



## *Wellington Harbour*

Wellington, the capital city of New Zealand, spreads around the bush clad hills of a large harbour at the southern tip of the North Island. With some 8,1000 hectares of deep water and sheltered anchorages, it was a natural choice for settlement by the New Zealand Company, which from 1839 sent emigrants to recreate English society in a new country on the other side of the world. The first ships arrived in the port in January of 1840.

That first European settlement at Wellington was called Britannia (soon to be renamed after the Iron Duke) and was established on flat land on the northeastern shore of the harbour. However, the site was exposed to flooding and the prevailing winds, and the settlement was soon moved across the harbour to a more sheltered site for shipping known as Lambton Harbour, where the city centre has grown today.

Maori had lived in the Wellington region for several hundred years and had named the harbour Te Whanganui a Tara. A European presence in the region did not begin until the 1820s, some 180 years after Abel Tasman, the European discoverer of New Zealand, encountered storm force winds off the west coast and did not enter the strait between the North and South Islands. Captain Cook, on his second voyage to New Zealand more than 130 years after Tasman, sailed through the strait which bears his name and anchored off the harbour entrance in January of 1773, but an unfavourable wind and tide led him to depart without entering. It is not known who was the first European to enter the harbour, but it was most probably a whaler or sealer about 1823, who gave it the name Port Nicholson after the harbour master at Sydney.

The central location of Wellington led to it becoming the seat of government in 1865 as the city prospered on the strength of its fine harbour. Flat land at the town site was scarce and reclamations into the harbour were begun in the 1850s and continued to be carried out at intervals right through until the 1970s. The first public deep water wharf was constructed in the 1860s and other wharves quickly followed, so that by the turn of the century the original shoreline of Lambton Harbour had all but disappeared.

The growing city became a thriving import and export centre (with the bulk of its trade to and from Britain) and also the hub of coastal shipping. As it grew the port's features included a number of purpose-built wharves and cargo sheds, a floating dock and a patent slip, and regular ferry sailings to some of the ports in the South Island. From the 1960s and 70s, when cargo handling methods were revolutionised with the advent of roll-on roll-off vessels and then container ships, the face of the port changed as the traditional finger wharves were swallowed up by new reclamations and sheds were demolished to make way for large cargo stacking areas. The number of ships calling at the port decreased as cargo tonnages increased and the number of waterfront workers required to handle the cargo dropped dramatically.

The region's notorious high winds have played havoc with shipping at times and there have been many shipwrecks around the Wellington coastline and harbour. This was especially so in the 1800s, when sailing ships were susceptible to the vagaries of the wind. In 1968 a modern roll-on-roll-off ferry, the *Wahine*, foundered in the entrance to the harbour, in what was the worst storm of the twentieth century. 51 people died in the disaster, which is recalled in displays at the Museum of Wellington City & Sea. New Zealand's worst 20<sup>th</sup> century shipwreck occurred only a few kilometres from where the *Wahine* went down in February 1909 when the Cook Strait passenger steamer *Penguin* struck a rock on the Wellington coast whilst en route from Picton, and sank about an hour later with the loss of 75 lives.

The harbour continues to play an important part in the city's economic life with over seven million tons of cargo crossing the wharves each year. The city's sense of identity focuses on the harbour – it is often referred to as the Harbour Capital – and the waters of Wellington Harbour provide an aquatic playground for many of the more than 300,000 residents of the Wellington region.

The portion of the waterfront which is no longer required for shipping purposes has been re-developed for public use, featuring a spacious park and marina, a leisure complex with underground car parking, and the conversion of old wharf buildings for apartments and restaurants. Wellington not only has one of the country's best harbours but also the country's foremost waterfront development, with Lambton Harbour featuring a mixture of venues and activities for residents and visitors alike.

Further reading: *Wellington Harbour*, David Johnson (Available from the Museum of Wellington City & Sea Shop).

