

Peter Ferguson and his New Era

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Peter Ferguson, who was born in Scotland in 1839, arrived in New Zealand in 1863 and moved to the new Thames goldfield at the beginning of 1868.¹ Over the next 12 years he mined on several Hauraki fields before becoming a director of the New Whau Company in February 1880 and being appointed to oversee contractors working this Thames mine.² Following the resignation of the manager in June, Ferguson who had acted as his assistant, replaced him, because of his ‘thorough knowledge of the ground’ since its early days.³ However, because of a broken arm, his management lasted less than a month. Afterwards a mining reporter, James Philp, commented that as his replacement was getting the mine ‘in ship-shape order’ he trusted ‘this hitherto grossly mismanaged mine’ would have a better future.⁴ Subsequently, as Philp told the magistrate, when Ferguson met him in a hotel he ‘without comment struck complainant on the cheek’, and then held his coat collar ‘and shook him’. Half an hour later Ferguson told him, ‘I’ll do it again, but in a different way next time’. Ferguson admitted he had

caught hold of Philp and dragged him over to the table, and asked him what he meant by writing it. Philp said he would write what he liked; it was purely a matter of business. He was so excited that he really did not know whether he had struck Philp, but he intended at the time to do so. He refused to apologise when asked to do so, as he considered that he was the injured party.

This petty assault was made worse by Philp’s gumboil.⁵

A sometimes bellicose personality

This offense was one example of his personality. At Te Aroha and Waiorongomai he clashed with other residents using words rather than fists. In 1883, he accused a county councillor of wanting a road diverted through his land for his personal benefit, but apologized after admitting to having been deceived. Despite claiming not to want ‘to heap abuse and detraction’ upon the councillor, when the latter, as owner of the local newspaper, did not publish Ferguson’s letter because it had been printed elsewhere, he complained of suffering ‘inconvenience’ through ‘the caprice of our vacillating newspaper proprietor’.⁶ In the following year, his claims about a conspiracy by ‘*certain people* at Te Aroha’ to handicap Waiorongomai were condemned as ‘the outcome of a fertile imagination’ and displaying ‘anything but good taste’. Residents expressed ‘their strong disapproval’ of his ‘absurd statements’ to the newspaper’s new editor, who expressed his regret that Ferguson took ‘such an apparent delight on every possible occasion of referring to grievances (be they real or imaginary) that are long since past’.⁷

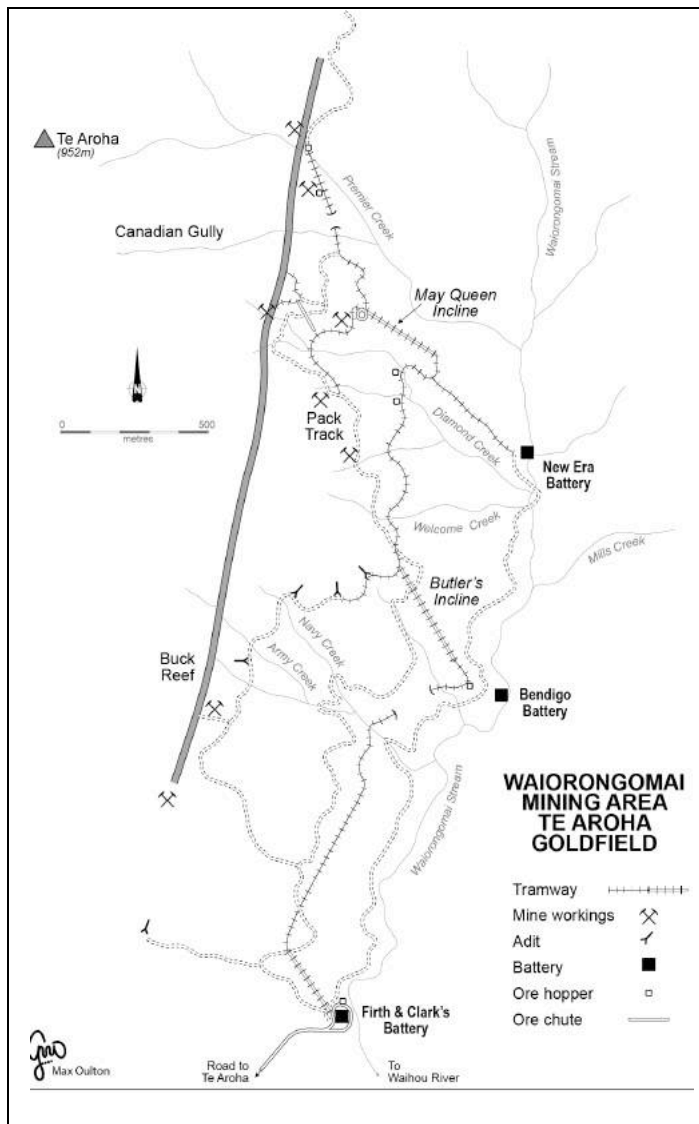
More positively, he was prominent in the Presbyterian Church, helped to establish a social club and debating society and a public library, was secretary of

Waiorongomai's Progress Committee, and was a very vocal spokesman for the mining industry.⁸

The Waiorongomai goldfield and Te Aroha Rush

Early in October 1880, upon hearing reports of gold being found at Te Aroha by Hone Werahiko, Ferguson went there with a mate, 'being cognisant of a spot at which auriferous indications have been met with'.⁹ He claimed to have prospected in the previous year, but when the places he claimed contained gold proved valueless, they explored closer to Werahiko's Prospectors' Claim.¹⁰ He claimed to be more successful than Werahiko in finding gold and that he could arrange with the Maori landowners to open their land for mining. Werahiko's version of their association was that Ferguson and his mate 'had been prospecting near him, and assisted him, to some extent, in his endeavours to discover a payable reef'.¹¹

Figure 1: *Waiorongomai mining area: Te Aroha Goldfield.*



Source: Max Oulton, University of Waikato.

After the field was proclaimed, Ferguson, having failed to find gold, helped to peg out only one claim, adjacent to the Prospectors'. In early January, with three others, he explored further upstream for about two weeks, again unsuccessfully. Within another two weeks he had departed for a new rush close to Coromandel township.¹²

From January 1882 onwards, Ferguson acquired interests in several Waiorongomai claims and companies and traded in shares.¹³ In November 1883 he was sole owner of the New Era claim, a name he reused for ground at the northern end of the field, which he developed from late 1885 onwards.¹⁴ He managed at least three mines, only one of any importance, in the early days of the field, and was director of three companies.¹⁵ For a while he was also a sharebroker, land and commission agent, and a merchant's agent.¹⁶

First attempts to erect a second battery

As the high cost of treating ore was blamed on the owners of the sole battery, from early 1882 onwards several attempts were made to break its monopoly.¹⁷ In 1883, possible sites and water races were surveyed and capital was raised.¹⁸ By early March 1884, it was reported that over two-thirds of the shares in the Excelsior Battery Company had been taken up. Ferguson, the main agent accepting applications for shares, convened meetings to elicit support, and assured the one at Te Aroha that reports ‘industriously circulated’ claiming the new battery would lack sufficient water power, were false.¹⁹ Despite his efforts, insufficient shares were taken up because many local residents considered it ‘a doubtful undertaking’, and by May all hopes of a successful flotation were abandoned, as was the site.²⁰

The New Era battery and gaining access to the site

At the same time as the Excelsior proposal expired, some mine owners planned to erect a ten-stamp battery to crush for ‘considerably less’ than the existing plant, a development the local newspaper considered would give ‘fresh life and energy’ to the field, ‘healthy competition’ being ‘the soul of business’.²¹ Through Ferguson’s ‘untiring efforts’ a private company, the New Era, was formed ‘to erect all necessary machinery, etc’, by the end of the year, and he acquired a site and began erecting several ‘one-room shanties’ for his employees (his own house had five rooms).²²

Being a private company, details of its finances were rarely published, but it was undoubtedly under-capitalized.²³ By May 1886, the shareholders had reportedly spent £20,000, an unlikely amount because there were only two or three of them; by February 1887 there were four,²⁴ none of them wealthy. Ferguson provided mining skills rather than capital. Another partner was Frederick Stoughton Margetts, a former Anglican clergyman who had become a farmer and mining investor.²⁵ Despite being described as the principal shareholder in November 1886, he cannot have been able to provide much capital, for earlier that year, having advanced £500 to Ferguson he was ‘quite unable to help him further’.²⁶ His son would be the battery’s amalgamator.²⁷

The most important partner was George Fraser, whose firm, variously Fraser and Tinne, the Phoenix Foundry, and George Fraser and Sons, had been a leading engineering firm in Auckland since 1864.²⁸ Fraser, who having erected batteries at Thames had visited Te Aroha during the first rush hoping to erect one there, would provide all the machinery for Ferguson’s plant.²⁹ His financial resources were limited, for by 1880 the firm’s profitability had decreased considerably and its works were ‘literally almost completely at a standstill’.³⁰ An American engineer, Alexander F. McKay, who supervised the erection of the plant and was its first manager, provided it with his patented roller pans.³¹ Fraser obtained patents for improvements to these pans, and in 1890 his modifications reputedly saved 94 per cent of the gold and silver in the ore ‘and at less cost’ than if it were treated by the cyanide process.³² A shareholder in many mining companies, and a director of nine,³³ it is not known how much capital Fraser invested; probably, like Ferguson, his main contribution was expertise.

As the site was far upstream and without any road or tramway connection, access was required before the plant, universally known as a battery despite not having a stamper mill, could be erected. From 1882 onwards Ferguson agitated for the

improvement and extension of the lower road, but faced resistance. This came mainly on financial grounds from the county council and in particular its most prominent member, Josiah Clifton Firth, who as an owner of the existing battery was suspected of trying to retain his monopoly.³⁴ In July 1884 Ferguson ‘complained bitterly of the opposition he had to contend with directly and indirectly, while seeking to have other batteries erected and the goldfield more generally opened up’, and promised to fight for greater fair play.³⁵ By the end of that year, the road had been widened and improved, but when damaged by carting machinery early in 1885, some councillors wanted the company to bear the cost of repairs. As the council claimed to be unable to pay for these, Ferguson obtained a government subsidy of two-thirds of the cost of extending it to his site.³⁶ Having agreed to meet £500 of the cost, despite the work costing ‘considerably’ more and requiring him to borrow the money, he supervised widening and extending the road, constructing culverts and a bridge, and clearing slips. Most of his expenditure was refunded once the council received the subsidy.³⁷

Ferguson’s struggles to obtain assistance for this road were as nothing compared with those experienced in constructing a branch tramway. After it was surveyed at the end of 1884 he stated there were ‘no special engineering difficulties’ and asked the council to apply for the government’s £2 for £1 subsidy towards the £1,700 cost.³⁸ Because the council postponed its decision, a public meeting, the *Te Aroha News*, the Warden, and the local Member of Parliament all supported his request.³⁹ Without waiting for the subsidy, Ferguson commenced preliminary work on the highest, and flattest, grade.⁴⁰ Late in May, after inspecting the battery site, the Minister of Mines declared that making the tramway ‘had his hearty sympathy, and he would see what could be done’, possibly by supplying rails and certainly by providing a subsidy of £1,000. Despite Firth requesting the latter, he and his associates on the council then raised objections, his brother-in-law claiming the battery would be buried under an avalanche ‘in about two years’ time’, and Firth opposing the raising of a special rate.⁴¹ Such obstructive policy by the Firth element provoked ‘great indignation’ at Waiorongomai, causing one correspondent to advocate doing something

to put to a stop to the mean and selfish treatment dealt out by the Piako County Council to the spirited owners of the new battery. They have had to fight against those in power, who have used their positions to promote selfish ends.⁴²

A ‘well attended’ meeting in Te Aroha unanimously expressed its indignation at the council’s failure to accept Larnach’s ‘generous offer’ because of Firth’s ‘determination to still have a monopoly’, and 173 residents signed a petition asking the government for the promised £1,000.⁴³ Ferguson’s evidence to the Goldfields Committee convinced it to recommend this subsidy.⁴⁴

The local newspaper congratulated Ferguson on this outcome, for he ‘had much to contend with, and the amount of opposition thrown in his way, and the many adverse influences brought to bear, would have completely disheartened many men, and caused them to have left the district in disgust’.⁴⁵ A Thames newspaper congratulated residents on their ‘efforts to break through the monopoly that has nearly strangled the life out of their district’.⁴⁶ Upon his return from Wellington, Ferguson was met by a large number of friends, who were collecting subscriptions for ‘a complementary reception’. The *Te Aroha News* noted that his ‘persistence and energy’ had:

gained him many new friends, who, although differing from his views on many important subjects, nevertheless could not but admire the spirited manner in which he has refused to be turned aside from his purpose.⁴⁷

At the banquet attended by most of the principal residents, Ferguson expressed his 'heartfelt feelings' and 'assured his hearers that the House was in full sympathy with the miners of Waiorongomai, and that there was every desire to redress the wrongs under which they had laboured for so long'.⁴⁸

The arrangement reached was that Ferguson would construct the tramway and hand it over to the council once it recouped his third of the total cost, estimated to be £1,584 12s 3d.⁴⁹ The *Te Aroha News* described the tramway's features:

The first section, connecting with the county tram, will be a horse grade 4 chains long to first break, which will be a horizontal one; then a self-acting grade of 5 chains, next 1 1/2 chains of level, at [the] end of which a vertical break will be erected, and 11 chains of self-acting grade at the bottom. At the bottom there will be one chain of level line terminating at the turn-table.⁵⁰

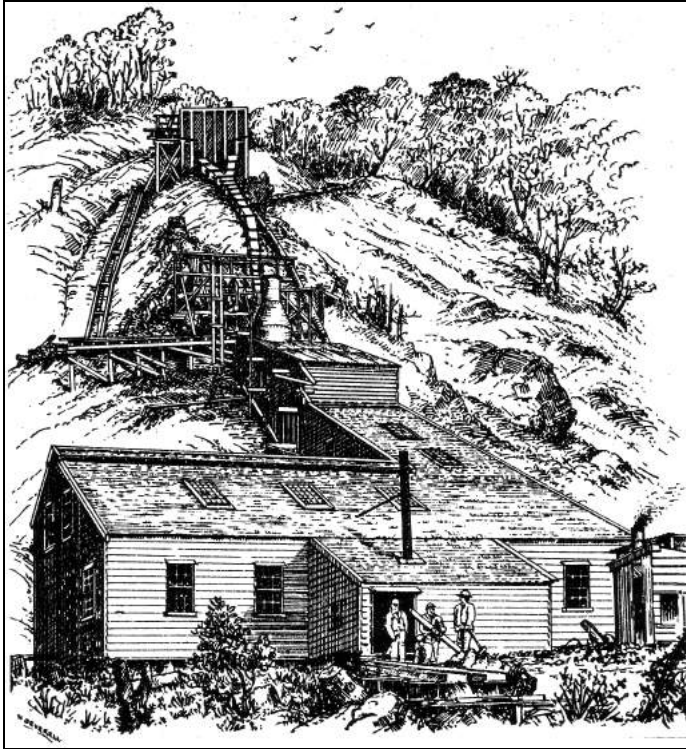
Because the steepest grade was one in two, many people had predicted 'all sorts of evil in the event of the wire rope giving way or trucks breaking loose' and crashing over the cliff into the plant. To avoid this, the end of the tramway and the turntable were placed 'considerably on one side of a direct line with the battery, and a branch line of some 30 to 40 feet at right angles' conveyed trucks to the hopper.⁵¹ One optimist expected the line would take less than two months to construct, but, as bad weather combined with allegedly incompetent contractors meant that embankments subsided and cuttings fell in, it took over seven months.⁵² Predictably, the council continued to be unco-operative, prompting the Minister to remind it that the government had dealt directly with Ferguson because it 'did not seem disposed to treat Ferguson fairly'.⁵³ Because the line had been surveyed poorly, construction cost was more than anticipated, causing financial difficulties for the syndicate, especially as the council refused to take the line over.⁵⁴ This decision prompted Ferguson to outline how Firth had opposed providing assistance, and to wonder whether the council should 'be allowed to obstruct and handicap enterprises in which some of the councillors are not personally interested'.⁵⁵ As the council refused to pay anything towards the cost of construction and the government would not contribute more than its agreed subsidy, the syndicate ended up paying £1,400 of their limited capital, whereas the rival battery had not had to pay anything towards constructing the tramway to its plant.⁵⁶

Erecting the plant

The 50-chain water race, by comparison, was erected speedily in mid-1884.⁵⁷ By the end of that year, construction of the plant commenced, with another optimist expecting crushing to start within two or three months.⁵⁸ McKay was praised for lowering the machinery from the road to the site without a single breakage, but there was one fatality when a stonebreaker fell on a carpenter.⁵⁹ The *Te Aroha News* considered the battery was 'certainly a very fine one, and the owners richly deserve a handsome return for their pluck and enterprise in erecting so valuable a plant ... in the face, too, of so much opposition and cold water thrown on the movement'.⁶⁰ Not completed until March

1886, the four partners had by then spent about £12,000 erecting it, in addition to spending £1,400 on the tramway, £900 on the water race, and £480 in purchasing three claims.⁶¹

Figure 2: *New Era Battery*



Source: *The Handbook of New Zealand Mines*, Wellington, 1887, facing p. 323.

From the start it had been doubted whether the plant would be able to save more gold than the current process, but experts with no connection with its owners praised it as a modification of a successful American method.⁶² Fraser's similar plant in Auckland experimented with the ore, with encouraging results.⁶³ Visitors were impressed with the plant's location on the side of a 'nearly perpendicular' gorge. They especially noted 'the entire absence of the stampers, with their deafening noise'; instead, a stonebreaker would reduce 70 tons in eight hours. A furnace would put the resultant gravel through 'a process of fusion in order to destroy all the refractory ores', after which a grinding pan would further reduce it to 'coarse meal'. Then the eight McKay pans would reduce it to the consistency of 'silk-dressed flour', a process claimed to be similar to the grinding machinery used for reducing flint in the glass-works in England and 'not used in any other mining battery in the world'. After this the powder was ground with mercury, the slurry was discharged into four settling pans, where the gold-silver amalgam 'settles at the bottom, from whence it is slowly ejected by specific gravity through a tube, and drops in[to] small enamelled iron buckets. It is then ready for the retort'. Reputed to be of the very latest design, very expensive, and the only one of its kind in Australasia, it was claimed that unlike other batteries, there was no resort to stampers, receiving boxes, blankets, berdans, sluices, or tail-boxes, nor 'a sludge channel carrying away a large percentage of the precious metal'.⁶⁴ This, it was stated, reflected credit on 'the plucky shareholders, who, while working for their own benefit, are also solving a problem which may ultimately prove of great public benefit'.⁶⁵

The plant in operation

Operations that commenced in late April 1886 attracted great public interest. Expected to treat 200 tons per week, as the gold was 'unusually fine', the plant was said to be 'greatly superior' so as to create 'a revolution' in local mining.⁶⁶ During the first tests,

improvements and additions were made to the machinery.⁶⁷ To compare results, during August, the rival batteries tested 30 trucks of ore taken from the same mine. But whereas Ferguson's plant produced bullion valued at £75 9s 10d, the opposition obtained £115 12s 6d, a result Fraser blamed on 'the want of skill' of those in charge. His claim that superior ore was sent to the rival plant provoked claim and counter-claim about a conspiracy to denigrate his process.⁶⁸ Fraser did admit difficulties had been created by 'a man from America who professed to be an expert, but proved himself not to be up to his business', meaning McKay, who had left New Zealand after being replaced as manager.⁶⁹ As miners had not supported the new battery, it treated only 140 tons for a yield of 87oz of bullion. Because the refractory ore clearly required a different process, after the plant ceased operating Fraser carried out further experiments, but the alterations, some made on the advice of other experts, failed to produce 'any good result'.⁷⁰

In December 1886, Fraser told the Minister that, after having samples tested in America, he had based the plant on American methods, but despite it being 'very successful' in treating free milling ore, they had not found a way to remove sulphur. The syndicate lacked the capital to erect a reverberatory furnace, which in his Auckland plant had proved 'a great success', and had been 'treated with anything but kindness' by miners: 'There seems to be a direct opposition to anything that will interfere with the old existing arrangements'.⁷¹ Ferguson explained that the plant, intended to treat ore 'which the ordinary battery won't touch, the precious metals being so combined with sulphur, chlorine, & tellurium', required overseas capital to pay for furnaces.⁷²

Forming the Ferguson Syndicate Company

In July 1887 Ferguson was granted Ferguson's Special Claim, 166 acres, an area seen as sufficiently large to encourage British investors to provide the £100,000 capital needed to erect new machinery and develop the mines systematically.⁷³ Financing his trip to Britain to raise capital by obtaining a loan from an Auckland moneylender, he travelled via the United States to obtain the latest information 'for the economic reduction of quartz on the most scientific and improved principles'.⁷⁴ In London, he 'so far ingratiated himself into the good opinion of experts that one ... placed at his disposal, free of charge, a commodious suite of rooms'. In Glasgow, having 'made a most favourable impression', he was introduced to a syndicate which planned to float a company once ore samples were tested and reports received on the plant, its tramway, and its water race.⁷⁵ Ferguson announced, in May 1888, that he had every prospect of obtaining 'the best discovered process for saving gold and silver in ores, however refractory', for all but one of the 'most severe tests' using this process had been 'most successful'. The syndicate owning it consisted of 'gentlemen of unlimited means (up to date they have spent over seventy thousand pounds in prosecuting their researches) and seem to delight in facing and overcoming difficulties'. He had had a mill made for less than £100 that 'reduced dry ore to a fineness of 2500 holes per square inch' and could treat ten tons in 24 hours. While negotiating with the directors and largest shareholders of this 'large going concern' he was able to visit 'as often as I choose', but some ore proving unsatisfactory the flotation was delayed for some months.⁷⁶

In November 1888, Ferguson agreed to sell his mines and plant for £10,000-worth of fully paid-up £1 shares plus £2,000 in cash; as the capital of the Ferguson Syndicate Company was only £15,000, over two-thirds of which was spent purchasing the property, it was seriously under-capitalized, but more capital was promised.⁷⁷ Members of the original syndicate retained interests, but Fraser could not invest more funds, having become bankrupt in 1888.⁷⁸ Shareholders included Ferguson, his wife and two of his brothers, John Stewart MacArthur, Robert Wardrop Forrest, William Forrest, who had developed the MacArthur-Forrest cyanide process,⁷⁹ and James Napier, a Glasgow chemist who would pioneer the use of cyanide in New Zealand.⁸⁰ The remaining 40 shareholders were all Scots, most of them living in Glasgow.⁸¹ Thomas Melville, a mining agent who received 800 vendors' shares, was also the vendor of Crown Mines at Karangahake, which became the first mining district in New Zealand to trial the cyanide process, in July 1889.⁸²

On 1 August 1889, the Cassel Gold Extracting Company, which owned the MacArthur-Forrest patents, granted the use of the process on condition the Ferguson Syndicate Company increased its capital by £5,000 and issued 4,000 of these shares to the Cassel Company as fully paid-up, plus one-fifth of the capital and assets 'present and future'. Once these shares were transferred, the Cassel Company would purchase the remaining 1,000 shares for 15s each, the balance of £250 being met by providing potassium cyanide to that value.⁸³ After returning to New Zealand in early 1889, Melville had stated that if the Waiorongomai and Karangahake ventures proved successful he would have 'no difficulty whatever in raising five or six times the money he has got at present',⁸⁴ but the Glaswegian investors revealed no inclination to provide more than a minimal amount until Ferguson's mines proved they were profitable.

Modifying the plant and developing the mines

When Ferguson left Britain in January 1889, a Te Aroha correspondent noted 'some rather ill-natured talk' about his mines being shepherded rather than worked.⁸⁵ Upon his return after nearly two years' absence, he announced that the new company had 'ample capital to thoroughly work the ground' and, should the ore 'warrant the expenditure', it would spend from £100,000 to £120,000 in development.⁸⁶ Although the capital had been subscribed on the understanding that he would manage both the mines and the battery, it had been decided that an expert from Glasgow would take over the treatment. In December 1888 his company ordered its first batch of potassium cyanide, and in the following month signed a contract to use the Cassel process, the first time anyone at Waiorongomai had decided to try it. Having treated his ore in Glasgow using cyanide, Ferguson was satisfied it would extract a high percentage of its value.⁸⁷ In late April 1889, when 12 percolating tanks and a Lamberton grinding mill were being installed,⁸⁸ the plant was inspected by Melville and Peter McIntyre, who had been MacArthur's assistant in Glasgow and who in 1888 had set up the plant at Ravenswood, Queensland. This was the the first goldfield in the world to produce gold using cyanide. In early 1889, Ferguson arrived in New Zealand to supervise the erection of the Crown Mines' plant.⁸⁹

During April 1889, mining recommenced on several reefs, parcels being broken out for testing.⁹⁰ Two months later, Arthur E. Wilson arrived from Glasgow to supervise

the use of cyanide, a role he would later fill at Waihi until returning to Scotland in 1895, leaving behind a reputation for 'efficient management'.⁹¹ Once the laboratory and assay furnace were completed in August, he assayed small parcels daily.⁹² That the capital was insufficient was revealed in mid-August, when an unpaid debt of £75 6s resulted in the seizure and sale of the New Era claim; Wilson, the only bidder, bought it for £5, and paid the £14 owing for rent.⁹³ A Waiorongomai correspondent noted that the seizure had

caused considerable comment, and, to a great degree, thrown a damper on our hopes. ... Unkind people have gone so far as to account for the present action as to say that the Scotch are tenacious of the Siller, but be that as it may, the syndicate have forwarded a large quantity of valuable machinery, and it is to be sincerely hoped it will not, through disuse, catch rust.⁹⁴

By December, after a few men spent some months modifying the plant, ore was being conveyed to it, and 'a preliminary start' using cyanide was planned once 'the necessary belts, etc', had arrived. Promising new ore was reportedly uncovered, and by April 1890 everything was in readiness to treat it once 'the long expected rain' fell.⁹⁵ It was claimed most of Wilson's tests had been satisfactory, with some picked stone being of exceptionally good quality. In general the ore was said to have been of a free and friable nature, and contained 'very little of the baser minerals', and furthermore, over 90 per cent of the assay value had been saved. The local newspaper hoped that 'the enterprise displayed by the New Era Syndicate in the face of great difficulties and discouraging circumstances' would have a fitting reward.⁹⁶

Early in May it was reported that Ferguson had 'for some time past been obtaining satisfactory returns', but in late July his arranging for 100 tons to be treated at the rival battery implied the reverse.⁹⁷ Not until 1 August did full treatment commence, without the use of cyanide, and although early that month large quantities of quartz were reportedly being treated, the plant ceased operating before the end of that month, and never restarted. Either 172 or 201 ounces of bullion were obtained, valued at £1 9s an ounce.⁹⁸

The end of the Ferguson syndicate

In late 1890 more money to meet debts was received from Glasgow and protection was granted to enable further testing of the ore, but the mines were forfeited in 1891 for non-working, then reacquired, before being forfeited for the last time in the following year.⁹⁹ In June 1891, shareholders agreed that, as the company could not 'by reason of its liabilities continue its existence', it would be wound up, and three months later Ferguson was dismissed as manager.¹⁰⁰ In July 1889, when vendors' shares had been reissued, as Ferguson 'did not participate in the re-issue', his shares were transferred to the Cassel Company, making him the only original shareholder not to retain an interest.¹⁰¹ Did he expect the new plant to fail? A mining commentator considered his behaviour was 'not likely to help him' should he revisit Britain to raise capital. 'He will have a warm reception and like his namesake of old', meaning St Peter, 'may have to deny himself'.¹⁰² In late 1891 Ferguson sued the company for various sums owing to him, finally being paid £140 'in full payment of debt and costs'.¹⁰³

In 1895, the Mines Department's inspecting engineer explained that Ferguson had made the common mistake of introducing machinery that had been very little used for the reduction of quartz-ores, and which had proved an entire failure so far as the first reduction process was concerned. The only really good machinery, the McKay pans, were stated to be 'only suitable for treating ore by amalgamation', but as the ore contained 'gold in a finely-divided state' it 'ought to have been treated by the cyanide process', as originally intended. The minister of Mines saw the closure as being linked to disagreement amongst the shareholders in Scotland following the disappointing returns of the extraction by amalgamation.¹⁰⁴ Clearly the Cassel Company, which blamed the poverty of the ore for the poor results,¹⁰⁵ had decided to concentrate their efforts on treating the superior Karangahake ore, meaning Waiorongomai missed out on being the second place in New Zealand to test the cyanide process.

In late 1891 it was decided to remove the plant to a new find at Waiomu, north of Thames, prompting the same mining commentator to comment: 'Such is mining, dear boys. Pull down, remove, burst up, re-form, re-erect. This is mining ... and will be till mining is carried on like any other business'.¹⁰⁶ In December the property was offered for sale, and in the following September all remaining machinery was sold for relocation.¹⁰⁷ As the New Era tramway was now superfluous, Ferguson sold the wire rope for £15, urging the purchaser not to pay the £5 due to the council because of 'the Cowardly treatment I received at their hands and for which the Council received the severest censure' from the Goldfields Committee. 'As for the Government it will never be out of my debt', for reasons unexplained.¹⁰⁸ In 1900 he sold the rails for £50, giving the government its third.¹⁰⁹

After Waiorongomai

Ferguson tributed in part of his former claims for some months, and would apply for another claim during the mining boom in 1896.¹¹⁰ According to his own account, he spent the early 1890s working with the Cassel Company experimenting with ways to combine wet crushing with cyanide treatment, but as the Waihi and Crown Mines' managers refused him permission to test his method on a large scale he went to Melbourne 'to finish some experiments in Electrolytic Precipitation', which he 'safely' predicted would 'soon be adopted instead of precipitating on zinc shavings'.¹¹¹ The Crown Mines' manager responded that he had never met Ferguson in 1896, as claimed, and that when they met later 'his conversation did not lead me to think that he possessed any technical knowledge'; furthermore, his process had 'no connection whatever' with that used by Crown Mines.¹¹² Describing himself as a mining engineer, Ferguson sought seven patents for improvements to battery machinery between 1897 and 1901.¹¹³ Before his death in June 1905, he prospected for copper in the northern part of the North Island, and his name lived on in The Ferguson's Syndicate, incorporated in December 1905, later renamed The Ferguson's Mining and Smelting Company (it collapsed in 1910).¹¹⁴

Conclusion

Upon Ferguson's death, aged 66, an obituary stated that his 'kindly temperament and straightforward disposition endeared him to all his friends'.¹¹⁵ Typically, it did not hint at what those he had clashed with thought of him, but circumstances had required him

to be both pugnacious and persistent in both mining and as an inventor. His struggles were typical of many a miner convinced of the value of their ore and of their process. He was handicapped by inadequate financial backing, rival battery owners reluctant to lose their monopoly, prolonged difficulties of access to his site, a council reluctant to assist him, a method of treatment that even with modifications did not produce the results predicted, a new cyanide process that might have been more successful but was not used, and the underlying problem of owning low grade ore. Plus, as so often, good results obtained in tests could not be replicated outside the laboratory.

At Te Aroha, his battery would be remembered as ‘Ferguson’s Folly’.¹¹⁶

Endnotes

¹ Marriage Certificate of Peter Ferguson, 24 October 1883, 1883/2855; Death Certificate of Peter Ferguson, 18 June 1905, 1905/2437, Register of Births Deaths and Marriages [hereafter BDM]; Thames Warden’s Court, Register of Miners’ Rights 1867-8, no. 3339, BACL 14358/1a, Archives New Zealand, Auckland Office [hereafter ANZ-A]; *New Zealand Herald*, 21 June 1905, p. 4.

² For example, Thames Warden’s Court, Thames Claims Register 1868, folios 208, 375, BACL 14397/1a; Register of Grahamstown Claims 1878-1880, nos. 628, 649, BACL 14397/12a, ANZ-A; *Thames Advertiser*, 15 January 1880, p. 3.

³ *Ibid.*, 17 June 1880, p. 3.

⁴ *Thames Star*, 9 July 1880, p. 2, 24 July 1880, p. 2.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 29 July 1880, p. 2; *Thames Advertiser*, 30 July 1880, p. 3.

⁶ *Waikato Times*, 13 September 1883, p. 2, 18 September 1883, p. 2, Letters to the Editor from Peter Ferguson, 25 September 1883, p. 2; *Thames Advertiser*, 5 October 1883, p. 3.

⁷ *Te Aroha News*, 6 December 1884, p. 2.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 28 February 1885, pp. 2, 7; 15 August 1885, p. 2; 24 October 1885; 12 December 1885, p. 2; 9 January 1886, p. 7; 5 June 1886, p. 2.

⁹ *Thames Star*, 4 October 1880, p. 2; 7 October 1880, p. 2; Philip Hart, ‘Maori and Mining: A Case Study of Hone Werahiko and Te Aroha’, *Journal of Australasian Mining History*, vol. 1, no. 1, September 2003, pp. 79-94.

¹⁰ Peter Ferguson to Harry Kenrick (Warden), 18 October 1880, Thames Warden’s Court, Letters and Telegrams 1879-1896, BACL 13388/1a, ANZ-A; *Thames Star*, 19 October 1880, p. 2; 25 October 1880, p. 2.

¹¹ Peter Ferguson to Harry Kenrick, 18 October 1880, Thames Warden’s Court, Letters and Telegrams 1879-1896, BACL 13388/1a, ANZ-A; *Thames Advertiser*, 1 November 1880, p. 3.

¹² A.G. Allom, ‘Prospecting in the Upper Thames’, *Thames Star*, 19 January 1881, p. 2; *New Zealand Gazette*, 20 January 1881, p. 111; *Thames Advertiser*, 28 December 1880, p. 3, 12 January 1881, p. 3; 31 January 1881, p. 2.

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