



In the Wanaka cemetery lies the grave of [Robert Henry Norman](#) . . .

WANAKA as we know it now is a thriving modern tourist town. However, in the far upper corner of its cemetery one finds a scattering of early graves, which tell the story of the older heritage of Pembroke (as Wanaka was formerly called), and the pioneering families that established themselves in the Upper Clutha region. Among these is the grave of [Robert Henry Norman](#), the first European to be born in the district.

[Robert Norman](#) was born on March 11, 1861. His father, [Henry Ferris Norman](#), was the first European to bring a family to the district, arriving in 1860 with his wife Mary Anne and [Robert's](#) older brother Richard to manage a sheep station. There is something of a mystery surrounding [Henry Norman's](#) name. He was born Abel Ferris Domini, in Dorset, in 1832, but for unknown reasons had taken his mother's maiden surname and changed his first name when he reached New Zealand. It has been suggested that he may have jumped ship in Wellington about 1851 and altered his name to avoid detection. Certainly after his arrival in New Zealand, he and his family were always known as [Norman](#).

The family travelled from Wellington to Oamaru in the Snaresbrook, accompanied by 1700 merino sheep. From Oamaru they travelled overland through the Lindis Pass to Lake Wanaka by bullock dray, the sheep being ferried over the Clutha in a whaleboat, with their legs tied. When they first arrived they camped in tents. Eventually, they built the first homestead on the lakeshore, near Glendhu Bay. The isolation of these pioneers was extreme. In 1861, when the arrival of young [Robert Norman](#) was imminent, his father had to ride on horseback to the Waitaki to fetch the midwife, a journey that took two days each way and covered a distance of almost 200km. Following the happy event, he was obliged to undertake a further arduous overland journey to Oamaru to register the birth.

As the district began to open to the gold rushes, the [Normans](#) opened a hotel and a store, as

well as running a ferry service. By the 1870s their business interests were well-established in Albert Town and included a post office. Young [Robert](#) married Mary Ann Halliday in 1888. In 1896 he took over the hotel, the Otago Witness congratulating him “on the fact of two old landmarks coming together to conjointly minister to [the residents’] comfort and welfare — the earliest built hotel and the first-born in the district in charge of it”.

[Robert](#) and Mary Ann had 12 children. Parenthood provided some fraught moments for them, as in 1892 the Witness reported the near-drowning of their 2-year-old son, who fell into a waterhole in the yard, and in 1896 another of his small sons accidentally set fire to the cowshed and its contents, “buggy and harness, horse covers, sacks, horse collars, tools, and numerous other articles to the value in the aggregate of fully £50”.

[Robert Norman](#) died on August 11, 1913, and was buried in the Pembroke cemetery, where he rests now with his wife and several of their children.

— Helen Gilmore