

BROOKLANDS.

75th Anniversary.

Mayor, Councillors and guests.

Thank you to the Council staff for organizing this special occasion, to celebrate the generosity and wisdom of my forbears in gifting the magnificent property which is Brooklands to the people of New Plymouth.

I am delighted to be here taking part in this anniversary. I share the vision of the speakers at the original ceremony in keeping the character of the garden for all time. It should retain its own identity and name forever, although it is managed in conjunction with Pukekura Park.

With five out seven of the remaining grandchildren of Newton here today, it shows how special this occasion is to us. Several of the following generation live locally. We have a small group of them here in the hope that they will provide a continuing link between Council and the King family in whatever capacity arises.

This park was my grandparents' garden. Newton King bought the property in 1896 having leased it for the 8 years prior to that. It was a farm holding planted already with a couple of Norfolk pines, the odd specimen tree and orchards.

Newton was an energetic and enterprising character, a pioneer of Taranaki who began the first stock and station agency in New Zealand. Some years ago I researched his life and this led me to write a book about it, for there was little material available in one place. In doing this I became tremendously impressed with the energy he applied to all his different interests and achievements. But always he made time in the mornings before work to inspect his garden with Tom Boulton, his head gardener, and it was Tom who made sure he was supplied with a fresh buttonhole.

At first Newton commissioned a landscape plan but for the rest of his tenure he and Tom developed the garden together. They used skill with colour and form in enhancing and thickening the only remnants of the original New Plymouth bush which provided a border to the south and west, by using pongas and different native trees which complemented each other. The bare rutted paddock which was the hill to the racecourse was planted in natives with a few exotics to provide autumn colour. This paddock is now the backdrop to the Bowl. Two glasshouses were built, one for soft plants such as begonias, the other for grapes. Hydrangea and rhododendron plants were among those he imported. A big home was built to house the family, and the pond was cleaned out manually. The garden was not planned but evolved into a pleasing blend of native and exotic plants with plenty of colour and food for the birds he loved.

Frequently he opened it to the public for viewing, sometimes he charged them and this money was given to the Plunket Society which was founded by his brother, Sir Truby King.

When Newton died in 1927, times were tough financially and death duties were harsh. His trustees were two of his sons, Truby and Eliot. Eventually they found that they could not in the short term meet the specific legacies listed in the will, and Truby said on the day “I believe the acquisition of the property to the town to be of much greater importance than any monetary arrangements. It goes without saying that we are not parting from Brooklands without regret. It has a number of happy associations for us, but we hope that it will retain its character and identity.” Truby is represented here today by his son Vivian, who boarded weekly with our grandparents for a few weeks. Vivian was present at the ceremony 75 years ago.

The weather was perfect on the day when Brooklands was formally handed over to the council with an impressive ceremony with an audience of about 5000 people. The actual ceremony was held on a dais on the lawn. My sister who is here today, Lynette Jolicoeur, is the only living participant from that ceremony, she was the little girl who handed the Governor General’s wife a bunch of flowers.

The speeches included phrases such as “old world charm and splendour” and “that Brooklands would always be Brooklands, retaining its own identity” “ A newspaper leader afterwards spoke about attacks of vandalism and the mischief of short sighted administration.

Had I been present at that ceremony, I would have been in a pram, but I carry memories of my own childhood, for we lived in Shortland Street and I spent many hours in the big playground which was Brooklands and the Park. We used to swing on rata vines in Maranui Gully, watch the bees high in the hive in the crown of the big Puriri, climb and swing on the branches of the huge chestnut and roll down the rutted grassy slopes of the cow paddock which became the Bowl. We gathered by the handful the beautifully scented flowers of the big port wine magnolia and revelled in the perfume of the horse chestnuts as we ran down the grass to the pond. Scents are unforgettable. The now massive plane trees were large even then.

My sister Jenny and I recently spoke together of my terror in entering the pond from the paddock bank, as Dad tried to teach me to swim in the murky lake. We stepped off into this brown water and I was terrified of the eels, the mud swirling around my toes, and the holes in the bank where all sorts of nasties could have lived. Eventually Dad gave up and I had lessons at Kawaroa before I returned to that pond.

Spanning this pond was a graceful curved wooden bridge which became progressively more dilapidated as people removed the planks for their firewood during the war. Cows grazed the paddock, at first they were driven from the gaol across Shortland Street after morning milking, and we had to close the gate to our drive. Later Mrs Slinger who lived in the Gables grazed her cows there and my sister Lynette had a horse she kept in that paddock.

I used to see Tom Boulton often as I trailed along with Dad to discuss things in the garden. Dad was Eliot King and he was appointed to the Pukekura Park Committee and continued there until he died in 1958. On some occasions he used to take me to do small things in the Brooklands garden. Once we measured the trunk of the chestnut, the diameter and circumference, and a notice was painted and hung there, for it was a massive tree. Sometimes Tom would have a paper bag full of chestnuts ready for us, he’d store them in the gardeners’ shed opposite the glasshouses. During the 1950’s Dad kept a keen eye on the growth rate of the kauri and kahikatea trees planted in the horse paddock. He was pleased with their progress.

I became a horticulturist and then a farmer and moved away, and fifty years later I have returned, and became a member of the Friends of the Park in the capacity of vice president. On their behalf I made submissions for some contact between the council and the Friends, with the result that two councillors were appointed to liaise.

The next goal was to try to get a curator appointed again, for this position had disappeared. Much later this submission was repeated and now we have an able curator in Chris Connolly, and the Park is regaining its former glory and colour. The decision to once again employ a curator has been completely vindicated.

I find the present condition of this garden attractive and in keeping with the nature of Brooklands. The addition of colour has brought it to life and I congratulate those staff who manage the garden.

My role now is a quiet one, as I volunteer to work in the garden weekly as a Friend of the Park. I feel honoured to be able to help in my grandfather's garden.

Where to from here? We will keep having to replace the big old trees which grow so fast in New Zealand that they have a shorter lifespan than elsewhere. Trees which have done so well in the past show us the way, and the character of Brooklands must be kept in mind, using mixtures of trees rather than plantations of a single species. It is ironic that the Auracarias so disliked by King family members were planted in this way.

There is a limit in allowing events to dictate the way the Park is designed and managed.

It is great though to see children swinging and climbing on trees and having picnics on the lawns with their families where they are safe and in sight. Those families picnicking there are free of demands to buy an ice cream or chips, and can relax in a great atmosphere.

The decision to gift Brooklands to the Council was nothing short of brilliant. Let's enjoy our park.