

The peninsula post

John Bishop joins the postman on his daily run around the hills and bays of Banks Peninsula.

S EVEN middle-aged passengers wait outside the post office in Akaroa while Robin Burleigh loads his van for his daily run around the hills and bays of Banks Peninsula. As well as the mail for 140 households he has newspapers, circulars, courier parcels and other items for delivery.

"Delivering mail would be hopelessly uneconomic as a service on its own," he says. So he takes up to 10 passengers along for the ride and a day's sightseeing, complete with commentary.

Burleigh lives in picturesque Le Bons Bay, half an hour's drive over the hill from Akaroa. Why live in Auckland when you can live here? he asks rhetorically.

Akaroa is a dead volcano and the harbour is the crater. The road we take is around the rim, dipping into the bays below for deliveries. The 120 kilometre trip takes five hours, and Burleigh does it six days a week.

In the first valley, he pulls to the right side of the road, and from the driver's seat reaches out the window to take outgoing mail from the box and deposit today's deliveries – a newspaper, and some magazines. He then lifts up the red flag on the box to indicate that mail has arrived.

The mailboxes vary wildly. They are supposed to be a standard size and positioned at a regulated height but they're not.

There are now only four dairy farms on the peninsula, compared with 800 to 900 dairy units and nine factories in the past.

In simpler times, Burleigh explains, cows were preferred because they gave beef, milk,



Beats Auckland: Akaroa Harbour provides a striking backdrop to a working life on the roads of Banks Peninsula.

Photo: JOSEPH JOHNSON/FAIRFAX NZ

butter and cheese, and that helped farming families to be self-sufficient. Now it's sheep on the hills, with beef cattle on the flatter land and some deer and alpacas.

At the next stop Gavin, a friendly local, is waiting for his paper. There's a happy "giddy" and a shake of the hand before the pair discuss Gavin's homemade beer.

Forty of the 140 houses on Burleigh's route get *The Press*. There is no other physical means of delivery.

One gate is painted blue and yellow. "Otago supporters," Burleigh mutters, "that's what they are."

We come across two black and red mailboxes. Canterbury

colours. Proper stuff. Burleigh doesn't even need to say. We know that is the way the world should be. Local, perhaps parochial, it's a connected community with shared values.

That's harder now with fewer people farming, schools closing, and isolated communities struggling to maintain services.

B URLEIGH is a fetcher and a carrier. At Decanter Bay there is a note on a letterbox. "Postman Robin. Please transfer two crepe pans to Allison in Duvauchelle. She will pay you. Thanks Brad."

"Nope", he says, "don't know Allison, so I am not doing it."

Burleigh worked for 20 years

on Banks Peninsula for the Department of Conservation. He left the department in one of its many restructurings. "Bloody politicians kept changing the rules, policies and priorities. I felt we were sticking on Band Aids and I had had enough of that."

Okains Bay is the widest and sandiest bay on the peninsula, popular because of its safe beach and recreational activities. About 140 people live around the area, and it's the only bay with a shop.

Burleigh pulls up outside the Okains Bay store. Two people are sitting outside waiting for the morning paper. One of them is Christchurch lawyer Nigel Hampton QC, "a good man to have on your side in a scrap", says Burleigh. "He helped us save

the local school from closure."

There are 17 children at the local school, one of the few left on the peninsula outside of Akaroa. "[Hekia] Parata [the Minister of Education] tried to close the school but failed. Local opposition was too strong," says Burleigh, warming to the story of a successful fight against Wellington.

The Okains Bay Maori and Colonial Museum has an important collection of taonga and pioneer possessions. A local chap named Murray Thacker, a descendant of an early settler family, collected a lot of taonga, housed it in the old dairy factory and later gifted the land, buildings and treasures to a trust which now runs the museum.

Thacker also did something quite clever, says Burleigh. "He leases the shop only to people who have school age children and who agree to send them to the local school."

The bays of Banks Peninsula offer plenty of wind and sea, a rough Kiwi environment for those seeking some distance from city pressures. Those who live or holiday here know that services like Burleigh's help make their choice of isolated lifestyle possible.

He is no Postman Pat, but he provides an insightful journey into life in a special part of the world.

Robin Burleigh's tours leave five days a week from the Akaroa Visitor Information Centre, 120 Rue Jolie – opposite the public library. The cost per passenger is \$75, which includes morning tea and a priceless array of stories. Book at akaroa.com/things-do/ tours or phone 03 304 8600.