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## **Black gold – early oil exploration in Taranaki**

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Oil exploration in

Taranaki has been in the news lately, with Greymouth Petroleum and international companies expressing strong interest in the oil reserves under Taranaki soils and sea-bed. Until recently I had assumed that oil exploration was a phenomenon of the 20th century – until a Taranaki resident informed me that it was being extracted around New Plymouth as early as the 1800s. About the time that the first successful oil well was drilled in Canada in 1858, early European settlers in New Plymouth were were complaining about an oily scum on Ngamotu Beach which stained their dresses and coated their boots. Rainbow hued slicks often covered the water around the Sugar Loaf Islands and local Māori told of an atua (spirit) who drowned there and was still undergoing decomposition. (In fact, the Maori interpretation was not far off – oil (or petroleum), is formed when organic material (land plants and marine plankton – but not dinosaurs, as I had thought!) be

came embedded in peat swamps, estuaries and shallow seas. Sediments buried this material, preserving it from decay. When at a particular depth, the requisite pressure and temperature is reached, and the material is slowly “cooked”, converting it to oil and gas.)

In 1865, an enterprising gunsmith, Edward M. Smith, sent samples of the oily slick from Ngamotu Beach off to England for testing and confirmed that the material was indeed petroleum. Later in 1865, a well was dug at Moturoa, on the New Plymouth foreshore, and in 1866 it struck oil at 20 metres. Other wells soon appeared, but only a few barrels of oil were recovered in the first years. In 1904, some Australians brought the first steel drilling rig to New Zealand, and two years later they struck oil and gas. By 1913, crude oil was being held in storage in New Plymouth. A refinery was built, but local production was spasmodic and could not sustain it. In the late 1920s, a second refinery was built by locals (it closed in 1975). During the 1950s, some pumps sold Peak Petrol (named after Mt Taranaki), and the local council used Taranaki diesel in its vehicles.

Since these early years of exploration, progress in exploration technology has meant the discovery of more fields beyond New Plymouth, including offshore islands. [Click here](#) to view a map of all the known oil and gas fields in Taranaki.

**Photo top:** Oil Derricks at Moturoa, New Plymouth, with Ngamotu beach on the right. Taken by an unknown photographer circa 1910. Not to be reproduced without permission from Alexander Turnbull Library, ref. ID 1/1-007630-G. **Above right:** “Peak Petrol”: Taranaki’s local petrol brand. Photo by David Mills. Not to be reproduced without permission from Puke Araki, ID PHO2002-055.

**Sources/further reading:** [Puke Ariki](#) (New Plymouth Library) website; [Oil and gas – early exploration](#), Te Ara Online Encyclopedia of New Zealand

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