

Interview with David Still

David (Dave) Still has, almost single-handedly, saved the history of Waipori for us and future generations.

Interviewer: Kerry Driscoll

Interviewee: David Still (with one intervention from his wife Christine Still)

Date of interview: 16 May 2025

Place of interview: Still family home, Dunedin.

The interview has been lightly edited for clarity. Unclear passages are enclosed in [square brackets].

Well, I was born in 1941, when they had just stopped putting blackouts on the windows and had come through the time of having coupons for bread — well, not so much bread, but certainly for meat and sugar. Tricky times really; we lived on offal and stuff that now cost a small fortune, and people still buy it — like tripe, pig's trotters and ox tongues and all the stuff we got at a reasonable price.

I lived on Gilmore St in Dunedin and stayed there until I was in my thirties and started flatting and got introduced to Christine and (wham, bam, thank you, ma'am) about four months later we were engaged and bought a house, got married, and married life began.

In the meantime, I had been a member of the Otago Tramping Club and had tramped all over the hills around Otago, Central Otago, Southland and bits of Canterbury. I had a wide group of friends. Most of our local tramping was in the Silverpeaks area on the outskirts of Dunedin, and after a few years of that it was getting a bit boring.

After a time I bought a Land Rover, and that extended the range of myself and my friends to get into some really backcountry places. One of my friends was Euan Warburton, who said: "You should come up to Lake Mahinerangi and have a look around there." He said, "All sorts of Interesting stuff." And so it all began.

Exploring around the hills of Waipori and Lake Mahinerangi, Euan introduced me to water races, dams, mining shafts and tunnels, and I would say, "Well, who made this?" and "That's a big hole, who dug that?" and "What's this bit of machinery?" And I couldn't get all the answers, and so I started asking questions further afield and doing a little bit of research.

How did you research back then?

Back then the newspapers were the best source of information, and the Tuapeka Times that was printed in Lawrence was the local and best source of information. Luckily, a lot of the volumes had been bound up into annual books, and three-quarters of them are now held in the Early Settlers Museum, which is now called Toitu, and the other 25% were held at the Hocken Library.

So I started reading through those. That involved pages and pages, and weeks and months, and finally years of reading everything because there was no internet, no shortcuts, so you had to turn the pages. The Settlers Museum had shorter hours, whereas the Hocken Library

was open on Saturdays, which gave me more scope for reading the newspapers because all this was taking place while I was working at a firm called Crystal Plastics, where I was working in the plastics trade with sheet plastics. Fortunately, the Hocken Library was housed in Otago Museum building in Great King Street, the same street as Crystal Plastics, where I worked. So, during lunchtimes that extended maybe a little longer than an hour, I would be racing along to the Hocken Library and searching through all sorts of records, including those newspapers.

At the Hocken Library, Michael Hitchens was the head librarian, and I became good friends with him, met up with his wife Maureen, and spent time visiting them. Michael would come out on several of our trips to visit the hills, not only to Waipori but to Skippers Creek up the Shotover Valley, and we had some good times together, so when I said that I needed a scrapbook to put newspaper cuttings in, he came up with this volume here, and I started filling it up with these. Now this is not as straightforward as you might think, as each of those had to be scanned, and you would have to put in an order with the Hocken Library saying you want this column copied, and then you would cut out the clipping and then place it in this book in chronological order. So, that was where a lot of my information came from and where it was stored. Of course this went on and on.

The big scrapbook of yours – what is the range of dates in it?

Well, from the earliest newspapers to, well, I tried to stop the research in 1924¹, but that didn't work. I would have been writing from the early 1860s and, at the same time as I was collecting those clippings, that was to save me from doing a lot of writing because I had notebooks, and I only have a few in my hand at the moment.

This one is number 3, and is dated starting the Tuapeka Times in April 1868, and as I got to hear of mining families, some of the miners were still alive, or their children who were brought up in Waipori, and I would go out and interview them. So I have quite a number of notebooks I filled up before the internet came on the scene.

You have obviously come into contact with some important people, such as Euan Warburton, with the impact he had on the direction of your life. Maybe the Gares as well?

Yes, I soon tracked down some of the families who had contacts with Waipori, or had lived at Waipori. As well as the Gares, there was the Cotton family, and I chased around, and I found some at [Hukaturaki] up near Middlemarch and Doctor Dick Cotton, who had his practice in Manse St, I think it was, in Dunedin. I was able to go and visit him, and he told me how some of the mining community from Waipori had, when the mining ceased, they had to move away and obtain work.

One of them was a gentleman whose name I have forgotten, but he had gone up to Shag Point north of Dunedin, where there were coal mines, because he was used to working underground. At Shag Point the coal mine actually extended a couple of miles under the ocean, and so Dick said I will take you up, and we will interview him. So I went down to his place one Saturday morning and we hopped in his car. We drove first to one of the nearest hotels where he bought a flagon of sherry, and then he hopped back into the car, folded down the glovebox, and the lid of the glovebox was perfectly level, ideal for sitting a glass,

¹ 1924 was when most of the Waipori landowners were bought out by the Dunedin City Council in advance of the area being flooded by Lake Mahinerangi.

and he would fill up a glass of sherry, and off we would drive. Because he was suffering from a lot of pain in his hips, I think, he was using this medicine to 'ease the pain'. We got through most of the flagon on this trip up to Shag Point and back.

But, getting back to the story — the miner up at Shag Point who I was able to interview and get stories about Waipori and names of other people that I might be able to track down. However, this was my first introduction to Dr Cotton, and then his sister Marguerite appeared on the scene and talked about having a reunion of the Waipori Goldfields, I think in 1969, and I got drawn into that. My friend Lexi Walker from the tramping club got involved as treasurer and, anyway, there was a committee put together to organise the reunion, and that went off very well. We used a projector (epidiascope) and we were able to put photographs up to show people, and of course this would prompt people to bring in more photographs, and that worked out pretty well. We hired buses, and there was a trip up to the Waipori Cemetery, and we got photographs of the groups standing around in the cemetery. I didn't get all the names of everybody at the time, and although I knew all the committee and knew them personally, but for some reason I don't remember all their names now.

Conflict with Marguerite Cotton

Some of the relics from Waipori he [Doctor Dick Cotton] put in the window because they were built like shops along that area, and he had various bits and pieces there, including what Christine refers to as 'The Flag', but I got accused of stealing it.

I was lucky enough to get from Dr Dick his father's mining records; a lot of them, a lot of paper. I started to index them and I never got it finished, and one day, while I was at work, Marguerite turned up demanding that I hand over the records of her father's mining claim. I said I can't give them to you because I was loaned them by Dr Dick Cotton, and she said, "Well, I want them" and I said, "Well, I'm sorry, you just can't have them." So she lay down on the office floor at Crystal Plastics and said "I am not moving until I have got them." So then my boss got involved and said "Get rid of that bloody woman." I said "Well, I don't know what to do", and he suggested I just give her the stuff she wanted. So I said I would ring Dr Cotton, which I did, and he said "Oh, well, just give it to her." So I had to take time off work and go home and get all the papers, bring them back down, and give them to her, and she buggered off. Then all that valuable information just disappeared. A lot of information about a lot of quite elaborate mining done by the Cotton family at Deep Lead, high-elevation claims and various claims around the district. Just like the earlier miners, he would always look for better just around the corner and try it out.

He, Richard Cotton, was always very sure there was a lot of gold in and around the Canton

Yes, and of course, current drilling for gold at this present time, the year 2025, now drilling is going on in the OPQ [Otago Pioneer Quartz claim] and the Canton, showing the reef extending right up into Central Otago and miles off towards Dunedin, getting quite good in today's terms, payable gold from their drilling. So, it certainly is around.

John Youngson said he (Dick Cotton snr) was correct and that there is a lot of gold there. Do you know there is an Australian company [New Age] with a permit to test for gold there?

Yes, and also a company called Glass Earth that flew over Otago with what I suspect is ground-penetrating radar that is able, somehow, to pick up traces of gold and so on.

Probably pegged out some land of interest and sold it on and made some money out of it. The testing is going on, even today, and with the price of gold getting up very, very high, thanks to Donald Trump. So the gold is still there.

And the Gare family, who bought the Golden Key mine on Mitchells Flat, they renamed it the Golden Padlock, or vice versa, they were mining along. If you can imagine a stream carrying gold, thousands of years ago, and then the ground gets heaved up in the air and the stream shifts its course to another valley further down and continues to scour out the ground. Over the years, the original stream would be for all its gold along its trail, would be broken up by little gullies, and there would be little ridges sticking up and so on, and the little outcrops sticking up between the gullies where gold was found. The Gare family would be working their way along, following that line up, high and dry above the current valley, excavating and elevating and throwing all the debris down into the gully down below. And, lo and behold, the course of the stream bed they were following turned around and went down into the gully where the debris is. So, old Bob Gare, who I had interviewed, said he knows where all the gold is, but there is too much dirt mixed with it [laughs].

Bob Gare was living at the time I was researching on Taieri Road, that runs over to Three Mile Road that runs out onto the Taieri. I started visiting him and asking questions. It became a regular thing on Tuesday nights, and if I missed a Tuesday night his wife would growl at me, saying she had made scones especially for me.

Anyway, Bob was just an amazing person. He had a brilliant memory, he had a way of telling stories, and if I produced my big list of miners' names or shopkeepers or residents of Waipori and asked, "Did you know such and such a person?", he would say "Oh yes, I knew him; he wore his trousers back to front", or somebody walked with a limp, probably injured himself mining, or old Johnstone was walking home through the tussocks one night and came across someone lying in the tussocks with his bald head shining in the moonlight. These were the sorts of stories I was getting! He was absolutely amazing; he had a great memory and some of those stories were just so good.

And the local signwriter, of course they were all miners up there, but if they had another skill, like the local signwriter who was up on a ladder doing some work, and slipped and fell and there were a load of clothes hangers on the wall to the side and as he slipped he put his hand out and a coat hanger split his hand and did quite a bit of damage —these were the sorts of things Bob remembered. He was just a valuable source of information. I worked my way down through the alphabet, you could say, and he reminded me of the Mitchell family who had moved down to Balclutha.

And so I went down to Balclutha and found this man and went inside. The first thing I do when I am meeting new people is I show them the photograph album and then the stories come out! He told me all sorts of things, and when his wife had left the room, he said about Matt Moody, who lived way up the hills in Deep Stream all by himself, and how he had been discussing with the local publican who had grown the best rhubarb. They had got into a bit of a stoush over it, and Matt Moody had hopped on his horse and rode off in a huff. He came down the next day with two sacks over the front of his horse stitched together so the open bags hung down each side of the horse. And here were these huge sticks of rhubarb, and he rode up. It was still in the morning; it was not busy, and the publican was sitting outside the hotel. Matt Moody got off his horse, pulled out the rhubarb and smashed the rhubarb over the publican's head and said "Stick it up your arse and make it grow!", got on

his horse and went back to Deep Stream. So, thank you, Mr Mitchell, for that story! Of course that story got told to me while his wife was away making a cup of tea, so we could hardly talk about it.

It was not very 'proper' [we had a chuckle]

It was not proper at all!

That brings me to the question about why you chose to write your book about the people, rather than the goldfields, of Waipori ?

Well, the information about the goldfields is so vast you could go on for years and, well, I have never stopped gathering the information, and it is still coming to light even these days with Euan and his wife Kathleen Warburton going out into the hills. Because of the information we've gained, he would say, well, because (this person) was working in such and such a gully, we will go up there and see if we can find any traces. We might find the remains of a hut, some steelwork lying there, and he would photograph that. Or a dam or a water race and he would record that, and that information is still coming to light even in 2025.

My ambition has been to divide the area up so, for instance, Lammerlaw Creek, which is where the main rush took place, and its tributaries at Lammerlaw Creek — a vast amount of mining took place there, and it is where the very early reports of mining come in from. I hope to tell the story of that valley and the small tributaries and get that done, then move south to Stoney Creek and record them by area. Either that or you have to tell the stories of the individual miners, but then you are shifting around from one valley to the next, then disappearing to Naseby and then coming back. I never really figured out the best way; a work in progress.

So, because I built up a list of everybody that had owned a dog at Waipori, and this could be an itinerant or shepherd that came to work at Cotton's station, or Macdonald's, or one of the nearby sheep stations; that period they got tough on people that owned dogs and made sure they had a licence. So, I was lucky enough to get hold of a list of everyone who had a dog at Waipori, so they were recorded, not necessarily miners, but at least we knew they had been there. Even the odd hawker who would pass through.

So with the advent of computers, there was a database program called Access that cost about 90 pounds with a little set of floppy disks. These days you just do it with the flick of a button, but in those days I got a student from the university to set up the way I wanted it to be, and then I could do a list based on the surnames first and their date of birth if possible, or death, occupation. Then on a separate file you would record their applications for, first of all, their claims as this is where it all started, once they had their claims legalised no-one could jump or steal from them, they would need to get water to the claim so they would probably have to get a permit for a dam across the best creek in the area that was available, then they would need a permit to build a water race to bring the water to the claim. That's fine they can get started but then as you work your way down digging your hole deeper, you find you have to build a tail race to get your debris away from the claim and this can be quite deep too, because the claim itself came, more or less, down into a hole so the tail-race permit had to be gained. So again on the database you have the tail race permit, water race, dams, claim, and then some people decided that they wanted to live near their claims

so they would have to get a permit to erect a dwelling – so again there was another field that we needed for the database.

And then there were the bigger companies that came along that had mineral leases and things like that. It didn't provide as much information about the people, but I was getting the information about the people.

One of the most difficult things was to get the information about the names of the wives, as in those days when somebody, well, when a child was born, it was born to the 'wife of Mr Brown', Mr Joe Brown, whatever, the wife's name was not mentioned. It takes a lot of research to find the name of the wife and even the name of the child. And then you get onto the school rolls, and you have to work your way through building up a vast amount of information about the people ... and that's why I chose to do the book about the people rather than about the mining!

[From Christine]

The main thing I did was proofread the book.

Yesterday I was up at Waipori looking over at the Pick and Shovel², knowing it was in your ownership. Tell us a bit about being up there.

We only really had babies before we were told to pull the Pick and Shovel down, or get it off the DoC³, or council land, and having a baby at Waipori, particularly our boys running around, was a nightmare because there was water everywhere and they loved to be outside.

But it was lovely to have it, and we did share it with another family, so we probably didn't make the same use of it as we would have if we had older kids. Because there was always the water issue when they were outside. But it had a lot of wonderful history: the little house that Dave and his friends had built; the same friends just came and went.

I did enjoy my time up there but, as I said, it was 'baby time' and baby time is baby time, and you don't get much respite. I can remember putting Danny under a bush in his carrycot while we pushed the car out —that's a good memory.

To enable us to buy the house and so on, we downgraded to an older Land rover, and then a long-wheel base Land rover which on our honeymoon, we came back with a double bed in the back to our house in Scotch St. And then we had to downgrade again just to a car and the road in, particularly to the cemetery through Nuggety Gully, was just a dirt track —and then on past the cemetery down across the Lammerlaw Creek and around to where we built the bach.

The bridge was there, part of the [Council's?] promise to provide access to the antimony mine and to the large portion of the Waipori Station; they had to have access to replace the lower bridge which had been just near the hut, actually, before the lake was raised. Getting out in wet weather, I never had chains, and on one occasion I had to hunt around under the hut for bits of chain and anything I could tie around the tyres to get up over the slippery bits, and as Christine was saying, we had to leave Danny under a tussock at the bottom of the hill. Of course, there was the chance we could go over the edge and drop down into a

² A bach on the western side of the Lammerlaw Creek, visible from the cemetery.

³ Department of Conservation.

gully with the car, so we took the car to the top of the hill and walked back down and picked the baby back up.

And, of course, that was about the end of it really. We decided it was probably better to quit the place and the condition of having the place built was to aid my research on the Waipori goldfields and then, when I was finished — ha! finished! — when I was finished I was to dismantle the building, pull down the chimney, pull down the poles and leave the ground exactly as it was before we built it. We looked at jacking it up and putting it on a truck, and just then, new weight limits got put on the new bridge at Lammerlaw Creek, and there was no way we could take it out on the back of the truck, so that ruled that out. It got to the point where we thought “Do we just burn it down and clean up all the debris?” And then somebody approached me and said he had just got the contract for ploughing all the government land in the area and needed a base to work from, so foolishly I said I would sell him this place providing when he had finished his contract he would pull it down and take away all the foundations, etc. So he got it for \$300, sold it for thousands, and it is still there today.

What other resources were available for your research? It must have been hard before the age of computers and technology; today, things are mostly able to be chased down online

Records back when I started? Most of them, but not all, were held at the Settlers Museum, so by becoming a member of the Settlers Museum Committee and getting to know people, I was then able to, tactfully, suggest that they might like to loan the Hocken Library all their volumes of the Tuapeka Times to enable me to research after hours. They fortunately agreed to that, and Hocken Library placed them on the top floor of the Otago Medical School library in King St, and I was given a key to get in. I could then go in until about 11 o'clock at night, and research through those newspapers to my heart's content and, in fact, was there when Dunedin was rocked by a fairly strong earthquake and bookshelves around me were shaking. I thought the lot was going to come down on top of me. As the shaking stopped, I opened the door, and other people were sitting around the library doing their own research. I apologised for burping and shut the door again.

The changes in research are amazing! I spent years going through the Tuapeka Times, and now you can punch in a few words, and it all opens up for you, but at least I was able to get those volumes into the Hocken Library and get started.

Police diaries

I did say to Rusty there was some stuff he might like to see at the Hocken Library. It was the Police diaries. I can't remember what year it was; it might have been 1884 or something. I said, particularly, you need to look at this. And then, of course, he did.

One of the boys fathered an illegitimate child and he got sent out of the country, or at least the area, and the mother of the child got paid 100 pounds, and then after a couple of months, the father came back to the town. This was not supposed to happen, and he happened to be on the main street on one occasion when the father of the girl who had the child was also on the main street. And he flattened Mr Knight [laughs]. Of course this got into the Police News as well, but I don't think anything came of it because there was a bit of sympathy there. I let Russell find this out for himself rather than give him too much information, but the Police diaries are very, very interesting! You get a lot of names and

different bits of information, even children, much like today, getting a little light-fingered, stealing tobacco and things.

Of course, the children are protected a little more these days, under a certain age

Well, this is right. You can also see just how racial things were back then, too. Whereas a European would be fined a few pounds for what he had done, the Chinese would be sent to jail for a few months, and with hard labour on that as well. There was no fairness whatsoever.

On race, there's one place that's recorded where mining operations took place in Maori Ned's Gully, so obviously, there was, during the mining time, somebody around that was Māori, but not a lot that I know of. However, there's the likes of the Cotton's mining claim, where they were doing elevating and so on, and shifting a lot of dirt; well, there were a number of Māori adzes and relics turned up, so they had obviously been in the area. Probably they were living on moorhens or pukekos.

Bob Gare said there was no fish in the river because the water went over Waipori Falls, so there would be fish downstream coming up from the ocean through Lake Waihola, and so on; so if they wanted to catch fish, then they would go to Lee Stream, as there were fish there. It is not a big stream, but obviously enough fish to make it worth a few hours' walk. Also, the eels: no eels in Waipori, but some in Lee Stream.

Oh, the other thing that Bob told me was that when the telephone line got put in, it eventually got extended. It came first from Lawrence up to Waipori, and the Knight family paid for that to get put in because the Knight Store could do with this service. How to put it. Well, the Knight family had a big commercial operation with the store, whereas the Cottons had the farming side, mostly, and later moved into selling with a general store and butcher's shop. The Knights were more into things from near the beginning, having taken over from the original shopkeeper.

The telephone line got extended to go right through to Outram, which involved going through Lee Stream and up to the main ridge, with leads down to Outram from Middlemarch. When the phone line went out due to a big snowstorm, Bob had to carry what I presume was a big battery pack on his back and alligator clips to keep testing the wires, with just the top of the telegraph poles sticking up out of the snow in the gullies. It took him a long time to find the fault, which was a long way over, near Lee Stream I think. How the local miners got involved in fixing up the phone line, I don't know; maybe it's just because of the Knights having the only telephone in the town, I guess everyone had to keep onside with them.

Probably paid them?

Probably, yeah.

Why do you think Waipori has kept you so interested and for so long?

It got to the point of having asked so many questions and getting so many answers that I found I knew more about it than even Marguerite Parsons [chuckle], and it was a shame to stop there. It was best to carry on and make it available for the rest of the world. So here we are, still, in 2025, still doing the work.

Marguerite was staying in her little hut up beside the cemetery, and if anybody arrived to visit the cemetery, she would race out to ask them if they had a connection, which they

could ... and some people did, but the majority were just nosy and cruising around. She told me that one day someone asked "Where was Cox's Reef?" She told them "You can't see that; it is under the lake, you can't see that." Well, of course, we know that it is miles up in the hills, high and dry, and it will never be flooded out. So, she knew quite a lot.

She was an amazing artist, she was famous for doing chalk drawings on the blackboard of the town, views of the town, and she was an extremely good artist with a good reputation. She spent quite a lot of time hanging around the cemetery there; she even went into Outram and hired a lawnmower from the local garage and towed it behind her car, all the way, about 12 to 14 miles on the gravel road, up to mow the grass at the cemetery! She didn't like my idea of having a wire over the top of the gate to let the sheep in underneath to graze around the headstones but to keep the cattle out. The cattle would destroy the headstones.

Glenore Cemetery – someone wrote a complaint about the condition of the cemetery about 9 years ago, and that must have stirred the Balclutha Council into doing something, so they had all the trees chopped down, which fell onto some of the graves and ruined them.

And never took the trees away?

Well, some of them, but there is a lot of slash still there

I certainly went there and went right through the cemetery before all this. I went before all the lists of inhabitants were available online. I took my list of Waipori people to see whether anyone had moved from Waipori and gone to that area. Of course, some could have followed mining, and there was a chance they could have turned up in the cemetery there; there was no one that I could find. But there were a few in Lawrence Cemetery.

Final story

There were so many, well, about 90% of the gold claims were sluicing and involved water. Water was just so important that some people invested in building water races. At least one of the water races was over 20 miles long and took a couple of years to build, so it was quite an investment. But by keeping the water high in the hills, you could then get the pressure by turning the water race into a pipe and starting off with bigger pipes at the top and reducing the diameter as it came down; the pressure increased, and then they could use it for sluicing.

Excuse me for saying, but owning a water race was a 'goldmine' because there was money in water, and once the work had been put in the money would come in without any more hard work.

Maintaining the water races was a bit of a job. When I moved up to building the bach at Waipori there was a horse roaming around in that area. I was told his name was Darkie and he was used by Dave Aiken and others who maintained the water races in the area for the City Council. They had to keep the water coming into the Lake Mahinerangi area from watersheds that would normally drain off into the Taieri or some other area, and they wanted to keep the water flowing into Mahinerangi to keep the power generation up. So, when I took Darkie for a ride, we just rode bareback, and we would be riding up a track and come to a water race, and the horse would do a right turn and start walking along the water race because that was what his job was: going around looking for any faults in the race,

looking for any leaks and slips that had come down. To get that horse to go anywhere else, I had to wait until another water race, or track, crossed over it to get it to change direction. I had a lot of fun telling people that I owned a racehorse at Waipori!

[Laughter] That's a good tale!