If the colour green had a homeland this would be it. Verdant fields give way to rolling hills in the countryside around New Zealand’s mightiest river, the Waikato. Visitors from southern England might wonder why they bothered leaving home, especially in quaint towns like Cambridge where every effort has been made to replicate the ‘mother country’. It’s little wonder that Peter Jackson chose the Waikato as the bucolic Shire in his movie adaptation of _Lord of the Rings_.

But this veneer of conspicuous Englishness only partly disguises another reality. Move over hobbits, this is Tainui country. This powerful coalition of related tribes joined with others to elect a king in the 1850s to resist the loss of their land and sovereignty. Although the fertile Waikato was taken from them by war, they retained control of the limestone crags and forests of what became known as the King Country to within a whisper of the 20th century. The back roads along the coast still contain tiny outposts of Maoridom, echoes of an earlier era.

Today’s visitors can experience first-hand the area’s genteel/free-wheeling dichotomy. Adrenaline junkies will be drawn to the wild surf of Raglan or rough-and-tumble underground pursuits in the extraordinary Waitomo Caves, while others will warm to the more sedate delights of Te Aroha’s Edwardian thermal complex or Hamilton’s gardens.

It’s the Waikato River that symbolises this best – in places idyllic lakes have been created by harnessing it to hydroelectric projects while elsewhere its _mauri_ (life force) flows fast and free.