

Russell's wharf was built in 1879, and is still in use today.

From hell to belle

From Pacific purgatory to holiday haven, Russell has come a long way. Liz Light takes a stroll and discovers its chequered past.

RUSSELL IS New Zealand's oldest town and was once the biggest.

By 1830, it had a permanent population of more than 2000 and, with up to 60 ships anchored in the bay, it often had 1000 or more unruly sailors drinking and carousing in its many pubs.

When Charles Darwin sailed in on the *Beagle* in 1830, he described it as the hellhole of the Pacific, referring to the stink of its sewage-infused water, scurrying rats, staggering drunks and disreputable prostitutes. But whalers and sailors, who had been to sea in sailing ships for months, didn't agree. To them it was fun city, civilisation, with bars, butchers, bakers, blacksmiths, ships' chandlers, a tannery, a cannery and, for the godly and literate, a church and a newspaper.

Now Russell wears history with casual aplomb. So casual that the teenagers diving and jumping off the 130-year-old wharf don't spare a thought for its age and beauty, nor do the ferry drivers that bump into it as they drop off people from Paiaia across the bay. But Russell is pivotal to New Zealand's history, and the Heritage Trail guide I pick up at the wharf's information centre, explains why. It was here that Samuel Marsden preached the first Christian sermon in 1814 and here the Maori Wars began. I stand under the troublesome flagstaff on Maiki Hill, north of town.

The first flagpole was erected in 1840 to commemorate British Sovereignty and the Treaty of Waitangi. Hone Heke, the pre-eminent chief, was incensed that the New Zealand Standard flag was not flown along with the Union Jack; he saw this as symbolic British disregard of Treaty obligations. His warriors cut down the flagpole in 1844 and, in a game of one-upmanship, it was erected by the

FACT FILE

■ Pick up a Heritage Trail guide at Russell Museum (www.russellmuseum.org.nz) or the Information Centre. www.russellinfo.co.nz

■ Pompailler House: www.pompailler.co.nz

British and cut down three more by Heke's men. Tension was high but the war began by accident in 1845. A British pipe smoker dropped sparks and exploded gunpowder stored nearby.

The Navy ship in the bay thought Maori were attacking the town so bombarded it with cannons. Heke and his men retaliated and much of Russell was destroyed in fighting that followed.

Christ Church, one street back from the waterfront, survived unscathed except for the finger-sized musket-ball holes still visible in the walls.

The cemetery surrounding it tells tales on stone and, inside, the ambience is simple and serene. The pews have rows of tapestry-covered cushions, all depicting different aspects of this pretty town: hibiscus flowers, colonial cottages creeping up the hills and boats in the bay.

I visit another survivor of the battle: Pompailler Mission, a rammed earth French-style building that was headquarters for the French Catholic mission to the Western Pacific. The first *Bibles* in Maori were printed here. Bishop Pompailler, after whom the house is named, didn't live here and when he visited, from the Marist headquarters in Auckland, he stayed in the garden cottage.

I stroll down the road that rims the

■ Stay at The Duke of Marlborough. Its bar has been busy since 1827 and licensed since 1840. New passionate-about-Russell owners have renovated guest rooms and restored the dining room, now home to Bay of Islands' best restaurant. www.theduke.co.nz

bay and pass the Gables built in 1847, after the sacking. It had a variety of uses over the years including being a bakery, a boys' home and a private hotel. It's tastefully renovated into a restaurant and the view of the beach through pohutukawa is hard to beat.

The Russell General Store, near the wharf, is a corrugated-iron classic built in 1880. It's a Four Square, with the front window featuring the 1950s Four Square man with smiley face and a thumbs-up.

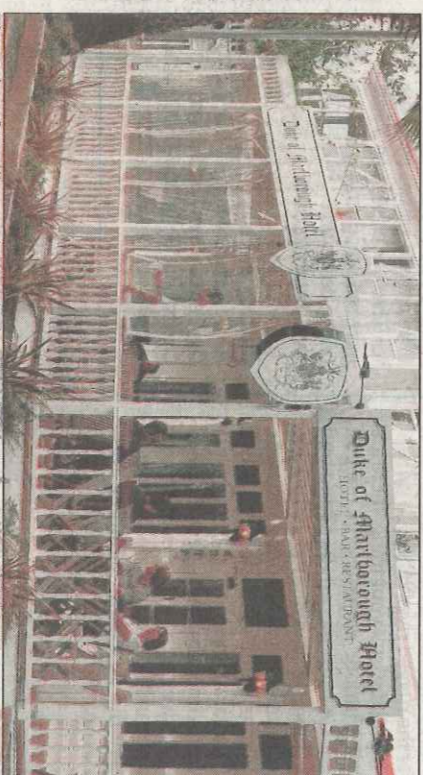
Giant pohutukawa trees line the bay and colonial buildings, two storeys at most, hide behind them. But the biggest tree, dwarfing the pohutukawa, is a Morton Bay fig, planted in 1870. It has a stunning trunk: a massive bundle of air roots woven together. The tree shelters New Zealand's cutest police station, a fine example of Victorian gothic-colonial architecture, with a characteristic steep slate roof. It was built by Edward Laing (the man who planted the tree) as the Customs House.

I stroll along the bay, keeping an eye out for a cannon that helped defend the town from Hone Heke's last attack. It has a new job now: it's a towel stand for swimmers and children leave their lunch in its shade while they play on the beach.

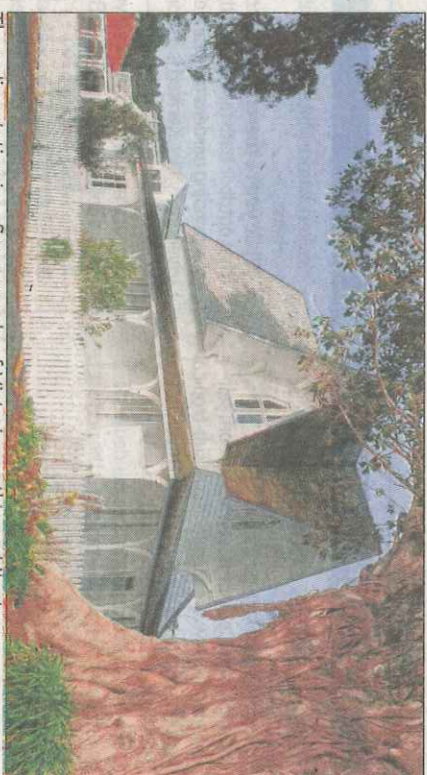
It's a sweet job for a 200-year-old cannon.



Christ Church still bears scars of the fighting between Hone Heke and the British.



The Duke of Marlborough Hotel's bar has been busy since 1827.



The police station is a fine example of Victorian gothic architecture.