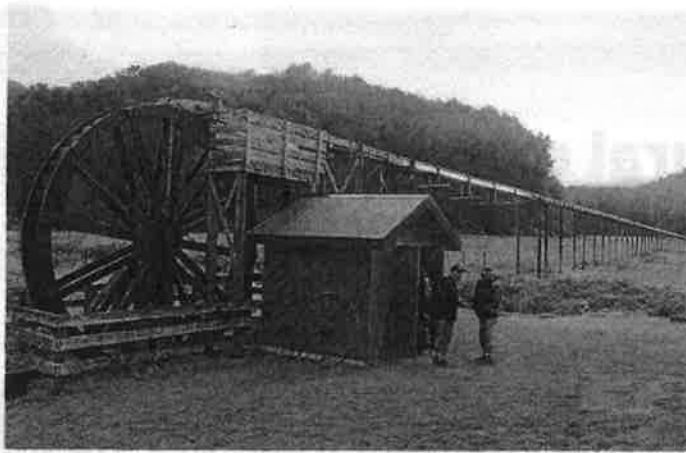


Visitors discuss the workings of the water race and water wheel that power Ahaura Lodge.



Eco-tourism boosts farm operation

Eco-tourism is one of the income streams on a small West Coast farm. **Kate Taylor** visited as part of a 4WD tour.

A gold-mining tunnel and a sluicing channel nicknamed the cathedral are two of the hidden treasures on the West Coast farm of Robyn Curtis-Smith and Malcolm Smith.

Add a five-metre wooden water wheel and an off-the-grid house built by the owners and there's the makings of a young eco-tourism business.

The Ahaura and Orwell Creek areas, which can be found between Reefton and Greymouth, have a history of alluvial gold mining dating back to the 1860s.

The couple's privately-owned valley, surrounded by Department of Conservation reserve land, leads from Ahaura to the historic gold mining area of Napoleon Hill as well as the Waipuna tunnels.

A bucket-line dredge used in the early 1900s left a lot of dredge tailings in the valley. The Forest Service planted pines and macrocarpas in the area in the 1960s but the forests weren't managed and only about one in four trees are suitable for milling.

Modern mining did more damage in the 1980s and 1990s before the land was given to Ngai Tahu as part of the Government's treaty settlement in 2003, then sold to the Smiths in a public tender in 2007.

It was covered in thick gorse with all manner of mining mess underneath.

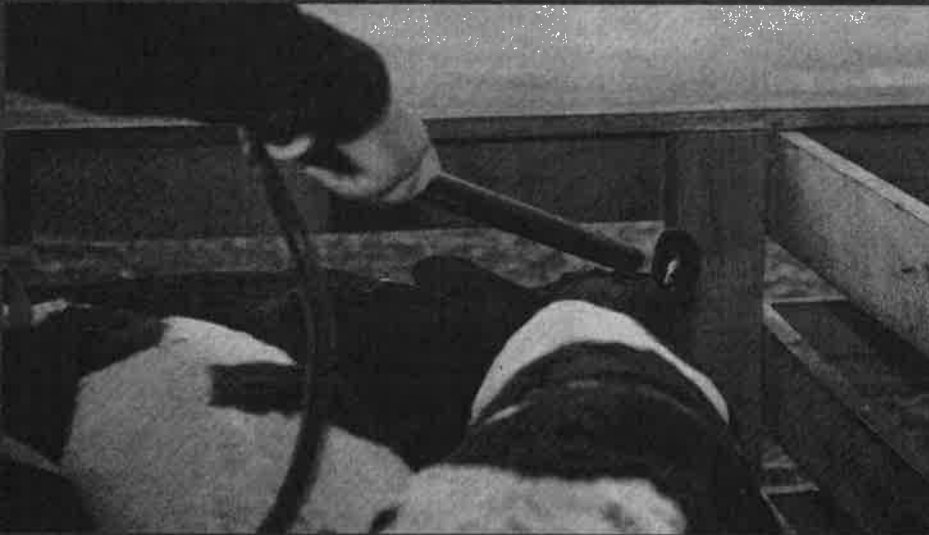
"We saw the potential," Curtis-Smith says. "Although friends used to visit and ask us where our straitjackets were," she adds, laughing.

Since 2007 they have put about 45ha of their 59ha into pasture. Until recently that was intended for dairy grazing.

"We've been diversifying into bull beef in the past couple of years in light of the Westland dairy payout. More and more people are keeping their heifers on-farm because they can't afford to pay for the grazing. We decided to run steers because it meant we could still accept dairy heifers if the chance arose. We want to keep that door open," Curtis-Smith says.

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The former gold mine is a dark tunnel inhabited by glow worms and cave weta.

The farm is carrying 34 steers this winter and 50 calves will be reared in spring for finishing.

"We will still have an 18-month lag time.

"It will be this time next year before we're into the cash flow cycle of the animals.

"That's one of the reasons we're looking at branching out and diversifying.

"Everything will be contributing to our income, so if something's down there's always something propping us up somewhere else."

Curtis-Smith says they were dairy grazing on their previous property for more than 20 years without any problems, but in 2008-2009 it started to become obvious they had to diversify.

Their first choice is still dairy heifers, but in conjunction with steers.

"The dairy grazing means a regular cheque coming in and you're not so much at the whim of the market.

"But again it's that diversification. If we put all our eggs in one basket then we're at the whim of the dairy farmers on one hand or the beef prices on the other.

"If we have a foot in each camp we can hedge our bets."

Their old block, just 8km down the road, was Smith's grandfather's land they bought from a cousin.

"It was a bare block of land covered in gorse... that sounds familiar," Curtis-Smith says with a smile.

"It was 19 hectares - basically their back paddock. We tidied it up and built a house on it."

It was sold in 2013, once the house was liveable on the new block.

"We had dairy grazers on both for a while. We had only just got the grass in up here after developing about 30 hectares in one hit.

"There wasn't even a paddock when we started. We made hay for supplement feed as well."

Development started with a friend's 23-tonne digger and a hired 12-tonne digger, as well as a D6 bulldozer for about two months.

"The gorse was so dense we had no idea what was underneath it."

This is where the couple's determination shines through - they paid for the experts to do the development work for them at the start on the proviso they would teach them as they went.

"We had contractors spread the initial grass seed with massive tractors with the spreader and roller. We've done the rest ourselves with levelling bars behind the tractor.



A group from an NZ Adventures 4WD trip take a wander to find a hidden tunnel.



Robyn Curtis-Smith and Malcolm Smith on their small farm at Ahaura on the West Coast.

There is so much bird life, including some wonderful bellbirds, and from the shortest day to the longest day we can have 20 to 30 wood pigeons around as well.

ROBYN CURTIS-SMITH

which has something like four hairs difference under a microscope to a grass grub.

"Our pasture started disappearing. We had to nuke the place that spring to get rid of it. We spent about three weeks waiting for the right weather to spray.

"We needed to wait for when we were getting about 10mm of rain and we went through a dry spell. We had to sit there watching our grass disappear," she says.

"It was noticeable because we brought in so much at once. Normally someone would bring in one paddock but we had pretty much the whole farm."

Repair and maintenance of the road was a serious problem, made worse by public access issues.

"Because we bought the land from Ngai Tahu and it had been public land before that, many people had taken public access for

granted even though the road closed in the late 1950s.

"I spent about two weeks down at the district council and the regional council and Fish and Game and DOC, making sure I ticked all the right boxes for taking back control.

"People didn't like paying to start with, some still don't, but it was a free-for-all that couldn't continue.

"There were a lot of idiots taking advantage of it and charging kept some of those people away."

The charge is \$10 a vehicle, which isn't an issue for the many 4WD clubs and organised 4WD tours, such as NZ Adventures, passing through.

"We have a lot of people who pay a little extra to get treated to morning tea and a tour to see our added attractions," Curtis-Smith says.

Those attractions include the tunnel through a low hillside, which is thought to have been a gold mine.

Even though it is about 100 metres long, it was discovered by accident during a family adventure in the bush.

About 40cm of mud was cleaned out of one end and access steps put at the other end.

Measuring about one metre wide and two metres high, the tunnel comes complete with blue glow worms, a unique sub-species

of cave weta and a resident robin at the entrance.

"There is so much bird life, including some wonderful bellbirds, and from the shortest day to the longest day we can have 20 to 30 wood pigeons around as well."

On the other side of the valley, the "cathedral" is probably an old sluicing channel or drop chute and was also discovered by accident.

"There are massive amounts of workings in the hills and there's probably something else in the bush that's still hidden... for now."

Accommodation is another income stream. The Smiths designed and built Ahaura Lodge themselves, just like the water race and water wheel that take the house off-the-grid.

"We've always had a bent for alternative energy and had played around with wind and solar."

Smith had previously built two steel water wheels and used the knowledge of friends to help make decisions on his own system.

Essentially, a modified smart drive washing machine motor and an inverter turn the power into 240V so the house runs as if it was on a normal supply.

It has up to nine days of battery storage as well as a back-up generator and solar panels to boost supply in summer.

They are still finishing the interior of the house and when the system has excess power they fire up the woodworking tools and consume it rather than let it go to waste, she says.

The change of pace and lifestyle came for health reasons for the couple, who have three adult children.

A boilermaker-welder by trade, Smith suffers from severe rheumatoid arthritis.

"We had to change the way we did things," Curtis-Smith says.

"Sometimes it's not how much you earn, it's what you spend... or to put it the other way, maybe if you don't spend it, you don't have to earn it in the first place.

"We changed the way we live and farm so we can have low stress and enjoy the pace we're at and we're set up now so if he's having a crappy day, I can do it.

"We're isolated away from anyone, when we want to be, but we are also keen to share that feeling. It's beautiful here. Quiet and peaceful.

"You can shut yourself off from the outside world. We can even lock the gate."

Steers grazing on Robyn Curtis-Smith and Malcolm Smith's farm at Ahaura.

