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FOXTON - A SMALL TOWN IN THE MANAWATU

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1. HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

Geographical Setting

Foxton (2,819)¹ is located on a former meander of the Manawatu River three miles from its mouth. It lies on the inland margin of the coastal sand dunes where they begin to merge into the flat alluvial plain of the Manawatu's lower course. To the north-east, at a distance of 24 miles by first class roads, lies Palmerston North (46,832), the main urban centre of the Manawatu, and eleven miles to the south-east is Levin, a bustling town of 11,402. Passing ten miles to the east is the Main Trunk Railway upon which is situated Shannon (1,544). (see Fig.1)

The area surrounding Foxton contains two distinct physical units. To the north and west are consolidated sand dunes which run inland from the coast and are separated by small areas of swampy ground. To the south and east lie the former swamplands of Moutoa.

The sand dune area can be further divided into two zones. The first is the actual dune complex, which consists of bare sand and marram-scrub cover, and stretches one to two miles inland from the coast. Limited areas of this zone have been developed to a semi-improved state and these portions are being used for semi-extensive sheep raising or dairying (where pockets of heavier soils occur in the swampy inter-dune areas). The second zone lies further inland and in this, farming is more intensive, with dairying being particularly important in the Croua Downs locality, eight miles to the north of Foxton.

The Moutoa district lies within a large loop of the Manawatu River and on its western edges fingers of consolidated sand dunes stretch down into it. Formerly Moutoa was swamp and highly susceptible to flooding but today it is drained and provides a fertile soil to support

¹ Population figures are taken from 1966 Census.

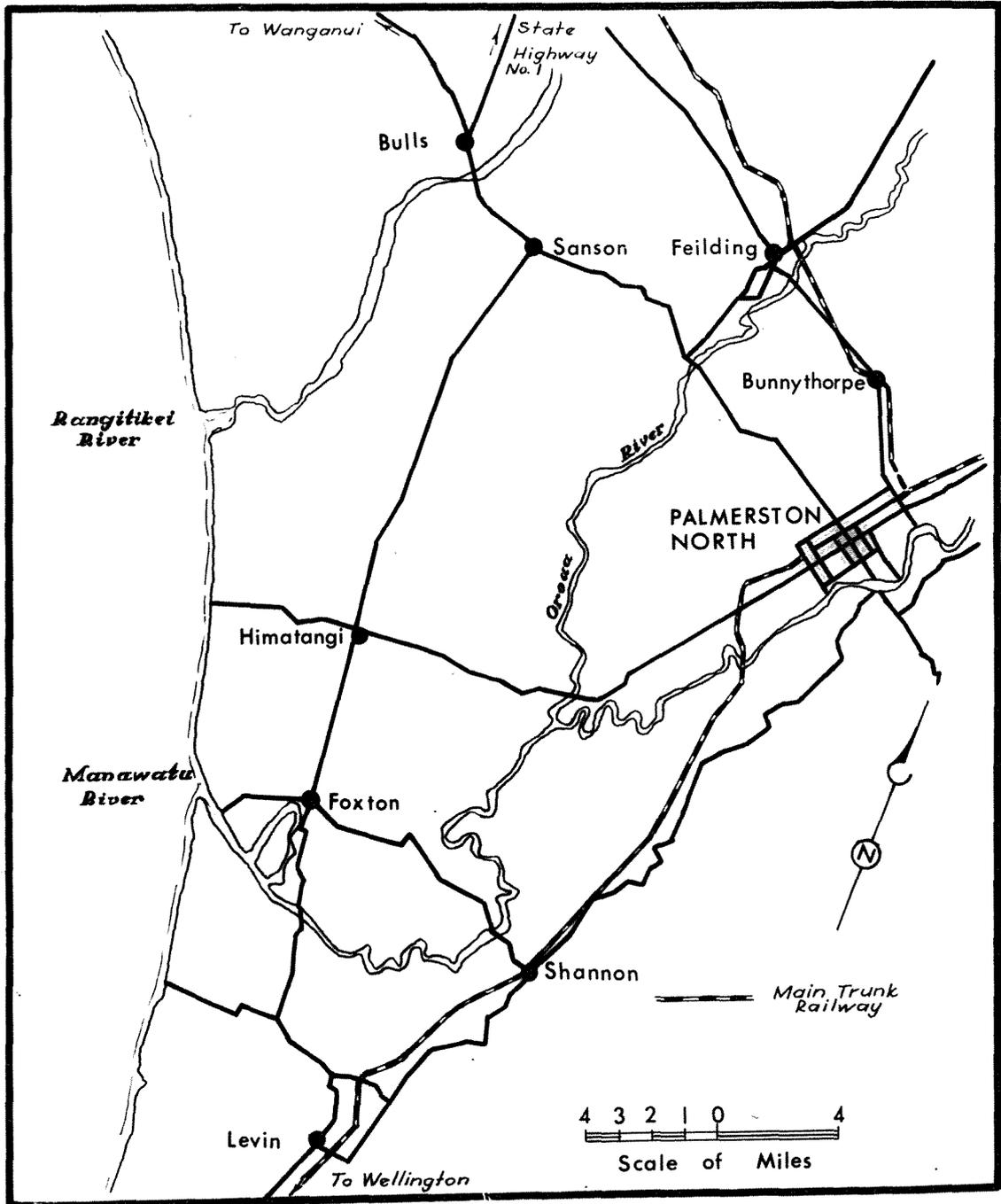


Fig.1 Manawatu — Location

the mixture of dairying and fat lamb raising that is carried out there. More important, it is here that the Department of Agriculture has established the Moutoa Estate which is the main source of Phormium tenax for the New Zealand Woolpack and Textile factory in Foxton.

This then is Foxton's physical setting: on the Manawatu River, near the lowest bridging point, on an important road route but not on the rail, and between the coastal sand dunes and the drained alluvial plain of the lower Manawatu. It is centrally situated in the southern North Island within easy reach of the three cities of the area. This location explains the rise, decline, and revival of Foxton.

Historical Setting

Foxton, the oldest town of the Manawatu owes its beginnings, in the 1850s, to its location near the mouth of the Manawatu River. From the time of its founding, until the construction of the Wellington-Manawatu railway in 1886, Foxton was the point of entry for the whole Manawatu. "For about 12 years Foxton was the only township in the whole district, and because of its coastal trade it remained the commercial centre for many years."¹ In 1870 a settlement, later to be known as Palmerston North, began in the Papaioea clearing. By 1878 this had a population of 880 compared with Foxton's 563. By then a railway link had been built between the two settlements. "In 1879 Foxton's future seemed sufficiently assured to justify the port being gazetted as a 'port of entry with a Custom Officer of its own and a bonded warehouse'."²

But the challenge of the railway soon put the future of Foxton as a port in a different light. The Government decision to

1 Oliver 67

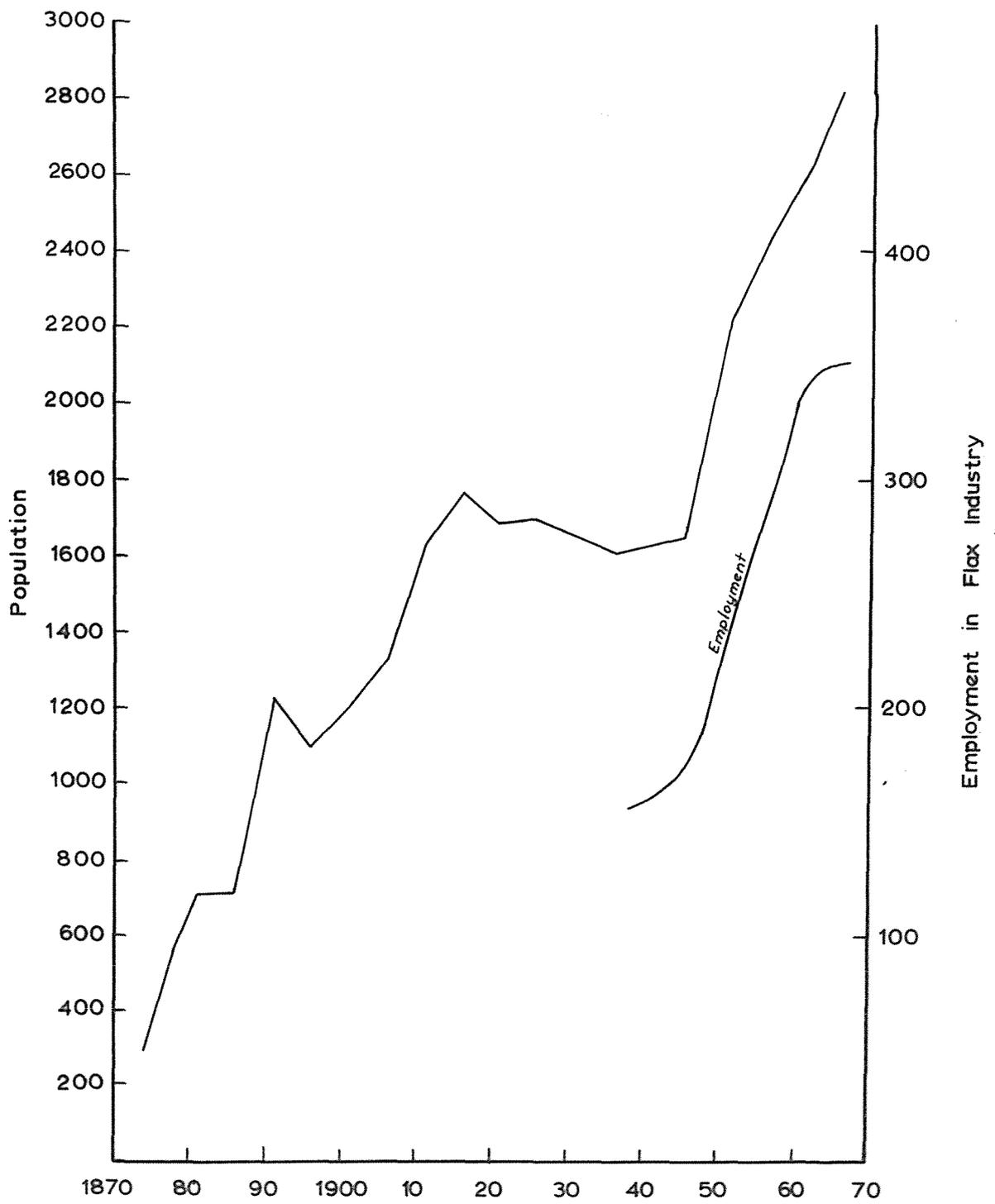
2 Hely 44

abandon the scheme to build a railway along the coast of the Manawatu area was crucial for the town. When the rail link between Wellington and the Manawatu was finally constructed in 1886, it was done so by the Manawatu Railway Company. Since this company owned land along the foothills of the Tararua Range they built the line there, ten miles from Foxton. This caused a sharp decline in Foxton's function as the point of entry to the Manawatu. From 1881 to 1886 Foxton's population grew by only one percent whereas Palmerston North's grew by 95 percent.

The late 1880s brought a flurry of renewed hope to Foxton when the price for flax rose rapidly on the London market. Between 1886 and 1891 the growth rate of the town was equal to that of Palmerston North and wharf revenue returned to the level attained prior to the construction of the Wellington-Manawatu Railway. But this boom period was short lived and the 1896 census revealed that the population had actually fallen. From then until 1911, due to the activity associated with the clearing and draining of the inland swamps, the town grew slowly reaching a population of 1,637.

Figure 2 illustrates the stagnation of Foxton between 1911 and 1946. During this period, while Levin was doubling in size, Foxton's population remained virtually unchanged. This stagnation was a reflection of the decline in Foxton's function as a communication and market centre. The growth of Levin as a rail centre, the decline of the port at Foxton, the lack of an extensive area of rich farmland to serve, and the ending of the flax clearing-swamp draining era, all played their part in practically halting the development of Foxton. The prospects of the town grew dim and efforts were made to persuade the Government to build a Levin-Greatford rail deviation to pass through Foxton. These failed and stagnation truly set in. The importance of both the port and

Fig.2 Population of Foxtton (1874-1966)
and Employment in Flax Industry(1937-1966)



the rail link to Palmerston North continued to decline. The question of where to site the main Wellington-Auckland highway during the 1920s saw the revival of the argument as to whether a coastal or inland route should be followed. This time the chosen route passed through Foxton, although not before some consternation was caused by an announcement that a Waikanae-Tokomeru path had been chosen.

Road transport began to expand at about this time and the railway revenue for the Foxton branch line fell even further. The flax industry declined to one small mill by the 1930s and from 1921 to 1936 the population fell by some 81 persons. Finally, in 1943, the Whirokino Cut, which was part of the Lower Manawatu Flood Control Scheme, was completed and the Foxton Harbour Board found itself without an effective harbour.

Thus in 1947 an observer could comment that: "It is the farmer who justifies the economic existence of the retail establishments."¹ After considering the prospects of the town's future, and noting the amount of undeveloped Maori land in the vicinity, the same observer concluded that "...the future function of Foxton is in a very definite way bound up with the future of its Maori people and their lands."² But he did note, although none too enthusiastically, that "...the whistle of the textile factory is a whistle of hope."³

Fortunately for the borough of Foxton this hope has been fulfilled. The beginnings of the town's revival were in the formation of New Zealand Woolpack and Textiles Limited which began production in 1934. During the 1920s the plentiful supplies of the superior sisal

1 Boniface 12

2 Boniface 76

3 Boniface 24

on the world market caused trade in Phormium tenax to virtually disappear. The development of a method of softening the phormium fibre so that it could be spun and woven had an important bearing on the decision to form the Woolpack and Textile company. The new industry was able to surmount early problems of production and by 1937 its woolpacks were selling well. World War 11 gave the fledgling industry further impetus and when this market was no longer available, a floor covering section was established. It is this development that has been the focus of recent growth.¹

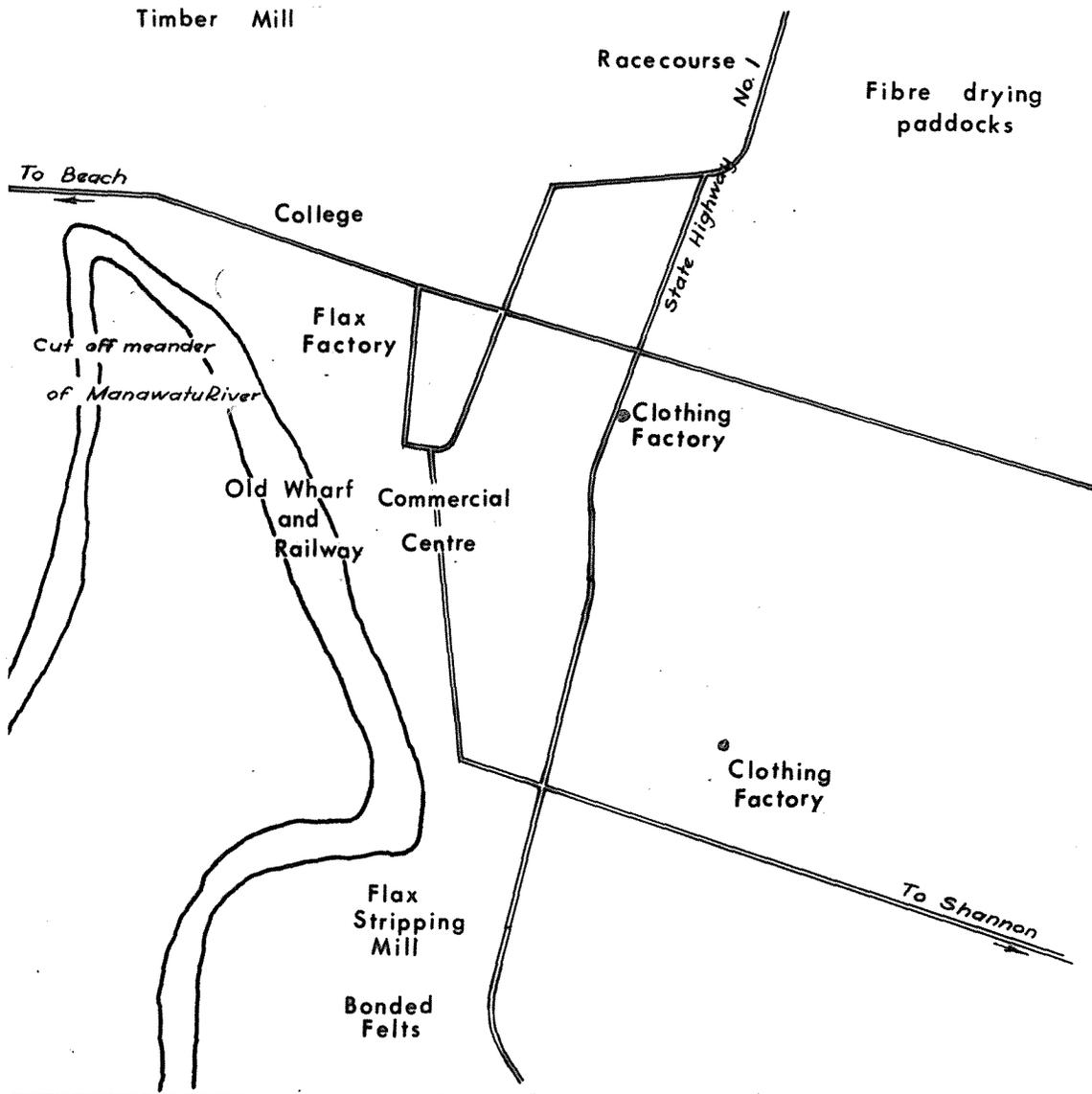
Since 1945 the population of Foxton has increased by 71 percent and employment in the flax industry by 100 percent. (See Fig. 2) The industry now employs 374, 308 of whom reside within the borough of Foxton. The industry has truly become the lifeblood of the town. From the production of woolpacks only, the company has expanded to the manufacture of carpeting, underfelt and upholsterer's padding. (The latter two are produced by a subsidiary, Bonded Felts Ltd.) Of the three types of carpeting produced, only one contains Phormium tenax (55 percent) and the other two use imported artificial and natural fibres. Today carpet production is one-third by value of the industry's output.

The success of the company has meant a revitalised town and the growth engendered by it has greatly increased the attraction of the town as a place of residence. During the 1950s, two clothing factories were established in the town to take advantage of the female labour that had become available. Today these two plants employ 83 persons or ten percent of those in full time employment in the town.

Other developments that have provided increased employment opportunities include the expansion of a small timber company which

1 A more detailed discussion of this development is found in Saunders and Anderson (ed) 203 - 206

Fig. 3a Foxton - location



Scale: 1 to 30,000

Fig. 3 Foxton



Photo. Lands and Survey Dept.

Scale: 1 to 30,000

today employs 35 men, although to some extent it has replaced jobs that disappeared when an older timber firm amalgamated and consolidated on the centre of its partner at Marton. The establishment of Manawatu College to replace the secondary department of the local District High School made Foxton a centre for education as well as providing additional employment. From seven in 1955 the number of staff at secondary level has risen to 22. During the same period the number of pupils has risen from 120 to 450. Over half of this increase has been due to the attendance of Shannon children at the College and the provision of school buses from Oroua Downs to Foxton rather than to Palmerston North as previously (see Chapter Six).

Future growth of Foxton would appear to be dependent on several factors, none of which seems likely to produce rapid change. First there is the possibility that ties formed as a result of attending College in the town may attract the patronage, if not the residence, of some of the nearby rural population. Second, the continued growth and popularity of Foxton Beach may also help the growth of Foxton, particularly as a service centre.

Third, and most significantly, there is the possibility of Foxton developing as a dormitory town for increasing numbers of the work force of Levin and Palmerston North. At present 18 percent of those employed full time are employed outside the town. Of this number the majority travel to Levin or Palmerston North. Should the road route to Palmerston North be shortened by three or four miles as is at present being considered, commuting from Foxton would be more attractive. The hopes that the much discussed Jumbo Jet Airport will be built on the Himatangi sand dunes, and thus give Foxton renewed prosperity as a residential and commercial centre to serve it, would appear to be without much concrete foundation.

An economist has suggested that the Moutoa Estate would be more profitable for the nation if it were used to grow grass. A move such as this could be a serious check to the town, but the continued increase in the production of carpeting from artificial and imported fibres would cushion the effect of it on Foxton. Whatever the extent to which the foreseeable changes do occur, the continued prosperity of the town would appear to be intimately dependent on the Woolpack factory and slow but steady growth in population is probable.