

# John W Goodwin MNZM

(1912 - 2005)

On 8 Nov this man who possessed such an outstanding knowledge of plants and administration of parks passed away peacefully in Napier, aged 93.

Because he retired as Director of Parks and Reserves for New Plymouth as long ago as 1977 not many now working are likely to have known him or even be aware of his horticultural prominence. He was an exceptionally multi-talented visionary and there is little doubt that most who read this will, in the course of their interest in trees, come in contact with some aspect of his influence somewhere in NZ, even if not aware of it.

He was born in Waimate and quickly revealed a flair for and understanding of natural phenomena. His natural horticultural talents were to flourish formally in the inspired scene in Christchurch but prior to this during the serious world-wide depression of the early 1930s he had been obliged to 'take to the road' with cycle and backpack in order to find work. He took to any task on offer with great enthusiasm from gold prospecting, to being in charge of a large sheep station garden. His remarkable encyclopaedic memory (not confined to plants) ensured that every lesson learned in the great diversity of work undertaken while pedalling backwards and forwards over the territory between Dunedin and Nelson during the 1930s could be recalled and used to advantage later in life.

In 1940 he was appointed Senior Gardener and Nursery Foreman for the Christchurch CC, where he became involved with street beautification then spent two years in the army, finally helping to train rehabilitating service personnel.

From 1944 -49 he was responsible for laying out the grounds, practical training of horticultural students and further rehabilitation of service personnel at the emerging Massey College (now Univ.) Palmerston Nth.

By 1949 his competence resulted in appointment as Curator of Pukekura Park, New Plymouth 'to bring back the visitors'. Implementation of some very adventurous and controversial proposals soon achieved this, despite some raling to "have him sent back to the South Island." Now, such features as fountain, waterfall, waterwheel, Festival of Lights in the summer (alone estimated to attract 200,000 visitors annually), etc, etc, etc are New Plymouth icons, enjoyed even by his early detractors.

His visionary brilliance and enthusiasm could not be retained within the confines of Pukekura Park. He was instrumental in amalgamating numerous disparate committees to form an autonomous Parks & Reserves Dept. within Council and was appointed its Superintendent then later Director as it expanded.

Even New Plymouth was too restrictive to contain all his energies. His voluntary input to horticulture was also vast and wide-ranging as evidenced by the following.

From 1944 - 64 he was Advisor to Douglas Cook in the establishment of the large Eastwoodhill Arboretum, Gisborne and from 1951 - 67 Hon. Supt. of the Pukeiti Rhodo. Trust, involving original survey, overall planning, development and layout. He served on the Executive Comm. and the Board, was elected a Life Member and in 2001, Patron. Having moved to Napier in 1996, every excuse for return visits to New Plymouth and particularly his beloved Pukeiti were exploited and seemed to provide a new lease on life.

Pages would be required to record his contribution to the expansion of recreational and park facilities locally. Then there is his input into the twenty-odd organizations from aquatic to avian of which he was a member plus the high distinctions he was accorded in most but if we restrict to horticulture and trees, notable are the following, His membership of the Royal Horticultural Soc. from 1950. In 1978 he was awarded their Veitch Memorial Medal, the rare, highest distinction given outside the U.K. From 1954 he was a member of the Int. Dendrology Soc. and established the N. Z. Chapter. He was also a Founder Member and N. Z. Delegate of the Int. Federation of Parks.

If we return to his work focussed on trees and arborists, two notable factors arise. The first was that as early as possible he established at Brooklands a highly

envied departmental plant nursery. Thanks to his international contacts and the high esteem in which he was held, the nursery became a channel through which plants, some rare and unusual, were exchanged in many directions. The second was that up-skilling the workforce to service the nursery provided another opportunity to employ more apprentices helping to fulfil his long-held desire to pass on knowledge to a younger generation. To his great satisfaction New Plymouth subsequently became the North Island centre for apprenticeship block courses in which Parks & Reserves Dept. senior staff assisted as instructors in a wide range of subjects. Everyone was a winner.

In 1964 he required the services of an orchid grower. Coincidentally I returned from a 17 year OE with orchid skills and was employed. Within a year I was upgraded to Curator of Pukekura Park. Although large blocks of geriatric pines had recently been felled and the monoculture replaced with an exciting diversity of species, little remedial work had ever been carried out on very needy mature remaining specimen trees. I had a great interest in trees but very little working knowledge of their care. He very subtly encouraged me to take a deeper interest and provided the means to improve skills.

Chainsaws were getting smaller and manageable at heights. Amongst the old trees much high work was involved and we may have been pioneers in this field. The skills of 'tree surgery' were introduced into the apprenticeship week curriculum. This introduced many students to the subject of care of mature trees and some of the techniques taught may also have been original. This is further evidence of both how innovative he was as a leader and of the level of trust he placed in his staff.

John Goodwin was elected by his peers to stand proudly on the world stage. They also bestowed upon him high accolades yet throughout his life he retained an unshakeable air of modesty and humility. His policy was to plan for needs well into the future and in his case that meant hundreds of years. He was a unique and inspirational role model.

*George Fuller, New Plymouth, 6 December 2005.*