

Okains Bay Museum: Re-setting to the 'new' normal

With its nationally significant Māori and colonial collections, rural character and historic setting, the Okains Bay Museum is uniquely placed to contribute to local and national conversations about our past, but when Covid-19 intervened it faced the possibility of shutting its doors.

Situated in the remote eastern bays of Te Pātaka-a-Rākaihautū/Banks Peninsula, the museum's extensive collections are housed in a mix of purpose-built, replica, and relocated heritage buildings that include examples of traditional Māori built heritage, and nineteenth century rural colonial architecture.

In addition to caring for these historic buildings, the museum holds one of the largest taonga Māori collections outside Aotearoa's major metropolitan museums, making it a particular drawcard for both domestic and international visitors.

"The taonga Māori collection comprising more than 20,000 items is wide-ranging and comprehensive, including taonga from the Peninsula, wider Te Waipounamu, and Te Ika-a-Māui. The museum also holds many colonial-era artefacts dating from

RIGHT: The museum cares for an extensive collection of waka and waka-related items including several waka from the Whanganui River area, and the Ngāi Tahu waka, Kōtukumairangi.





the nineteenth century when newly arrived European whalers, sawyers, and boat builders set up their homes in Okains Bay. Together these collections illustrate aspects of our national, regional, and local bicultural histories,” says Helen Brown, Chair and Te Rūnanga o Ngāi Tahu representative on the museum board

The museum first opened in 1977 and hosts one of the largest and longest-running Waitangi Day commemorations in the country. On top of this, it puts on other regular events, however its role as a

ABOVE: Museum volunteer Thungpetch Chutrchaivech gives a blacksmithing demonstration during the 2021 Waitangi Day Commemorations. Photo: Wendy Riley

community hub was put in real jeopardy after the arrival of Covid-19. Brown says that even before the pandemic, the museum faced significant financial challenges, so when Covid arrived, they thought it could be the final straw.

“Pre-pandemic, we welcomed around 10,000 visitors, forty-five percent of whom came from overseas. The absence of these visitors meant our gate-take was slashed in half overnight.”

To cut costs immediately, the board was faced with some hard decisions, and concluded regretfully, that operating seven days per week with full-time staffing was not viable or sustainable in a post Covid-19 world. They restructured, mothballed the museum, and temporarily closed to the public over winter.

Cutting their cloth to Covid times

After careful planning, consultation, and the submission of numerous funding applications, the museum re-opened at Labour Weekend under a more sustainable model with part-time staffing, reduced opening hours, and increased entry fees. An entirely new team was recruited including two Visitor Hosts, a Handyman, and a Business Builder/General Manager.

“Our museum ‘reset’ involved some difficult decision-making, drawing on longstanding relationships, and the forging of new ones, plus a huge amount of hard work and goodwill. When Covid hit our shores, we were open seven days a week. The museum is in a remote location making recruitment difficult, so we had live-in staff however that wasn’t financially sustainable, so we cut back on those roles, and hired part-time staff on fixed term contracts,” says Brown.

A few months later, the Okains Bay board received the news that their application for \$25,000 from the Museum Hardship Fund had been successful, which Brown says helped to put wind in their sails.

“It really gave us a boost. At that stage we were still trialling our new structure. While we felt that we were heading in the right direction, the fund gave us the surety that we could keep our staff on, and we rolled over our fixed term roles into permanent positions.”

By covering operational costs such as wages, electricity, and insurance, the Museum Hardship Fund has allowed the museum to continue to care for its collections and bolster community engagement by offering new educational programmes, activities, and events.

Business Builder and General Manager, Wendy Riley, was recruited as part of the new team and has been recalibrating the museum’s strategy and operations to a post-Covid world. Since starting in December 2020, she has established a growing pool of volunteers, created a domestic-focused social media strategy, instigated a professional marketing strategy, run several events, and developed new funding streams.

“As part of the museum reset, our staff were no longer permanently occupying one of the museum houses, so that has been styled as a retro bach and is now let as holiday accommodation, providing the museum with an innovative revenue stream. There is no wifi in the area, so we are pushing it as a place to take a digital detox,” says Riley.

Brown says despite the many setbacks and cost-cutting, community support has contributed immensely to the museum’s significant achievements over the past eighteen months. The Canterbury Museum has also offered invaluable assistance and enabled Okains Bay Museum to benefit from stronger ties with subject matter experts who have provided advice on security, pest management, conservation, and collection care.

“Covid was a real catalyst for building this relationship. A large group of Canterbury Museum staff have volunteered their time, assisting with a professional gallery-style clean, the installation of humidity and temperature data collection units, the careful removal of taonga for conservation work, and assistance with displays. For many of these museum experts, Okains has provided a unique opportunity to get up close to the collections – in sharing their expertise, they have also been able to expand on their skills and knowledge.”

Brown says that one of the key areas they are looking to strengthen are ways in which volunteers can support the museum year round. During its Waitangi Day commemorations the museum runs a series of workshops on printing, blacksmithing, and weaving run by volunteer experts. Now it is looking to expand this across the year, through standalone offerings and working in partnership with ReKindle, a charity that runs workshops on sustainable crafts.

Building back from bare necessities

After stripping back to bare necessities, Brown says the museum is now in a place to consciously build back in certain areas instead of reactively plugging holes to fill in gaps.

“It has been a battle to survive and it’s a relief to know that we are back from the brink ...



... At one point, in the wake of our restructure, the museum’s bank account was completely emptied to pay out leave entitlements to departing staff. That was frightening. However, we’re now in a position to take a breath, take stock, and look to the future,” says Brown.

Despite surviving this critical low-point, Riley is conscious that the ‘new normal’ is a lean one that will require the team to be constantly looking for large and small pots of money in a competitive environment. As part of their re-set, the staff and the board are looking at ways that they can work with mana whenua Te Rūnanga o Koukourarata, the Canterbury Museum, and funders to provide the collection care needed for the museum’s significant taonga Māori collection.

“We are now climbing out of the abyss. Though it is very much a hand to mouth existence, we’re barely ticking over, we’re holding on by the skin of our teeth, and now it has got even more competitive to get funding - everything is being interrogated. Now we’re rebuilding back in small and important ways with a focus on our collection. This is part of reshaping and resetting.”

ABOVE: Some of the restored buildings in Okains bay include two historic homes - the Churchill and slab cottage. The slab cottage was blown down by the 1968 Wahine storm and later restored. It now stands virtually in its original form, simply furnished with pieces collected from old Banks Peninsula families. Outside the cottage is a clay oven, used to bake bread each Waitangi Day, and also a water pump.



This case study was produced by National Services Te Paerangi

The Museum Hardship Fund is a COVID response funding stream from the Ministry for Culture and Heritage



Ministry for Culture & Heritage