



Nautical artifacts on display in
The Old Customhouse

all hands on deck

WORDS Lara Hornby
PHOTOS Charlotte Anderson

It's likely you have spent a slow Sunday walking or cycling around the iconic Hawke's Bay Ahuriri seaside. Maybe stopping to quench your thirst, or enjoying a meal at one of Ahuriri's waterfront bars and eateries. But what you may have overlooked is the little yellow weatherboard building nestled at the eastern end of Nelson Quay.

The building gives a hint of its history with a squat black whaling pot and a large ship anchor sitting outside. It is in fact Napier's own Maritime Museum. I will admit, like many locals, I have never stepped foot in the building, one of Hawke's Bay's oldest historic buildings.

Alison McKimm and Chris Styles, two of the 23-member volunteer team, are here to greet me. Alison recounts the history of the Ahuriri Customhouse, which began in 1895. "Today's building was in fact the third Customhouse built at Port Ahuriri. The first was located at the bottom of Milton Road on the sea side, and the second was in nearby Barry Street," she remarks. The Old Customhouse served Napier for just over 58 years.

"The building traditionally housed the offices for a jurisdictional government, where the administration of importing and exporting goods into and from New Zealand took place," Alison continues.

The Customhouse was also the office of the appointed Government Administrator. "The administrator was the most important person in Napier after the mayor. It was the administrator you would need to visit to officially report births, deaths or marriages."

As the hub for these prominent government functions, the Customhouse was considered 'the heart of the city'.



Passionate volunteers who have given the Maritime Museum a new lease of life

SEATED LEFT TO RIGHT: Dorothy Pilkington and Chris Styles; Standing left to right: Denis Pilkington, Noelene Pannett, Phil Crombie and Alison McKimm

With the passing of time, its age and poor state of repair, the Customhouse building faced the threat of demolition. Fortunately, the Hawke’s Bay Harbour Board stepped in, purchasing the building and overseeing its restoration. It was later in 1989 when The Old Customhouse Trust was formed to administer and maintain the building. They had the purpose of “ensuring the building would serve as a local maritime museum and provide a meeting space for locals at a moderate cost,” continues Alison.

The restoration, driven by the trustees (some of whom are still active members today), re-energised the building considerably. Alison recalls that when she moved to the region in 2008, the building was often closed. “I started rounding up a few volunteers. We were all keen to see the building consistently open to the public on a Sunday.

“Initially we would get excited when individual visitors ventured through the door. Now we see the numbers increasing as locals spread the word. We’ve embraced Facebook as a positive marketing tool and we are seeing around 20 visitors coming through the doors at each opening.”



Ahuriri’s ‘Iron Pot’ as we know it today

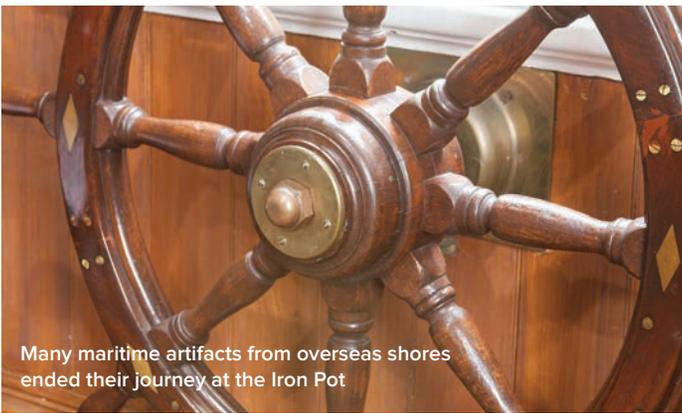
Located in Ahuriri, The Old Customhouse



ABOVE: A glimpse into the past – the Barry Bros warehouse;
BELOW: Original rope from one of the ships that docked in Ahuriri



Many maritime artifacts from overseas shores ended their journey at the Iron Pot



The *Whakarire* model boat, one of the maritime treasures on display

Napier's third Customhouse, built in 1895



The volunteers' hard work is paying off. "When visitors, particularly locals, arrive, we love watching their faces as they enter a place they hadn't realised was right on their doorstep."

The building is made up of three rooms named the 'Collector's Room', the 'Examining Room' and the 'Long Room'. Each fulfils a different function. The rooms present walls covered in beautifully preserved historical photographs, charts mapping shipwrecks, historic reclamation maps and a myriad of maritime objects. Volunteers work hard to source and continually add authentic historical publications to the various collections.

While standing in the 'Long Room', Alison points out that the room is named after its original long counter stretching the width of the room. "It's not hard to imagine the officials of the time right here stamping, signing and sealing all of the importing and exporting paperwork."

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MCLEAN PARK HAVELOCK **NAPIER** WAIPATU NELSON PARK
ONEKAWA PIRIMAI PORAITI TAMATEA TARADALE WESTSHORE
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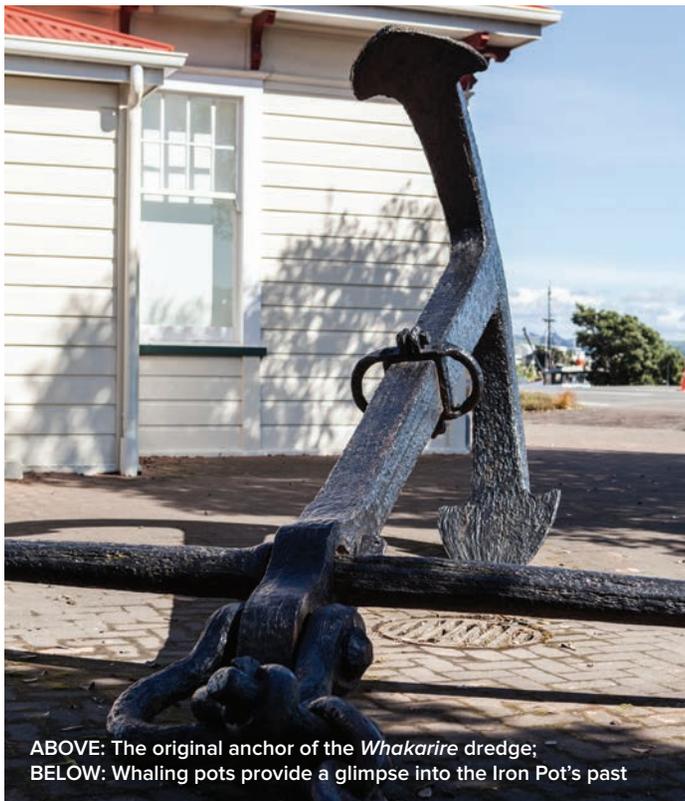
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ABOVE: The original anchor of the *Whakarire* dredge;
BELOW: Whaling pots provide a glimpse into the Iron Pot's past



A special artefact, which maritime enthusiasts are drawn to in the 'Examining Room', is the large model of the locally based water dredge the *Whakarire*. After four decades on display at the Wellington Maritime Museum, the model has finally come home to its original location, the Hawke's Bay waters.

Although many visitors come to just look around, Alison remarks that "other visitors come to share their own family stories. We hear the stories of those relatives who lived here in Ahuriri, or worked on the wharf or at the Iron Pot. This place becomes a wonderful two-way exchange of stories and information from times gone by."

During the cruise ship season, opening days are busy, especially helped by the local visitor experience the Hawke's Bay Express Train, which brings usually around 3,000 visitors through our doors annually."

But, "sadly, the number of daytime bookings available to local clubs and businesses encouraged to use the building as a meeting venue has markedly decreased." Alison hopes more groups will consider using The Old Customhouse. "Why not come along and enjoy the space, and add a special maritime twist to your meeting with a tour of the building?"

With the 'Long Room' able to seat up to 30 people, The Old Customhouse is a convenient central meeting location, available at a community friendly cost of \$25 per session.



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Maritime Union badges



Standing in The Old Customhouse, the large amount of painstaking and skilled restoration work undertaken is obvious. Alison comments, “It’s all attributed to the invaluable enthusiasm and energy gifted by volunteers.”

Looking to the future to help preserve the collection, the trust has lodged a submission to the Napier City Council Long Term Plan.

“We have a vision of establishing and including The Old Customhouse in a dedicated Ahuriri walk, which would help showcase all the historical points and the artworks in the area,” she explains.

And there’s more as the trust is working to be involved alongside Napier’s Museum Theatre Gallery (MTG). With the aim to develop a programme for school visits from 2020. “We would love this to be a place where school groups can come and enjoy an educational treasure hunt similar to the museum.”

This hidden gem of Napier mustn’t remain hidden. Alison challenges us as local residents to mix up Napier sightseeing rituals with family, friends and visitors to include The Old Customhouse on the ‘must-visit’ list. Open every Sunday from 11 a.m. until 4 p.m., you’ll be greeted by maritime-passionate local volunteers who can guide you through one of the best maritime artefact collections in the country. And imagine your forefathers living life as an Ahuriri ‘Portie’. Wander in, but save your coins for a coffee, as entry is free! ☪