Tokoroa- centre of the universe

A town shaped by industry, people, and global change

Big question

Who decides the future of a town—and who carries the impact of those decisions?

Key idea

Tokoroa is not just a story about decline or job loss.
It is a story about:

- **how towns are built and shaped by industry**
- **how global systems affect local communities**
- **how migration creates cultural identity**
- **how narratives can oversimplify complex places**
- **how communities continue to adapt and endure**

Tokoroa is a town in the South Waikato region that grew and developed around the forestry and wood-processing industry.
For decades, large-scale mills such as the Kinleith operations shaped:

- **EmploymentEconomic growth**
- **Community identity**
- **Everyday life**

At its peak, the mills employed people from 51 different nationalities, making Tokoroa a highly diverse industrial town with a strong multicultural workforce.
Tokoroa became widely known as a "mill town," where forestry connected nearly every family in some way.

A thriving town

For much of its history, Tokoroa was a prosperous forestry town where mills and related industries provided jobs and supported local businesses. Many young families moved in for work before relocating elsewhere, creating both a transient population and a strong community identity. The town also became a site for government initiatives in employment and infrastructure, with services such as hospitals developed through partnerships between industry and unions, giving workers a sense of local ownership.

Stereotypes versus reality

Tokoroa is often defined by stereotypes of unemployment, crime, and decline, but these overlook its strong community, rich cultural identity, and resilience. Many residents stay because of family, culture, and belonging—not because they cannot leave.

As Fiona Hurd says, "Everyone has a Tokoroa story."



TOKOROA CASE STUDY

Voices from Fiona Hurd & Suzette Dyer

MORE THAN A FORESTRY STORY—IT'S OUR STORY.

SPEAKERS

- FIONA HURD
- SUZETTE DYER

1 THE ORIGINS OF TOKOROA

GEOGRAPHY · HISTORY · MĀORI PERSPECTIVE

FIONA HURD

Well, it's a really interesting case study, and I wasn't aware of how interesting it was until I started having a look into it. There are so many branches to it. Of course, it can be linked back to some of the recent examples of closures, because it's really the same thing occurring again and again.

There's everything from geography to the historic importance of the land. Tokoroa were actually had a marae there, it was a hunting ground. It's a volcanic plateau, but it was very important to Māori because of that. It was where they would hunt and also a place between different iwi and hapū. It was a place they would meet together, and all of that was forgotten.

SUZETTE DYER

No, I was just going to say it's such a story of support.

When I started my work on Tokoroa as a master's student, and Fiona first proposed it, I thought, "Why would I want to do that?" The impression most Kiwis have is that it's a town with high crime, high unemployment, and all of those stereotypes. But it's actually a really interesting case.

I've come to think it's like the centre of the universe—everyone has a Tokoroa story.

Everyone has a parent or grandparent who worked there. It was common for young married couples to go there, earn money, and then leave. It has always been transient, but vibrant, and a place to be in its early days.

> *"Everyone has a Tokoroa story."*

2 A COMPANY TOWN

INDUSTRY · INFRASTRUCTURE · EMPLOYMENT

> *"Tokoroa was really the first example of a true company town in New Zealand."*

FIONA HURD

It was a very early farming settlement with only a handful of people, and then was taken on by Sir David Henry. A New Zealander who was very high up in the aristocracy in Britain. Tokoroa was really the first example of a true company town in New Zealand, funded completely by the company.

David who ud go back to Britain when more houses or infrastructure were needed and ask who would sponoor them. In many ways, it was well ahead of New Zealand in terms of infrastructure.

There had been planting before that, linked to Depression-era labour needs. The first pulp and paper licence was issued as a result of men returning from war needing employment, so the government needed to respond. Forestry became part of that solution, but it became much more than forestry.

Yes, and they trialled a lot of things there because it was a key part of government industrial and employment policy. The union there even helped fund the hospital that was established. It had a full hospital with several boards and specialists.

Union members and their children now have a strong sense of ownership of those services and are upset about their removal because they feel they paid for them.



DID YOU KNOW?

At one point there were around 61 nationalities in town. It really wasn't just for New Zealanders—it were a place people went to. Everyone was, in a sense, a visitor in a brand-new town.

3 PACIFIC MIGRATION & COMMUNITY

CULTURE · DIVERSITY · COMMUNITY

FIONA HURD

The cultural aspects are really important. It was the first site of the Migration Programme. I was lucky enough to speak with the first Cook Island man who came over. He has since passed away, but he talkpoal away, but he talked about arriving from a tropical islawth things like traffic lights, the cold, and a lack of community living. Thaw no vermillion corrow hwaing.

What I realised is that it is so much more important to the people in the town. It was the first site of the migration programme. It was the first scheme under that scheme. It became a dream a cook nest would take clutarly Cook families to esperially Cook Islands culture—if they couldn't afford to travel home.

It became culturally significant, far more than just wood products. A lot participants, and the town generally, were teen gonerding, w the mill, bush teams, or local businoses. The town was thrving. It was the fastest-growing town in New Zealand for a long time, nagarly meeting city criteria.

It had high wages, a relatively small New Zealand workforce, and a large overseas workforce. Engineers were brought in from Scandinavia.

SUZETTE DYER

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> *"It wasn't just a wood products town. It was a place of culture, community and connection."*

4 OUTSOURCING & GLOBALISATION

GLOBALISATION · ECONOMICS · INDUSTRY CHANGE

FIONA HURD

A major shift happened when the industry was outsourced to an international company. It was later bought back by one of Graham Hart's entities. At the time, people believed it would return to the "old New Zealand Forest Products" era.

But instead, there was asset stripping and a shift toward exporting logs rather than processing them locally.

SUZETTE DYER

It's a fascinating case depending on the curriculum. You could use it across economics, geography, globalisation, politics, history, and treaty issues.

You could build multiple layers of learning from the same case study rather than introducing new ones each time.

SUZETTE DYER

These are global stories. Decisions about Tokoroa have been made overseas with no real local democracy or participation.

We have to ask what it means when decisions about entire communities are made by people with no lived connection to them.

FIONA HURD

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HOMELESSNESS · WHĀNAUNGA · ECONOMY · JUSTICE

FIONA HURD

The perception is that Tokoroa's story is historical, but what we see is that these cycles happen again and again, all the time, and across the world. We've just seen it in places like Napier, and in Te Tairāwhiti and up the East Coast, where towns were once thriving.

People are told that if they assimilate and behave in certain ways, they will be looked after, and then that support is withdrawn.

The responsibility is then placed on individuals to manage the consequences, even though many of these people were from government and industry as part of national employment strategy.

It is not just about job loss. These towns are important for whānau, for community vibrancy, and for Aotearoa as a whole. Those stories get lost.

SUZETTE DYER

It happens everywhere, all the time. We lose sight of the fact that these are people's stories.

Job loss and job creation are part of it, but so is the idea that economics has often been prioritised over humanity. Economics should serve people, but often people are made to serve economic systems.

> *"These are not just economic stories—they are human stories."*



6 LOOKING FORWARD: RESILIENCE & REGENERATION

REGENERATION · EDUCATION · COMMUNITY INITIATIVES · FUTURE

SUZETTE DYER

We initially approached Tokoroa through a neoliberal framework expecting to see the impacts of global economic systems. But what we found was the vibrancy that comes through even after disinvestment, reconnected, and reformed.

FIONA HURD

We went in with that lens, but found it was much more than that. People were aware of what was happening and aware of international ownership.

But they stayed because they chose to be there. They built connections and community.

FIONA HURD

I'm not sure about current economic development in Tokoroa, but hopefully generators come and invest. There was previously severe land fragmentation from attempts to convert land into dairy farms.

SUZETTE DYER

There are also iwi-led initiatives, education programmes, and community radio stations. There is ongoing effort to regenerate community life.

FIONA HURD

Tokoroa is deeply connected to multiple migration stories and industries. It is not a simple decline story.

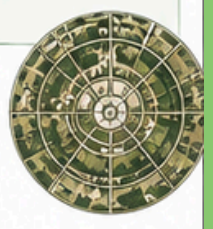
FIONA HURD

It's still happening all the time. These are not just economic stories—they are human stories.

SUZETTE DYER

The town layout is also significant. It was designed off David Henry's childhood home in Scotland. The original houses were arranged in connected circles.

There were "number one" houses, then "number two" houses, and so on. These calculations counted all tax in local memory. The managers were placed centrally, and workers lived in outer housing rings.



ECONOMICS SHOULD SERVE PEOPLE—NOT THE IE WAY AROUND.

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

ECONOMICS · GEOGRAPHY · HISTORY · POLITICS · GLOBALISATION · TREATY ISSUES · CULTURE

READ THE FULL INTERVIEW

Scan the QR code to access the complete transcript with Fiona Hurd and Suzette Dyer.

Hear the full discussion. Explore the full story.

One town many stories

Tokoroa is often described through forestry and economic decline, but its story is far richer. Shaped by geography, Māori history, migration, global industry, and ongoing change, Tokoroa is, as Fiona Hurd explains, “not just a story of downsizing,” but a place continually transformed over time.

The land before the town

Before Tokoroa became a town, the area held long-standing significance for Māori as a volcanic plateau used for hunting and as a travel route between iwi and hapū.
While there were no permanent marae in the immediate area, it was an important shared landscape used seasonally. Over time, this history became less visible as the land was transformed by forestry and industrial development.

Building a company town

Tokoroa developed as one of New Zealand’s earliest company towns, shaped by forestry and government-supported industrial policy. Housing, infrastructure, and services were closely tied to forestry and pulp and paper production, with the town largely built around industry needs.

As Fiona Hurd notes, “Tokoroa was really the first example of a true company town in New Zealand, funded completely by the company.” Unlike typical towns, it was planned primarily for production, labour, and economic output.

A global workforce and migration

Tokoroa became a major site of migration and cultural diversity, linked to Pacific migration schemes including workers from the Cook Islands and other Pacific nations. Many families moved for forestry and related work, with some settling long-term and others moving on after saving money. At its peak, the town included around 50 nationalities, with overseas engineers and skilled workers also brought in. Tokoroa became a place where global migration and local industry were closely connected.

BUILT BY THE MILLS: COMMUNITY LIFE IN TOKOROA



Mayor of South Waikato District, Gary Petley, has lived most of his life in Tokoroa and worked in the mills after leaving school.
He describes forestry as the foundation of the town's growth and culture.
He recalls that as a school leaver, he was initially expected to work at the Post Office earning around $40 per week. However, when he learned that mill workers were earning around $300–$350 per fortnight, he chose mill work instead, describing it as "a no brainer."
He believes that Tokoroa people had "a brilliant life" during the peak of the forestry era, with strong community connections and a shared sense of purpose.
At its peak, forestry provided:

- Stable, well-paid employment
- Strong community connections
- Intergenerational work opportunities
- A shared identity across cultures and families

Life in Tokoroa was often described as "working hard and playing hard," supported by a diverse workforce and strong social networks built around the mills.

Economics and people

The Tokoroa case highlights the link between economic systems and human communities. Decisions made for efficiency, productivity, and global competitiveness have real impacts on people and places.
As one researcher states, "Economics should serve human beings. But too often, people are made to serve economic systems." Tokoroa shows how global economic decisions can reshape local communities in lasting ways.

A place still changing

Tokoroa is not just a story of the past; it continues to evolve as industries change, communities adapt, and new opportunities emerge. Forestry remains important in some areas, alongside regeneration, education, iwi-led development, and community initiatives.
Like many regional towns, it balances economic challenge with resilience and innovation, reflecting wider patterns seen across New Zealand and the world.

CHANGE OVER TIME: OWNERSHIP AND ECONOMIC SHIFT

Over the past 30 years, Tokoroa's mills have undergone multiple ownership changes, including transition to corporate ownership such as Carter Holt Harvey. Gary Petley describes this period as gradual change involving:

SOCIAL IMPACT ON THE PEOPLE 1

- Restructuring of operations
- Job losses and redundancies
- Asset sales and consolidation
- Reduced long-term local certainty

Because changes occurred slowly, many in the community found it difficult to fully recognise or respond to the scale of change.

SOCIAL IMPACT ON THE PEOPLE 2

The decline of traditional mill employment has had lasting effects, including:

- Fewer secure, long-term jobs
- Reduced intergenerational employment pathways
- Increased economic uncertainty for families
- Movement of people out of the region for work

Mayor Petley reflects that he and his wife eventually accepted redundancy after decades of mill employment. He also notes that younger generations continue to adapt to a changing job market.

EMERGING OPPORTUNITIES

Despite the decline in traditional milling, new opportunities are developing in Tokoroa, including:

- Industrial redevelopment of former forestry sites
- New industrial parks on the town's outskirts
- New and emerging businesses
- Bio-based innovation such as biochar and biomass use

These developments suggest a shift toward a more diverse and innovation-driven economy.

FUTURE OF TOKOROA

The future of Tokoroa is increasingly focused on:

- Science and technology
- Environmental innovation
- Advanced forestry and biomass industries

Young people are encouraged to pursue education in STEM fields to support these emerging industries.

Scan the QR code to access the infographic of Fiona Hurd and Suzette Dyer

Big Idea / Conclusion

Tokoroa shows how economic change can reshape a community over time.

It raises important questions:

Who benefits from economic change?

How do global decisions affect local communities?

How can towns adapt and create new futures?

What Happened in Waverley?

The Sawmill That Built a Community

Reflections of Syd Irving- Former Manager Waverley Sawmill in Taranaki

1 The Heart of the Town

- Syd Irving was the sawmill manager for 38 years
- He was noted for his hands-on leadership during a period when the mill was upgrading and modernising its operations to increase output and efficiency
- At its peak, the mill supported around 65 workers and contractors, making it the largest employer in the township for much of its modern history
- The sawmill operated for over a century in various forms, anchoring Waverley as a key rural service centre in the region

2 Families Built Around the Mill

- For many local families, the sawmill provided employment and attracted other families from outside the area
- Many families in Waverley have had up to three generations employed by the sawmill, creating a strong sense of ownership and belonging within the community.
- Over the years, these families supported the schools, shops, dentists and doctors, while also helping other trades and industries to flourish with confidence.
- Mill workers supported local shops, services, and businesses—so when the mill closed, the ripple effect was felt across the whole town



3 The Closure & Its Impact

- When the Waverley Sawmill closed in 201i, 60- to 70 jobs were lost directly
- In a small rural township, this contributed to out-migration of families seeking work elsewhere, which also reduced school rolls and local spending
- The closure of the mill reflected wider pressures in New Zealand's forestry and timber sector
- Volatile international log prices, increasing operational costs, and competition from larger, more efficient processors overseas and in other regions of NZ.

4 A Changing Landscape

- International timber markets and large-scale producers put pressure on smaller mills, making it harder to compete on price and output.
- Industry-wide modernisation demanded faster, high-output systems that smaller regional mills struggled to match financially.
- The mill's closure removed a key employer, reducing local income and shifting the town toward a more service and agriculture-based economy.

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WIDE TRUST

The Wood Industry Development and Education (WIDE) Trust is a charitable trust established in 2018 with the mission to support development and education in the forestry and wood industry sectors through the provision of grants and scholarships to New Zealand students and institutions.

FOREST GROWERS LEVY TRUST (FGLT)

The Forest Growers' Levy Trust collects the commodity levy paid on harvested wood material from forest growers and acts as the custodian of those funds. The Trust ensures the levy is invested in research, development, biosecurity, promotion and other industry-good activities that benefit New Zealand's plantation forest sector.