

Tuna Nui - a brief history

The Farm



The Tuna Nui run was taken up in 1861 by Andrew Hamilton Russell (known as Ham). He was joined by his brother William a year later and they ran the enterprise as a 50/50 partnership. At this stage they only had a right to occupy and run sheep on the 31,000 acre property, which stretched from the Black Bridge in the east to Waiwhare on the western side.

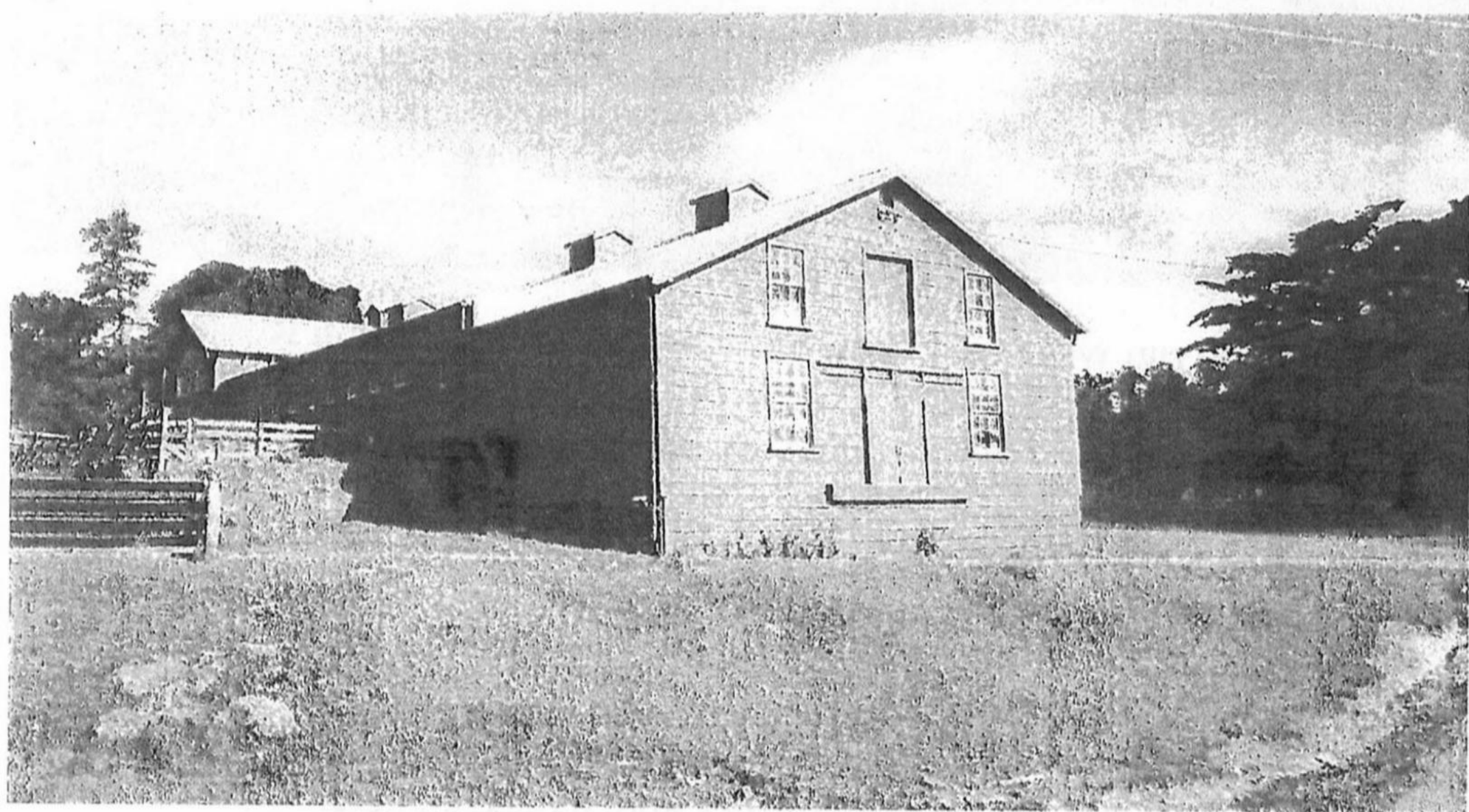
A formal lease was negotiated with the Maori owners in 1865 and the land was finally purchased in 1870. The total cost including stamp duty, legal fees interpreters fees etc., was 5shillings and 3pence an acre.

In 1860, a thousand acres at the western end was sold to J.G. Kinross and three years later 11,000 acres to Robert Rhodes. These sales provided capital for development.

The day to day running was in the hands of managers, first Ken Shirly, followed in 1863 by James Livingston, when Ham went home to England to be married.

The Farm continued

George Milne took over on Ham's return and during his time, (in 1878) the woolshed was built for a cost of £900. The shed originally had twenty stands, ten down each side, in those days they were shearing about 15,000 merino sheep using hand blades. The shed is still in use today and has the original iron on the roof which was painted for the first time in 2003. Milne left in 1883 after a sad time when two of his young children died of dysentery.



He was succeeded by an Australian cousin, Fred Russell, who was in turn followed by Ham's younger brother Herbert. He ran the operation until 1895 when Ham and William dissolved their partnership and split the property between them. William took the Sherenden block and this was sold out of the family to Mr Lethbridge in 1906.

Ham's son, also Andrew Hamilton Russell (later Sir Andrew) but known as Guy, took over the running of his father's block in 1895 and continued to look after the property (with the aid of managers) until his death aged 92 in 1960.

His grandson, John took over in 1961 and in turn handed over to his sons Andrew and Sam in 1992.

Guy sold 4,000 acres of his block in 1907 when Richard Seddon was in power and aiming to break up the big estates. Further blocks totalling 3,000 acres were sold off over the years, some to men who had managed for Guy, Alec Sinclair, Stan McAulay and Alex Agnew, some to returned servicemen. Some prospered and some failed, one block reverted to Guy during the great depression when the purchaser was unable to pay.

John Russell bought back 700 acres in 1977.

The Homestead

The present house, the second on the site was built in 1913/14 by Phillips and Wright, and cost £10,000. The architect was Mr C.T. Natusch ably assisted by Lady Russell. This house was her second attempt at building a homestead, the first being Little Flaxmere on Omahu Road Hastings.

The house is built on concrete foundations and piles, quite modern for that time. All the timber is native except for windows, exterior doors and the slats holding the rough cast, where cedar was used. The tiles are Marsailles tiles imported from France as ballast on ships that were coming to collect meat and wool.

The Homestead continued

The internal walls are filled with fine pumice, which keeps the house cool in summer and very quiet. The original lighting was acetylene gas generated in the gas house across the back yard. I believe there was only one accident with the gas when a light exploded. Electricity came in 1949 and the gas plant was done away with.



The 1931 earthquake caused all the chimneys to collapse and produced some cracks in the rough cast, otherwise, apart from things being no longer quite square, no damage was sustained. The building materials were all transported from Hastings by bullock wagon – one load per day. The floor space of the house is 7500 square feet.

Guy was the tree man and responsible for planting most of the trees on the property while Lady Russell designed and developed the garden. Since John and Phillida took over, the garden has been maintained and developed over the 45 years to its current beauty. Their son and wife, Andrew and Pip have taken residence since 2006.