

SUGAR WORKERS, SUGAR TOWN

An oral history of
Chelsea Sugar Refinery,
1884-1984



Colonial Sugar Refining Co.,
Limited

EMPLOYEES' PICNIC

PINE ISLAND

SATURDAY, JANUARY 8th, 1927



Programme of Sports

PATRON:

J. NEWELL, ESQ.

COMMITTEE:

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G. PUGH, E. SAPSWORTH, J. ARDEN, J. R. BRODIE,
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REFEREE:

J. C. YEOMANS.

HANDICAPPERS:

J. ESDAILE AND B. WILLIAMS.

STARTER:

B. WILLIAMS.

HON. TREAS.:

J. McF. KNOX.

HON. SEC.:

W. J. COOK.

BIRKENHEAD MUNICIPAL SILVER BAND.

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P.S. "Mararoa"

Colonial Sugar Refining Company - Ltd
Offices, Connell Street,
Sydney 18th July 1889

The Manager
Auckland

Dear Sir,

I would now supplement my letter of today with the following remarks. -

"Argus". - As advised on previous occasions, you are to receive about half this vessel's cargo, which will be, say, 1500 tons,

Cottages. - I have now to advise that the Board have voted the sum of £500 to be spent in improvements on or about the cottages, and we have decided to leave the expenditure of the money in your hands; that is to say, after consulting with Messrs Miller and Stables, (and also, we think, with two or three of the more intelligent occupiers of the cottages) the money can be devoted, as already stated, to fencing round the cottages, and providing a proper water supply and decent accommodation. -

Outturn of Sugar per "Fiona". - This cargo was undoubtedly two bags short, with

INTRODUCTION

"I'm in that photo. I'm the only survivor. I'd just started in the syrup house when that was taken. I'm the little one in white at the front. I was only 12, and I'd had to leave school because of illness. So my uncle got me and my brother Joe a job at the sugar works. At that stage I could only work six hours, but when I turned 13 I could work the full eight hours. From there I worked for 51 years. Just look at the insides of my hands from lifting and stacking 70lb bags of sugar."



The youngest sugar worker. Twelve year old Ernie France in 1912.

This booklet is about sugar workers. Through text and photo it portrays the older sugar works, which endured from 1884 to the 1950's, but was then swept aside by technological changes. Today it is alive only in the memories, faces and bodies of men like Ernie France.

To talk to these older sugar workers is to enter a distinctive world and culture. The world is defined by Birkenhead's isolation from Auckland, and the culture is marked by the experience of living in a "company town" and working in a refinery famous for its tough conditions. There was no single response to this experience. Two of Chelsea's most well-known sugar workers had totally different reactions.

James K. Baxter was a three-week

cleaning wonder in 1969. After his dismissal his "Ballad of the Stonegut Sugar Works" recorded that:

*"... along those slippery floors
A man might break a leg
And the foul stink of Diesel fumes
Flows through the packing shed
And men in clouds of char dust
move
Like the animated dead ..."*

Albert Henry was a sugar worker a decade earlier:

"He then applied for a position at the Chelsea sugar works and got it. There he found himself again involved in union affairs, but it was smooth going after the turmoil of the waterfront that he had left behind him ... 'I learnt the other side of unionism there ... that you can be a

worker and fight for the rights of all workers and yet you don't have to be militant about it' ... Albert enjoyed the agreeable atmosphere at his new job. He played business house cricket and captained the sugar workers' team ..."

As this booklet is based on the oral history and traditions of surviving sugar workers it concentrates on the inter-war years and the transformation of Chelsea after 1958. The elements of a conventional "company history" are missing here — the statistics of production, a roll-call of managers and even a chronology of the refinery's development. Instead this booklet is centered around the perceptions of sugar workers. It seems appropriate to mark the centenary of a sugar refinery by celebrating its social and human dimensions.



The Chelsea site, 1883. Behind the tents of the shanty town lies the half-built refinery.

BIRKENHEAD

Company town

"We were cut off from Auckland. The sugar works was the only real employment in the area. Birkenhead was a company town."

Hardly a grand beginning to what's now a city of 25,000 people. Yet it's true that between them, the Waitemata Harbour and Chelsea set the pace of Birkenhead's development before 1959.

The harbour allowed development only at the pace of the ferry boats.

Birkenhead prided itself on being the "healthy Marine Suburb", another way of saying that in addition to the hazards of a twice-daily ferry voyage, would-be commuters faced a hefty climb up the ridge behind the wharf. Borough population increased slowly, from around 1,000 in 1900 to 5,000 in 1950. As Auckland sprawled over the farmland of the isthmus, Birkenhead retained the institutions and feeling of a small community.

Within this community the sugar

works was the greatest institution. In 1881 the area was a wilderness of sporadic farm and embryonic orchard, centered around the handful of houses which huddled above the security of Birkenhead wharf. The sugar works brought families and money. Four years after the refinery opened Birkenhead became a borough. Two years earlier, in 1886, Birkenhead Township had boasted 334 inhabitants — many worked at least casually at the refinery — while Chelsea Village itself had 189 residents.



H.A.W.E. houses of Huka Road

"If it was not for those company loans, well, Birkenhead would not have developed for another 20 or 30 years."

The sugar works' housing policy played a vital role in the growth of Birkenhead. One hundred and fifty workers built the refinery, with a hundred staying on to operate it after 1884. Some were locals but the majority migrated from Auckland. Farm houses on the refinery site were snapped up by company officers, but many of the workers wintered 1883 in some 60 tents and shacks, pitched on the exposed foreshore east of the refinery.

A shanty town promotes neither industrial harmony nor a stable work force. More comfortable housing was provided by the company in 1884 in the form of Chelsea Village. Thirty-five cottages faced one another across a wide street pointing directly at Chelsea's

char tower. This village was distinct from Birkenhead which was an arduous walk from the refinery and could offer few social amenities.

A mixture of necessity and paternalism underwrote the village. Without housing there would be no workers, but the village is also a fine example of the sugar company's late-Victorian welfare ideas. This was to be a model town. Large sections encouraged gardening and leisure, as well as providing room for the very regular out-houses. A church defended both the northern approach and the morals of the villagers, for whose enlightenment and comfort reading room, infant school and store were attached. Newspapers praised this concern for the workers. They noted the "comfortable and well-built houses", as well as the independently-run store which prevented the infamous "truck" system (payment in goods).





A "brick-house family" in 1916.

The sugar workers themselves voted with their feet. By the early 1890's the lower houses — cheap rent notwithstanding — were unoccupied because of their dampness. Shortly after the reading room fizzled out through lack of patronage. By 1900 the village was known as the barracks. It was the haunt of single men whose night-time revelries are still remembered by older residents.

Married men were shifting to Birkenhead, which could now offer the social comforts absent two decades earlier. The decision to remove the village followed its condemnation by health authorities in 1905. Several houses were demolished, the rest sold for £10 each and moved elsewhere in Birkenhead. A number still stand in Rugby and Mokoia Roads, while St Peters Church celebrates its own centenary this year at Verrans Corner.

The sugar company still wanted a core of tradesmen living on the estate to attend emergencies. For these men the four existing brick duplexes were built in 1909, on the site of the old village. Each contained two houses and were remembered as being "nice but cold" by former residents. As the need for live-in tradesmen

disappeared the houses slipped into a cycle of disuse, vandalism and the present restoration. In their hey-day eight families lived there. With the chemists' "bach" further down the hill, the manager's mansion behind the refinery (built in 1908 and now leased out), the houses of the first and second engineers, and the boarding house by the ferry wharf, the refinery was home as well as work-place for dozens of sugar workers before the 1960's.

For the rest of the sugar workers the company introduced the Housing Advances for Wage Earners Scheme (H.A.W.E.) to provide cheap housing loans. These loans shaped the growth and character of the Birkenhead area. Over 130 houses were financed — over a third of all new houses in Birkenhead between 1910 and 1926. Most were in Birkenhead and helped foster a tradition of close links between refinery, sugar worker and suburb.

A distinct social pattern emerged. The streets around Birkenhead wharf harboured city-commuters and shopkeepers — the "nobs" — but fewer sugar workers. As Palmerston Road approached Chelsea, it and the roads it crossed were the haunt of sugar workers. Above the refinery Rawene, Hutton

and Seddon Roads were exclusively sugar worker. Hutton Road is now Huka Road — Maori for sugar.

"Virtually all the early residents of Huka Road worked at the refinery. There were 14 sugar workers here. The sugar works made all these houses ... they used to take the rent out of my wages. It was a 25 year loan. Three-quarters of all the houses in the bottom of Birkenhead were built with sugar works' loans."

It's worth remembering that even in the inter-war decades Birkenhead was a semi-rural area, with all the rigours of a mid-century community.

"You could have shot a gun in the streets without hitting anyone. The streets were narrow and there was no electricity in 1920 ... if you saw half a dozen cars you'd seen a lot ... Highbury was nothing, there weren't many shops ... the water supply was filthy. If you had your eyes closed you'd think it was fish soup."

Employment was the greatest problem of all. Shops and orchards were family-run, employing few outsiders, and more likely to send their own sons to Chelsea. Many orchardists relied on casual work there unloading sugar boats.

"The sugar works was the biggest employer. There was no other place ... If you went to the sugar works you were down the social scale in the early days. But everyone wanted to work at the sugar works though, because you did not have to go over to town. It was very popular."

The combination of housing loans and limited employment made Birkenhead seem like a company town to many sugar workers. At the human level this was reflected in the fantastic long-service records built up at Chelsea, and in the entire families who worked there. Some of these sugar families of lower Birkenhead had father and up to five sons at Chelsea. When the sons left home they often married into another sugar family and shifted to a nearby street. There was a great stability of residence, family, and employment.

This community of sugar workers was a dynamic part of a wider Birkenhead community little different to any New Zealand small town. The Municipal Brass Band played on Sundays, "Queen Carnivals" financed the fire brigade, and on Wednesdays and Saturdays everyone turned up at the Old Forrester's Hall. People were drawn as much by Lannigan, his four inch collar and his piano, as the silent movies he accompanied. People like Lannigan, who laid Chelsea bricks by day, became local identities. They vied in prestige with national figures and are better remembered today. Permeating throughout was a feeling of neighbourliness.

"We were better suited in those days. The grocer, the baker and butcher all used to call ... No-one locked their house. We knew everybody. We got all our news from the ferry boats. The captain would say that Mrs So-and-So was sick and would you pick up some shopping for her in town? Then on the way home you would pick out someone who lived near her and get them to deliver it."

"I used to go across to Auckland on Friday night. A terrific crowd of sugar workers would go over. Sometimes we would get on the seven o'clock ferry and just go up and down the harbour playing poker. It did not cost you anything. There were lots of poker schools."

Other sugar workers participated in borough affairs. Four mayors and many councillors were sugar workers. All Birkenhead residents were affected by Chelsea. "Shops like Waller, Roberts, the grocer and Stott, the butcher. Most of their trade would be sugar works." The Chelsea whistle was a community clock and the Chelsea smoke was dreaded.

"We fought the smoke at Chelsea for years. The houses got absolutely filthy. Clothes and nappies were terrible. There was soot at night. If dew was down it would go right up the valley."

The sugar workers of Chelsea benefitted from living in a company town. They had a secure job and many also gained a cheap house. "Once you got a loan you became a permanent hand. They wouldn't sack you if you owed them money." Yet these sugar worker families could never escape the pulse of the refinery.

"Arthur Wilkins lived near me. He was one of the best fitters they had. On a calm summer's night from here he could listen to the machinery going on down there, and if it was not going on as it should be, he could tell from the noise and would go down to see what it was."

"The nearer people lived to Chelsea the better the company liked it. There were no phones so when they wanted him to come in, if there was something wrong, they would tap on his bedroom window. They did that a few times — dragging him in at two in the morning. It got to the stage that I'd tell them that he

wasn't home ... I said that he married the sugar works. It was all dominated by the works."

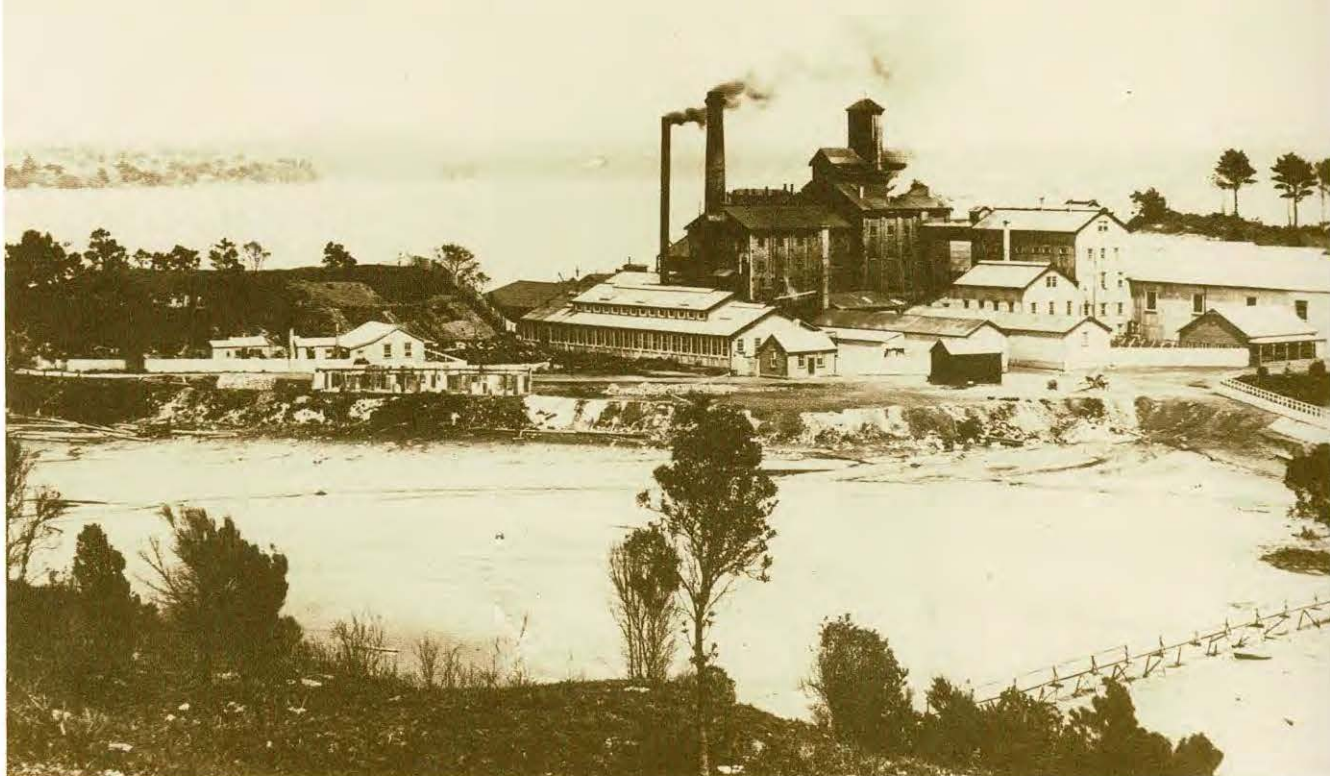
Harbour and sugar works continued to dominate Birkenhead until 1959, when the Harbour Bridge probed and leap-frogged over to Northcote. Birkenhead entered the age of the car and road access to Auckland. Acres of land, once dirt cheap, became the realm of the developer. Highbury grew from an assortment of shops to a modern complex of supermarket and car park, while in the air above, Chelsea smoke was superseded by the pot-bellies of Chatswood. By 1970 Birkenhead's population stood at 13,000; by 1980, 20,000. The borough was now a city, yet the transition was marked by a new dependence — on Auckland as a commuter suburb.

Birkenhead still has close links with Chelsea, yet the influence of the sugar works has been diluted by the social changes since 1959. Over 90% of the sugar workers live within a few kilometers of Chelsea, but fewer right on its door-step. Suburban growth has overcome the isolation of Birkenhead, and the older community only survives among these older residents without cars, who can remember a time when the villas of the Huka Road area were not the prizes of a young, city-based generation.

"I used to know everyone in Birkenhead in those days. Now you can go and sit on the bus beside a nice young lady and she will ignore you. But if you were on the ferry boat in those days, she would have talked to you."

"We used to live in Birkenhead in those days, and we could talk to anyone. Now when we go to Birkenhead we don't know a soul."

"The old days? It was grim. Life's much better now with the cars and all the facilities we've got. Even those supermarkets are more convenient. I wouldn't have the past at any price."



Chelsea Refinery, 1908

CHELSEA REFINERY

The New Zealand Sugar Company, 1883-1888

Chelsea sugar refinery was built by the Colonial Sugar Refining Company (CSR) of Australia and a score of Auckland capitalists. Before it opened in September 1884 all New Zealand's refined sugar had been imported, much of it from CSR's two Australian refineries. Throughout the 1870's New Zealand businessmen schemed to break this dependence and emulate the successful Australian sugar industry. However the necessary finance and expertise were lacking. Naturally CSR had followed these local proposals closely. They had even considered starting a New Zealand refinery themselves to forestall any local move, but decided that this would not be economical.

This situation changed around 1880. Local interest was heightened by a government bounty for the first locally refined sugar. Meanwhile,

the rising New Zealand population and the development by CSR of Fijian sugar plantations made a New Zealand refinery a paying proposition.

Edward Knox, chairman of CSR, visited New Zealand in 1881 to sound-out local interest and to select a refinery site. Having inspected the four main centres he returned to Auckland and bought 160 acres of farmland at Duck Creek in Birkenhead.

To build and operate the refinery the first New Zealand Sugar Company was formed in June 1883. This was a joint venture between CSR, the Victorian Sugar Company (partially owned by CSR) and a group of Auckland businessmen. At £50 a share it's no surprise that the elect of the Auckland business community were involved. Among

the shareholders were J C Firth, Thomas Russell, David Murdoch, Sir Frederick Whitaker, David Nathan, A G Horton, W S and J L Wilson, Allan Kerr Taylor and a dozen other "makers of fortune".

The refinery had hardly opened before the world sugar market collapsed. By 1887, after four profitless years, amalgamation seemed the only answer. Shares in the New Zealand company were exchanged for CSR shares. The legacy of this exchange are some 7,000 New Zealanders (more than in several Australian states) who own CSR shares today.

The present New Zealand Sugar Company was formed in 1959. While a subsidiary of CSR it was designed to promote greater local flexibility and autonomy.

Duck Creek to Chelsea

Duck Creek was an ideal site for a sugar refinery. The Waitemata Harbour is at its deepest a few yards from shore. The creek itself could supply the fresh water required for refining sugar, and there was enough land for the refinery buildings.

Duck Creek did not last long. The first customs officer — homesick or imaginative — renamed it “Chelsea”. By then its geography had already been restructured around the distinctive silhouette of a sugar refinery. Between the creek and the sea had run a tapering peninsula, roughly parallel to both. Along this peninsula a prolonged hump hid the sea from the creek, and beside the hump was a lagoon.

Restructuring began in March 1883. The lagoon went immediately but the hump, though cut whenever filling spoil was required, lingered into the 1960's. The first cut was in 1883. The ground was levelled, the spoil used to drive out the lagoon, reclaim two acres from the sea and make 1.5 million bricks. These were re-inserted in the cutting as a sugar refinery. Meanwhile the first wharf was blasted into harbour bedrock and the first two dams were bricked across Duck Creek.

These were monumental environmental changes, yet Chelsea in 1884 was an infant refinery compared to today or even 1908.

It was an abbreviated refinery in the 1880's. From the harbour the wilderness behind the refinery suggests why Chelsea Village was necessary. From the north it is clear that the refinery protruded little beyond the “pagoda” lines of the char tower.

By 1908 the original 100 workers are now almost 250. The char tower has lost its oriental look and the buildings beneath it are larger and dirtier. Reclamation of Duck Creek has allowed the extension of the raw store and the building of newer buildings — including workshops — to the north and west. The dam here, the number three dam, was built in 1901, and with the bridge at the bottom right, provided access to Chelsea. By the raw store, the workers' dining room was built in 1904, while on the far left the boarding house originally provided housing for workers, but was later the wharfies' dining room, and finally a house for estate workers.

Between 1908 and 1958 the major change on this side of the refinery was the construction of the number four dam in 1917. This spanned the mouth of Duck Creek and Chelsea Bay. Not only did it provide more direct access to Chelsea but it allowed large-scale reclamation of the area now occupied by the main office and carpark. In this process more of the “hump” was carved away, and the original tapering peninsula had become a broad industrial plain.

The front of the refinery evolved towards its present shape between 1884 and 1912. The photo overleaf, taken in 1929, shows the three-storied building in which the 70lb hessian bags were made, and the syrup tins pressed out and filled. The building was built in 1910 and took the place of a collection of one storied buildings and huts. The low building to the right is the laboratory (now in the top floor of the old bag and tin shop). Behind the bag and tin shop is the warehouse — between them ran the bitterly cold “Pneumonia



Chelsea, 1885. (Alexander Turnbull Library)



Chelsea, 1885. (Alexander Turnbull Library)



Chelsea, 1929. To those who worked there the refinery had a timeless feeling. This photo could have been taken in 1912 or 1945.



Alley" — and at the foot of the wharf lay the equally cold office and weighbridge.

Chelsea's dams and lakes supplied the refinery's water until after the Second World War. To safeguard the purity of this supply, the sugar company had to control the entire catchment area of Duck Creek. At one time it owned the land between Huka Road and Balmain Road. Much of this area was semi-cleared farmland in 1900 but a replanting programme was soon started under the guidance of Mr Knox in Sydney. For decades the ridges and valleys of the estate were a paradise of flora and fauna. When the sugar works began using council water this huge estate became too costly and the land was sold in the 1960's. Now Chatswood offers a different kind of paradise.

Bridging the gap

Not for these young buckos the daily grind of gears on the Colonial Road roller-coaster. For them a gentler approach to Chelsea. The broad-brimmed hat and river setting reminds you of Huck Finn but these men were sugar workers from the streets of lower Birkenhead. The photograph was taken post-Henry Ford but even a bicycle was a luxury to sugar workers. In later years a bus brought Takapuna men to work, and Northcote or city workers ferried to Chelsea. But most older sugar workers, living locally, had no need to preface their eight hours toil with jogging, yoga, jazzercise or any other fitness fad.

"There was one chap worked in the stokehole. He lived out the back, so he walked five miles to work, did his eight hours stoking and walked home again."

The bridge lay across Chelsea Bay.

At full tide it attracted swimmers and voyeurs.

"A couple of women in the brick houses loved to swim in the nude down there about the bridge. The boys all used to love to go down and hide in the bushes and watch them. Nobody thought anything of it then."

At low tide when this photo was taken, the bridge spanned a tidal mire. The characters here are slouched at the Chelsea end either waiting for the tide to turn for swimming and watching, or having a smoke after work. If the latter, they'd be "rollies" because 'you could tell the "nobs" — they all smoked "tailors".'

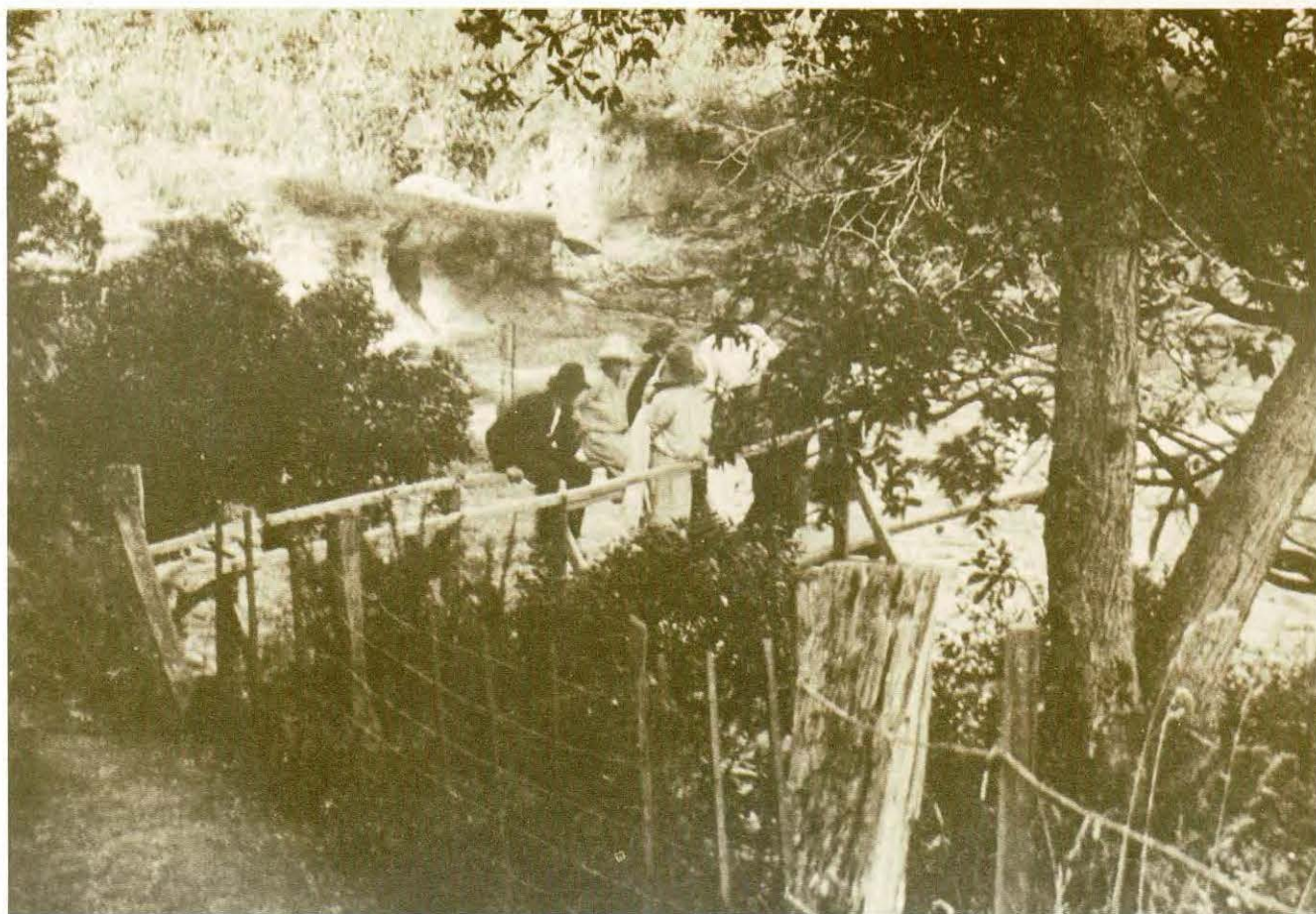
The bridge was a rickety ti-tree affair of similar instability to another smaller bridge across the next bay. A track linked the two then joined a maze of tracks from

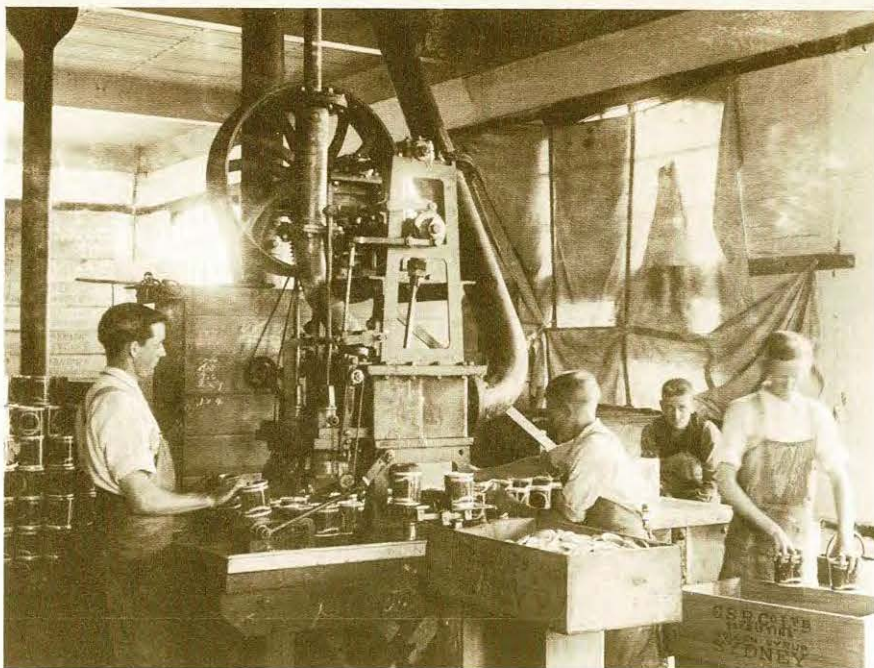
Palmerston Road. At the Chelsea end the bridge led to the number three dam and the main gate. This system of tracks gave sugar workers east of Hutton Road a short-cut to work. Those in Hutton Road had a more direct descent to work, past the brick houses and the chemists' "bach" on the point just above these sugar workers.

Crossing the bridge was a Chelsea art.

"At high tide the bridge was just about covered ... and at night, coming off a night-shift, there were no lights, so you couldn't tell where the bridge was. One stormy night some planks got washed away and a fellow just walked into the drink."

When the number four dam was built in 1917 this bridge was not needed, but the other remained to provide sugar workers with a risky start to their shifts.





A lot of us were kids

"You must keep down dissension among boys if you want work out of them."

Before the 1930's there were many man-child workers at the refinery. This group was photographed in 1911. One year later Ernie France started here in the syrup house as a 12 year old. Like Ernie, most sugar workers — young and old — got their jobs through relatives and neighbours who were already sugar workers. Ernie was the last 12 year

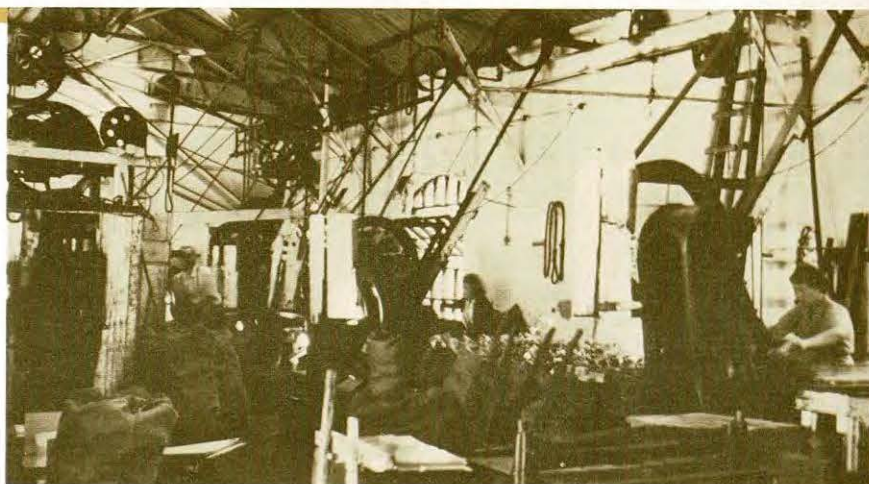
old at Chelsea and he had to have special permission to become a sugar worker. But for many Birkenhead 14 year olds it was a natural progression from school work to sugar work.

"I started off at 14½ in the bag shed in 1924. I started on £1.12.6 and didn't get a rise until I turned 17. Then each birthday you went up until you got the basic wage at 21 ... The syrup house and the bag shop both employed boys ... about

eight to ten in the bag shed, six in the syrup house and a couple in the tin shop."

"We had a lot of fun. A lot of us were kids in those days ... when you got to 20 you used to get the sack if there was no vacancies in the mill itself and they would take a new boy on. They kept me on when I got to 20 because I was paying my father's rent. He used to have a sugar works house but he was on relief work. If they'd sacked me they wouldn't have got any rent."

But none of us were women



Age was not the only measure of diversity at Chelsea. Sons of the old sugar works' families of Birkenhead worked alongside a large British contingent. Yet before the late 1930's Chelsea was a totally masculine community.

Women had their place serving meals to wharfies in the old boarding house but were excluded

from refinery work. The position had been made clear in 1904 when Sydney informed the Auckland manager that he was "correct in assuming that we did not wish to employ women in our offices." Strangely, the jobs performed by boys at Chelsea were done by women at Sydney's Pymont refinery.

World War II ushered these women

into the refinery. As an essential industry the sugar works was not crippled by manpower shortages — many workers resented having to stay there — but any vacancies were filled by women. Here in the tin shop two women are pressing out the two and seven pound syrup tins. Elsewhere the office employed five women during the war, and shortly afterwards the laboratory and the syrup house employed women.