

Kush stream, commenced to clear a track with bill hooks through the fern and bush to it. Next day completed the track and cut poles . . . and erected a tent ten feet by eight. We purchased potatoes, wheat, etc. from the natives . . .”

Space does not permit a full account of the first months which were occupied chiefly with clearing, house building, negotiations with the local Maoris for essential supplies, suffering sleepless nights from sand-flies and mosquitoes and splitting battens and shingles.

At the outset they fell into a new chum's mistake “We commenced felling a number of trees such as Tepou, Toto rimo puriri lance wood manuka etc. We felled large trees for plates and squared them down the adze, but after all our trouble and expending several days on this work the natives informed us we had used very bad trees, which would only last for about three months, and we had in consequence to pull the whole affair down again after the Upper plates being fixed to the corner posts, this was rather vexatious work . . .” After four months labour Robert wrote with foreboding: “I have a presentiment that to make this farm pay, fearful difficulties must yet be overcome.”

The onset of winter found the house still unfinished “. . . worst of all we are infested with mice and rats which eat up grass seed, potatoes, Maize, and everything they can seize – The owls frequently perch over our beds in the house at night and sit till morning watching the mice, sometimes starting us in our sleep by a sudden dive at their prey. – We never interfere with the owls – The natives continue to visit us and put off much of our time with their nonsense – In fine weather our days work is generally half a chain picked up and hoed for grass – Our limited capital will not admit of us purchasing horses or ploughs.” The reference to exercising restraint in not killing moreporks was further to an earlier entry noting “. . . several pigeons shot and owls, not a few.”

On 6 May he left for a visit to Whangarei by “Mr Walton's new road under Maungau Manu, dense forest for twelve miles, precipitous gullies, descents, found it much worse than any other and much longer – reached Mr Rust surnamed Wai Kura at 4 pm. Wai-Kura is famed far and near for his niggardly meals scanty hospitality, poor accommodation and high charges for everything – Tremendous wet weather set in rivers, & creeks, flooded, and stopping all travelling for a season.” However he managed to pass the time at Rust's “very well” with many other stormbound visitors “among whom were a party of surveyors, Mr Johnson of Otaki and others. I overheard Johnston [sic] the magistrate giving Wai-Kura a long lecture on his niggardly principles – Why I've seen you Mr Rust, set a small plate of six or eight thin slices of beef and half a dozen potatoes for the dinner of seven hungry travellers and you charge two shillings each, and so on – ‘Starvation principles’”