

THE GIANT OF HAHEI

Robert Wigmore

The 270 acre Wigmore homestead. The large 5 bedroom house above was built by Robert Wigmore in 1868.

The famous two-seat loo (turn page for story) is to far right.



There lived on Coromandel Peninsula a settler named Wigmore, a very large man with feet in proportion. Discussing one day who was the proud possessor of the largest 'understandings' in the province, I was told that Wigmore was.

One day when Wigmore came visiting over the sands, some Maori rushed after him, exclaiming "Oh the Moa, the Moa". But, alas, it was only the footprints of Wigmore.

Phillipps, in his 'Reminiscences of Early Days' 1897, and quoted from *The Wigmore of Hahei Beach, Mercury Bay* by J. D. Osborne

The valley of Hahei was purchased in the early 1870s by Robert Wigmore. Said to be the 'largest man in New Zealand', he lived on the homestead with his wife Fanny and their children until his death in 1890.

Robert Wigmore was also a man of some connections. He was a good friend of Auckland's esteemed founding father, Sir John Logan Campbell, (pictured below right) and was thought to have collaborated on several Auckland development projects with him in the 1840s. He was a Freemason of the Grand Lodge of Ireland and served as the Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages in NZ from 1876 to 1887.

According to some records, the Irish born Wigmore visited the region as early as 1840 as a land surveyor. He was believed to be the first 'pakeha' to walk from Whitianga to Auckland and apparently walked as far away as Wellington in a six month trek.

Interesting to note that Wigmore left his initial home of Auckland in 1842 bound for Peru and Chile, posting letters to New Zealand newspapers describing the poor living conditions of the people there. It may have been his interest in railroads and the timber industry that drew him there.

Not much is documented, but apparently Wigmore then returned to Ireland and travelled on to Canada where, in 1849 he married Fanny Willis, an Irish woman from his hometown (it is believed his parents disapproved of the marriage and disinherited him).

The couple sailed to New Zealand with their five children (they eventually had eight in all), landing in Auckland in 1866. The family soon moved to Whitianga and later to Hahei where Wigmore built a cottage on the beach. He then, being a fine carpenter, began building not only his large Hahei homestead, but the furniture as well.

Although it is said he started the 'big house' in 1868, he did not take ownership of the sections (reported to be over 270 acres purchases under the Auckland Wasteland's Act) until the early 1870s. It included all of Cathedral Cove as well as the valley, which he farmed with his family.

Wigmore died of an apparent heart attack in 1890 (see account in Horace's memoirs next page). Fanny remained on the homestead until her death in 1911. The burial place of Robert and his wife is marked by a cairn in the Wigmore Historic Reserve, at the end of Hahei Beach Road by the beach (see next page).

The Harsants and descendants have occupied the big house since purchasing the homestead in 1915. Vaughan and Dawn Harsant lived in the homestead since the 1960s and Dawn continued to live there after her husband's death.

