

'Owhiti' - Shingle Scow or Hollywood Tart?

By Peter Tait (Published here with permission from *Wiundling World*)

The life of the scow 'Owhiti' was fairly normal until the 1980's when a restoration led to adventure and Hollywood stardom.

The New Zealand trading scows had by the 1920's developed from the clumsy sailing barges of the early 1800's into relatively attractive and speedy sea going vessels but the lifestyle was tough. Today, in a world of 'marina mentality' boating, it requires an effort to get a true perspective on the life, the ships, and the hardships that prevailed at the time. The skill levels required to survive were high. Luck played a part. The shipbuilders, sailors and ships of that era were a special breed. The very best of grassroots Kiwi ingenuity.

On the water it was a case of surviving under sail alone - no engine, no electrics, no electronics, no modern synthetics, not really much at all except leaky wooden hulls with clumsy gaff rigs and heavy cargoes. It was rough going but a living had to be earned and there were adventures a-plenty along the way.



Under full sail loaded with firewood, Rangitoto behind.
- Photo Cliff Hawkins

The 'Owhiti' (commonly pronounced O-fitty) was launched in the mid 1920's from the yard of D Darroch and Son in Stanley Bay in Auckland, one of the last scows to be built. An example of the full evolution.

Dimensions: 71'-6" x 22'-0" x 3'-8". Most of her early working life was around the Hauraki Gulf. At a distance, a prettier little ship is hard to imagine. In the book 'Phantom Fleet' on a page entitled 'Sundry Scows and Scowmen' the author Ted Ashby wrote "*The 'Owhiti' for most of her life freighted sand, shingle and firewood for A W Bryant Ltd. For many years she was skippered by Billy Jennings and worked all the local sand and shingle beaches and though she had no power never had a mishap.*" As the years of sail slipped away the masts remained stepped even after twin engines had been installed. But by 1975 she was described in a list of Auckland Scows as '*Owhiti - At present a power barge moored up in Auckland, out of survey. Future uncertain.*'



Sailing up the Waitemata in 'Hollywood mode'

But the Owhiti had always been a lucky ship. A remarkable twist of fate saved her from the 'future uncertain'. Big time movie makers needed a colonial sailing vessel. Owhiti was the chosen one. The restoration team under the leadership of roustabout Dave Skyrmes, did a transformation. She was purchased as a hulk and restored to a fully rigged ship and those who knew about such things reckoned the job was good. She looked just like a real one from the old days, not too flash, lots of handmade, no sponsors logos.

So for several years her career continued. Not shingle and firewood this time. No more mundane work at all and no longer on the list of sundry scows. This was the big break. It was all glamour work such as sailing the Pacific, charter in the Bay of Islands and star roles in the movies.

The first venture into the Pacific was in 1982 when she was involved in the making of the movie 'Savage Island'. On her way to Fiji with a good turn of speed for an old girl the 'O' clocked 160 miles in 24 hours. Later Owhiti sailed from New Zealand to the Cook Islands with 25 tons of cargo for a film production called 'The Silent One'. After some supply trips around the islands the return passage was made but some reports on this trip were tidings of trouble to come. Perhaps the restoration had been light on structural repair, with too much emphasis on aesthetics to satisfy the movie makers. Major leak problems meant continuous pumping. One crew member claimed that a large part of the Pacific Ocean had been 'recycled' through the bilge pumps during the sail home. He felt he was lucky to have made it. Had the reliable firewood trader become too much of a Hollywood tart?

The Bay of Islands in Northland became home. 'Owhiti' helped make another movie in the Bay. Not a hit on screen but memorable for the fact the one of the islands was set ablaze by simulated cannon fire.

In between glamour roles under owner/skipper Dave Skyrmes the 'O' was used for coastal construction work, jetty building etc, going as far afield as the Great Barrier Island near Auckland. However the old lady couldn't cope with being a working boat again. Hull timbers became strained as a result and reports from Ron Wilkinson who lived on board at Opuia as watchman indicate a deterioration. At this time further restoration of the hull was due but sadly it never happened. Ron says sudden trickles through the hull used to worry him. One morning he was awakened by an early morning fountain of water leaking through the hull.

Ron a professional seaman of long experience enjoyed his time on board, "After numerous Tasman crossings, Pacific experiences and wartime adventures at sea Owhiti was the only vessel to ever throw me out of a bunk. It was a quiet night in the bay and as often happened the ship settled on the sand. (Scows are flat bottomed and built to cope with such strandings) On this occasion she settled very gently but to a steep angle and the first thing I knew was landing at great speed on the messroom table. The bruises took weeks to go!"



Ron Wilkinson

I asked Ron about her sailing ability. Ron reports that "She was nicely balanced on the helm but without any 'feel' to speak of. She sailed well".

Then all of a sudden on a work trip to Whangaroa Harbour, north of the Bay of Islands, disaster struck. Owhiti was left unattended for a few days and was discovered swamped. It seemed that accumulated bilge water rushing to one side had caused a sudden list which in turn let in more water. She went to the bottom but fortunately only in shallow water. She was refloated relatively quickly and with engines working again it was back to the Bay.

At about this time Auckland's Maritime Museum were on the lookout for a scow but luck seemed to have run out. They chose to build a new one (rather ironically based on the design of the 'Owhiti') and it wasn't long before more leaking problems and on coming serious decay resulted in the ship being beached in front of Dave Skyrmes home on the beach near Opuia in the Bay of Islands perhaps with repair work in mind. Unfortunately it wasn't forthcoming.

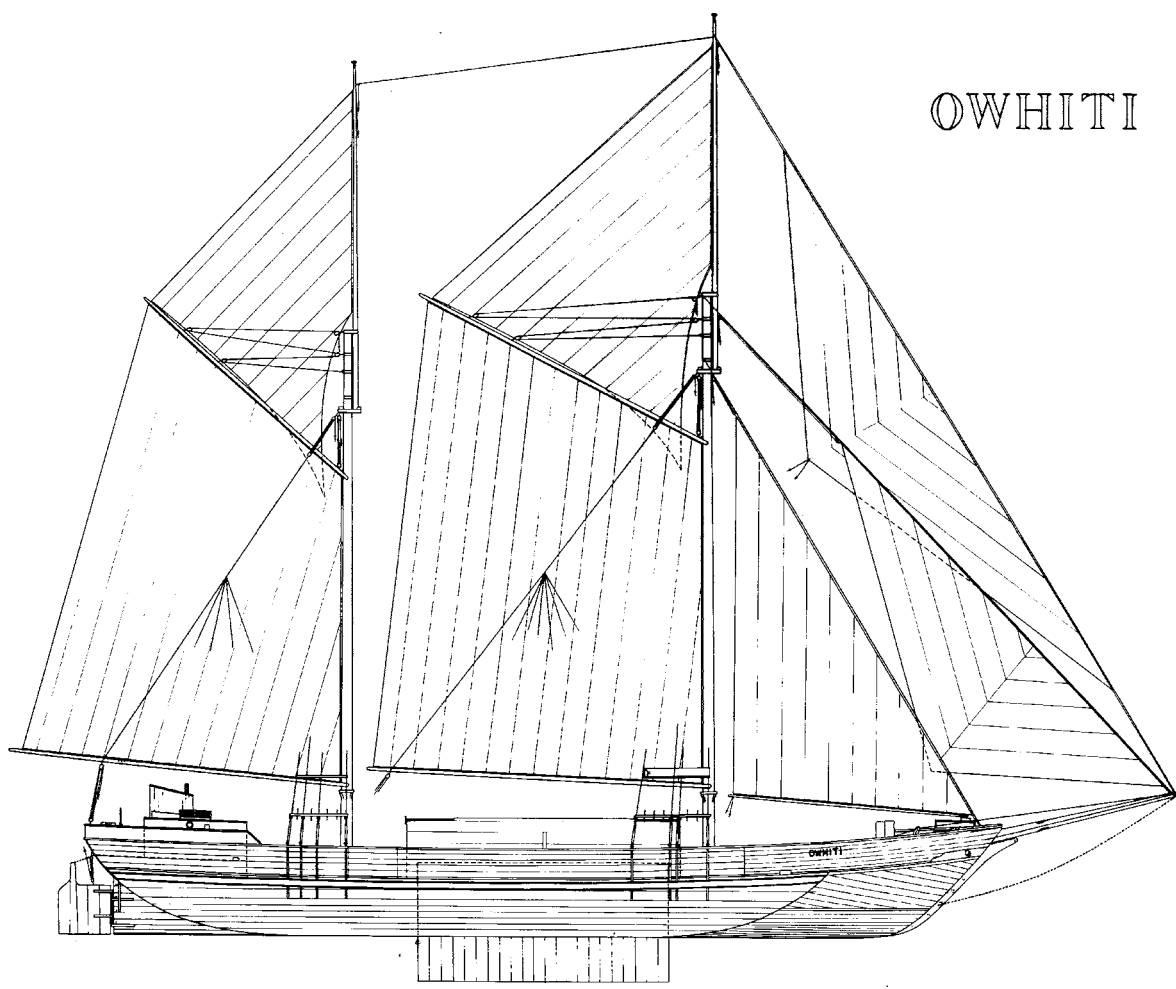
Today she's still there, but derelict and eight years later, a sorry sight - fully rigged but with the tide flowing in and out of the hull, moss growing out of canvas sails and grass growing out of the deck, fully equipped with sails, sheets, anchors and compass in place. Pepper, salt and dirty dishes in the galley. A terribly sad sight. Not once, but twice a proud sailing vessel, now just a wreck with no chance of third time lucky. An important and irreplaceable part of New Zealand's seafaring history lost for ever. As Ron Wilkinson has noted as a caption in his photo album, "A ship that I love dead on the beach."



On the beach derelict Opua

And that long time successful skipper from years gone by, Billy Jennings, what would he have reckoned? His once proud sailing scow, had she become a Hollywood Dame in later life or was she always a Shingle Girl at heart?

*Below:
Construction plans from the book
'Phantom Fleet' by Ted Ashby*



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