

KAURI RICKERSJ. Beever

I think Mr Hatch was trailing his coat when he wrote his note re kauri rickers for the June news-sheet. It seems generally agreed that people last century who enquired of Maoris why they called young pole kauris "rickers" were told that it was not a Maori word, while pakeha bushmen thought it was a Maori word. I do not know who told Mr Hatch that ricker was a corruption of the Maori word, riki, but it seems most unlikely. There was no reason for Maoris to mispronounce one of their own common words and the pakeha can say riki just as readily as rika or ricker. We need a much better reason than that.

The reason I think lies in the history of the British navy in the early 19th century. It was fighting Napoleon till 1815 then defending the Empire it had captured in the previous century. All over England oaks were planted so that Britain would never again be short of good "hearts of oak". These trees are now coming to their prime, alas somewhat late. But Britain never grew the conifers for the masts which constantly needed replacement. These had traditionally come from the Baltic countries and had been shipped out of the entre-pot port of Riga. The Oxford English Dictionary states that the word Riga was used in the name of certain products exported from there such as Riga deal, Riga fir, Riga hemp, Riga oak &c, and quotes a statement of 1802 that, "Riga hemp is chiefly used for shrouds and stays of Men of War".

And of course the most important naval import from there was Riga spars for masts. When Napoleon had closed the Baltic to Britain the Admiralty looked urgently for other sources of supply and found that North America and New Zealand were the best. From about 1820 kauri spars were sought in Northland. Between 1820 and 1840 His Majesty's Ships Buffalo, Coromandel and Dromedary as well as other ships loaded many spars for the navy. Their specific instructions laid down the size for the great top-masts of the "ships of the line". They were to be 74 to 84 feet long and 21 to 23 inches in diameter at the base as well as being perfectly straight. These were of course the dimensions of the best Riga spars and when bargaining with Maori chiefs for trees the officers would naturally reject those not up to Riga standard. A good one was a Riga spar or for short a Riga. Large massive kauris were no good, they were too vast. J.S. Polack writing in about 1838 said of kauri, "It would be much superior to the best Riga spars."

Maoris soon knew what the pakeha meant by a Riga and the name remained even when the navy ceased using New Zealand spars. Gradually it became the name for all pole kauris except saplings and was used by both races of bushmen. The English speakers soon forgot the reason for Riga and the Maori probably never knew. The northern Maori pronounced the g as a hard k and so rika or ricker was created to puzzle later generations.

And should you think that the word Riga has a very different pronunciation in Latvia remember that the people using the word in New Zealand were British sailors and anyone familiar with British servicemen will know how much they care for pedantic pronunciation of European place names. Remember what they did to the Spanish Trafalgar and later to Ypres and Armentiers.