## The fire INSIDE

It's taken almost three decades, but a community's efforts to restore its historic bakehouse are delivering more than just fresh bread

Once you've crossed the Category 2 Millers Flat Bridge, its girders painted school-room blue, the building comes into sight. Small, sitting out on its own, the stark black letters on the freshly painted tongue-and-groove exterior stand out: 'N. Campbell, Baker'.

And as you approach its front door – the timber etched with the patina of the past century – you can already smell the bread. But it's when you step inside the building that you really need to pause to take it all in: whitewashed stone walls, stacks of old bread tins, kauri flour bins, a coal range (now unused), and along the entire fourth wall, a discrete assembly of small doors, sliding plates (the fire's dampers), and the flicker of flame from the wood and coal fire.

This, the Millers Flat Bakehouse, is the only surviving wood- and coal-fired bakery in New Zealand. And it is a thing of beauty.

It has only survived, however, because a few locals decided it should. The story of how Betty Adams, Dennis Kirkpatrick and a number of other locals banded together to restore this small town bakehouse, first built and operational in 1908, is as heartwarming as the bread now emerging from its oven.

WORDS: PETA CAREY ● IMAGERY: ADAM WALKER



- The Millers Flat Bakehouse dates back to 1908.
- 2 Ric Hunt, volunteer and trainee baker, uses the 'peel' to move loaves around in the oven.
- 3 Some of the original loaf tins and cooling trays line a kahikatea bench top in the bakehouse.
- The oven's fire, fuelled by coal and wood, must be alight for three days to ensure sufficient heat for the oven.

Ric Hunt, wearing a wide grin and smudged apron, is having a ball. He's been up since 6.30 on this Saturday morning – checking on the oven temperature, mixing the dough and piling it into tins to 'prove' – but he'd lit the fire on the Wednesday and prepared a good 20 loaves the night before. He's now pulling them out of the oven.

Above him, a wooden brace holds the 'peel', which looks much like a paddle. Ric reaches up to grab it and the pushing and pulling of the loaves begins. The peel is essential for pushing loaves in through the tiny cast-iron oven door, around the cavernous space (as temperatures can vary from one side of the oven to the other), and finally out and onto the historic kahikatea benchtop. (Kahikatea, or white pine, contains a tannin in the timber that prevents contamination.) He taps the surface of the browned crust, and with leather gloves turns the loaves out of their tins. Perfect.

Ric was a gib-stopper most of his life. Now semiretired, he's taken on the volunteer role of baker, on at least the first Saturday of every month, or by special arrangement. Stoking the fire, mixing the dough, perfecting the loaves – there was a lot to learn, but he had the country's best teacher in Dennis Kirkpatrick.

Based down the road in Roxburgh, Dennis is a secondgeneration baker and owner of the famous Jimmy's Pies. He learned the art of working a wood- and coal-fired oven from his father. As a child in Invercargill, he and his siblings would be up early, bringing in the coal and wood, helping to make the pies before school.

"There were six of us. We didn't get much of a childhood," he says with a touch of sadness. When the family moved to Roxburgh, to a bakery with an electric oven, that old wood- and coal-fired oven in Invercargill went the way of most in New Zealand and was demolished.

But Dennis remembered it. And when Millers Flat local Betty Adams contacted him back in 1991 with the idea of restoring the bakehouse, he agreed to help.

From 1991 to 2019 – that's how long it took the Millers Flat Bakehouse Restoration Trust to raise the funds and complete the restoration. Betty, now well into her ninth decade, has a photograph of herself in the late 1930s standing in front of the bakehouse alongside the three daughters of the second-generation baker, Nathaniel Campbell (Jnr). It wasn't long after, in 1939, that the bakehouse lease was sold, and the new owner took the business to Roxburgh.

"I've lived in Millers Flat all my life. And every day when I went to school or crossed that bridge, that bakehouse was always there, increasingly derelict," she says.

"Initially our aim was just to restore the exterior, perhaps just as a meeting place or museum, but later we realised the oven could also be restored, and that we could have a working bakehouse."

The challenges in those 28 years were many. There were fundraising lunches, which required hard work but raised little, and a farming initiative, fattening bobby calves to sell, with the profits going to the bakehouse. But it wasn't until the trust applied to the Lottery Grants Board and major donor Central Lakes Trust that the committee secured sufficient funds for the restoration.

Firstly, it had to own the land – a complex but ultimately inexpensive process – and then gain more land for power, water and septic systems before the restoration work eventually began.

Carl Feinerman of Breen Construction led the restoration work and laughs quietly as he recalls the sight that first confronted him.



"The first stage was to redo the front of the building, replacing old weatherboards, to showcase what was possible"







Step inside Millers Flat Bakehouse – view our video story here:



24 Raumati • Summer 2020 Heritage New Zealand Heritage New Zealand Raumati • Summer 2020 25



"The oven was collapsing, the bricks caving in. There aren't many people in the know about how to build a stone oven, so it was a case of trial and error"

"Initially the building was actually melting into the earth. We had to jack it up, and reinstate joists and bearers underneath. The first stage was to redo the front of the building, replacing old weatherboards, to showcase what was possible."

But it was when he investigated the oven that the real fun began.

"The oven was collapsing, the bricks caving in. There aren't many people in the know about how to build a stone oven, so it was a case of trial and error."

Carl explains that they had to remove (and later rebuild) the entire roof to access the oven, build interior wooden frames on which to lay the topmost bricks, and infill with sand to support the brickwork. But although he could access two-thirds of the oven from above, finishing and cleaning up the last third meant crawling inside the oven itself.

"I'm a fairly small chap, so of course that was my job." Carl attended the grand opening of the bakehouse at Labour Weekend in 2019 and admits he was overwhelmed by the size of the crowd, and very proud.

"The difference from old to new, inside and out, is astonishing."

After 28 years of work, Betty was also very proud: "I was delighted, the fulfilment of a dream."

What Betty might not have anticipated, however, is that the bakehouse would give Millers Flat far more than just fresh bread. It has become the very heart of the community.





On this Saturday, Ric now has around 40 warm loaves of bread to sell, and at 12.30pm the doors open to the locals lined up outside.

As they walk inside they pass through the front room. Once a tearoom, it's now filled with the history of Millers Flat and the surrounding area, with black-and-white photographs on the walls, and a team of volunteers selling crafts and memorabilia.

The bakehouse is suddenly bursting with lined faces – descendants of farmers, shepherds and gold diggers, and local truckies – as well as their children and grandchildren. Locals pause, meet, natter and exchange yarns, and the photographs provide a springboard to their stories. This writer's favourite is an image of shepherds and farm workers in front of the beautiful Teviot woolshed.

"It held 40 shearing stands," a local farmer tells me. "Back in the day it was the biggest working woolshed in the Southern Hemisphere."

Sadly, this 137-metre-long building was destroyed by fire in 1924; all that is left now are the remains of the beautiful arched stone façade, and rubble.

I learn that the head shepherd standing in front of the Teviot woolshed is the grandfather of local Johnny Rae. It leads Johnny to tell me a story about his own father, George Rae, who was also a shepherd on neighbouring Beaumont Station.

Caught in the hills in a snowstorm in 1938, Johnny tells me, George sought refuge in a cave-like fissure in the rocks. Looking up he spied a box, clad in bark cloth. Knowing he daren't open it, the young shepherd journeyed to Otago Museum and handed it over.

"No, not even a thank you," went the story. But George did find out what it contained: "Seventy pairs of huia feathers and 25 bunches of little orange kākā feathers," recounts Johnny.

As an ice cream container fills up with \$5 bills (the cost of each white-paper-wrapped loaf), people slowly filter back out the door. The bread, when I taste it, is delicious: "The coal-fired oven does that," says Dennis. "As the temperature drops, the flavour of the bread improves."

And as Ric begins the clean-up, the fire within those whitewashed brick and stone walls slowly dies back. But the stories, the people and the warmth of this local community endure.

- 1 Trust volunteers Julie
  Asher and Hilary McKenzie
  in what was the old
  tearoom of the bakehouse,
  now a museum and
  craft shoo.
- Ric Hunt stands proudly over the day's batch of 40 still-warm loaves of bread.
- 3 Local farmer Johnny May is a regular, lining up to buy a loaf of fresh warm bread every first Saturday of the month.

See more of Millers Flat Bakehouse on our video:
www.youtube.com/user/HeritageNewZealand/featured

**26** Raumati • Summer 2020 Heritage New Zealand Heritage New Zealand Raumati • Summer 2020 **27**