

THE BATTERY COMPANY, FORMED TO OPERATE THE FIRTH
AND CLARK BATTERY AT WAIORONGOMAI

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Abstract: *The Battery Company was a private one, and although there were hints that other shareholders existed, only Josiah Clifton Firth and James McCosh Clark were known to be its owners. Firth was the more prominent of the two, willingly so, as he was never short of opinions and used his links with local and central government to assist his own interests in general and this company in particular.*

When constructing the battery at Waiorongomai, Firth posed as a philanthropist aiming to benefit the mining community rather than himself. As the venture was potentially risky, he was praised for his initiative, but his terms for raising capital from mining companies and the charges he imposed soon led to widespread criticism. As time passed and as mining faded, he gained increasing control over the mines, acquiring interests in many of them, some of which were developed with little success.

After celebrations were held for the opening of his battery, the cold water treatment of the first crushing created distrust and suspicion. For years there were loud complaints about the high charges and how mining companies controlled by the company were being exploited simply to keep the battery operating. That so many mines were unprofitable was blamed on the company, and Firth's policy of working mines as cheaply as possible was criticized. Because of his monopoly, miners wanted other batteries erected, and Firth was accused of discouraging this through his influence on the county council; an influence that was claimed to mean higher tramway charges through his appointing a pawn as tramway manager.

Despite his constant praise of private enterprise and private initiative, Firth was very ready to seek financial assistance from government, with some success. Genuinely interested in new technology, his successful efforts to, first, improve the battery, and second, to sell his company's interests to wealthy overseas capitalists were praised. He even planned to construct a low level tunnel traversing most of the field. But despite all their efforts, neither Firth nor Clark benefited financially from their company.

INTRODUCTION

This private company was also known as Firth and Clark's, for its only known shareholders were Josiah Clifton Firth and James McCosh Clark,

who had been associated with each other in the Auckland business community since the 1860s. In 1883 Firth mentioned ‘many gentlemen who are working with me’,¹ which may refer to other shareholders, but in the absence of any company records it is not possible to verify their existence. Likely shareholders such as Henry Ernest Whitaker, William Brook Smith, or James Henry Smith, although purchasing some interests in Waiorongomai mines, did not purchase shares in claims of value to this company.

JOSIAH CLIFTON FIRTH AND JAMES McCOSH CLARK

The laudatory biography in the *Cyclopedia of New Zealand* was an official version of Firth’s life that omitted his involvement with Te Aroha mining. Born in 1826, after arriving in Auckland he was joined by his brother-in-law, Daniel Bateman Thornton, who became the senior partner in the flour milling firm of Thornton, Smith, and Firth.² Thornton, who died in October 1881, did not invest in any Te Aroha mines. The other partner, William Brook Smith, ‘an old schoolfellow’ of Firth’s, had shares in three mines in the district,³ According to the *Cyclopedia*, they created ‘the leading flour milling business in the Colony’.

In 1866 Mr Firth purchased from the natives 55,000 acres of land in the Upper Thames Valley, and well known as the “Matamata Estate.” This was a bold undertaking as the estate was unpleasantly close to the stronghold of unfriendly natives, unapproachable either by road or river, and covered withal by fern and scrub.... The Thames [Waihou] river, which runs through the Matamata Estate for some ten miles, was then navigable only by rowing boats. No Government subsidy being forthcoming for the improvement of this river, Mr Firth undertook the work, and in seven years spent £7,000 in forming a channel forty feet wide navigable for steamers drawing up to five feet of water, from Paeroa to Stanley,

¹ *Thames Advertiser*, 7 December 1883, p. 3.

² See *Auckland Weekly News*, 15 October 1881, p. 13.

³ Te Aroha Warden’s Court, Register of Te Aroha Claims 1880-1888, folio 205, BBAV 11567/1a; Register of Licensed Holdings 1881-1887, folios 97, 111, BBAV 11500/9a, ANZ-A.

the landing near his estate. Firth 'succeeded in cultivating 25,000 acres, and much interest was centred in the colossal undertaking'.⁴ His experiments with new farming methods were praised,⁵ but as most of these failed his venture was a financial failure which he had to abandon in 1887 when the bank foreclosed on his mortgage.⁶ His clearing of the Waihou River cost £7,442 by 1 January 1880,⁷ but his comment to the Waste Lands Board in October that year (when he inflated the cost to £10,000) revealed his motive was not public-spiritedness but 'his own convenience and profit'.⁸ The river provided cheap transport between his farm and the Auckland market, and he had been forced to snag it after failing to convince the government to do this.⁹ His acquisition of the estate was, as Firth kept reminding everyone, the dying wish of his friend Wiremu Tamihana, as he inscribed in gilt lettering on his memorial to this Ngati Haua chief.¹⁰ Although Tamihana had agreed to lease the land, he had not anticipated its sale, although at the end of his life he may have hoped that Firth's occupation would bring peace between Maori and Pakeha.¹¹

Firth was commonly considered a 'land shark', for in 1882 the value of his holdings was £164,163.¹² That his methods of obtaining land were seen

⁴ *Cyclopedia of New Zealand*, vol. 2, pp. 103-104.

⁵ See *Brett's Auckland Almanac, Provincial Handbook, and Strangers' Vade Mecum for 1880*, ed. Thomas W. Leys (Auckland, 1880), pp. 54-58; 'A Visit to Matamata', *Auckland Weekly News*, 6 August 1881, p. 22, 18 February 1882, p. 14, 13 May 1882, p. 17, 6 January 1883, p. 17, 20 October 1883, p. 6, 23 July 1887, pp. 7-8; *New Zealand Herald*, 18 January 1881, p. 5, 29 April 1884, p. 3.

⁶ *Auckland Weekly News*, 4 June 1887, p. 17; *Observer*, 31 December 1904, p. 17; see also D.B. Waterson, 'The Matamata Estate, 1904-1959: Land Transfers and Subdivision in the Waikato', *New Zealand Journal of History*, vol. 3 no. 1 (April 1969), pp. 34-35.

⁷ *Thames Advertiser*, 27 February 1880, p. 3.

⁸ Waste Lands Board, *Auckland Weekly News*, 9 October 1880, p. 19; for details of the snagging and its cost, see *Thames Advertiser*, 4 June 1878, p. 3, 27 February 1880, p. 3, 9 March 1880, p. 3; *Auckland Weekly News*, 30 August 1879, p. 8, 28 February 1880, Supplement, p. 1.

⁹ *Auckland Weekly News*, 21 October 1876, p. 13.

¹⁰ *Auckland Weekly News*, 12 January 1867, p. 9, 10 August 1867, p. 12; *Observer*, 18 February 1882, p. 355, 13 October 1883, p. 3.

¹¹ Evelyn Stokes, *Wiremu Tamihana: Rangatira* (Wellington, 2002), pp. 498-500, 503-505.

¹² *A Return of the Freeholders of New Zealand, giving the Names, Addresses, and Occupations of Owners of Land, together with the Area and Value in Counties, and the*

as questionable was indicated by an 1875 statement by James Mackay, a land purchase officer, that Firth had offered him £100 to obtain a signature for a deed of sale from a Maori who would only deal with Mackay.¹³ In the same year, Charles Featherstone Mitchell¹⁴ claimed it was ‘notorious’ that Firth had ‘bought land for sixpence or eightpence an acre’ and ‘re-sold it for £2 an acre’.¹⁵

Clark held shares in four Coromandel mining companies between 1862 and 1865 and was a director of one,¹⁶ and both Firth and Clark held interests in early Thames mines. Both men had shares in 15 claims and companies, but the only company in which they were both shareholders was the Moanataiari. Clark was a director of the latter since its formation, and a director of three other companies; Firth was a director of one, the Missouri.¹⁷ According to Thomas Morrin, Clark was ‘a very large

Value in Boroughs and Town Districts, October 1882 (Wellington, 1884), p. F 17; for details of his land holdings between 1863 and 1892, see Index of Deposited Documents, Department of Lands and Deeds, Auckland, vol. 1, pp. 154-155, BCAT A1009, ANZ-A; for examples of criticisms of his land dealings, see George Vesey Stewart, quoted in *Thames Advertiser*, 10 February 1880, p. 2, and W. Hutchinson, 16 August 1880, in *New Zealand Parliamentary Debates*, vol. 37, p.372; see also Waterson, pp. 32-33.

¹³ *AJHR*, 1875, I-1, p. 5; for rumours about how he obtained the Matamata Estate, see *Observer*, 17 October 1903, p. 4.

¹⁴ See paper on the Thames Miners’ Union.

¹⁵ ‘Papers Relating to Miners’, Auckland Provincial Government Papers, ACFL 8170, 5/4, ANZ-A.

¹⁶ Company Files, BADZ 5181, box 1 no. 1, box 1 no. 5, box 2 no. 19, box 3 no. 24, ANZ-A.

¹⁷ For Firth’s shareholdings and directorate, see Thames Warden’s Court, Thames Claims Register 1868, folios 30, 42, 203, 317, BACL 14397/1a; Thames Claims Register 1868-1869, no. 464, BACL 14397/2a; Thames Claims Register 1868-1869, no. 1391, BACL 14397/3a; Thames Claims Register 1869, nos. 1475, 1733, BACL 14397/4a; Register of Deeds 1869, folios 651-653, BACL, 14417/3a; Register of Deeds 1869, folios 652, 654-658, BACL 14417/4a; Missouri Gold Mining Company, Company Files, BADZ 5181, box 15 no. 84, ANZ-A; *Auckland Provincial Government Gazette*, 15 July 1869, p. 589, 6 October 1869, p. 1407, 1 November 1869, p. 1450, 4 November 1869, p. 1481, 25 March 1871, p. 50, 26 October 1871, p. 277; *Auckland Weekly News*, 27 September 1873, p. 15; *Thames Advertiser*, 22 October 1873, p. 3. For Clark’s shareholdings and directorates, see Thames Warden’s Court, Thames Claims Register 1868, folios 10, 15, 28, BACL 14397/1a; Thames Claims Register 1868-1869, nos. 633, 747, BACL 14397/2a; Register of Agreements and Licenses 1868-1870, folio 64, BACL 14417/1a; Point Russell Gold Mining

shareholder' in the Moanataiari Company and 'took a very great interest' in it.¹⁸ There was no indication of the success of his investments. According to the *Observer*, Firth suffered 'various losses' in early Thames, 'losses which were enough to deter any ordinary person from again venturing upon such speculation'.¹⁹ One particular investment was to construct 'at great cost the Wild Missouri battery at Tararu', which was a failure.²⁰ Both men were actively involved in getting pumping of the deeper levels restarted in 1879.²¹

Firth's most notable venture as a merchant was his flour mill, begun in partnership with Thornton and Smith but carried on with Smith after 1867 and by Firth alone from 1875.²² During the 1860s, the manager of the Union Bank of Australia reported that Thornton was 'possessed of considerable capital' and 'very wealthy', while both Firth and Smith had 'some private means'. Their firm was 'highly respectable' and 'one of the soundest' in Auckland.²³

Clark, the eldest son of Alexander, came to Auckland in 1849, aged 16, and in 1856 became a partner in the family firm of Alexander Clark and Sons. Upon the death of his father in 1875, he became the senior and managing partner; by the late nineteenth century it was one of the most

Company, and Hauraki Pumping and Drainage Company, Company Files, BADZ 5181, box 9 no. 56, box 33 no. 203, ANZ-A; *Auckland Provincial Government Gazette*, 25 April 1868, p. 214, 24 June 1868, p. 298, 30 July 1869, p. 652, 3 September 1869, p. 919, 28 January 1870, p. 9, 1 March 1870, p. 101; *New Zealand Gazette*, 27 April 1868, p. 195; *Thames Advertiser*, 31 October 1870, p. 2, 1 June 1876, p. 3, 2 June 1879, p. 3; *Auckland Weekly News*, 25 April 1868, p. 3, 20 June 1868, p. 4, 24 July 1869, p. 11, 4 September 1869, p. 23, 21 October 1871, p. 13, 5 June 1875, p. 7, 2 March 1878, p. 8, 8 October 1881, p. 20.

¹⁸ *Thames Advertiser*, 2 June 1879, p. 3.

¹⁹ *Observer*, 15 December 1883, p. 4.

²⁰ *New Zealand Herald*, 13 December 1897, p. 6.

²¹ *Thames Advertiser*, 14 February 1879, p. 3, 2 July 1879, p. 3.

²² *Auckland Weekly News*, 12 January 1867, p. 1, 6 November 1875, p. 5.

²³ Union Bank of Australia, Half-Yearly Balance Books of the Transactions of the Auckland Branch for half-years ending 30 June 1860, 4 November 1861, 16 November 1867: Liabilities of Parties to the Branch, 1135, Australia and New Zealand Bank Archives, Wellington.

prosperous firms in New Zealand.²⁴ As a ‘young lad’, he had served behind the counter, and was regarded, non-pejoratively, as ‘one of our *nouveaux riches*’.²⁵

Firth was a shareholder in 14 non-mining companies and director of six; Clark had interests in 27 and was director of 16. Both men were directors of the Auckland and South Pacific Steamship Company, the New Zealand Stud and Pedigree Stock Company, and the Bank of New Zealand; they were both shareholders of six other non-mining companies, the Auckland Fibre Manufacturing Company, the Thames Valley and Rotorua Railway Company, the Auckland Coffee Palace Company, the Waikato Cheese and Bacon Factory Company, the City of Auckland Tramways and Suburban Land Company, and the New Zealand Loan and Mercantile Agency. Their other financial interests were equally diverse, notably Firth’s long involvement with the Bay of Islands Coal Company and Clark’s in the Auckland Whaling Company.²⁶

Firth was always interested in technology. The first telephones in New Zealand were installed on his Matamata estate, and he erected a 22-mile line from there to the Waiorongomai telegraph office.²⁷ His trip to the United States in 1886 to inspect machinery for his flourmill led to a new type of furnace being installed in the Waiorongomai battery.²⁸ His rebuilt Eight Hours Roller Mills were opened with much publicity in 1888,

²⁴ Details of the firm and its rise are given in *Cyclopedia of New Zealand*, vol. 2, pp. 102-103, 396, *British Australasian*, 5 February 1898, p. 156; for its splendid new warehouse of 1872, see *Auckland Weekly News*, 23 March 1872, p. 7; for the new premises of 1882, see *Auckland Weekly News*, 4 March 1882, Supplement, p. 3, 14 October 1882, Supplement, p. 3.

²⁵ *Observer*, 14 May 1881, p. 377.

²⁶ To avoid an enormously voluminous footnote, only the example of the Bank of New Zealand is given: *Thames Advertiser*, 23 October 1877, p. 3; *Auckland Weekly News*, 8 October 1882, p. 9, 1 November 1884, p. 18, 20 October 1888, p. 29; *Observer*, 22 June 1889, p. 9; Bank of New Zealand, Stock Ledger, Auckland, 1879-1885, pp. 102, 106, Bank of New Zealand Archives, Wellington; House of Representatives Banking Committee: Minutes of Evidence, *AJHR*, 1896, I-6, pp. 1, 5, plus Exhibits, p. 120.

²⁷ Edward Clifton Firth, *Waves of Chance: New Zealand, America, Australia* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 10a.

²⁸ *Auckland Weekly News*, 21 August 1886, p. 17.

including a letter of thanks from the Melbourne Trades Hall for having established the first eight hours mill in New Zealand.²⁹

Since 1867 both men were members of the committee of the Auckland Chamber of Commerce, Firth being elected president in 1878 and replaced by Clark in the following year.³⁰ They shared some interests, both, for example, encouraging the Volunteer movement, Clark being Captain of the Auckland Rifles for a time.³¹ Both encouraged education, Firth as a member of the board of the Auckland Grammar School and of the Auckland Board of Education in the early 1870s as well as forming the first Mechanics' Institutes and being president of the Auckland Institute and the Auckland Sunday School Union.³² Clark was also on the board of Auckland Grammar School, was a member of the Central Board of Education and later chairman of the Auckland Board of Education for two years, and became one of the two School Commissioners for the Auckland district. In 1882 he was elected to the council of the Auckland Institute.³³ Both supported local artists: Firth by purchasing their paintings and being a vice-president of the Auckland Society of Arts,³⁴ Clark by being a more active member of this society, of which he was president for five years, reflecting the fact that his

²⁹ *Auckland Weekly News*, 17 March 1888, p. 18, 14 April 1888, pp. 9-10, 11 August 1888, p. 18, 22 December 1888, p. 18.

³⁰ *Cyclopedia of New Zealand*, vol. 2, p. 303; *Auckland Weekly News*, 30 March 1867, p. 3, 13 March 1869, p. 7, 14 June 1879, Supplement, pp. 1-3; *Thames Advertiser*, 12 July 1870, p. 3.

³¹ Volunteer List 1866-1871, folio 13, Auckland Rifle Volunteers, Army Department, AD 20/4, ANZ-W; *Auckland Weekly News*, 2 March 1872, p. 9, 23 March 1872, p. 8, 22 June 1872, p. 6, 23 June 1883, p. 17, 16 July 1887, p. 14, 15 October 1887, p. 23.

³² *Auckland Weekly News*, 23 November 1872, p. 4, 5 April 1873, p. 4, 17 September 1881, p. 11; *Thames Advertiser*, 24 February 1873, p. 3, 19 May 1875, p. 3.

³³ *Auckland Provincial Government Gazette*, 7 February 1871, p. 25; *Auckland Weekly News*, 15 March 1879, p. 8, 8 November 1879, p. 8, 18 September 1880, p. 18, 9 April 1881, p. 11, 25 February 1882, p. 19; *Thames Advertiser*, 19 April 1879, p. 3; *Waikato Times*, 1 March 1882, p. 2; *New Zealand Gazette*, 26 May 1881, p. 676, 10 April 1884, pp. 652, 654, 19 May 1887, p. 658.

³⁴ *Auckland Weekly News*, 23 June 1883, p. 8, 17 August 1889, p. 14.

wife Kate was a prominent painter.³⁵ In 1888, both men were elected patrons.³⁶

They were both philanthropic, Firth claiming that he was ‘a very liberal giver; no one was ever sent away hungry from my house’. He estimated that he gave away £300 a year during the 1880s, nearly half the amount spent on his family’s living expenses.³⁷ He assisted to help the sick and destitute, and was on the board of Auckland hospital for one year;³⁸ Clark was on its board during the same year and continued to serve for several more years.³⁹ His wife was praised for her kindness and assistance to ‘poor deserving persons’,⁴⁰ and they both assisted the Auckland Ladies’ Benevolent Society.⁴¹ He was elected to the committee of the Young Women’s Institute in 1882.⁴²

In local government, Clark outshone Firth, being a very popular and effective mayor of Auckland from 1880 to 1883.⁴³ Firth chaired a public meeting that agreed to collect subscriptions to make a presentation to mark his retirement; £260 was raised, and a banquet held in his honour.⁴⁴ He had declined to continue to serve for more than three years, for being mayor had been at the expense of his business interests.⁴⁵

³⁵ *Observer*, 14 May 1881, p. 377; *Auckland Weekly News*, 19 August 1882, Supplement, p. 3, 6 August 1887, p. 12.

³⁶ *Auckland Weekly News*, 11 August 1888, p. 37.

³⁷ *Auckland Weekly News*, 17 August 1889, p. 14.

³⁸ *Auckland Weekly News*, 25 May 1867, p. 22, 19 September 1868, p. 13, 3 February 1883, p. 17, 3 March 1883, p. 18, 5 January 1884, p. 18.

³⁹ *Auckland Weekly News*, 3 February 1883, p. 17, 3 March 1883, p. 18, 21 February 1885, p. 18.

⁴⁰ *Auckland Weekly News*, 28 July 1877, pp. 8, 14, 4 August 1877, p. 8,

⁴¹ *Auckland Weekly News*, 25 February 1882, p. 19, 18 April 1885, p. 7, 27 August 1887, p. 35.

⁴² *Auckland Weekly News*, 9 September 1882, p. 18.

⁴³ See *Freeman’s Journal*, 19 November 1880, p. 6; *Observer*, 20 November 1880, p. 77, 24 November 1883, p. 14, 5 February 1898, p. 2; ‘St Mungo’, ‘Echoes from the Cafe’, *Waikato Times*, 4 December 1883, p. 3; *Auckland Weekly News*, 28 October 1882, p. 18, 18 November 1882, p. 20, 23 December 1882, p. 15.

⁴⁴ *Auckland Weekly News*, 1 December 1883, p. 17 (including editorial), 22 December 1883, p. 11, 26 January 1884, p. 24.

⁴⁵ *Auckland Weekly News*, 17 February 1883, p. 19, editorial, 1 December 1883, p. 17.

Firth was involved in some Auckland bodies, most notably the Waste Lands Board from 1876 until his resignation over an alleged slight in 1881; his domineering presence had irritated some.⁴⁶ For his involvement with mining, his membership of the Piako County Council from 1877 to 1886 was important. Although its first chairman in 1877 and its treasurer from 1877 to 1881, he did not attend any meetings from 2 April 1878 until 23 November 1881, prompting councillors to reprimand him in January 1881.⁴⁷ But from within a month of the discovery of the Waiorongomai goldfield he attended once more. His principal concerns were to ensure that any bridge did not interfere with his using the river to convey produce to Auckland and to get the council to build goldfield tracks and the tramway (thereby benefiting his battery).⁴⁸ In addition to managing his Matamata estate,⁴⁹ one of his sons, William Thornton Firth, was also on the council from 1881 to 1887⁵⁰ and invariably supported his father's policies. Firth could also normally rely on the support of his brother-in-law, William Louis Campbell Williams, a member in 1877 and 1878 and from 1880 to 1889 and chairman from 1884 to 1887.⁵¹

Clark was not involved with acclimatising European fish, birds, and deer, which Firth spent many years introducing, in particular into the Waihou Valley. Firth was a member of the Auckland Acclimatisation Society from its foundation in 1867, and its president for several years.

⁴⁶ *New Zealand Gazette*, 23 November 1876, p. 807; *Thames Advertiser*, 10 February 1880, p. 2; Crown Lands Board, *Auckland Weekly News*, 23 July 1881, p. 21; *Observer*, 27 August 1881, p. 583, 1 October 1881, p. 34.

⁴⁷ Piako County Council, Minutes of Meetings held from 1878 to 1881, Matamata-Piako District Council Archives, Te Aroha.

⁴⁸ Piako County Council, Minutes of Meetings held from 1881 to 1882, Matamata-Piako District Council Archives, Te Aroha [the subsequent minute book is missing, but newspaper coverage of meetings reveals his role, as covered in the papers on the tramway and the development of mining].

⁴⁹ *Waikato Times*, 5 November 1881, p. 2, 4 November 1884, p. 2, 18 August 1887, p. 2, 25 October 1887, p. 3.

⁵⁰ For the correct date of his resignation from the council, see *Te Aroha News*, 29 October 1887, p. 2

⁵¹ C.W. Vennell and David More, *Land of the Three Rivers: a centennial history of Piako County* (Auckland, 1976), pp. 335-336.

Even after retiring as president, he still controlled it.⁵² Nor did Clark share Firth's enthusiasm for Sunday Schools, the British and Foreign Bible Society, or the London Missionary Society, although he was for a time the General Treasurer of the Presbyterian Church.⁵³

Whether their acquaintance became a friendship is not known. They certainly had different life styles. Firth did not indulge in 'entertainments', and lived, in his words, in 'a moderate manner',⁵⁴ whereas Clark, especially when mayor, entertained lavishly.⁵⁵ Only on one occasion were they in conflict, at least in public, as was reported in typical *Observer* style in 1882:

When Mr Firth intimated to the Reception Committee that he had invited the Maori king to his castellated home at Mount Eden, the Mayor very quietly "sat on" him for not sending his invitation through the Reception Committee. The big miller bounced at first, and said nothing would be easier than to withdraw the invite; but finally his Worship carried his point.⁵⁶

Hardly a massive falling-out, and Firth's good feelings towards Clark and the closeness of their association were revealed two years later at a meeting called to consider how to honour Clark's years as mayor. Firth stated that being mayor had been 'very greatly' to Clark's 'disadvantage and inconvenience', for his 'time was very much occupied, as those present knew, by the various duties he had to fulfil'.

Every gentleman knew just as well as he did, the duties that Mr Clark had to fulfil had been heavy and had taxed very largely his time and his means. Every gentlemen present knew as well as he did that Mr Clark had never held back, that he had devoted his best energies, his time, and his means to further the interests of

⁵² *Observer*, 25 November 1882, p. 169; for examples of his work, see *Thames Advertiser*, 5 December 1873, p. 3, 15 December 1877, p. 3, 19 December 1877, p. 3; *Auckland Weekly News*, 9 February 1867, p. 6, 13 November 1875, p. 11, 17 February 1877, p. 10, 8 September 1877, p. 10, 30 March 1878, p. 7, 12 November 1903, p. 9, 19 November 1903, p. 9; *Observer*, 1 March 1934, p. 15.

⁵³ *Observer*, 25 December 1880, p. 137.

⁵⁴ *Auckland Weekly News*, 17 August 1889, p. 14.

⁵⁵ For example, *Auckland Weekly News*, 28 July 1877, p. 8, 4 August 1877, p. 8, 28 January 1882, p. 19, editorial, 1 December 1883, p. 17; *Observer*, 10 December 1881, p. 20, 25 March 1882, p. 19, 29 July 1882, p. 310.

⁵⁶ *Observer*, 28 January 1882, p. 316.

the city of Auckland in every way. He was very glad Mr Clark was not present, because if he were, he would be very angry at what he (Mr Firth) was saying, for Mr Clark, although he thoroughly appreciated the opinions of his fellow citizens, was satisfied with the approval of his own conscience, when he felt he had done right. He believed Mr Clark had devoted a large portion, if not the whole, of his mayoral salary to the Free Library.

He also praised Clark for the manner in which he had entertained visitors and his devotion to the daily duties of mayor instead of delegating these to others.⁵⁷ Such praise was not universal, *Labour* commenting that he had been ‘very coarse in speech’ when his choice as engineer for the harbour board was not selected, prompting him to threaten to resign from it. Referring to ‘the impression’ that Clark gave his ‘entire salary’ to the library, it pointed out ‘that he received £250 for his first year in office, the same amount for the second, and £400 for the third, or £900 in all, and of this he has returned to the public, by a gift to the Library, the munificent sum of £200!’⁵⁸

These remarks implied that Clark was wealthy. In commenting on his unopposed election, one newspaper noted that he had ‘the means’ to be able to entertain ‘in a proper manner’.⁵⁹ Nearly two years later, the *Observer*, reporting a rumour that he was spending £10,000 a year on balls, parties, and entertainments for the citizens, added that with an income of £14,000 he could ‘afford to do the thing in style’.⁶⁰ The precision of these figures is unknown, but it is clear that his firm was successful and that he was well off. Firth was also rumoured to be wealthy, the *Observer* describing him in 1881 as ‘a shrewd, practical and hard-headed man of business’, who from his ‘exertions and sharp-sighted bargains’ must be worth about £100,000.⁶¹ This journal also quoted the following exchange: ‘“Do as I do. Live within your income,” said Mr J.C. Firth to a new chum, who was bemoaning his poverty’.⁶²

Whether Firth really lived within his means, and whether he really was ‘worth’ that amount was questioned because of his close links with the

⁵⁷ *New Zealand Herald*, 29 November 1883, p. 6.

⁵⁸ *Labour*, 28 February 1884, p. 6.

⁵⁹ *Waikato Times*, 20 November 1880, p. 2.

⁶⁰ *Observer*, 29 July 1882, p. 310.

⁶¹ *Observer*, 27 August 1881, p. 583.

⁶² *Observer*, 21 January 1882, p. 300.

Bank of New Zealand, as the *Observer* noted: ‘Mr Firth, on the occasion of the opening of his new granary, seized the opportunity of publicly thanking the Deity for His long-continued patronage. But if Mr Firth had not been forgetful, he would have felt it his duty also to thank another patron - a certain big monetary institution’.⁶³ Firth was a director of this bank from 1877 to 1884,⁶⁴ and of the New Zealand Loan and Mercantile Agency Company in the 1880s; he was still a director of the colonial board of the latter in 1887. His credit at that time came mainly from the Loan Company, which permitted him to over-borrow on the security of his over-valued Matamata estate.⁶⁵ His associate in some business dealings, John Logan Campbell, later wrote, when Firth was complaining of financial problems because the bank had foreclosed on its mortgage on it, that for Firth to pose as the injured party was ‘one of those extraordinary obliquities of vision past comprehending, ignoring as he does the huge amount of money lost in trying to keep him going’.⁶⁶ In 1882 the *Observer* published a poem about him:

May classic muses tune my lyre,
To chant thy praises, just Josiah!
Thou man of *flour*, and flowery speech,
Not *meally*-mouthed, but prone to preach:
To raise us up to pious ways,
And *raise* the flour too, when it pays.
You love a *mill*,⁶⁷ though fond of peace,
But most a *piece* of land to lease,⁶⁸

a reference to his Matamata estate. Fewer criticisms were published about Clark, who was regularly praised as a businessman of skill and

⁶³ *Observer*, 21 April 1883, p. 76.

⁶⁴ Mona Gordon, *The Golden Age of Josiah Clifton Firth* (Christchurch, 1963), p. 249.

⁶⁵ Russell Stone, *Makers of Fortune: A colonial business community and its fall* (Auckland, 1973), pp. 148-151, 173, 188.

⁶⁶ John Logan Campbell to William Brown, 16 June 1889, cited in Keith C. Hooper, Michael J. Pratt, and Kathryn N. Kearing, ‘Accounting, Auditing and the Business Establishment in Colonial Auckland 1880-1895’, *Accounting, Auditing and Accountability Journal*, vol. 6 no. 1 (1993), p. 83.

⁶⁷ Meaning a fight: *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 5 ed. (Oxford, 1864), p. 768.

⁶⁸ *Observer*, 11 February 1882, p. 339.

integrity. The *Observer*, which published somewhat acid portraits of local worthies, described him as an

old and highly-esteemed settler, industriously solicitous of Auckland's progress and prosperity, practical, shrewd, enterprising and upright in his business and social dealings and relations. His great forte is finance, and political economy. Few men in New Zealand equal him in grasp of the intricate problems of figures and statistics, and in the force and clearness in which he can explain the details and results of financial investigations and comparisons to a popular audience.⁶⁹

When elected mayor, an Auckland newspaper wrote that, 'whether as a business-man or as a politician, his name has been proverbial for integrity'.⁷⁰ One obituary stated that, of all the Auckland businessmen of the 1880s, 'he was without doubt the one who had the largest amount of business acumen and energetic initiative'.⁷¹ Praised as a great coloniser, Clark did not have Firth's reputation for being over-sanguine. The *Observer* did not qualify its praise of him as 'a living example of what may be achieved in New Zealand, by a clear, shrewd brain, a steadfast will, and an untiring energy of purpose'.⁷² When he became mayor, the *Waikato Times* wrote that he bore 'the highest character for probity and ability, his thorough knowledge of business and his practical common sense will be invaluable'.⁷³ His integrity and the esteem in which he was held were often mentioned.⁷⁴

Whether Firth was as skilful and had as much integrity as Clark was a matter of debate. The *Observer* saw him as 'one of the most striking living examples of Luck' in New Zealand. 'When he was a red-hot advocate of the Waikato War, Luck spared him from its toils, its dangers, and its losses'.

⁶⁹ *Observer*, 1 April 1882, p. 36.

⁷⁰ *Auckland Weekly News*, 20 November 1880, p. 13.

⁷¹ *Observer*, 5 February 1898, p. 2.

⁷² *Observer*, 14 May 1881, p. 377.

⁷³ *Waikato Times*, 20 November 1880, p. 2.

⁷⁴ For example, John Hall to Frederick Whitaker, 21 January 1880, Political Letters 1879-1882, p. 147, Sir John Hall Papers, MSy 1102, Alexander Turnbull Library; *Auckland Weekly News*, 20 November 1880, p. 13; *Observer*, 20 November 1880, p. 77, 14 May 1881, p. 377.

(Unlike Clark, who served in the field as captain of a volunteer company.)⁷⁵ ‘Luck brought him into contact with William Thompson’, otherwise Wiremu Tamihana, ‘the owner of the broad fertile plains of Matamata’, which, luckily, he leased to Firth. Upon Tamihana’s death, Firth erected a memorial inscribed: ‘These were his last words - “Let Hohaia [Josiah] remain in possession of his run!” ’ Another example of luck was Firth becoming a director of the Bank of New Zealand, ‘enabling him to acquire the freehold of a princely estate, to purchase expensive machinery to convert that estate into smiling cornfields’ for his flour mill. It noted that Firth’s letters to the press on such topics as philanthropy and social reform were always influenced by self-interest.⁷⁶ Writing in 1881 about the financial cost of building a bridge at Te Aroha, ‘Snooks’ commented that, ‘of course, the benefactor of the whole human race will have these sums placed at the disposal of the local bodies by the House, and, if not, lend them the cash himself.’⁷⁷ The *Observer*’s Te Aroha correspondent would later refer to Firth as ‘that noble-minded and philanthropic squanderer of other people’s money’.⁷⁸

Firth did use other people’s money for grand schemes which caught the public imagination, and when he died these were remembered whereas his financial problems were overlooked. The *Observer*’s obituary called him ‘a man of gigantic things, and, more especially, he was a gigantic coloniser. Given a thousand such colonists thirty years ago, and ample means at their disposal, New Zealand would be a veritable garden today’.⁷⁹ In 1880, the same journal, which oscillated between praise and abuse, described him as ‘a type of the successful colonist, who has won his way to independence by industry, thrift, enterprise, shrewdness, and great personal pluck and determination, combined with adherence to those Christian principles which were inculcated in his youth’.⁸⁰ The personality trait that caused most offence was his ‘overweening vanity and self-complacency’, which led him to assert his opinions in a ‘fatuously conceited and egotistic’ way.⁸¹ In 1881, it heard Firth being discussed in ‘a large room full of people, and

⁷⁵ *British Australasian*, 5 February 1898, p. 156.

⁷⁶ *Observer*, 13 October 1883, p. 3.

⁷⁷ ‘Snooks’, ‘Jottings from the Upper Country’, *Thames Star*, 14 April 1881, p. 2.

⁷⁸ ‘Te Aroha’, *Observer*, 12 October 1889, p. 18.

⁷⁹ *Observer*, 18 December 1897, p. 7.

⁸⁰ *Observer*, 4 December 1880, p. 100.

⁸¹ *Observer*, 1 October 1881, p. 34.

though the politics differed considerably, there was only one opinion - "Firth 'jaws' too much, and is too selfish and self-sufficient"'.⁸² A journal that stood for the rights of workers described him as 'always ready at a moment's notice and on the slightest provocation to make a speech - long if time will allow'.⁸³ In a private letter, John Logan Campbell wondered, about Firth's total self-centredness, whether he was 'not altogether right in his head. I am always in fear that he will go off it, he is so peculiar and excitable and eaten up with infallibility of his own judgment'.⁸⁴

One positive trait, according to a columnist, was his loyalty to his workers. 'He loved to have around him men who had spent their lives in his service, instead of their being, as is sometimes the case, thrown aside like a squeezed orange, when the prime of their manhood is over'.⁸⁵ At the banquet to celebrate the first month's crushing at Waiorongomai, in proposing a toast to 'The Working Men' he orated that 'the clearest intellect, the strongest will, were all dependent on the strong arms of the working men, and it was to them as much as to anyone that the success ... was due'.⁸⁶ From the workers' perspective, actions were more important than verbiage. 'Miner' commented during the 1884 strike that the battery charged 10s per ton for crushing when 7s 'would pay handsomely'. Because of the higher charge, the battery had an 'unreasonable net profit of £100 per week; and finding the pressure too heavy on the mines, have endeavoured to cut the wages down'. The company was trying to 'retain the enormous battery profits, at the expense of the miner'.⁸⁷ In a speech at a Harvest Home at Matamata in 1884, Firth called for capital and labour to work together, and claimed that he had tried to treat his farm workers as friends:

I have striven to make you happy and contented. You know very well I allow no bullying, no cursing at Matamata. (Cheers.) If a man won't do a fair day's work without that, for a fair day's wages and plenty of good food, he is no man for me, and he very soon gets the walking ticket. (Cheers.).⁸⁸

⁸² *Observer*, 1 October 1881, p. 34.

⁸³ *New Zealand Watchman*, 22 April 1886, p. 5.

⁸⁴ John Logan Campbell to William Brown, 16 June 1889, cited in Hooper, Pratt, and Kearins, p. 83.

⁸⁵ 'Mercurio', 'Local Gossip', *Auckland Weekly News*, 25 December 1897, p. 7.

⁸⁶ *Thames Star*, 7 December 1883, p. 2.

⁸⁷ Letter from 'Miner', *Thames Advertiser*, 14 January 1884, p. 3.

⁸⁸ *New Zealand Herald*, 29 April 1884, p. 3.

Labour was unimpressed:

That excessively stupid man, Mr J.C. Firth, has been again talking of things he has no knowledge of. He gave what he called a Harvest-Home at Matamata last Saturday, and after the Thanksgiving was over – the Thanksgiving, by the way, being a call on all the people in Matamata to thank God that the land had given its increase to Mr J.C. Firth – he delivered a homily on what certain people call Political Economy. Mr Firth is great as a quack doctor, on what he calls the relation of Capital and Labour.

This ‘silly, garrulous man’ got his workers ‘to pray for him before discharging them’.⁸⁹ Two years later, *Labour*’s successor described him as ‘a very useful, enterprising settler, and a good but mistaken citizen’ because he argued that workers were receiving ‘big wages’.⁹⁰ At another harvest home, he was

praised, caressed, and flattered, like a little demi-god, by his admiring dependants – those wide-awake and prudent workmen, who, knowing his proverbial generosity, fully anticipated a substantial rise in their very modest wages, to crown the ceremony and make their joy complete, when, to their inexpressible horror and amazement, he very unkindly took a rise out of them instead, by giving them their discharge, with his most affectionate blessing; and he did this while in the very act of returning thanks for the adulation heaped upon him for favours to come.⁹¹

In 1889 Firth said that he considered his workers to be his friends, and supported the principles of the eight-hour day.⁹² Yet, two years previously, as chairman of directors of the Bay of Islands Coal Company he argued that their inability to pay dividends was in large part due to ‘the comparatively high wages’ paid to the workers. He praised the principles of co-operation, and was sure that

there could be no real prosperity until there was a community of interests between capital and labour - between employers and

⁸⁹ *Labour*, 1 May 1884, p. 6.

⁹⁰ *New Zealand Watchman*, 24 February 1886, p. 16.

⁹¹ *New Zealand Watchman*, 24 February 1886, p. 15.

⁹² *Auckland Weekly News*, 20 July 1889, p. 38.

workmen. No doubt in old times employers of labour had secured too large a share of profits, but he thought there could be no doubt that in these times workmen were obtaining far too great a proportion of the profits.

Co-operation was vital, and he considered that 'if the workmen would be content to make some sacrifice in the present with a view of bettering their condition in the future', it would mean 'a very important step would be taken in meeting the growing labour difficulty. If workingmen would take two-thirds or one-half of their present wages, then at the end of the half-year they would be entitled to a certain proportion of the profits which had been fairly earned'. Under this system, 'every man would be working for himself, and would be likely to do his level best for the prosperity of himself and for those who employed him'.⁹³ Possibly he gained these ideas from Clark, who in 1881 recommended working the Moanataiari mine on co-operative principles. Clark described the advantages to be gained from 'making the men feel identified with the business' and how miners would work harder and more honestly because it would be to their advantage. 'If the proprietors put the plant and mine at the disposal of the men, they were entitled to some consideration - half the wages. If the mine did not pay, the men would still have drawn half wages'. Details still had to be worked out, and the men consulted.⁹⁴ This suggestion came to nothing, and was not tried at Waiorongomai either. Like Firth, he considered that the colony was 'handicapped considerably by the heavy rate of wages'.⁹⁵

In 1884 Firth stated that, in making the Waihou navigable, he claimed 'very little credit' for himself, 'for He has so endowed me that a difficulty to me is little more than a plate of porridge to a hungry man, or than a shovelful of coal under a steam boiler'.⁹⁶ This attitude would lead one obituary writer to reflect that 'his principal failing was that of being too sanguine; it was only for him to recognize that success under certain conditions was probable, and he at once acted as if there were not a reverse side of the picture'.⁹⁷ This attribute, coupled with his tendency to forget that

⁹³ *Auckland Weekly News*, 12 February 1887, p. 18.

⁹⁴ *Auckland Weekly News*, 8 October 1881, p. 20.

⁹⁵ *Auckland Weekly News*, 1 May 1886, p. 19.

⁹⁶ *New Zealand Herald*, 29 April 1884, p. 3.

⁹⁷ *Waikato Argus*, 14 December 1897, p. 2.

‘Rome wasn’t built in a day’,⁹⁸ was very relevant to his involvement with Waiorongomai mining.

Unlike Firth, Clark rarely made any personal comments about himself, although in 1883 he told a banquet held in his honour that ‘I confess I have myself a very strong opinion on most subjects, and it is usually a pretty decided one’.⁹⁹ It might therefore be anticipated that he would be a foil to Firth’s enthusiasms, but there is no evidence to suggest that this was the case at Waiorongomai. This may simply reflect the fact that Firth, as the leading member of the council and a relentless self-promoter, publicized his views and his actions more. Although Firth was believed to decide the Battery Company’s policies, Clark was no mere sleeping partner, for he regularly inspected operations with Firth and must be assumed to have played an active part in reaching decisions.

INVESTING IN A BATTERY

Firth stated that the first report of the warden, Harry Kenrick,¹⁰⁰ on the discovery of gold at Waiorongomai ‘had first drawn his attention to the district’.¹⁰¹ As the *Observer* commented, there was a very good financial incentive for his promotion of the goldfield:

Why is it that the miller who advertises “superior flour” had plunged so wildly into Te Aroha goldmining companies. Has the fact of his possessing fat stock in the vicinity of the Upper Thames anything to do with the population being drawn to Te Aroha? Beware, Josiah! remember the fate of your venture in the Wild Missouri, Tararu, and only go in for genuine specs.¹⁰²

There was no evidence that either Firth or Clark considered Waiorongomai to be anything but a genuine speculation; and why should they, when experienced miners forecast a splendid goldfield? Firth, being Firth, put a veneer of high moral tone on his investment. Addressing a Te Aroha meeting that was considering his terms for erecting the battery, he said he was ready to risk £10,000 and was ‘by no means actuated by

⁹⁸ ‘Mercurio’, ‘Local Gossip’, *Auckland Weekly News*, 27 July 1889, p. 7.

⁹⁹ *Auckland Weekly News*, 22 December 1883, p. 11.

¹⁰⁰ See paper on his life.

¹⁰¹ *Thames Star*, 7 December 1883, p. 2.

¹⁰² *Observer*, 25 March 1882, p. 2.

mercenary motives, but rather for the general welfare of the district'.¹⁰³ Possibly impressed with such statements, and certainly by the fact that his was the only proposal, a Te Aroha correspondent reflected local gratitude by writing that Firth, 'for his enterprising speculations amongst us in gold mining matters, certainly merits that reward, which we ultimately trust will be his in the shape of lasting and continuous dividends'.¹⁰⁴ William Larnach, when Minister of Mines, agreed, informing parliament in 1885 that the battery was

owned and worked by one of New Zealand's most enterprising men - Mr Firth, of Auckland, and I have no hesitation in pronouncing this plant to be the most perfect of its kind that I have yet seen in the colony. Without it the resources of this great mining district could not have been developed. If therefore the proprietor has reaped a good harvest for his enterprise it is well deserved.¹⁰⁵

Once again, Firth had placed himself so prominently in the spotlight that Larnach seemed unaware that he had a partner.

In his usual manner, Firth had, as his brother-in-law commented, 'gone in whole sale both in Claims and Battery'.¹⁰⁶ Admiringly, when the battery started the *Observer* wrote that he 'threw his energy and capital into the opening of this new field. The difficulties to be surmounted were such as any mere speculator would have shrunk from'.¹⁰⁷ But any altruism was subordinated to his desire to make money. Waiorongomai was very much part of his business empire, as illustrated by his extending his private telephone line from Matamata to Waiorongomai, from whence there was telegraphic communication with Auckland, enabling him to be informed immediately of developments in both places.¹⁰⁸ It was believed by some that

¹⁰³ *Waikato Times*, 18 April 1882, p. 2.

¹⁰⁴ Te Aroha Correspondent, *Waikato Times*, 18 April 1882, p. 2.

¹⁰⁵ *Waikato Times*, 28 July 1885, p. 3.

¹⁰⁶ W.L.C. Williams to F.D. Rich, 22 April 1882, W.L.C. Williams Letterbook 1880-1884, in private possession.

¹⁰⁷ *Observer*, 15 December 1883, p. 4.

¹⁰⁸ *Te Aroha Mail*, n.d., reprinted in *Thames Star*, 2 January 1883, p. 2; *New Zealand Herald*, 9 May 1883, p. 4; *Thames Star*, 10 December 1883, p. 2; Superintendent, Post Office and Telegraph Department, Auckland, to William Thornton Firth, 28 December 1883, Firth Family Papers, MS-Papers-1491-02, Alexander Turnbull Library.

it was not his own money that was being investing but that he was living on credit, one mine manager, Edward Kersey Cooper,¹⁰⁹ telling a Te Aroha meeting in 1884 that Firth ‘had got the ear of all the financial institutions’.¹¹⁰ When a drunken carpenter was arrested at Te Aroha in 1889 with £1,100 in his pocket, apparently earned by working for Firth at Matamata for 20 years, one Te Aroha resident wondered ‘how much of that money ought, strictly speaking, to belong to the B.N.Z.’.¹¹¹

Those interested in mining did not care whose money it was or how it was come by, just so long as it was provided, as illustrated in April 1882 when a visitor arrived on a dark evening and fumbled his way from the wharf into the township:

After groping our way up for a hundred yards, we got into what appeared to be a line of street in which were numerous knots of men standing about, and all apparently discussing some very important event or events. You would see one leave a knot and hurry off and join another some distance away, while one would leave No. 2 knot and join the next, and so on. This continued all the way up to the first hotel ([George] O’Halloran’s).¹¹² One of our party remarked there appeared to be a strong trade of axe grinding going on here; a “cutler’s shop,” replied another. On entering the hotel we found “All sorts and conditions of men,” from the Mayor of Auckland [Clark] and J.C. Firth in the parlour, down to Billy Dewar, the packer, and his mate in the bar. The place was crowded, drinking was rampant, and Scotch champagne [whisky] was ready chorus. Everybody was perfectly sober, and every person was in a whirl of excitement. The barman wanted to be hammered out into four to supply the demand. We asked what was up? Had any one got his legs jammed with five tons of gold twenty-three carats fine falling out of the roof of a drive? They said “No; but the battery was settled.” The battery was to go up. J.C. Firth had squared the whole matter; every one saw, or appeared to see, piles as high as Te Aroha.¹¹³

The *Te Aroha News* considered that ‘Fortune seemed to smile on us’ when those ‘energetic and plucky investors’ Firth and Clark became

¹⁰⁹ See paper on his life.

¹¹⁰ *Te Aroha News*, 30 August 1884, p. 2.

¹¹¹ ‘Te Aroha’, *Observer*, 12 October 1889, p. 18; see also cartoon, 22 August 1891, p. 8.

¹¹² See paper on his life.

¹¹³ ‘Miranda’, ‘The First Trip of the S.S. “Miranda” ’, *Thames Advertiser*, 20 April 1882, p. 3.

involved, their ‘thorough business knowledge and shrewdness’ quickly seeing ‘a legitimate and profitable investment for their loose cash’.¹¹⁴ In November 1882, at a banquet to Henry Hopper Adams,¹¹⁵ who had supervised the construction of their battery, the vice-chair proposed a toast to the company’s prosperity, ‘remarking that if they had a few more men like Messrs Firth and Clark in their midst their prosperity would be secured. Drunk with three times three’.¹¹⁶ The *Thames Advertiser* commended them for ‘the spirit of enterprise’ they displayed ‘in sinking such an enormous amount of money’ into the battery. ‘Their belief in the payable character of the mines’ was ‘evidently of the firmest kind’ and it hoped they would reap ‘a splendid reward for their faith and perseverance’.¹¹⁷

In its editorial on the first crushing, this newspaper described their investment as being ‘as plucky a piece of speculation as has been witnessed’ on the peninsula ‘since the day the miners first put a pick into it, and this is saying a good deal’. Its justification for this statement was that the prospects were ‘by no means as good as those which can, by a little labour, be obtained almost anywhere in the ranges’ near Thames. Their investment was ‘spirited’ and ‘unique’, and if they had not erected their excellent battery the goldfield ‘would really have had no practical existence’. Only ‘an ill-conditioned churl’ would ‘begrudge the very best of good luck to men willing to risk so much upon a venture’ at a time when ‘mining wiseacres shook their heads at what they deemed rashness’. Their ‘unusual enterprise’ deserved a ‘rich reward’.¹¹⁸

At the banquet celebrating the starting of the battery, Firth’s long speech about the future of the goldfield mentioned speculation. He pronounced himself pleased that the field was not one ‘producing merely a few extravagant returns leading to wild excitement and speculation, but [was] one of steady payable dividends, involving legitimate shareholding and honest working’.¹¹⁹

I hope that as the development of Te Aroha goldfield progresses
we shall find it to be a field which will offer a reasonable and fair

¹¹⁴ *Te Aroha News*, 3 November 1883, p. 2.

¹¹⁵ See paper on his life.

¹¹⁶ *Thames Advertiser*, 8 November 1882, p. 3.

¹¹⁷ *Thames Advertiser*, 7 November 1882, p. 3.

¹¹⁸ Editorial, *Thames Advertiser*, 6 December 1883, p. 2.

¹¹⁹ *Te Aroha News*, 8 December 1883, p. 3.

prospect to investors more than to speculators. I hope, gentlemen, that this goldfield will not afford a field for swindling (Hear, hear); will not afford an opportunity for speculators making money out of their neighbours' pockets. (Hear, hear). I hope that our object in this field is ... that this field will be worked in the interest, not of sharebrokers - not of speculators - but of shareholders. (Cheers.) For myself, and many gentlemen who are working with me, I may say that this is our fixed resolution: that we regard ourselves as the servants of the shareholders; that their interests are our primary object. Therefore if at any time it should be supposed that we are not affording undue facilities for speculation and gambling, I hope that you will remember that that is no part of our intention or our business. Our simple object is to promote the interests of those persons who have invested a little money in this goldfield with the idea of drawing reasonable returns from it. (Hear, hear.)¹²⁰

An indication of his public-spiritedness and how repugnant speculation was to him was revealed in the terms under which he erected the battery. Negotiations started in February 1882,¹²¹ and a decision was made on 15 April, when a meeting of shareholders in the New Find, English Army, and Premier companies was held under the chairmanship of Henry Ernest Whitaker.¹²² Whitaker,

in a neat and appropriate address pointed clearly to the great requirement of the new field, viz: the want of a quartz-crushing mill. That desideratum, he then showed, rested entirely with the present representatives of the meeting, inasmuch as Mr Firth had made certain proposals for the erection of a powerful crushing plant of 40 stampers on the Waiorongomai Creek, in consideration of receiving from the New Find Gold-mining Company 2,000 shares, Premier 2,000, and English Army 2,500 shares; these companies respectively, to have at all times a prior right of ten head each, and at a moderate cost of ten shillings per ton for crushing, the remaining head to be set apart for public use. The time fixed for their ultimate decision had arrived, and as Mr Firth was present he would call on that gentleman to express his views on the matter. Mr J.C. Firth stated he had come that evening for the purpose of knowing the decision arrived at by the representatives of the companies above referred to. He showed

¹²⁰ *Thames Advertiser*, 7 December 1883, p. 3.

¹²¹ *Thames Advertiser*, 24 February 1882, p. 3.

¹²² See paper on Harry and Charles: Henry Ernest Whitaker and Charles Stanislaus Stafford.

that the mill proposed to be erected by him would absorb a sum of between £7000 and £8000, and would, when finished, be replete with all the latest modern appliances for saving gold, the whole to be turned out and ready for action within six months, and, if it could possibly be accomplished, sooner. He further stated that some short time since, hearing the great want of the field was battery power, he had purchased the Piako mill at Grahamstown for the sum of £2000. Now, for the erection of this splendid plant, approximating the new goldfield, a further sum of between £5000 and £6000 would be required. This, however, he was prepared to risk, even in the present undeveloped state of the field, provided the terms referred to were agreed upon.¹²³

They were, this report giving no indication of any disquiet. Two days before the meeting, however, a rumour was current that Firth's terms would be rejected.¹²⁴ One Thames newspaper revealed that while his terms were seen as rather hard, claimholders realized that, if they did not agree, there would be no battery and the goldfield 'might collapse altogether for some time'. It hoped that other batteries would soon be erected to compete. It did not see Firth as public-spirited: 'Mr Firth, shrewd business man as he is, very naturally made the best terms he could'.¹²⁵

INVESTING IN, AND GAINING CONTROL OF, MINES

Firth and Clark not only erected a battery but also bought shares in claims and companies, either in its own name or in their names but on behalf of the company.¹²⁶ The following details are of the first time an interest was purchased; further shares were later purchased in some mines. Only on one occasion, when Clark sold a quarter of a share,¹²⁷ were any sold to other investors: all other shares were retained for the company. The first purchases were made on 25 February 1882, when Firth bought all the

¹²³ *Waikato Times*, 18 April 1882, p. 2.

¹²⁴ *Thames Advertiser*, 13 April 1882, p. 3.

¹²⁵ *Thames Advertiser*, 17 April 1882, p. 2.

¹²⁶ J.C. Firth to George Wilson, 29 July 1887, Te Aroha Warden's Court, Mining Applications 1887, BBAV 11582/3a, ANZ-A.

¹²⁷ Te Aroha Warden's Court, Register of Licensed Holdings 1881-1887, folio 45, BBAV 11500/9a, ANZ-A [it is not known how many full shares there were in this claim].

shares in the Ajax; three days later Clark bought one in the Coquette.¹²⁸ In March, Clark bought shares in seven claims,¹²⁹ and both men had shares in the New Find, Premier, and Army companies.¹³⁰ All these had 20,000 shares; by April they had 2,750 fully paid-up shares in the first, 3,000 in the second, and 8,250 in the third. Company records have not survived, but it may be assumed that further shares were bought, thereby increasingly giving the Battery Company the same controlling interest it was to acquire in other mines.

In April, a month after Clark had bought some shares in both the Eureka and Victoria, Firth bought more.¹³¹ Both men had shares in the Waitoki Company, floated in April: Clark had 1,000, and the 2,500 in Firth's name were fully paid up¹³² to ensure it had priority in crushing. In May, Firth bought shares in three more mines, in one of which Clark had already purchased an interest.¹³³ June saw Firth become the sole owner of the Moa and A to H claims, which unsurprisingly became the Alphabet Company, a private company solely owned by the Battery Company.¹³⁴ He and Clark became the sole owners of the Pearl as well in that month.¹³⁵

In June the company first acquired shares under its own name. It obtained a small interest in the Young Colonial, soon to be renamed the

¹²⁸ Te Aroha Warden's Court, Register of Licensed Holdings 1881-1887, folios 8, 52, BBAV 11500/9a; Transfers and Assignments 1882, nos. 91, 139, BBAV 11581/1a, ANZ-A.

¹²⁹ Te Aroha Warden's Court, Register of Licensed Holdings 1881-1887, folios 1, 4, 6, 26, 45, 46, 50, BBAV 11500/9a; Transfers and Assignments 1882, nos. 105-107, 114-116, 166, 176, 220, 225, 227, 258, BBAV 11581/1a ANZ-A.

¹³⁰ *New Zealand Gazette*, 23 March 1882, pp. 489-490.

¹³¹ Te Aroha Warden's Court, Register of Licensed Holdings 1881-1887, folios 26, 45, BBAV 11500/9a; Transfers and Assignments 1882, nos. 113, 166, 224-226, 258, BBAV 11581/1a, ANZ-A.

¹³² *New Zealand Gazette*, 27 April 1882, p. 646.

¹³³ Te Aroha Warden's Court, Register of Licensed Holdings 1881-1887, folios 9, 24, 53, 54, BBAV 11500/9a, ANZ-A.

¹³⁴ Te Aroha Warden's Court, Register of Applications 1880-1882, folios 127, 129, BBAV 11505/3a; Register of Licensed Holdings 1881-1887, folio 115, BBAV 11500/9a; Henry Gilfillan, Jr, to Receiver of Gold Revenue, 13 June 1883, 6 June 1883, Mining Applications 1883, BBAV 11591/1a; Henry Gilfillan, Jr, to George Wilson, 31 December 1883 (telegram), General Correspondence 1884, BBAV 11584/2b, ANZ-A.

¹³⁵ Te Aroha Warden's Court, Register of Licensed Holdings 1881-1887, folio 104, BBAV 11500/9a, ANZ-A.

Colonist, and in the Diamond Gully and the Lady Ferguson.¹³⁶ In July it acquired its first shares in the Little Jimmy, and the Stanley and Matamata claims were registered as solely owned by it.¹³⁷ When the Little Jimmy Company was registered in November, it held 9,000 of its 20,000 shares.¹³⁸ In August, Firth acquired his first shares in the Colonist Company,¹³⁹ the last time he would buy shares in his own name; the company also owned 7,500 of the 20,000 shares of the Lord Stanley Company.¹⁴⁰ The following month, the company's holding in the Canadian Company was the smallest it had in any company, a mere 350 shares.¹⁴¹ Clark registered his last shareholding under his own name in October, in the Treasury Company.¹⁴² The company acquired shares in one more claim and three more companies between October and December.¹⁴³

In December, the Battery Company became a shareholder in a Karangahake company and in another one a year later,¹⁴⁴ the only interests it acquired outside Waiorongomai. According to the *Thames Star*, in April 1883 Firth was 'so well satisfied with his mining speculations at Te Aroha that he has secured large interests in some of the leading claims in the Karangahake district'.¹⁴⁵ In the absence of company records, the details of these shareholdings are unknown. In 1882, Clark was elected a director of the Maria Company, in 1883 of the Crown, and in 1885 of the Dubbo, all at Karangahake.¹⁴⁶ When he inspected the mines there with Adams in 1885,

¹³⁶ Te Aroha Warden's Court, Transfers and Assignments 1882, nos. 414, 423, 424, 449, 450, BBAV 11581/2a; Register of Licensed Holdings 1881-1887, folios 4, 80, BBAV 11500/9a, ANZ-A.

¹³⁷ Te Aroha Warden's Court, Register of Licensed Holdings 1881-1887, folios 25, 130, BBAV 11500/9a; Transfers and Assignments 1882, no. 681, BBAV 11581/2a, ANZ-A.

¹³⁸ *New Zealand Gazette*, 16 November 1882, p. 1732.

¹³⁹ *New Zealand Gazette*, 10 August 1882, p. 1101.

¹⁴⁰ *New Zealand Gazette*, 17 August 1882, p. 1132.

¹⁴¹ *New Zealand Gazette*, 14 September 1882, p. 1264.

¹⁴² *New Zealand Gazette*, 2 November 1882, p. 1616.

¹⁴³ Te Aroha Warden's Court, Notices of Transfers of Shares, 681/262, BBAV A485/42, ANZ-A; *New Zealand Gazette*, 2 November 1882, p. 1616, 16 November 1882, p. 1733, 14 December 1882, p. 1884.

¹⁴⁴ *New Zealand Gazette*, 14 December 1882, p. 1886, 27 December 1883, p. 1815.

¹⁴⁵ *Thames Star*, 25 April 1883, p. 2.

¹⁴⁶ Company Files, BBAE 10286/14c, 10286/16l, ANZ-A; *Auckland Weekly News*, 30 September 1882, p. 20.

‘both seemed highly pleased with the prospects of the different mines, in many of which’ Clark was ‘somewhat deeply interested’.¹⁴⁷

The only other purchases of Waiorongomai shares before the battery started were in two claims in late 1883, when small interests were bought from Adams, who possibly acquired them on behalf of the company. For no apparent reason, on the same day the company and Adams exchanged half a full share (out of seven-and-a-half) in the Star at identical prices.¹⁴⁸ By December the company had sole ownership of ten claims, the eight that made up the Alphabet Company plus the two Moa ones.¹⁴⁹

Their leading role in the field meant that both men became directors of the main companies. Firth was director of the Canadian and Clark of the Werahiko, Lady Ferguson, and Waiorongomai. Both men were directors of the Army, Waitoki, Lord Stanley, New Find, Diamond Gully, Premier, Te Aroha Eureka, and Colonist, Firth being chairman of directors of the last five as well as of the Canadian.¹⁵⁰ By 1888, Clark had replaced Firth as chairman of the Colonist.¹⁵¹ They may also be assumed to have been the sole directors of the company’s subsidiary, the Alphabet Company.

As the goldfield declined during the mid-1880s, the company gained total control of more mines. In early 1884, it took all the reserve shares in the Eureka Company to pay for the erection of its wire tramway,¹⁵² and late that year bought this company and the adjoining Little and Good claim.¹⁵³ In April it made its most philanthropic purchase by paying £200 on top of their accepted tender for 8,000 reserved shares in the Waiorongomai claim, a ‘voluntary advance of 50 per cent’ on the agreed price made because of a rich find made a few hours after their tender was accepted. The *Te Aroha*

¹⁴⁷ *Thames Advertiser*, 17 February 1885, p. 3.

¹⁴⁸ Te Aroha Warden’s Court, Register of Licensed Holdings 1882-1887, folio 153, BBAV A485/5; Certified Instruments 1883, nos. 340, 512, 513, BBAV 11581/4a, ANZ-A.

¹⁴⁹ *Thames Star*, 18 December 1883, p. 3.

¹⁵⁰ *Thames Directory for 1885* (Thames, 1885), p. 127; Company Files, BBAE 10286/9e, 10286/9f, 10286/10a, 10286/10b, 10286/10h, 10286/11c, 10286/11e, 10286/12e, ANZ-A; *Thames Advertiser*, 23 February 1882, p. 2, 7 March 1882, p. 3, 15 September 1883, p. 3; Piako County Council, *Waikato Times*, 12 February 1885, p. 2; *Te Aroha News*, 18 September 1886, p. 2.

¹⁵¹ *Te Aroha News*, 1 June 1889, p. 2.

¹⁵² *Thames Advertiser*, 1 May 1884, p. 2; *Auckland Weekly News*, 3 May 1884, p. 13.

¹⁵³ Te Aroha Warden’s Court, Register of Licensed Holdings 1881-1887, folios 41, 44, BBAV 11500/9a, ANZ-A.

News considered this extra payment to be ‘certainly unique in the annals of the mining sharemarket’.¹⁵⁴ It was also unique for Firth and Clark, who normally drove a hard bargain.

These were the last purchases of part-interests in claims; from 1885 onwards they acquired all the interests. This reflected the decline in mining rather than megalomania, for to keep their plant operating they needed mines to keep producing ore, which required taking over those in financial difficulty. The company quickly abandoned mines shown to have no prospects of success.¹⁵⁵ In 1885 it took control of five mines, of varying potential,¹⁵⁶ and in the last week of 1886 pegged off much of the abandoned ground in anticipation of the successful treating of the ore resulting from Adams’ trip to America to investigate the latest technology.¹⁵⁷ By the following February, it had purchased about a quarter of the interests in all the mines, meaning a quarter of its wages bill in the battery was spent on crushings from its own claims.¹⁵⁸ Having bought the *May Queen*, in December it acquired the *New Find* as well for £2,000, ‘a good bargain’.¹⁵⁹ The purchase of four more mines was completed in January 1888, notably the *Diamond Gully* and *Canadian*.¹⁶⁰

WORKING THEIR MINES

Immediately after acquiring interests, Firth and Clark sought to develop their mines. At no time was there any indication that they were,

¹⁵⁴ *Te Aroha News*, 12 April 1884, p. 2.

¹⁵⁵ For example, the *Little and Good* was surrendered on 9 December 1885: *Te Aroha Warden’s Court, Register of Licensed Holdings 1881-1887*, folio 41, BBAV 11500/9a, ANZ-A.

¹⁵⁶ *Te Aroha Warden’s Court, Register of Licensed Holdings 1881-1887*, folios 199, 200, BBAV 11500/9a, ANZ-A; *The Handbook of New Zealand Mines* (Wellington, 1887), p. 341; *Thames Advertiser*, *Te Aroha Correspondent*, 15 August 1885, p. 3, 16 September 1885, p. 3.

¹⁵⁷ *Waikato Times*, 1 January 1887, p. 3.

¹⁵⁸ H.A. Stratford to Minister of Mines, 2 February 1887, Mines Department, MD 1, 87/89, ANZ-W.

¹⁵⁹ H.A. Gordon to Minister of Mines, 5 May 1887, *AJHR*, C-6, p. 6; *Waikato Times*, 15 December 1887, p. 2.

¹⁶⁰ *Te Aroha Warden’s Court, Register of Licensed Holdings 1881-1887*, folios 5, 24, 113, 134, BBAV 11500/9a, ANZ-A.

like so many shareholders, merely intending to play the sharemarket. According to one editorial, in a number of claims the company did not buy any shares but was given some 'to act as a stimulus to force the development of the field'.¹⁶¹ This may refer only to the companies that agreed to the terms for the erection of the battery. The *Te Aroha Mail*, in reporting on the Pearl and Little Jimmy claims in August 1882, noted that 50 feet had been driven in the former with 'little to be seen for the work done' and that 'very little work' had been done in the latter beyond some trenching and driving on the lode, which it described as 'mere prospecting, without anything very satisfactory to show for it'.¹⁶² In late 1882, when George Wilson,¹⁶³ the mining inspector, was considering forfeiting these for being undermanned, Adams pointed out that the company had 'spent a lot of money' on the former claim, and had two men prospecting on each. He hoped Wilson would 'take into consideration the enormous outlay of the Battery Company at present', and would 'not consider it necessary to bear too heavily on its endeavours at first but give us a little time to get things into working order'.¹⁶⁴ Henry Gilfillan, Jr, the legal manager,¹⁶⁵ repeated that the company had invested 'a very large amount' in its battery and water races, was 'intimately connected with many claims', and was 'well acquainted' with the tramway. 'Any attempt to enforce the manning of the ground to any great extent would inflict most serious damage to the field at large'. Even though the battery should be ready by January 1883, for 'many months' claims would be unable to send quartz to it because of delays in constructing the tramway.¹⁶⁶

On 21 December, the Little Jimmy was transformed into a company; the Pearl was surrendered at an unrecorded date.¹⁶⁷ In January 1883, Gilfillan applied for protection of the company's mines until the tramway was ready. 'We do not intend to cease work altogether, but will continue to

¹⁶¹ Editorial, *Freeman's Journal*, 30 November 1883, p. 9.

¹⁶² *Te Aroha Mail*, n.d., reprinted in *Thames Star*, 15 August 1882, p. 3.

¹⁶³ See paper on his life.

¹⁶⁴ H.H. Adams to George Wilson, 23 November 1882, 5 December 1882, Te Aroha Warden's Court, Applications 1882, BBAV 11582/2a, ANZ-A.

¹⁶⁵ See *Cyclopedia of New Zealand*, vol. 2, p. 464.

¹⁶⁶ Henry Gilfillan, Jr, to George Wilson, 27 November 1882, Te Aroha Warden's Court, General Correspondence 1882, BBAV 11584/1c, ANZ-A.

¹⁶⁷ Te Aroha Warden's Court, Register of Licensed Holdings 1881-1887, folios 5, 25, BBAV 11500/9a, ANZ-A.

keep some men employed'.¹⁶⁸ They did, and in July 'very fair picked stone' was found in the F claim. A correspondent considered it was 'highly satisfactory to find that the Battery Company who own the Alphabet claims have met with such encouraging results, as they have spent a great deal of money in prospecting'.¹⁶⁹ However, two months later the *Te Aroha News* stated that only a 'small amount of money' had been spent by the Alphabet Company, mostly in prospecting the D, F, and the two Moa claims.¹⁷⁰

Its most promising claim in 1883 and 1884 was the F. A trial crushing in July 1883 of either 35lb or 40lb (two newspapers gave two different amounts) had been expected to produce 2oz to the ton but in fact produced 3oz 4 1/2dwt.¹⁷¹ This gold, when assayed by the bank, was valued at £3 8s 6d per ounce, superior to Coromandel or Thames gold, the latter being only £2 19s.¹⁷² By mid-September, the reef had been driven on for 80 feet, gold being seen for the whole distance, and a new level to cut the reef at the creek level was in 20 feet.¹⁷³ A test taken in October of one ton 'taken promiscuously from the paddock' gave 6oz to the ton and a value of £3 9s 1d per ounce.¹⁷⁴ Gold was seen in both levels as driving continued, and by November a 35-foot rise had connected them, making the mine ready for stoping out.¹⁷⁵ A test at the beginning of December gave 6oz of retorted gold from 15oz of amalgam.¹⁷⁶ Nothing further was heard about this claim until a test of two tons taken from a narrow leader was reported to have obtained over 5oz.¹⁷⁷ In April 1884, the donkey engine formerly used for hauling rails up the tramway inclines was placed near the Inverness hopper to haul quartz by a ten-chain wire tramway from F claim's paddock, 300 feet below

¹⁶⁸ Henry Gilfillan, Jr, to George Wilson, 19 January 1883, Te Aroha Warden's Court, Applications 1883, BBAV 11289/9a, ANZ-A.

¹⁶⁹ Te Aroha Correspondent, *Waikato Times*, 19 July 1883, p. 3; see also *Waikato Times*, 10 July 1883, p. 2.

¹⁷⁰ *Te Aroha News*, 15 September 1883, p. 2.

¹⁷¹ *Te Aroha News*, 21 July 1883, p. 2; *Waikato Times*, 24 July 1883, p. 2.

¹⁷² *Thames Advertiser*, 1 August 1883, p. 2.

¹⁷³ *Te Aroha News*, 15 September 1883, p. 2.

¹⁷⁴ *Waikato Times*, 9 October 1883, p. 2, 23 October 1883, p. 2.

¹⁷⁵ *Te Aroha News*, 3 November 1883, p. 2; see also Special Reporter, 'A Trip to Te Aroha Goldfield', *Thames Star*, 18 December 1883, p. 3.

¹⁷⁶ *Thames Star*, 5 December 1883, p. 2.

¹⁷⁷ *Waikato Times*, 29 March 1884, p. 3.

the tramline; by May six or seven tons was being conveyed each day.¹⁷⁸ The 49 trucks sent to the battery were expected to yield 70 ounces.¹⁷⁹ 'Much unnecessary reticence' about the result frustrated the local newspaper, which nevertheless decided that 'the fact of operations being resumed and preparations being made for a lengthened period of work with the wire tramway' proved that the result 'must have been satisfactory'.¹⁸⁰ The result was never made public, but became apparent when the company unsuccessfully attempted to sell the claim two months later; it was surrendered in 1885.¹⁸¹

Samples were taken by Firth to Auckland from the Moa claims in May 1883 for a test crushing.¹⁸² In December, the company was only working three of its ten adjoining leases, the two Moa claims and the F. In the Moa No. 1, two reefs had been opened up, one being driven on for 50 feet, a winze was sunk 60 feet, and two trial parcels taken out. In Moa No. 2, two tunnels had been driven, one of 140 feet, and a winze down 20 feet was stopped by water.¹⁸³ The result of a trial crushing in June 1884 was not published, but was believed not to be 'satisfactory'.¹⁸⁴ Three days later, the Moa No. 1 was surrendered; the date of the surrender of Moa No. 2 was not recorded, but was probably at the same time.¹⁸⁵

CELEBRATING THE FIRST CRUSHING

To signify the importance of the first crushing in December 1883, many important people were invited to a celebratory banquet, including John Bryce, the Native Minister, and all the Auckland city councillors. Three steamers were chartered to bring the guests.¹⁸⁶ Over 100 invitations were sent 'to gentlemen interested in the commercial prosperity of Auckland

¹⁷⁸ *Te Aroha News*, 19 April 1884, p. 2, 10 May 1884, p. 2.

¹⁷⁹ *Te Aroha News*, 31 May 1884, p. 2.

¹⁸⁰ *Te Aroha News*, 7 June 1884, p. 2.

¹⁸¹ *Te Aroha News*, 9 August 1884, p. 7, 13 June 1885, p. 7.

¹⁸² *Thames Advertiser*, 21 May 1883, p. 2.

¹⁸³ Special Reporter, 'A Trip to Te Aroha Goldfield', *Thames Star*, 18 December 1883, p. 3.

¹⁸⁴ *Te Aroha News*, 7 June 1884, p. 2.

¹⁸⁵ Te Aroha Warden's Court, Register of Licensed Holdings 1881-1887, folios 106, 115, BBAV 11500/9a, ANZ-A.

¹⁸⁶ *Thames Advertiser*, 26 November 1883, p. 2; *Freeman's Journal*, 14 December 1883, p. 10; *New Zealand Herald*, 30 November 1883, p. 5; *Observer*, 15 December 1883, p. 4.

and its surrounding districts. The arrangements made for the conveyance and convenience of the guests were most perfect, superintended in person by the hosts', assisted by 'the courteous' Gilfillan and Thomas Macffarlane.¹⁸⁷ The latter was an accountant,¹⁸⁸ with investments in many Hauraki mines,¹⁸⁹ including one claim and two companies at Waiorongomai.¹⁹⁰

The guests filled the Palace Hotel, and all available horses were used to take them to inspect the mines and to witness the retorting.¹⁹¹ 'In honor of the occasion the miners were granted a half-holiday, and refreshments supplied'.¹⁹² At the banquet, speakers eulogized the prospects and thanking both government and council for their assistance. Firth made the longest speech of the evening, reported verbatim in the press.¹⁹³ One journalist who attended later recalled listening

to some of the most flowery speeches I have ever heard, and my experience in the flowery line is considerable. Mr Firth was more florid in his eloquence than ever before.... It has always puzzled me since how they managed to get so much gold there, and how it seemed to evaporate with these impassioned speeches.¹⁹⁴

ANTAGONISM TO THE COMPANY

¹⁸⁷ *Observer*, 15 December 1883, p. 4.

¹⁸⁸ See *New Zealand Herald*, 11 May 1885, p. 5; *Thames Advertiser*, 12 May 1885, p. 3.

¹⁸⁹ For example, *Auckland Provincial Government Gazette*, 12 February 1869, p. 92, 29 March 1869, p. 416, 18 May 1869, p. 709, 23 August 1869, p. 775, 1 September 1869, p. 888, 27 November 1869, p. 1648; *New Zealand Gazette*, 26 February 1880, p. 242, 20 May 1880, p. 789, 22 July 1880, p. 1065, 19 August 1880, p. 1235.

¹⁹⁰ Te Aroha Warden's Court, Register of Licensed Holdings 1881-1887, folio 1, BBAV 11500/9a, ANZ-A; *New Zealand Gazette*, 22 June 1882, p. 895, 19 October 1882, p. 1616.

¹⁹¹ *Observer*, 15 December 1883, p. 4.

¹⁹² *Thames Star*, 7 December 1883, p. 2.

¹⁹³ The most complete report of his speech was in *Thames Advertiser*, 7 December 1883, p. 3; see also *Thames Star*, 7 December 1883, p. 2; *Waikato Times*, 8 December 1883, p. 2; *Auckland Weekly News*, 15 December 1883, p. 7.

¹⁹⁴ 'Maratuahu', 'Te Aroha: Past and Present', *New Zealand Herald*, 21 April 1900, Supplement, p. 1.

Nobody had the bad taste to mention cold water squeezing, or any of the other controversies provoked by the first month's working.¹⁹⁵ But that these issues were in everyone's mind was illustrated by a *Thames Advertiser's* editorial:

There was a sufficient departure from the usual battery rules of treating the amalgam to raise in the minds of everybody some little doubt regarding the bona fides of the style in which the crushing was being conducted, with the result that something approaching a panic set in, and the word "swindle" was but too frequently applied to men who ill-deserved it. Who, or what, was primarily responsible for the errors which were undoubtedly committed in the manipulation of the amalgam will, probably, never be now fully explained, but we think all except prejudiced people will freely acquit Messrs Clark and Firth from any knowledge or participation in it, and will rather be disposed to look and see who the people were who "got out" of Waiorongomai stock during the few days when the belief was prevalent that the amalgam, the result of each day's crushing, had been put through the usual warm-water process before its weight was reported. However, this temporary cloud has now passed.... More Firths and Clarks are wanted, and less of the gentry who are supposed to have been at the bottom of the late amalgam muddle.¹⁹⁶

From which it can be taken that there were some 'prejudiced people' who did suspect Firth and Clark of insider trading and sharemarket manipulation. The *Freeman's Journal* reported that

rumours by the score have been floating; many have described the field as a "plant" from the first; another discourses of a desire to get off an unused battery; a third declares a deliberate attempt was made to deceive the public, which was rendered abortive by the stone turning out better than was anticipated; but such rumours, and many others, are more than ordinarily baseless, and we are fully convinced the promoters have acted in good faith, and with good intentions throughout. Circulating as the FREEMAN does among every mining community in the Colony, the necessity arose for some definite statement on this head to be made.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁵ See paper on the first crushings at Waiorongomai.

¹⁹⁶ Editorial, *Thames Advertiser*, 6 December 1883, p. 2.

¹⁹⁷ *Freeman's Journal*, 30 November 1883, p. 9.

This statement indicated that rumours about Firth and Clark's probity had spread throughout the mining districts. There had been local suspicions about their intentions well before the start of crushing, as indicated by a grumble from the Te Aroha correspondent of the *Observer* in April 1883 that the company was 'keeping things so nicely in hand that another nine months of starvation is before the shareholders'.¹⁹⁸ Which seems to have been an unfair charge that the company was deliberately delaying the battery's construction. When crushing started, the *Te Aroha News* wrote that there had been a 'certain amount of doubt' in the minds of

a portion of the general public as to the course the proprietors of the battery would pursue regarding the tailings, which were always considered would be of a payable nature. Messrs Firth and Clark came in for their usual amount of public growl; no end of bets were wagered as to the richness of the tailings, and the enormous fortunes that would be amassed by the gentlemen above referred to. We have great satisfaction in placing before the public a few particulars of the handsome and honourable manner in which the proprietors of the battery have acted,

namely to stack the tailings for the benefit of the companies. 'The line of conduct adopted by the proprietors gives great assurance to investors; it shows the public how to deal with clear-headed and straightforward businessmen, who only require to deal fairly with others'.¹⁹⁹ Three weeks later, it expressed very different views, although it did not join the ranks of the rumour-mongers:

The novel arrangements of the Battery Company ... for battery management can scarcely be looked upon as a success, and the blame is now being shifted onto the shoulders of the local directors [of companies]. By them, however, it is publicly stated that the returns of amalgam were published without their approval; while regarding the treatment and private retorting of same, they were never consulted. Even the general retorting so lately carried out was ordered by the Battery Company without even informing them, and they refused to sanction such a proceeding until it was approved of by their co-directors. Some of our local directors used every means in their power to have the battery free for the inspection of any one from the very start; but this was over-ruled. In making these remarks we desire to state

¹⁹⁸ Te Aroha Correspondent, *Observer*, 21 April 1883, p. 76.

¹⁹⁹ *Te Aroha News*, 10 November 1883, p. 2.

nothing but actual facts, and if these statements are correct, who but Messrs Clark and Firth are to blame with regard to the public having been misled, and as no one would for a moment, we are sure, impute that their motives were not the best in acting as they have, surely the honourable course for them to take now would be to openly admit that they have made a mistake. We trust that a good deal that now causes dissatisfaction will speedily and satisfactorily be explained, and that better arrangements will be made for the future.²⁰⁰

The company for its part wanted to be seen as a benefactor to the community, an instance being its paying £5 5s as its subscription to the Te Aroha library in 1883.²⁰¹

CHARGES

When preparing to erect the battery, Firth assured participating companies that the cost of crushing would not exceed 10s a ton.²⁰² The directors of these companies had signed an agreement that the blanketings from their ten head of stamps would be treated by two berdans, but as five were needed, the company offered in December to provide more, charging 10s per day for each. The local newspaper was outraged, writing that ‘this one-sided agreement’ gave the company ‘a legal right to take advantage of the folly of the mine directors’. This additional charge was ‘a thing unheard of elsewhere, but, as their own directors brought this about, we suppose the shareholders will have to bear it’.²⁰³ The directors explained that they had agreed to two berdans per company because they thought that, as the ore was not impregnated with base metals, no more would be needed.²⁰⁴ An equally outraged ‘Waiorongomai’ wrote that he was

informed that the battery manager recommended his employers to demand 25 per cent of the gold from the tailings for the use of the berdans. This, considering the predicament in which the mine directors have placed themselves through their shortsightedness

²⁰⁰ *Te Aroha News*, 1 December 1883, p. 2.

²⁰¹ Henry Gilfillan, Jr, to George Wilson, 4 July 1883, Te Aroha Warden’s Court, General Correspondence 1883, BBAV 11584/2a, ANZ-A.

²⁰² *Thames Advertiser*, 17 April 1882, p. 3.

²⁰³ *Te Aroha News*, 15 December 1883, p. 2.

²⁰⁴ *Te Aroha News*, 5 January 1883, p. 2.

in not securing a sufficient number of berdans in the first agreement, would have been a fair charge. But the battery²⁰⁵ owners did not see through the same spectacles as their employee, and their grasping policy was again brought into bold relief. "Oh, yes," they say, "we'll take the 25 per cent, but we want 10s per day for each berdan as well." An interesting calculation to illustrate the effect of this arrangement has been made. It is estimated that the New Find, crushing for 4 years, with ten head of stampers, will produce 23,000 ounces of gold from tailings. At the end of 4 years the battery proprietors would have had 19,000 ounces of gold, and the unfortunate shareholders in the New Find only 4000 ounces. After this my faith in philanthropists is gone forever.²⁰⁶

Others also lost faith in 'philanthropists' of the Firth variety: for instance, 'Disgusted' was informed that his letter 're battery management' was libellous.²⁰⁷ In practice this extreme profit did not occur. Because of the controversy the company first offered each mine five berdans for each ten head of stamps without extra charge, and then imposed new charges of, at first, 6s 8d, and then 5s per berdan per day.²⁰⁸ Despite these reductions, the *Te Aroha News* remained concerned about costs. When treatment started, each truck was charged as if it contained one and a third tons, but it was rumoured that soon each truck would be charged

as if containing one and a half tons. We trust however that the rumour is without foundation, for such a proceeding will undoubtedly - in conjunction with the present expense of conveying quartz over the tramway and charges made for treating the blanketings, &c, have the effect of deterring all low grade dirt being dealt with. We have no doubt, however, but that the battery proprietors will see the wisdom of giving every possible encouragement to mine owners to open up their ground.²⁰⁹

This fear came to nothing, but many rumours and concerns about charges continued. In an editorial in mid-May, the *Te Aroha News* claimed that the company was ruining the mines by getting ore out on contract just

²⁰⁵ Printed as 'mine'.

²⁰⁶ Letter from 'Waiorongomai', *Te Aroha News*, 26 January 1884, p. 7.

²⁰⁷ *Te Aroha News*, 26 January 1884, p. 2.

²⁰⁸ *Te Aroha News*, 5 January 1884, p. 2, 24 May 1884, p. 7, 7 June 1884, p. 2.

²⁰⁹ *Te Aroha News*, 5 January 1884, p. 2.

to keep its mill operating. 'Quantities of worthless stuff will be sent' to it, destroying the good reputation of some mines. 'Those who have assumed control' of mining had the 'sole object' of keeping the battery 'fully employed, no matter at what cost to the mines'. It claimed that 'for months past the direction of matters has virtually been in the hands of' Firth, who had not consulted shareholders or directors before instructing managers to get ore out by contract. 'Under his control the interests of shareholders have been made subservient to those of the Battery Company', for the mines were being forced to operate at twice the normal cost. 'The crushing charges - which phrase has an ominous significance in this instance, for they will assuredly have the effect of crushing many companies out of existence - are such as can be borne by only a very few claims'. The charges were 'prohibitory', and under 'such an incubus as this Battery Company has proved itself to be, the mines, one after another', were being 'literally smothered'. Until companies made 'strenuous' efforts 'to free themselves in some way from its toils' it was 'a mere waste of words to talk of prosperity for the goldfield'.²¹⁰ In its following issue, 'A Miner' agreed:

I say work the mines for the shareholders and not for the Battery Company, and let the Battery owners and their manager attend to their own business, and not under pretence of studying the shareholders' interests, legislate entirely for the battery's interest. It is true the directors of the different companies deserve great censure for the apathy they've displayed in allowing Mr J.C. Firth to take, as it were, the reins into his own hands and drive as he likes. To bear out this rather forcible language, I will take for instance the Colonist Goldmining Company's last week's crushing account, and compare Te Aroha charges with what the charges for the same amount of quartz would be at the Thames:-

Tramway charges on 80 trucks, 4s 6d	£18 0 0
Crushing 80 trucks, equal to 107 tons, 10s.	...		53 10 0
8 berdans charged treating blanketing, per day, 6s 8d...			16 0 0
16 berdans on tailings, per day, 6s 8d	...		33 0 0
Total for six days			£119 10s

²¹⁰ Editorial, *Te Aroha News*, 17 May 1884, p. 2.

Against these preposterous charges we have 249oz 15dwt amalgam, which I will take to be worth one-fourth, or 62oz 8dwt of gold, worth say £2 16s 6d per ounce, £176 6s 6d, a balance of £56 16s 7d to pay all wages and incidental expenses. The 16 berdans (which are going only half-speed [because of a shortage of water]) on tailings at 6s 8d per day, brings the company, on this account, £5 3s 3d on the week in debt. On the Thames 107 tons of quartz would be called under 60 loads, this crushed at 8s per load would cost £24. There will be no extra charge for the berdans to treat the blanketings, thus the charge at the Thames versus Te Aroha for the given amount of quartz shows thus -

Te Aroha	Thames
£69 10s 0d	£24 0s 0d

Our tailings at the Thames would have a ready sale, whilst the tailings-plant here brings the companies in debt. I will instance another glaring injustice to the shareholders of our goldmines. A buddle or sluice-box was recommended to the directors of the New Find as used at the Thames as a means of concentrating the tailings to one-sixth of the bulk. This *modus operandi* in the case of last week's treatment of the Colonist's tailings would have reduced the charges from £32 to £5 6s 8d, a savings of £26 13s 4d. To erect an appliance of this kind would not cost £5, yet permission was withheld to do so, as it did not suit the Battery Company. If Mr J.C. Firth has really, as he professes, the interest of this goldfield at heart, he will at once cease to represent two interests diametrically opposed to one another.²¹¹

Neither Firth nor Clark took this advice, and continued to be directors of mining companies. Once again Firth was seen as the cause of all the woes, but although he was the spokesman it must be assumed that Clark, and indeed Adams and others, helped to devise the policy. In June, another *Te Aroha News* editorial attacked the excessive charges:

Claim holders complain that they never know what they will amount to. Ten shillings is first charged per ton for crushing, then extra berdans for treatment of the blanketings must be paid for at per day, and the tailings are crushed in the company's plant at 5s per berdan per day. It is said the battery company have expressed their willingness to reduce their charges, provided they themselves should continue to have a liberal profit. Public opinion here very strongly favours the idea that with good management the charges could be very considerably reduced, without affecting the profits of the battery. We do not concur in all the opinions

²¹¹ Letter from 'A Miner', *Te Aroha News*, 24 May 1884, p. 7.

expressed by our correspondents regarding the battery owners, and we confidently hope, no matter what mistakes they have hitherto made, that these gentlemen who hold so large a stake here, even for their own interests, will properly investigate and remedy the present unsatisfactory position of affairs.²¹²

The other Te Aroha newspaper, the *Te Aroha Mail*, accused Firth of doing all he could to ruin the goldfield 'by excessive charges for crushing', and quoted 'A Miner's' letter comparing Thames and Te Aroha costs.²¹³ *Labour* considered that as the government had subsidized the field 'so largely, it should have a potent voice in fixing the battery charges'.²¹⁴

Those connected with mining elsewhere agreed with the criticism. The Thames correspondent of the *New Zealand Industrial Gazette* wrote that battery charges were 'very heavy, fully half as much again' as charged at Thames, even though expenses were lighter, 'hampering the mining industry considerably'. He hoped that the construction of another battery would 'cause the proprietors to be satisfied with a less exorbitant rate'.²¹⁵ That a rival plant was seen as the way to end the company's monopoly and thereby revive the goldfield was illustrated by the song written by a Thames poet, Richard Wiseman,²¹⁶ 'A Te Aroha Idyl', performed at a Presbyterian concert at Te Aroha in March 1884.²¹⁷ Some of its verses attacked the company:

There's a good time coming, boys - a good time coming!
Battery-owners then no longer blind, will much more to their
interest find,

In the good time coming,
A moderate charge for crushing done - let and let live prove
stronger;
'Twill answer best in the long run; wait a little longer.

²¹² Editorial, *Te Aroha News*, 7 June 1884, p. 2.

²¹³ *Te Aroha Mail*, n.d., cited in *Labour*, 5 June 1884, p. 5.

²¹⁴ *Labour*, 5 June 1884, p. 5.

²¹⁵ Thames Correspondent, *New Zealand Industrial Gazette and Pastoral and Agricultural News*, 15 June 1884, p. 39.

²¹⁶ See *Observer*, 28 September 1895, p. 5, 13 February 1915, p. 16; *Thames Star*, 24 October 1896, p. 2, 8 July 1897, p. 2.

²¹⁷ Richard Wiseman to Sir George Grey, 24 May 1884, Grey New Zealand Letters, vol. 36, p. 64, Auckland Public Library; *Te Aroha News*, 22 March 1884, p. 2.

some claimholders had preferred 'that work should cease rather than continue to work out their ground for the benefit of the Battery Company'. Unfortunately, the reduction, 'although a most liberal one as affecting low grade quartz', was 'not by any means such as was reported, or such as would cause any appreciable revival of work'. All quartz yielding under half an ounce of gold per truck would be charged 8s with the use of two berdans instead of one as previously; for each pennyweight over and above that half ounce, an additional charge of 6d would be levied up to the maximum of 12s per truck:

In other words, the new tariff represents a reduction on late rates equal to about 6s 4d on dirt yielding 10dwt, 4s 4d on 14dwt dirt, and 2s 4d on dirt yielding 18dwt and over per truck. In addition to this, a reduction has been made with regard to extra berdans required in connection with new crushings, which will be charged 4s each instead of 5s, but berdans needed for treating tailings, &c, already accumulated, will still be charged 5s each as heretofore. The reduction, therefore, being on the sliding scale system, and not a general one, will not, we believe, have the effect of causing many mines which have ceased working for the present to resume operations, as the owners will probably prefer to wait and see what inducements will be offered by the new battery now being erected.²²⁴

The *Waikato Times* correspondent noted that companies would be permitted to lease part of the battery at £12 per week for five head of stampers and two berdans, and would even be able to provide their own batteryhands. He considered the new terms were 'fair and reasonable', and if applied 12 months ago mining 'would not now be in such a depressed state'. It remained 'to be seen whether the concessions so tardily made by the battery company will have any effect in reviving it'.²²⁵ In August 1886, another newspaper quoted the cost of crushing as being £1 per truck.²²⁶

William Larnach, Minister of Mines, discussed the needs of the field with mine managers during his visit in May 1885. 'On being informed what shareholders have been obliged to pay for treatment' at the battery 'he remarked they were not very modest with respect to their charges'. During this conversation he stated 'more than once' that cheaper crushing

²²⁴ Editorial, *Te Aroha News*, 18 April 1885, p. 2.

²²⁵ Te Aroha Correspondent, *Waikato Times*, 23 April 1885, p. 2.

²²⁶ *New Zealand Herald*, 30 August 1886, p. 6.

‘appeared to be the great need’. When meeting the council, he said it was ‘most highly desirable in the interests of the field that the charges’ were reduced. Firth interposed that the company had recently cut these ‘very considerably, and could not afford to do so further’, and claimed the rates were ‘far lower than at the Thames, whilst the quartz was from thirty to fifty per cent harder’.²²⁷ When Kenrick commented that Thames batteries had to pay for their water supply, Firth responded that at Thames water races had been constructed by the government and that the interest his company was paying on the cost of building its races was ‘very much greater than the rent paid’ in Thames.²²⁸

CONTROLLING THE MINES

James Mills, a carpenter who would become the first mayor,²²⁹ told Larnach how pleased he was that the competition provided by the New Era battery²³⁰ would mean lower charges.

The average return from all the mines per ton since the opening of the field was close on an ounce, and surely this ought to pay well, but owing to excessive battery charges it did not, and the result was that a great many of the mines had ceased working for the moment, rather than continue paying prohibitive rates.

He cited the example of the Colonist, from which, between 6 December 1883 and 20 December 1884, 4,362 $\frac{2}{3}$ tons had been treated, yielding 3,069 ounces. The battery received £2,934 18s 2d for crushing; the tailings had not been treated and ‘had passed into the possession of the Battery Company in payment of monies due’.²³¹

Complaints about profiteering continued throughout 1885. In January, a correspondent noted that ‘during the holidays the battery company made no less than £600 out of the tailings alone’.²³² At a public meeting in June, Mills stated that ‘the cost of crushing at the existing battery had been reduced, but they all know in what way. What was the good of striving and

²²⁷ *Te Aroha News*, 30 May 1885, p. 2.

²²⁸ *Waikato Times*, 28 May 1885, p. 2.

²²⁹ See paper on his life.

²³⁰ See paper on Peter Ferguson and his New Era.

²³¹ *Te Aroha News*, 30 May 1885, p. 7.

²³² *Te Aroha Correspondent*, *Waikato Times*, 17 January 1885, p. 2.

working if all the results were to be absorbed by Mr Firth's battery'.²³³ In assessing the goldfield in its first issue for 1886, the *Te Aroha News* wrote that 'the inevitable result of a long-continued excessive battery charges (long foreseen and oft predicted), has come about in the closing or forfeiture of most of the mines'. It considered that Firth and Clark had

made a great mistake in offering so little inducement to mine owners to develop their properties. One mine after another had to cease work, unable to pay the high rates levied for treatment of quartz; and it was only when there was a strong probability of the remainder following suit that any reduction was made, and then on a sliding scale of an unsatisfactory character, which completely failed to induce companies who had been obliged to cease work owing to long-continued excessive rates, to resume operations.

It blamed the apathy of directors and shareholders for not taking steps 'to have their properties worked to more advantage', using as its example the Colonist during 1885:

The shareholders who quietly submitted to have their property temporarily closed, the mine manager discharged just as he had opened up what was known to be a payable block of ground, and that mine afterwards handed over to the Battery Company to do as they liked with, deserve no better than their property should be returned to them comparatively worthless.²³⁴

Clark had inspected the mine in February and was shown payable stone ready for breaking out.²³⁵ Later that month, 'Busybody' asked whether there was 'a move on foot to have the Colonist claim disposed of, and if so, will it be done in a similar manner to the disposing of the Eureka';²³⁶ meaning that it would be taken over by the company at a cheap price.²³⁷ At a public meeting in Te Aroha that month, a contractor, Bernard Montague,²³⁸ opposed the company asking Colonist shareholders to pay a call of 6d. It 'held a large number of shares in the mine, and the making of the call just at this time, when work in the mine had been suspended,

²³³ *Te Aroha News*, 20 June 1885, p. 2.

²³⁴ Editorial, *Te Aroha News*, 2 January 1886, p. 2.

²³⁵ *Te Aroha News*, 14 February 1885, p. 2.

²³⁶ Letter from 'Busybody', *Te Aroha News*, 21 February 1885, p. 7.

²³⁷ See paper on the Eureka claim.

²³⁸ See paper on his life.

meant causing the shareholders to let their shares be forfeited'. Tributers were willing to work it, 'but no! They would not get it, and now protection was to be sought, and the mine kept idle'. Mills believed 'it was high time the outside public knew more about the freezing out process being pursued here with regard to the poor people', and charged the company with injuring the field by controlling the mines. The meeting unanimously opposed the Colonist being granted protection, believing this was intended to ensure that Firth and Clark could acquire it cheaply.²³⁹

The company did take control of the Colonist in June, and let a contract to break out 300 trucks at 16s 3d per truck. After deducting all the costs of mining, haulage, and crushing, it was to give the balance to the Colonist Company,²⁴⁰ provoking an impassioned editorial in the *Te Aroha News* on the way this mine was to be worked:

The conditions are certainly of a very extraordinary nature, and we cannot do better than give the gist of them, to enable shareholders at a distance to know what is being done with their property. The arrangement, we are informed, is that the directors of the Colonist mine have granted the Battery Company the right of working this mine themselves; they to deduct all the costs of working and crushing, *etc, etc*, from the yield of gold, the cash balance, if any, to be handed over to the company, the deficiency, if such exists, to be borne by the Battery Company. To the uninitiated this may appear at first sight quite a fair arrangement,

but the contractor would have full use of the property, and could treat it as desired, for example not being required to fill in any stopes.

Now we believe, without any exception, every mine manager on this field is opposed to this system of breaking up quartz by the truck load, and where it has been tried, viz., in the Eureka and Canadian mines, the results have been most disastrous. We believe that the battery manager in the past made many and strenuous efforts to induce the late manager of the Colonist mine to have his quartz broken out by the truck. But to this the manager would never consent, knowing that such a course would be most detrimental to the interests of the shareholders. We may state that when work was suspended in the Colonist mine some three months ago, a large sum of money (probably £500 more or

²³⁹ *Te Aroha News*, 28 February 1885, p. 2.

²⁴⁰ *Te Aroha Correspondent*, *Thames Advertiser*, 11 June 1885, p. 2.

less) had just been expended in opening up a new block of ground which has scarcely been worked upon, but is believed to be payable, at least to an extent of 60ft to 70ft in length, and giving 75ft of backs. By the arrangement with the Battery Company they are now permitted to walk in and reap the benefit of all past expenditure of time and shareholders' money. The upper portion of the block referred to is known to be really good quartz, as when the upper level was being driven the dirt went over 1oz to the truck, and this portion of the block, if worked by itself (as recommended by the late manager), would undoubtedly leave a profit to the shareholders; but the block if broken out as a whole by the truck, simply for the purpose of keeping so many stamps at work, will, almost to a certainty, yield them no benefit whatever. The whole agreement, we consider, is one that cannot be too strongly condemned, as being of a most one-sided character. It appears that *no individual whatever has been appointed by the directors to look after the interests of the shareholders, either at the mine or in the battery*; the Battery Company having, we understand, appointed the mine manager on their own behalf. Now in this arrangement we decidedly say it is not the Battery Company who are to blame, (as it is but natural they should accept such advantageous terms when offered them) but the directors; those gentlemen who, having accepted such important positions, now deal in such an apparently careless way with the company's property. Pray in what condition can it be expected the mine will be left by the contractors, or what will it be worth when the Battery Company have done with it?

It suggested that shareholders, instead of being responsible for calls while their mine was being treated in this way, should hand the mine over 'as a present to the Battery Company (who, during the twelve months the mine was at work, received close on £3000 for the treatment of quartz, and also the whole of the tailings - estimated at 1,000 tons) and let them be released from all further liability'. Or they should offer it on tribute to the company, 'even at 5 per cent of the returns, then shareholders would have the chance of some little return. With such management, how can the mining industry flourish in our midst as it should do?'²⁴¹

Its advice was ignored. In August, as the quality of Colonist ore had improved, another contract was let for another 300 trucks.²⁴² One correspondent had a more favourable view of the company's management; having miners drive the low level to pick up the gold found above showed

²⁴¹ Editorial, *Te Aroha News*, 6 June 1885, p. 2.

²⁴² *Te Aroha News*, 8 August 1885, p. 2

that it was 'willing to prospect the low levels instead of merely taking out what quantity' was 'in sight'.²⁴³ Then, in December, Firth said that, because the return had sunk to 15dwt per truck, the mine 'was likely to be stopped'.²⁴⁴ It did in fact continue working, and by April 1887 the company had crushed 865 tons for a return of 483oz 3dwt of gold; 200 fathoms had been stoped, and the reef driven on for 150 feet.²⁴⁵

Firth and Clark bought the Galena claim in 1885,²⁴⁶ and by April 1887 had driven 300 feet, stoped out 175 fathoms, and obtained 193oz 16dwt from 396 tons.²⁴⁷ In July 1885, the *Te Aroha News* wrote that the company appeared 'to have got hold of the Canadian mine also', as it had called tenders for 'breaking out of 300 tons of quartz, on terms very similar to those in connection with the Colonist'.²⁴⁸ It took over the May Queen in late 1886, and by the following April had driven 50 feet on what was believed to be a payable reef.²⁴⁹ Some people continued to see Firth as an expert on working mines, and in 1888 he became a member of a committee charged with developing ways to work the Champion Company's property at Tui.²⁵⁰

Firth always sought to work mines cheaply. In May 1884, when he discussed ways of doing this with mine managers, they agreed to try some of the (publicly unspecified) suggestions.²⁵¹ The *Te Aroha News* opposed directors leaving the running of the field to Firth, who was not a mining expert.²⁵² 'Shareholder' noted that although the press normally gave 'a full and particular account of all his sayings and doings', there had been no information about what he had said at this meeting.²⁵³ 'Justice' claimed that Firth told the managers 'he had been authorized to arrange for the

²⁴³ Te Aroha Correspondent, *Thames Advertiser*, 15 August 1885, p. 2.

²⁴⁴ *Waikato Times*, 19 December 1885, p. 3.

²⁴⁵ H.A. Stratford to Under-Secretary, Mines Department, 7 April 1887, *AJHR*, 1887, C-6, p. 5.

²⁴⁶ *Te Aroha News*, 17 April 1886, p. 2.

²⁴⁷ H.A. Stratford to Under-Secretary, Mines Department, 7 April 1887, *AJHR*, 1887, C-6, p. 6.

²⁴⁸ *Te Aroha News*, 25 July 1885, p. 2.

²⁴⁹ H.A. Stratford to Under-Secretary, Mines Department, 7 April 1887, *AJHR*, 1887, C-6, p. 6.

²⁵⁰ *Te Aroha News*, 4 August 1888, p. 2.

²⁵¹ *Waikato Times*, 17 May 1884, p. 2.

²⁵² Editorial, *Te Aroha News*, 17 May 1884, p. 2.

²⁵³ Letter from 'Shareholder', *Te Aroha News*, 31 May 1884, p. 7.

future workings' and marvelled that directors would appoint him to direct their mines, 'his chief qualifications being that he had spent £2500 in the field (how?)!'²⁵⁴

In a report dated 5 May 1887, Henry Andrew Gordon, the Inspecting Engineer of the Mines Department, reported that Firth and Clark mined 'principally by contract', paying 'from 7s to 12s per truck'.²⁵⁵ When this policy was introduced in 1884, a trade union journal pointed out that contracts were rarely profitable for either companies or contractors unless there were thick reefs containing gold throughout and cheap tramway and battery charges. Waiorongomai reefs were not of this nature, and the charges were heavy. 'Any arrangements will suit the Battery Company by which their machine is kept in work. They hold thousands of shares in the principal mines, shares on which they pay no calls, and for which they incur no responsibility'.²⁵⁶ A 1935 history of Hauraki mining by the then mining inspector noted that the company mined 'in the cheapest possible way. No filling was placed in the stopes, very little mining timber was used, and all stoping and transport work was done on contract at prices very much below what would rule nowadays'.²⁵⁷ Costs were also kept low by under-manning: in January 1884, a correspondent wanted Kenrick to compel the company 'to employ more than five men on their two square miles of leases'.²⁵⁸

FIRTH INCREASINGLY ATTACKED

Labour, commenting on the battery charges, wrote that Firth's knowledge of mining appeared 'to be on a par with his knowledge of farming. Sufficient to prate to the people in Canterbury about, but nothing more'.²⁵⁹ When a Te Aroha public meeting elected a committee to meet with the Minister of Mines, 'someone' proposed that Firth's name be added, 'a proposition that was received with strong signs of disapprobation, some of those appointed declining to act if he had anything to do with it'.²⁶⁰ In June

²⁵⁴ Letter from 'Justice', *Te Aroha News*, 31 May 1884, p. 7.

²⁵⁵ H.A. Gordon to Minister of Mines, 5 May 1887, *AJHR*, 1887, C-5, p. 30.

²⁵⁶ *Labour*, 22 May 1884, p. 6.

²⁵⁷ J.F. Downey, *Gold Mines of the Hauraki District, New Zealand* (Wellington, 1935), p. 255.

²⁵⁸ Te Aroha Correspondent, *Auckland Star*, 9 January 1884, p. 3.

²⁵⁹ *Labour*, 5 June 1884, p. 5.

²⁶⁰ *Te Aroha News*, 28 February 1885, p. 2.

1884, one of Firth's sons told a friend that the company was 'making its mark' and was 'successful and remunerative in every way. The local paper as a matter of course pitches into the Company in every issue and talks about monopolies etc etc, as indeed the *Waikato Buster*²⁶¹ does into Matamata. This is to be expected and does no harm'.²⁶² In fact, not only this newspaper attacked the company, for the issue of monopoly was of wide concern. The Wellington *Industrial Gazette* was sure its readers would 'hardly credit' the charges imposed by the 'so-called philanthropic battery-owners'. It was

the conduct of men like these - who have the principal mines bound by an agreement to crush with them, and to perforce boast that they have assisted the field - which is really retarding the district, and until the shareholders either show pluck enough to erect mills of their own near their mines, or other capital is introduced into the field, the district cannot be expected to go ahead as quickly as should be the case.²⁶³

Charles Featherstone Mitchell's *Hauraki Tribune* was unrestrained in responding to a letter from a J.C. Firth in the Auckland press criticizing Sir George Grey:

Presuming that the writer is identical with the Mr J.C. Firth of the Matamata plains, we hail every one of the words of the criticism as being words of wisdom and pearls of great price. No man has shown himself so thoroughly unselfish, so purely philanthropical; and of few men can it be said with entire truthfulness, that "godliness," of the sort practiced by Mr Josiah Clifton Firth, "is great gain."

That these words should not be taken at face value was immediately apparent, for the vast area of his estate was stressed along with his 'effrontery to tell us that land in this colony is within the reach of all'. The newspaper then asked whether he was 'the Mr Firth who owns the only water right, and the only battery and battery site, and a whole alphabet of claims at Te Aroha?', and whether he was saying, 'after our Te Aroha

²⁶¹ Presumably the *Waikato Times*, although newspapers published in Cambridge could fit this description.

²⁶² W.T. Firth to 'Bate' Thornton, 16 June 1884, William Thornton Firth Letterbook 1883-1900, MSC 19, Hamilton Public Library.

²⁶³ *Industrial Gazette*, n.d., reprinted in *Te Aroha News*, 8 November 1884, p. 7.

experiences, that the capitalist cannot be a fraud, a cheat, a scoundrel, and a liar as well now as in any time past?' It accused him of 'cant and humbug', who had 'defrauded' men 'out of the land on which his battery site stands'. While it was, 'no doubt, a great blessing to the community that we have pious and benevolent men like Mr J.C. Firth', his 'unselfishness and public spirit' had taken the form of obtaining 100,000 acres of the best land in the district.²⁶⁴

'Miner' wrote, at the time of the 1884 strike,²⁶⁵ that the 'clique who have endeavoured from the first to work everything for their own sole advantage' had 'succeeded in getting the control of public money, and by mispending it' had 'created a monopoly for themselves of the tramway by laying the line in such a direction as to make it valuable only for their own battery'.²⁶⁶ Widespread suspicion about Firth's links with politicians was illustrated by a comment in *Labour* shortly after the strike: 'A correspondent asks what amount of public money has been spent on Te Aroha tramway. £6000 certainly; a similar sum is expected. Whether any portion of the second £6000 has been paid or not, I cannot tell, as some people get public money before it is voted'.²⁶⁷ Criticism of 'the battery monopoly' was common at public meetings during the early years of the goldfield.²⁶⁸ In May 1884, 'A Shareholder' wrote that Firth's 'arbitrary power' over mining was

difficult to believe can exist in what should be a free country, and the mismanagement would give one to suppose the Mr Firth contemplated another Matamata *fasco*. Never did a goldfield open with fairer promise than that of Te Aroha, and nothing but mismanagement and arbitrary battery and tramway charges, together with Mr Firth's general interference, have brought it to its present neglected condition. Visitor after visitor comes to look at our field with a determination of investing money in it, but one and all, after hearing of the principle of monopoly adopted, content themselves by saying "You have capital shows, but I am afraid of the ring." Mine managers are afraid to open their mouths and propound ideas that would be beneficial to the shareholders, and, in fact, a reign of terror exists where all should be harmony.

²⁶⁴ *Hauraki Tribune*, n.d., reprinted in *Labour*, 9 August 1884, p. 4.

²⁶⁵ See paper on the strike at Waiorongomai in 1884.

²⁶⁶ Letter from 'Miner', *Thames Advertiser*, 14 January 1884, p. 3.

²⁶⁷ *Labour*, 13 March 1884, p. 5.

²⁶⁸ For example, *Thames Advertiser*, 2 April 1884, p. 3.

He considered that the council's resolution 'to make the same charge over a short portion of the tramway as over the entire distance' was a 'very clever trick' by Firth 'to handicap batteries that may be erected close to the claims'. In addition, he claimed that whereas the council had paid £100 to Adams it had not paid storekeepers and carters,²⁶⁹ a charge that cannot be confirmed.

THE MONOPOLY ATTACKED

There were persistent hopes that other batteries would be erected, thereby forcing prices down. The company's secretary anticipated such a development, telling Wilson in November 1882 that should the field be 'proved to be a success further batteries will doubtless be erected, but with the utmost exertion it is impossible that a second battery can be at work before 1st January 1884'.²⁷⁰ In October 1883, Firth told the council that 'if the tramway and mines came up to the expectations of the company, they intended to erect another battery, to crush 500 tons weekly'.²⁷¹ In the following February, the *Te Aroha News* reported a rumour that Firth and Clark had bought a battery site plus its water right at the foot of Butler's Spur:

We sincerely hope that the report is not correct. The succession of unpleasantnesses and misunderstandings that have resulted from the connection of these gentlemen with the field, renders it impossible for those who have the interests of the place at heart to look with equanimity to an increase in their interest and influence. To take the most charitable view of their conduct, it has been a case of "mean well but don't know how," as Dick Deadeye tritely puts it. And quite apart from all other considerations we can see that the fact of one syndicate possessing the only two available water rights on the field ... cannot but fail to be detrimental to our best interests. At any rate the circumstance contains a rampant element of danger. Competition is a good thing in all classes of business and in none more so than battery owning, and we had hoped that the erection of a battery by independent persons would have been proceeded

²⁶⁹ Letter from 'A Shareholder', *Te Aroha News*, 31 May 1884, p. 7.

²⁷⁰ Henry Gilfillan, Jr, to George Wilson, 27 November 1882, Te Aroha Warden's Court, General Correspondence 1882, BBAV 11584/1c, ANZ-A.

²⁷¹ Piako County Council, *Waikato Times*, 11 October 1883, p. 2.

with, and that the interests of the field would have been advanced by introduction of the healthy competition engendered thereby.

If the rumour was true, the newspaper wanted the mining inspector to insist that the new battery be erected immediately. He must not permit 'the interests of the whole community to be dallied with for the occult purposes of speculators or philanthropists, for in a degenerate day these two widely different terms seem to have become synonymous'.²⁷² When the company bought John Cook's right to a water race to the foot of Butler's Spur, an alarmed Robert Wiseman portrayed this as being intended to prevent competition.²⁷³ However, in the following March, it was reported that Firth and Clark had resigned their rights to the race and had 'decided to give their moral support to the new undertaking'.²⁷⁴ The latter was Peter Ferguson's New Era battery, but in practice they did not support it, morally or otherwise.²⁷⁵ The water right was sold to Ferguson on 29 May.²⁷⁶

In his response to 'Busybody's' letter in January 1885 criticizing how Adams ran the tramway, the editor of the *Te Aroha News* commented that 'the *grinding* process appears to have become almost a "fine art" at the existing battery'.²⁷⁷ Early the following month, a public meeting at Waiorongomai called for the government to assist a tramway to Ferguson's battery site. Bernard Montague said that the Firth and Clark battery 'meant starvation to the district', and James Munro, a miner,²⁷⁸ cited as 'a notorious fact' that 'the gentleman now in possession of a considerable portion of the field, was in possession also of privileges now denied to all others. Advantage had been taken of their position to obtain those privileges, and the principle was now to all intents and purposes laid down, that everybody must go to that source only'.²⁷⁹

²⁷² Editorial, *Te Aroha News*, 9 February 1884, p. 2.

²⁷³ Robert Wiseman, 'A Te Aroha Idyl', Grey New Zealand Letters, vol. 36, p. 69, Auckland Public Library.

²⁷⁴ *Waikato Times*, 8 March 1884, p. 3.

²⁷⁵ See paper on Peter Ferguson and his New Era.

²⁷⁶ Te Aroha Warden's Court, Transfer to Peter Ferguson, 29 May 1884, Certified Instruments 1884, BBAV 11581/5a, ANZ-A.

²⁷⁷ Letter from 'Busybody', and editor's response, *Te Aroha News*, 24 January 1885, p. 7.

²⁷⁸ See paper on John Squirrell.

²⁷⁹ *Te Aroha News*, 7 February 1885, p. 7.

In mid-1885, anger at Firth apparently discouraging the erection of Ferguson's battery prompted a public meeting at Te Aroha. Mills said the action of his company, 'in its selfish desire to keep a monopoly of power, has been the means of driving over a hundred families from the field'.²⁸⁰ Another version of his speech had him blaming half the 'depopulation and poverty of the district' on the Firth family.²⁸¹ The *Te Aroha News* supported the meeting, but warning that whenever an attempt had been made to break the monopoly, 'opposition has been brought to bear directly or indirectly'.²⁸² If that was true, Firth's power was waning, for parliament's goldfields committee supported constructing a tramway to Ferguson's battery. On receipt of this news, the *Thames Advertiser* congratulated 'our Waiorongomai neighbours on the success that has attended their efforts to break through the monopoly that has nearly strangled the life out of their district'.²⁸³ Ferguson informed the 50 to 60 people attending the celebratory dinner at Waiorongomai after he returned with the guarantee of public money that parliament 'was in full sympathy with the miners of Waiorongomai, and that there was every desire to redress the wrongs under which they had laboured for so long'.²⁸⁴ Mills, the chairman, said that 'the amount of opposition, direct and indirect, that has been thrown in the way of the erection of a second battery has been enough to daunt a hero'.²⁸⁵ One month later, the company was once more accused of discouraging other capitalists in a *Te Aroha News* editorial:

The wide feeling of dissatisfaction which has long been felt with respect to the Firth and Clark's Battery (inaugurated by the "no admittance" to battery, interim retorting, and cold water squeezing of amalgam business) together with the excessively high charges ... has much to do with the divorcement of both capital and labour from our district; and it will take considerable persuasive power to bring them together again.²⁸⁶

²⁸⁰ *Thames Advertiser*, 20 June 1885, p. 3.

²⁸¹ *Te Aroha News*, 30 June 1885, p. 2.

²⁸² Editorial, *Te Aroha News*, 20 June 1885, p. 2.

²⁸³ *Thames Advertiser*, 4 July 1885, p. 3.

²⁸⁴ Te Aroha Correspondent, *Thames Advertiser*, 25 July 1885, p. 3.

²⁸⁵ *Te Aroha News*, 25 July 1885, p. 2.

²⁸⁶ Editorial, *Te Aroha News*, 29 August 1885, p. 2.

At the beginning of 1886, when recommending that the New Find Company should erect its own plant rather than provide work for Firth's, it commented that 'apparently opposing influences' could be brought to bear and it had 'almost given up all hope of seeing such a course adopted. Truly this district has had a severe experience of what monopoly means'.²⁸⁷ Or, to quote Munro at a meeting, 'instead of a liberal go-ahead policy, a *cold water* freezing out policy has been the rule from the start'.²⁸⁸

In September 1884, miners were reported to fear that the company would gain control of the tramway:

It is thought the paramount influence exercised by that company has tended in a great measure to bring the mines to their present unsatisfactory condition, and it is also feared that if they acquire control of the tramway, they will virtually and for a length of time to come have a monopoly of the field.... It is generally thought that it would prove a death blow to the prosperity of mining.²⁸⁹

'Silex', a Waiorongomai resident, detected the company's hand behind a petition to sanction the lease of the tramway for ten years. He argued that the signatures must have come

chiefly among the miners in certain claims (where a kind of reign of terror seems to prevail) and the workmen and others employed on the tramway and at the battery, who can only be regarded as the nominees of the Battery Co., and in such matters do as bidden.... The whole matter wears a most suspicious look.²⁹⁰

His suspicions would have been confirmed when the names of the petitioners were published. Adams had signed first, followed by ten mine managers; the overseer of the tramway also signed, as did two brakesmen, and an amalgamator.²⁹¹ 'A Shareholder' feared that, if the company obtained the tramway, there would be no prospect of reducing charges for ten years, 'for the lessee would naturally charge as much as possible'.²⁹²

²⁸⁷ Editorial, *Te Aroha News*, 2 January 1886, p. 2.

²⁸⁸ *Te Aroha News*, 16 August 1884, p. 2.

²⁸⁹ Te Aroha Correspondent, *Waikato Times*, 30 September 1884, p. 3.

²⁹⁰ Letter from 'Silex', *Te Aroha News*, 11 October 1884, p. 7.

²⁹¹ *Te Aroha News*, 18 October 1884, p. 7.

²⁹² Letter from 'A Shareholder', *Te Aroha News*, 8 November 1884, p. 7.

FIRTH AND ADAMS

The close link between Firth and Adams caused libellous comment at a public meeting at Te Aroha in February 1885 called to discuss the tramway. Munro stated that 'there appeared to be such an affinity of soul between Messrs Adams and Firth, that you could scarcely tell which was which'. Mills said that some people thought Firth was sufficiently powerful to be able to prevent an enquiry into the running of the tramway. 'He had heard it stated that contracts had been let by the chairman of the Tramway Committee', Firth, 'to his servant', Adams, 'who it was stated, had made a very decent profit out of same'. Mills admitted that 'he could not say of his own knowledge if the report was true or not. If it was true, it was a very serious matter indeed. No doubt' Firth 'had had a good deal to do with how the money had been expended with respect to the tramway', implying the charges were correct.²⁹³

Criticism of the links between Firth and Adams first surfaced in February 1884, when 'Observer' was suspicious because Whitaker attempted to extend the franchise for electing the school committee 'to everybody', because Adams was standing:

As far as I can make the matter out, Mr Editor, the clique were at work. Mr Adams, they say, has undeservedly got a bad name. We placed him there; the Auckland shareholders are dissatisfied - shares are dull of sale; we must prove at any cost, by any means, that Mr Adams is the right man in the right place, and how can we do so better than by thimble-rigging him into the first place in the school election?²⁹⁴

Adams indeed topped the poll with 117 votes, the next highest being 75.²⁹⁵ Within a month, he was re-elected president of the Te Aroha Miners' Accident Fund and elected to the licensing committee, with nine votes less than the top-scoring candidate. Two months later he was elected president of the Waiorongomai Athletic Club,²⁹⁶ all of which suggests that he was not forced upon unwilling residents by a clique but had genuine local support.

²⁹³ *Te Aroha News*, 28 February 1885, p. 2.

²⁹⁴ Letter from 'Observer', *Te Aroha News*, 2 February 1884, p. 2.

²⁹⁵ *Te Aroha News*, 2 February 1884, p. 7.

²⁹⁶ *Te Aroha News*, 16 February 1884, p. 2, 1 March 1884, p. 2, 26 April 1884, p. 2.

Criticism of the link between them continued in the mid-1880s. For instance, in May 1884 'Justice' condemned the way Firth had insisted that Adams' plans for the tramway and the New Find chute must be adopted.²⁹⁷ At a public meeting in mid-1885 Mills claimed that Firth 'seemed specially anxious' for Adams 'to have the expenditure of the money' to construct the track to Buck reef.²⁹⁸

FIRTH AND THE COUNTY COUNCIL

In October 1884, 'A Shareholder' asked was it 'by the authority of the directors that work was suspended in many of the claims on the Hill during the two election days' for the Aroha Riding? It was unfair on the men to have to go without pay, unless of course they were paid out of company money, 'a piece of dishonesty which I am unable to believe' - but by raising it clearly could.

I also understand that the men on the County tramway were ordered to cease work on these days, on purpose to take their part in the elections. Was it to see that they, as well as the miners rolled up neatly to record their votes as *free and independent* men that the Battery Company's clerk acted as scrutineer on the last occasion? Or was it merely the result of a fortuitous concatenation of events, or for some set and sinister purpose that a certain functionary from Auckland made his appearance at both times so opportunely?²⁹⁹

'Shareholder', a Te Aroha resident who appeared to be the same writer, used the *New Zealand Herald* to ask whether the directors or the managers had ordered all work in the mines to stop so that men could vote. 'The same influence is supposed to have been used in the same direction' on the tramway, where work ceased at noon on election day:

In the interests of shareholders, as well as in those of the field generally, it would be well if, in the present state of matters here, these things were fully inquired into. It ought to be mentioned that the last election was not the only occasion on which these occurrences took place. At the former election the same state of things prevailed, and if a check is not applied, will continue to do

²⁹⁷ Letter from 'Justice', *Te Aroha News*, 31 May 1884, p. 7.

²⁹⁸ *Te Aroha News*, 30 June 1885, p. 2.

²⁹⁹ Letter from 'A Shareholder', *Te Aroha News*, 11 October 1884, p. 7.

so as long as a certain clique find it necessary to have the directing of local politics.

He noted the ‘active part’ played by the managers of ‘certain claims’ in supporting the election of one candidate:

Not only did they take a prominent part personally, but they also brought their influence to bear upon the men working under them, and in whatever way these men may have voted, it was generally understood among them that they were generally expected to give their support to a certain candidate whose name it is not necessary to mention.³⁰⁰

This unnamed candidate in the by-election was Denis Murphy, a contractor and farmer,³⁰¹ who supported how Adams operated the tramway.³⁰² His opponent was mine manager Edward Kersey Cooper, a leading critic of the way Firth and Adams controlled the tramway, battery, and goldfield, and whose election placard asked: ‘Who reduced the wages, but not the crushing?’³⁰³ For an unexplained reason, but possibly because he could see the way voting was going, Cooper withdrew at the last moment and urged his supporters not to vote; Murphy therefore won with 109 votes, Cooper still receiving 10.³⁰⁴

When the county tramway was first constructed, the council’s chairman said ‘the entire credit’ was due to Firth, without whom it ‘would never have been completed’.³⁰⁵ But it was soon believed that Firth had an undue influence in council decisions, and always for selfish ends. For instance, a public meeting at Te Aroha in 1885 heard claims that the council had paid for the battery’s connection to the tramway and may have given other financial assistance to the erection of the Eureka wire tramway, all of which should have been paid by the company.³⁰⁶ Firth was forced to respond to such criticisms when they were repeated at the subsequent

³⁰⁰ Letter from ‘Shareholder’, *New Zealand Herald*, 15 October 1884, p. 6.

³⁰¹ See paper on his life.

³⁰² For example, *Te Aroha News*, 18 October 1884, p. 7; Piako County Council, *Waikato Times*, 18 December 1884, p. 2.

³⁰³ *Te Aroha News*, 23 August 1884, p. 2, 30 August 1884, p. 2, 27 September 1884, pp. 2, 7.

³⁰⁴ *Te Aroha News*, 4 October 1884, p. 2.

³⁰⁵ Piako County Council, *Waikato Times*, 11 October 1883, p. 2.

³⁰⁶ *Te Aroha News*, 7 February 1885, p. 7; see also letter from ‘Justice’, 31 May 1884, p. 7.

council meeting. He confirmed that the trestle work to the battery had indeed been paid for by the council, for 'the tramway would have been useless without it'. He agreed similar connections should be made to other batteries, but his constant critic over the tramway, William Philip Chepmell,³⁰⁷ who had no mining interests, considered this to be the responsibility of the battery companies. One councillor, Charles Gould,³⁰⁸ 'thought the battery company had no right to the expenditure of so large a sum of county money for their sole benefit'. Ferguson's New Era Company 'did not appear to have any chance of similar advantages being granted them, nor any further batteries that might be erected, either'.³⁰⁹

In June, a Waiorongomai correspondent reported 'general indignation' over 'the continued obstructive policy of the Firth element' in the council against Ferguson's battery. Firth 'showed a great want of tact' by asking the council to use some of the money promised by Larnach for Ferguson's tramway to make 'a road to his own mine' near Buck Rock and to permit the money to be spent by Hugh McLiver, manager of the New Find,³¹⁰ and Adams. Why were the county engineer and the tramway manager ignored? 'Why, because Mr Firth wants to have the road made to suit himself, which he could manage with minions, just as he managed the tramway, for it cannot be disputed that a large sum of the money paid by the County tramway account was spent on his battery site'. He hoped Firth would soon 'see the error of his ways, and give others a chance to live', because his actions, 'in and out of the Council', was the cause of 'the present great depression and want'.³¹¹ Ten days later, the same correspondent wrote that there could not

be the slightest doubt that if the tramway was under the control of some local governing body who was resolved to work the tramway for the benefit of the mining community independent of the interests of any particular battery, the line could be made to pay well; but so long as the property is under the management and subject to influences that have hitherto been successful in making the tramway ... subservient to the interests of the owners of a forty-stamp battery, so long will capitalists have to mourn their acquaintance with our district, and leave us in disgust.

³⁰⁷ See paper on the Piako County tramway.

³⁰⁸ See paper on his life.

³⁰⁹ Piako County Council, *Te Aroha News*, 14 February 1885, p. 7.

³¹⁰ See paper on the New Find mine.

³¹¹ Waiorongomai Correspondent, *Thames Advertiser*, 9 June 1885, p. 3.

Mining was 'being strangled by a monopoly whose only aim can be to secure for its own the whole of the gold-producing claims'.³¹²

In early June 1885, a public meeting held at Te Aroha protested against the refusal by Firth and the council to accept the £1,000 offered by Larnach to assist to construct a tramway to Ferguson's battery site. Mills pointed out that Williams and Firth, who opposed accepting the offer, were brothers-in-law.³¹³ He also referred to 'the great Ohia', a Maori transliteration of Josiah, 'who comes out of his way and interviews Mr Larnach, who promises to assist the work of making a connection to the new battery, and then is bare faced enough to go and oppose the striking of a rate, thereby effectually preventing that very connection' being made. Firth was determined to retain his monopoly and 'had no compunction to try and get the council to sanction the making of a track round by the Buck reef, where the family owned another mine'; this was 'unblushing effrontery'.³¹⁴ Firth had indeed opposed a special rate, arguing instead for a loan, which other councillors warned him was illegal.³¹⁵

A letter in September complained of the cost of running the tramway and asked why the government and the farmers should be expected to pay to 'bolster up mining speculations, even if they are owned in part by influential councillors'.³¹⁶ Ferguson wrote in March the following year complaining that for 18 months Firth had pretended to support a tramway to his battery, but in council debates he 'said never a word, but Councillor Williams and his other friends did', urging that they would be wasting their money on a battery that would be destroyed by a landslide. Councillors would not accept Larnach's offer of a subsidy for the proposed tramway because some of them were 'personally interested' in the existing battery.³¹⁷ In June 1885, when the council declined assistance for Ferguson's tramway, a Te Aroha correspondent commented that

When the personnel of the Council is considered, it is not difficult to arrive at a conclusion. The continued attempts to stifle the

³¹² Waiorongomai Correspondent, *Thames Advertiser*, 23 June 1885, p. 3.

³¹³ Te Aroha Correspondent, *Thames Advertiser*, 20 June 1885, p. 3.

³¹⁴ *Te Aroha News*, 30 June 1885, p. 2.

³¹⁵ Piako County Council, *Waikato Times*, 30 May 1885, p. 3.

³¹⁶ Letter from 'A Ratepayer', *Waikato Times*, 12 September 1885, p. 3.

³¹⁷ Letter from Peter Ferguson, *Te Aroha News*, 20 March 1886, p. 7.

introduction of capital into this district is causing the mining industry to languish, and there can be no other object in view but that certain persons may maintain a monopoly of crushing power.³¹⁸

A Waiorongomai correspondent agreed that Ferguson's tramway was 'constantly opposed' by councillors whose 'sympathies' were 'with the maintenance of the present monopoly'.³¹⁹

Out of eight councillors, Firth could always count on the votes of Whitaker, his son, and, usually, his brother-in-law.³²⁰ On all issues concerning his personal interests, Firth took the lead in debates, usually managing to get majority support. His dominance ended in 1887, when the company bought the lease of the tramway. Although at first he did not believe this would affect his position as a councillor, he then obtained a legal opinion 'which was to the effect that he could not now legally retain his seat' because 'the lease of the tramway comprised more than land'. Accordingly he resigned, unwillingly, with regret being expressed by all his ex-colleagues, Murphy describing him as a 'true friend' of Te Aroha who had given him 'great support'.³²¹ A year later, Murphy stated that when he resigned, 'Te Aroha lost the best friend it had in that Council'.³²²

Some of Firth's critics also suggested that he received government favours. For example, in January 1884, *Labour* wrote that Auckland speculators,

having the ear of the Government of the colony, being possessed of political influence, and the control of votes in the General Assembly, the speculators obtained a large grant of public money, to aid them in carrying out their private undertakings. Stripped of disguise, the matter stands thus: the prospectors found the gold, the public found the money to prove the mines; when the mines were proved shares in them were given to speculators to erect machinery; and the people from the North Cape to the Bluff are taxed to aid in making roads and tramways to improve and to

³¹⁸ Te Aroha Correspondent, *Thames Advertiser*, 19 June 1885, p. 3.

³¹⁹ Waiorongomai Correspondent, *Thames Advertiser*, 23 June 1885, p. 3.

³²⁰ For Williams' links with Firth, in particular his being manager of the Matamata Estate from 1865 to 1877, see Gordon, pp. 45, 137, 205, 206.

³²¹ Piako County Council, *Te Aroha News*, 18 June 1887, p. 2; see also Murphy's speech at Waiorongomai banquet, *Te Aroha News*, 14 April 1888, p. 2.

³²² *Te Aroha News*, 14 April 1888, p. 2.

develop private property. There was no sentiment in the transaction whatever. All the fustian [bombast] that has been written about energy, patriotism, and enterprise ... is fustian and nothing more. Those who put up the machinery thought they had got a good thing; and if they had not put it up some other persons would.³²³

STATE AID FOR PRIVATE ENTERPRISE

Firth made oft-repeated calls for self-reliance (calls that ignored his own reliance on credit provided by the Bank of New Zealand). For instance, when he laid the foundation stone of the Waiorongomai Public Hall in 1884, he praised the residents for building it themselves: 'The common plan now-a-days in this country is to ask the Government for everything'.³²⁴ At an 1887 Auckland meeting to consider erecting a small concentration plant at Thames, he moved that a committee be formed to raise the necessary money. 'He had a great objection to running to the Government for everything (applause), and quoted the fable of "The Drayman and Jupiter" to show that the best way was to put their own shoulders to the wheel'.³²⁵

Despite extolling the principles of self-help, Firth expected the government to assist his own enterprises. He had managed, through the council, to convince the government to assist the Waiorongomai tramway on the reasoning that this would enable a new goldfield to be developed. Ministers were concerned about being involved, as the Minister of Mines, William Rolleston, told Firth in a personal letter in January 1884. As the tramway, 'connecting with a private battery company and really being largely a private enterprise', did not meet the normal criteria, he had made a special grant that would not be continued indefinitely.³²⁶ That the company expected aid was indicated by Clark's speech at the banquet celebrating the battery's opening. He 'congratulated the district on the support which successive Governments had wisely extended to the goldfields, and expressed a hope that such would be continued and

³²³ *Labour*, 31 January 1884, reprinted in *Thames Star*, 31 January 1884, p. 2.

³²⁴ *Te Aroha News*, 4 October 1884, p. 2.

³²⁵ *Auckland Weekly News*, 7 May 1887, p. 19.

³²⁶ William Rolleston to J.C. Firth (Private)', 19 January 1884, Letterbook 1882-1884, pp. 235-236, William Rolleston Papers, MS 77-248, vol. 5, Alexander Turnbull Library.

increased'.³²⁷ 'The aid given to the tramway by Government was well-spent money which the colony would benefit by in the future'.³²⁸

In an editorial about the starting of the battery, the *Thames Advertiser* wrote that 'of course' there were

not wanting those who say that the owners of the battery have done a very good thing for themselves, when, by the expenditure of their own and Government money, they erected a powerful battery and obtained a large interest in the main mines of the district. Possibly this may be so, we trust it is, but it should be remembered that if they have done a good thing for themselves they can only have done so by accomplishing a still better thing for the shareholders in the different claims concerned, whose property without crushing power in its vicinity would have been of precious little value indeed.³²⁹

IMPROVING THE BATTERY

Firth was always interested in new techniques, not just because the battery was increasingly unprofitable. He imported a rock drill from America in 1884, and the following year obtained a copy of Gordon's report on mining machinery used in Australia.³³⁰ Also in 1885, 16 bags of quartz were shipped to Sydney,³³¹ presumably for testing with a different process. Local comments about Firth's involvement in mining changed in tone in late 1886. In September, a Te Aroha correspondent reported that 'the enterprise displayed' by Firth in 'sending from San Francisco for' Adams, 'with a view to the introduction of new gold-saving appliances on the field', had been 'much applauded'. It was 'hoped that his public spirit' would 'result in profit to himself, and benefit the goldfields at large'.³³² Upon his return, Firth informed reporters that, with Adams, he had 'inspected a great many processes of quartz-treating and gold-saving', to discover that

³²⁷ *Waikato Times*, 8 December 1883, p. 2.

³²⁸ *Thames Advertiser*, 7 December 1883, p. 3.

³²⁹ Editorial, *Thames Advertiser*, 6 December 1883, p. 2.

³³⁰ *Thames Star*, 16 September 1884, p. 2; J.C. Firth to Minister of Mines, 14 August 1885, Mines Department, MD 1, 85/946, ANZ-W.

³³¹ Henry Gilfillan, Jr, to Collector of Customs, Auckland, 19 May 1885, Customs Department, BBAO 5544/35a, no. 424, ANZ-A.

³³² Te Aroha Correspondent, *Waikato Times*, 18 September 1886, p. 2.

New Zealand was not far behind the processes used there.³³³ Adams gave an address to a Waiorongomai audience in December to explain what he had seen and how the battery would be improved. At its conclusion, on the motion of Munro, formerly a critic of Firth's monopoly, 'a hearty vote of thanks was passed' to Firth for sending for Adams to 'visit all these mining districts'.³³⁴

In writing about the changes Adams made to the battery, a leading Thames mine manager, John Watson Walker,³³⁵ regretted that more advice was not taken from Americans. 'Unfortunately we have not all the means, public spirit, and dash of Mr Firth (worse luck)'.³³⁶ When informed that the company would spend an estimated £2,000 on a revolving furnace and other improvements, the *Te Aroha News* forgot its earlier criticisms. It now hoped that Firth and Clark would be 'handsomely rewarded for their pluck and enterprise as evinced by their erection of so costly a plant for the more efficient treatment of ore, and that too in the face of prevailing depression'.³³⁷ Firth attended the first test of the revolving furnace erected by Adams, and after later tests the newspaper wrote that it was

a matter of much moment not only to Te Aroha goldfield and the Upper Thames generally, but to the whole colony; and should it come up to expectations, the enterprising spirit evinced by Messrs Firth and Clark in this matter will result in great benefit to the goldfields of New Zealand. We trust this new venture may ... prove a most remunerative one to the owners.³³⁸

FOREIGN CAPITAL

As early as July 1882, Firth attempted to interest overseas investors in the field, hosting a meeting of sharebrokers along with Kenrick in his Auckland office with 'a gentleman representing a number of mining capitalists of Victoria' who had visited the field.³³⁹ In 1886 he wrote of his hope that £500,000 of English capital would be spent in North Island mines,

³³³ *Te Aroha News*, 20 November 1886, Supplement, p. 2.

³³⁴ *Te Aroha News*, 18 December 1886, p. 2.

³³⁵ See paper on his life.

³³⁶ *New Zealand Herald*, 24 January 1887, p. 3.

³³⁷ *Te Aroha News*, 23 April 1887, p. 2.

³³⁸ *Te Aroha News*, 25 June 1887, p. 3, 3 September 1887, p. 2.

³³⁹ *Auckland Weekly News*, 29 July 1882, p. 9.

and urged shareholders to adopt ‘a reasonable and non-obstructive policy’ towards such investment.³⁴⁰ Early in 1887, his company applied to amalgamate land that had been unoccupied for the past year or more into Special Claim No. 1,³⁴¹ otherwise known as Firth’s Special Claim, thus omitting Clark’s name once more. Granted in May, its 140 acres and 20 perches extended from the southern boundary of the New Find nearly to Waiorongomai village.³⁴² Firth explained that he needed this large area ‘because: 1st, the mining operations proposed to be carried on will be of great extent; 2nd. Attended by circumstances of extraordinary difficulty; and 3rd. Will involve the expenditure of considerable sources of money, estimated at £40,000 before the claim is in full working order’.³⁴³ This sum, to be sought from foreign investors, would be used to drive a low level tunnel.

The first mention of such a tunnel had been made, in November 1882, in a letter to Wilson written on behalf of the company by Adams and Henry Charles Thomas Lawlor, an amalgamator.³⁴⁴ They planned to work the Little Jimmy, Pearl, Vulcan, Colonist, Premier, Hero, and Smile of Fortune ‘by running a Low Level Tunnel through and intend to seek the Co-operation of the said Claims, in this scheme that is so likely to benefit not only these claims but the whole District’.³⁴⁵ This plan became public knowledge in January 1887, when Firth applied for five acres from whence to drive a tunnel ‘along the reef for 1 1/2 miles, and connecting with the Battery by a tramway’.³⁴⁶ At the request of the Minister, Warden Stratford visited on 1 February ‘to inquire into the bona fides of applications for

³⁴⁰ Letter from J.C. Firth, *Auckland Weekly News*, 11 December 1886, p. 6.

³⁴¹ *Te Aroha News*, 15 January 1887, p. 2.

³⁴² Te Aroha Warden’s Court, Certified Instruments 1887, BBAV 11581/8a; Register of Applications 1883-1900, folios 1c-4 of 1887, BBAV 11505/1a, ANZ-A; Plan of Firth’s Special Claim, SO 4445, Land Information New Zealand, Hamilton; *Te Aroha News*, 15 January 1887, p. 2, 12 March 1887, p. 2.

³⁴³ J.C. Firth to H.A. Stratford, 2 February 1887, Te Aroha Warden’s Court, Register of Applications 1883-1900, folio 5a, 22/1887, BBAV 11505/1a, ANZ-A.

³⁴⁴ Te Aroha Warden’s Court, Transfer of Waiorongomai Allotment by George Sly to H.C.T. Lawlor, 9 October 1883, Certified Instruments, BBAV 11581/4a, ANZ-A.

³⁴⁵ H.C.T. Lawlor and H.H. Adams, for the Battery Company, to George Wilson, 22 November 1882, Te Aroha Warden’s Court, Applications 1882, BBAV 11582/2a, ANZ-A.

³⁴⁶ Te Aroha Warden’s Court, Register of Applications 1883-1900, folio 1a, 1/1887, BBAV 11505/1a; see also Applications for Licensed Holdings 1887, BBAV 11582/3a, ANZ-A.

extraordinary large special claims' made by Firth and Ferguson.³⁴⁷ Whilst there, he was introduced to one Price-Williams, 'an Englishman of considerable experience as a Mining Engineer', who claimed to have 'recently travelled over the length and breadth of this colony inspecting our mines, and mineral resources'. Firth and Adams 'appeared quite willing' to provide him with all the information 'required and took considerable trouble to explain processes, and results'. The reason for applying for so large a claim was that

the appliances necessary for working these reefs are so expensive that it is impossible for men with small means to work small holdings, and that Capitalists only who are prepared to expend large sums of money in erecting machinery, and constructing tramways, shoots, and easements can develop this industry to advantage. The battery and Races & c have cost about £20,000, and all works, purchases and expenditure outside these special properties amount it is stated by Mr Firth as nearly another £20,000.

The sole reason given, presumably by Firth, why the goldfield had 'retrograded instead of progressing' was

the want of means on the part of individual miners to perform work requiring considerable capital at the onset. This Company proposes to construct a main tunnel to be driven by means of air compressors, and when in full working it will be necessary to keep continuously employed not less than 100 men. The Company is negotiating with an English Syndicate.³⁴⁸

Warden Stratford considered that the proposal was

a thoroughly practical way of prospecting a large extent of known gold-bearing reef; and, although at the commencement of the tunnels there is not much of the reef overhead, when it has been driven a mile and a half there will be at least 2,000ft of "backs" on the reef, and if any runs of gold are found there are vast

³⁴⁷ For the latter, see paper on Peter Ferguson and his New Era.

³⁴⁸ H.A. Stratford to Minister of Mines, 2 February 1887, Thames Warden's Court, Warden's Letterbook 1886-1893, BACL 14458/2b, ANZ-A; copy in Mines Department, MD 1, 87/89, ANZ-W.

quantities of quartz to be obtained between the tunnel and the surface.³⁴⁹

This plan revived hope at Te Aroha. A visiting correspondent discovered that merchants were 'looking forward with great hope to a prosperous year' because of Firth's new battery process, which was reported to be 'in every way satisfactory'. Locals debated whether his special claim would be floated in London or America.³⁵⁰ The *Te Aroha News* reported that the company would spend £4,000 in each of the claims comprising the special claim, making a total of £76,000:

Should the project be successfully carried out it is probable that a double tunnel would be driven; one on the footwall and one on the hangingwall side of the reef simultaneously, as by so doing and putting in cross-cuts at intervals, ventilation would be provided for, and also the reef thoroughly tested as the work proceeded. The scheme is undoubtedly a grand one, and in all probability would lead to most valuable discoveries being made. From the results obtained from the various small test parcels of quartz taken from time to time along the whole length of the ground now applied for, there can be no doubt as to its value; and there is every reason to assume that with economic and systematic working on a large scale, the returns would be highly remunerative. This scheme is one of great moment to this whole district and would test our quartz-reefs in a manner totally beyond the power of small individual companies, as the termination of the proposed tunnel would be some 2000 feet below the surface. The Battery proprietors, Messrs J.C. Firth and J. McCosh Clark, are both well known as gentlemen possessed of great practical experience and influence, of capital, of indomitable energy and enterprise, to whom carrying on business on a large scale is natural, colonists of whom New Zealand may well be proud, and therefore the right men in the right place for such an undertaking as that we refer to, and in whose hands, if entered upon, the work will be carried out in a thorough and practical manner; and we sincerely hope the proposed undertaking will be carried out, and the promoters receive that full measure of success their pluck and enterprise would so well deserve. The carrying out of the proposed scheme and occupation of this land, which has so long lain idle, would at once produce good results by providing a steady employment for a number of workmen, and the

³⁴⁹ H.A. Stratford to Under-Secretary, Mines Department, 7 April 1887, *AJHR*, 1887, C-6, p. 6.

³⁵⁰ Own Correspondent, *Auckland Weekly News*, 22 January 1887, p. 8.

attention of capitalists be directed to Te Aroha as a most promising field for investment.... The revival of mining in our midst means the free circulation of money, increased value of property, better prices for produce, and be followed by general prosperity all round. So be it!³⁵¹

This praise reflected more a desperate hope for the recovery of the goldfield than a belated realisation of Firth and Clark's sterling qualities. As Firth 'was afraid Russia would declare war with England and prevent the introduction of English Capital', he tried to rush through the approval of his special claim.³⁵² After being told by Price-Williams that his 'proposed London company' would want to lease the tramway, Firth gained the council's consent after urging it to do nothing 'that would have the effect of breaking off negotiations'.³⁵³ Although the special claim had been approved on the understanding that it would be worked by a London company, the latter was not floated, as explained by Gordon:

The terms on which a London syndicate offered to float the company could not be entertained by the Battery Company, as the large number of paid-up shares to be manipulated and the small amount of cash proposed to be given to Battery proprietors left them no option but to refuse the syndicate's offer.³⁵⁴

The special claim was enlarged in February 1888, when protection was renewed for another three months while negotiations for floating the property in London continued,³⁵⁵ to no avail. The warden was most reluctant to extend protection, 'remarking that must be the last of it' and that he had only done so because Larnach wanted Firth to 'have protection

³⁵¹ Editorial, *Te Aroha News*, 15 January 1887, p. 2.

³⁵² H.A. Stratford to W.C. Kensington, Chief Survey Office, Auckland, 29 April 1887, Thames Warden's Court, Warden's Letterbook 1886-1893, p. 111, BACL 14458/2b, ANZ-A.

³⁵³ Piako County Council, *Te Aroha News*, 29 January 1887, p. 2, 18 June 1887, p. 2.

³⁵⁴ H.A. Gordon to Under-Secretary, Mines Department, 1 May 1888, *AJHR*, 1888, C-5, p. 29.

³⁵⁵ Te Aroha Warden's Court, Register of Applications 1883-1900, 1/1888, BBAV 11505/1a; Mining Applications 1888, 18 January 1888, BBAV 11289/12a, ANZ-A; George Wilson to Under-Secretary, Mines Department, 4 April 1888, *AJHR*, 1888, C-6, p. 12; Warden's Court, *Te Aroha News*, 18 February 1888, p. 2.

for twelve months'.³⁵⁶ (Larnach wanted foreign capital to work the field systematically.)³⁵⁷ Some work had been done; for example, trial parcels were broken out 'from the various reefs that were cut when the county prospecting track, by the Buck reef, was made'.³⁵⁸

Capital came from quite another quarter. When returning from America, Adams met William Robert Wilson, one of the discoverers of the Broken Hill mines in Australia.³⁵⁹ Wilson was so interested in what he was told that he visited Waiorongomai and in March 1888 offered to purchase both mines and battery for £25,000, but his offer was declined because that they were worth at least three times as much.³⁶⁰ Firth and Clark immediately dropped their price to £30,000, which Wilson declined and announced he would return to Australia. 'Only a short time before the advertised hour of the vessel's departure an agreement was arrived at' whereby the company received £25,000 cash for four-fifths of the property and retained a one-fifth interest, in paid-up shares.³⁶¹ This interest 'was probably the main consideration which induced them to accept the offer'.³⁶² The *Te Aroha News* remarked that the cash payment was 'decidedly small, considering the large sums expended on the various mines, and plant', but assumed that Firth and Clark 'fully recognised the importance of having very large capital expended, and the mines thoroughly opened up, and the value that will attach to one fifth of the whole interest still retained by them'.³⁶³

'The Coming Mining Boom' was the *Te Aroha News* headline announcing the sale. As it had 'good grounds' for stating that Adams had been 'largely instrumental in bringing negotiations to such a successful issue' and was 'deserving of great credit for so doing', it urged that a banquet be held to thank him.³⁶⁴ A public meeting at Waiorongomai to arrange this asked both Firth and Clark to attend, but they stated their

³⁵⁶ Warden's Court, *Te Aroha News*, 18 February 1888, p. 2.

³⁵⁷ *Te Aroha News*, 16 April 1887, p. 2

³⁵⁸ *Te Aroha News*, 21 May 1887, p. 2.

³⁵⁹ *Te Aroha News*, 14 April 1888, p. 2.

³⁶⁰ *Thames Advertiser*, 22 March 1888, p. 2.

³⁶¹ *Thames Advertiser*, 23 March 1888, p. 2; *Te Aroha News*, 24 March 1888, p. 2.

³⁶² *New Zealand Herald*, 23 March 1888, p. 5.

³⁶³ *Te Aroha News*, 24 March 1888, p. 2.

³⁶⁴ *Te Aroha News*, 24 March 1888, p. 2.

inability to do so.³⁶⁵ Adams, in addressing it, said that £10,000 was needed to open up the mines adequately. ‘The late Battery Company were willing, but their capital was too small’. Waiorongomai owed Firth and Clark ‘a debt of gratitude for what they had done’ for mining because they ‘had sacrificed many thousands of pounds’. Mills, vice-chairman, in proposing a toast to them, said that ‘it was customary on such an occasion as the present to forget all unpleasantness and only remember the good done.... The late proprietors of the Battery had done a great deal for the mining industry, and all regretted their reward had not been equal to their deserts’.³⁶⁶ In a Te Aroha banquet given to a leading miner a month later, the county engineer described Firth and Clark as ‘a good old firm, who had been the means of doing much good amongst them’. William Thornton Firth, in replying, said ‘he was very glad they had given place to a stronger firm’.³⁶⁷ From heroes to villains to heroes once more, their changing status depended on perceptions of whether their actions were likely to benefit others beside themselves.

Firth and Clark’s reward was loss, not profit.³⁶⁸ Precise figures cannot be given for the amount they had lost by 1888, but one newspaper understood that they had spent from £35,000 to £40,000 on the New Find mine and the battery. The higher figure was given by Firth to the warden in January 1887,³⁶⁹ before further expenses were incurred when changes were made to the battery. Their loss increased with the failure of the company that bought their assets.

CLARK AFTER THE BATTERY COMPANY

Clark took an active role in the company’s successor, the Te Aroha Silver and Gold Mining Company, in which he was the sole New Zealand director, including encouraging the government to assist the proposed low level tunnel.³⁷⁰ In 1890, two years after its formation, he held 10,700 of the

³⁶⁵ *Te Aroha News*, 31 March 1888, p. 2.

³⁶⁶ *Te Aroha News*, 14 April 1888, p. 2.

³⁶⁷ *Te Aroha News*, 12 May 1888, p. 7.

³⁶⁸ *Observer*, 18 December 1897, p. 7.

³⁶⁹ *New Zealand Herald*, 23 March 1888, p. 5; H.A. Stratford to Minister of Mines, 2 February 1887, Mines Department, MD 1, 87/89, ANZ-W.

³⁷⁰ See paper on this company.

200,000 shares.³⁷¹ Although a director, he did not appear to be working in its interests when he wrote to the Minister of Mines in July 1888 that he and Firth were 'largely interested' in methods of treating refractory ores. Having stated that the company was likely to win the government's £5,000 bonus for finding a successful process, he suggested that instead of giving them the bonus the money should be used instead for the School of Mines and for erecting testing plants.³⁷² Clark visited Waiorongomai several times to inspect changes made in the battery.³⁷³ With his brother, he was bondsman for keeping the tramway in order and paying its rent; when the company failed to meet its obligations, they had to pay £1,000 to be released from their bond.³⁷⁴

In 1888 Clark purchased six claims in addition to the two he already owned (with others).³⁷⁵ Being unsuccessful, they were either abandoned or forfeited.³⁷⁶ By 1898, he had no interests in Waiorongomai, although he had some elsewhere, being director of the Union Waihi Company, an English one.³⁷⁷ He continued to be involved with Thames mining, and was elected a director of the New Moanataiari in 1888, retiring in the following year because of departing for London.³⁷⁸

The official reason for his departure was that he was 'to conduct the buying operations' for his firm, Archibald Clark and Sons.³⁷⁹ Various complementary speeches were given in his honour before he left, John Logan Campbell referring to his career as a merchant 'in flattering terms'.

³⁷¹ Company Files, VPRS 932, Victorian Public Record Office, Melbourne, Australia; *Te Aroha News*, 11 April 1888, p. 2; *New Zealand Gazette*, 25 October 1888, p. 1151.

³⁷² J.M. Clark to Minister of Mines, 30 July 1888, Mines Department, MD 1, 89/843, ANZ-W.

³⁷³ *Te Aroha News*, 9 June 1888, p. 2, 30 June 1888, p. 2, 7 July 1888, p. 2, 6 October 1888, p. 2, 27 July 1889, p. 2, 14 August 1889, p. 2.

³⁷⁴ *Waikato Times*, 7 May 1891, p. 2.

³⁷⁵ Te Aroha Warden's Court, Certified Instruments 1888, BBAV 11581/9a; *Plaint Book 1880-1898*, 31/1889, 6/1890, BBAV 11547/1a, ANZ-A.

³⁷⁶ For example, forfeiture of Werahiko Licensed Holding: Te Aroha Warden's Court, *Thames Advertiser*, 1 July 1895, p. 3.

³⁷⁷ Probates, BBAE 1569/2822, ANZ-A; *Auckland Weekly News*, 6 February 1897, p. 31.

³⁷⁸ *Thames Advertiser*, 6 December 1888, p. 3; *Te Aroha News*, 4 December 1889, p. 4.

³⁷⁹ *Observer*, 5 February 1898, p. 2.

Nobody was unkind enough to mention his mining speculations.³⁸⁰ In replying to a presentation from his employees, he stated that he 'hoped soon to be amongst them again', by which time he hoped 'that things would be a little more lively when that time came round'.³⁸¹ This comment implied a decline in the financial position of his firm, and presumably also of himself. In June 1890, it was announced that he had decided to stay in England.³⁸² There he contributed to a discussion on New Zealand mining 'not as an engineer, nor as a scientist, but merely as a business man, who for the last thirty years had been engaged in goldmining in the north of New Zealand, being one of those who when he fancied any particular mine, bought an interest in it and endeavoured to work it to advantage'. Contrary to others' views, he argued that the value of the lodes diminished at depth, citing Thames and Coromandel examples. Mining machinery was excellent, but mine managers were not and could not make the best use of it, as he had learnt from his involvement with the Te Aroha Silver and Gold Mining Company.³⁸³ In 1896, he presided at a general meeting in London of the New Zealand Thames Valley Land Company.³⁸⁴ He was also a director of the Ohinemuri Syndicate and chairman of directors of the Union Waihi Company.³⁸⁵

Clark and his wife were fondly remembered in Auckland, and when he died of a heart attack in 1898 the obituaries were flattering.³⁸⁶ He left a considerable estate, £40,991 18s 7d, but to meet his debts, property in Auckland and Tauranga had to be sold.³⁸⁷

FIRTH AFTER THE BATTERY COMPANY

³⁸⁰ *Auckland Weekly News*, 24 August 1889, pp. 10, 30; *New Zealand Herald*, 30 August 1889, p. 5.

³⁸¹ *Auckland Weekly News*, 7 September 1889, p. 36.

³⁸² *Observer*, 28 June 1890, p. 7.

³⁸³ J.M. Clark, contribution to discussion, in George J. Binns, 'Mining in New Zealand', *Transactions of the Federated Mining Engineers*, vol. 3 (1891-1892), pp. 669-671.

³⁸⁴ *British Australasian*, 30 July 1896, p. 1234.

³⁸⁵ *British Australasian*, 4 February 1897, p. 248.

³⁸⁶ *Observer*, 28 June 1890, p. 7, 14 March 1891, p. 12, 5 February 1898, pp. 2, 3, Christmas Annual, 1907, p. 14; *New Zealand Graphic*, 5 February 1898, p. 136; *New Zealand Herald*, 28 January 1898, p. 5; *British Australasian*, 5 February 1898, p. 156.

³⁸⁷ Probates, BBAE 1569/2822; Testamentary Register 1896-1900, folio 85, BBCB 4208/4, ANZ-A.

When Firth died in the previous year, the value of his estate was 'nil'.³⁸⁸ By the time the Battery Company was dissolved he had already lost his Matamata estate, although he retained ownership of the hot pools at Matamata, which he planned to turn into a tourist and health resort.³⁸⁹ In 1889, he lost his Auckland flour mill to his creditors.³⁹⁰ Worse was to come, for in 1888 he owed £120,000 to the Bank of New Zealand.³⁹¹ In May 1889, its Acting General Manager recorded that 'the Board desire that there should be no undue delay in dealing with Firth's affairs', and he hoped the New Zealand Loan and Mercantile Company would 'succeed in making him bankrupt soon'.³⁹² Two months later, Firth did file as bankrupt. His estate included an interest in the Te Aroha Silver and Gold Mining Company, valued at £4,062.³⁹³ A bank director informed shareholders that whereas the bank expected to lose £20,000 over Firth's account, his own estimate was £25,000.³⁹⁴ The Inspector of the National Bank wrote, privately, in 1896 that Firth had 'failed for something like £100,000 with the BNZ'.³⁹⁵

In April 1890, he was discharged as a bankrupt. The assignee's report was favourable, although its contents are not known because of the destruction of the file. 'His Honor said it was a bad affair. The debts were £35,000, and the dividend 6d in the £, or less, but there being no opposition the order of discharge was granted'.³⁹⁶ 'All the household property' was

³⁸⁸ Testamentary Register 1896-1900, folio 86, BBCB 4208/4, ANZ-A.

³⁸⁹ *New Zealand Herald*, 3 June 1886, p. 3; *Auckland Weekly News*, 4 June 1887, p. 17; *Te Aroha News*, 15 May 1888, p. 2.

³⁹⁰ *Auckland Weekly News*, 18 May 1889, p. 35, 8 June 1889, p. 20, 20 July 1889, p. 38; *Observer*, 13 April 1889, pp. 10, 15, 20 July 1889, p. 3.

³⁹¹ *Observer*, 6 June 1889, p. 11.

³⁹² Acting General Manager to Inspector, 14 May 1889, Inspectors' Files, Correspondence: In, xxviii, Bank of New Zealand Archives, Wellington; for judgment against Firth, see *Observer*, 6 July 1889, p. 11.

³⁹³ *Waikato Times*, 3 August 1889, p. 2; *Auckland Weekly News*, 10 August 1889, p. 20, 17 August 1889, p. 14.

³⁹⁴ *Auckland Weekly News*, 2 November 1889, p. 11.

³⁹⁵ National Bank, Inspector's Report on Auckland Branch, 31 August 1896: Advances, National Bank Archives, Wellington.

³⁹⁶ Supreme Court, *New Zealand Herald*, 1 April 1890, p. 3.

‘secure’ and remained in the family’s possession.³⁹⁷ After reaching a settlement with creditors, the details of which were never released, the bankruptcy was annulled in August 1891.³⁹⁸ The annulment caused considerable anger amongst writers of Letters to the Editor, many of whom considered that he was getting special treatment compared to small businessmen. His few defenders considered the matter to be one between Firth and his creditors: if the latter were content, then it was nobody else’s business.³⁹⁹

Firth treated his bankruptcy as another challenge to overcome. Speaking to his flour mill workers, he claimed his troubles were not his fault but caused by the fall of agricultural prices. He had worked hard and ‘made a great deal of money; but I have never made a penny of it wrongfully.... Winning or losing, all through these 35 years I never did a wrong action or said an unkind word’. He was ‘not broken-hearted’, and as soon as he could ‘get clear’ and everything was ‘settled, I shall go to work again, though I am growing old, for God has given me a youthful vigour, and hope and courage that nothing can put down’.⁴⁰⁰ His wife assured a son, when Firth was forced into bankruptcy because ‘he cannot get clear without’, that he had taken up a new store in Auckland and ‘so many persons are anxious for him to commence business so they may help by their support’. She considered Firth had been ‘shamefully treated especially at the last, he asked to be allowed to remain in the office for a fortnight until he could get a place to suit’, but was told to be out within five days.⁴⁰¹

Firth had retained his shares in the Te Aroha Silver and Gold Mining Company, in March 1890 holding 10,000.⁴⁰² Despite the fact that these proved to be valueless, he continued to be involved in Waiorongomai mining, visiting in 1893 ‘in connection with the mining property in which he

³⁹⁷ Annie Clifton Firth to Edward Firth, 25 July 1889, Firth Family Papers, MS-Papers-1491-06, Alexander Turnbull Library.

³⁹⁸ Supreme Court, *New Zealand Herald*, 4 August 1891, p. 3, 6 August 1891, p. 3; see also cartoon in *Observer*, 22 August 1891, p. 8.

³⁹⁹ Letters to the Editor, *New Zealand Herald*, 8 August 1891, p. 3, 12 August 1891, p. 3, 13 August 1891, p. 3, 14 August 1891, p. 3, 15 August 1891, p. 3, 17 August 1891, p. 3, 18 August 1891, p. 3.

⁴⁰⁰ *Auckland Weekly News*, 20 July 1889, p. 38.

⁴⁰¹ Annie Clifton Firth to Edward Firth, 25 July 1889, Firth Family Papers, MS-Papers-1491-06, Alexander Turnbull Library.

⁴⁰² Company Files, VPRS 932, Victorian Public Record Office, Melbourne, Australia.

is interested', unspecified. He was 'very hopeful regarding the prospects of the place', anticipating that the new cyanide process would be 'very successful'.⁴⁰³ His only other involvement in mining was to be elected in 1894 to the Committee of Management of the Coolgardie Prospecting Association, an Auckland syndicate that sent two prospectors to Western Australia, one being his son Edward.⁴⁰⁴

Firth also invented new products, or, perhaps, was permitted to claim the patent rights of inventions made by his sons. In 1888 he applied for 'a new kind of food, to be called "Germina" ', in 1889 for a patent for 'Firth's Patent Automatic Flour', in 1890 for 'a new or improved method of cleaning, treating, or preparing Kauri-gum for the market', in 1891 for 'a new process or method of cleaning Kauri gum', and in 1896 for 'an automatic coal-distributor, when loading vessels with coal, for the purpose of preventing spontaneous combustion of the coal'.⁴⁰⁵ The main hope for his financial recovery was pumice.⁴⁰⁶ In 1891, he applied for a patent for 'Firth's Patent Pumice Insulator', and in 1894 for 'an invention for drying pumice' and 'the application of prepared pumice for insulation for insulating various structures, and for sanitary and other purposes'.⁴⁰⁷ The pumice, processed at his Rangiriri plant, was intended to replace charcoal as insulation for frozen meat in ships, and created much interest.⁴⁰⁸ The attempt to float a company in London to develop this patent failed.⁴⁰⁹

⁴⁰³ Te Aroha Correspondent, *Auckland Weekly News*, 14 January 1893, p. 23.

⁴⁰⁴ *Thames Advertiser*, 5 September 1894, p. 2, 29 May 1895, p. 2; *Auckland Weekly News*, 8 September 1894, p. 21, 9 February 1895, p. 30.

⁴⁰⁵ *New Zealand Gazette*, 21 June 1888, p. 695, 24 January 1889, p. 80, 18 December 1890, p. 1491, 14 May 1891, p. 559, 25 June 1896, p. 1022; for an enthusiastic account of the last application, see *Auckland Weekly News*, 22 August 1896, p. 17.

⁴⁰⁶ See D.A. Rae, 'Pumice in the Freezing Industry: Josiah Clifton Firth's Experiment', *Historical Journal, Auckland-Waikato*, no. 25 (October 1974), pp. 37-38.

⁴⁰⁷ *New Zealand Gazette*, 5 February 1891, p. 202, 18 January 1894, p. 127, 8 November 1894, p. 1655.

⁴⁰⁸ *Auckland Weekly News*, 22 November 1890, p. 37, 27 August 1892, p. 10, 15 October 1892, p. 17, 31 March 1894, p. 19, 29 September 1894, p. 17, 20 October 1894, p. 17, 18 July 1896, p. 8, 25 July 1896, p. 8, 1 August 1896, p. 8, *Waikato Times*, 31 March 1894, p. 9; *Observer*, 3 February 1894, p. 3, 21 July 1894, p. 10, 28 July 1894, p. 3, 26 January 1895, p. 10; *New Zealand Herald*, 29 August 1895, p. 3.

⁴⁰⁹ National Bank, Inspector's Reports on Auckland Branch, 31 August 1896, 13 December 1897, National Bank Archives, Wellington.

In September 1896, the *Observer* noted that Firth hoped ‘to retrieve himself financially by the scheme to obtain electric power from the Waikato River’,⁴¹⁰ the electricity being generated by using the Huka Falls at Taupo. He gained support from miners by arguing that, with timber running out, electricity would be needed.⁴¹¹ He asked for exclusive use of this water for 50 years, and obtained the services of the engineer who had utilised the Niagara Falls.⁴¹² As his request was considered exorbitant, this latest effort to obtain special privileges for private gain was declined.⁴¹³ The *Observer*, noting that his response to parliament’s rebuff was to write an article entitled ‘The Decadence of the House of Representatives’, commented that ‘the diversions of genius are peculiar’.⁴¹⁴

Old associates provided some of the capital for these schemes. Thomas Russell of London advanced him £1,000 in 1895, and the widow of James Henry Smith lent him £188 10s 9d; both would have difficulty getting their money back.⁴¹⁵ Smith, the brother of William Brook Smith, a partner in Firth’s original flour mill, was for many years the accountant for this firm.⁴¹⁶ Having lost his creditworthiness with the Bank of New Zealand, Firth obtained unsecured advances with the Auckland branch of the National Bank, to the alarm of the inspector, who noted in August 1894 that he had broken all his promises to reduce his overdraft. The inspector

⁴¹⁰ *Observer*, 5 September 1896, p. 3.

⁴¹¹ *Ohinemuri Gazette*, 16 September 1896, p. 4.

⁴¹² *Thames Advertiser*, 13 August 1896, p. 2, 28 August 1896, p. 2; *Waikato Argus*, 29 August 1896, p. 2.

⁴¹³ *Observer*, 5 September 1896, p. 3, 19 September 1896, p. 21.

⁴¹⁴ *Observer*, 10 October 1896, p. 19.

⁴¹⁵ Jackson and Russell to J.C. Firth, 21 June 1895, Jackson and Russell Letterbook no. 59, p. 179; Jackson and Russell to J.C. Firth, 11 September 1895, Thomas Russell to Registrar of Patents, 19 October 1895, Jackson and Russell Letterbook no. 60, pp. 8, 318; Jackson and Russell to W. Brook Smith, 19 February 1897, Jackson and Russell Letterbook no. 65; Jackson and Russell to J.C. Firth, 15 October 1897, Jackson and Russell to Mrs.J.H. Smith, 21 October 1897, Jackson and Russell to J.C. Firth, 27 October 1897, Jackson and Russell Letterbook no. 66, pp. 906, 951, 998; Jackson and Russell to W.T. and E.T. Firth, 25 March 1898, 18 April 1898, 7 July 1898, Jackson and Russell Letterbook no. 69, pp. 294, 354, 938, MS 360, Library of the Auckland Institute and Museum.

⁴¹⁶ Obituary of James Henry Smith, *New Zealand Herald*, 11 July 1896, p. 4.

described him as ‘rather a dangerous man to quarrel with’,⁴¹⁷ and therefore the bank failed to prevent his overdraft from increasing. A year later the inspector hoped that the pumice scheme might succeed, but expressed ‘the strongest objections to the bank’s being made to fund a penniless man the money to start a new industry’.⁴¹⁸ Another year later, the overdraft continued to worry him, although ‘we don’t want to incur his dangerous enmity’.⁴¹⁹ In December 1897, he wondered where the money was, if, as Firth claimed, he was making a profit of £2 per ton on pumice. He noted that Firth now stated that the profit was only £1 5s, that he had claimed, wrongly, that he had obtained government funds for his electricity scheme, that he had over-valued his pumice plant, and that he had not presented a balance sheet for two years.⁴²⁰ Firth died in that month, but not before giving the bank a balance sheet showing a surplus of £3,500, a figure the inspector doubted, rightly, for after his death it was found that there was a deficit of £7,866. Firth had claimed the property and plant to be worth £9,000; they were worth £3,400.⁴²¹ His probate revealed that the estate was valued at £1,911 9s 2d, but debts of £9,829 7s 2d meant a deficiency of £7,917 18s 2d.⁴²² ‘Outside creditors’ obtained only 2s 6d in the pound.⁴²³

This inspector assessed Firth as ‘a shrewd, able and unscrupulous man, of intensely sanguine disposition’, with ‘no capital but his brains’.⁴²⁴ Apart from the borrowed capital he had access to in the 1880s, this view was more accurate than the ‘great coloniser’ he made himself out to be, as the history of the Battery Company exemplified.

⁴¹⁷ National Bank, Inspector’s Report on Auckland Branch, August 1884, National Bank Archives, Wellington.

⁴¹⁸ National Bank, Inspector’s Report on Auckland Branch, 31 July 1895, National Bank Archives, Wellington.

⁴¹⁹ National Bank, Inspector’s Report on Auckland Branch, 31 August 1896, National Bank Archives, Wellington.

⁴²⁰ National Bank, Inspector’s Report on Auckland Branch, 18 December 1897, National Bank Archives, Wellington.

⁴²¹ National Bank, Inspector’s Report on Auckland Branch, 13 February 1899, Advances: W.T. and E.T. Firth Pumice Merchants, National Bank Archives, Wellington.

⁴²² Probates, BBAE 1569/2798, ANZ-A.

⁴²³ National Bank, Inspector’s Report on Auckland Branch, 13 February 1899, Advances: W.T. and E.T. Firth Pumice Merchants, National Bank Archives, Wellington.

⁴²⁴ National Bank, Inspector’s Reports on Auckland Branch, 31 August 1896: Advances, 13 December 1897, National Bank Archives, Wellington.

CONCLUSION

This company failed not because of the qualities of either Firth or Clark but because of objective realities, as proved by the history of the other companies which attempted to work Waiorongomai's refractory and low-grade ore.⁴²⁵ Ever optimistic, and for many years backed with ample credit, Firth was the leader in this company, meaning he also received all the criticism for its actions. For a man who extolled private enterprise, Firth was very ready to manipulate the council and government ministers to obtain benefits for his company, which with the decline of mining – a decline in large part blamed on his company's extortionate charges – came to have a monopoly not only over battery treatment but also over much of the goldfield.

Appendix

Figure 1: Photograph of J.C. Firth (on left), William Australia Graham, Wiremu Tamihana, and others, n.d. [c. 1870], Te Aroha and District Museum; used with permission.

Figure 2: 'Men of the Time: Mr J.C. Firth', *Observer*, 4 December 1886; this issue is no longer extant, but the sketch is reproduced in Mona Gordon, *The Golden Age of Josiah Clifton Firth* (Christchurch, 1963), facing p. 144.

Figure 3: 'James McCosh Clark, Esq., J.P., Mayor of Auckland', *Observer*, 1 April 1882, facing p. 40.

⁴²⁵ See in particular papers on the Te Aroha Silver and Gold Mining Company and on the New Zealand Exploration Company and Aroha Gold Mines.



Figure 1: Photograph of J.C. Firth (on left), William Australia Graham, Wiremu Tamihana, and others, n.d. [c. 1870], Te Aroha and District Museum; used with permission.



'MEN OF THE TIME: MR J. C. FIRTH'

Figure 2: 'Men of the Time: Mr J.C. Firth', Observer, 4 December 1886; this issue is no longer extant, but the sketch is reproduced in Mona Gordon, *The Golden Age of Josiah Clifton Firth* (Christchurch, 1963), facing p. 144.



Figure 3: 'James McCosh Clark, Esq., J.P., Mayor of Auckland', *Observer*, 1 April 1882, facing p. 40.