

(By Marianne Spence)

ONE of Gisborne's few remaining First World War veterans turned 100 yesterday. And to say Roland Graham is remarkable for a man his age is probably an understatement.

Although he is slightly "hors de combat" physically, Mr Graham is as alert today as he was when he set off for Gallipoli, just a lot more experienced and informed.

The springy old gentleman, who still keeps his own house and garden with the help of a housekeeper, still keeps and active interest in the things going on around him locally, nationally and internationally and has done as long as he can remember.

His memory goes back to the late part of last century when, as a young boy, he watched his parents clear the land on the family farm, Mangatoitoi, at Ngatapa.

He later cleared his own land at Ormond and continued an active role in the development of the district after that.

As a former chairman of Cook County Council, a

founding member of the East Coast Catchment Board, president of Poverty Bay Club, the local RSA and a bowling club among many other things, his life has been as busy as it has been long.

Jokingly he puts the secret of his longevity down to smoking, eating lots of butter and cream and avoiding lean meat — "lean is just nother work for skinny; the sort you kill for dog tucker".

But in all seriousness, he believes there is no secret to eternal youth. "It's a load of bull dust," he said.

"It's not my doing that I have reached 100. It's anybody's guess when you are born how long you are doing to live and how you live and when you're going to die.

"I have seen people in more distress when they are in their 70s and 80s," he said.

Seeing old friends suffering has been one of the disadvantages of outliving many of them.

"In some ways I am an advocate of some form of euthanasias being introduced in this country," he said. "I have seen the

plight and suffering of a lot of old people for no fault of their own.

"I have seen a lot of people in old people's homes suffering a good deal of mental rather than physical distress. A good number have said to me they wish they could die — there should be a short cut for them."

Mr Graham himself keeps generally good health, apart from a bout of pneumonia about 10 years ago, which forced him to stop smoking, and a slight loss of hearing. He has also suffered from failing eyesight over the past nine or 10 years, a matter he finds particularly frustrating because it means he can no longer drive his car.

"It sort of anchors you in port," he said. But he still manages to get down to the Poverty Bay Club now and again to catch up with old friends. After 70 years, he is the club's longest member.

He says he has been well looked after by friends and family, many of whom come around to read the parts of the paper not included in daily tape recordings by Foundation for the Blind



Local identity Roland Graham — 100 years and still living life to the full.

volunteers. Particularly the stock reports he had monitored closed for many years. He also relies heavily on the radio for information and "talking" books for entertainment.

Apart from a year years in the Middle East during the First World War, Mr Graham has been in this district all his life.

"I spent the first five years of my life at Ngatapa where my father had Mangatoitoi Station."

The house his father built in 1886 is still standing and is currently owned by the Sherriff family.

Mr Graham had one brother and two sisters, one of whom, Mrs Janet Rathbone, 86, was still alive and coming from Hawkes Bay to celebrate his birthday.

When Mr Graham was five the family moved to the Ngakarua farm at Orchard, where as a young boy he remembers riding a horse three miles to school and three miles back each day.

"There used to be about 20 horses in the school paddock — some of our class had to ride nine or 10 miles to get there. In those days the back country roads had no metal and used to become bog holes in wintertime."

Like the house at Ngatapa, the house his father built at Ngakarua

is still standing and is currently occupied by fifth generation Grahams.

After Ormond School Mr Graham sent three years at King's College in Auckland, returning to join his father on the farm when he was 18.

"I became a sort of jackaroo and learnt to use the spade, hammer, shovel and mattock (a grubbing tool).

"During my time on the farm we cleared about 1500 acres of scrub and erected about 100 miles of fence."

It was during the first 30 or 40 years of his life that the district underwent its most rapid development, he said.

Mr Graham's earliest memories of the landscape were very much as Captain Cook must have seen it, he said. "Toi toi, scrub and raupo on the Flats — bush in the hill country." There was no drainage on the Flats and little fencing.

"Our cow paddock was about 1000 acres when we first got it fenced."

At a time wool was fetching only a few pence a pound, development

was limited by money. Mr Graham remembers splitting Matawai timber for fence posts.

Not all the development had been good for the district, he said. As the bush came down the rivers started silting up but the farmers failed to take head.

"In 1910 I saw the fire of 10,000 acres of bush country at Mangatu — it was dark at Ormond at four o'clock in the afternoon, we had to stop shearing."

"We called it process but the dollar was important. Now we have to start replanting but we will never get back the beautiful native timbers like totara, matai and rimu."

Farmers had been slow to recognise the need for controlled development.

"They are generally inclined to leave it to the next generation. It it's going to cost anything you general get an adverse reaction."

Mr Graham has always taken the view that farmers should take individual responsibility for their back country roads instead of viewing it entirely as a council

responsibility.

"I think all farmers should take an interest in planting their roads to beautify them and stabilise them."

Mr Graham and his wife Dora had done this at Ngakarua Road and lived to see the advantages. The only patch left unplanted was also the only part to slip in floods.

The couple were married in 1921 and had three sons, one of whom was killed in action overseas. Robin Graham died about 18 months ago leaving Don Graham his sole remaining son.

Like his father, Mr Robin Graham was keenly interested in soil conservation and water management and was also chairman of the former East Cape Catchment Board.

Apart from his sons and daughters-in-law, Mr Graham was joined this weekend by his eight grandchildren and 13 great-grandchildren, including one grandson who flew in from Australia especially for the occasion.

Sunday evening was set aside for a special

celebration with many of his old friends and especially some of the people who worked for him on his farm, including Charlie Waihua who was with the family for over 50 years and built fences that would stand forever."

The celebrations started late last week as friends and family began to come from near and far to see him and were expected to continue well into this week as some of Mr Graham's older friends called around for more leisurely visits.

One of them is Mr Arthur Gardiner who, at 101, is his only remaining Anzac mate — the pair of them set off to Palestine together and returned together, among the few to survive Gallipoli.

Although Mr Gardiner is not as well as Mr Graham would like to see him, the pair still enjoy a strong bond of friendship and memories that has survived the hard times.

"There were some sad memories, some hard times but you put them on the back burner and only seem to remember the good times," he said. "I have many happy memories."