

## NZ HISTORIES POP-UP'S:

# Mere Harper

**Also known as; Big Mary or Big Maere**

Mere Harper was a strong and respected woman from the Ngāi Tahu and Ngāti Huirapa iwi. She was born in 1842. Her mother, Mata (Caroline) Punahere, was Māori from Arowhenua, and her father, William Apes, was Native American. William came to New Zealand in 1839, jumped off a ship after seeing mistreatment on board, and later settled in the South Island.

Mere grew up and lived all her life in Waikouaiti (now Karitāne), which used to be a whaling village. She was the first of her parents' children to survive to adulthood. She was born shortly after the Treaty of Waitangi was signed and was very young when Ngāi Tahu land was first sold to the British Crown, including the 1844 Otago Purchase.



In 1863, Mere married William Harper, an Englishman who worked as a ship's captain, harbourmaster, and lighthouse keeper. They had one son, also named William. Mere was very tall and strong. She worked as a porter, carrying people from boats to shore on her back –sometimes even carrying three men at once! She was known to give a dunk in the sea to passengers who were rude or impatient. On New Year's Day 1877, Mere won a women's boat race at the Waikouaiti Regatta, and her husband won the whalers' race.

When the railway came to Puketeraki in the 1880s, the lighthouse was no longer needed, so William became a fisherman. In 1905, Mere spoke out against building toilets on the foreshore, saying it was a sacred site where her ancestor Hine Koraku was buried.

Mere had deep knowledge of her people's history, traditions, and place names. She shared this knowledge with researchers like William Anderson Taylor and Henry Devenish Skinner, helping preserve Ngāi Tahu history. She also worked as a midwife for both Māori and Pākehā families.

Later in life, Mere and Ria Tikini helped care for babies in the community with Dr. Truby King, who later founded Plunket. Their work began with a baby named Thomas Rangiwahia (Mutu) Ellison in 1906. In 2016, they were officially recognised for their contributions to Plunket, thanks to a request by Mutu's son, David Ellison.

Mere Harper died in 1924, aged 82, and is buried at Puketeraki with her whānau. She is remembered as a strong, wise, and caring woman who made a lasting impact on her people and preserved their stories.



**Born: 1842**

**Lived: In Waikouaiti / Karitāne**

**Known for: her knowledge, strength and height.**

**Mere Harper - Biography - Kareao Ngai Tahu Archives Art Taonga**

<https://www.plunket.org.nz/plunket/about-plunket/who-we-are/mere-harper/>

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In 1863, Mere \_\_\_\_\_ William Harper, an Englishman who worked as a ship's captain, harbourmaster, and \_\_\_\_\_. They had one son, also named William. Mere was very tall and strong. She worked as a \_\_\_\_\_ carrying people from boats to shore on her back—sometimes even carrying \_\_\_\_\_ men at once! She was known to give a \_\_\_\_\_ in the sea to passengers who were \_\_\_\_\_.

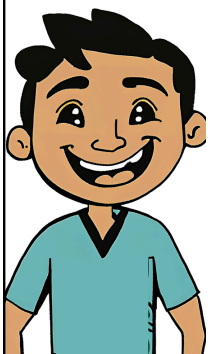
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Mere Harper died in 1924, aged 82, and is buried at \_\_\_\_\_ with her whānau. She is remembered as a strong, wise, and caring woman who made a lasting impact on her people and preserved their stories.



Use these words to fill in the blanks

knowledge  
Plunket  
lighthouse keeper  
Waikouaiti

Puketeraki  
three  
foreshore  
researchers  
Dr. Truby King  
midwife  
railway  
Native American

2016  
Native American  
1842  
porter  
dunk  
toilets  
rude or impatient  
married

# Mere Harper

## Timeline of Her Life and Legacy



### 1830s

◆ Mata Punahere, Mere's mother, moves south to Puketeraki from Arowhenua for safety during tribal conflicts between Ngāi Tahu and Ngāti Toa.

### 1839

◆ William Apes, Mere's father, a Native American, arrives in New Zealand on the ship Anna Maria and jumps ship in Otago.

### 1842

👶 Mere Harper is born at Waikouaiti (now Karitāne).  
She is the first child of Mata and William to survive to adulthood.

### 1844

📄 The Otago Deed of Purchase – the first major sale of Ngāi Tahu land to the British Crown – takes place while Mere is a toddler.

### 1863

👤 Mere marries William Harper, an English seaman and lighthouse keeper.  
👶 They have one child: William Jr.

### Late 1800s

👉 Known as “Big Mary”, Mere works as a porter, famously carrying passengers from ships on her back—even up to three men at once.  
🌊 She becomes known for dunking rude passengers in the water.

### 1877 (New Year's Day)

🏊♀ Mere wins the Women's Race at the Waikouaiti Regatta.  
🏊♂ William Harper wins the Whalers' Race.

### 1880s

🚂 The railway reaches Puketeraki; the lighthouse is no longer needed.  
👤 William becomes a fisherman.

### 1905

🚫 Mere protests plans to build toilets on the foreshore, saying her ancestor Hine Koraku is buried there (a wāhi tapu / sacred site).

### Early 1900s

📖 Mere shares Ngāi Tahu history and place names with researchers like W.A. Taylor and H.D. Skinner.  
👩 She works as a midwife for both Māori and Pākehā families.

### 1906

👶 Helps care for baby Thomas Rangiwahia (Mutu) Ellison with Ria Tikini and Dr. Truby King – the beginning of what becomes the Plunket Society.

### 1924

👤 Mere Harper passes away, aged 82.  
👤 She is buried at Puketeraki with her whānau.

### 2016

👤 Mere Harper and Ria Tikini are formally recognised for their early contribution to Plunket, following a request by David Ellison (Mutu's son).

# Glossary: Mere Harper

|  |                                  |
|--|----------------------------------|
|  | Things ie ..                     |
|  | People                           |
|  | Plants and Places                |
|  | Concepts, values, understandings |
|  | Animals, fish                    |

Right: Mere Harper, an unidentified man (possibly her son William Harper jr) and Ria Tikini at the Harper family home, Huriawa. C. 1904-1919. W. A. Taylor Collection, Canterbury Museum.



|                                |  |
|--------------------------------|--|
| <b>Arowhenua</b>               | <b>Ngāi Tahu settlement in the Aoraki region</b>                         |
| <b>Huriawa</b>                 | <b>Mouth of the Waikouaiti River</b>                                     |
| <b>Karitāne</b>                | <b>Current name for the Waikouaiti settlement</b>                        |
| <b>Puketeraki</b>              | <b>Village near the Waikouaiti River</b>                                 |
| <b>Mere Harper</b>             | <b>Also known as Big Maere, Big Mary, Mere Apes</b>                      |
| <b>David Ellison</b>           | <b>Mutu Ellison's son, Upoko of Kāti Huirapa Rūnaka ki Puketeraki</b>    |
| <b>Frederic Truby King</b>     | <b>Founder of Plunket in New Zealand</b>                                 |
| <b>Hapū</b>                    | <b>Sub-tribe of an iwi</b>   |
| <b>Hine Koraku</b>             | <b>Ancestor of Mere</b>  |
| <b>Māori</b>                   | <b>Indigenous person of New Zealand</b>                                  |
| <b>Mata Apes</b>               | <b>Mother of Mere Harper, also known as Mata (Caroline) Punahere</b>     |
| <b>Ngāi Tahu</b>               | <b>The iwi of Te Waipounamu excluding Marlborough, Tasman, Nelson</b>    |
| <b>Ngāti Huirapa</b>           | <b>Hapū of Ngāi Tahu connected to Arowhenua</b>                          |
| <b>Ngāti Toa</b>               | <b>People of Kapiti, near Wellington</b>                                 |
| <b>Pākehā</b>                  | <b>Foreign, introduced, commonly describes people of European</b>        |
| <b>Plunket</b>                 | <b>NZ organisation, formed 1907, to provide ante &amp; neonatal care</b> |
| <b>Ria Tikini</b>              | <b>Midwife that worked with Mere and Dr. King at Plunket</b>             |
| <b>Thomas R (Mutu) Ellison</b> | <b>First Plunket baby, cared for by Mere, Ria &amp; Dr. King</b>         |
| <b>Tipuna</b>                  | <b>Ancestor</b>  |
| <b>Tīpuna</b>                  | <b>Ancestors</b>   |
| <b>Upoko</b>                   | <b>Rangatira/leader/head of Marae</b>                                    |
| <b>Whānau</b>                  | <b>Family</b>  |
| <b>William A Taylor</b>        | <b>Photographer, amateur historian</b>                                   |
| <b>William Apes</b>            | <b>Father of Mere Harper</b>   |
| <b>William Harper</b>          | <b>Husband of Mere Harper</b>  |
| <b>Te Tiriti o Waitangi</b>    | <b>The te reo Māori version of the Treaty of Waitangi</b>                |
| <b>Midwife</b>                 | <b>A person who assists a woman during childbirth</b>                    |
| <b>Porter</b>                  | <b>A person helping to transfer people from their boats to the shore</b> |
| <b>Wahi Tapu</b>               | <b>Sacred or prohibited place</b>  |
| <b>Wahine Toa</b>              | <b>Strong woman, wāhine toa are strong women</b>                         |

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## WORDFIND



- Big Maere
- Māori
- Midwife
- Plunket
- Porter
- Tipuna
- Upoko
- Wahine toa
- Whānau

R M J S I X L H C B H H L A O  
 E G U R J K Q E I Y R L F N W  
 L C O J Y Q Y G K H H B F U R  
 R Ä G N J Q M S A K S W A P M  
 M E L X C A T G V I K H O I E  
 G V T Z E F I W D I M Ä T T W  
 F E Q R F X K E N V B N E O K  
 X W E C O P Y M Z Y A A N R U  
 B S G A O P D N E J L U I E K  
 O M X Z I Y L Y P T K S H O A  
 U Y V Z F O D K X D Y X A H L  
 V P N J O W Z Q L Q V J W L R  
 W D O K T U B N P L U N K E T  
 J K R K Y F X I G L T S C Z X  
 J M B T O J M L V G K L Q U N

### Where are these Places?

Use [www.kahurumanu.co.nz/atlas](http://www.kahurumanu.co.nz/atlas) to find these places of significance on the map!

- Arowhenua
- Kaiapoi
- Waikouaiti
- Oamaru
- Ōtākou
- Ōtautahi
- Timaru
- Waimate

How would you help others, if you had super strength like Mere?

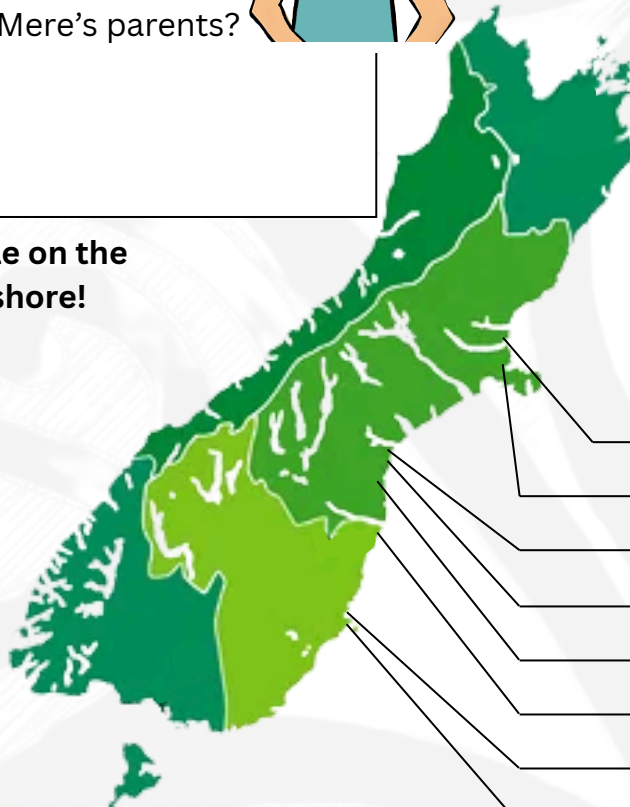
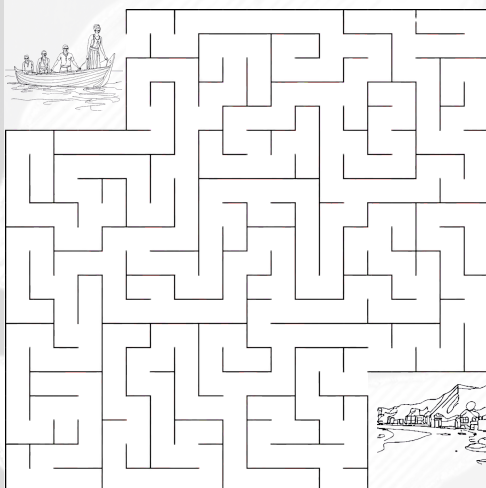


What were the ethnicities of Mere's parents?



## MAZE

Help the people on the boat get to shore!



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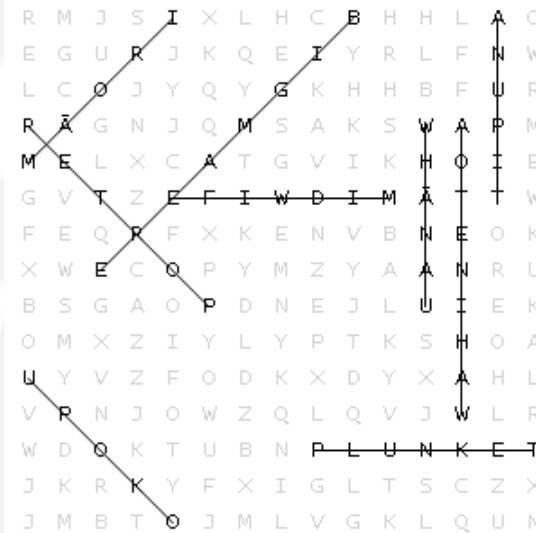
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**Kaiapoi**  
**Ōtautahi**

**Arowhenua**  
**Timaru**

**Waimate**  
**Oamaru**

**Waikouaiti**  
**Ōtākou**

What were the ethnicities of Mere's parents?

**Mother-Māori**  
**Father-Native American**

How would you help others, if you had super Strength like Mere?



Help the people on the boat get to shore!

