



But for an upset tummy . . .



The mystery ship, briefly uncovered on Fitzroy Beach in January 1980.

In January 1980, at the time of some of the worst erosion to have affected Fitzroy Beach, the ribs of an old wooden ship suddenly appeared from beneath the sand just a few metres east of the pathway leading down from the surf club building.

The remains were visible for only a few days before the shifting sands reclaimed them, and they have not been seen again since. There was barely enough of the wreck visible for any firm conclusion to be reached as to the ship's identity, but the general consensus among historians is that the wreck is that of the two-masted brig George Henderson which was driven ashore in that general area in August 1860.

If the remains are in fact those of the George Henderson, they would have an interesting link with the death of a member of the Taranaki Rifle Volunteers whose grave may be found in St Mary's churchyard, close to the south wall, and marked with a stone that tells the passerby he was 'killed by rebel Natives' on August 17, 1860.

Had it not been for an upset tummy, Ephraim Coad might have ended his days as did most other veterans of the Taranaki Wars, the proud possessor of his silver campaign medal and a bottomless pit of stirring tales to be told and retold until his dying day.

But for the need to help defend his own community, Coad would not likely have chosen soldiering even as a part-time pursuit. A brewer and hotelier, he was a small and physically unimpressive man who, at the age of 43, would surely much rather have spent the cold winter

nights at his own fireside than walking a sentry beat or manning a draughty blockhouse somewhere around the perimeter of the town.

Even when he found himself in uniform, rifle in hand, Ephraim Coad would never have thought of himself as someone who would find any sort of a place in the pages of history other than for his role in the commercial life of New Plymouth. But fate is something which may never be taken for granted.

August 16, 1860, was a Taranaki winter's day of the worst sort, with an icy rain being driven straight in off the sea by a gale force wind. In the open roadstead off the mouth of the Huatoki the brig George Henderson, which had arrived on the previous day to evacuate local women and children to Nelson, strained frantically at the anchors as her crew fought to keep her turned into the wind.

It was a losing battle. The anchors dragged and finally broke free. At the mercy of wind and waves the ship drifted up the coast and was finally forced ashore at the mouth of the Te Henui River, which, in those days, entered the sea, after a meander parallel with the beach, near the site of today's Fitzroy Surf Life Saving Club headquarters.

The ship's progress along the coast had been followed by a party of bluejackets, from the local Royal Navy garrison, and they were right on the spot to help the crew get ashore almost dryshod.

With the George Henderson having been deposited on the sand apparently without having struck any