

Excerpt from “The Notable Trees of New Plymouth”, 2002

Author: Cory Smith, Editor: George Fuller

Based on a review of S.W. (Bob) Burstall's Mensuration Report # 19, 1973.

Foreword

It is possibly unethical for one who has assisted in the compiling of such a work as this to be involved in its foreword but since neither Cory nor I tend toward the conventional, I have accepted this opportunity to set the stage.

S.W. (Bob) Burstall is a hard act to follow. He swept into the New Plymouth City Council's Parks and Reserves office in 1969 when J.W. Goodwin (J.W.G.) was its Director and I was Curator of Pukekura Park and with his insatiable enthusiasm and dedication to studying trees, charmed J.W.G. into allowing me to assist as 'tape boy' during the few days he was here to record local trees for his national register. During this exercise and in subsequent correspondence and visits I soon gained great respect for his attention to detail and constant search for accuracy in all matters. He returned in 1973 but time soon ran out again with much left to be recorded so he switched on his charm once more and J.W.G. willingly agreed to allow me to continue recordings solo 'as time permitted'.

Within the deadline allowed I had compiled a list of a further 142 specimens which I forwarded together with photographs. I have good reason to be proud of his gracious and generous acknowledgement of my help noted on page 8 of his Forest Research Inst. Mensuration Report # 19 (includes Taranaki). Bob was outstanding in the field of tree recording and I feel privileged to have shared not only in his friendship but also his trust.

My reason for recording these details is not solely for ego massage but more importantly to offer a possible explanation for why, 30 odd years later I would allow myself to be enticed out of comfortable retirement to once again become a 'tape boy' but this time to a younger boss, naïve enough to dare to emulate the great Bob Burstall. Enter Cory Smith.

In the course of upgrading his arboricultural qualifications at Waikato Polytechnic Cory was assigned to re-measure 100 of the trees recorded in the F.R.I. regional reports of Burstall, with a choice of locality. Since he is from New Plymouth, that city was his choice but he soon faced an impediment. Some location data in report # 19 he found to be too vague for the level of accuracy demanded. He soon found out that one of the perpetrators of recording the inadequate detail was still alive and I was soon brought to account for my sins. Would I now be able and if so, willing, to help with identity and locality verification?

I have to confess that a quick assessment of this bright eyed and bushy tailed young tree seeker with such high aspirations left me with the feeling that 'burn-out' would take about a fortnight, then I would be left in peace and so agreed. Here I am nearly two years later anguishing over words to complete his manuscript! In the meantime I have fallen down steep banks, splashed in streams, been peppered with mosquito bites and have callouses from having obediently run out and rewound a 100 m tape surely thousands of times (one quickly learns the error of dragging a tape between measurements). Despite all that, purring over the volume and quality of his work leaves me with the distinct feeling that it was all worth-while.

We must look a fairly unlikely duo entering a park to measure trees, even discounting the age difference and casual dress. Perhaps surprisingly we were never arrested for tenderly caressing tree trunks while gazing upward in adoration, incanting in a foreign language, then conversing in numbers shouted aloud but I would not have been surprised if parents clutched their children a little closer and womenfolk made certain that they were always between us and the nearest exit. Even more surprising was that no women screamed when we knocked on their doors on the pretext of wanting to measure the tree in their garden. With no such setbacks we both became consumed with the desire to excel in our task with Bob Burstall as our inspiration and the tally grew beyond 100, sneaked up to 200 then over 300 when rather fortuitously time ran out.

It would have been much simpler and more expedient to simply clinically record statistics and satisfy academia but we soon found that there are moving human interest stories and important historical associations in the background of many trees and we both felt that such detail should be faithfully recorded. Cory has a sensitivity to the sentiment and emotion which the quest has revealed and he has embodied much of this feeling in his writing, even to expressing awe. In offering guidance on grammar and in proof-reading care has been taken to avoid destroying this quality.

I suspect that I cut my first tooth chewing lumps of kauri gum from the craters left by gum diggers in the Henderson property on which my parents established an orchard. In 1954 I was given copy # 837 of 'The Story of the Kauri' signed by A.H. Reed and for years I have collected data about the species, notably anything relating to the human-assisted migration across its natural southern boundary (Kawhia – Thames) into Taranaki where it now looms large. No doubt my mild obsession has strongly influenced Cory, helping to explain the disproportionate volume of space dedicated to this single species. Our studies reveal that New Plymouth is indeed 'The Kauri Capital of the World' and give ample justification for predicting that in the not too distant future, visitors will be drawn here specifically to enjoy what 'The City of Giants' has to offer. Burstall estimated that there were 'about 4000 trees' in the locality and it can be claimed that the equivalent of farm forestry with kauri was pioneered in a cow paddock in Brooklands Rd, N.P., in 1935.

The blending of scientific facts with emotional interpretation tends to be nauseous to the academic. It is at this point therefore that a travel-sickness pill may be advisable for the more academically minded reader because this journey pitches and rolls from one extreme to the other. I think that Cory has based justification for this on the facts that the potential dimensions and lifespan of most trees exceed that of humans and they tend therefore to evoke a sense of reverence, particularly if planted for a special reason. The fact that levels of reverence and sentiment are unmeasurable has not been regarded as sufficient reason for their exclusion from this document.

Cory Smith will be a hard act to follow. He swept into our home and for months charmed me into neglect of my garden, orchids, house maintenance and various hobbies in the course of pursuing greater knowledge of trees. He even charmed my long-suffering wife into offering food, which obliged me to teach him the secrets of constructing genuine open sandwiches.

Cory's research has been thorough and he has crystallised much new material through listening intently and recording that of relevance. I feel both proud and privileged to have been associated with his masterwork. I am even tempted to offer my services as 'tape boy' for the third time round!

George Fuller M.B.E.
6th November, 2002.