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Glen Massey School: A History from 1887

Lauren Retter

In 1887 a settlement of 22 families was founded at Te Akatea, about two kilometres north of what is now Glen Massey.¹ In 1915 Glen Massey School was opened for the growing population in the area, and the school quickly became the social centre and hub of Glen Massey. The church was moved from across the road to be adapted and utilised by the school, allowing more students to enrol, and more families to become part of the village and community that was quickly establishing itself within rural Waikato. Like all rural places in New Zealand, time seems to move slowly without much being changed. People love the way their paradise is and try and keep it as traditional as possible, but they also try to keep up with the times that are moving ahead. This is where the story of Glen Massey and its school begins.

When we think of rural New Zealand a certain image springs to mind, one that is full of green paddocks and pastures with an abundance of cows, sheep, goats and even deer. This is an image which for many people is the ideal and picturesque backdrop for bringing up a family and also having the best of both worlds: a quiet rural area not too far from town. Glen Massey is one of those many rural villages that can be found nestled in the mountain range that surrounds Ngaruawahia; it is only eight minutes west of State Highway 1 going north, and fifteen kilometres from the famous natural Waingaro Hot Springs. This tiny sleepy village of Ngaruawahia was once a bustling mining town that allowed many people to have a good start in life, but with the growth of the village things needed to start changing, especially for the growing families surrounding Glen Massey. A school was required, to ensure the proper education of the youngest generation and to prepare them for a wider range of job opportunities.

Glen Massey came into being because of an abundance of coal found in the local Ngaruawahia area in 1912. The village grew and many families migrated to the Glen Massey area; many Scottish families made a major move from the other side of the world because of the encouraging job prospects in New Zealand. The influx of families to the area encouraged the village to look at its population and make some important decisions to ensure healthy growth and development, but also to encourage families to stay. One of the biggest decisions that was made by the village as a whole was to build a school so that families would not have to move away from the area.

The naming of Glen Massey was a given; as there was a large Scottish population congregated in the area, the name naturally reflected their heritage. ‘Glen’ means ‘valley’, and ‘Massey’ was in homage to the Right Honourable William Ferguson Massey, who was Prime Minister of New Zealand from 1912 to 1925. He was the founder of the Reform Party, and is widely considered to be one of the most skilled politicians of his time. Massey was also known for his support of rural interests; significantly, this permitted the proper development and application of resources to rural areas in New Zealand, allowing many rural areas to increase in prosperity.² After Richard Seddon, Massey was the longest-serving Prime Minister in New Zealand’s history.³

Before the school in Glen Massey was established the villagers had to send their children to Te Akatea (two miles north of Glen Massey), or Waingaro School (seven miles south of Glen Massey).⁴ This put many families in a predicament; should they move from the area and closer to the school? Or should they risk their children’s lives every day by sending them on foot to school? A villager, Mr Lambourne, made an application to the Education Board to have a school established in Glen Massey.⁵ On the piece of land that was purchased for the school, a huge marquee was erected to ensure that the education of the children could begin as soon as possible, even before the permanent buildings had been constructed. The permanent school was opened on Monday 1 February 1915, with 58 students on its roll.⁶ Over the years the school grew, with classrooms being added to accommodate the growing school roll. Enrolment reached its peak in 1957, with 146 students.⁷ Yet just one year later, in 1958, disaster struck the village. The closure of the state-owned mine resulted in the gradual decline of the population in the area. With families having to move away from the tranquil area of Glen Massey for job opportunities, the school’s roll rapidly decreased by 10 students each year. Enrolment levelled out in 1960 with 64 students, which is the lowest it has ever been.⁸

Before Glen Massey School was built, an interesting situation had developed with the other schools in the surrounding areas. A teacher, Mr Frank McGrath, had to split his time between Te Akatea on Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays, and Waingaro School on Thursdays and Fridays.⁹ With so many families in the affected areas, it was felt that the division of Mr McGrath’s time was unfair, so as a consequence his work week was increased to six days to give each school an even share of his time.¹⁰ As the population of Glen Massey increased, more teachers were added to accommodate the growing school roll. A maximum of four teachers was employed at the peaks, and as the roll declined one or two teachers were employed for the teaching positions.

With every low there is a high to look forward to: there has been an increase in the population of Glen Massey, as people have started to seek the quiet oasis that is rural life with the added bonus of not being too far from town. The school, with all of the developments and improvements that have been made to it, has been able to retain the character of its original 1915 buildings, while enjoying the 1980s architectural developments that have ensured that it is a functional and attractive complex for the students to enjoy and use.¹¹ Glen Massey School today boasts a Grade U3 and a decile five status. There are five classrooms, and the roll of the school fluctuates around 100 students, with six full-time teachers who teach a range of ages from Year 1 to Year 8. Also on staff is a principal and a deputy principal, one part-time Special Needs and Abilities teacher, and two teacher aides. A reading recovery programme is run at the school.¹²

Although it may seem like the picture perfect, gone in the blink of an eye village, Glen Massey is a village that has built itself on a rock. All of the families that live there love it and do all that they can to preserve what they have. Glen Massey has had a hard road to get to where it is today, but as you drive through the village nearly everyone will stop and wave in greeting, so you get a real sense of community and continuity with time moving slowly and things being kept the same. As a new resident to the area I have been welcomed with open arms and have a feeling of being home and of being accepted for who I am and what I can bring to this old, traditional community.¹³

Notes

¹ *Waikato District Council* <www.waikatodc.govt.nz> [accessed 26 October 2013].

² *Ibid.*

³ 'List of New Zealand Prime Ministers by Term', *Wikipedia* <www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Prime_Ministers_by_term> [accessed 26 October 2013].

⁴ Pam Bovill, *Glen Massey School 75th Jubilee, 1915-1990: Including Te Akatea School, 1892-1914: Incorporating a Brief History of the District* (Ngaruawahia: The School, 1989).

⁵ Bovill.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Gwyneth Jones, *The End of an Era* (G. Jones: Publicity Printing, 2010).

¹⁰ Jones.

¹¹ Bovill.

¹² *Glen Massey School, 2013* <<http://www.glenmassey.school.nz/>> [accessed 26 October 2013].

¹³ I would like to thank Cathy Coleborne, Guy Sutton, Ethan Sutton, and all of the classmates who have given me the support and encouragement that I have needed to get to where I am today.