Heretaunga St. looking West from Railway line Princess Theatre in left distance 189

WHO WAS THE FOUNDER OF HASTINGS?

As Hastings celebrates its 150th birthday, a mystery surrounds its earliest beginnings. Who was the township's founder?

Some sources claim pastoral runholder and entrepreneur Thomas Tanner who saw the Heretaunga Plain's agricultural potential in the 1860s.

The huge, open plain had first been settled by Māori between 1250 -1300 AD and was considered a rich food source with its fertile soils and plentiful waterways. Yet European settlers were wary of its "endless shingle deposits and swamps" until Tanner gained a legal lease to a large amount of it in 1867 and set out to sell some of the leases off.
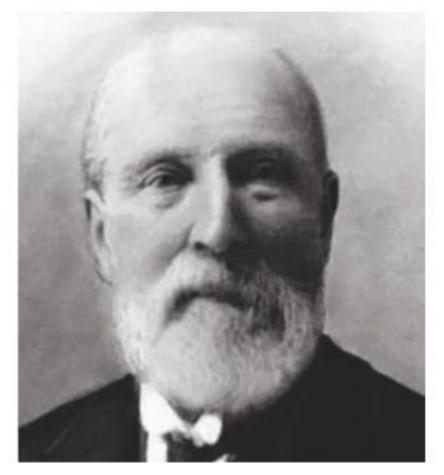
"HOT PROSPECT," he advertised,

"… 5 SECTIONS (100 acres each) on the Karamu Plains, about three miles from Havelock, two miles from the Karamu Pa, and three miles from Pakowai" [Pakowhai]. Interestingly, he added, "the land is well situated, beyond the reach of any flood…"

Tanner sold six leases and, including himself, the lease holders came to be known as the Twelve Apostles controlling 12 sections of land on the Heretaunga block. In 1870/71 they were then able to buy the entire block of 19,365 acres, which is the footprint

Hastings is settled on today, and in large part is why Tanner is often cited as the town's founder.
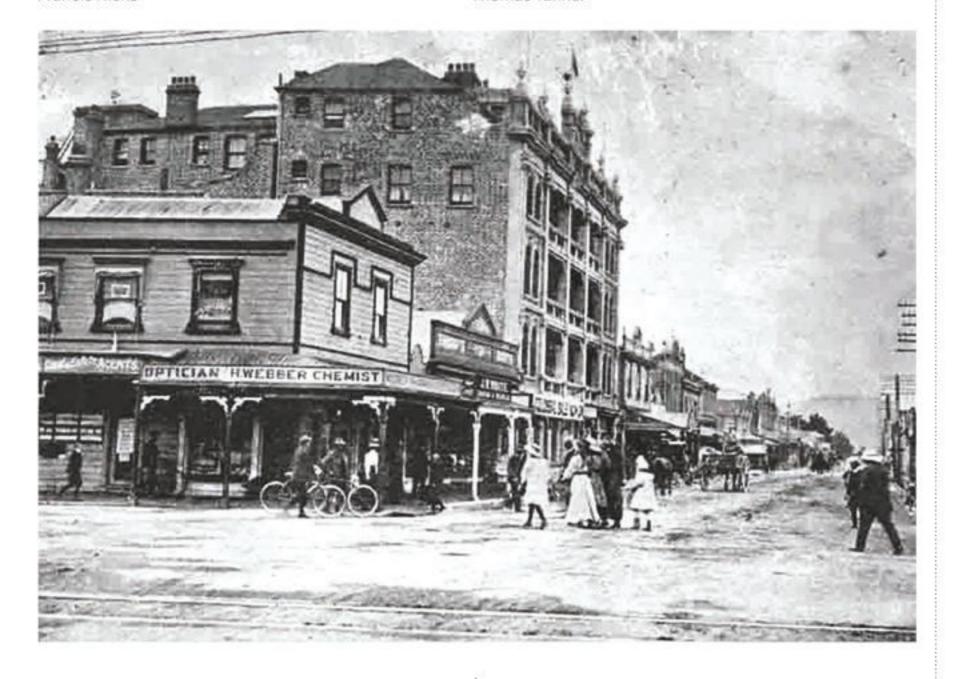
But enter Francis Hicks. A Cornish immigrant who left home aged 20 and worked on farms and goldfields in NSW and Otago, before arriving in Heretaunga in the 1860s. He bought his 100-acre block from Tanner in 1871 and had his nephew Tobias Hicks begin building a two-room general store on the corner site now occupied by the ANZ Bank at the intersection of Karamu and Heretaunga Streets.

Francis Hicks

Thomas Tanner

Two years later, when the government wanted to run a railway through the plains to the south, Hicks with "some perspicacity", says historian Russell Orr, cleverly gifted 150 acres (60 hectares) of his land for the rail tracks and for a railway station at Karamu junction.

A township was now destined to sprout around the railway line and on the 7 June, 1873, the *Hawke's Bay Herald* announced, "The name of the new town is to be Hastings. We hear it now for the first time..."

Hicks quickly subdivided the rest of his land into town and suburban sections and the first were sold on 8 July, with his overall profit an average of £50 per acre. Intriguingly, two thirds of the buyers in the new Hastings township were speculators from Napier.

Hicks made a small fortune with his land sales and left Hawke's Bay in December 1875. He eventually bought 800 acres at Pukekura, near Cambridge, and reportedly only returned to Hawke's Bay once after that.

By contrast Thomas Tanner became a dominant figure in Hawke's Bay affairs. His 5,332 acre portion of the Heretaunga block was Riverslea, and he built a 22-roomed mansion there. At various times Tanner was a member of the Hastings Town Board, Hastings Borough Council, and a Hawke's Bay county councillor. He served on the Hawke's Bay Provincial Council and was a member of the House of Representatives for Waipawa from 1887 to 1890. He was a keen Church of England man and the pin oak outside the St Lukes Church in Havelock North is known as Tanner's Oak.

Depending on who you source, it was either Thomas Tanner or Francis Hicks or both, who named Hastings after Warren Hastings, a British colonial administrator, and the first Governor-General of Bengal in the British Raj in India.

Apparently Tanner claimed publicly, including in a *Hawke's Bay Herald* report in February 1884, that he chose the name and was the "Father of Hastings".

But head to the Hastings District Library, as I did, and in the stacks there is a laminated file *"Hicks, F. (1994). The "Father of Hastings" Francis Hicks: letters by his daughters."*

This includes newspaper cuttings, hand-written letters and one written to the then Town Clerk on 21 February, 1967, by F.G. Claridge. "I cannot imagine why the Hastings people do not want to recognise my father (the Father of Hastings) do you?"

F.G. Claridge went on to claim that Francis Hicks was the "Father of Hastings" and asked that the Hicks family be invited to the Hastings 100 year celebrations.

F.G. Claridge also referred to a Letter to the Editor, published in the *Hawke's Bay Herald Tribune* in 1920 and in the Library file, from the first Mayor of Hastings 1886 -87, Robert Wellwood.

"...There is no doubt," wrote Wellwood, "that the late Thomas Tanner was the 'father' of the Heretaunga plains. He leased the greatest part of the plains from the natives in the sixties and afterwards acquired freehold. ....neither the late Mr Tanner nor myself was the 'father of Hastings', the honour belongs to the late M.J. Hicks who bought 100 acres on the north side of what is now known as Heretaunga Street... Mr Hicks soon after cut his lot up for a township, giving it the name of Hastings. I presume after the renowned Warren Hastings.

"I take it that the man who owned the land and formed the township and gave it a name was the "father" of Hastings. I suppose I must be the Godfather having been the first mayor.....I am etc R. Wellwood. Hastings Dec 7th 1920."

Undoubtedly Francis Hicks and Thomas Tanner both had pivotal roles to play in the founding of Hastings and could be equally honoured, along with the earlier Māori of the Heretaunga Block – but let's not keep any of their stories tucked away in books, archives, oral histories and stacks.

Let's have plaques, pictorial boards, monuments, regular historic festivities to alert passers-by to the stories of our past and to the people who have walked here before us. ●

Hastings officially celebrates its 150th with a Council-organised commemorative weekend, July 7-9, and then ongoing events ending with the Blossom Festival in September. For more details see: **www. hastingsdc.govt.nz/150-years**