

INTRODUCTION

The Value of a Backcountry Hut

Mountain Hut

Rain eases down
Like a gentle strum
On the roof
All wet and dripping
In the forest
Snug and warm are we
In our mountain hideaway
Waiting the passing
Of the storm
Roaring fire
Licks blackened billy
Chasing damp from our socks
While we contemplate
Our next brew ...
Simple delights
In a simple world

I wrote this poem in January 1993 during four storm-bound days in Pell Stream Hut, near Lewis Pass. I'd been surveying kiwi in the area with two companions, when a persistent nor'wester swept over the country. Not able to survey in the wet conditions, and unable to get down the flooded Pell Stream, we simply waited out the tempest at the hut.

Pell Stream Hut, a standard six-bunk Forest Service design built in 1961, eight years before I was born, was a bit rusty, a bit run down, but adequate enough for shelter. Rain fell with a relentlessness I've rarely witnessed for such an extended period, but to us it didn't matter much. Inside we played cards, read, slept, ate and generally enjoyed life at a slow, contemplative pace. For a few days, the simple shelter became our entire world, and by the time the storm passed and we could head out, I'd grown rather fond of the hut.

I started tramping in the mountains of Hawke's Bay during the mid-1980s.

McGregor Biv and the Waiohine Valley from near McGregor, Tararua Forest Park, Wairarapa, 2011. PHOTO: SHAUN BARNETT/BLACK ROBIN PHOTOGRAPHY

Back then, Kaweka Forest Park huts simply meant shelter to me, places to doss down for the night before trudging on. The four walls and a roof of huts allowed tramping without the need to lug a tent. The Kaweka Range boasted about thirty huts, mostly built by the Forest Service, which then still managed the area. Beyond that, I didn't give much more thought to huts than to the trash I tossed into the adjacent rubbish pits.

Twenty-five years on, I have an appreciation of huts that extends far beyond their value as shelters from the storm. Huts mean many things: destinations, incentives to get out into the hills, repositories of outdoor history and stories, and monuments to various styles of backcountry architecture, from the spartan to the elaborate.

Other countries also have hut networks, but there is probably nowhere else in the world with such an extensive collection of simple public huts as New Zealand. Australia has a good smattering of huts in Tasmania, Victoria and the Snowy Mountains, but the vast extent of the continent has very few. The European Alps and Norway's mountains also have large hut networks, but their huts are usually run more like hostels, with a permanent warden and often with food and bedding available.

In his book *A Trampler's Journey* (2004), Mark Pickering says that unlatching the door of a backcountry hut at the end of a day's tramping feels 'like a homecoming'.¹ I, too, love arriving at a backcountry hut. Imagine the scene: the hut lies on the far side of a clearing, a square orange shape. Behind it, slopes rise to open scree summits, while tongues of beech forest stretch down from spurs on either side. A small stream burbles its way through the clearing and past the hut.

By its colour and shape, the hut contrasts strongly with its surroundings. Yet at the same time, it's perfect in this landscape – its small size serving to better define the scale of the surrounding mountains. It forms a potent yet humble symbol of human endeavour in the otherwise natural setting.

Although I've never been here before, it's somehow familiar and reassuring. Hundreds of others like it exist in the backcountry, each one slightly different. The setting, the position and little design details all make each hut distinctive.

I stride across the clearing, shrubs brushing my gaiters, and reach the hut. I snip back the bolt and slip inside. The aroma of past fires filters into my nostrils,



Pell Stream Hut, Lewis Pass National Reserve, May 2008. PHOTO: GEOFF SPEARPOINT

along with a slightly musty smell – no one has been here for a while. I shed my pack onto a bunk, open the window a fraction and haul out the burner for a brew. Then it's time to peruse the hut book. Who has been here before me? What adventures did they record?

Every hut has its own story, its own questions. Who built it? Why? How? Did anyone maintain it, or was it simply left to rot once its main purpose had faded? Who visited? What did they do here?

Shelter from the Storm

People go into the bush and mountains to tramp, hunt, fish and climb, or any number of other reasons, not necessarily just to stay in a hut. So why do huts captivate people so? Perhaps it's because they symbolise the wider experience of the outdoors: they provide a waypoint on a journey, a link with other trampers, a destination in their own right, a refuge where you can hang up your boots for a while and watch the weather.

First and foremost, people appreciate huts because New Zealand's climate is extremely tempestuous and frequently wet, particularly so in the mountains. The Cropp, a tributary of the West Coast's Whitcombe River, holds the record for the highest annual rainfall in New Zealand: 18 metres, making it one of the wettest places in the world.² It's not the only wet place in New Zealand though – Fiordland, Mt Taranaki and the Tararua Range also receive extraordinary amounts of rainfall. Even in the drier eastern mountains of the South Island, the weather can turn very nasty very quickly: the coldest parts of the country are up in the central Otago ranges. New Zealand's highly changeable climate increases the value of a hut immensely.

For some, the combination of poor weather and scenery on such a grand scale can seem forbidding, as trumper Elsie K. Morton found during a trip up Westland's Copland Valley in the 1950s:

Almost terrifying in its utter loneliness and isolation was this high, remote valley, yet not so terrifying at a second glance, for there, just ahead, was a little wooden cottage with a wide, hospitable fireplace that bespoke warmth, good cheer – and the immediate promise of cups and cups of good, hot tea! Never was the site of a mountain hut more happily named than Welcome Flat.³

For mountaineers, the shelter offered by huts is often not just a matter of comfort, but sometimes the difference between life and death. During the 1970s, renowned climber Bill Denz made a habit of establishing bold new routes, often in the coldest months of the year. He was the first to venture into the Hooker Valley of Mount Cook National Park in winter, where the original Empress Hut stood, dwarfed by the giant ice-festooned face of Mt Hicks. The hut may have been small and rough, but after a stormy descent from Mt Hicks in 1974, Denz found salvation there:

We brave the sand-blasting wind to peer down the South Face, our next objective. Phil [Herron] is thrilled by its steepness and oppressive air. Our abseil down from the saddle, in darkness and blinding wind, is an eventful one, but soon we are at Empress Hut – that damp, cramped little shack, our haven away from it all, where we lie under a pile of heavy blankets and sip our fifth cup of tea.⁴

It's no exaggeration to claim that huts enabled the climbers of the 1970s to launch themselves up unclimbed faces once considered impossible. By staying in the huts, they didn't have to carry tents, and could use blankets in lieu of a sleeping bag.

People value huts as shelters, but that's not the whole story. Tents provide shelter too, but during a storm you can exist in a hut with a degree of comfort that is simply not possible in a tent. Mountaineer Paul Powell summed this up superbly:

There's nothing so pleasant as preparing the meal in a back-country hut. You're relaxed and you know that for a few hours at least you're free from important decisions. Let it rain, thunder or snow. Provided the roof stays on the hut and the cooking-pots keep bubbling you don't worry. You don't care if the river floods or the wind blows itself inside out. The worse the weather, the more you revel in your temporary home. Like small boys safe from the bullies in a favourite hideout, you rejoice all the more.⁵

Tararua Tramping Club member John Gates also expressed this simple quality of huts in the 1961 club annual *Tararua*:

Ignoring the purist who can bypass a hut even in bad weather for the philosophical comfort of a wet tent or melting snow cave, let us be human and admit that the rest of us would rather cross a welcoming threshold when the alternatives are rain, wind and cold as tempting bed companions.⁶

Although Gates enjoyed the shelter of a hut over a tent, he didn't want too much luxury. Writing during the 1960s, he always rated Cone Hut above its nearby alternative down the valley, Tauherenikau Hut: 'Cone, being smaller, darker, and further from the road, contrasts more with our homes and offices.'⁷

Huts then, are about shelter, but many trampers and hunters don't want them too flash. The outdoor experience provides a welcome contrast to our daily lives, and that's why so many people value simple, basic huts. That's not to say a rustic hut appeals to everyone. For many older trampers and family groups, there is no doubt that some of the modern, warm DOC huts serve a valuable purpose in enabling them to enjoy their experience more.

Huts also offer a destination for the curious. In her 1993 Masters thesis *Back-country Huts, More Than a Roof Over Your Head*, Lincoln University student Robin Quigg identified huts as a motivating factor for people to go into the mountains. As one trumper stated, 'If I know there is a hut there then I'd go there because it is like a stopping point drawing you in.'⁸

Huts as a Social Experience

Huts also provide the important social nucleus of the outdoor experience. Over the course of a tramp or hunt, people disperse over the track or mountainside

How Many Huts?

DOC has close to 1000 backcountry huts on its records: about 700 in the South Island and about 300 in the North Island. Trumper and hut enthusiast Mark Pickering reckons another 400 to 500 huts lie on pastoral lease stations in the South Island. The exact number of DOC huts changes from year to year, as high-country huts are added from tenure review, old huts become derelict, new ones get built, and some burn down or are washed away in floods. Fire is a persistent threat to huts, and on average one burns down every year.

After DOC, the New Zealand Alpine Club manages the next largest number of huts: seventeen, including base huts. The Canterbury Mountaineering Club, the Tararua Tramping Club and the New Zealand Deerstalkers' Association also have fine records of building and maintaining huts. A myriad of clubs have just one or two huts – Hawke's Bay's Heretaunga Tramping Club maintains the popular Howletts Hut in the Ruahines, while the Canterbury University Tramping Club manages Avoca Hut in Craigieburn Forest Park.

A surprising number of private huts are also secreted on conservation lands, some known only to those who built them, but others legally sanctioned. The fifty or so club ski huts at Iwikau Village on Mt Ruapehu are one example, and Caroline Hut, near Ball Pass, is another. Other locked club huts exist in the Waitakere Ranges, but by far the largest concentration occurs in the Orongorongo Valley in Wellington's Rimutaka Forest Park.

but come together again at night within the confines of the hut. With people inside it, a hut develops a personality. John Gates recalled the tramping days of the 1950s in a crowded Tararua hut with everyone cooking, talking and singing: 'Te Matawai Hut is never quite the same as when chock-a-block with dripping, steaming trampers secretly cooking breakfast straight after tea in order to be first away for a "northern" [crossing]. Empty it is quite a lonely, chilly place.'⁹

Public huts, by their very nature – unlocked and open to all – encourage some degree of egalitarianism. In any hut, particularly the accessible ones on the Great Walks, large groups of trampers gather in the evening after a satisfying day's walk and rub shoulders with people from all branches of society. At night, after everyone dosses down in their sleeping bags, all must endure the rumbles of the snorer, the rustles of those reorganising their gear or the patter of rodents. The communal nature of sleeping in a hut is rather like staying on a marae; indeed, the term 'Maori bunks' is sometimes used for a sleeping platform.¹⁰



This egalitarianism has been a feature of huts since New Zealand's early colonial days, as Jock Phillips wrote in his 1996 book *A Man's Country?* Although 'major contrasts of wealth, power, and lifestyle' existed in colonial New Zealand, the backcountry provided a levelling effect:

Yet when men left settled society and entered the frontier world of tents and huts, it became increasingly difficult to maintain the symbols of class distinction. 'Posh' clothes were an encumbrance or quickly became dirty; there was simply no chance of being served fine food or living in splendid style. The itinerancy and lack of specialisation of frontier labour broke down hierarchies within the working class.¹¹

Phillips notes, for example, that Charles Money came from English upper-class origins, but in the Canterbury high country found himself among a wide variety of men. 'But in the men's hut, where Money preferred to mix, his social status counted for little. There his willingness to share a pipe around the fire was the level of expectation.'¹²

Early hut designs also reflected issues of gender and social etiquette. Many of the first climbing and tourism huts built in the Southern Alps during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had separate quarters for men and women simply as a matter of privacy, in keeping with the social norms of the time. During the 1920s, however, tramping clubs often dispensed with this formality as it was simply too impractical to build huts that way.

Most clubs welcomed both men and women, but not all. For instance, the Canterbury Mountaineering Club (CMC) did not at first allow women to join as they felt that doing so might restrict not only men's activities but also their behaviour. While tongue-in-cheek, this comment by club stalwart Nui Robins reflected the views of some CMC members in the 1920s and 1930s:

Twenty six people emerged with their impedimenta from the train at the Bealey corner and struggled as fast as riding breeches and ill-fitted puttees would allow up to Carrington [Hut] in order to get a bunk. Twenty five failed to arrive in time and had to bed down on the floor. That was not the worst. Two more people arrived – one a woman who despoiled the purity of our monastic organisation by entering the hut. Horrid thought, it appeared she might even stay the night. She didn't, thanks to her brother's kindly provision of a tent which he pitched for her just outside the adjective range of the hut.¹³

Today, the CMC has moved on, and includes women presidents and top female climbers in its ranks.

The early tramping, climbing and hunting clubs knew only too well the value of huts for shelter, as precious few existed during their early forays into

Trampers at Carrington Hut II, Arthur's Pass National Park, 1960s. PHOTO: RICK WATSON

mountain country. Clubs also soon learnt that building a club hut united members more than virtually any other activity. It created a different sort of camaraderie to tramping or hunting together; the shared purpose and sense of developing the backcountry ensured club members took deserved pride in their huts. Through hard toil and a great sense of accomplishment, hut building forged strong clubs and lasting friendships.

Cameron Hut in Canterbury's Hakatere Conservation Park provides an example of this extraordinary effort. CMC members built the hut over three weekends in 1953. On the first weekend, a group of six, led by Nui Robins, packed material up to the hut site, dumped their loads, then walked out for three hours, before repeating the procedure with fresh loads the next day. Another member of the hut-building party, J. Walton, described the weekend's efforts:

The packers were well spread out and crosstrees of timber or iron could be seen floating up the river bed, bobbing along the flats and dumping themselves heavily when the human 'uprights' collapsed for a breather ... With shoulders sore, backs screaming, sunburn tingling and sweat constantly running into their eyes they scrambled on. Steep short climbs, traverses, slippery snow grass and large boulders were very nearly the last straw and the packers were very tired when they finally 'collapsed' at the site.¹⁴

While some packers performed such impressive feats to establish backcountry huts, they usually didn't do so out of any perverse sense of pain or pride. If alternative means of transport – packhorses or trucks – were available, people used them. After the Second World War, a number of huts were even built using ex-Army Bren gun carriers.¹⁵

Huts like Cameron remain as symbols that the mountains are not just empty scenery, but places of effort and activity, of human endeavour and enterprise. Hut building creates something for the common good, allowing people to gather and enjoy the bush and mountains.

A Refuge from Urban Life

For many people, huts are not just a refuge from mountain weather, but also a refuge from the commerce and busyness of our everyday lives. We go into the hills to escape from the pressures of urban life, retreating to an environment where the world is more natural and we can re-create ourselves. Huts are not essential to this need by any means; many people seek the remoteness and solitude of a wilderness camp. But for those without the skills or inclination to travel through untracked terrain, a hut provides a level of comfort.

Some people have even found huts to be a permanent refuge from society. Robert Long, also known as Beansprout, sought an alternative life – not away from people, but away from what he viewed as the evils of society – and wrote about it in his bestselling book *A Life on Gorge River* (2010). He began living in Gorge



Cameron Hut, built by the Canterbury Mountaineering Club, pictured in 1952.

PHOTO SUPPLIED BY RAY CHAPMAN

River Hut, an abandoned mining hut in remote south Westland, in 1980, and has even raised a family there with his wife, Catherine Stewart.

Yet others have sought refuge in huts for different reasons, even to escape the law, like suspected murderer James Ellis, who hid in the Ruahine hut that

now bears his name. During the Second World War, the occasional deserting soldier also tried to evade authorities by hiding in huts. And at least one pair escaped to a mountain hut for love. The extraordinary Chaffeys of Asbestos Cottage lived in their prospecting hut for over three decades, after both escaped failed marriages.

Hut Diversity

Diversity is another important aspect of New Zealand huts, which reflect a range of designs and settings. A hut's style often speaks of the era in which it was built and the purpose for which it was used. Huts come in all shapes, sizes, colours and locations. Some are ugly; others are works of art. While a few bivvies are so small you can only crawl into them, some of the large Great Walks huts sport flushing toilets and separate warden's quarters. Opinion on design and colour is, of course, varied. Some people love the classic orange of the old Forest Service huts, while others find green and brown a more acceptable backcountry tone. While opinions differ, everyone appreciates the diversity.

Some huts boast spectacular settings, which were chosen expressly for their ability to impress. For example, Cape Defiance Hut was built in 1913, during the early days of tourism, on the lower slopes of a bold headland jutting out into the Franz Josef Glacier. Elsie K. Morton was suitably awed by its location during her 1950s visit:

A final scramble over the rough ice of the lateral moraine, a stiff climb up the shingly hillside, and we reached a little track leading up to a clearing in the bush, and to Defiance Hut, snugly set on a narrow ledge, with Mount Moltke rising dark and high above, and the frozen waves of the glacier plunging down into the valley below.¹⁶

Early huts were not usually salubrious. Some made up in character for what they lacked in comfort, but others fell well short. Glazebrook Hut, on Marlborough's Waihopai Station, failed to charm Wildlife Officer Ken Francis during the winter he spent there in the 1930s:

Made of corrugated iron and unlined, it had an earth floor which froze if the fire went out for too long. The fireplace was huge and would take small logs, and there were bunks for three men, made of sacking, and the 'mattresses' were tussock grass. We added deerskins for additional warmth and soon got used to the smell. There was only one small window so, unless the door was open, the interior was rather dark. Water was drawn from the adjacent creek and manuka firewood from the hillside.¹⁷

Huts resulting from club efforts were not always works of architectural brilliance either. One bush poet described Heretaunga Tramping Club's Kiwi Saddle Hut (built in 1946) with this ditty:

This here shack must be about the roughest;
In the whole of the Kaweka Range,
Strictly designed for the toughest,
The architecture is rugged and strange.¹⁸

Many backcountry huts have expansive views, while yet others lie tucked away in tiny forest clearings. Whatever their location, these mostly simple shelters help to define New Zealand's outdoors, distinguishing it from other mountain areas of the world.

The Accumulation of Stories

Perhaps the least acknowledged quality of huts is their ability to act as a depository of backcountry knowledge and stories that might otherwise be lost. Older huts gather stories according to the changing use to which they have been put. They may, like Hideaway Biv (in Canterbury's Ahuriri Conservation Park), have begun as a mustering hut on a station, then been abandoned after sheep grazing became uneconomic, and finally become sufficiently venerable to attract the attention of DOC heritage specialists. Some of these huts feature the scrawled names of visitors etched with pencil or penknife onto their roof and walls, written before the idea of hut books became widespread.

Even historic huts are not simple museum pieces, but living structures that still have a function as shelter. Yet other huts become so strongly identified with a particular individual that their name is forever associated with it. Other huts form monuments to those who have died: Fenella Hut in Kahurangi National Park and Colin Todd Hut in Mount Aspiring National Park are examples. Through the hut logbook, stories accumulate over time, providing a sense of ongoing community.

A Brief History of Huts

Huts as Home

Huts have served as shelter ever since Maori first stepped onto the shores of Aotearoa. Temporary whare served as seasonal bases for hunting and fishing expeditions to the coast and mountains. Maori used rock shelters or caves where they existed, and elsewhere made an art form of erecting temporary shelters



Huts as home: a man outside his canvas hut, probably Ohingaiti or Rangitikei.

PHOTO: EDWARD GEORGE CHILD, ALEXANDER TURNBULL LIBRARY, WELLINGTON, A G-32338-1/2

quickly and efficiently using whatever materials were on hand – tree bark and fern fronds served particularly well. Of more permanent huts, ethnographer Elsdon Best wrote this description:

The term 'house' comes naturally to the point of the pen, but in many cases native habitations can only be described as 'huts'. The Maori strove to make his hut a warm retreat in winter on account of his lack of *kaka moe* (sleeping-garments), but comfort in other ways he never evolved; the native hut was a cheerless abode. The lack of a chimney meant that merely a small fire could be kept burning, and that the smoke from such fire was a source of great discomfort – or at least it would be to us.¹⁹

New Zealand's earliest European building was erected in the 1790s in Fiordland's Dusky Sound by sealers.²⁰ Later, European settlers often lived in huts

Hut Logbooks

Unlike tracks or bridges, huts hold a record of the visitors who pass through them in the form of hut logbooks, which include details of past trips, events, people and experiences. This informal record provides a sort of cultural history, particularly for lesser used huts, where logbooks may span a decade or more.

Hawke's Bay hunter and bush poet Lester Masters knew the value of hut logbooks for recording stories, and in the 1950s installed logbooks and holders in several Ruahine huts; the one for Ellis Hut featured two skulls on the cover. He neatly summed up their purpose with this ditty:

Please write down brief what you have seen,
Tell of the weather and the chase,
The luck you've had, and where you've been,
Then park the book safe in the case;
So that maybe when some man's son
Comes drifting in from off the spur,
He'll read what you have seen and done
When you were here in days that were.²¹

Palmerston North trumper Tony Gates continued this tradition with a beautifully etched logbook case for Howletts Hut, engraved with the Ruahine Tramping Club's logo by Fred Lemberg. Gates has also collected much poetry and quotes from Ruahine, Kaweka and Tararua hut logbooks, ranging from the sublime to the crude. There's nothing quite so enjoyable as arriving at a hut, perusing the contents of its logbook, and gleaning any amusing entries about past adventures and follies.

Hut logbooks on Stewart Island/Rakiura make frequent references – not usually complimentary – to mud. A Canadian trumper drew a picture of Yoda from *Star Wars* in one logbook and wrote, 'Worry NOT tired trumper, mud is friend of Jedi. It makes you strong in the mind. Hmmm ... Yes!'

Sometimes there is even a broken dialogue between successive hut occupants. One of my personal favourites came from Middy Hut in Mt Richmond Forest Park. One disgruntled trumper made this plea: 'Please don't be an idiot. Don't leave your rubbish around this nice hut.' The next entry read: 'Ahhh, Grasshopper, so much Anger.'

Hut logbooks also provide useful information in the event of a search, as well as visitation statistics for hut managers. Unfortunately, a fair proportion of hut visitors do not sign logbooks, whether for reasons of avoid-

ing hut fees, a dislike of records or simply forgetfulness. In the Nelson conservancy, DOC adds about 25 per cent on visitation stats to compensate for this shortfall.

Many early huts, notably mustering huts, often did not have logbooks, and instead visitors scrawled their names on the walls. Hideaway Biv and the Old Waihothonu Hut remain good examples of this, with graffiti preserved on both, inside and out.

Other huts had logbooks right from the outset. Archives New Zealand holds a copy of a logbook dating between 1914 and 1930 from Cape Defiance Hut, an early tourism hut on the West Coast built in 1913. Two members of the Beaglehole family visited the Franz Josef Glacier in 1917 and wrote in the Cape Defiance logbook, 'An entirely new and beautiful experience.'²²

The Forest Service developed its own standard hut logbooks, dun in colour, during the 1970s, and DOC continued with its own green ones in the 1990s. These logbooks have become progressively more prescribed, with columns for specific details, and this certainly aids hut managers in recording information and statistics. But it does, to a certain degree, inhibit the creativity and free-flow that used to dominate logbooks.

Hut logbooks can be a rich source of informal backcountry history, but until recently there has been little consistency over preserving them after they become full. Some historic ones are held in museums, DOC offices, libraries and archives, but many have simply been thrown away. Bill Keir recently began a hut logbook inventory, which is accessible online.²³

ARRIVAL	PARTY	IN YOUR PARTY	(Home Town)	Private Party	TRIP DESTINATION AND ROUTE
07/11/02	2	DENOWA R SOWANSON	CHCH	Pie	HERE, FROM TAKA, BACK TO AICKENS
11/1/02	1	Simon Johnson	Lyttelton		Passing through to Aickens
20/12/02	2	ANDREW McLELLAN JO MCKENZIE	Wairarapa (Wairarapa)	Pf	In from Otetake hot spring - Kawapuka Hut: via tops to Whareroa of travel gear Down to Taramakau then up
30-12-02	3	BARRY HOWARD JOHN RIPPON SUE CUTBERTSON	Wairarapa Wairarapa Wairarapa		Deception
30-12-02	2	Randy Stewart Suzanne	CHCH		From Otetake via tops westside of Koroia
17-1-03	1	MARCEL BRUNN	CHCH	P	FROM EDWARDS VALLEY THROUGH DECEPTION TO
5-2-03	1	Nils Weidmann	Germany	?	From Teuka Hut - Murchison Riv - Keeti ridge Tomorrow out to Aickens
7-2-03	1	Garth Repley	CHCH	P (or)	Pass out to Aickens today or stay at Biv the
11-3-03	2	Oliver Breen Sue Horne-Jones	Geelong Greymouth	P (or)	Aickens -> Taramakau -> Murchison Pass -> Murchison -> Biv
19-3-03	1	Michael Ostosh	CHCH	P	
"	1	STEWART RIPPON	BARCLAYTON	P	TOPS TARAMAKAU -> BACK HERE -> AICKENS
"	x2	JOHN & SUE BRUNSON	ALEX	P	MURCHISON PASS -> RAMPART -> WAT. CORNER VIA BIV

before they built more substantial homes, or erected huts in which to base themselves while employed in such occupations as bush felling and gum digging. Virtually none of these huts survive. The ongoing existence of a hut largely depends on use. A needed and used hut will persist; an abandoned one soon falls down and rots.

Farm Huts

The oldest existing huts in New Zealand were built for farming purposes during the early days of pastoral agriculture in the South Island. High-country farmers may have found pleasure in walking, but they didn't stroll simply for the fun of it. It was more a means to an end, as were the huts they built. Many used local stone, and the survival of these huts owes much to the durability of this material, along with their locations on the more easterly (drier) side of the Southern Alps.

Farm huts often served as accommodation for hunters employed by farmers to control wild dogs, rabbits or pigs, an example being the Iron Whare in the Kawekas. It's difficult to imagine now, but wild dogs – probably the progeny of Maori kuri and escaped Pakeha dogs – once roamed the mountains in menacing packs, and they found sheep an easy target. After rabbits reached plague proportions in the South Island, many farmers found it cheaper to employ rabbiters and house them in huts than to suffer the loss of grazing.

Mining and Road-building Huts

From the late 1850s onwards, gold prospectors also built ramshackle affairs from which they could toil over their pans and cradles, but very few from the earliest gold-mining period now survive. Most of those that still do exist, like Cecil Kings and Waingaro Forks huts (both in Kahurangi National Park), date from the 1930s, when the Depression spurred a brief flush of reworking old gold sites.

Road builders and men maintaining water races also lived in huts, some of which have survived. Jacks Hut, a one-time roadman's hut at Arthur's Pass, has in recent years been preserved beautifully, but it's more a museum piece than a backcountry hut. However, Blowfly Hut, once a roadman's hut on the West Coast's Haast–Paringa Track, serves as a public hut.

Huts for Tourism and Recreation

It's difficult to pinpoint which hut was the first erected purely for recreation. In 1882, English climber William Spotswood Green pioneered mountaineering in New Zealand with his attempt on Aoraki/Mt Cook. Green later urged New Zealanders to form their own alpine club so that they might devote 'the subscriptions to building a few huts in certain centres of [the] Southern Alps'.²⁴

As the fledgling tourist industry grew in New Zealand, huts for recreation came onto the agenda. During the 1890s, the government paid for huts to be



The restored roadman's hut, Jacks Hut, Arthur's Pass National Park, Canterbury, 2004. Built in 1879, it is a rare example of a roadman's cottage. It served as a bach for the Butler family for many decades from 1923. SHAUN BARNETT/BLACK ROBIN PHOTOGRAPHY

built at Aoraki/Mount Cook and on the Milford Track, and many more were erected over the ensuing decades. Some of these huts have now been rebuilt several times. Pioneer Hut in Westland Tai Poutini National Park, for example, has had five incarnations spanning eighty years.

Club Huts

After the First World War there was renewed enthusiasm for outdoor pursuits. During the 1920s and 1930s, many tramping clubs formed in New Zealand, in addition to the already existing New Zealand Alpine Club, part of an international movement that saw interest in mountain walking flourish. Many members saw building a hut as a rite of passage for their club. The New Zealand Deerstalkers' Association (NZDA) was formed in 1937, and soon built its own huts too. Through the activities of clubs, huts in a wide range of designs and materials sprang up over the backcountry in a largely ad hoc fashion.

Before helicopters arrived in New Zealand, club members toiled to build these huts in ways that are now almost unimaginable. Even after planes began to be used for transporting material in the late 1940s, most clubs could not afford them and simply continued using traditional means: hard slog on foot.

To some extent a hut also served as a symbol of ownership, a way for a club to stamp its name on its patch. Neither clubs nor government agencies are immune to this desire. But overall, constructing public huts is a nice form of democracy, and most clubs were driven by an eagerness to do something for the

greater good. Providing open huts, freely available to all-comers, also helped clubs to recruit new trampers.

Government Huts for Deer Cullers and National Parks

Coinciding with the golden age of clubs in New Zealand in the 1930s was the beginning of deer culling by the Department of Internal Affairs (DIA). One scientist described it as the ‘biggest control campaign against large mammals ever undertaken in the world’, and it lasted more than forty years.²⁵ Hut building was not a priority at first, but later on the DIA did build a significant number of huts and also pioneered the use of planes to air-drop materials.

Between the 1950s and 1970s, a great hut-building boom swept New Zealand, instigated by the New Zealand Forest Service (NZFS) when it took over deer control from the DIA in 1956. It was the NZFS that populated the backcountry with its now classic six- and four-bunk designs.

During the 1960s and 1970s, the Department of Lands and Survey, through the national park boards, augmented the number of facilities by building huts in the national parks it managed, which were often larger than the huts built by the NZFS. The impact of all these new huts on outdoor recreation, together with the construction of attendant tracks and bridges, was nothing short of transformational, and helped drive a second tramping boom in the 1970s.

After commercial helicopter hunting took over from ground culling in the late 1960s, the Forest Service – somewhat in rivalry with Lands and Survey – built larger huts too. Some, like the twenty-bunk Holdsworth Lodge, built near the road end in Tararua Forest Park, were aimed at school groups and signalled that the NZFS was now taking provision of recreation facilities very seriously.

The DOC Era

After Lands and Survey and the Forest Service were disbanded in 1987, the Department of Conservation (DOC) was formed, marking the first time a single body, rather than several, managed New Zealand’s conservation lands – and huts. Unfortunately, DOC received only limited government funding at first, despite having even greater responsibilities than its parent departments. Consequently, some facilities – including huts – went through a period of neglect. As always, however, passionate DOC staff made do on shoestring budgets and undertook some superb maintenance work in many backcountry areas.

The changing nature of New Zealand’s population, combined with the increasing numbers of tourists visiting the country, also had implications for backcountry huts. Up until the 1970s, the backcountry was still very much the domain of New Zealanders. During the 1980s, however, when cheap international flights became available, a growing tourist backpacker movement discovered New Zealand’s tracks. The trickle of overseas visitors suddenly became a flood. Many enjoyed long stays in New Zealand, with huts providing the cheapest form of holiday accommodation possible. Recognising this trend early

Wilderness: A Backlash Against Huts

If any single measure exists of how successful the combined Forest Service and Lands and Survey hut-building programme was in changing the nature of the New Zealand backcountry, it is the counter-culture ‘wilderness’ movement that reached its crescendo in the early 1980s. Forest Service ranger Athol Geddes, whose team built nearly two dozen huts in the Tararuas between 1960 and the mid-1970s, recalled, ‘Sometimes we copped a bit of flak from the tramping clubs. They said we were making the Tararuas too safe!’²⁶

As early as the 1960s, some people within the Federated Mountain Clubs felt there was a very real danger that all these huts and tracks would erode the very wild and remote nature of the many mountainous parts of New Zealand’s backcountry. Calls for the establishment of ‘wilderness areas’ culminated in a landmark 1981 conference hosted by FMC at Lake Rotoiti Lodge, Nelson Lakes. Participants included not only tramping and climbing club members, but policymakers, Forest Service and Lands and Survey managers, and politicians. Two years later, FMC’s influential book *Wilderness Recreation in New Zealand* appeared, edited by articulate wilderness advocate Les Molloy. Molloy’s early life was strongly shaped by trips to remote places like the Olivine Ice Plateau, and he firmly believed that New Zealand needed some places free from all human infrastructure, including huts, tracks and bridges. The book identified ten such areas, ranging from the Raukumara Range near East Cape to the Pegasus area of Stewart Island/Rakiura.

As early as the 1950s and 1960s, wilderness areas were established within Arthur’s Pass and Tongariro national parks, but these were small and inadequate. In 1974, Lands and Survey had already responded to the call for larger wilderness areas by establishing two (the Glaisnock and Pembroke) in Fiordland National Park. After the FMC conference, the Forest Service responded positively with two more, the Raukumara and Tasman (Northwest Nelson), although these were not finally gazetted until 1988. Since then, six of the ten areas identified in the book have been gazetted as wilderness: places where trampers can meet nature purely on nature’s terms, without even a track to lead them there.

Forest Service deer cullers G. Savage and H. Maunder in a hut, 1964.
PHOTO: JOHN JOHNS, NZFS COLLECTION, ARCHIVES NZ, WELLINGTON, M9756



Hut Fees

Many trampers believe the introduction of hut fees coincided with the formation of DOC in 1987. They have, however, been around for much longer; DOC merely initiated a consistent nationwide fee policy. Charging for the use of huts was not a new idea: tourist tracks like the Milford imposed fees right from their beginning in the late 1890s, and the same applied to the first huts established in the Aoraki/Mount Cook area.

In the early years of the Tararua Tramping Club in the 1920s and 1930s, it decided not to charge for the use of its huts, viewing this as a reciprocal arrangement with other clubs. However, during the Depression fees provided essential revenue for other huts. In 1930, for example, the Mt Balloon Scenic Reserve Board charged 1 shilling for Flora and Salisbury huts in Northwest Nelson,²⁷ and at the same time the cost of hut fees was a major point of contention in the Aoraki/Mount Cook area. During the 1940s, a 1-shilling fee also applied to the Port Levy Saddle Hut in Canterbury.

The New Zealand Alpine Club has charged overnight fees right from when it built its first hut in 1931. At the same time, the Mt Egmont Alpine Club charged modest fees for an overnight stay at Syme Hut. During the 1970s, Syme's fees rose to \$1.25 for non-members and \$1 for members, and included a 10¢ day-use charge.²⁸ Most tramping clubs, however, didn't charge fees, although sometimes club parties would deny access to private hunters, but only if the hut was full.

In the 1960s, national park boards charged modest fees for most huts in national parks, including Nelson Lakes and Abel Tasman. This was a small attempt at some cost recovery from the boards, which did not have the resources of the Forest Service. Geoff Spearpoint, who was working in national parks in the 1980s, remembers that charges were nominal when introduced, but escalated: 'Setting the fee was a bit arbitrary; there wasn't much alignment between costs and charges. During this time the \$2 fee for Routeburn huts doubled to \$4.'²⁹

Forest Service huts were free, a fact not lost on either Lands and Survey or the fee-avoiding public. The working plan for Northwest Nelson Forest Park in 1965–70 clearly stated: 'No charge shall be made for use of any huts in the park, but donations may be accepted and used towards the upkeep of huts.'³⁰ However, by 1979 hut fees were accepted in principal by the Northwest Nelson State Forest Park Advisory Committee,³¹ and were finally introduced to the park in July 1986, the year before DOC was formed.³²

In 1989, DOC introduced the first nationwide hut fee system, based on hut standards: the more facilities, the higher the fee. A brief history of DOC published in 2007 recorded: 'The fee system for national park huts and DOC campgrounds was extended to forest park huts in 1989 and 1990, to general public outcry at having to pay \$4 a night, and later grudging acceptance.'³³ The fee for a basic hut has since risen to \$5.

Although some grumbled at the charges, and complained that they had already paid for huts through their taxes, no one could deny the enormous cost to DOC of maintaining such a large network. Later, an annual hut pass was introduced, to cover all but Alpine, Category 1 and Great Walks huts. Hut fees help offset maintenance costs, but by no means cover it. Compliance at many huts is often disappointingly low, except where resident hut wardens enforce payment.

Costs for staying in Great Walk huts rose steadily during the first years of the twenty-first century, to \$51.10/night for the Milford Track in 2012. However, in 2008, after protests from Federated Mountain Clubs and others that the cost to families had become prohibitively high, DOC promptly abolished fees for under-eighteens.³⁷



The NZAC's Murchison Hut, Aoraki/Mount Cook National Park, November 1977.
PHOTO: BRUCE POSTILL

on, DOC gave 'front country' areas more attention and developed the concept of Great Walks, making use of popular tracks like the Heaphy, Tongariro Northern Circuit, Milford, Routeburn, Lake Waikaremoana and Abel Tasman.

For a while the increasing use of huts, fuelled in part by the growing numbers of overseas tourists, created something of an arms race over hut size. The greater the use of huts, the more pressure to build ever-bigger designs. This perhaps culminated in the decision to build the Pinnacles Hut in Coromandel Forest Park in the early 1990s, which at eighty bunks remains New Zealand's largest hut. Crowded huts can be unpleasant, and DOC wanted to avoid criticism by catering for the increased demand. But larger and larger huts create their own catch-22, tending to attract even more people. Traditional New Zealand trampers tended to react negatively against the bigger huts, with not unjustified accusations that they were soulless and that taxpayer dollars were effectively being used to subsidise the tourist industry.

DOC has also had to contend with hut and fire regulations, which have imposed sometimes draconian standards that are suited more to urban situations than backcountry huts. Often DOC has been able to negotiate sensible decisions, such as the requirement for only those huts exceeding ten bunks to need a second fire exit. But Occupational Safety and Health regulations have sometimes added a layer of the ridiculous to this, occasionally provoking exasperated comments from trampers like Barry Dunnett, who on discovering a fire exit sign in a two-bunk hut wrote, 'Come on DOC! In some huts highlighting the fire exit is a useful safety feature, but in many smaller huts – especially bivvies – they are totally redundant.'³⁵

After a period of cutbacks, DOC gained additional funding for huts and tracks in 2002–03, which marked the beginning of a new era of hut building to DOC designs.

Hut Architecture

The words 'hut' and 'architecture' perhaps seem mutually exclusive. Indeed, many of New Zealand's oldest huts were put together without anything resembling a blueprint or plan. The style of architecture used in any one era was often simply dependent on the means available for transporting materials, and the type of materials readily to hand. For example, corrugated iron and timber were



Interior of Bealey Spur Hut, Arthur's Pass National Park, 1993. PHOTO: SHAUN BARNETT/BLACK ROBIN PHOTOGRAPHY

used without a great degree of architectural variation in many high-country stations, while stone served in other, treeless, parts of Otago and Canterbury. Although on a superficial level many of these huts do resemble one another, this is mostly the result of practicality, and to imply any master architectural plan is overstating the case.

Similarly, club huts built in the forested ranges of the North Island were often constructed using timber sawn on site. Fixed-wing planes used for air-drops could carry only limited lengths of materials, so huts were designed accordingly. Helicopters expanded the possibilities of using different materials, and over time have helped encourage the general drift towards larger huts.

Many New Zealand trampers have a clear preference for older-style huts, probably for several reasons: their simplicity, their small size, and the nostalgia associated with a bygone era. The more individualistic a hut, the more it speaks of its human character, of those who built it, maintained it and used it. For this reason, some despise larger, newer huts, and this opinion is not always confined to locals. On a visit in 2006, English hiker Stephen Pern made this comment in the NZFS-built Mid Waiohine Hut in Tararua Forest Park: 'At last – a proper

Hut Nuts

In recent years, a certain type of trumper has become obsessive enough about huts to ‘collect’ them. ‘Hut baggers’ will make strange and seemingly pointless deviations from their route just to visit an extra hut. They record their growing tallies, sometimes keeping photo albums of every hut they’ve visited, much as a twitcher might check bird observations from a list. The hut bagger places a higher value on the remotest huts, just as a twitcher does with a rare bird.

Hut bagging is not quite as eccentric or pointless as might be imagined. The number of huts visited does reflect a level of tramping experience. Marton’s Rangitikei Tramping Club offers an annual prize for the member who has bagged the most huts. Other clubs, such as the Hutt Valley Tramping Club and Palmerston North Tramping and Mountaineering Club, run bagging competitions.

Self-confessed hut bagger Brian Dobbie, a keen trumper for thirty-five years, is DOC’s national officer responsible for hut and track standards. He’s visited more than 600 backcountry huts and says that to ‘bag’ a hut, a trumper must ‘darken its door with [their] shadow’. The differences between huts interest him: ‘I’m just intrigued by the decision to build a hut in a particular place, the way in which it is constructed, how it fits with the particular landscape ... I love seeing huts with character, ones that have a little something extra.’³⁶

Almost undoubtedly, the record for the most number of huts visited belongs to Christchurch trumper Mark Pickering, author of *Huts: Untold Stories from Back-country New Zealand* (2010). He has visited over 1150 backcountry huts, most of them on the public conservation estate but also a couple of hundred high-country mustering huts. In addition to mustering huts he particularly likes old Forest Service huts, but large modern huts leave him cold. He rates the Kepler Track’s Luxmore Hut as New Zealand’s ugliest.

Visiting so many huts led Pickering to write eloquently about them in *A Trumper’s Journey* (2004): ‘I confess to a deep affection for mountain



As one the least-visited huts in the country, the West Coast’s Sir Robert Hut, photographed here in 1991, is something of a holy grail for hut baggers. In 2007, the hut book recorded the visits of just 61 people since 1983, an average of two to three people per year. The hut’s popularity peaked in 1993, when eight people visited, one of them writing: ‘Great hut! ... maybe 1993 marks a revival in popularity.’ It was a premature hope: the next entry came three years later. PHOTO: GEOFF SPEARPOINT

huts. They are durable and vulnerable, a bit like the people who use them I suppose. A few get blown to oblivion but most hang on in there, and even with years of neglect they can still manage to do the job they were set down on this earth for.’³⁷

hut than smells like a hut and sounds like a hut – not a horrible barn like Mangahao Flats or Te Matawai which don’t have anywhere to dry your clothes.’³⁸

But rustic does not always equate to character or historic value. Old huts always have the added layer of history and stories that – by charming us – disguises their faults: cold, draughty, rodent-infested or dark. DOC managers

have, over the past twenty-five years, tried to provide a range of facilities to suit differing needs, and this is reflected in the types of huts provided. The trend has largely been for more comfortable, better insulated and better lit huts, sometimes with sinks and running water – from a tap, not just a nearby stream.

Undoubtedly, the new DOC hut designs have been aimed at encouraging

less experienced people to enjoy the hills by providing some degree of comfort, including double glazing and insulation. Soulless they may be, but practical and popular? Definitely. The reasons behind the appeal of a hut's design are as wide-ranging as the reasons why people enjoy the outdoors, and there is no doubt that many trampers much prefer a warm, dry, new hut. And over time, of course, these new huts will develop their own stories and personalities.

Throughout this book, we've tried to demonstrate the wonderful diversity of huts in New Zealand, and the fascinating history they represent. Retaining diversity across historic eras is important. Hut standards serve a necessary purpose, but if they are too regimental they stifle any design creativity. Somehow, regulation needs to make allowances for individual or regional designs, yet still maintain a basic standard to ensure low-maintenance, long-lasting huts.

The role of older huts in the story of our backcountry heritage is slowly becoming accepted – even celebrated. Indeed, DOC has in recent years identified many huts worthy of historic status, and many of the oldest huts have been assessed for their heritage value. DOC's Jackie Breen and Steve Bagley have been at the forefront of this effort, along with conservation architect Chris Cochran and historian Michael Kelly. Clubs have celebrated their huts in their journals, too, and since 2001 the Federated Mountain Clubs (FMC) has run regular 'Huts as Heritage' features in its quarterly *FMC Bulletin*. This growing interest in, and appreciation of, huts is extremely pleasing.

Though falling short of Buckingham Palace, these simple structures embody so many backcountry stories. Through the cycles of neglect and care huts also echo the wider political context. For ultimately, although on the surface they may seem to be just four walls and a roof, at their core huts are about people.

Perhaps no one has described the worth of huts better than mountaineer Paul Powell:

It came to me what shelter means in the mountains. Huts, tents, shelter rocks, were more than stops along the way – places where men stayed to eat and sleep, leaving them to hunt deer, cross passes or cut transient steps up summit ice.



McCormack Hut at Luncheon Rock, Westland Tai Poutini National Park, about to be engulfed by the advancing Franz Josef Glacier, July 1985. The hut was dismantled and removed, and now forms part of other huts. PHOTO: BRUCE POSTILL

Shelter in the hills meant more than cleaning a rifle, mapping the cross-country tramp, or resting for the climb. In huts or under bivvy rocks men were relaxed ... By the fire they bragged like Norsemen, argued like Jesuits, sang like minstrels, and dreamed like poets ... Such hospices were the beginning and the end of mountain life with the minutes of action sandwiched in between.³⁹

SHAUN BARNETT