

# Supplement to The Newsletter of the Friends of Pukekura Park

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## The earliest known botanical survey of Pukekura Park

David Medway

At the annual meeting of the Taranaki Scenery Preservation Society held at New Plymouth in August 1898 the President, C. W. Govett, observed that “The advice so persistently given by the Society to plant native trees and shrubs wherever possible is ever more and more followed, and we believe that in a few more years New Plymouth will be noted for its good taste and beauty in this respect” (*The Budget and Taranaki Weekly Herald* 6/8/1898).

William Park F.R.H.S. of Palmerston North spent a day in Pukekura Park in mid-1908 and was so “delighted and charmed” with what he saw that he wrote an appreciative article which was published in his local newspaper and reproduced in the *Taranaki Herald* of 12 June 1908. In this article William Park said that “one of the principal features of the park is the splendid collection of native flora ... There are about 200 species of native plants in the park, including some of the rarer shrubs and trees, and all are flourishing as if in their native forest”.

The accompanying hand-coloured photograph taken about 1906 shows a well-vegetated Pukekura Park. It is reproduced from a post card owned by David Lowe.



The anonymous contributor of a lengthy article in the *Taranaki Herald* of 19 September 1925 considered that, to the botanist, Pukekura Park opened up “a field more prolific and fascinating than any in the Dominion”. Included with the article is an account of a botanical survey of Pukekura Park which must have been written by a person who was knowledgeable about native plants and the history of plantings in the Park. Thomas Horton, who had become Superintendent of the Park in 1924, would have been eminently qualified to do so. This account is of the earliest known botanical survey of Pukekura Park. It provides an important record, indeed the only record, of the

identity of many of the native plants to be found in the Park half a century after the first trees were planted there on 29 May 1876 when the whole area was covered with “fern, furze and tutu”. The account is reproduced here as it appeared in the *Taranaki Herald*, except that I have corrected one or two minor printer’s errors, and have added the currently accepted scientific names of the plants that are specifically referred to.

## A botanical survey

The park offers a very extensive field for the naturalist, and many fine and rare native trees are growing therein. Kauris (*Agathis australis*) grow rapidly. One fine specimen is 30ft in height with a trunk five inches in diameter at a distance of four feet from the ground. The tree is seventeen years old. Several good specimens of tanekaha (*Phyllocladus trichomanoides*) are showing vigorous growth. This is the “celery-topped pine” of Hooker. The three species of totara (*Podocarpus* spp.) are growing rapidly, and there are groups of fine specimens ranging from five to thirty-five years old. Ages of the rimu trees, of which there are several varieties (*Dacrydium* spp.), range from thirteen to thirty years. Miro (*Prumnopitys ferruginea*), planted from ten to twenty-one years ago, are growing robustly and are graceful young forest trees. A charm of the park is the puriri (*Vitex lucens*) trees, of rapid growth. The most magnificent specimens growing south of Kawhia are in Mr. Newton King’s garden, adjoining the park.

The *Pinus insignis* (*Pinus radiata*) trees show the best and straightest growth in New Zealand. There are some splendid specimens of *Pinus torreyana*, which yields good timber for furniture and general work. The tree is a native of Puget Sound. American redwood pines (*Sequoia sempervirens*), which produce valuable timber, are showing good growth.

The six species of tree-ferns are most admired by visitors from overseas. Taranaki is the home of the magnificent mamaku (*Cyathea medullaris*), the king of tree-ferns. There are seven species of native orchids, which are of great interest in the flowering season. The large island at the head of the upper lake was planted with twenty-seven species of native plants twenty-three years ago. With two exceptions they succeeded well, and are a good illustration of the comparative growth of native trees under favourable conditions. There are forty-four species of native ferns and twenty-eight native mosses in the park. Some of both orders are beautiful and rare forms.

The park also contains a fine series of specimens of kaikomako (*Pennantia corymbosa*), kaikawaka (*Libocedrus plumosa*), kaiwhiria (*Hedycarya arborea*), kakaramu (*Coprosma robusta*), kakaha (probably *Collospermum hastatum*), karaka (*Corynocarpus laevigatus*), karo (*Pittosporum crassifolium*), kumarahou (*Pomaderris kumeraho*), kowhai (*Sophora* spp.) and kohekohe (*Dysoxylum spectabile*). Akerautangi (*Dodonaea viscosa*), hohoeke (*Pseudopanax crassifolius*), horopito (probably *Alseuosmia macrophylla*), maire (*Nestegis* spp.), mairehau (*Phebalium nudum*), monoao (probably *Dracophyllum* spp.) and mauku (probably *Asplenium bulbiferum*) grow luxuriantly. Paratawhiti (horse-shoe fern) (*Marattia salicina*), patete (*Schefflera digitata*), puahou (*Pseudopanax arboreus*), putaputaweta (*Carpodetus serratus*), and puwhaureroa (the bird-catching tree) (*Heimerliodendron brunonianum*) are well represented. Five species of rata (*Metrosideros* spp.) - two timber trees and three climbers - flourish. The rangiora (*Brachyglottis repanda*), rewarewa (*Knightia excelsa*) and wharangi (*Melicope ternata*) are very floriferous this season, and are very fine at present.



## Original ferns of the Pukekura Park Fernery

David Medway

A scheme to provide “what will probably be the most complete fernery in New Zealand” was adopted by the Pukekura Park Board at its meeting in June 1926. It was confidently hoped that varieties of all of New Zealand’s hundreds of ferns and mosses would be growing in the proposed Fernery within two or three years (*The Budget and Taranaki Weekly Herald* 19/6/1926).

In July 1927, Thomas Horton, Superintendent of the Park, showed a *Taranaki Herald* reporter through the almost-completed Fernery. Horton told the reporter that “The idea is to establish as complete a collection of New Zealand ferns as we can get together. For this purpose over a score of enthusiastic botanists in various parts of the Dominion are collecting specimens. When the collection is complete we hope to make it a sanctuary which will be the only one of its kind in New Zealand”. The collection would include “all the smaller-growing ferns, such as: *Todea superba*, *lomarias*, *gleichenias*, *aspleniums*, *doodia media*, *leptolepia*, *nephrodium*, *loxsoma*, *blechnum*, *lygodium*, *hymenophyllum*, *lindsaya*, *polystichum*, *pteris*, *trichomanes reniforme*, etc”. 204 ferns of 25 varieties donated by Duncan & Davies, nurserymen, would form the foundation of the collection (*The Budget and Taranaki Weekly Herald* 30/7/1927).

Horton informed the Pukekura Park Board at its meeting in August 1927 that, in addition to ferns donated, he and his staff had collected a great many themselves. The work of stocking the three chambers of the new Fernery was well advanced, a total of 1071 ferns having been planted. In October 1927, the thanks of the Board were due to a Mrs Mason, of Westown, for the gift of *Lomaria alpina* (now *Blechnum penna-marina*) for the Fernery (*The Budget and Taranaki Weekly Herald* 20/8/1927, 15/10/1927). Horton recorded in his work diaries, now in Puke Ariki at New Plymouth, that 2370 ferns were growing in the Fernery as at 25 January 1928.

The new Fernery was officially opened by the Mayor of New Plymouth, Mr. H.V.S. Griffiths, on 28 January 1928. He believed the Fernery would be unique, and that it deserved success as one of the greatest attractions of the town (*Taranaki Herald* 28/1/1928). On 11 June 1929, at the last meeting of the Pukekura Park Board as it was then constituted, the Chairman Mr. F. Amoo expressed the opinion that erection of the Fernery was the wisest thing the Board ever did. Every visitor spoke well of it, and that very morning the Minister of Industries said he had seen nothing like it in New Zealand (*The Budget and Taranaki Weekly Herald* 15/6/1929).

Francis Morshead was acting Superintendent of the Park from 4 February 1928 until 11 October 1928 while Horton was overseas. Morshead continued Horton’s work diary during that period. We learn from it that on 8



Photograph taken by Teeds of New Plymouth, probably in the early 1930s, showing the interior of the new Fernery.

May 1928 Morshead “collected 5 specimens of *Gleichenia cunninghamii* var. *alpina* from Mt Egmont”. *Gleichenia cunninghamii* is the umbrella fern, now *Sticherus cunninghamii*. As far as I am aware, no variety of that fern has ever been formally described and named as *alpina*. On 14 September 1928 Morshead “cycled to Mt Messenger for ferns”, and on 3 October 1928 he “botanised Paritutu with V. C. Davies for ferns etc”. Ferns collected by Morshead in the course of these excursions found their way into the new Fernery. Morshead’s assistance in this

regard was acknowledged by Horton in his report to the December 1928 meeting of the Board (*The Budget and Taranaki Weekly Herald* 15/12/1928).

Also in 1928, ferns were donated to the Fernery by interested members of the public. For example, the September 1928 meeting of the Board was informed by Morshead that a collection of ferns had been received from Mr L. S. Mackie of Otakeho, and Mr Chas. Cameron of Tauranga, who visited the Fernery during Easter 1928, had sent a very fine collection many of which were rare species and varieties. The fern collection then “comprised 112 recognised species and varieties, besides many local variations of the types which had been collected and sent in by interested collectors” (*The Budget and Taranaki Weekly Herald* 22/9/1928). Horton informed the December 1928 meeting of the Board that “They now had the most complete collection of New Zealand ferns in the Dominion and he was hopeful that the time was not far distant when the collection will be absolutely complete. The few required were being sought for by collectors who were intensely interested in the fernery” (*The Budget and Taranaki Weekly Herald* 15/12/1928).

H.B. Dobbie, a noted fern expert, visited the Fernery sometime between when it opened and the unknown date in 1930 when he wrote the Preface to the third edition (1931) of his popular book *New Zealand ferns*. Dobbie said the fern he illustrated in this edition under the name *Gleichenia cunninghamii* var. *montanum* (= *Sticherus cunninghamii*) was from “the wonderful New Plymouth fernery, where one sees almost every New Zealand species and variety growing in luxuriance”. The varietal name *montanum* was almost certainly applied by Dobbie to the specimens of *Sticherus cunninghamii* from Mt Egmont to which Morshead had given the manuscript name *alpina*. Dobbie probably gave the name *montanum* to this fern to avoid confusion with the name *alpina* which was applicable to a variety of the closely-related tangle fern *Gleichenia dicarpa*.

It is to be regretted that there seem to be no surviving lists from which we can ascertain the specific identity of any of the ferns which were growing in the Fernery when it opened in January 1928, or were growing there in the years immediately following its opening. In the absence of any such lists, the only specifically identified ferns known from contemporary written sources to have been growing in the Fernery at that time were the above-mentioned *Blechnum penna-marina* gifted by Mrs Mason in 1927, and the *Sticherus cunninghamii* collected by Francis Morshead somewhere on Mt Egmont on 8 May 1928.



Photo - Derek Hughes

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