Auckland's harbour bridge turns 50 on Saturday. This week, the herald looks at how it has changed the city.

Today, Mathew Dearnaley goes back to the beginning.

Below the mid-19th century, the North Shore was a sleepy backwater of scattered settlements, usually visited to live only at weekends and public holidays by Aucklanders commuting to ferries to visit its beaches and attractions.

But in the postwar boom, Auckland began looking hungrily across the Waitemata Harbour for development space to counter the urban sprawl churning through agricultural land to the south.

Although about 35,000 people had made the Shore their home by the mid-1950s — compared with more than 220,000 now — its growth rate was still only half Auckland's average, hampered by the harbour divide.

Coffered two jobs, meaning around daily trips across the water on the Devonport Swing Ferry Co's 19th century coal-burning vessels.

For those with cars, the alternative was a 50km-drive via Westhead.

But developers were drawing up expansion plans, confident times were nearing when pressure for a bridge or tunnel would triumph, despite the failure of proposals going back to 1900.

That was when engineer Fred Blunt, commissioned by North Shore businessmen wanting to herd their pigs and cattle to market, designed a drawbridge on floating pontoons along an appreciation of today's crossing routes.

Although it was to be paid for from tolls — a concept to be adopted on the route 39 years later — it was determined over a prohibitive estimate of almost £200,000, or $5.6 million in today's inflation-adjusted terms.

After other schemes came and went, a royal commission in 1948 recommended a four-lane bridge.

But further investigations revealed fear the commission had underestimated population growth, and six-lane lanes might be needed, prompting the Ministry of Works to opt for a six-lane compromise.

A harbour bridge authority headed by Auckland mayor Sir John Allen was appointed in 1951 to seek public loans and call tenders for the plans, which also included two footbridges and a network of approach roads.

But the struggle was far from over. Prime Minister Sidney Holland shelved the project in 1956 in fringes at the lowest bid of just over £6.1 million (at $376 million now) from a consortium of British engineering giants Cleveland Bridge and Seymour Long.

But after intense lobbying from the authority, the government said it would build the bridge with a budget of £5 million ($245 million).

That produced the "economically" bridge, with four lanes and the proposed footbridges dropped.

The authority even used the multi-proposed approach roads, along St Mary's Bay and Cheddi Day. But the alternative of Curran St and Queen St through Alberton whirled up enough of a public outcry to force the government to reinstate the original network.

That pushed the cost to £13.5 million ($294 million). Not even Sir John could resist the high traffic lane, and pedestrians and cyclists have been building in this day for footpaths.

Loss of the fifth lane meant the bridge authority could not use third-lane traffic management to control demand which exceeded expectations from opening day on May 30, 1959.

Far above the royal commission's prediction the bridge would be carrying three million vehicles annually by 1992, the volume exceeded 10 million that year, and was approaching 12 million when the four-lane lanes added in 1990.
