PROJECT UPDATE October 2020



New Öpaoa River Bridge



Locals and visitors to
Marlborough will be
well aware of progress
on the New Ōpaoa
River Bridge project,
particularly the opening
of the northbound lane
to traffic in June, and the
southbound lane shortly
afterwards.

Despite some delays to works due to the COVID-19 lockdown, the past months have seen an extraordinary effort from the wider team involved in building the new Ōpaoa River Bridge, conserving the original Opawa Bridge, and creating the prominent heritage gateway.

At this stage, construction of the new bridge is expected to be complete by the end of October. Work including final conservation and heritage measures will continue into November. This includes steam-cleaning the heritage bridge, the placement of two five-metre long panels that illustrate the story of Ōpaoa, and riparian planting of native species.

Barring any further COVID-19 interruptions, an official opening is planned for the end of November 2020.

We thank you whole-heartedly for your patience and support throughout this important project, from initial public consultation, through to navigation of the works as traffic was relocated to the new bridge. This has truly been a community effort, and has resulted in a fantastic community asset.





Urban design the gateway to Wairau (Blenheim)

Conservation and heritage have been key priorities throughout the project, reflected in the urban design of the new bridge, and the recreation and gateway areas. Complex measures have been taken to preserve the original bridge for its protection and for the enjoyment of locals and visitors.

The new Opaoa River Bridge is deliberately simple and slender - though it's amost twice as wide as its predecessor - with octagonal piers that reflect the octagonal bowstring arches from the original.

Only three other bridges with this particular arch design remain in New Zealand, which makes preserving the original bridge important.

Cultural references and native plant themes help weave together the past and present, with harakeke (flax) elements appearing throughout the bridge design. Not only has harakeke been an important resource for iwi for hundreds of years, this area was also once home to a flax mill, making the plant a valuable part of the Opaoa story.

A stylised version of the harakeke and its flower appears along the new bridge's concrete side barrier. The patterns are repeated on several panels, with the motif fading from dark to light along the bridge's length.



Conservation and heritage

Heritage Conservation Architect Chessa Stevens, working with infrastructure consultancy WSP, came on board at the beginning of the project to create a Conservation Management Plan, aimed at ensuring the best possible preservation of the original Opawa Bridge.

Chessa specialises in conservation, restoration, renovation, and adaptive reuse of historic and character buildings and landmarks. She says the heritage bridge has been a fascinating project.

'It's been really satisfying to see this through from birth to fruition - and we're completing some of the last and most important processes to revitalise and preserve the bridge.'

Under Chessa's watchful eye, the old Opawa Bridge has been carefully steam-cleaned.

'This is the first time the bridge has ever been fully cleaned,' says Chessa. 'Steam is a good choice because it's very gentle and won't abrade the concrete, and it's effective at removing lichen, moss and other buildup. Keeping moisture to a minimum is important as well, as this has the potential to cause further damage.'

The next step will be to apply a special treatment specifically developed for historic structures, which will help prevent regrowth.

'The bridge won't look like a brand-new structure after this work,' says Chessa. 'The aim isn't to get it perfectly clean and sparkling, but to give it a bit of TLC while maintaining the history and integrity. We're leaving some of the impact damage for example, because it tells the story of how the bridge was used by vehicles over the decades.'





Along with preservation, the Opawa Bridge will receive some upgrades, including state-of-the-art LED lighting, power points and tie-down points, and seating so the space can be used for local markets and recreation. It will also become a key part of the walking and cycling path alongside State Highway 1.

Ten metres of storytelling

Artist, designer and storyteller Janet Bathgate has researched and written the two five-metre-long 'interpretive' panels that will sit on the southbound side of the bridge. These story panels will help visitors learn about and engage with the area, the bridge, and its historical importance.

Designed in 1912, the Opawa Bridge is a Heritage NZ Category 1 Historic Place, indicating a place of outstanding significance.

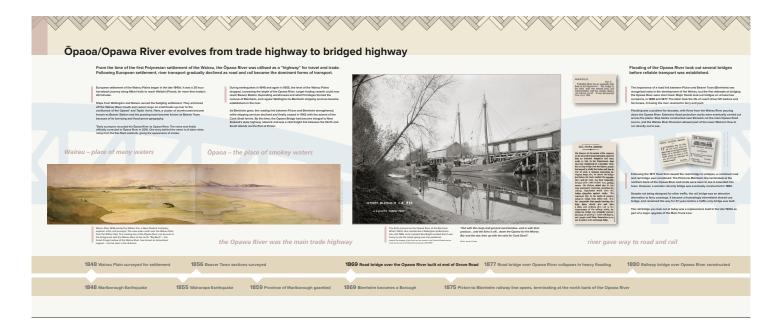
Janet worked over a two-year period with three local iwi, Te Rūnanga a Rangitāne o Wairau, Ngāti Toa Rangatira, and Ngāti Rārua, to gather stories about the abundant, complex history of Wairau. She also trawled through resources at the Marlborough Museum, as well as those used by Chessa Stevens in her conservation and heritage research on the original bridge.

The panels are illustrated with original photos, drawings, landscape paintings and maps.

'We can tell from the concrete bowstring arch truss that the designers of the bridge were pioneering innovators, highly aware of advances in international architecture,' says Janet.

She says there were several attempts to bridge the river before this, but flooding was a major issue.

'A rail bridge was in place for 30 years before the new construction, but with no official road or pedestrian access. Three years after work began, the new bridge opened in 1917.'



Examples of the interpretative panels.



Giving nature a helping hand

More than a century of human use has eroded the natural environment surrounding the bridge, turning what was once lush native bush and shrubs into barren grass.

Landscape Architect Matthew Tidball says replanting the area will help restore history through careful choice of indigenous species.

'A number of things have gone into selecting the five plant species and two tree species that will cover the northern banks,' says Matthew. 'We're supporting Marlborough District Council's "Tūī To Town" project, which encourages planting of indigenous plants to attract native birds to the region. We've also considered what the river wildlife needs, and what has deep roots for stabilisation.'

This has led to choices of kahikatea and tī kōuka trees, as well as mingimingi, toetoe, tussock, harakeke and kāpūngāwhā rushes.

Seeds and seedlings have been sourced locally where possible, with 200 plants already in the ground.

Clusters of tī kōuka trees will work with kahikatea to sow deep roots and keep the banks stabilised, while harakeke shades the river to manage weed growth. Fewer weeds will mean an easier passage for fish, with the shrubs still providing some refuge.

During the course of the project some trees were removed, however one large kahikatea abutting the heritage bridge has been preserved, in recognition of its landmark status and place in local history.



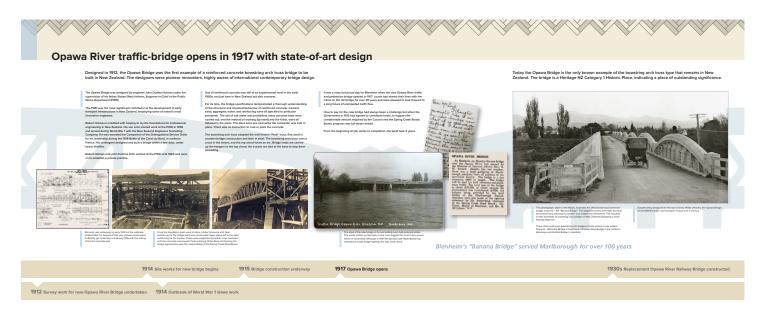
Blessing before lane opening in June

A pre-dawn blessing was held to mark the opening of the northbound lane on 22 June 2020. This was a significant milestone in the project as drivers could test out the new bridge for the first time.

Representatives from the three iwi, Marlborough Council, and Waka Kotahi staff and contractors gathered before dawn to acknowledge the work done so far and mark the next stage of construction.

See a video of the blessing here - nzta.govt.nz/projects/newopaoa-river-bridge/videos/

The southbound lane was opened soon after, with all traffic now flowing over the new Opaoa River Bridge. Meanwhile, in early September, a dawn blessing of the Kōhatu Mauri/Mauri stones at the future site of a new pou whenua was also held.



From landscaping to **landscapes**

Jim Gardiner is used to getting his hands a bit dirty while working on the new Opaoa River Bridge project, but these days it's just as likely to be from his love of paintbrushes and oils.

The Blenheim local's not only part of the hardworking project team, he's also the project's resident painter.

'It was in my early 20s when I started to get into it - studying nature, light on subjects, how the effects of light can change tone and depth perception. I'm what you call a landscape artist, I appreciate anything in nature - oceans, mountains, waterfalls, the light coming through leaves in forests.'

While he has been painting for about eight years, it was only when he started work on the Ōpaoa River Bridge that he was encouraged to try something different.

'This is the first time I've done a structure, so it was more of a learning experience. I was at the local tavern, where we drink on Friday nights and people realised I was an artist. They all started saying, 'you should paint the bridge, Jimmy!' I had thought about it while I've been working here, and it was a no-brainer. I thought I'd have a go at it, and then I brought it in.'



His workmates were so impressed at the first-up effort that they organised a whip-around, presenting the painting to a retiring colleague, Downer Project Manager Paul Cunliffe, as a farewell gift.

'I heard it's over forty years he's been working for Downer. So, I was happy that it's in good hands and he has some sort of memory of what he's accomplished.'

Jim says that seeing the pleasure his paintings give others is always rewarding, but it's also the challenge of accurately capturing a subject that keeps him coming back to the canvas.

'You just get lost with it. You've got to look for something you want to persevere with, and for those tonal ranges. It's really a study after that - you want to get the shapes right, the brushwork - it's a bit more of a science at the later stages, the finishing touches.'

While he's never considered making a living out of painting, Jim says he's definitely open to further commissions.

'If NZTA want me to do a painting of the Auckland Harbour Bridge, that'd be nice!'

