiers), with 63 women and 114 children, on the ship *Sir George Seymour*, which arrived 26 November 1847.

The arrival of the ship was reported in the **Daily Southern Cross, 27 November 1847**

The Sir George Seymour" arrived last evening with a fourth division of the New Zealand Fencibles, under the command of Major Gray. The vessel left England on the 12th of August, and had had a fine run of 103 days. – We congratulate the Pensioners on the arrival of their gallant Commander – they will no longer want a friend able and willing to attend to their interest - and who comes with the latest and fullest instructions from Her majesty's Government in all that concerns them - information in which, to all appearances, we have hitherto been very deficient.

Source : National Library of New Zealand



The Sir George Seymour

Fencible comes from the word "defencible" meaning "capable of defence". Howick was founded by Governor Captain George Grey as part of a chain of villages around the southern aspect of Auckland to protect Auckland from possible attack. Grey requested troops, but Earl Grey (later Lord Howick) as Secretary of State for the Colonies (1846-1852) decided to send retired soldiers as members of the Royal New Zealand Fencible Corps.

The Fencibles had served in the wars of Britain in the 1830s and 1840s. To emigrate to NZ under the fencible scheme, retired soldiers were required to be under 48 years of age and of 'good character and industrious habits'. These soldier-settlers were offered a free passage to New Zealand with their wives and families, a cottage and an acre of land. Providing they performed certain military duties - including compulsory church parade on Sundays - their cottage and acre would be theirs after a seven-year term of service. They received a small pension and were required to find gainful employment in addition to their 'fencible' occupation.

The role of the retired soldiers was to protect Auckland from possible attack. Between 1847-1854 eleven ships brought 721 fencibles and their families, (a total of 2, 500) which nearly doubled the population of Auckland at that time.

Source: The Fencible Organization, New Zealand



A Fencible cottage - the Fencibles built these themselves.

Royal (N.Z.) Fencibles - Anniversary Gathering

A gathering of a unique character was held today at Howick, a jubilee festival being held in commemoration of the landing of the Royal N. Z. Fencibles at Howick in 1847. As might be expected there are now not many of the old veterans left who were landed on Howick Beach half a century ago for the purpose of making a home for themselves amongst the fern and ti-tree in order to form a permanent outpost of military settlers for the future defence of the then infant city of Auckland. As a matter of fact Mr. Thomas Heath is the sole survivor of the particular group that formed the original Howick settlement, while Mrs Heath and Mrs Frost are the last members of the band of matrons who accompanied their husbands. There are, however, survivors of other adjacent pensioner settlements, and these attended at the Howick gathering today to talk over old times. Mr. Heath has now reached the advanced age of 83 years. He saw service in Syria in 1836, and was invalided shortly afterwards. That the Fencibles were settlers of the right stamp to send to a new country was manifest today, when their descendants arrived in large numbers at Howick to commemorate the anniversary of the arrival of their progenitors. In order to carry out the celebration successfully a Committee was formed of which Mr. John White was the Secretary. Invitations were forwarded to the Hon. Colonel Haultain, the last of the divisional officers, and many others interested in the gathering, and it is needless to say that where possible, those asked attended. A 'bus load left Auckland early this morning, arriving in time for the sports which took place this afternoon. At 3 o'clock the guests partook of a dinner provided in the Oddfellow's Hall, and it is arranged that the festivities shall close with a ball in the same building this evening

Auckland Star, 9 November 1897

Royal (N.Z.) Fencibles - Anniversary Gathering

A gathering of descendants of the Royal N.Z. Fencibles at Howick passed off very pleasantly yesterday. Photographers were present and took pictures of the survivors of the original party that landed on Howick Beach 50 years ago: Mesdames Heath, Paton, Frost, Nicholas, and Mr. Thomas Heath.

Separate groups were also taken of their descendants as follows:

Minerva: Mesdames J. Carter, George E. White, Hathaway, McMillan, Kenealy, Pye, Paton, Speight, Massey, M. Macaulay, J. Kelly, Speer, Paton, Messrs. S. Lord, J. Carter, W. A. White, George E. White, John W. White, Edward Fitzpatrick, John Kelly, Charles Hare, George Wadman, Thomas Speer.

Sir George Seymour: Mesdames Quinn, Farn, Crawshaw, Bushell, Nicholas, Heath, Smythyman, Ohlson, Mackay, Brady, Messrs. Thomas Heath, Cunningham, Massey, Nicholas, J. Lynch.

Monsignor McDonald, as parish priest, was taken with each group. At 4 o'clock in the afternoon 200 sat down to the dinner in the Oddfellow's Hall. The interior of the building was tastefully decorated. ... Mr. Thomas Heath and his wife, the only surviving pensioners at present resident in Howick, were brought to the dinner in Mr. McLean's carriage.

... The health of Mr. Heath, by Mr. McLean, was responded to by the Rev. Mr. Boler on Mr. Heath's behalf, as he was in indifferent health. ...

The ball in the evening was well attended, and the whole gathering was a decided success, reflecting credit on the committee of management - Messrs. John W. White (honorary secretary), George White, J. Nicholas, Edward Fitzpatrick, and Thomas Speer.

The Auckland Star, 10 November 1897

Thomas and Jane Heath had seven children, William, Mary Ann, Thomas, Elizabeth, Edwin John, Emily Jane and Sarah. Thomas died in 1902 - he was the last surviving Fencible at that time, and his wife Jane died in 1913. Both were buried in All Saint's Church, Howick.

Death announcement for Thomas Heath

Heath - At Howick, on Friday, January 3rd, Thomas, the beloved husband of Jane Heath, in his 88th year. The funeral will leave his late residence for All Saints Churchyard on Monday, January 6th, at 4 p.m.

Auckland Star, 4 January 1902

On Monday the remains of the late Thomas Heath were laid in the grave at the old churchyard of all Saints' Howick, the Rev. R. G. Boler conducting the funeral service. The deceased, who was born in 1814, was the last of the eight hundred Fencibles of New Zealand, who arrived in this colony in 1847, and were later stationed on the frontier of the then young and defenceless town of Auckland. The deceased served under Sir Charles Napier at the siege of Acre in the Syrian war of 1841, in the marines, and was wounded in the affair. He received a very thick and handsome silver medal and clasp for this campaign. A copper medal had been prepared for issue, but the troops declined it. Many interesting stories of the old time service used to be narrated by the deceased, who was borne to the grave by old comrades of many years' standing on the bier made to carry Captain Pilling, of the 70th, to the grave nearly forty years ago. The Union Jack and wreaths of flowers covered the coffin, three sons and four daughters, and a very large cortege following.

Auckland Star, 7 January 1902

Death of Mrs. Heath

Mrs. Heath, the last of the pioneer settlers of Howick, passed away on Monday morning, the 8th instant, in her 89th year. She came to New Zealand in the ship Sir George Seymour in the year 1847, before roads were formed. The settlers in those days had to come to Howick by boat, they landed on the beach and had to cut their way through the bush to what was destined to be a military settlement. In the fifties many of the brave women had to take refuge on Stockade Hill, while their husbands had to fight against the then troublesome Maoris. Mrs Heath leaves two sons and three daughters.

Hastings Standard, 13 December 1913