D

The first kauri gum to be exported from New Zealand was part of a cargo taken back to Australia and England by two early expeditions in 1814 and 1815. By the 1860s, kauri gum's reputation was well established in the overseas markets and European immigrants were joining the Maoris in collecting gum on the hills of northern New Zealand. As the surface gum became more scarce, spades were used to dig up the buried 'treasure'. The increasing number of diggers resulted in rapid growth of the kauri gum exports from 1,000 tons in 1860 to a maximum of over 10,000 tons in 1900.

For fifty years from about 1870 to 1920, the kauri gum industry was a major source of income for settlers in northern New Zealand. As these would-be farmers struggled to break in the land, many turned to gum-digging to earn enough money to support their families and pay for improvements to their farms until better times arrived. By the 1890s, there were 20,000 people engaged in gum-digging. Although many of these, such as farmers, women and children, were only part-time diggers, nearly 7,000 were full-timers. During times of economic difficulty, gum-digging was the only job available where the unemployed from many walks of life could earn a living, if they were prepared to work.

E

The first major commercial use of kauri gum was in the manufacture of high-grade furniture varnish, a kind of clear paint used to treat wood. The best and purest gum that was exported prior to 1910 was used in this way. Kauri gum was used in 70% of the oil varnishes being manufactured in England in the 1890s. It was favoured ahead of other gums because it was easier to process at lower temperatures. The cooler the process could be kept the better, as it meant a paler varnish could be produced.

About 1910, kauri gum was found to be a very suitable ingredient in the production of some kinds of floor coverings such as linoleum. In this way, a use was found for the vast quantities of poorer quality and less pure gum, that had up till then been discarded as waste. Kauri gum's importance in the manufacture of varnish and linoleum was displaced by synthetic alternatives in the 1930s.

F

Fossil kauri gum is rather soft and can be carved easily with a knife or polished with fine sandpaper. In the time of Queen Victoria of England (1837–1901), some pieces were made into fashionable amber beads that women wore around their necks. The occasional lump that contained preserved insects was prized for use in necklaces and bracelets. Many of the gum-diggers enjoyed the occasional spell of carving and produced a wide variety of small sculptured pieces. Many of these carvings can be seen today in local museums.

Over the years, kauri gum has also been used in a number of minor products, such as an ingredient in marine glue and candles. In the last decades it has had a very limited use in the manufacture of extremely high-grade varnish for violins, but the gum of the magnificent kauri tree remains an important part of New Zealand's history.