COROMIND

Issue 47



There is no such place as away

Kathryn Engebretsen: A World Made From What Others Leave Behind

A Story 44 Years in the Making

Marc Simon: From Childhood Passion to *The Last Defender*

It's a Big Job, Tim

A Crane Operator's View of Tairua

WORDS THAT ROSE WITH THE GOLD

Charlotte Lawlor: A Hidden Literary Figure of Early Thames

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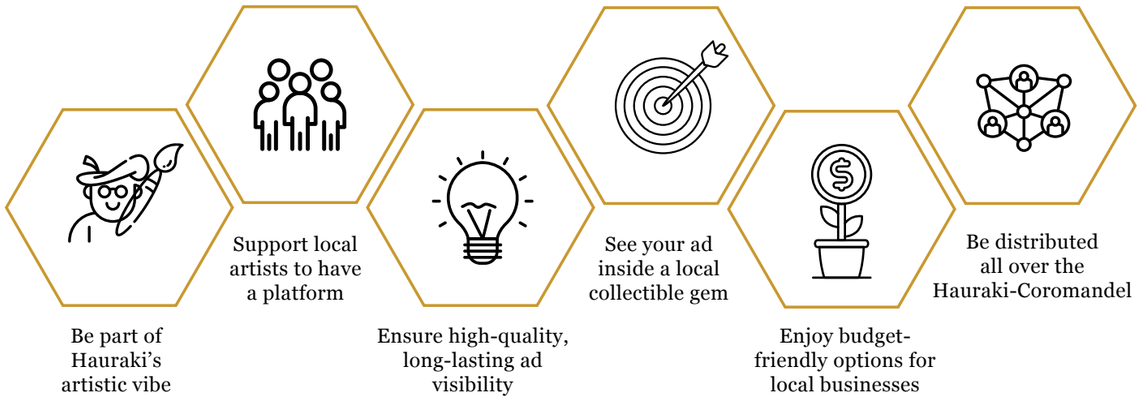
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Sarah Nicholson



It was a typical English summer morning: gloomy skies, endless drizzle, and my usual early-morning trudge up the main street of Bristol's city centre to the dental office where I worked. Then I noticed a couple of people excitedly pointing towards the upper level of a building across the street. And there it was: the latest masterpiece from local hero and street artist Banksy. Painted high on the wall of a local family planning clinic was the image of a window, with a naked man hanging out of it, apparently caught in an affair. As usual, Banksy seemed to have pulled off the feat without anyone seeing him at work. I was likely among the first handful of people to spot it before the news spread. The artwork would later become the first piece of street art in the UK to receive legal protection.

I'd moved to Bristol the year before to spend time with family there and travel around Europe. It was an amazing city, but one of the highlights for me was always the street art, much of it by Banksy, which could be found throughout his hometown. I loved how he could transform an ordinary, blank wall into something that made you laugh or, as with many of his more political works, stop and think.

Little did I know that 20 years later I'd be painting murals of my own, transforming ordinary spaces into something full of life and colour. It still doesn't quite feel real! Writing 'artist' as my occupation on a customs form for the first time was a real pinch-me moment. It certainly fitted on that little line better than 'orthodontic laboratory technician'!

My first major mural was at Whenuakite School. The brief was to create something colourful that would inspire the students and incorporate the school's values. I chose the life cycle of the monarch butterfly, which I felt perfectly represented the students' journey through the school. They arrive as cute little caterpillars, are nurtured and protected as they grow, and eventually emerge as beautiful butterflies, full of knowledge and ready to fly off into the future. My favourite feature is the interactive butterfly wings. I still get a kick out of seeing parents taking their children's first-day-of-school photos in front of them, knowing those pictures will become treasured memories in the years to come.

Since then, I've painted murals at Wildwood Mini Golf, Cooked Mexican Restaurant and The Lost Spring, as well as creating blackboard artwork for cafés and takeaways, decorating food trucks and painting murals in private homes.

One of my favourites was a beautiful beachfront home at Cooks Beach. The owners had seen my work at Cooked and wanted a Mexican-themed splashback for their bar area, but with a design that was deeply personal to them. I loved getting to know them and finding ways to tell their story through the artwork. The focal point was a set of playing cards, reflecting how the couple had met while playing poker. They became the king and queen, while the two jacks represented their sons. Every detail in the mural had a hidden meaning, making it much more than just a decorative feature. It was their story, painted onto a wall.

Some of my most well-known works are the Chorus cabinets in Whangamatā, Cooks Beach and Whitianga. The Chorus Cabinet Art initiative is a fantastic idea, bringing together local councils and Chorus to transform unsightly telecommunications cabinets into canvases for local artists. Each year, Chorus selects 12 of its favourite cabinets from around New Zealand to be professionally photographed and featured in calendars and gifts distributed to Parliament, councils and clients. Two of my designs were selected: my marlin near the Joan Gaskell roundabout and my Beach Hop inspired artwork in Whangamatā.







Looking ahead, I have a couple more murals lined up, some old surfboards waiting to be transformed into artworks, and an exciting project painting sets and props for MBPA's upcoming production of Grease Young@Part.

When I think back to that drizzly morning in Bristol, watching people gather to admire a painting on a wall, I could never have imagined where that moment would lead me. Now, I'm the one with a paintbrush in hand, turning everyday spaces into something unexpected, colourful and full of meaning. And I feel incredibly lucky to be doing it here, in a place where creativity is embraced, opportunities keep appearing, and there's always another blank surface waiting to become something special.

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Words by
Sarah Nicholson



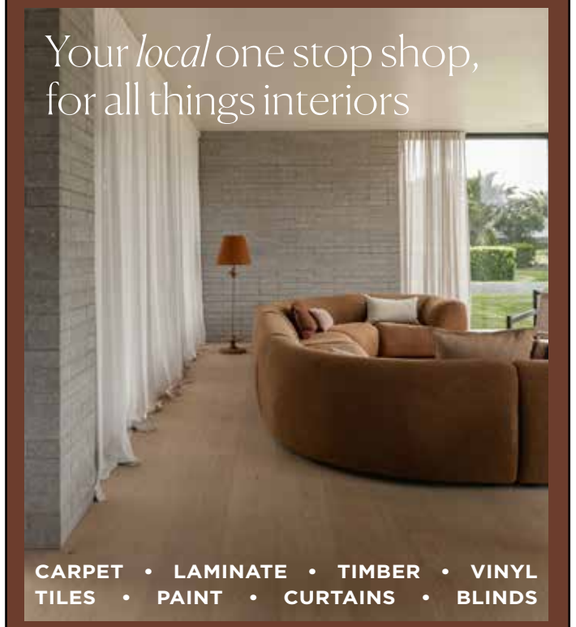
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— Banksy



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Starting Again by the Sea Series

Quitting the Rat Race

Why So Many People Leave the City in Mid-Life

Across Aotearoa, more people in mid-life are leaving cities and resettling in coastal towns. These moves are not about retirement, but about re-thinking how to live well: with less pressure, stronger connections, and a greater sense of purpose. This six-part series explores what draws people to the coast, what they find when they arrive, and how both newcomers and long-term locals are reshaping community life in the process.

From long commutes to constant pressure, city life can wear people down. This article draws on my Master's research on why pre-retirement age people move to Mercury Bay and explores why mid-life has become a turning point: why a remote coastal region offers something cities no longer can.

At some point in middle age, many people begin to ask a quiet but persistent question: Is this really how I want to live the rest of my life? For a growing number of New Zealanders, the answer to that question leads away from the city and towards the coast.

This particular stage of life is called 'pre-retirement' and typically covers the age range of 45 to 65 years old. It sits somewhere between full-time career building and full retirement. For most people, there are some common features: children have usually left home, careers are established, there is enough confidence to make change, and enough awareness that time is precious.

This kind of move is not retirement in the traditional sense. The people making it are often still working, still active, still busy. But they are no longer willing to accept constant pressure as the price of success. Instead, they are seeking something simpler, slower, and more meaningful.

Cities offer plenty of opportunity, but they also demand constant attention. Many people say they felt permanently 'on', with pressure to be always available, and consequently, always juggling priorities. Over time, this takes a toll on health, on relationships and ultimately, on a sense of meaning.

The allure of Mercury Bay offers a powerful contrast. The obvious lack of crowds is just a surface-level observation. On a deeper, more experiential level, the contrasts are more subtle, but they are also more powerful. The sea replaces traffic noise. Walking or cycling replaces commuting. Time begins to feel fundamentally different, more in-tune with the cyclic rhythm of nature or tides. People notice the weather again. They recognise faces at the supermarket.

A move from a city to a remote, quiet town is rarely impulsive. Instead, it is a rational, well-pondered decision, in which competing values are weighed up. Most people think about it for years. They might holiday in the same place repeatedly. They begin to imagine what daily life might look like rather than just weekends away, and ask practical questions about healthcare, housing, and work. They consider distance and travel-time; how will they negotiate maintaining family relationships and friendships when their people are a three-hour commute away?

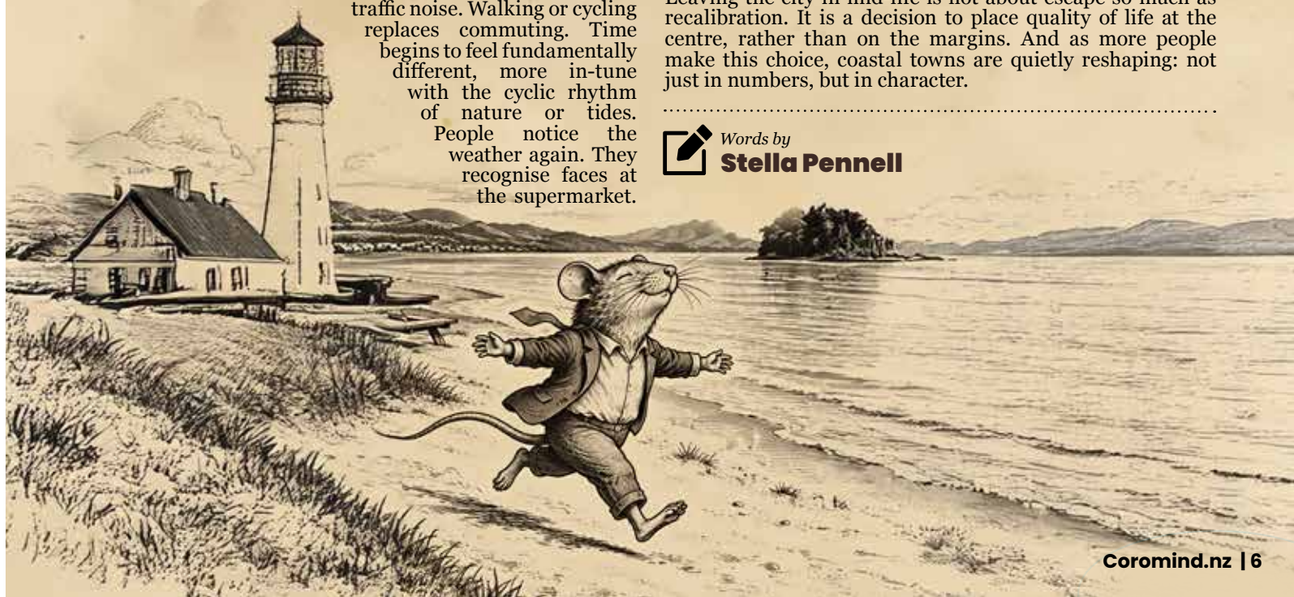
Money plays a role in people's decisions to move, but it's not the whole story. Selling a city house and buying in a smaller town can free up finances, but what people value most is control over their time. Additionally, because Mercury Bay is a premium holiday spot, house prices reflect that reality so monetary gains may not be significant, if at all. Consequently, many who come here still need to work, and opt for part-time work or flexible arrangements. Others continue to work full time. Most people acknowledge that career building opportunities are unlikely in a smaller place, or at least, more difficult to source, and most people also acknowledge and accept that their incomes will likely drop.

Yet moving is only the first step. Arriving in a new place doesn't automatically bring belonging and becoming 'local' takes effort. People soon realise that moving into a different environment is not just a matter of packing up your old house and unpacking it in a new one. Instead, they must learn new rhythms, new social rules, and new ways of contributing.

Learning to fit in requires patience and humility. It takes time to become accepted as a local. Still, for many, the trade-off is worth it. They speak of breathing more deeply, sleeping better, and feeling more present. Life feels less crowded, not just physically, but mentally.

Leaving the city in mid-life is not about escape so much as recalibration. It is a decision to place quality of life at the centre, rather than on the margins. And as more people make this choice, coastal towns are quietly reshaping: not just in numbers, but in character.

Words by
Stella Pennell



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WORDS THAT ROSE WITH THE GOLD

CHARLOTTE LAWLOR: A HIDDEN LITERARY FIGURE OF EARLY THAMES

Poetry has long been a way of expressing beauty and intense emotions, passing down history, and telling stories about life experiences – the earliest poetry being recited or sung as a way of remembering law, family history and the broader human experience. Through the arrangement of language for its meaning, sound and rhythm, poetry can be more effective than ordinary speech in stirring up strong emotions. Traditionally, poetry also explores the many facets of eternal and boundless love, as recorded in the earliest known poem, "Love Song of Shu-Sin" from around 2000 BCE, and timeless classics such as Shakespeare's Sonnet 18, and Elizabeth Barratt Browning's "How Do I Love Thee".

Throughout history, there have been many talented poets who have captivated with their poetic forms and emotive expression. Charlotte Lawlor was one such poet. From a very early age Charlotte was given the nickname 'Bob' by her family, and she later wrote under the pen-names, 'Bob Lawlor' and 'Ruthyn'.

Charlotte was born on 3 October 1878, at Shortland (Thames Advisor, 7 October 1878) to George James Lawlor (1852-1913) and Augusta Eliza Lawlor née Grey (1855-1933). George and Augusta married in 1876. (1) George was a gold mine battery manager, and later a district agent for the A.M.P. Society. Augusta was the niece of Sir George Grey who was twice Governor, and 11th premier of New Zealand. Charlotte was the second daughter in a family of four girls, and the granddaughter of Henry Charles Lawlor who, with his wife Anne and family, arrived in Onehunga, Auckland aboard the ship *Brilliant* in the early 1840s. The Lawlor family was one of Thames' oldest and most respected families. Charlotte and her sisters initially received private schooling, and later continued their education at Kauaeranga Boys School, and Thames High School. Her talents as an artist showed up early in her life. At the age of 14 she was working for Foy Brothers, photographers (Pollen St, Thames), and by age 22 was receiving instruction in black and white sketching in Auckland. She also enjoyed musical theatre, and was a talented actor and singer.

By 1903, Charlotte was writing prolifically for a number of papers and magazines, was living in Queen Street, Thames (with her parents), and working as an advertisement writer and designer. At age 28, she moved with her family to Waihi where gold had been discovered in 1878, as George thought there would be more work available there. When George died in 1913, (2) Charlotte and her mother relocated to Manukau Road, Auckland, where Charlotte worked for the advertising agency, Chandler & Co., in Symonds Street. It was here that she became responsible for the Fleming's campaign, and created the well-known character of Sergeant Dan the Creamota Man, to help sell a breakfast cereal called Creamota. Finding the Auckland house too big for just the two of them, Charlotte and her mother moved to a cottage on the Tapu-Coroglen Road. Charlotte's mother Gussie, as she was affectionately known,



died in 1933 from a sudden heart attack. Gussie had been associated with the social and philanthropic work of Thames for most of her life, until her health began to fail.

After experiencing health issues, and the ordeal of operations, and X-ray and radium treatment, Charlotte succumbed to her illness, and died on 2 July 1941 aged 62, at Thames Hospital. (3)

"Charlotte is remembered for her talents as a writer of verse, a water colour artist, and having a rare sense of humour and natural grace of style."

Toss Hammond, 1966.

> *You may meet him at the Mata,*
> *Perhaps at Thornton's Bay,*
> *Turning at the Whalebone,*
> *Back the same old way.*
> *Clinking sound of metal,*
> *Shingle, sand and shell,*
> *Tiger grading up the road,*
> *Tiger doing it well.*
>
> *Oh! The highway is forever,*
> *And the highway is the King's,*
> *On it roll the motor cars*
> *And the lesser things.*
> *So, Tiger's task is crowning*
> *The highway fair and free,*
> *To make it safe for everyone,*
> *For him, and you and me...*

Extract from: The Road Graders of the Thames Coast – Tiger
By Charlotte (Bob) Lawlor

Words by
Robyn Pearce
Volunteer, Thames Museum Te Whare Taonga o te Kauaeranga

References: (1) BDMNZ, 1876/1227, Augusta Eliza Grey and George James Lawton {sic}; (2) BDMNZ, 1913/883; (3) BDMNZ, 1941/23080; Thames Museum collection archives; Photos Thames Museum collection.

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SUPPA WORDS

4.19am

when we both wake at the same time
in different beds
in different houses
in different streets
but are thinking of each other
and maybe trying to feel each other
the tarmac between us cannot separate us from each other
the night will connect us, each to the other
then maybe we can even get there, in time with each other
and the seconds,
the minutes,
the hours,
the breath between us
dissolves
the sheets, blankets
walls and doors
the paths and roadways are nothing
and I am in your arms
your breath in my ear
and we are with each other
connected to each other
by a force greater than each other
and it is mighty fine

By WORDsmith

Wise is the man who plants a tree knowing that he may never share in its shade

A Tribute to:
Howard Saunders [Howie] who passed peacefully on 7th November 2025

A mighty kauri has fallen. Howie always stood with his feet firmly planted on the ground and his legacy can be seen at Te Puia [Hot Water Beach], a place he loved and called home for over 60 years.

The native pōhutukawa planted at Domain Road car park, the reinstated wetlands at North end and the numerous beach and dune plantings, as well as the many private properties he worked on in the area. Howie is with us all and his good work lives on for all to see and enjoy.

"A good friend Is, Hard to find, Hard to lose and impossible to forget"

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Wondering in Waikino

THE LONELY GHOST

A house full of love – and one lingering soul

The chill arrived first. A gentle, persistent draft that curled around ankles and whispered across the back of necks in the old wooden house. Then came the soft sounds: the sigh of a rocking chair on worn floorboards long after midnight, the faint chime of a flute no one owned, playing a familiar tune that no one could quite remember.

The Osman family noticed. Arif, pragmatic and weary, blamed the ancient structure. Saloma, intuitive and nurturing, felt a quiet melancholy seep into the rooms. Their six-year-old, Leo, wide-eyed and curious, declared, "We have a shy friend."

The ghost wasn't shy, just very lonely. His name, when he still remembered such things, was Silas. Decades, perhaps centuries, had blurred since his last human interaction. He drifted through the empty rooms of the wooden house, a wisp of memory and regret, yearning for the warmth of belonging he observed through the windows of other, occupied homes. When the Osmans moved in, their laughter, their arguments, the scent of Saloma's' cooking clinging to the air gave Silas a sense of fragile hope.

His first attempts were clumsy. He'd materialise partially near the fireplace while Leo read, hoping the flickering light might disguise his form, only to vanish when Arif glanced up after noticing the sudden drop in temperature. He'd try to join Leo building block towers, concentrating fiercely to nudge a block an inch, startling the boy when it inexplicably slid. Leo, however, wasn't scared. "Did you see that, Mum? The tower helper did it again!"

One rainy October afternoon, Saloma sat nursing baby Klara in the dim living room. A profound quiet, broken only by Klara's soft suckling and the drumming rain, settled over the house. Silas, drawn by the profound intimacy of the scene, felt his loneliness sharpen into an ache. He gathered his energy, focusing not on fear, but on a gentle presence. Slowly, deliberately, he allowed himself to become visible.

Not a terrifying spectre, but a translucent figure, like smoke held in moonlight. He appeared near the old rocking chair, his form indistinct – a suggestion of a young man in clothes from another time, his eyes wide and pleading. Saloma gasped, clutching Klara closer, her heart hammering. But the figure didn't advance. He didn't moan or rattle chains. He simply stood there, radiating a sadness so deep it felt like a physical weight in the room. He looked ... lost.

"Who ... who are you?" Saloma whispered, her voice trembling but not screaming.

Silas couldn't speak, not in words she could hear. Communication was a tangle of intention and emotion. He focused on the image of an empty chair at a table laden with food, the feeling of watching a family game through a frosted window, the profound silence of centuries. He projected *wanting*, not haunting.

Saloma, staring into those sorrowful eyes, felt a shift. This wasn't menace; it was profound isolation. "You're ... lonely?" she ventured.

A wave of palpable relief and desperate affirmation washed over her. The air warmed slightly. Silas shimmered, a faint, hopeful light replacing some of the gloom.

Leo burst into the room, trailing muddy boots. "Mum, the puddle by the shed is ..." He stopped dead, staring at Silas. His eyes widened, not with fear, but with wonder. "You came out!" He beamed. "Are you the tower helper? The rocking chair sitter?"

Silas managed a slight, wobbly nod in Leo's direction. The simple recognition, the lack of terror, was a balm.

Arif, drawn by the commotion, paused in the doorway. Seeing the translucent figure, his hand instinctively went to his phone, then stopped. He saw Saloma's expression – not fear, but cautious empathy – and Leo's utter delight. He saw the ghost's posture, not threatening, but ... hopeful? Hesitant?

"He's sad, Dad," Leo announced. "He wants to stay. With us."

Silas held his breath, if ghosts breathe. He focused every ounce of his being on projecting a single image: himself, sitting quietly in the corner of the living room while the family lived their lives. Not intruding, just ... being present. Included.

Arif ran a hand through his hair, ex haling slowly. "Right. Okay. This is ... unexpected." He looked from his wife to his son to the ethereal figure radiating nervous anticipation. "So ... no slamming doors? No blood on the walls? Just ... quiet company?"

Silas shook his head vehemently, a faint ripple passing through his form.

Saloma stood, shifting Klara to her hip. The baby, far from frightened, gurgled and reached a chubby fist towards the shimmering light. "He feels ... gentle, Arif. Just terribly alone."

A long moment stretched. The rain drummed. Klara cooed. Leo held his breath. Silas waited, the weight of his hope almost unbearable.

Finally, Arif sighed, a small, almost imperceptible smile touching his lips. "Alright then. House is big enough, I suppose. But you help with the drafts," he added, a weak attempt at normalcy. "And absolutely no spooking the cat. Kuching is jumpy enough."

The relief that flooded Silas was like sunshine breaking through storm clouds. He didn't fade, but solidified slightly, his form gaining a touch more definition. He drifted slowly, respectfully, towards the empty corner Saloma had gestured to earlier. He settled into the space, not quite sitting, but occupying it with quiet reverence.

He didn't become visible often. Mostly, he remained a comforting presence: the extra warmth near the fireplace on cold nights, the unseen hand that gently stopped a vase from toppling when Leo raced past, the soft sigh of contentment that sometimes mingled with the family's laughter. He'd rock the empty chair sometimes, a silent lullaby for Klara. Leo chatted to him constantly, showing him drawings, explaining complex Lego constructions. Saloma would sometimes leave a small, symbolic offering – a warm cup of cocoa placed near his corner, the steam curling upwards, undisturbed but appreciated.

One evening, as they sat reading, Klara, now a toddler, pointed a sticky finger towards Silas's corner. "Eh?" she babbled.

Leo looked up. "That's Silas, Klara. He lives here too."

Silas, focusing hard, managed to make the dust motes in a sunbeam dance in a playful spiral just for her. Klara giggled, clapping her hands.

Arif glanced up from his book, catching Saloma's eye. He nodded towards the corner, a silent understanding passing between them. It wasn't conventional. It wasn't explained. But the draft was gone, replaced by a subtle, comforting warmth. The loneliness that had seeped into the old wooden house had lifted, replaced by the quiet, steadfast presence of a ghost who had finally, finally, found his family. He wasn't just tolerated; he was, in their own unique way, adopted. And Silas, the lonely ghost, basked in the simple, profound miracle of belonging, his centuries of silence finally broken by the gentle hum of home.

Words by
Amir Yussof



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The gift of enough

Christmas has a way of creeping up on us.

The decorations appear, the sales begin, and before long we're surrounded by messages telling us we need just one more thing. More presents. More decorations. More food. More everything.

But I wonder what Christmas would look like if we measured it a little differently?

Would our children remember the mountain of presents under the tree? Or the afternoon spent baking together, making homemade decorations, building a bird feeder from scrap timber, or searching our reuse store for quirky gifts with a story behind them?

At Wāhi Tukurua, we see the other side of Christmas too. The unwanted gifts, the toys that lose their appeal by Boxing Day, and the items that arrive at our gates months later, still in near-new condition.
It makes me think that perhaps the greatest gift we can give isn't another "thing".
It's an example.

An example that happiness doesn't always come wrapped in shiny paper. That repairing, reusing and creating can be just as rewarding as buying. That experiences often outlast possessions.

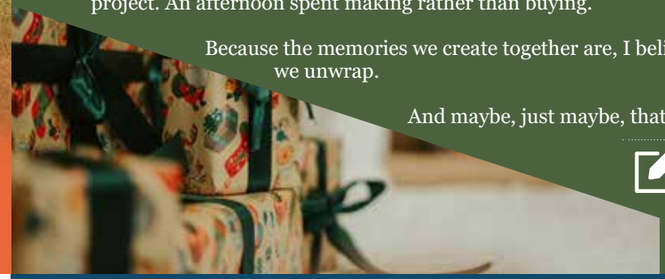
Christmas is a wonderful time for generosity, but generosity doesn't have to mean consumption.

This year, perhaps we could give something else alongside the presents. A family tradition. A shared project. An afternoon spent making rather than buying.

Because the memories we create together are, I believe, worth far more than the things we unwrap.

And maybe, just maybe, that's a gift our planet would appreciate too.

Words by
Kat Neilson-Jones









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It's a Big Job, Tim

A Crane Operator's View of Tairua

Ten truckloads of parts arrived in Tairua recently, as part of the Pepe Stream Bridge replacement project. It was important they turned up in the right order. Fulton Hogan crane driver, Tim Warburton, explains.

"Huge cranes are too big to travel along roads, so they're assembled piece by piece on site. And we have to ensure parts arrive at the construction site in the right order so we've enough room to lay them out and put them together." The biggest cranes need up to 16 truckloads. Imagine that. Assembly starts with the car body or cabin. Then the tracks are installed, then the counter weights and finally the boom, which can be up 100 metres long! (The Tairua crane is set up with a 42-metre boom for best lift configuration.)

Tim has operated cranes for 15 years and worked for Fulton Hogan for ten. In his youth he wanted to be a topdressing pilot, but started working as a farmer. Then he was employed by Wrightsons, followed by a job at Hinuera Natural Stone, where he was employed as the 'dog man', who is in charge of overall crane operation and planning.

"Then one day the crane operator didn't show up, I was asked to take over, and I've been working on cranes ever since," smiles Tim. I can tell he enjoys his job. The biggest loads he has lifted so far were steel girders for a bridge built in Tauranga. Each was 32 metres long, weighed 62 tonnes, and had to be hauled 22 metres in the air, up and over a bridge before landing on the site of a new bridge. On some jobs he does 'blind lifts', where he totally relies on radio contact. He works on a lot of water treatment plants and bridges, including a bridge replacement following the devastation caused by Cyclone Gabrielle near Napier.

Perched up in a crane, Tim has some interesting views. With forest, ocean and mountain ranges, Tairua must have some of the best. "Operating in Tairua has been one of the better sites because it has beautiful views and friendly locals," he says.

The 120 tonne Sumitomo crane that he is currently working on (crane SCX1200HD-2, to be precise) is set up to lift 32 tonnes and has been putting foundation piles in place for Pepe's two-lane bridge. The cabin has air conditioning and a meter that monitors wind speeds, with a guideline to operate up to 11 metres per second.

Tim enjoys working for Fulton Hogan and likes the family atmosphere. "The company looks after us and we can talk to everyone. Another good thing when working in the civil sector is that you are on one site for a while and get to know the locals. In jobs such as the cyclone recovery work that we did near Napier, we find the residents appreciate us being there."

He reflects, with nostalgia, that back in the 1960s his grandfather, Ken Pollitt, worked on construction of the road from Hikuai to the top of SH25A.

While Tim's job sees him travel to construction sites around the country, he loves living in Te Aroha with his wife Cassie and sons, Liam (20) and Michael (17). Cassie works as a planner for a local surveyor. The couple are both 'car mad'. They have two rally cars and love being involved in motor sports. Maybe that's why Liam is interested in being a mechanic. Michael is still deciding his options.

Meanwhile, on the Coromandel Peninsula, Fulton Hogan is on track to deliver a two-lane bridge by December 2027, and motorists are a step closer to a smoother ride into the friendly village of Tairua and beyond.

Words by
Pamela Ferla

Note: A timber Pepe Bridge was built in 1911 and widened in 1926. This was replaced in 1943 by the bridge now being demolished.



Qualifications

So, what skills do you need to be a crane driver? You need certificates to drive those giants, with modules up to level four and a national certificate.

"You need excellent eyesight as well as spatial awareness and good hand/eye coordination," says Tim. "You also need the ability to multitask. And it helps if you have a calm nature."

The White House Gallery in Coroglen

Paula McNeill Welcomes You to a World of Art, Treasures and Garden Views

The White House is a welcoming home and gallery in Coroglen, created by artist Paula McNeill and her late husband, Don. After purchasing the property 21 years ago, they began shaping it into the gallery visitors see today: a place to enjoy an eclectic collection of fine art and collectables, along with creative gardens and views across the valley and estuary.

The gallery has earned praise from visitors near and far, offering a relaxed space to browse, take in the surroundings and discover something unexpected.

Meet your host, Paula McNeill

An award-winning mixed-media artist, Paula creates vibrant, layered works that invite curiosity, reflection and wonder. Since moving from Pumpkin Hill in Tairua to establish The White House and her studio at Coroglen, she has continued to explore ideas through colour, texture and form.

Her work draws on life, nature and people, blending traditional methods with experimental materials. For Paula, art is about following the creative path wherever it leads – and trusting that each step may reveal something extraordinary.

Art, artists and collectables

The gallery focuses on contemporary art, from abstraction to postmodernism, and supports a growing community of local artists. Its featured artists include Peter Augustin, Susan Dunster, Jane Parson, Jan Illingsworth, Kay de Blaauw, Peter Muller, Aviva Clark, Kate Hill, Jane Galloway, Verena Tagmann, Dave Fowell, Vanessa McKay, Logan Humphrey, Gary Nevin, Marion Manson Joanne Mahoney, Caroline Peacocke and Sally Samins.

Alongside paintings and sculpture, visitors can browse glassware, pottery, mid-century furniture, modern pieces and intriguing finds from around the world. Aladdin's Cave adds another layer of discovery, with nostalgic treasures that invite visitors to linger.













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Hitchhiker Tales – A Series

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What Life Looks Like Without a Safety Net

I was driving through the countryside near Paeroa when I picked up a hitchhiker. He was a large man walking alone along a rural road, with no luggage at all. As soon as he got in, he told me he was homeless. Almost immediately, he moved on to explaining how he scavenged food from bins. He'd once spent three months in prison, transferred between three facilities.

When I lightly asked about prison food, he spoke enthusiastically about breakfast – even though he'd lost six kilos inside. Looking at his hulking frame, I wondered whether the instability of scavenging had taught him to eat whenever food appeared, and as much as possible. When meals are unpredictable, you might eat more, not less.

When I asked why he'd been transferred so often, he laughed. Once, he'd flashed a security camera. "Why put up cameras if you don't want to be flashed?" Another time, he'd tried to hug a female guard. She hadn't appreciated that.

The conversation stayed light, but the undercurrent for me was clear: keep him feeling respected and everything would be fine. He suggested games to fill the silences – spelling games, then *I Spy*. It felt oddly like a family road trip.

He had hitchhiked from Tauranga and was aiming for Whangamatā, though he was detouring. He was on his way to see his three children. Their mother wasn't keen to see him. He planned to ask his sister if he could stay a night or two. His family, he said, didn't really help him anymore.

He told me he kept a towel and soap hidden along a riverbank in Tauranga where he usually stayed. That's where he washed. When I asked whether homeless people looked out for each other, he said yes – though one man had recently taken a large bite out of his soap. It still had the bite mark.

I dropped him at the Whitianga–Whangamatā intersection and drove on.

A month earlier, I'd stopped in Whangamatā to pick up a woman on her way to see a baby that had been removed from her care. I didn't pry. It was nearly dusk and threatening rain. Her baby was likely a two-hour hitch away. As she spoke about her life, the rain began – sudden and heavy. I found myself judging her for starting hitchhiking so late in the day.

Before I let her out at the Whitianga–Whangamatā intersection, I handed her the emergency poncho I keep in my car so she could head towards Thames and then Coromandel. The rain stopped the moment she got out of the car.

She wasn't a threat to me, but she was clearly a threat to herself. She said she had people who *might* come from Coromandel to pick her up if things went wrong. I couldn't help thinking how long that wait would be, and what an imposition it would become – especially in the dark.

Not long before that, north of Tairua, I picked up another woman walking with no luggage. I coaxed her story out of her, but the conversation was stilted. She had no family support. She'd moved constantly. She'd walked out from an argument with friends in Tairua with nothing – no phone, no coat, no water bottle. The night was getting cold. She said she had friends who might let her stay in Whitianga.

As we neared town, she asked if I had money for food. It was the first time I'd ever reached into my pocket for a hitchhiker – the need was unmistakable.

The lighter stories exist too, though they're less memorable. I recently picked up an Argentine man hitching fifteen minutes to work in Coroglen while his car was at the mechanic. He was shy about his English. I speak Spanish and teach English, but I realised what he needed most was confidence in English. I stayed in English until near the end.

Another time, I picked up a German woman at the Whitianga–Whangamatā intersection. She wanted to walk the Pinnacles and stay in the hut. I was already heading there myself for a day walk. Those two interactions felt like rare alignments – the Spanish speaker, the hiker, and a driver who spoke Spanish and was going to the very same hike.

Refreshing hitch-hikers are more common. The others are rarer, but they offer sharper insights into the cracks in society.

Some people are dangerous to others. Some are dangerous only to themselves. Many are simply surviving with fewer buffers than the rest of us.

I stop. I listen. Sometimes I give more than a lift.

And for now, I keep stopping.

Words by
Rachael Mayne



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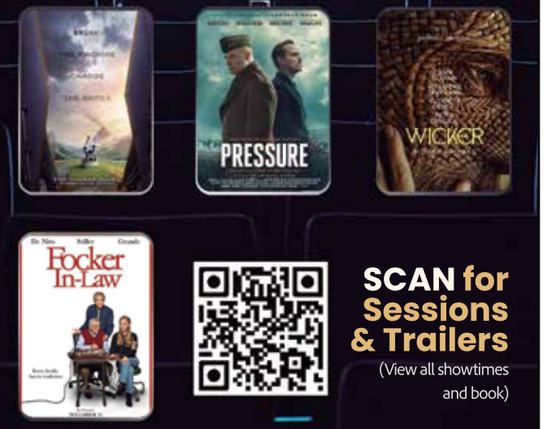
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A day in the life of a Kaiāwhina Hauora

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Essential to our service, our Kaiāwhina expertly juggle a multitude of tasks, while always, the heart of their mahi is, "Caring for our whānau in a way that is meaningful to them." – Rhianna (Kaiāwhina Hauora Team Lead)

Their holistic whānau-centred approach to care prioritises connection and cultural safety, ensuring clinical spaces feel warm and less intimidating. In these safe spaces, whānau are more likely to open up and share what is going on for them. "We don't speak medical jargon, we speak from life experience, from the heart."

I te ata (morning)

Our team arrive at 7.30am each morning to get the clinics set-up for the day. A karakia and quick hui to plan the day before launching into consults with whānau, recording observations and collecting general health information to ensure whānau are all up to date before being seen by a clinician.

Then it's onto the phone for recalls. Following-up with whānau who are due or overdue for any checks, screenings, or immunisations. Making sure they receive the best ongoing care.

I muri (later)

Kaiāwhina can be anywhere they are needed on any given day, and that's exactly where you will find them, frequently working outside the clinic walls in the community. Collecting whānau for their appointments, looking for whānau they can't contact, or spending several hours holding someone's hand as they wait in ED.

A favourite aspect of the role for our Kaiāwhina Ariana is home visits. "Especially for the elderly, they feel safe and comfortable in their home." One of the many 'Nannies' that she has acquired over the years has invited Ariana over for a kai. It's a great opportunity to take her observations in an environment where she feels comfortable and can kōrero about how she has been feeling. While there, Ariana may fold washing, change beds, and ensure that the dishes are done and kitchen tidied before heading back to the clinic, just as you would do for your own Nanny.

I te ahiahi (afternoon)

Afternoons may involve assisting whānau ā-tinana with a virtual doctor consult, carrying out delegated tasks for the clinical team while making whānau feel comfortable.

Or, could be spent working on this month's in-clinic health promotion display. These displays really help to spark conversations about our hauora, the signs and symptoms that need to be checked, and the various screening campaigns that are available.

In this ever-changing role, the only certainty is that tomorrow will look different to today.

Ia rā, ia rā (every day)

Our Kaiāwhina Hauora embody the extra layer of manaakitanga (care) that leaves nobody behind, bridging the gap between whānau and access to services. Most importantly, they look beyond the surface issues to view patients as people, and people as whānau, providing the wrap-around support that Te Korowai Hauora a Hauraki is proud to deliver to our people. Mō tātou o Hauraki.



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PROUD TO BE LOCAL

Mike Wilkes

THRIVE TRUST, THAMES







You're originally from West Auckland. What brought you to the Coromandel and why did you choose to stay?
My wife Jovana and I had started a charitable trust supporting young people and were looking for somewhere to take them on adventures. Around that time, my in-laws invited us to help establish a retreat centre at Te Mata Lodge on the Thames Coast. That became the beginning of our own journey into the Thames community.

Had you had much to do with the area before?
My family had holidayed at Ōtautū Bay, near Colville, for a few years when I was younger. But after moving to Thames, I discovered that our family had originally settled here during the early goldfields days. They ran a local jewellery and watchmaking business called Chronometer House.

What drives you to be so passionate about helping our young people?
We often underestimate how much our past and our future shape the way we live today. My teenage years were turbulent. I experienced significant family trauma and the pain of losing people around me. I didn't navigate those years particularly well. Later, when a friend's father and another young friend took their own lives, I remember thinking, "This is not the way it should be." That lit a fire in me to do something about it.

What do some of us 'adults' miss about today's youth?
I have conversations with young people who talk about their parents escaping into devices, much like we often criticise young people for doing. I sometimes wonder whether the question isn't so much what we're missing about today's youth, but what today's youth are missing from us. Most parents love their kids immensely, but the heartbreaking thing is that it's not what their children are experiencing.

How did Thrive Trust get its start?
It really began with a remarkable lady named Lynne Chaffey. I had all these dreams and ideas about supporting young people, and Lynne, who attended my church, heard the vision and simply said, "Hey, why don't we get it started then?" We launched with a pilot programme called Res-Kids. Our initial goal was to build confidence and resilience. But after that first term, we started hearing stories of young people improving in maths, stepping into leadership at school and no longer fighting at home. We realised we'd stumbled onto something much bigger than our original goals.

What does 'success' look like for Thrive Trust?
For me, success has to start with the individual. It's one young person discovering a sense of vision, hope and connection, and stepping into life with confidence. Everything else we do comes back to that same heart. Helping our young people thrive.

Tell me about *The Unschooled Life*
The Unschooled Life is a book I wrote after seeing how many young people were struggling with the transition from education into adult life. I wanted to create something that could be like a field guide for navigating change, finding purpose and recognising that our past doesn't have to define our future.

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STEP THIS WAY

You can stomp your feet, wiggle your bum and have a lot of fun if you join the dance phenomenon that's growing in popularity around the Coromandel Peninsula and beyond. With a strong beat and catchy music, line dancing appeals to people of all ages and one of its biggest fans is dance teacher, Donna Brooke of Tairua.

"Young and old people find line dancing is fun," says Donna, as we relax over a cup of coffee. "And whatever your age it's great for mobility, mental agility, gaining confidence and concentration. But more than anything it's about being in the community and making new friends."

Donna started line dancing in Thames early in 2025 and enjoyed it so much that she decided to run her own classes. She calls them the 'Salty Steppers'. "About 50 people turned up to my first class in Tairua about a year ago. Numbers grew and I started a class in Pauanui and then Whangamatā. Now I do eight classes, with about 250 members overall." Most dancers are aged between 30 – 70. Donna caters for all levels, starting with a free 'Give it a go' class. "I love it when I see grandparents with their grandies on the dance floor. We have men dancing as well as women, and the most senior dancer is 90. With the youngest being 4!"

Now Donna takes classes at Whangamatā Club, Pauanui Club and Tairua Fishing Club. Hikuai Hall is another dance venue and she says the wooden floor there is "beautiful for dancing. It's so much easier to slide on the wood and the surface is also better for our joints. Now that summer is upon us, the Tairua Tennis Courts is another fun venue! Line dancing can be very fast and we are serious about protecting our bodies." She points out that when she takes classes on carpet she has sliders available. These are put over shoes to make dancing easier. "But these days most line dancers will have a pair of western boots or proper dance shoes."

There is a variety of music – pop, Irish, Latin American, and, of course, country ... all those favourites that entice you to move to the beat. A new advent is AI music. The dance steps have special names and it's like learning a new language. There's the swivet, rocking chair, V step, K step and the shuffle, and Donna says don't forget the grapevine. There's quite a bit of twirling around to another direction. (Warning from a learner – if you think that standing at the back of the room you won't be seen, forget it. At some point everyone turns and you find yourself in the limelight of the front row!) But it's so much fun and you don't need a partner to dance with.

"One of the greatest things is that, wherever you go, the line dance steps are the same. Just the way they are put together differs," says Donna, who continues to learn new moves so that she can pass them on to her classes. She dances at the St James Hall in Thames and Whitianga's hall and goes to line dancing social events at clubs around the district.

"It's a really good atmosphere there. You can expect over 100 people turning up from all over the place." Line dancing is also held at Smitty's where it is led by local instructor, Ceanne. "What I love there is that I can have dinner plus a social drink as well as dance. It's a very welcoming way to do it."

A recent highlight for Donna was the Salty Steppers' mid-winter Xmas Boots and Baubles social, held at Stonewood Barn in Hikuai, where 140 people turned up from all over the Coromandel and as far as Rotorua and Auckland.

Donna tells me, with pride, that the Salty Steppers have been nominated as finalists in the NZ Line Dancing Awards, for Club of the Year and Instructor of the Year as well as the 'Sweet As' award. She is organising a trip to Ireland next year for up to 20 people, with workshops, dancing at clubs and sightseeing. She also has plans for trips to Australia and then Texas.

Donna has lived in Tairua for 15 years. The Bed and Breakfast, Sunlover Retreat, which she ran with her husband Chris, received national acclaim. This energetic community lady also mentioned her other passion – Tairua River Trail, which is now selling planks at $2,000 a board. The funds go towards building a suspension trail bridge over the Tairua River. The big project on the go at the moment is the Tairua River Trail Country Festival on the 23rd January 2027. With live bands, DJ, of course some line dancing, mechanical bull and just an all round good country feel, this festival is going to be a hit! The festival will be held at the Coroglen Tavern and tickets are selling now. I'd recommend people get tickets early by going to www.countryfestival.co.nz

The Tairua River Trail is already two kilometres down the Tairua side of the plan and promises to be very popular. "I like a full life and being part of a community," says Donna. "I do like to support the community I live in." And she does.

You are welcome to contact Donna:

Phone: 0278481612.
Website: www.saltysteppers.co.nz
Facebook: Salty Steppers

Words by
Pamela Ferla

THE WOMAN WHO ADDED TO THE COROMANDEL DANCING SCENE

SALTY STEPPERS
· LINE DANCER ·

















A Story 44 Years in the Making

MARC SIMON: FROM CHILDHOOD PASSION TO *THE LAST DEFENDER*

I can still remember it. I can remember the classroom, the shelf and the book. It was 1982 at primary school when I pulled a book from the library shelf. This book changed my life. The cover showed a wizard and a dragon. The title was *The Warlock of Firetop Mountain* by Steve Jackson and Ian Livingstone, and it was an adventure gamebook. I flicked through the pages revealing swords, sorcery and illustrations of strange creatures, monsters and ghouls. My path was set.

The Warlock of Firetop Mountain was just the beginning. Over the years I lapped up every book in the series, fifty in total, and then found others like it. This led me to *Dungeons and Dragons*, but unfortunately none of my friends wanted to get involved. So, I designed my own game similar to D&D but easier to play and quicker to set up. My friends loved it. I still have the scrapbook I wrote my game in, along with the dungeon map. I called the gamebook *The Fire Demon* and the objective for the players was to navigate their way through the dungeon, fighting monsters and avoiding traps, to hunt the Fire Demon. There were useful items that could be found and ones that could harm or kill. The point was that they had freedom of choice, THEY were the heroes.

Then I grew up and did the things teenagers and young adults do, but my scrapbook seemed to follow me. Although I had forgotten about the book, I took it to Ireland when I moved there with my Kiwi girlfriend, and then to New Zealand a year later. Quite why I took it I do not know, perhaps it was destiny. A few years later I met an Irish girl in Queenstown (ironically), where I was landscaping at the time. She discovered my book and encouraged me to update it and get it published. In 2012, my gamebook *The Fire Demon – Death Awaits You!* was published. I had enlisted four young artists to illustrate the book and give them the opportunity to have their art in a published book. The artwork completed the book, just like I remembered in *The Warlock of Firetop Mountain*.

I subsequently made a series with a broader storyline. I wrote book two in the series, *The Fire Demon – Deadly Trails*, and half of book three, *The Fire Demon – Deadlocks*. Book two was never published but is still available as an unedited PDF on: DriveThruRPG.com

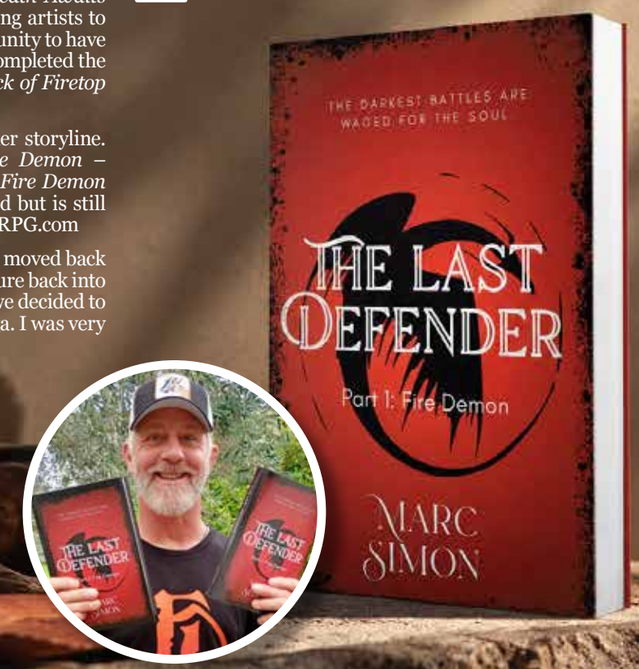
Then life happened again. We had a son and moved back to Ireland for nine years. Not once did I venture back into the world of the Fire Demon. Then in 2024 we decided to move back to New Zealand, and to Whitianga. I was very lucky, and extremely grateful, to get a job with Chops Landscaping and live in such a beautiful area. As a family we enjoy the outdoors and the Coromandel is perfect for a life outside. Kayaking, biking, running and camping. This was ideal to get my creative juices flowing again. Unfortunately, on one such family walk I slipped and broke my hand, leading to time off work. This was the catalyst. Rather than sitting around watching box sets, I came up with the idea to convert my gamebook to a novel and continue where my writing left off, by making it a series.

Although I had the story background from the previous books for the novel, I still had to weave a plot from a completely different format, reflecting my roots in interactive gamebook storytelling. In the gamebook, the main protagonist is you, the player, so I decided to make the novel, at its core, character driven. Just like in the gamebook, where players can be one of six characters, there are six main protagonists in *The Last Defender*. Like the gamebook they all have their flaws and merits, but each is seeking redemption on a path to destiny.

It took me six months to write *The Last Defender Part 1: Fire Demon*. It then took a further six months for the publishing process. By March 2026, the book was published and for sale. As of now, I have nearly completed part two.

You can find the adventure and more online at: marcsimonauthor.com or on Amazon and Goodreads

Words by
Marc Simon



Ross' Ramblings | Part 2

RELIGIONS & CULTS I'VE NEVER JOINED

The Freedom to Believe, the Freedom to Question

Continuing on from Part 1, where I described the restrictive life of some friends who disappeared down an evangelical Christian rabbit hole for a time, I remember another group of friends who became part of the so-called Divine Light Movement in the 1970s. It was led by a chubby Indian teenager at the time who called himself Guru Maharaji Ji. My friends and flatmates, Pete and Sally, had become devotees and practised the various forms of meditation he preached. They came to live with me after gifting their house to the guru's movement. Gifting of material assets was encouraged by Maharaji Ji. This enabled him to lead a somewhat flamboyant lifestyle, enjoying fast cars and extensive international travel. Apparently even his mother accused him of being a playboy. Living with Pete and Sally was sometimes frustrating. They struggled to pay the rent and didn't seem to be particularly happy but were adamant that the decision to gift their house had been the right one. It left me wondering how financing a young Indian guru's material lifestyle could help with one's own spiritual development. Was it another example of followers who needed a leader, and a leader who happily obliged them?



The next cult-like organisation that I encountered was Centrepoint, a community in Albany that was established by psychotherapist Bert Potter. Members had to sign over their material assets to the community, which soon attracted a large following. The group thrived for a number of years, but unfortunately, Bert's teachings through what he called 'encounter groups' eventually lead to lengthy prison sentences for Bert and some of his most faithful followers, having been found guilty of child abuse and illicit drug charges. I visited friends at Centrepoint a couple of times and often wondered why they would hand over control of themselves, their children and their assets to a man who some described as an extremely autocratic leader.

During my time as an ESL teacher, I came into contact with Muslim students mostly from Saudi Arabia. Nearly all were lovely people and only one ever tried to push his ideas of Islam on me, by giving me some literature to peruse. I read it, of course but the literal laws and punishments for disobeying them seemed a bit extreme for my peace-loving mind. Just as in Christianity, where Jehovah of the Old Testament reportedly killed millions of disobeying humans, Islam has its fair share of extremists and extreme teachings. There are good Muslims and others who would like to impose sharia law onto unwilling populations – just as there are good Christians and others who support genocide in the Middle East, some of whom are praying for the so-called rapture and the war of Armageddon, an event which will apparently cause rivers of blood to flow across the land, before the 'true' Christians are saved, which doesn't really sound like a Sunday picnic for the rest of us. Is it any wonder that, for me, it would be very difficult to join even a very moderate branch of either religion?

One such moderate group I encountered were the Pacific Island Christians in Fiji, Samoa and Tonga. In these idyllic places, Christianity forms the basis of society. There is a church in almost every village and Sunday is indeed a day of rest. On some islands, we weren't permitted to surf on Sundays, while the mandatory church services were often followed by large feasts of pig on the spit, plus other local and imported food. Unfortunately, the imported food differs from the traditional fare in that it often includes extremely fatty, low quality meat products from New Zealand and Australia and processed food laden with sugar, salt and unhealthy fats, both of which contribute to the widespread obesity prevalent in many of the islands.

Twenty years ago, in Samoa, I met an American doctor who was trying to tackle the obesity epidemic. It was an attempt to alter the harmful diet and reduce the consumption of the unhealthy imported food that had become a staple. I asked Doctor Ken how his project was going. He replied that it was disastrously difficult to change people's dietary habits in those Christian communities. He had tried to reach the people through the pastors, ministers and priests who presided over church congregations, to explain to them that changing what they consumed could greatly increase their life span and reduce much of the physical suffering caused by such unhealthy food. Ken said that a common reply by the churchmen was that there existed a degree of ambivalence towards living longer, because the sooner one dies, the sooner one gets to be in heaven and be with God. I couldn't argue with that logic and I am not sure whether such attitudes still exist but personally I would rather live longer and more healthily than rely on the promise of paradise in a heaven that may or may not eventuate. I have never met anyone who has come back from the dead to verify such claims. However, most of the islanders I met in the Pacific were very happy, generous people so perhaps quality of life to them was more important than quantity.

It seems ironic that Christian organisations first came to the Pacific to 'do good', but ended up contributing to the decimation of the indigenous populations by introducing diseases against which the islanders had no immunity. Measles, influenza, syphilis, dysentery, smallpox and others decimated the populations with some islands losing 80-90% of their people. This undoubtedly made it easier for the Europeans to benefit economically by taking control of land and resources and eventually establishing their own brands of government. While in Hawaii, I heard a phrase that encapsulates the cynicism that some Hawaiians hold towards the early colonisers – "The missionaries came to do good and they did very well indeed."

While enjoying the singing and general atmosphere of the Sunday services I attended in the Pacific Islands, and recognising the important part the churches play in Pacific societies, and indeed in many other countries throughout the world, I have never been able to commit to becoming a member of any of them. To me, in the twilight years of a very enjoyable life, adhering to a literal belief in scriptures, of whatever sect or religion, written thousands of years ago, interpreted, reinterpreted and translated by fallible humans and used as the guiding documents in the formation of organised religions, many of which believe that theirs is the only way, seems somewhat limiting to my human spirit. For, to believe one might require shunning another regardless of the wisdom it may embody. I would rather leave the mind and spirit free from doctrine, free from the influence of appointed leaders, free to discover life's lessons and truths from personal experiences at the right places and times, and free to accept the beliefs of others without doctrinal influence or judgement.

Hopefully see you all in nirvana one day, if such a place or time exists.

Words by
Ross Liggins

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DO IT WELL, DO IT ONCE

Custom-Fit Kitchens and Home Renovations in the Coromandel

A kitchen renovation is about more than choosing cabinets and colours. It's about creating a space that feels right for the people who use it every day. For local builder Aydhan Liefting, that means taking the time to understand how each client lives, what they need from their kitchen and how to make the finished space feel warm, welcoming and practical.

Aydhan has called the Coromandel home for around 10 years, after moving from the Bombay region, where he was born and raised. His path to establishing Aspire Carpentry has taken in rural fencing, civil construction, earthworks and hard landscaping, as well as building work across Auckland. He has been building for around 12 years and is a qualified builder and Licensed Building Practitioner.

"I've always enjoyed the fine details in everything I do," he says. "Building and carpentry is my passion, where I can fight for every millimetre, take my time, do it right, do it well and do it once."

That attention to detail is especially clear in the kitchens he designs and installs. Aydhan meets with clients to learn how they use the space, then develops a plan and render so they can picture the result before work begins. His customised kitchens are assembled on site and designed to fit each space, with a wide range of colours, handles and finishes. The hardware includes soft-close doors and drawers and a lifetime guarantee.

Aydhan can also manage the wider renovation, from removing the old kitchen to coordinating the building work, plastering, painting, plumbing and electrical trades. If walls need to be removed or straightened, he can take care of that too. By managing the project and keeping communication flowing between the trades, he aims to make the process easier for homeowners.

While kitchens are a particular favourite, Aspire Carpentry takes on a broad range of projects, including new builds, renovations, bathrooms, decks and fences. Aydhan enjoys seeing a design move from the page into its finished form, and values the whole process – from planning and installation to working alongside clients and the wider team.

Choosing a local carpenter can also make a difference to the community. It helps keep work and spending local, while avoiding the extra costs of bringing in a crew from elsewhere. For Aydhan, the relationships are just as important as the finished work: he enjoys getting to know clients, sharing a laugh and bringing people together to get the job done well.

With Aspire Carpentry, the aim is simple: thoughtful workmanship, clear communication and a result that feels made for the people who call it home.

ASPIRE CARPENTRY

Planning a kitchen or renovation in the Coromandel? Get in touch with Aydhan to talk through your ideas.

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021 793 115



there is no such place as away

KATHRYN ENGEBRETSEN: A WORLD MADE FROM WHAT OTHERS LEAVE BEHIND

Back in the early 90s, I worked at the landfill in Horotiu as a gardener planting and tending natives and roses in a beautifying project. Truckload after truckload of rubbish would rumble past in a flurry of dust on its way to a hole in the ground as I weeded, pruned and nurtured the gardens. (There is no such place as away.)

Fast forward to 2007, where I got a much wanted part-time job at the transfer station or the 'pit', as it was called, rescuing items before they got swept into the crusher. Oh, the things I saved! At the same time, I was doing a year-long course on Art therapy at Waikato University, as well as restoring our 1920s railway house, repairing and painting it. These three aspects sort of combined as I found offcuts, and random things to paint on, and was the beginning of my unique style.

My partner Marti Wong was already becoming an established artist using recycled metal and we had many exhibitions together, but it wasn't until we came to Thames that I began to take my art more seriously. Two months after shifting, I got talked into having a show with a friend. I had a month to paint and with a short deadline and the inspiration of our new seaside home I got to work. This was a success and 'firmed' in my art style.

Directly after this, I broke my arm badly. With nothing else to do I sat on my front porch, wrote a book I had talked about (but never had time for) and thought about new art projects. I got the itch to create again once my arm was back in use and it was then I had the idea of starting an art co-op here in Thames. After many conversations with Marti and Eben (the building owner), the Vessel co-op was born.

My art is quirky, and sometimes deep but with a sense of humour. It has a slightly magical aspect to it, with things in and on bottles or teacups or on edges of old paint that look like the shore line. I take photos of all my images and am always keeping my eye out for new characters. The backgrounds are as important as the picture and I am on the lookout for things to paint on wherever I go. Matching an image with a background piece is a big part of the magic of the story I am trying to tell, and getting it right can be tricky. I have a serious interest in old used things, anything that has had a previous life and story, I'm very sentimental. The tea cups I paint are ones I found and gave to my nana years ago; many chats were had over those cups! The titles are important and are a big part of the 'message' I want to convey. A lot of thought goes into it.

The girl is my daughter, but in my art she represents the feminine – she is usually hidden, either turning away or with a hat covering her face. This is the mystery of both the feminine and the journey we call life. She often has a companion (we aren't really alone), birds feature heavily, and wide open spaces. Both of these I attribute to the influence of the Firth here in Thames.

I have a cute railway hut with a red curved roof as my studio, this is inspirational all by itself and I am in there most days. It was a wreck when I got it, with rot both inside and out, but I knew it would be the perfect space for both my art and Tarot card readings.

Life for me is based around the core energy of creativity, it is essential. I get satisfaction and joy from the work I do; it hasn't been easy, it takes courage. Each time I sell an artwork, I get a tinge of sadness (they are a piece of me) followed by a quiet validation. Someone else gets it.

The Vessel has literally been the vessel for bringing my art to the world. It has been a place of connection and community and it's the only place I stock – I can only make so much art! I need an open mind and inventive spirit as I come up with new ideas, and as I rely on recycled materials, I never really know what will be next. It's not as easy as buying a canvas, I have to find the item, then clean, fix, and prepare the surface ready for use, which all takes time. Perhaps though, this is why I love the fun, freedom and randomness of being an artist. It is worth it.

martkath@xtra.co.nz
Vessel Art Co-op Grahamstown Thames

Words by
Kathryn Engebretsen





















Luke's Kitchen: 17 Years of Family, Food and Good Times

From a Caravan in Kūaotunu to a Favourite Coromandel Destination

Seventeen years ago, Luke's Kitchen started with a simple caravan on Luke's dad's property in Kūaotunu. Since then, it has grown into one of the Coromandel's favourite destinations, but family is still at the heart of everything.

For Luke, that means his partner Steph, founder of Sol Goods sunscreen, and their kids, Evie and Jaxon, are part of the everyday rhythm of the restaurant. Evie loves getting creative with dishes, and young Jax can often be found on a stool behind the pizza bench, apron on and helping Dad.

That same family spirit brought Steve and Els to Kūaotunu in 2019. After years in Auckland hospitality, including managing Vivace and working as a consultant, Steve was ready for a change when he spotted an advert for a summer pizza chef role at Luke's Kitchen. He came down for a long weekend, met Luke and the community, and never looked back.

But the pizza job never eventuated. Instead, Luke offered Steve the general manager and operations role, and five years later, a business partnership. Els now runs the bar, their son Tyrone has worked his way up to managing the pizza bench, and their daughter Sharmian spent two years managing 'front of house'. For Steve, it has meant more family time than ever before in his career.

Luke and Steve share a simple philosophy: Luke's isn't just somewhere to eat and drink. It's a destination and an experience, run like a family. It's about the food, the music, the atmosphere and the staff who bring the energy. Every summer, locals, uni students and travellers from around the world come together, each bringing their own personality. They become part of the extended Luke's Kitchen family.

Growth is important, but never at the cost of character. Recently, Luke renovated the middle of the restaurant, opening things up and improving the flow while keeping its rustic charm. He has a knack for making new things feel old. Customers say the place feels more open, but still unmistakably 'Luke's'.

Recognition has followed, too. Being included in the *Cuisine Good Food Guide 2026* was a proud moment for everyone, and Luke's Kitchen also took home the People's Choice Award in the Thames-Coromandel category at the Hauraki-Coromandel Business Awards. But for Luke and Steve, the real reward is still seeing people happy.

Looking ahead, summer is shaping up nicely. Live music remains central, with Tiki Taane returning, P Diggs playing in November, and plenty of talented locals in the mix. Familiar faces, new sounds.

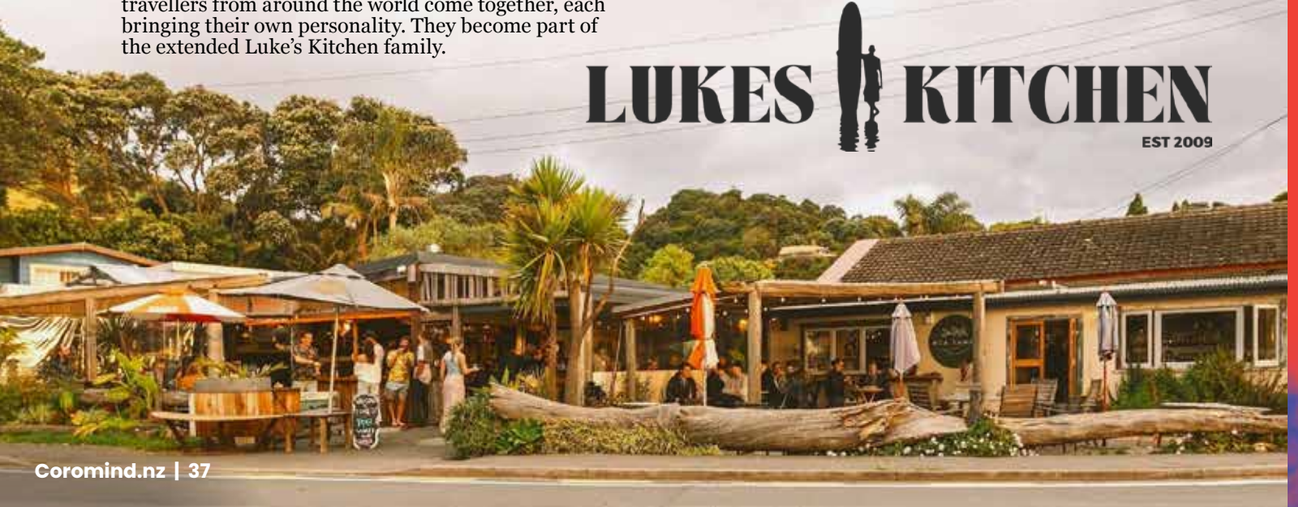
Seventeen years on, the heart of Luke's Kitchen hasn't changed: family, friends, community, good food and good times. And with another summer just around the corner, there's plenty more to come.

Keep an eye out for the full Luke's Kitchen summer gig guide in Coromind's December issue.

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