

# A Difficult Path

*By Barrie Woods*

Imagine this, if you will...

It is 10am on Monday, December 16, 1850. The Charlotte Jane, the first of the First Four Ships bringing the Canterbury Association's first settlers has just anchored at Lyttelton. Once brought ashore the passengers are mustered together to be briefed on the journey they would shortly make on foot, across the Bridle Path, which would take them to the new settlement of Christchurch, waiting for them on the other side of the hills.

This image of new settlers traversing the Bridle Path en masse, dressed in their Sunday best, to take up residence in their new Christchurch homes is how many of us picture the arrival of the city's first pilgrim founders. However, it is actually far from the way it really was.

In December of 1850, when the first four ships arrived, Christchurch did not yet exist. There was only one building in the area where the city would eventually be built, a surveyor's hut – no streets, no houses, and definitely no cathedral to mark the centre. Instead, the new arrivals were to stay in Lyttelton. Four immigration barracks had been built in Lyttelton in preparation for the arrival of the settlers. With 750 new arrivals they were cramped, so many of the younger single men camped out or built temporary huts nearby. Many of the cabin passengers preferred to stay on board their ships in more comfortable conditions.

To understand the greater picture, it is helpful to know a little about the first settlers. They came as two discrete groups: 'colonists' and 'emigrants'. The colonists had sufficient money to buy land, and they travelled as cabin passengers. Emigrants were mainly skilled workers and their families and travelled as steerage class passengers. For most, their passage was subsidised, either by the Canterbury Association or their prospective

employers in the new land, as their labour was needed to help build the settlement. Whether colonists or emigrants, they all came with a sense of adventure and hope for a better life.



*A painting of Lyttelton in 1850 by J. Gibb showing the immigration barracks*

The settlers arriving on the first four ships were not the very first to arrive. Lyttelton (Port Cooper) was already established and families such as the Deans and Gebbies had already begun farming on the plains. Some preparations for the building of Christchurch had started, but there was still much to be done.

Land was not allocated to the colonists until February 1951, so it was a while before they could start making plans, let alone commence building. The town sections in Lyttelton were actually the most desirable and there was certainly more opportunity for work in Lyttelton for the immigrants, so for a while Lyttelton was the place to be. Christchurch on the other hand was still largely swamp land and with much development work needing to happen. Many of the first buildings were V-huts, which were small temporary shelters that were used until proper houses could be built.

The Bridle Path was intended as a temporary route over the hill until a road could be completed via



*V-huts at Riccarton, 1864*

Evans Pass. Due to a shortage of labour and funds, it was not until 1857 that the Sumner (Evans Pass) road was completed, and even then it was a tortuous route. The Bridle Path was therefore the main access by land to the plains for some time.



*This 1881 etching, based on a drawing by William Fox, is of the view early settlers would have seen before descending to Heathcote.*

In her letter home to her mother dated 26<sup>th</sup> November 1850, Charlotte Godley wrote: "...about £300 has been devoted to making a bridle path, over the hill, immediately above the port; which is about two miles shorter than the line of the road, but will only be meant for horses. When we went up there was still a bit at the top where no one can ride; man and horse must climb over rough stones and rocks, and on the other side the descent is steep enough to make most people prefer walking, too, until the path is completed."

Having to dismount one's horse and lead it by the bridle gave rise to the name Bridle Path.

No doubt sooner or later the first arrivals made the trek, at least to the top of the Bridle Path to survey the view. For many, after weeks at sea, it would

not have been an easy feat. It proved too much for 41-year-old baker, John Williams, a passenger from the Randolph (one of the first four ships), who was found dead on the path from a stroke.

In its early days the Bridle Path was not only used as a route to take people between Lyttelton and the plains, but it was also used for moving stock animals such as cattle and sheep. Larger items were taken by ferry, across the Sumner bar, and landed at the Ferrymead wharf.

On the Heathcote side, on a clear day, travellers would have been greeted by magnificent views across the plains to the mountains, and little to no sign of human habitation. The Heathcote Valley was relatively sparsely vegetated, with mostly grass and tussock, but few trees or bush. For those travellers in the summer of 1850, it would have been hot and dry, and the grass would have been brown, much as we see it in summer today, except there would have been no gorse or broom.

On 17<sup>th</sup> March 1857, the first vehicle crossed the Port Hills - a spring cart pulled by bullocks negotiated the Bridle Path. It is perhaps surprising that it took that long to form a track which could be safely negotiated by a cart, which gives testament to the roughness of the track at the time. Even after the Sumner road was opened, the Bridle Path remained an important route across the hills, until the rail tunnel was opened in 1867. The original route ran from Norwich Quay to Ferrymead and was named Bridle Road. In fact, to this day the Bridle Path is still a legal road which, in theory, could be used by motor vehicles, though this would be considered inappropriate given its popularity as a walking track. The lower parts of the route, at both ends, are now sealed roads bearing the name Bridle Path Road.

Today the Bridle Path is a popular walking track which follows the footsteps of the early settlers. The Canterbury Pioneer Women's Memorial is located at the top of the path and was unveiled on Saturday 14<sup>th</sup> December 1940 to mark the

centenary of the founding of New Zealand and the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi. Most celebrations at the time focussed on the pioneering spirit of the first European settlers, but the place of the Treaty of Waitangi or Māori in these celebrations was less obvious. An interesting and obscure fact – the memorial has its own street address: 915 Summit Road, though I'm not so sure that NZ Post delivers there.



*The Canterbury Pioneer Women's Memorial*

While we are on the subject of facts, the Bridle Path reaches an altitude of 333 metres. The present-day track starts from the Gondola carpark at the Heathcote end and finishes near the Lyttelton portal of the road tunnel. The route is 2.4Km long and takes around one and a half hours to walk depending on your level of fitness. It's certainly a steep climb and a rest or two may be needed along the way to catch your breath. In fact, there are seven stone seats along the way where you can stop for recovery and take in the views as you do so. Most of these were built for the Canterbury centenary celebrations in 1950.

A Wayside Memorial Cross was erected in 1856, at the request of Charlotte Godley, to mark the site of a small spring where she rested and drank the water. The first cross was made of white stone and erected near a water-tank on the path, but by July 1857 it had fallen over and was in pieces. The cross, having been vandalised numerous times, was replaced in 1864 and again in 1898. It was eventually destroyed in the 2011 earthquakes.

In December of 1950, to mark the Canterbury



*A large crowd turned out in 1950 to re-enact the arrival of the First Four Ships.*

centennial, there was a re-enactment of the arrival of the First Four Ships where some of the descendants of the Canterbury Pilgrims dressed in period costume and walked over the Bridle Path. Historians seem to think that this event, together with photographs taken at the time, gave rise to the myth that the new arrivals disembarked their ships and immediately marched over the hill to Christchurch, as the re-enactment appeared to portray.

If you feel like an adventure culminating in coffee at Lyttelton, or other liquid refreshment as a reward, then a Bridle Path excursion may be just the ticket. And talking about tickets, you can catch the bus through the tunnel back home to Heathcote again, unless you want to walk the track over again. Another option for the less physically fit is to take the Gondola to the top, then walk along the Summit road to the Bridle Path, and take the downwards route, either to Lyttelton and coffee or back to Heathcote (and coffee). Choose a fine day and you will be treated to some spectacular views.