

### **Not Just Sugar: The Human Face of the Chelsea Sugar Factory**

The history of a factory such as Chelsea often takes a very industrial or commercial form. As historians studying these mass-producing structures, we naturally ask questions on matters such as the development of the factory, its statistics of production, the markets it serves and any periods of rapid mechanisation or industrialisation.

What we often overlook - perhaps due to our awe at billowing chimneys and heavy machinery or due to the physical separation often created between these factories and the public by menacing fences which span their circumference - is the fact that these structures are manned and operated by *human beings*, each with their own personal lives, stories and backgrounds. At Chelsea, this was especially true in the years prior to the 1960s, when manual labour performed much of the work now done by machines.<sup>1</sup> Indeed after World War II, when Chelsea was at its peak employment numbers, over 400 staff worked at the factory.<sup>2</sup> This realisation prompted me to wonder more about the actual *individuals* working at Chelsea. Who was the Chelsea sugar worker? How did they experience working at Chelsea? And what did they do in their free time? These are the questions I seek to explore in this piece.



Chelsea Sugar Factory in 2017, with  
barbed wire fence separating the  
factory from the public. Auckland  
Libraries Heritage Collections  
1385-1014.

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<sup>1</sup> Watson, Grant. "The Chelsea Sugar Works: An Oral Account". Master's Thesis, University of Auckland, 1979, Special Collections: University of Auckland (MSS-Archives-A-218), pp. 15-17.

<sup>2</sup> Watson, "The Chelsea Sugar Works: An Oral Account", p. 38.

Upon beginning my research into this area, I was overjoyed to discover several interviews conducted in the 1970s and 1980s with retired sugar workers, many of whom had worked at the factory for several decades. What better way to get a glimpse into the lives of the hundreds of workers who have helped produce sugar for one of New Zealand's most iconic brands than to hear first-hand from some of these workers themselves?

Things became more difficult when I began thinking about how to present the information I had heard. For while there were some common themes amongst these workers' accounts, there was no one overarching experience. For instance, critically acclaimed New Zealand poet James K. Baxter worked at Chelsea for three weeks in 1969. His poem, "Ballad of the Stonegut Sugar Works" presents a scathing account of the factory, recalling how Chelsea was to workers "a strange kind of bedmate/that sucks away their life".<sup>3</sup> Contrastingly, Charlie Castleton's experience at the works was far more positive. Castleton, who worked at the factory for 46 and a half years, recalls how "there was a good feeling amongst the members that worked down there".<sup>4</sup>

Noting these disparities in workers' experiences, I came to realise that the accounts of approximately 10 workers can in no way encapsulate the experience of every single individual to have worked at the factory in its 138 years of existence. This piece, therefore, is far from a comprehensive recount of how all sugar workers experienced their time employed at Chelsea. Instead, this glimpse into the lives and memories of the sugar workers whose oral accounts exist reminds us that the factory was, and still is, very much a human space.

### **Who were the Chelsea Sugar Workers?**

To be sure, the men interviewed about their experiences at Chelsea came from varying walks of life. Some, like Percy Hurn and Stan Luker, were born in the United Kingdom and

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<sup>3</sup> "Ballad of the Stonegut Sugar Works". WordPress - Vomiting Diamonds. Accessed February 22, 2022. <https://vomitingdiamonds.wordpress.com/2015/08/07/ballad-of-the-stonegut-sugar-works/>

<sup>4</sup> Castleton, Charlie. "Charlie Castleton, oral history, 1986". By Colleen Christie. Transcript published in *Back Then: oral history interviews from the Birkenhead Public Library collection 3*, Auckland, Birkenhead City Council: 1988. Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections NOH-AAA-0264.

emigrated to New Zealand during adulthood in search of a better life. Hurn, who clocked 32 years of service for the factory, was brought out in the wake of high unemployment in Wales under the sponsorship of his wife's aunt, who had moved to Birkenhead in the 1890s.<sup>5</sup> Luker moved from England as an assisted immigrant after injury saw him demobilised from World War I.<sup>6</sup>

Other workers were born in New Zealand, moving to Birkenhead or its surrounding suburbs with their families during childhood and hence finding themselves in the vicinity of the works when the time came to find employment. Charlie Castleton spent his childhood moving between North Island towns due to his father's job as a postmaster before his family settled in Northcote when he was 16.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the varying reasons for moving to Birkenhead, a common theme to emerge from available oral accounts is that most workers found themselves employed at Chelsea out of ease or necessity. In other words, although most individuals grew to cherish their job at the factory, its main appeal does not appear to have been in the kind of work offered itself. Instead, most workers lived in or near Birkenhead and flocked to Chelsea because it was one of the only major employers close by. As one sugar worker remarked:<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Hurn, Percy. "Percy Hurn, oral history, 1986". By Colleen Christie. Transcript published in *Back Then: oral history interviews from the Birkenhead Public Library collection*, Auckland, Birkenhead City Council: 1988. Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections NOH-AAA-0363.

<sup>6</sup> Luker, Stan. "Interview with S. (Stan) Luker, b.1899 – greaser, engine driver and member of union executive." By Grant Watson. Part of *Grant Watson research papers on the Chelsea Sugar Works, Birkenhead*, 1979, Special Collections: University of Auckland (MSS-Archives-A-218).

<sup>7</sup> Castleton, Charlie. "Charlie Castleton, oral history, 1986". By Colleen Christie.

<sup>8</sup> Luke, Peter. "Sugar Workers, Sugar Town: An oral history of Chelsea Sugar Refinery, 1884-1984". Auckland: New Zealand Sugar Company Limited, 1984. p. 7.

*“If you went to the sugar works you were down the social scale in the early days. But everyone wanted to work at the sugar works though, because you did not have to go over to town. It was very popular”*

Charlie Castleton captures a similar sentiment in explaining his reasoning for leaving his job at the New Zealand Dairy Company in Auckland when a job at Chelsea became available: “Well, it suited me. I could walk to work - there were no fares, no hassle with ferry boats or buses or anything like that... And when I was on shift work sometimes leaving home at half past eleven and walking to Chelsea - at night”.<sup>9</sup>

A handful of employees worked at Chelsea casually to supplement other sources of income. Frank Schorman was one of several individuals in the fruit-growing district of Birkenhead and Birkdale who owned a strawberry farm.<sup>10</sup> When not working on his farm, Schorman worked for the stevedores at the Chelsea wharf, unloading raw sugar from ships and stacking it in the raw store.<sup>11</sup> Curly Mayall, who worked at the refined sugar store, recalls the job these men used to do:<sup>12</sup>

*They used to rely on a lot of the gardeners, you know, market gardeners and strawberry gardeners, for the extra labour for unloading the raw boats. They used to come down and it*

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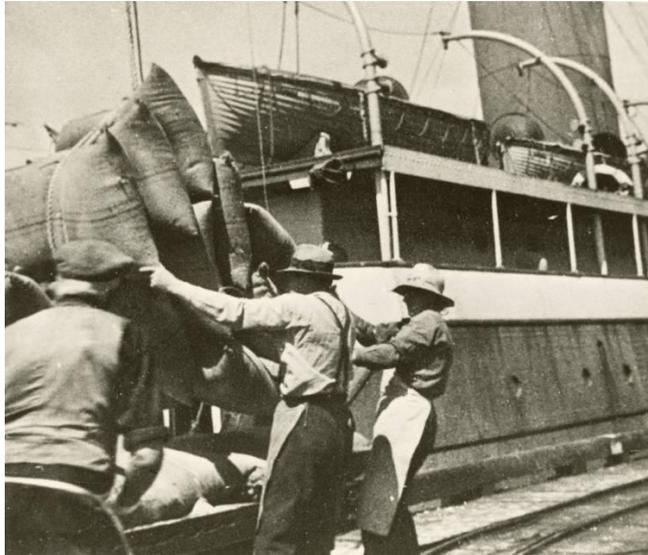
<sup>9</sup> Castleton, Charlie. “Charlie Castleton, oral history, 1986”. By Colleen Christie.

<sup>10</sup> Schorman, Frank. “Interview with F.H. (Frank) Schorman, b.1906 - casual worker”. By Grant Watson. Part of *Grant Watson research papers on the Chelsea Sugar Works, Birkenhead, 1979*, Special Collections: University of Auckland (MSS-Archives-A-218).

<sup>11</sup> Schorman, Frank. “Interview with F.H. (Frank) Schorman, b.1906 - casual worker”. By Grant Watson.

<sup>12</sup> Mayall, Curly. “Interview with W.J. (Curly) Mayall, b. 1897- storeman, tallyman and foreman.” By Grant Watson. Part of *Grant Watson research papers on the Chelsea Sugar Works, Birkenhead, 1979*, Special Collections: University of Auckland (MSS-Archives-A-218).

*was quite a hand side-line for those chaps. Everytime there was a raw boat they'd get a job there in the raw store stacking sugar.*



Workers unloading raw sugar at the Chelsea wharf. Casual workers from the surrounding orchards used to supplement their income by helping at the wharf. Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections B0055.

Ultimately, entire families often ended up working at Chelsea, creating a great sense of stability in employment, family and residence.<sup>13</sup> For instance, Ernie France got a job at the refinery through his uncle when he was just 12 years old. Throughout his 51 years of service at the factory, Ernie worked alongside his uncle, cousin and father, whilst his mother used to help with the refinery's washing and his wife later worked as a cook in the Chelsea dining hall.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Roy Harkin's father worked as a sugarboiler at Chelsea whilst one of his brothers was a bricklayer and the other worked as a Chelsea sail-maker.<sup>15</sup> Schorman

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<sup>13</sup> Luke, "Sugar Workers, Sugar Town", p. 7.

<sup>14</sup> Watson, Grant. "The Chelsea Sugar Works: An Oral Account". Master's Thesis, University of Auckland, 1979, University of Auckland Special Collections (MSS-Archives-A-218), p. 42.

<sup>15</sup> Harkin, Roy. "Interview with R.C. (Roy) Harkin, b. 1906 – rigger, sailmaker and boiler fireman." By Grant Watson. Part of *Grant Watson research papers on the Chelsea Sugar Works, Birkenhead*, 1979, Special Collections: University of Auckland (MSS-Archives-A-218).

testifies to these family ties, noting how “there were quite a few cases of father and son working down there”.<sup>16</sup>

### **How did these workers experience working at Chelsea?**

Popular discourse surrounding the Chelsea sugar works often remarks on the incredible self-sufficiency of the factory. Chelsea not only sources its own water and electricity from on-site dams, but also employed a wide range of workers to carry out the many tasks essential to its daily operations.<sup>17</sup> In addition to the workers unloading and stacking the raw sugar bags or those working on the actual refining process, there were chemists, engineers, packing workers, dining hall staff and administrators.

Naturally, the work conditions and overall experiences of Chelsea depended somewhat on the department in which each individual worked. Castleton had few complaints about the shift work he undertook as a liquor runner for his first 13 years of employment. His job, which consisted of distributing liquid sugar into the correct tank after it had been separated in the fugal, required concentration and could get very hot but was not difficult or dangerous.<sup>18</sup>

On the other hand, those employed in the washhouse had “a really unpleasant job”.<sup>19</sup> Categorised as the worst job by many retired sugar workers, this task involved supervising the filtering of mud and other debris out of the liquid sugar. The actual filtering was done in tanks using big filter bags but workers used to have to enter the tanks and stand in three

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<sup>16</sup> Schorman, Frank. “Interview with F.H. (Frank) Schorman, b.1906 - casual worker”. By Grant Watson.

<sup>17</sup> Watson, “The Chelsea Sugar Works: An Oral Account”, p. 14.

<sup>18</sup> Castleton, Charlie. “Charlie Castleton, oral history, 1986”. By Colleen Christie.

<sup>19</sup> Castleton, Charlie. “Charlie Castleton, oral history, 1986”. By Colleen Christie.

feet of grimy water to clean the filter bags out.<sup>20</sup> The dirtiness of the job leant itself to many workers carrying out the task practically naked, often with just a piece of cloth tied around their waists.<sup>21</sup> The noise added to these rough conditions, with one worker suggesting “I daresay it did have quite an effect on their hearing”.<sup>22</sup>

Interestingly, most workers appeared content with their job regardless of any tough conditions of employment. One worker observed: “*They were a hard firm to work for. They expected if you had a job to do, to do it.*”<sup>23</sup> *They had bosses, foremen and they saw that you did your job*”. But nevertheless, “*the men respected that*”.<sup>24</sup> After all, Castleton remarked, “*it was a job and that was the main thing*”.<sup>25</sup> Another worker echoed this respect for the management: “*In my day, if you saw a boss you got out of his way*”.<sup>26</sup>

Perhaps adding to this sense of contentment in these Chelsea workers is the remarkable feeling of community created by involvement in social clubs and outings. There were several sports teams, including a Chelsea cricket team composed of the head chemists who used to

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<sup>20</sup> Watson, Grant. “The Chelsea Sugar Works: An Oral Account”. Master’s Thesis, University of Auckland, 1979, University of Auckland Special Collections (MSS-Archives-A-218), p. 8.

<sup>21</sup> Luke, “Sugar Workers, Sugar Town”, p. 17.

<sup>22</sup> Castleton, Charlie. “Charlie Castleton, oral history, 1986”. By Colleen Christie.

<sup>23</sup> Castleton, Charlie. “Charlie Castleton, oral history, 1986”. By Colleen Christie.

<sup>24</sup> Castleton, Charlie. “Charlie Castleton, oral history, 1986”. By Colleen Christie.

<sup>25</sup> Castleton, Charlie. “Charlie Castleton, oral history, 1986”. By Colleen Christie.

<sup>26</sup> Maloney, Sheren, dir. *Chelsea: Experience of a Lifetime*. Auckland: University of Auckland Audiovisual Centre, 1985. Video Cassette.

play in competitions at Victoria Park.<sup>27</sup> Meanwhile, many workers spoke fondly of their times at the Old Forester's Hall in Birkenhead. Twice a week, on Wednesdays and Saturdays, a Chelsea bricklayer called Mr Lanigan would play the piano for the silent movies at the hall.<sup>28</sup> On Sundays, the Municipal Brass Band, which was largely made up of sugar workers, would perform at Forester's Hall.<sup>29</sup> Another sugar worker recalled their trips on the ferry playing poker on Friday nights:<sup>30</sup>

*"I used to go across the Auckland on Friday night. A terrific crowd of sugar workers would go over... We... would just go up and down the harbour playing poker... There were lots of poker schools".*

The most anticipated event of the year was undoubtedly the annual Chelsea Picnic. Once a year, on what would otherwise have been a normal workday, the Company would put on a fully-sponsored outing to a nearby island, where sugar workers and their families would spend the day eating, drinking, listening to music and competing in a variety of games and competitions complete with record boards and prizes for the winners.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Maloney, Sheren, dir. *Chelsea: Experience of a Lifetime*. Auckland: University of Auckland Audiovisual Centre, 1985. Video Cassette.

<sup>28</sup> Kelly, Ivan. "Ivan (Barney) Kelly, oral history, 1984". By Colleen Christie. Transcript published in *Back Then: oral history interviews from the Birkenhead Public Library collection*, Auckland, Birkenhead City Council: 1988. Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections NOH-AAA-0265.

<sup>29</sup> Luke, "Sugar Workers, Sugar Town", p. 7

<sup>30</sup> Luke, "Sugar Workers, Sugar Town", p. 7

<sup>31</sup> Luke, "Sugar Workers, Sugar Town", p. 22.

Reviews of the picnic were glowing and illustrate the impression the picnic had on the workers' overall experience at Chelsea. Castleton recalls:<sup>32</sup>

*That was one of the greatest things that's ever happened in Birkenhead... The whole of Birkenhead would be on the ferry, and the Birkenhead Municipal Band, and away we'd go. It was a great day. Great sports day. It was really the day of the year to have the sugar company's picnic."*



Sugar workers pose for a photo on Motutapu Island at their annual Chelsea Picnic. Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections B0092.

### **Who's Missing? - The Silent Voices of Women and Non-Pākehā**

Overall, oral accounts from some of the men who worked at Chelsea in the early to mid-twentieth century give us a glimpse into the lives of just a few of the many workers who over the years have contributed to producing iconic Chelsea sugar. However, it must be remembered that although some common themes may be extracted from these interviews, it would be wrong to assume that these accounts encapsulate the experiences of everyone who has ever worked there.

Indeed, a notable gap in the sources exists in that not one worker interviewed was either female or non-Pākehā. While far fewer women were employed by the works, we know they increasingly took up important roles at the factory, serving meals to wharf workers in the early twentieth Century and later taking on both administrative roles and tasks in the syrup tin shed during World War II.<sup>33</sup> For example, Jean France worked in the Chelsea dining hall,

<sup>32</sup> Castleton, Charlie. "Charlie Castleton, oral history, 1986". By Colleen Christie.

<sup>33</sup> Luke, "Sugar Workers, Sugar Town", p. 12.

whilst another workers' mother was a housemaid for the refinery manager.<sup>34</sup> According to the men whose oral accounts do exist, there were also several non-Pākehā men employed by the works, many of whom were thought to have performed some of the more menial tasks. A man from the Cook Islands known by the name of Sir Albert Henry, for example, worked as the manager's chauffeur.<sup>35</sup> While we are aware these individuals existed in the history of the works, their voices on their experiences remain largely silent and are needed to inform a more comprehensive picture of the experiences of the Chelsea sugar workers.



Jean France, who worked in the Chelsea refinery kitchen, pictured here in 1987. Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections B0331.

Altogether, an examination of the lives and experiences of individuals who worked at the factory during the twentieth century, however incomplete, reminds us that Chelsea is so

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<sup>34</sup> Kelly, Ivan. "Ivan (Barney) Kelly, oral history, 1984". By Colleen Christie.

<sup>35</sup> Hurn, Percy. "Interview with Percy Hurn b. 1894 – raw store and bag store worker". By Grant Watson. Part of *Grant Watson research papers on the Chelsea Sugar Works, Birkenhead*, 1979, Special Collections: University of Auckland (MSS-Archives-A-218).

much more than a mass-producing sugar factory. Especially prior to large-scale mechanisation in the 1960s, it was also a workplace for thousands of individuals who built their lives and identities around their jobs.