

History of the Piha Post Office



Piha has had its own locally run postal service for nearly 100 years. Postal services at Piha go back to the days of the Piha State Sawmill (1910-1921) when the mill manager, Hans Peter Knutzen, was also the Post Master.

The current service has the unique distinction of being the only one in New Zealand run by a ratepayers' association.



Hans Peter Knutzen, first Post Master of Piha

In the pre-War years, postal services at Piha were provided by the Piha boarding house or hotel which opened in 1922. In the 1930s, Bill Browne, the son of the owner, ran a small post office. Official services started again on 3 September 1935 and have operated continuously ever since.

When the Piha Store opened in the 1940s, it took over the role. The mail was delivered by the daily bus to the store, where it was sorted, and the names of lucky recipients had their names written on a blackboard. People picked up their meat, took delivery of their newspaper, and claimed their letters and parcels, while catching up on the gossip. Thus started the tradition of the mail delivery as a hub of Piha community life.

In return for acting as the Post Office agency, sending telegrams and running the telephone exchange, the storekeeper was entitled to a free phone, an accommodation allowance and a small fixed salary.

The high point of this period in Piha's communications history, was 1953, when Post Mistress, Dot Mercier, at 1 am in the morning, took the calls that told Jim Rose at White's Beach that son-in-law Ed Hillary had reached the summit of Mt Everest.



Piha Post Office Store about 1970

In 1982 new store owners decided they had no time to continue the service. In stepped the Piha Ratepayers' and Residents' Association. Joan Crossland, the secretary, negotiated to have the service transferred to the Library, in reality a small shed at the entrance to the Camping Ground. Val Jensen was the first postmistress under the new arrangement, followed by Sue Lucas, whose husband Brad had taken on the milk run and rural postal delivery.

Not content with a small space at one end of a very small building, the R&R approached the then Post and Telegraph Department about permanent quarters. The news in 1985 that a new telephone exchange was to be built provided the opportunity to press the case for the Piha R&R to be able to use the old exchange building as a post office. The exchange was built on a 33.3 perch residential section next to the Piha Store which had been acquired under the Public Works Act in 1967 for an automatic telephone exchange from Harold Rowe, proprietor of the Piha Hotel.

The P&T was reluctant. A survey, conducted in the slow winter months, convinced them that Piha did not justify an official Post Office, but help, and connections, came to the rescue of Piha.

The ward representative of the Waitemata County Council, Peter Furze, got the support of the Council, who in turn lobbied the Postmaster General, who happily was long-time Karekare resident, Jonathan Hunt.

Late in 1985 the R&R heard that not only would they be gifted the building, but that they were in line to receive 'full accounting/banking facilities'.

But the wheels turned slowly and many letters went to and fro between the R&R, WCC and the P&T. To complicate matters, in 1987 the Post and Telegraph Department was corporatised and split up into Telecom and New Zealand Post. Telecom now owned the land which was proposed as the site for postal services. There was certainly no chance the promised banking services would eventuate.

Despite this hitch, in May 1987 the R&R received a letter from Telecom offering to gift the old telephone exchange building for a post office with the right to use the existing site. Any costs of alterations were to be met by the R&R. At the same time New Zealand Post offered to provide a nest of 60 boxes.

At the R&R committee meeting in June 1987, Joan Crossland, who had led the sub-committee negotiating this deal, was mandated to write to Telecom accepting the offer of the gift of the building, and to write to the manager of the New Lynn branch of New Zealand Post saying it was eager to take delivery of the boxes. This was duly done and the R&R became the proud owner of the Piha Post Office, building, boxes and all.



(Left) Cyril Murphy, John Mannall and Don Wright transforming the old exchange building into a community post office, and (right) Don Wright hard at work on the carpentry

It was up to the R&R to provide the materials and labour to turn the old exchange into a functional community Post Office. John Mannall offered fittings and materials from a bank demolition job he was involved in - shelves, counter, and door - and the community swung into action. The floor bristled with severed cables and Jack Kingston volunteered to remove the cables and stop all 80 holes with glue dowelling. It took a weekend working bee for committee members to convert the building into a working Post Office, and Sue Lucas was able to take her stamps across the road into the new premises. The

new system of payment for the Post Mistress was based on the amount of mail handled, with a small counter allowance. The revenue from the boxes went to the R&R.

It was not all plain sailing from here. In 1989, New Zealand Post delivered a new contract which reduced the Post Mistress's pay from \$5 an hour to \$2.10 an hour. The R&R wondered if it could keep it going, but at a public meeting at Easter 1989, the R&R was told in no uncertain terms to keep the Post Office open, so it topped up the wages.



Piha Post Office, 1997, Chris Warman, Post Mistress, behind the counter, Betty Hanson on the right, and Jan O'Connor, then President of the R&R leaning against the counter

Fast forward to February 2004 when, following a power outage, fire burned out the telegraph exchange. With new technology, Telecom was able to install all the equipment it needed in a small roadside box. John Goulter of Telecom wrote to the R&R saying it was now looking for other options for the site. The crisis was the matter of much discussion at the AGM of the association in January 2005. The meeting passed two resolutions:

- "That this AGM recognises the unique character of the Piha Post Office, its importance to the community and its iconic status
- That this AGM mandates the committee to pursue all options to secure the use of the Telecom land by the community, thereby ensuring the post office can continue on its site in perpetuity."

Mayor Bob Harvey gave an indication the Council would assist with this.

The Council subsequently decided the land was Telecom's to do with as it wished. A packed public meeting in May voted unanimously for the service to be retained, and Telecom representative John Goulter assured the meeting that Telecom would take the community's views into consideration when deciding what to do with the land. Gifting, a peppercorn rental and selling the land to the R&R at a discounted price were raised as solutions, and Mr Goulter said these would be considered.

By the end of the year, however, Telecom was making moves to sell the property by tender. With limited funds, a token bid was put in by the R&R, and the R&R supported another tender, which would have enabled the Post Office to continue on the site.

In the event, Telecom accepted a tender from Preserve Piha Ltd who intended to establish a café. In June 2008, Preserve Piha Ltd put conditions on the continuation of the Post Office on the land which included paying \$150 a week rent, and stated that the building could be purchased from them by the association for \$10,000.

In mid-2008, a Special General Meeting of the Association determined that it wanted a full postal service at Piha, and it wanted the old building to remain in the ownership of the community.

In early 2009, when Preserve Piha Ltd gained a consent to develop the site as a café, the café developers agreed that the R&R could take the building away. Waitakere City Council gave permission for the building to be temporarily stored on the Domain and for some months the post office service operated from two small cabins, part of the campground.



(Left) The building is lifted off its old site to be assigned to a temporary location in the Domain, while (right) Post Mistress, Chris Warman, operated from a small cabin in the Domain.

A number of proposals were explored by the R&R Committee, including location beside the store, extension of the Library building, operation from the campground office and location on the Domain. Closure was also an option. With the assistance of local bach owner, Graham Gleghorn, the committee systematically evaluated the pros and cons of these options, and finally developed a proposal that the Domain location was the best solution.

This was on the eastern side of the entrance to the campground, opposite its former site, and within the village hub of store, library and campground. The WCC offered to amend the lease with the campground lessee so that the post office could go there. As the R&R saw it, the main advantages of the proposal were:

- “The historic Post Office building continues to be utilised
- The location is central to the Piha village hub and is a high profile location eminently suitable for a Post Office

- The location will continue to enable the Post Office to provide significant social value as a central meeting place where local information is made available
- At least the present level of services will be retained and may be enhanced
- The contract with NZ Post will be retained ensuring the net income from the Post Office continues to substantially enhance the R&R funds, and enabling the R&R to provide more value to the community than it otherwise could
- The building will be refurbished and properly insulated
- Box holders will have 24/7 access out of the weather
- The proposal is achievable in the required timeframe and affordable by the R&R
- Both the WCC and the Camp Ground Lessee support the proposal
- The area surrounding the building will be landscaped and wheelchair access will be provided.”

At a well attended public meeting, held at the Piha Surf Club on 19 July 2009, the association president, Keith Franich, and Graham Gleghorn, presented the proposal, and asked for the meeting’s approval to go ahead. No one at the meeting spoke against the proposal, however, four statements opposing it were read out from persons not attending.

Despite this dissension from a small group, endorsement of the proposal was resounding, as can be seen from the record below (the votes included proxies held by members attending the meeting).

The following resolutions were passed:

1. “That the meeting approves the R&R Committee’s recommendation for the relocation of the Piha Post Office building and Postal Services and instructs the R&R Committee to proceed with the implementation of the proposal.

Jan O’Connor/Jude Morton Votes in favour: 112 Votes against: 17 CARRIED

2. That authority is granted to the R&R Committee to spend up to \$26,000 to relocate the Post Office services and that the Committee make every endeavour to reduce the total cost as much as possible by fundraising, community grants, donations, supplier discounts and utilising voluntary labour. Jan O’Connor/Jude Morton Votes in Favour: 115 Votes against: 14 CARRIED

3. Further resolutions passed were: That this meeting congratulates the President and committee of the Piha R&R Assn. on the comprehensive and responsible way they have secured the future of the Piha Post Office. Sandra Coney/Elizabeth Franich CARRIED -Unanimously

4. That the meeting thanks Graham Cleghorn for the assistance he has given to the committee in reaching this happy conclusion. SandraConey/Elizabeth Franich CARRIED – Unanimously “

Site for Piha PO, 3 October 2009



Armed with this mandate, the Piha R&R was able to go back to the Council and, over the next few months, the building was moved to its new site, an all-weather porch and wheel-chair access ramp were constructed, and the building given a new coat of paint in colours suitable for the vintage of the building. Paint was applied inside too, along with new vinyl and carpet. With Keith Franich supervising, and many local trades people donating materials and labour, the total cost came in at under \$10,000. The Trusts Charitable Foundation donated \$10,000 and WCC gave \$2000 towards consent costs.



Keith Franich, Chris Warman, and R&R committee member, Barron Braden, at the start of the PO's epic, if brief, journey to its new home, 12 October 2009









Working bee, 17 October 2009

The Post Office was re-opened on its new site on 24 October 2009, in the presence of a large number of community members. R&R committee member, Monique Davis, thanked Keith Franich for all the work he had put into the project, and Sandra Coney, for Protect Piha Heritage, presented Keith with a framed photograph of Hans Peter Knutzen first postmaster of the Piha Post Office, to hang in the new building (see page one of this booklet.)

Janet Murray, who had worked at the post office when it was in the Piha Store, shared her memories, and then Jack Kingston, who had worked on the building when it was first converted from telephone exchange to post office, was given the honour of cutting the ribbon. Time for the first customer, Val Alison, to bring her parcel in for mailing, and the rest of the community to admire their new asset.



Jack Kingston (left) with Keith Franich, holding the photo of Mr Knutzen. Note the official bright red NZ Post sign



Jack Kingston, who worked on the building when it was first converted from telephone exchange to community post office, cuts the ribbon to officially open the building



Val Alison becomes the first customer, 24 October 2009.



Opening day for the new Piha PO, 24 October 2009, and, below, new planting and a seat for customers.



Written by Sandra Coney, Protect Piha Heritage Society Inc, July 2008, revised January 2010

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