



a passion for the Port Hills

Newsletter, February 2014

From the Secretary

Welcome to the first newsletter of 2014. I hope you have all had a good Christmas and New Year break. 2013 has been another successful year for the Society and we are still 'in good heart'. Membership has dropped slightly which has been largely due to the ongoing aftermath of the earthquakes as more people move from Christchurch. However, we haven't lost any of our support from the various tramping clubs and walking groups who are Society members. Our volunteers have been as active as ever, and have achieved almost 3,000 hours during the year. However, we can't afford to be complacent and over the next few months a small group will be looking at initiatives to increase membership and our pool of volunteers.

The relationship with the City Council, particularly the Port Hills Rangers is as positive as ever, and we are delighted that Islay McLeod has been reappointed to the Board as the Hagley/Ferrymead Community Board representative, and that Paula Smith, chairperson of the Lyttelton/Mt Herbert Community Board is joining the Board to replace Jeremy Agar who has retired from local politics. Jeremy will remain on the Board in a personal capacity. Councillor Grant Miller will now be representing Selwyn District Council on the Board. The Society's finances also remain healthy and I'd like to take the opportunity of acknowledging the funding provided by the City Council which helps considerably with our running costs and supporting our work parties and to thank the many members who made donations.

2014 therefore, will be 'business as usual' with a particular focus on opening Ohinetahi Reserve (see below) and efforts to strengthen our membership base and volunteer numbers.



Ohinetahi update

In the last newsletter we reported that the Board was assessing the results of the risk assessment report prepared by Aurecon and funded by the City Council. This has been done, with the net result that we are now in the process of installing signage that will alert users to rockfall risk, indicate tracks that remain closed and mark a short 'no stopping' section on Ella's Track. In addition the team has re-routed a short section of track at the Titoki and South Boundary track junctions to avoid one of the identified hazards. Once the signs are in place the Board will then discuss what action will be needed to deal with the remainder of the reserve. We will need to bear in mind that the results of the recent review has now formally included some houses in Governors Bay in the red zone which may have an impact. The team has not forgotten routine management, and the year has seen more planting, weed and animal pest control, track maintenance and the establishment of a small native plant nursery.

Omahu Bush update

The year has been one of routine maintenance of tracks, and animal and plant pest control, with major assaults on gorse. The grazing of the grassland area continues, which is fundamental to the management and improvement of native tussock. 2013 also proved to be a good year for introducing the reserve and practical conservation work to others as the team was joined by other volunteers on three occasions. In September, seven volunteers from the Downer group were introduced to the joys of clearing gorse, and the following month we were delighted that seven young, fit and very talkative students from Canterbury University joined the group for more of the same. On the third occasion three mums plus five eleven year old girls visited the reserve and put in a very productive morning's work. It's certainly reassuring to see young people taking an interest and being prepared to get their hands dirty. Finally, the new signs have been a success, are weathering nicely and so far have proved vandal-proof and graffiti-free.



Omahu Bush was recently visited by some young and enthusiastic volunteers armed with loppers and handsaws, photographed here on the historic 'Watershed'.





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Horomaka Geopark Project

Over the last six months a working group has been assessing the development of a GeoPark on Banks Peninsula. A GeoPark is a UNESCO initiative to integrate the concept of protection, education, and sustainable development, and provide areas for the study and preservation of natural sciences. You may have heard the recent coverage of this on Radio New Zealand National. A Geopark will fulfil the general aims of the group which are to:

- ❑ Promote the awareness of sites of significance in Horomaka / Banks Peninsula, as icons of national and international significance.

- ❑ Stimulate and assist, in the continued diverse scientific studies in the region and communicate this knowledge.
- ❑ Educate, promote and relate the history of the region, and recognise its significance in New Zealand.
- ❑ Unify Banks Peninsula's communities, providing a framework for community initiatives, the development of employment opportunities, and sustainability.

To have a look at existing geoparks in operation around the world visit:

www.unesco.org/new/en/natural-sciences/environment/earth-sciences/global-geoparks/

The group also has a Facebook page:

www.facebook.com/HoromakaBanksPeninsula

The 'Gathering'

The five groups the City Council funds – Banks Peninsula Conservation Trust, Mount Vernon Park, Orton Bradley Park, Otamahua/Quail Island Ecological Restoration Trust and the Summit Road Society at Orton Bradley have a shared vision:

To recognise, protect and enhance the environment, restore and promote indigenous vegetation and habitats for indigenous fauna in relation to our areas of responsibility on Banks Peninsula, including the Port Hills; through practical conservation (including pest and weed management, track building and maintenance, and planting) education, community engagement, recreation provision, research and monitoring—for the benefit of the people of New Zealand.

On the 25th August the Council organised a meeting at Orton Bradley, which was a great opportunity to meet colleagues from the other groups, to catch up with what they have been doing over the last year, to share experiences and to talk about current issues. After a brief presentation from each of the groups, Brian Patrick from Wildlands, ecological consultants, gave a presentation on 'Endemic Invertebrates of Banks Peninsula'. This highlighted how easy it is not to notice this huge and important group, and how significant Banks Peninsula is, with at least three species not found anywhere else. The day concluded with a walk round Orton Bradley Park where Manager, Ian Luxford talked about some of the history, current work and plans for the future.

However, the highlight for some of us was to arrive in the car park to find a New Zealand falcon perched in one of the trees in full view. After watching us for around five minutes it took off and nonchalantly flew off over the park. I suspect most people's experience of falcons is a quick 'fly-by', so it was quite something to get views like this. (See the short piece below for more information).



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| Ohinetahi work party | Anne Kennedy | 337 0364 |
| Omahu Bush work party | Paul Tebbutt | 384 3086 |

We are a voluntary society working to enhance, preserve and protect the natural environment, beauty and open character of the Port Hills of Banks Peninsula for people to enjoy.

We need and welcome contributions to our work through memberships, donations and corporate sponsorships, participation in work parties (non-members welcome - but why not join us as well!), and bequests.

The New Zealand Falcon

The New Zealand Falcon (*Falco noveaealandiae*) is found only in New Zealand. Other names it is known by are bush hawk, sparrow hawk, bush falcon, southern falcon, eastern falcon, karearea and quail hawk. Its population in the 1970s was estimated to be around 4,000 pairs. There are three forms which differ in colour and habitats, the 'Bush Falcon' of North Island forests, the 'Eastern Falcon' of the open country of the South Island, and the 'Southern Falcon' found in coastal Fiordland and Stewart Island. The 'Eastern Falcon' is the most numerous. Prey is predominantly small birds which they can take in flight, and introduced mammals especially rabbits and hares.

In September I was working in the garden and heard a noise overhead—difficult to describe, but a rush of air and a distinctive 'thrumming sound' like a faster version of kereru flight. This was a falcon, and the first I have seen in the Sumner area. This prompted me to ask Andrew Crossland, an ornithologist and Port Hills Ranger, about the current status of the falcon in the Christchurch area:

"New Zealand Falcons began to reappear in Christchurch in the mid-2000s with regular autumn/winter sightings around the base and summit of the Port Hills from Godley Head to Gebbies Pass, and in the Waitikiri golf course/Bottle Lake/Brooklands area. This probably involves at least two birds at each of these two core locations. Others are occasionally seen further afield including recent sightings in the Botanic Gardens and one catching feral rock pigeons in Cathedral Square. On Banks Peninsula sightings have also become more common, particularly at higher altitudes and they've been reported widely all over the peninsula."

Compared to many other countries, New Zealand has very few raptors, which makes our falcon very special as well as a superb bird in its own right. Whilst adults tend to be fairly sedentary, juveniles range quite widely in autumn and winter. So, keep your eyes open and you also may be lucky enough to see one locally.

The Secretary

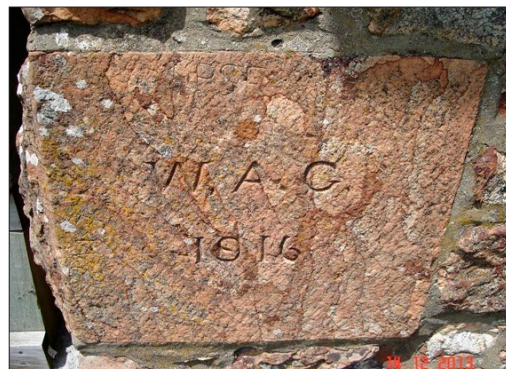


PHOTOS: ANNE LAMBE



Mystery Photographs

◀ This is a small trailer you can see at the Yaldhurst Museum—which, incidentally, is well worth a visit, with an extensive collection of horse-drawn vehicles, classic cars, fire engines and printing presses. The museum has very little information other than it is known as a 'Swamp Dray' or 'Hill Dray', assumed to be used in the construction of the Summit Road, and purchased from bachelor brothers in 1968. The words "Summit Road Trust Board CH-CH" are stenciled on the side. If you have any more information, please contact the Secretary. ▼



◀ This photograph was taken by a member of the Kaiapoi Walkers Group. It is on the front wall of the Sign of the Packhorse. We are wondering if anyone knows who or what "W.A.G. 1916" was. If you know, please contact the Secretary.



Where have all the characters gone?

As well as a history of the Society from its formation in 1948 to its 50th birthday in 1998, Jennifer Loughton's publication, *Fifty Years Along The Road: A History of the Summit Road Society Incorporated, 1948-1998*, contains a wealth of social history and information about the colourful characters associated with the Society in its early years. Their legacy is the work parties as we know them today and the valuable voluntary work that they carry out on the Port Hills. My question is: **Where have all the characters gone?** I am sure that we still have plenty, but we have found a general reluctance among our volunteers to talk about themselves and certainly to have anything written down.

My challenge is: **Can we match Cedric Turner's 'thumbnail sketches' taken from a 1983 Society newsletter?**

More characters, all retired Eastenders 2004. Left to right: John Willocks, Ian Wood, Bruce Bunny, Ken Rossiter and Bob Cawley.



HILL GANG 1983 by Cedric Turner

Members are aware that on Tuesdays some of the more senile gather on the Hills in the fond hope that they are protecting and enhancing the environment, carrying out such tasks as: fencing, track making, planting, clearing, putting salt on opossum tails and generally interfering with nature. Following are thumbnail sketches of these merry geriatrics. They are in no order because there never is any.

CEDRIC TURNER

Did not enjoy the best of health when young and has been going steadily downhill ever since. Also has flat feet, one of the many defects which kept him out of the Army, the others being more apparent. Always full of bright ideas, none of which ever came to anything.

CLIFF HOLDSWORTH: D.D

Dedicated, desiccated, so sparsely built people wonder what is holding up the hat. Carries own fumigating plant. Apt to break into long discourses about nothing in particular. Expert in calligraphy. Has made a close study of various methods of writing and has developed own style which nobody can read.

JACK HUTCHINSON

A workaholic. Hates stopping for lunch. Ex nurseryman, also known as 'the Lone Star Ranger' and Director of 'Dry Bush holdings'. Spearheads movement for bigger and better rest areas on the Summit Road. A stimulating companion on a day's outing as he never agrees with anyone.

BERT THOMPSON

A happy and well-adjusted man. Emigrated from Scotland at an early age: actually the family was requested to leave as it insisted in having sugar in its porridge. Bert says he would not go back anyway as the nights are too long in winter and that's when a man gets into trouble. First job was general dogs-body and telegraphist in the Ross Post Office. Old habits die hard and he still alternates long and short steps when walking.

FERRIS CROSS

A really splendid fellow. Goes poking about with a bemused look as though he has put down his glasses somewhere and doesn't expect to find them. This dreamy look makes him attractive to women which he finds embarrassing. A man of few words, he sometimes surprises with profound statements such as: 'I think it's going to rain', or 'the country's in a mess'.

JIM BROADLEY

A braw lad who knows his own mind but is quite willing to change it to have an argument. The incumbent at the Kiwi but seldom recumbent. Out on the hill his enthusiasm knows no bounds and, unlike the Grand Old Duke of York, it is Jim who goes marching up and down, while the troops, with low cunning, stay put. Has a nice wife, Eileen, who turns on morning tea for the Gang.

The following is the final part of the article that appeared in the November-December 2002 issue of New Zealand Geographic. It is reproduced here with kind permission of the author, photographer and writer, Rob Brown (www.robbrown.co.nz)



As work progressed on the Takahe, Ell continued to drive the Port Hills-Akaroa trust to the edge of despair. Even so, it is clear from the trust's records and correspondence that it had come to accept its lot was to pick up the bills for a man who was now widely considered a somewhat crazed genius. That it should have done so may be attributed to the fact that, for all the exasperation that Ell caused, there was never any hint that money found its way into his own pocket. Indeed, Ell's own financial commitment and his willingness to go without to achieve a greater good aroused the trustees' genuine admiration. The government also recognised Ell's financial sacrifice, granting him £300 "in recognition of the valuable public services rendered in the matter of the Summit Road and Reserves," to be used "in discharge of your existing personal liabilities." Though long gone from the corridors of power, he was not forgotten.

Harry Ell didn't live to see the official opening of the Summit Road. In May 1934, those working with him noticed for the first time that he was starting to show signs of strain. Now 71, he was a familiar, if somewhat forlorn, sight to Cashmere residents, trudging up to the Takahe from Duff's store with a sackful of groceries and provisions even in the worst weather.

For the previous year he had lived on site, continuing to control and oversee even the smallest details of the project. His greatest fear was that his vision might be compromised. To leave the hills – latterly just to leave the Takahe—was to risk interference in the work he jealously regarded as his alone. Taking a holiday was out of the question, even when a staunch admirer offered a generous sum for that very purpose, and family life suffered. The years of toil and argument had bred in Ell the belief that he was being persecuted, and that at every turn lurked someone who was out to wreck his plans. In an attempt to set the record straight he wrote a "true" history of the Summit Road. It was so libellous that no publisher would print it.

Ell had given nearly half his life and everything he had to the Summit Road, and his energy was finally running out. On his doctor's



insistence, he went into hospital on June 23, leaving his son, George, in charge of work at the Takahe, and a loyal friend and supporter, expert carver Mary Douglas, to manage the tea-rooms. He took paper, pencils and notes with him to carry on the struggle from his bed, but a few days later, after undergoing an operation for stomach cancer, he died.

News of his death stunned the people of Christchurch. He had been around for so long, working tirelessly on the Summit Road, that he had seemed indestructible. Although his difficult nature was not forgotten—his uncooperativeness, his inflexibility, his ill temper and, most famously, his flimsy grasp of financial reality—both friend and foe praised what he had achieved. "Of age, of the retreats and surrenders and growing indifference by which age is frequently acknowledged, he gave no sign," ran his obituary in the Press. "He held on his way with the vigour, the humorous, sometimes stormy pugnacity, the bold opportunism, and the unfailing confidence which made him a remarkable man, and gave him success in a remarkable self-imposed task. Men of one idea often achieve a great deal, as Mr Ell did; they often live long and die young, as Mr Ell did."

In 1938, the minister of works, Bob Semple, opened the section of road between Evans Pass, a few kilometres short of Godley Head, and Dyers Pass, where the Sign of the Kiwi

nestles against the hillside. It would have been some comfort to Ell that Semple was part of the first Labour government, which shared his high ideals of public service. Ada cut the ribbon. The road was later completed as far as Gebbies Pass. From there only walking tracks, some crossing private land, continue to the Pigeon Bay saddle, which was as far as Ell surveyed. The final section of the route follows the Peninsula Summit Road to just above Akaroa.



Mrs Ell cutting the ribbon at the opening of the Summit Road by the Minister of Public Works, the Hon. R. Semple. 26 February 1938

During the Second World War, the Summit Road was sadly neglected, and in the absence of Ell's watchful eye some of the buildings fell into disrepair, and the Bellbird and Packhorse were badly vandalised. The Bellbird is today just a shelter, but the now restored Packhorse is maintained by the Department of Conservation as a trampers' hut. The Takahe is leased out as a restaurant, while the Kiwi is operating just as Ell envisaged: a teahouse where people stop to admire the view before stepping onto the walkway to enjoy the freedom of the Port Hills.

In 1947, at a meeting in Kaikoura of the Junior Chamber of Commerce, Harry Ell's grandson, John Jameson, proposed the formation of a society to beautify the Summit Road. Since its inaugural meeting the following year, the Summit Road Society has been active in shaping policy and

in undertaking much of the hard manual work required to restore and enhance the Port Hills landscape for the purposes of conservation and public recreation. Today, the public land on the Port Hill—still only 11 per cent of the total, despite the efforts of Harry Ell and those who have followed—is administered variously by the Department of Conservation, Christchurch City Council and the Summit Road Society. The responsibility for

its management rests largely with the council's Park Ranger Service, whose annual operational budget of some \$300,000 goes towards an extensive programme of reforestation, the cutting and maintenance of walking and mountain-biking tracks, a fire patrol service, and plant

and animal pest control. Voluntary groups, including the Summit Road Society, provide most of the manpower for tree-planting and track maintenance.

The remaining 89 per cent is owned or leased by farmers, and access to the Summit Walkway, which roughly parallels the Summit Road, and subsidiary tracks still relies on a degree of goodwill. Even so, nearly a fifth of the land—some 3000 ha—is covered by some form of environmental protection, and a proposal has been drawn up for the unified management of the entire Port Hills area between Godley Head and Gebbies Pass as a single regional park, bringing conservation, farming and recreation under one umbrella.

Thus is the legacy of Harry Ell, and before him of William Rolleston, carried into a new century. There may be no plans for another Takahe, nor is the clarion call of a coaching horn likely to

echo around the Port Hills; and perhaps Ell's ghost stalks the Summit Road in vexation, distraught that his grand design remains so terribly incomplete. But for the many thousands each year who walk, run, bike, motorcycle, drive, ride, climb and paraglide in these hills, revelling in the airy spaciousness of the rolling high lands he fought so long and hard to preserve, his labour of love is a priceless treasure.

Late one cold October evening, after a stressful day at work, I drive up to the Sign of the Kiwi, park my car and start walking. After about an hour I reach a high point on the crest of the hills that I visit often, where the ashes of a dog of mine have been fertilising the tussock for a couple of years now. He was a strapping black Labrador in his time, and this used to be a favourite area for hunting rabbits. I sit amongst the tussock, wrapped in mist, remembering him gliding along the track, nose to the ground, clearing the stiles with an easy leap, standing on the rises, panting, ears blown back by the wind.

A lucky life for a town dog. A lucky life for all of us who have these hills in which to roam. Lucky for Christchurch it produced such a visionary as Harry Ell.

