

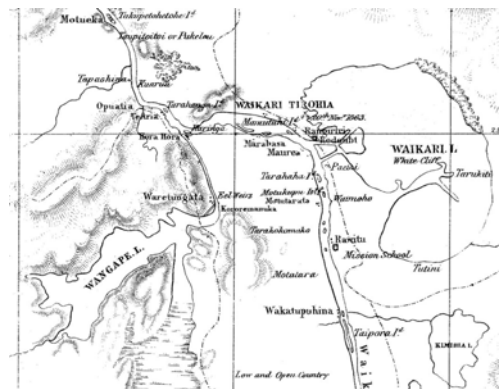
Trip Report: Horahora Power Station (Lake Karapiro), 21st October 2009

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One of the things I really love about wreck diving is that each time you dive a wreck, you get a connection to its history. From every aspect of the dive, research the wreck to gliding through its superstructure gives me a feeling of the events that led up to it's sinking and what has happened since. I never thought I'd get that same feeling, until Tom from Global Dive mentioned in passing that there was an old power station in Lake Karapiro that became submerged when the lake was created. The idea became a seed that germinated over time, I had to dive this.

But where to start? Lake Karapiro is huge, what are the chances of finding the site in a lake that is 11km long? I started digging around on the internet, finding the odd clue here and there would eventually help us to find the site – but the more I found, the more intriguing the history of the power station became.

Horahora power station was built in 1910, it was New Zealand's first hydro-electric power station and was built by the Waihi gold mining company to provide power for mining operations at Waihi, about 80 km away. Construction took three years, continuing through the Waihi miners' strike despite attempts to involve the Horahora construction workers in the strike action. When the power station opened in October 1913 it was the largest generating plant in the country. The magnitude of the construction effort only became apparent when I found that the Waikato River was diverted to create the reservoir – a piece of information that became key in finding of the site. Comparing maps from the late 1800s to today shows just how much the river was diverted, and the maps helped narrow down our search to around about half a kilometre of the lake.



More research unearthed more history, the power station was bought by the government in 1919 and it began to supply Cambridge, Hamilton and surrounding farming districts. In 1926 the power station was upgraded, increasing capacity to 10.3 MW... but it had passed its middle age and the end was coming for Horahora. Growing power shortages produced larger power stations on the Waikato, until finally in 1947 Lake Karapiro was created to store water for the Karapiro Power Station, the last of the eight hydroelectric power stations on the Waikato River, and in its creation Horahora power station was swallowed forever. The lake began to fill

on March 4, 1947, and the process took about a week. Many people flocked to watch as Horahora powerhouse and surroundings gradually disappeared and the riverscape changed forever. Because of the shortage of power, the station was left running as the lake filled, with turbines thrashing as the water level rose. Horahora power station had eight generators and generator No7 was unable to be shut down as it was covered by water, giving rise to the legend that Horahora refused to die.

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How can any diver find this story, and the promise of the dive not compelling? Old photos show the turbines in place, and buildings on the old riverbank that housed 40 people. This surely has to be dived. The final piece in the puzzle fell into place, after information from the Waikato Historical Society came through by email – *“The whole of the power station complex is submerged beneath Lake Karapiro. The only visible remains are the top of the ramp for heavy equipment and the steps leading down to the power house - these are located on the true right bank of the Lake just below Finlay Park Adventure Camp”*.



With the exact location pinpointed, it was only a matter of assembling a team, picking the day and doing the dive. Or so we thought.



The team was easy, so Jamie, Mel and I were joined by Matt Shortall from the Dive Centre, Tom Crisp from Global Dive and James Crocker from DiveHQ Tauranga. Not exactly knowing what to expect, we loaded up the cars with twinsets, lights, oxygen deco tanks and reels. The promise of diving a flooded power station was too great for us to do this by halves. If it was good, it was going to be a long dive! Meeting at our rendezvous point, we started scouring the banks of the lake looking for the steps that we knew were somewhere nearby – but access was barred by a gorse and bramble hedge. Wandering around for

an hour, we found nothing. But thankfully, when being told off for trespassing one of the locals gave us the precise location we were looking for – we were about half a kilometre away. From the road, it's a good 1.5km walk over fields to reach the site of the steps. Still positive, we ignored the omens of James' feet, and decided that the six of us would schlep two sets of gear from the car first and one pair of divers would do an initial dive and report back before bringing the rest of the gear over.

Tom and I volunteered, after all it was his idea in the first place and it was me that tracked down the location. Fairs fair, right? We geared up and set off across the mud flat towards the steps. We knew it wasn't going to be easy, and sinking up to your knees in sucking mud tells you two things – get in the water and swim, and don't expect perfect vis. I broke out of the mud and took the swim option, but Tom was having a harder time of it – his drysuit boots are too large, and every step he'd try to pull his foot out of the mud, but all that would happen is that his leg would move inside the drysuit leaving the actual boot in the mud.... Eventually, he too made it into the water and swam across to where I had fixed a line to a fence post. The plan was to reel out down the ramp and tie it off on any part of the remaining buildings that we could find. Looking into the water, it wasn't looking that clear – we'd definitely need the line to find our way back.



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Sometimes, it is better to travel hopefully than arrive.

We started our descent, at 2m it was dark. The silt in the water obscured everything. My HID light was barely visible even though I was shining it into my eyes. Tom was nowhere to be seen. I stopped and waited, and then I didn't see him but felt him bump into me. This is not good. Sorting the line out, I carried on down but could feel the current pulling us sideways off the ramp. At this rate, we'd miss the buildings completely. I couldn't see the bottom, but reached down to touch it and a cloud of silt billowed up. Feeling the concrete ramp, I pulled myself down it a bit further and the vis seemed to be getting better – I could nearly see something, as opposed to nothing! I looked behind me, Tom was nowhere to be seen and the line was snagged around a plant and the current had dragged it out into a huge loop. Was going on a good idea? I looked at my computer, 9m and 2 minutes. Tom was still nowhere to be seen – I made the call, and turned around. As I reeled in the line, I bumped into Tom at about 5m. In the murk, I gave the up signal – I wasn't enjoying this, and even if we found something down there... what were going to do, feel for openings and hope that it would be safe to penetrate? Maybe we'd found the reason that no one we knew had ever dived Horahora Power Station.

Surfacing, we untied the line and opted for the long swim back to the entry point rather than trying the sucking mud flats. Even then, getting out of the water wasn't easy – taking my fins off, I stood up and



immediately sank into waist deep mud. Never again would either of us curse Lake Pupuke, there is a lot of silt in this part of Lake Karapiro! Making it back on to firm ground, there was just the long walk back to the car. The council's contractors working on the access road must have been bemused, as Tom and I stomped past in drysuits and carrying twinsets on our backs! You could see their thoughts, "Crazy Fools!", but when it comes to true exploration diving you have to take the rough with the smooth. Who knows, maybe one day we'll be back?