

CANTERBURY HISTORY GROUP
Our March 2024 Outing

EXPLORING RIPAPA ISLAND

There she sits in the sunshine, small and insignificant to the fleeting glance. A little block of an island, barely raised above the level of the waterline. From the Lyttelton waterfront, cast your eyes across to Diamond Harbour and look a little to the left – there she sits = RIPAPA ISLAND – an island full of many stories and a very rich history.



Crossing the drawbridge



Heading towards the Quarantine Station

From a fortified pa during the times of the Musket Wars, to a Quarantine Station for immigrants trying to survive smallpox, typhoid fever and scarlet fever, to a Prison for the Parihaka passive resistance Maori protesting about the confiscation of their Taranaki land, to a military fort (protecting Cantabrians from the perceived “Russian Scare”) – Ripapa Island has known and survived a great deal.

With our torches we explored the dark and damp tunnels that led us through narrow access ways to the little rooms tucked each side of the corridors. Then, balancing carefully on the mossy, uneven steps, with water dripping overhead, we went down further to the site of the Disappearing Guns. The two (of the original four) remaining guns are virtually complete and are a very rare example of their kind, recoiling from firing, thus denying the enemy ships the location from which they were being shelled. But when they were first fired, the explosive force was so great that cracks appeared in the concrete foundations and all the ice plants on the island flew 100 metres into the air. But they weren't a secret for long, when a clever designer made a children's toy that was identical in its movement!



Exploring the tunnels with our torches



Robin climbs up on the disappearing gun

We heard tall stories from the past that included the most famous prison escaper from the island. Johnathon Roberts, who in 1888 made off while the wardens and prisoners were having lunch. He was helped by fellow prisoners as he prised open a sheet of galvanised iron and slid down the 12 foot parapet into the sea. He then swam the channel to the mainland and climbed high into the snowline and down into Kaituna Valley – quite a feat in itself. He was not caught and years later wrote a diary of his exploits.

And when the Maori Parihaka prisoners were held on Ripapa, the steam launch Lyttelton made trips down the harbour, charging 1shilling and six pence, to view the Maori prisoners!



Entrance to the tunnels



Walking the walls of the island

But the dashing young naval officer, Count Felix Von Luckner from an aristocratic military German family, seemed to have a charmed, challenging and exciting life – well worth a book and a film.

