

# Sands of Time

Ti Point Bar – the making and breaking of a legend



By Luke and Matthew Williamson

*Above: Locked and loaded on a set wave at the legendary Ti Point Bar, around 1977. Photo courtesy of Paul Atkin.*

Matthew: *“Some of my fondest surf memories are of a few truly classic days at Ti Point Bar. To see a set of solid waves push onto the bar was impressive.*

*The paddle out usually took longer than it should because a peeling set passing by would prove to be too tempting and I would be lured into a wave or two before actually making it to the head of the bar.*

*Once there, it was a real test of paddle fitness to push as far inside as you could (or dared) amongst top competition from the likes of Gary Hurring, Scott Dudding, Nick Minogue, Peter Boronski, Noel Francis, Mike and Tim Newdick, and Tim from the Leigh Pub, amongst others. I still recall the exasperation as Gary Hurring, probably at the peak of his Commonwealth gold medal fitness, would effortlessly paddle past us to claim another inside set wave.*

*“The first section really drained off the bank at low tide and created some grinding barrels. The wave then became a long, long wall which often enticed me to surf too far out on the shoulder but could also provide nice off-the-tops on crumbling sections. When the waves lined up perfectly, they created mind-numbing and leg-buckling rides – multiple off-the-tops, followed by big roundhouse cutbacks and on through several sections to the beach. A wonder to behold!*

*“Paddling back out, ‘amped up’, there was lots of*

*hooting to do as I saw friends coming down the line. During a good session, I would often stop half-way out for a breather and a chat with one of the other surfers. However, it wouldn’t last long as another set would tempt me to the outside or even to pick up one from right where I was.*

*“I am left with the poignant memory of a magnificent swell in 1977 when I was working as a labourer, having just left school, pouring concrete on the North Shore Hospital site and saving hard for my trip to Hawaii that year. I was on the first floor at dawn on a Monday morning following a weekend of wonderful surf at Ti Point Bar. I was suffering what surfers will know as a ‘surf hangover’. My body was aching from hours of paddling and I was still mind surfing some of the fantastic waves I had enjoyed, and remembering some of the rides I had seen others get. As I looked out to the east where the sun was rising, I knew the swell was still there and that those waves would still be peeling relentlessly down the bar. I foolishly thought at that time that those waves would continue to peel forever and that I would be able to enjoy them for many years to come. This was not to be and it is with great interest that I have come to understand that what I enjoyed was a genuine freak of nature and human intervention.”*

## Ti Point discovered

The story of surfing Ti Point begins with the surf pioneers exploring Northland in the early 1960s. Breaks at Pakiri, Goat Island and Daniel's Reef were discovered quite quickly because they were relatively accessible by road. One that took a little longer to be colonised was the Ti Point Bar at the northern end of Omaha Beach. This was because access was restricted to either boat traffic, paddling over from the Ti Point wharf, or by land through the Fraser property, off Takatu Road. Anecdotal evidence suggests that surfers such as Adrian Rogers, Rod Toohill, Bill Ebdale and Tim Newdick (snr) had braved the paddle in the early to mid-1960s but it was an infrequent destination for surfers who preferred to drive up to the waves.

## The heyday of The Bar

Where was the fabulous Ti Point Bar during the 1960s then?

Research done by Beca Carter Hollings & Ferner (who were contracted to build the groynes at the northern end of Omaha Beach in 1978) shows that the natural currents at the tip of the Mangatawhiri Spit (what is now known as Omaha Beach) included a northerly "littoral" drift along the beach, and an opposing "ebb" current that came out of the Whangateau Harbour and flowed south along the beach. Where these two currents met, a small "nodal" sandbar formed approximately at the present location of the middle, smallest groyne (see 1953 aerial photo below).

Surveys from as early as 1874, right up until



*(Above): Aerial photograph of Omaha spit from 1953. A small sand bar can be seen to have formed where the ebb current leaving the harbour has met the littoral current flowing north along the beach. Compare this with the aerial photos from 1963 and 1976. Photo courtesy of Whites Aviation Collection (WA-32400), Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, N.Z.*

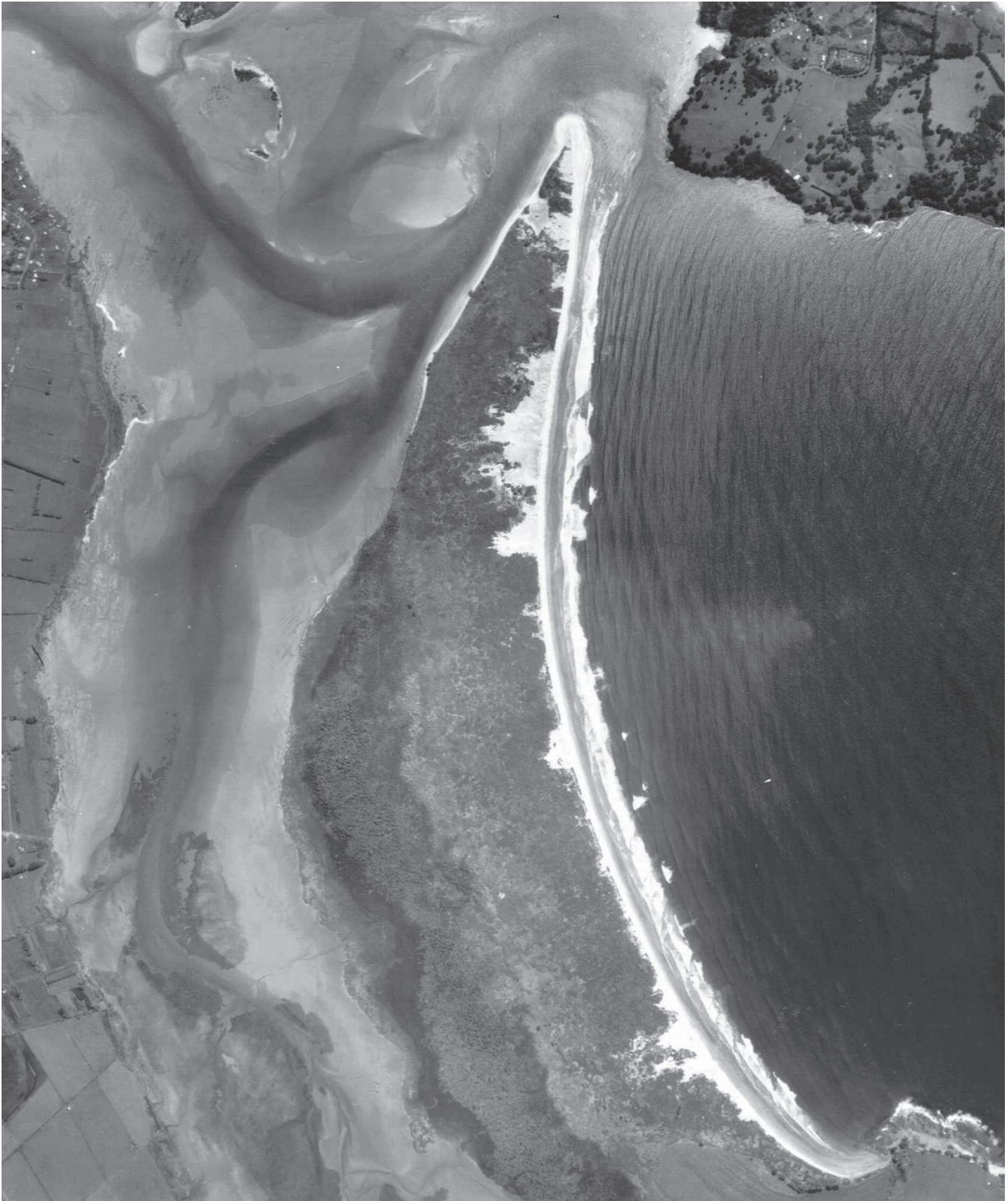


the 1950s, showed that the spit had maintained a consistent shape and volume over that time.

Based on this data, plus many aerial photographs covering 1948-1986, and the fact that there was no anecdotal evidence from surfers of a “legendary” break at Ti Point during the 1960s, it would appear that there was only a modest

sand bar in the 1960s (see 1963 aerial photograph below), similar perhaps to that which we see now.

Paul Atkin was in his teens when he and his friends first started visiting Omaha. “*We used to paddle over from the Ti Point wharf and spend the day over there but there was no sandbar in the 60s like there was later. Not even in the early 70s, I don’t think.*”



*(Above): Aerial photograph of Omaha spit from 1963. There is no sign of the bar and the current flow out of the harbour goes around the tip and south along the beach. Compare this with the photo on page 5 from 1976. Photo courtesy of NZ Aerial Mapping Ltd.*

*However, by the mid-70s there was a big bar there and it was just getting better and better – up until the groynes went in.”*

Paul’s photos feature in this article and show how good the waves were during big easterly swells. They are also one of the few remaining photographic records of the Ti Point Bar in its prime.

### The birth of a legend

The Ti Point Bar was an infrequent break but was one of the few on that stretch of coastline that would produce great waves in a big swell. The quality can be judged from the few photos available here and in some movie footage from around 1976-7. Having watched through the movie footage many times, I would have to say that it deserves the “legendary” tag.

It appears that the Ti Point Bar was born of human interference in the form of sand dredging outside the harbour entrance, next to Ti Point itself. Over 380,000m<sup>3</sup> of sand was removed between 1942 and 1963 before dredging was stopped.

The Beca Carter Hollings & Ferner report states that this dredging was the likely cause of steady erosion of the spit during the 1960s. In the early 1970s, a resulting change in the ebb current coming out of the Whangateau Harbour led to a substantial loss of sand from the tip of the spit (see diagrams below).

The ebb current coming out of the harbour began to flow directly out into Little Omaha Bay, rather than south along the beach, and subsequently deposited its sand out in the deeper water. Between 1966 and 1976, it is estimated that 150,000m<sup>3</sup> of sand was lost from the tip of the spit, 200,000m<sup>3</sup> from the foredunes, and up to 1,000,000m<sup>3</sup> from the beach itself.

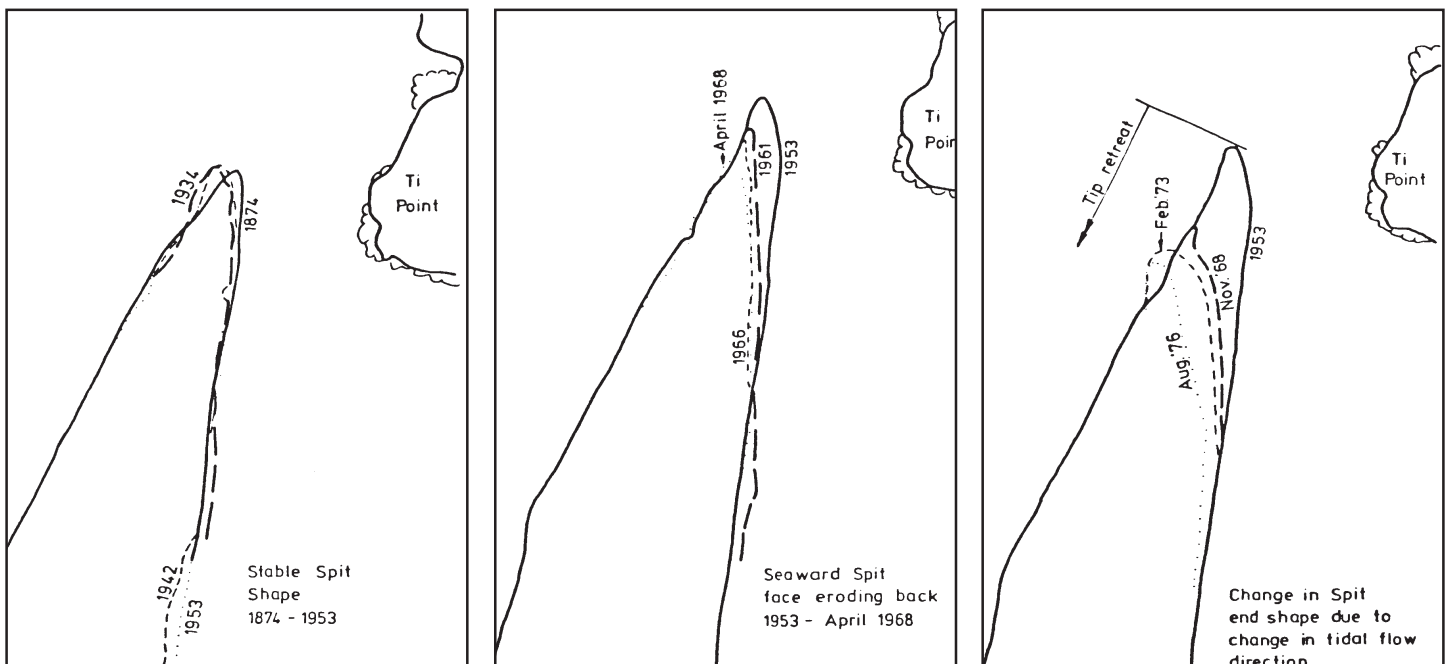
However, one aspect of this change in currents was the creation of an eddy near the harbour entrance where sand was deposited into a bar that surfers grew to love (see 1976 aerial photo on page 5).

These changes just happened to occur at the same time that Omaha was opened up for development.

### Omaha grows houses

Property developer, Bob Green, in conjunction with Broadlands Properties Ltd, purchased the Fraser Property at Omaha and, in 1975, built a road and bridge across the inner lagoon to allow public access. This was the beginning of the housing development at Omaha. It was also the beginning of the brief heyday of the Ti Point Bar for surfers. Although there was still a bit of a walk from the end of the road to the surf, the fame of the waves quickly spread and it became a favourite spot during big easterly swells.

Despite the knowledge that the Omaha







*Above: Aerial photograph of Omaha spit from 1976 showing the legendary Ti Point Bar. Note here that the current flowing out of the Whangateau is moving directly out to sea rather than around the tip of the spit and south along the beach. Also, compared to the 1963 photo on page 3 and the 2005 photo below, it can be seen that the tip of the spit has almost entirely eroded away.*

peninsula was susceptible to erosion from storms and high tides, the developers went ahead with the subdivision of the land into beach sections. In an effort to stabilise the land, the foreshore was planted with marram grass placed behind a large wall built from high density tanalised pine. With this complete, the sell off of the sections began with foreshore sections fetching \$25,000.

It was not long before trouble began in the form of storms in October 1975 and April 1976

which undermined the wall and removed the sand from behind the barriers, right up to the foreshore reserve (see page 6, top). Then, on 19 July 1978, a north-easterly storm, combined with an exceptionally high tide, reduced the wall to matchwood (see page 6, bottom), and even went so far as to undermine the foundations of one of the first houses built there.

Broadlands had another problem when it was discovered that the tip of the peninsula was being







*(Above): During storms in 1975 and 1976, sand and maram grass were removed from behind the “protective” wall, and the sea started cutting into beach-front sections. Note the stranded stairway, part way along the wall, which used to lead onto the grass. Photo courtesy of Cliff Grant.*

*(Below): The July 1978 storm demolished the wall and removed more sand from the beach. Photo courtesy of Cliff Grant.*



eroded into the sea, thus threatening valuable sections. In late-1978, consultant engineers Beca Carter Hollings & Ferner Ltd were called in by the Rodney County Council and they recommended building the infamous groyne. Their plan was for a hook-shaped groyne at the northern end of the beach to deflect the flow of water away

from the tip of the Omaha peninsula (back to the original current direction before dredging). They also proposed a groyne to the south of the first to decrease wave action running up the beach, and between those two, a smaller “swash” groyne to ensure the build up of sand at the tip of the peninsula. In order to replace the sand lost during





*Above: Ti Point at its best during a big storm in 1976. Note the surfer on a head-high wave on the inside. Photo courtesy of Mark Thomson*

the previous years of erosion, approximately 400,000m<sup>3</sup> of sand was dredged from the inner harbour and pumped around to between the groynes on the seaward side of the beach.

By November 1979, the project was complete and building on the foreshore began again in earnest.

### **Gone but not forgotten**

Thus, the glories of the legendary Ti Point Bar were diminished after only a short life – perhaps as little as four or five years. When the swell gets really big, there are still some good waves to be had off the southern groyne but they are a shadow of those of the mid- to late-70s. Those waves live only in the vivid memories of those lucky enough to have been surfing in those precious few years, and in the few surviving visual images.

Human interference – dredging the harbour entrance – probably created this amazing break, with a bit of assistance from a couple of whopping storms in the mid-70s. Human interference –

building the groynes to protect the subdivision – ensured that those long, freight train lefts of the mid-70s won't be seen again.

### **Learning our lessons**

I re-learned the lesson that it is important not to jump to conclusions. I had always thought that the Ti Point Bar must have been breaking forever and it was ruined by the building of the groynes which only served to protect the sub-division at Omaha, etc. etc. Luckily, I was saved from embarrassing myself by wiser heads, patience and research.

Another lesson learned is that even when we think we can tinker with the environment and cause little harm, such as dredging the entrance



*(Above): Storm swells roll across the Ti Point Bar showing good size and loooooong rides. Photos taken from Ti Point and courtesy of Tony Ogle.*



to the Whangateau Harbour, we may find the consequences don't become apparent until 10-15 years later. In this case, surfers got to enjoy the magnificent by-product of this interference but, given enough time, the currents probably would have re-established themselves and the Ti Point Bar would have reverted to its natural state.

The construction of the groynes was still more human interference in order to protect expensive properties at the end of the Omaha spit. Theoretically, it should be possible to remove the groynes now that the original ebb current has been re-established at the mouth of the Whangateau Harbour, but, with rising sea levels and rising property prices, we won't get to see this theory tested.

The final lesson from this story is to be vigilant over interference with the natural order of things.

Beware marinas, dredging and artificial reefs. Short-term gain may not get you what you want in the long run. One need only see the lack of consideration for the wonderful Whangamata bar to realise that the enduring commercial mindset is that surf breaks don't count as valuable resources. We must work as one to overcome this prejudice and wield the significant political weight that tens of thousands of dedicated surfers can muster.

It's also important that we walk the talk and try not to encourage harmful developments just because it will get us a bit closer to the surf, or fly along delicate beach environments in our 4-wheel drives because we don't want to walk. Think about it and think about the generations to come.

*Many thanks to Harry Bioletti, Phil Jamieson, Paul Klinac, Tim Newdick, Tony Ogle, Wayne Parkes, Tony Reid, Peter Riley, John Stephens*

*(Right and below): It was a long paddle back out but it was worth it when those sets came through. Photos courtesy of Paul Atkin.*

