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The identity of the Hatchery Lawn notable camellia

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The earliest reference I have found to the very large, white-flowered camellia that grows immediately below the main lake dam at the southern end of Hatchery Lawn at Pukekura Park in New Plymouth is in an article by Jack Goodwin, who became curator of Pukekura Park and Brooklands in 1949, which appeared in the *New Zealand Camellia Bulletin* 2(4)(1961): 5-8. Goodwin recorded that, in the early 1950s, he had measured “a few” of the camellias in Pukekura Park and Brooklands. He found that, at that time, there must have been 50 more than 12 feet high and with a spread of 18 feet or more - “The largest, a double white in a sheltered gully, was 28 ft across and 17½ ft high”. This must be the Hatchery Lawn camellia discussed in this article. Some 50 years later it is much larger. Cory Smith and George Fuller, in their recent, very informative *The Notable Trees of New Plymouth* (2007: 97) give its height as 13.5 metres and its canopy spread as 19.95 metres in 2001. They observe that the plant has an extremely large spread for a camellia, branching from just above 1 metre into five main limbs which sweep to the ground. This outstanding and healthy specimen, depicted in the accompanying photographs, is still the largest camellia growing in Pukekura Park and Brooklands.



The flowers of this camellia have usually been described as being double white. This is probably the reason why it is



included as *Camellia japonica* 'Double White' under no. 38 in an unpublished register compiled in about 1986 of notable and historic trees and shrubs in Pukekura Park and Brooklands which is held by the Parks & Recreation Department of the New Plymouth District Council. 'Double White' as a name is a synonym of 'Alba Plena' which is a formal double, white-flowered cultivar of *Camellia japonica*. 'Alba Plena' was the first formal double camellia introduced into the West, and it is still widely grown. When the first flowers of this season opened on the Hatchery Lawn camellia, in late May, it was immediately obvious that they were not formal double. Therefore, this camellia cannot be *Camellia japonica* 'Alba Plena', or any other similar formal double, white-flowered *Camellia japonica* cultivar.

It is not possible to identify most old *Camellia japonica* cultivars, even given that they have been named, without reference to the early illustrated camellia literature, most of which is not available in New Zealand. Fortunately, that literature is available from overseas sources, and some of it is now available on the Internet. After researching the most relevant of this early literature, I am as satisfied as I can be that the Hatchery Lawn camellia is a specimen of the cultivar *Camellia japonica* 'Welbankiana'.

Camellia japonica 'Welbankiana' was one of the earliest camellias introduced into the West. Both Captains Richard Rawes and Robert Welbank, of the English East India Company, separately took it to England in 1816 and it first flowered there in 1819. Curtis, in his *A monograph on the genus Camellia* (1819), recorded that the Horticultural Society of London named it 'Welbankiana' after Captain Welbank. Curtis called it "Camellia Welbankiana, or White Paeony-Flowered Camellia". The accompanying painting of this cultivar appeared under the name "Camellia Welbancksiana" in Berlese's *Iconographie du genre Camellia* (1841-1843).

The best description of 'Welbankiana' I am aware of is by W.B. Booth in the *Transactions of the Horticultural*



Photo - Karl Rossiter

Society of London Volume 7 (1830) at pp. 552-553 under the names “*Camellia Japonica Welbankii*, Welbank’s *White Camellia*”. Booth said that this camellia differed very considerably from any of the other white-flowering kinds, and that its foliage, from its convexity, was so peculiar as to give a character to this variety, by which it may at all times be readily distinguished. That may have been the case in 1830, when Booth had only 6 camellia species and 23 camellia cultivars available to him for description. However, there are now about 300 described camellia species and many thousands of named and unnamed camellia cultivars, including numerous white-flowered ones. In 2007, it is no longer possible to say that ‘Welbankiana’ differs very considerably from all other white-flowering kinds, or that its foliage is so peculiar that it can be used to readily distinguish that cultivar from others.

Booth went on to describe the flowers of ‘Welbankiana’ as being “of a yellowish white colour, and about three or three and a half inches in diameter. They may be said to rank between the Double White and the Pompone, assimilating more with the latter than the former, but perfectly distinct from either. The petals are not arranged in any sort of order, so that the flower has a confused appearance. Those at the circumference are of a roundish form, from an inch to an inch and a half in diameter, much undulated and but very little recurved or divided at their extremity. The centre petals are irregularly shaped; sometimes they approach to those of the Pompone, but are often twisted and arranged in tufts, with several parcels of imperfect stamina intermixed among them”. The cultivar ‘Double White’ is the formal double *Camellia japonica* ‘Alba Plena’, mentioned above. The cultivar ‘Pompone’ is *Camellia japonica* ‘Pompone’. Its flower is described in current camellia literature as being of peony-form with high ruffled petals, white occasionally marked in deep pink, that swirl among golden stamens. ‘Pompone’ has a pure white sport known as ‘Paeoniiflora Alba’.

The form of the flowers of some camellia cultivars may vary considerably from one bloom to another. Variation in the form of the flowers of ‘Welbankiana’ was noted by Booth when he said that its centre petals sometimes approach to those of ‘Pompone’, but are often twisted and arranged in tufts. Individual flowers of the Hatchery Lawn camellia also vary in form, as is illustrated to some degree in the accompanying photographs. Nevertheless, in their form, the flowers of the Hatchery Lawn camellia generally fall between those of ‘Alba Plena’ and ‘Pompone’, and they have imperfect stamina, just as Booth said the flowers of ‘Welbankiana’ do. It can be noted here that the yellowish centre of these flowers, which is obvious in one of the accompanying photographs, may be the reason why Booth described the flowers of ‘Welbankiana’ as being of a yellowish white colour.

It is not known when the Hatchery Lawn

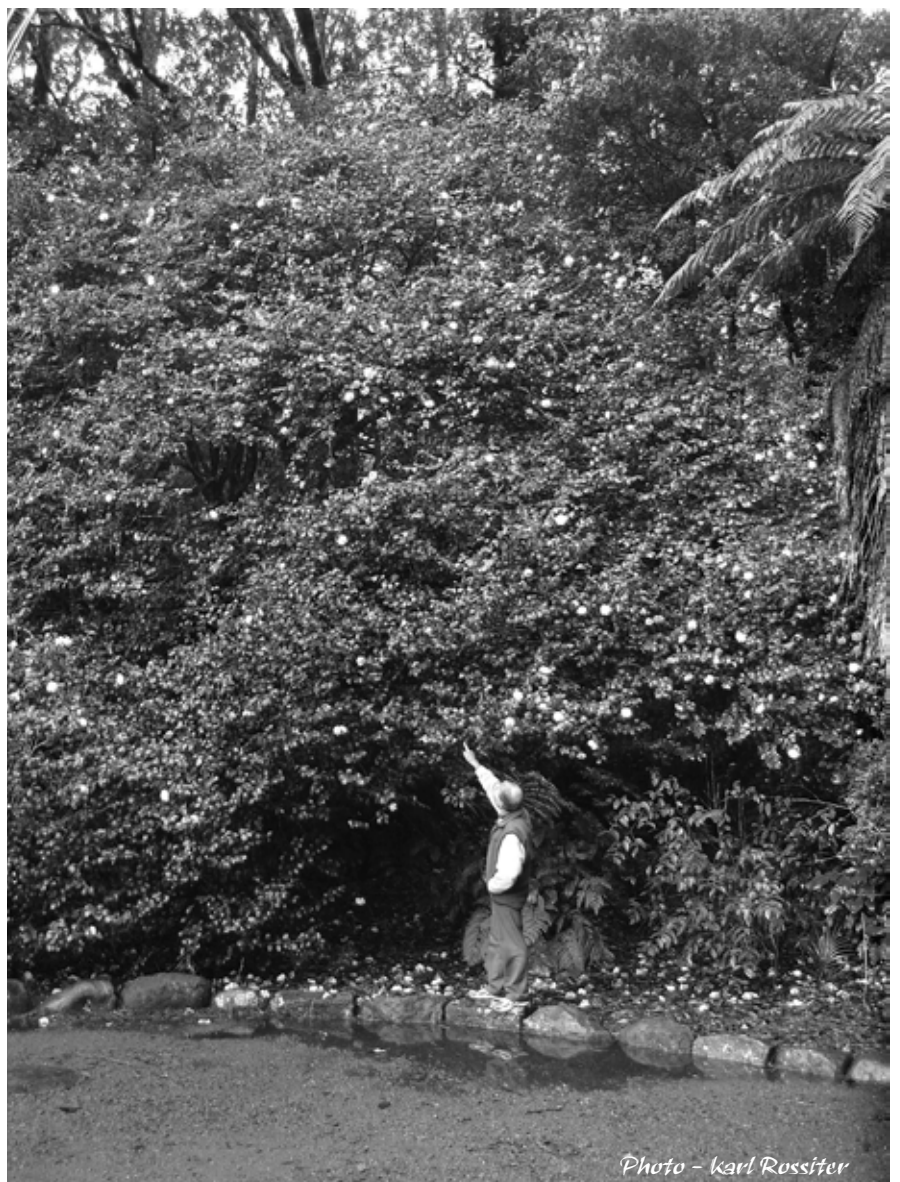


Photo - Karl Rossiter

specimen of 'Welbankiana' was planted in its present position immediately below the main lake dam, but it would not have been planted there before construction of the dam was completed towards the end of 1878. I have not been able to identify this plant in photos taken in the late 19th and early 20th centuries which depict the southern sector of what is now Hatchery Lawn. It may have been hidden among other vegetation growing there during that period. However, based on its overall dimensions, and by comparison to other old camellias of more-or-less known age, this specimen of 'Welbankiana' must be at least 100 years old. It may even be up to 125 years of age if it was planted as a young plant in its present position at some time during the years immediately following completion of the main lake dam.

Nor is the source of this plant known. It appears that 'Welbankiana' was available from at least some New Zealand nurseries in the 1870s. Robert Thomson of Dunedin was offering it for sale in 1876 as "Wellebanki, pure white" (*New Zealand Camellia Bulletin* 21(1)(1999): 7). James Mitchinson trading as Caledonian Nursery, and J. W. Morshead trading as South Road Nursery, were both operating in New Plymouth in the 1880s and 1890s. Camellias, but of unknown identity, featured prominently among the stock they had for sale. The Hatchery Lawn 'Welbankiana' might have come from either of those local nurseries if it was planted before 1900.

The Pukekura Park specimen of *Camellia japonica* 'Welbankiana' is rightly regarded as a notable tree because of its size and age. It is also notable because, as far as I am aware, it is the only specimen of this very old cultivar presently known in New Zealand. It is possible that other specimens of it do still exist elsewhere in the country, but have not yet been identified as such. Whether or not those other specimens exist, it would be desirable to propagate the Pukekura Park plant to ensure the continuing existence of this old and worthwhile camellia cultivar in New Zealand.

I am grateful to Gina Douglas, Librarian and Archivist of the Linnean Society of London, for supplying a copy of the Booth description quoted in this article, and to Ron Lambert, senior researcher at Puke Ariki in New Plymouth, for drawing my attention to newspaper items relating to the Mitchinson and Morshead nurseries. I am also grateful to Ken Davey FRIH of New Plymouth for his comments on this article.



Camellia japonica 'Welbankiana'
as illustrated in Berlese (1841-1843)