



Construction of the 30m hydro dam.

KARĀPIRO HYDRO STATION

Forged in wartime, powered by people.

The Karāpiro Hydro Station was one of nine constructed on the Waikato River from the 1920s through to the 1970s, as part of a Government programme to firm up electricity resources for a national power grid.

There was a national power shortage looming and intense political pressure to see new generation schemes constructed quickly.

Story details and photos: Cambridge Museum.



WATCH

New Zealand Weekly Review video of Karāpiro Hydro Station, 1947.

Source: Archives New Zealand.



1940

Heavy machinery was moved to site to mark the start of the construction of the hydro project in 1940.

Initially, there were 230 men employed to work on the project, they lived in a camp consisting of wooden huts, some still with canvas roofs.

There was a YMCA with billiards, a canteen, table tennis and movies. There was also a Post Office, library, dances nearly every week and church services fortnightly.

The World War II conscription forced many men off the project site and into active duty.

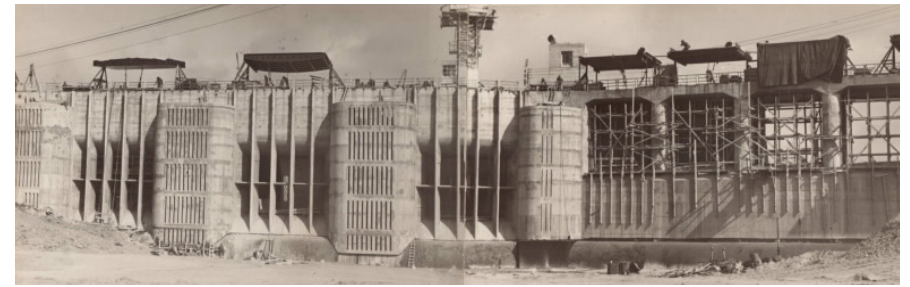
It was not until 12 September 1943 that the tunnel was completed, and the river was diverted.

By early 1945 the excavations were complete; the powerhouse was being built, and the dam was going up. Up to 1000 men were now working on the project.

An open day was held at the beginning of December 1945, to promote a better understanding and appreciation of the people and social life of the Karāpiro Hydro Village.



Huts were constructed for the workforce. Up to 1000 men worked on the dam at its peak.



A view of the three penstock intake structures and to the right, the four spillway portals, from the bed of the lake before it was filled.

1942

With fewer workers, it meant the diversion tunnel took two years to complete and then finally in 1942, work was suspended because of the labour shortage.

1943

Resources were also hard to secure. The best steel, for example, was used to build tanks, weapons and other machinery to support the war effort.

1944

The workforce capacity began to improve in 1944, when about 700 men were working on the project, and the Karāpiro village increased to about 1500 people.

1945

It had a school which catered for 205 pupils. Clubs for football and cricket were formed, there was also a Plunket group, Caledonian dances and later a Returned Services Association branch.

Metal and sand were used to improve the muddy roads around the village and a bus service to Cambridge kept the neighbouring communities connected.

1947

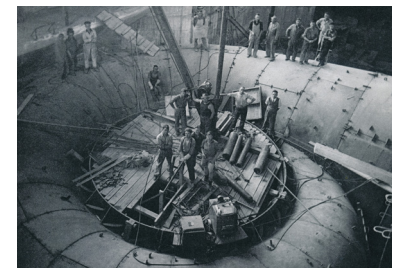
The Karāpiro Hydro Dam was finished in 1947. During April that year, more than 25,000 people came to watch the water rise as the new dam was filled.

Farmland and part of the public works camp set up to house the project workers were also submerged as the lake filled, changing the local river environment forever.

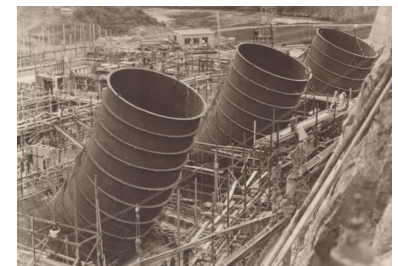
In May 1947, the administration staff moved from Karāpiro to Mangakino, where work began on the Maraetai and Whakamaru hydro stations and dams.



An aerial view showing the diversion tunnel, access bridge and dam completed.



Construction workers standing on the lower end of the penstock, where the turbine is fitted.



Construction of the penstocks.