

Community-led heritage conservation in processes of rural regeneration

Community-led
heritage
conservation

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Abstract

Purpose – The authors report a study of heritage conservation linked to rural small-town regeneration in Aotearoa New Zealand. The purpose of this study is to answer the question: how, with limited local resources, do the residents and administrators of small settlements conserve historic heritage in the processes of rural regeneration?

Design/methodology/approach – This research is based on an analysis of physical heritage objects (buildings, artefacts and landscapes), associated regulatory arrangements, archival material, news media reporting, community group newsletters and photography. The authors use the river-side town of Rakaia and its environs in Te Waipounamu/the South Island of Aotearoa New Zealand to answer the research question.

Findings – This research found that in a context of limited resources, volunteers, supported by small businesses and local and central government, can contribute positively to the conservation and interpretation of heritage as part of wider rural regeneration activities.

Originality/value – There is only limited writing on the links between heritage conservation, rural regeneration and the development of small towns. To advance the debate, the authors combine ideas about community-led heritage conservation and management with concepts drawn from rural studies, particularly the multifunctional rural space paradigm. This allows us to explore heritage conservation in a context of rapid rural change.

Keywords Heritage conservation, Rural regeneration, Rural communities, Multifunctional rural space, Agricultural super-productivism, Rakaia, New Zealand

Paper type Research paper

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Introduction

This paper emerges from a larger study of small-town and rural regeneration in Aotearoa New Zealand. Regeneration has many dimensions, seeks to create a range of local outcomes (Roberts *et al.*, 2017) and can create positive change in small towns and their rural hinterlands (Powe *et al.*, 2015; Spires and Moore, 2017). These changes include improving the status and economic outlook of communities; enhancing the well-being of settlement populations; sustainably managing bio-physical environments; and valorising the built environment. Successful regeneration depends on multiple interested parties collaborating over the long term, effective capability building, programme integration and a balance between local initiative and extra-local, often financial, support (Powe *et al.*, 2015). In our wider research, conducted in several rural towns in Te Waipounamu/the South Island, we have examined various social, cultural, environmental and economic initiatives established by local people and agencies to regenerate their settlements and communities (Dance *et al.*, 2018; Levy *et al.*, 2021; Mackay and Perkins, 2019; Mackay *et al.*, 2018; Perkins and Mackay, 2022; Perkins *et al.*, 2019; Taylor *et al.*, 2021). Heritage conservation was a notable dimension in this work, and as a result, we advanced our interest in this field.

Our purpose in this paper is, thus, to reflect on the kinds of heritage resources extant in small rural towns and answer the question: how, with limited local resources (Aigwi *et al.*, 2021), do the residents and administrators of small settlements conserve historic heritage and link it to other activities to meet regeneration objectives? Our research is based on an analysis of physical heritage objects (buildings, artefacts and landscapes), associated regulatory arrangements, archival material and photography. The river-side town of Rakaia and its environs in Te Waipounamu/the South Island of Aotearoa New Zealand are used to address our purpose and explore our research question.

Rakaia is a 19th-century colonial creation, with its origins closely linked economically and culturally to the bridging of the neighbouring braided Rakaia River. The elements of Rakaia's European settler agricultural, infrastructural and cultural heritage are evident in the landscape and, therefore, of primary importance in the study. This has, however, not distracted us from the loud silence that exists with respect to the representation and interpretation of approximately 800-year-old indigenous Ngāi Tahu Māori heritage in Rakaia. That this silence is relevant is reflected in the township's name: Rakaia is a Māori term and translates literally as "ranged in ranks" referring to the way strong people stood in a line to break the force of the water when crossing the river long before European colonisation and its bridging (NZ History, 2022).

In the remainder of the paper, we first discuss relevant elements of the rural studies and heritage literature. The paper then turns to a discussion of the form and management of heritage in rural Aotearoa New Zealand – in the form of buildings, artefacts, landscapes and interpretative representations of local history. We outline the ways these heritage resources serve a variety of community functions, including contributing to the visible townscape and offering possibilities for community action. In this way, heritage is associated with place and community identity and is widely used in place promotion targeted at attracting residents, visitors and business investment. Several key issues and challenges associated with heritage conservation are highlighted, including the practical constraints in respect of funding, time and skill. The case study setting is then elaborated followed by a discussion of research methods and findings. The paper concludes by summarising the main points of the research, outlining the significant elements of our work as they relate to existing literature and offering two suggestions for further research, with respect to heritage management and regeneration in rural areas.

Heritage and rural regeneration

Globally, heritage resources have been a key element of rural regeneration for many years (Brown, 1996; de Luca *et al.*, 2021). Heritage exemplars often emphasise buildings and objects linked with stories about the past (McCloy and King, 2021) and often become visitor attractions, a common phenomenon in Aotearoa New Zealand's rural areas (Mackay *et al.*, 2019). Rural heritage conservation has increased in importance as part of a recent complex diversification of land use in the countryside, particularly in affluent societies (Woods, 2010). This change is characterised by some Australasian scholars as the transition to the development of multifunctional rural spaces (Holmes, 2010; Mackay *et al.*, 2014). In this theorisation, rural areas are no longer interpreted only in terms of agricultural production and allied secondary support and processing. Rural areas are also acknowledged as being places in which a variety of experiences and products are consumed by visitors and locals and as spaces of protection where nature and heritage are conserved in various ways (Holmes, 2010).

Similar ideas have been adopted in discussions of rural change in Canada (Mitchell, 2013). Heritage and tourism are linked in this conceptualisation, so historic buildings may be visitor attractions, with some remaining *in situ* (often in recognition of the importance of the site itself or because of difficulty relocating) and others moved from their original site (e.g. to a central public space or to a dedicated heritage complex). These buildings may also be adapted to house a variety of visitor services such as accommodation, hospitality and shopping (Mackay *et al.*, 2019).

There is a range of perspectives about what rural heritage sites and objects provide residents. Bell (1997, 2007), writing from Aotearoa New Zealand, suggests that local heritage management has often been a vehicle for perpetuating and commodifying colonial pākehā (Anglo-European) identities and mythologies which exclude indigenous Māori narratives. In this reading, heritage management does not critique rural conditions, and it is, therefore, conservative in its orientation.

In contrast, but not in complete contradiction, another Aotearoa New Zealand viewpoint has it that rural heritage plays an important role in interpreting a community's past and impelling it into the future (Aigwi *et al.*, 2021). Writing from Australia, Grimwade and Carter (2000, p. 33) argue that small rural heritage sites can provide "socio-economic advantages for local communities and transferring knowledge of the past to future generations." Using an Indian case study from the town of Lakhnu in Uttar Pradesh, Stephens and Tiwari (2015) show how heritage contributes to the social and cultural health of communities. And recent work reporting Belgian experience (Schmitz and Pepe, 2022) emphasises a shift away from religious and farming heritage toward those elements of heritage that make settlements unique. In this argument, there is now less interest in protecting buildings, places and artifacts from the past, but rather emphasising things, sometimes intangible, that are potentially valuable for present and future generations. In this conceptualisation, the importance of heritage is measured in terms of its capacity for the bonding and well-being of rural people. This shift is said in part to result from changing senses of rural places because of globalisation (Perkins and Thorns, 2017; Woods, 2007).

A notable theme in the heritage studies literature is that where heritage objects are primarily of local rather than national interest, their conservation and interpretation is carried out by local community volunteers rather than formally constituted heritage agencies (de Luca *et al.*, 2021). In digital times, voluntary local effort is also used to digitise heritage information in rural settings (Beel *et al.*, 2017). Using Norwegian research, Mydland and Grahn (2012) argue that the motive for such voluntary effort and expenditure is less to preserve cultural heritage objects, but rather more to create and advance local social

institutions and the sense of identity they engender: “local stewardship of cultural heritage has the capacity to empower and recover cultural identity” (Stephens and Tiwari, 2015, p. 99). In situations such as this, reliance on professional heritage management is not essential.

Rural heritage volunteers and their local advisers, where they exist, often operate in places replete with built heritage but also in which there are few local private and public funds to support heritage protection and interpretation. Much depends on the availability of extra-local, often local and central government funding, but this too is often limited (Aigwi *et al.*, 2021). In rural settlements dependent on industrial agriculture and allied servicing for their existence, these volunteers are often faced with rapid landscape and demographic change. In this situation, heritage is used as a vehicle to strengthen senses of local identity and place.

The form and management of heritage in a “young” country

In Aotearoa New Zealand, the last major landmass on earth to be settled by humans approximately 800 years ago, physical traces of the human world are not very old by global standards (Te Ara: New Zealand Encyclopedia, 2023a, 2023b). In this context, the terms historic and heritage are often used in tandem to denote something from the relatively recent past that is of value to present and future generations. The motive to protect this heritage stems from a widely held desire to conserve objects and places that are of cultural significance historically, aesthetically, socially, technically, economically and/or associated with particularly people or events.

A recent growth in interest in built heritage arises from an awareness that much has been lost to demolition, as buildings and sites have become redundant economically and to natural disasters such as earthquakes (Aigwi *et al.*, 2021). The Environment Foundation (2022, n.p.), a national charitable trust, describes heritage as having “three key elements: a geographical place (e.g. a structure, house, site, or area), associated heritage values and heritage significance, and associated connections with a person, group, or community”. Aotearoa New Zealand’s officially designated heritage includes:

Sites, structures, places and areas; archaeological sites; sites of significance to Māori, including wāhi tapu (sacred places) and wāhi tupuna (ancestrally significant places); and surroundings associated with natural and physical resources (The Environment Foundation, 2022, n.p.).

Aigwi *et al.* (2021) discuss the development of heritage policy and management in Aotearoa New Zealand in some detail. The essence of their work is that at a national level, heritage management has been supported by government and guided by statute in various administrative forms since 1954. In its most recent manifestation, operating since 2014 and having approximately 20,000 subscriber members, Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga uses several approaches to identify, register and advocate for heritage buildings and places. Key among these approaches is the New Zealand Heritage List Rārangi Kōrero on which are registered Aotearoa New Zealand’s significant heritage places and structures. The list comprises several categories including historic places, historic areas, wāhi tapu, wāhi tapu areas and wāhi tupuna. The list is in two broad parts: Category 1 being reserved for historic places of special or outstanding historical or cultural significance or value and Category 2 for places of value, but of lesser importance (Aigwi *et al.*, 2021). The list provides information to individuals, agencies and local governments who own or have responsibility for particular aspects of heritage about the importance and need for protection. Having national reach, Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga has regional offices whose staff offer advice to a range of interest groups and engage with those wishing to list places and

structures on the Heritage List. These staff are also heritage advocates (Aigwi *et al.*, 2021). Inclusion on the list does not necessarily lead directly to the complete protection of heritage sites or places, but it does mean that heritage resources may attract conservation funding and inclusion in local authority heritage lists, which we discuss further below. With respect to funding, Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga has a limited budget and is only able to incentivise and partially fund some heritage conservation work of national significance on sites held in private hands. Other funds are available from government and private philanthropic trusts but these too are not large (Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga, 2023). Until recently, earthquake prone heritage buildings attracted specific funding (Heritage EQUIP, 2023).

Regionally, heritage identification and conservation are achieved primarily by local governments (Aigwi *et al.*, 2021). These authorities are required to work alongside Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga in its heritage advocacy and must inform the national body if consent is sought by owners to modify listed buildings. At that stage, Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga steps in to advise the local government and owners in question. Local governments have their own locally focused heritage lists comprising buildings and sites of regional heritage value. They develop and administer these lists using categorisation systems separate from those of the national authority and may include heritage buildings and sites also on the national list. These local lists are registered in the schedules of district plans created and managed under the auspices of the Resource Management Act 1991 (Memon and Perkins, 2000). They, thus, trigger conservation considerations if district planning consent is sought by owners to make modifications to their heritage buildings. As for the national body, heritage conservation funds are limited, and grants are very small, in the order of \$NZ5000 to \$NZ10,000 being allocated. Even more limited at the local government level, particularly in rural and provincial areas, is in-house heritage expertise. In rural areas where cash strapped local governments spend much of their finance on roads and other physical infrastructure, there is little left for heritage conservation, promotion and interpretation. As a consequence, it is accepted that regional listings are not comprehensive, consistent or complete. Thus, identification and protection of significant buildings are sometimes completely dependent on the good will of often private land and building owners without any likely support from local government (Aigwi *et al.*, 2021).

In Te Waipounamu/the South Island of Aotearoa New Zealand, where our case study setting is located, the larger proportion of the formally registered and extant heritage is associated with European colonial settlement dating from the middle of the 19th century [1], and in global terms would be described as modern heritage. This includes industrial heritage associated with gold and coal mining (Balcar and Pearce, 1996; Reeves and McConville, 2011), hydro-electricity development (Wilson and Mackay, 2015) and agricultural development (Ricart *et al.*, 2019). It also comprises an array of other structures associated with transportation (Reis and Jellum, 2014) and memorialising events (Ministry for Culture and Heritage, 2014), military servicemen and women (Cloke and Pawson, 2008) and political leaders (Ballantyne, 2021). Tourism-driven regeneration is especially evident in rural areas with a history of mining and railway heritage (Balcar and Pearce, 1996; Reeves and McConville, 2011; Reis and Jellum, 2014).

In rural localities, the conservation of a range of landscape features, including the outer fabric of heritage buildings and other structures, is important in respect of place aesthetics and attractiveness: although the reality is that – through structural, functional and commercial necessity – many surviving rural colonial heritage structures have been adapted for contemporary use in a variety of ways (Mackay *et al.*, 2019). Heritage buildings have, for example, become repositories, housing artifacts not necessarily related to the original

building's purpose. They are also used by a variety of commercial businesses (some of which serve the visitor and hospitality industry) or are private residences. Adaptive reuse extends in some instances to new building construction which retains connection to the past through the reuse of original construction materials and the incorporation of historic features (Mackay *et al.*, 2019).

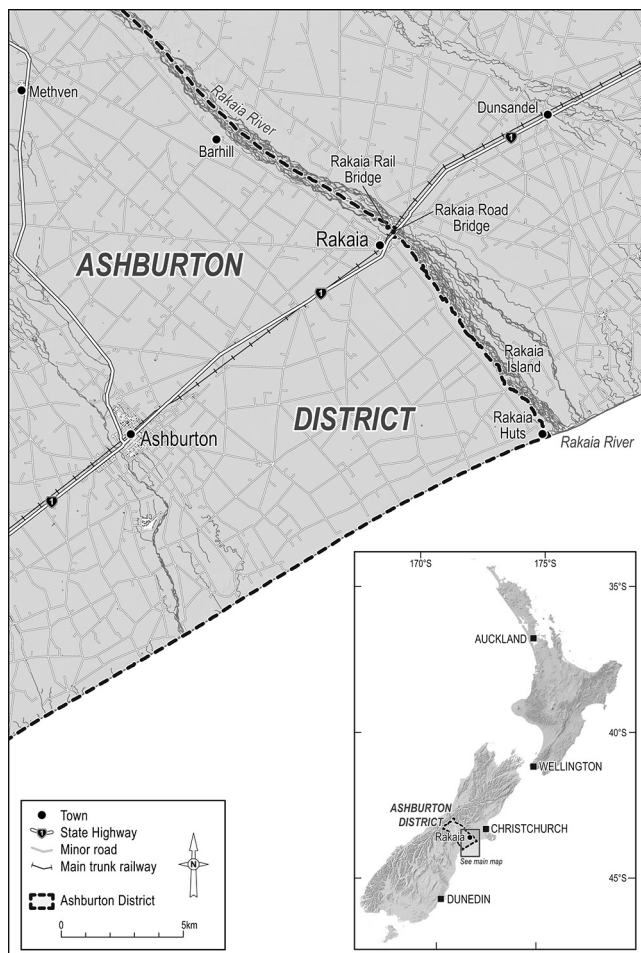
While much of Aotearoa New Zealand's agricultural rural heritage is represented by vernacular heritage structures and is often found on private land (Mackay *et al.*, 2019), there are also diverse heritage sites scattered around rural locales and in small rural settlements. This often only locally important rural heritage does not attract the interest of commercial developers as it does in urban areas (Aigwi *et al.*, 2021), and its tourism function is often also limited by not being located on main tourism routes. Thus, when it comes to the conservation of buildings and sites of local cultural significance, the onus is placed on citizens acting in a voluntary capacity to take the lead in this area. Local history groups, community service organisations (e.g. Lions Clubs, garden clubs, church groups, etc.) and motivated individuals with an interest in heritage are notable contributors to this work. These locals often must spend much time raising community funds and applying for small grants from a variety of agencies and philanthropic trusts who may be able to contribute to their work (Aigwi *et al.*, 2021). As we shall discuss later in this paper, when these voluntary heritage conservation activities overlap with regeneration projects, local governments sometimes step in with advice and some financial support.

Case study setting and research method

Rakaia

Rakaia is a small highway settlement (estimated population of 1,560 in June 2021) located on State Highway 1 to the south of the Rakaia River (Plate 1). In 2018, approximately 90% of Rakaia's population identified as New Zealand European, with the remainder being Māori, Pacific and Asian peoples (Statistics New Zealand, 2018a). The town exists because of 19th century colonial infrastructure development. The road-rail bridge over the Rakaia River, completed in 1873, and since 1939 replaced with two separate road and rail bridges was the key to connecting the colonial settlement of mid-Canterbury to Christchurch in the north, the latter now the South Island's largest city. This was a major engineering achievement as the river is braided with an unstable alluvial shingle bed and is 1.76 km (1.1 miles) wide at the bridging point (Engineering New Zealand, 2023) (Plate 2). The river has an average flow of 203 cumecs but is subject to much higher occasional flows because it emanates from a catchment spanning 2,900 km²/1,120 square miles, the mountain headwaters of which periodically record very high rainfall and annual snow-melt (Braided Rivers, 2023; Land Air Water Aotearoa, 2023). The construction of the first bridge, and the township's location at the junction of a (now disestablished) branch railway line into the interior and foothills of the Southern Alps, gave the settlement a reason for being, and it was for a time an important and growing transport hub.

Jurisdictionally, Rakaia is now on the northern border and part of Ashburton District, a multi-settlement largely pastoral rural district stretching from the Pacific Ocean to the mountains of the Southern Alps, with a total population of approximately 33,500 at the 2018 census (Statistics New Zealand, 2018b). Rakaia exists in a rural context where strong elements of agricultural super-productivism are present (Mackay and Perkins, 2019). Over the past decade, the agricultural activities surrounding Rakaia have shifted from an extensive often dryland sheep and beef grazing regime supplemented with significant levels of agronomy, to one involving intensive high-input irrigated dairy farming. This has



Source: Tim Nolan, Blackant Mapping Solutions

Plate 1.

Rakaia and environs

introduced new people and ways of living to Rakaia and has changed long-established rural landscapes very rapidly, with the loss of many ancillary buildings (Mackay *et al.*, 2019).

Today, Rakaia primarily provides services to the surrounding farming community, but it is also the site of some light engineering and manufacturing industry and, importantly, provides services to passing travellers on the state highway. Rakaia is also widely known as the “Salmon Capital of New Zealand” because of the annual Chinook salmon run in the Rakaia River. The fish was introduced from the northern hemisphere to create a recreational fishery in 1901 (Fish and Game New Zealand, 2023). The enjoyment salmon now provide and economic activity they generate are celebrated with a spectacular 12 m/40 ft fibreglass silver salmon statue (Plate 3). This statue is located in an area of the town centre known as the salmon reserve positioned beside the main highway. The statue was erected in 1991 because of voluntary community effort by a variety of local and extra-local participants (Rollinson, 2023).



Plate 2.
Aerial view of the
braided Rakaia River
and bridges with
Rakaia township at
top of image

Sources: Photographed by Whites Aviation Ltd. Ref: WA-49563-F. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand./records/22311621

Two smaller satellite settlements are associated with Rakaia. The first comprises remnants of the 19th-century model village designed and built by colonial Scots settler, farmer and politician Cathcart Wason to house his farm workers at Barrhill (17 km/11 miles inland). The village is the most significant heritage site in the Rakaia district. The second is the South Bank Rakaia Huts settlement at the Rakaia River mouth which is home to a small heritage building, the Brick Hut (Plate 4), with three archaeological sites also located nearby. Because these settlements are some distance from the Rakaia township, they are not included in the township's regeneration efforts, which since the 1990s have been focused on the salmon reserve.

Research method

Our research method is consistent with human geographical adaptations of qualitative social research methods commonly used in preliminary exploratory studies of places and the actions of their residents. The methods typically used include observational techniques and interpretation of texts, images, media stories and planning and policy documents (Clope and Perkins, 1998; Lofland *et al.*, 2006). Given the nature of our research in Rakaia, this approach had the advantage of allowing us to immerse ourselves in the landscapes of our study area and use secondary qualitative data sources as an aid to the interpretation of what we observed.

We began our study on 10th June 2022 with an initial field trip to the Ashburton District to observe and photograph extant heritage resources across the whole region. We were particularly interested in observing local heritage conservation and the ways it was related to attempts at economic regeneration. Rakaia township and environs emerged as a place of particular interest because in it are located an array of 19th- and early 20th-century



Source: Authors

Plate 3.
Rakaia salmon statue
with interpretive
panels

municipal, commercial and industrial buildings in various states of (dis)repair (Plate 5), some having been restored (Plate 6).

As Rakaia township is small, we were able to traverse all its streets and observe all its buildings and associated places. The buildings we observed are traces of the important role the township once played in the development and use of the South Island's early road and rail infrastructure. Additionally, attempts at heritage interpretation linked to road-side highway visitor services have been made by local volunteer groups with support from the Ashburton District Council. These include a newly installed set of heritage interpretation panels integrated with other public facilities at the Salmon Reserve designed to service locals and travellers on State Highway 1 and a large mural depicting key facets of Rakaia history. Rakaia, thus, offers a case study location with a diversity of heritage representative of the wider Ashburton District and recent and ongoing volunteer heritage-led regeneration.

This first field visit was followed by an examination of grey literature relating to heritage conservation in Aotearoa New Zealand (first more broadly and then specifically relating to Rakaia). The aspects of this work relating to Rakaia began with a review of the area's formally listed heritage. This indicated that the Rakaia community also encompassed the

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Plate 4.
The restored Brick
Hut (1906)



Source: Authors

Plate 5.
The former Post
Office (1910), not yet
restored



Source: Authors

nearby settlements of Barrhill and the South Rakaia Huts. An internet search was conducted for heritage-related local government documents and news media, including websites and published blogs and articles.

Somewhat, fortuitously, the celebration of 150 years of colonial settlement in Rakaia (in 2006) had fostered several heritage projects including the compilation of a Rakaia history and the restoration of heritage buildings by a specially formed Rakaia History Group (Irvine and Rakaia History Group, 2015). Irvine and Rakaia History Group's (2015) book *Rakaia: Our History* provided a detailed historical record of both presently existing and "lost" heritage buildings. This resource highlighted several additional places of heritage interest,



Source: Authors

Plate 6.
The former Bank of
New Zealand
building (1881),
restored and
repurposed

and a second site-visit was undertaken on 8th July 2022 to locate – and observe – Rakaia’s heritage buildings and artefacts and the ways in which this heritage is presented and interpreted. This site visit also included a stop at the Ashburton Museum, located in the relatively large district capital of Ashburton, 28 km/17 miles south of Rakaia. We wanted to see how Rakaia is interpreted by those charged with representing it as part of the wider district. Both during this and our first site visit, we photographed all obvious heritage sites and interpretative settings and objects in Rakaia.

Our search of the news media and newsletters produced by the Rakaia Community Association found a small number of articles describing heritage activity and the motives for local participation undertaken within the community. With one exception, which reported the work of parishioners engaged in heritage work at St Ita’s Church ([Ashburton Courier, 2021](#)), the articles focused on developments at the Salmon Reserve and the mural nearby. These articles served the dual purposes of reporting perspectives and activity in and to the wider community, thus generating interest in the activity or project and connecting the community to its heritage. There was also an array of material directed towards members of the community with an interest in heritage such as, for example, the blog posts on the Ashburton Museum and Heritage Places Aotearoa Mid Canterbury websites.

The approach taken to analysing the data generated by the activities and techniques discussed above was to focus on the ways Rakaia’s heritage resources are being conserved and its story interpreted in the context of its role as an agricultural servicing town and a stop-over for passing highway users. Given the focus of our research project overall, attempts to revitalise Rakaia for both residents and visitors were examined. In this way, we came to the realisation that Rakaia’s heritage story is not static but adapts and changes to reflect changing values and to accommodate new technologies and communication channels.

An inventory of Rakaia’s built heritage

A heritage typology for Rakaia

An important part of the heritage stories able to be told in small towns in Aotearoa New Zealand rely on the physical traces of the past that have survived. In Rakaia, this surviving

heritage is mainly represented by churches, government, commercial and agricultural buildings and residential dwellings. These exhibit a range of building styles and materials and often occupation by influential people and entities. The current Ashburton District Council heritage register which relies on a two-part, A/B categorisation, includes nine Rakaia sites, four at Barrhill and one at the South Bank Rakaia Huts. In addition, the register includes heritage trees at two Rakaia churches and many of the trees at the Barrhill model village site (Table 1).

Group A sites are assessed as having national or regional significance, while Group B ones have historical or cultural heritage significance or value to the district. Only three places within the case study area are on the national Heritage New Zealand List. These include Holmeslee House and Garden (a private residence nine kilometres/six miles inland from Rakaia), St John's Anglican Church at Barrhill and St Mark's Anglican Church in the Rakaia township. All of these are listed as Category 2 on the Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga list, as they are of historical or cultural significance or value.

Incomplete listing and limited on-site interpretation

The links between this register and heritage on the ground were supported by observations during our site visits. Not unexpectedly, many of the formally listed heritage sites were not publicly accessible, as they are in private ownership and use. There is also often no on-site indication of their past use(s) or heritage importance. In addition to the formally registered sites, we observed several buildings and structures that looked like heritage but were not

Heritage buildings	Construction date	Ashburton District/ Heritage NZ categorisation	Location
Holmeslee House and Garden	1872	A/Cat 2	Rakaia-Methven Rd
St Mark's Church (Anglican)	1877	B/Cat 2	Rakaia
Brick Villa	Unknown	B	Rakaia
Former Rakaia Bank of New Zealand	1881	B	Rakaia
Former Rakaia Post Office	1910	B	Rakaia
St Ita's Catholic Church	1885	B	Rakaia
St Ita's Convent School	1912	B	Rakaia
South Rakaia Hotel	1872	B	Rakaia
Bridge Keeper's Hut	c.1873	B	Rakaia
Former Rakaia Cottage Hospital	1923	B	Rakaia
Brick Hut (Rakaia Huts Museum)	1906	B	South Rakaia Huts
Corwar Gate Keeper's Lodge	c.1870	A	Barrhill
St John's Anglican Church	1877	A/Cat 2	Barrhill
Former School	1878	A	Barrhill
Former Teacher's Schoolhouse	1878	A	Barrhill
<i>Heritage trees</i>	Age		
<i>Sequoiadendron giganteum</i> , Wellingtonia	131 years	52/62	St Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Rakaia
<i>Chamaecyparis lawsoniana</i> , Lawson Cypress	70 years (QE II coronation)	36/62	St Mark's Anglican Church, Rakaia
All trees in the Residential C Zone (over 5 m in height and located within 10 m of the road reserve)	Various (planted since c.1870)	50/62	Barrhill

Table 1. Inventory of listed heritage in Rakaia, including Barrhill and the South Rakaia Huts

Source: Ashburton District Council register and Heritage New Zealand List

formally recognised. These include a large warehouse adjacent to the railway line, a corner of which has been converted to accommodate a café and gift shop, the Rakaia cenotaph (dedicated in 1922), like those formally listed as heritage in other Ashburton District townships and the Railway Tavern (formerly the Railway Hotel) (Plate 7) built in 1883, only 11 years after the listed South Rakaia Hotel (opened in 1872) (Plate 8).

Visitor information brochures and leaflets provided a useful guide to additional places of historical interest, but once again, there was no on-site interpretation telling of their heritage importance. In this respect, the Barrhill model village and the Corwar Gatekeeper's Lodge, the latter the last remnant of Wason's farm homestead, stand out by virtue of having an

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Source: Authors

Plate 7.
The unlisted Railway
Tavern (1883)



Source: Authors

Plate 8.
The listed South
Rakaia Hotel (1872)

interpretative information panel at the locality. In contrast, while there are articles and blogs describing both the Lodge and the Brick Hut at South Rakaia Huts as museums, the only on-site indication of this is a sign on the door of the Brick Hut, but it included no record of opening hours or contact details for the curator. Inquiries about this in Rakaia and at the Ashburton Museum were unfruitful.

Accessible heritage

Rakaia's most accessible heritage takes the form of interpretative representations, such as the town's mural, painted in 2013 on the wall of a new commercial building (Plate 9). The mural is located away from State Highway 1 and was designed primarily for residents rather than for visitors. The creation of the mural illustrates the ways volunteers from a small rural community harness resources from beyond their local environment to achieve heritage outcomes and highlights their motives for participation.

The painting of the mural was proposed and initiated by the volunteer Rakaia Beautification and Identification Committee and supported by the local Lions Club. This community organisation contracted a professional mural painting team to decorate the building because the "new and the large wall stood out in the township of older buildings, so it was decided to decorate it in a traditional style to help it fit in" (Resene, 2013, n.p.). Sponsorship was successfully sought from national paint manufacturer, Resene and the mural was ultimately an award-winner in that business's Mural Masterpieces Competition (Resene, 2013).

The mural depicts the development of Rakaia dating from the steam train era (including an image of the "lost" Railway Station). It illustrates the arrival of the early motor-vehicle, emphasises the township's and region's reliance for many years on pastoral agriculture, particularly agronomy, and connects the fortunes of present-day Rakaia with the State Highway 1 road bridge and recreational use of the neighbouring river. Notably, and likely because the mural was created 10 years ago, no room was found for representations of intensive high input dairy farming which over the past decade or so has transformed Rakaia's economy and its rural hinterland. When seen from the perspective of the representation of built heritage, the mural connects to the extant buildings still evident in



Plate 9.
Rakaia mural

Source: Authors

the township (e.g. both the former Bank of New Zealand building and the Bridge Keeper's Hut are depicted in it) and connects a new building to its setting in a town of old buildings. Consistent with our comment in the Introduction to this paper, the mural presents a colonial narrative and does not acknowledge and reference Māori and their navigation, use and interpretation of the Rakaia River before and after European settlement.

Voluntary collaborative effort and the salmon reserve

The creation of the Rakaia mural speaks in some degree to our research question, illustrating one way rural small-town residents overcome the problem of limited local resources as they endeavour to engage with heritage issues. Other dimensions of the answer to that research question are illustrated in the development of the small historic precinct in the Salmon Reserve on State Highway 1. The reserve has recently had a significant makeover with new public toilets and landscaping. A children's playground, rubbish and recycling bins, café, seating and an electric vehicle charging station are also located at the site. The locally listed Bridge Keeper's Hut (Plate 10, right), the only surviving building of the period when the Rakaia River was bridged and the township began to flourish, has been removed from its original site and is now on display in the reserve in renovated form. It sits beside the unlisted Jail (Plate 10, left), also translocated for public viewing. The site continues to be developed with plans by the Rakaia Community Association to display and interpret the old bridge pile that was removed from the Rakaia River bed many years ago (Rakaia Community Association, 2022). This place-making and regeneration effort at the reserve has enhanced the amenity of this part of the township for visitors and residents alike.

Voluntary collaborative effort and a measure of local finance has been vital to the development of the Rakaia heritage precinct and Salmon Reserve enhancement project, as has engagement with people and resources from beyond the Rakaia township. This illustrates further how residents working cooperatively with regional administrators of small settlements conserve heritage and link it to other activities to meet regeneration objectives. As local project participant Sue Rollinson (2023) points out, in the late 1980s, the



Source: Authors

Plate 10.
Bridge Keeper's Hut
(right), the former Jail
(left)

Rakaia Area Promotions Group and the Rakaia Lions Club commissioned two Christchurch fine arts students to design and build the salmon statue. The Club allocated funding for design, construction and landscaping and a local company helped with engineering supplies. The motive for creating the sculpture was that:

The icon would attract the attention of travellers passing on State Highway 1, and give the township a tourism identity that reflected the role of the river in their history (Rollinson, 2023, p. 15).

In 1991, after the statue was unveiled, the Ashburton District Council loaned the community groups involved a small sum to help defray the cost of landscaping. Further locally funded landscaping, including a water feature and a garden comprising indigenous plants, was constructed by enthusiastic and energetic Rakaia residents supported by local agricultural irrigation and concrete manufacturing companies and members of the Lions Club (Rollinson, 2023).

Building on this early foundation, the recent makeover of the Salmon Reserve has again involved not only leadership from the Rakaia Lions Club but also contributions from local businesses and the Ashburton District Council (Rakaia Community Association, 2023). Seen by the council as a boon to passing travellers, the motive for this enhancement project is much the same as it was for the construction of the salmon statue: as a way of representing local identity and heritage and attracting highway users so that they stop and spend time and money. The council has harnessed resources in support of the project from the central government's Tourism Infrastructure Fund but also from other of its locally raised finances (Ashburton District Council, 2020).

Most recently, this community and local government collective initiated the creation of a series of interpretative panels in the reserve and the display of a Rakaia township map, indicating local heritage landmarks and another of Rakaia in the wider region (Ashburton District Council, 2021; Rakaia Community Association, 2023). Summing up the collaborative nature of this regeneration project, District Council Community Services Group Manager, Steve Fabish, noted that the council had "provided support to help design the signs and also spent time collating and refining the information" (Ashburton District Council, 2021, n.p.). He also said that:

The Rakaia Lions had generously contributed time, labour, and money to the project. Graham Pluck, and the team at Pluck's Engineering Limited built the frames; the Lions Club paid for all the materials and powder coating of the frames; and John McKimmie and his very able team of Lions volunteers installed the panels (Ashburton District Council, 2021, n.p.).

With respect to the panels and as per Bell's (1997, p. 149) observation that "curators know most visitors will not read long interpretative texts", the panels provide short descriptions of each heritage item and broader historical stories. One of the panels, for example, describes the history of the Bridge Keeper's Hut and Jail. Other panels describe the settlement, the industrial, commercial and agricultural and recreational history of Rakaia. Early colonial navigation of the Rakaia River is included, incorporating stories from the time before the bridges were built and when many drowned in attempts to cross it. The panels also display images of Rakaia's extant historic buildings that are located elsewhere in the town. Panels alongside the "iconic" salmon statue describe the importance of the introduced chinook salmon and recreational fishing. In this way, heritage displays and interpretation are combined with services to locals and visitors. All the panels include QR codes giving access to "more information" although, according to the staff at the Ashburton Museum, these connect to blank webpages as the relevant information has not yet been prepared, highlighting the limited resources available in support of this heritage and regeneration project.

Reinforcing the link between voluntary effort, local identity formation, including pride of place, and regeneration, Kristin Hartley, Editor of the *Rakaia News*, in a comment about the Salmon Reserve and mural, noted that:

We all recognise the salmon that greets all who enter our town, who stop to take their photos and contribute to our economy. This salmon came into fruition due to the Lions Club taking the project on. And what about the beautiful mural which also came into being with the Lions Club getting behind it (Hartley, 2021, n.p.).

Conclusion

Focusing on our research question, the Rakaia study illustrates an example of how in a context of limited local resources, but active voluntary citizen commitment, with collaborative support from small businesses and extra-local expertise and government resourcing over a significant period of time, the conservation and interpretation of rural heritage can be combined successfully with regeneration objectives. In Rakaia, this activity entices highway travellers to stop, rest and spend, all while learning something about the history of the town. The heritage interpretation on display tells small-town heritage stories to locals and visitors about structures, places and artefacts, some of which are no longer physically present.

The Rakaia study and our wider small-town regeneration research suggests that linking heritage with tourism is a common regeneration tactic, at least in the small rural towns of Aotearoa New Zealand. There are also similarities between our findings in this regard and those of researchers internationally, as per our literature review. Our study and reports of others we have reviewed further indicate that heritage is an important element of local identity and sense of place, linking local residents with the people, activities and places of the past. Most importantly, as we have shown, heritage is a significant arena for present-day local and extra-local social interaction, often built on voluntary activity which is a source of enjoyment and satisfaction for participants. In this interactive process some heritage resources are conserved *in situ*, others are translocated from their original sites, and still others are created as present-day representations of a place's and a people's past. The Rakaia salmon statue and mural, set in association with the historic precinct, are good examples and speak of what the participants in this heritage enhancement project hope for in the present and future: a flourishing rural township.

As also raised in the literature review, the study findings show that voluntary local heritage conservation has the potential to represent and interpret only dominant cultural identities and can exclude other voices and narratives, such as those of Māori. While this is certainly the case in Rakaia, we note a change in perspective in this regard as heritage stakeholders in other rural towns in Te Waipounamu/the South Island have begun incorporating Māori motifs, place names and similar heritage markers in their work. This illustrates that in settler societies such as Aotearoa New Zealand, with their basis in colonisation and interaction between indigenous peoples and settlers, managing heritage inclusively is being given a greater emphasis.

Our research also points to the practical value of ensuring the ongoing integrity of heritage sites and information about them in rural settings. Making sure Web links to further information are working is important: so, too, is maintaining and updating interpretative signage so that it is fit for purpose both physically and communicatively. There is an important role here for rural local governments, employing people with expertise in the facilitation of small-town heritage story-telling: their role is to resource such work and allow best use to be made of local collaborative voluntary effort in what are sometimes complex situations, where building code and planning permissions are required.

Two possibilities for future research emerged from our study. The first relates to developing a deeper understanding how rural people interpret heritage in a context of rapid rural change. The diverse nature of multifunctional rural spaces and the very great change engendered by the rise of globalised agricultural super-productivism injects a sense of urgency into heritage management as sites and buildings are threatened with redundancy as land use and economic priorities shift. Interpreting ways of conserving heritage through processes of adaptive re-use and protection of heritage exemplars from past agricultural regimes becomes a priority. We have found the emphasis on production, consumption and protection within the multifunctional rural space research paradigm particularly useful for thinking about heritage, as it relates to all three of these elements (Mitchell, 2013).

The second future research possibility relates to understanding how widely distributed but isolated heritage resources in rural regions may be made more obvious and accessible. In our Rakaia fieldwork, long distances were travelled searching for heritage exemplars, which sometimes could not be located, or when found, were not easily interpreted. Our work to date suggests that a more strategic approach is required. In part, this relates to a need to concentrate more strongly on the classification of heritage resources. This is because heritage listing and category of registration may influence private use of buildings, access to heritage funding where it is available and what happens to heritage artifacts, structures and places in respect of their conservation, restoration or any repurposing that might be proposed. Clear classification can then be linked to on-site heritage interpretation and promotion, making it easier for locals and visitors to understand the relevance and importance of heritage. The key challenge, of course, is that the resources required to elaborate classification and interpretation are often in short supply, as are the funds to conduct research in support of such work. These lacunae again speak of a need for rural local governments and allied central government agencies to enhance their role in support of heritage conservation and its potential in rural regeneration projects. A management model involving residents, local and central government agencies, tourism specialists and place marketers is required (Verbeke and Vanneste, 2018). The Salmon Reserve and its developing links to wider examples of heritage in Rakaia stands as an exemplar of what can be achieved.

Note

1. Notwithstanding this point, in Te Waipounamu/the South Island, where today approximately 10% of Māori dwell (which is a significant proportional increase over the number of permanent Māori residents at the beginning of European colonisation in 1840; Pool, 1991), there are many important places of long-established Māori connection and settlement, a notable range of archaeological sites, wāhi tapu, wāhi tupuna and settings where more recent explicit attempts have been made to re-establish Māori motifs and other markers of cultural identity in the landscape (www.kahurumanu.co.nz/).

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