



A brief History of Waihi

Gold was first discovered on Pukewa (later known as Martha Hill) by John McCombie and Robert Lee in 1878. Although they tried hard, they could not obtain sufficient investment for the infrastructure needed to treat the gold-bearing quartz to separate the gold from the quartz. They abandoned the project and it was taken up by William Nicholl the following year, who had no better luck at finding the required investment.

In 1890 it was acquired for \$6000 by T H Russell and, as he had excellent investment connections in England, he soon raised the required \$40,000 to purchase the machinery to get the mine going. In 1896 the patent to use cyanide in the gold extraction process was made freely available by the NZ Government to all miners and this doubled the extraction of gold and silver from the quartz and made the mine much more viable. As the mine grew, so did the number of men employed.

In 1905 Waihi became connected by rail to Paeroa, and this eased access for not only people but also goods and other necessities such as coal, required by the mine. The extraction process took place at Waikino, where there was good flat ground, sufficient water to power the various steam engines involved in the crushing and a handy method of cheap disposal for the wastes (into the Ohinemuri River). During these early days other smaller mines sprang up, but as extraction was so difficult on a small scale, most of these did not last long and either closed or became swallowed up into the Martha Mine. The largest and most successful of these was the Grand Junction Mine which also worked a continuation of the Martha lode. This mine was incorporated into the Martha in the mid 1930s.

By 1909 with the Martha Mine in its heyday employing 1500 men that year, the Waihi population exceeded 6000, compared to Hamilton at that time of just over 2000. Although gold yields began to drop after 1909 and with it the number of men employed, Martha remained viable until 1950 when the decision to close it was made in England. Martha closed down two years later and the shaft and tunnel riddled hill became a (dangerous) playground for local kids

The electronics industry mopped up some of the unemployed. First Akrad (started in 1932 by Keith Wrigley), then PYE and later Philips manufactured radios, televisions and other electronic equipment in Waihi. A cheese factory was also established and local businesses continued to service the farming community. For 35 years Waihi remained a sleepy town devoid of mining,

In 1986 Philips closed its doors and one year later saw the start of another mining era. The new mining licence was granted to a consortium to mine the Martha Hill by open cast method. The cheese factory had closed some years earlier. The new mine initially drew a lot of opposition in the town from the 'Greenies' but over time this has toned down considerably and Waihi continues to be a mining town, just as in its early days.

Today, besides the open-cast Martha Mine, there is also another underground mine called the Favona, situated behind Union Hill and just in the rural area surrounding the town. Its licence to operate was granted in August 2004. Both mines utilise the multi million dollar mill facility which lies between them. Here the gold and silver is extracted from the quartz and sent to the Western Australia Mint as 'dore' (pronounced doray), where the gold and silver are separated.