

## A history of the Harris Scientific Reserve, Ashburton

Val Clemens

### A precious remnant conserved

As with many similar projects, the history of the Harris Scientific Reserve (HSR) consists of two intertwining stories. Firstly the people: those who have touched the reserve fleetingly and those who work constantly to protect the place they see as significant and irreplaceable. Secondly the place: there are remnants of a much longer natural history that we can only surmise from the clues that have been left for us to find.

Our part of this history began when Arthur and Shirley Harris bought the farm at Maronan, 12 km southwest of Ashburton, in 1962. Their house was on nearby Scales Road but part of the farm consisted of 40 acres (about 16 ha) of dry stony land along Lovetts Road that still had “scrub” on it. “Townies” would often arrive to help themselves to firewood, and sometimes leave the gate open letting Arthur’s stock escape. To prevent this, he asked the council grader driver to flatten the scrub but to leave a small paddock surrounded by kānuka down a farm track about 300 m from the Lovetts Road frontage as shelter for lambing ewes.

Local GP Ross Lane and his wife Marion were early conservationists in Ashburton who had noticed the increasing rarity of native plants on the plains. They suggested to Arthur and Shirley that the remaining kānuka be protected. They arranged a visit with Dr Brian Molloy and Dr William Blair of QEII, who confirmed the significance of the area when they visited in 1969. A QEII covenant was gazetted in 1983. Arthur then double-fenced the perimeter with the kānuka and continued to use the interior.

*“This patch is the largest of several smaller remnants that occur on farmland and roadside verges in this district ... Together they represent the last survivors of an extensive area of scrub mapped for this district between 1858 and 1873 ... The Lovetts Rd scrub, and the small kanuka scientific reserve at Eyrewell, are virtually all that remains of a vegetation type that once covered 500,000 acres or 200,000 hectares on the Canterbury Plains.”* Dr Brian Molloy

Arthur and Shirley spoke of driving sheep past the covenant on a warm spring day and noticing a delightful perfume. After some time they realised that it came from small green flowers high in the kānuka – it was *Clematis marata*.

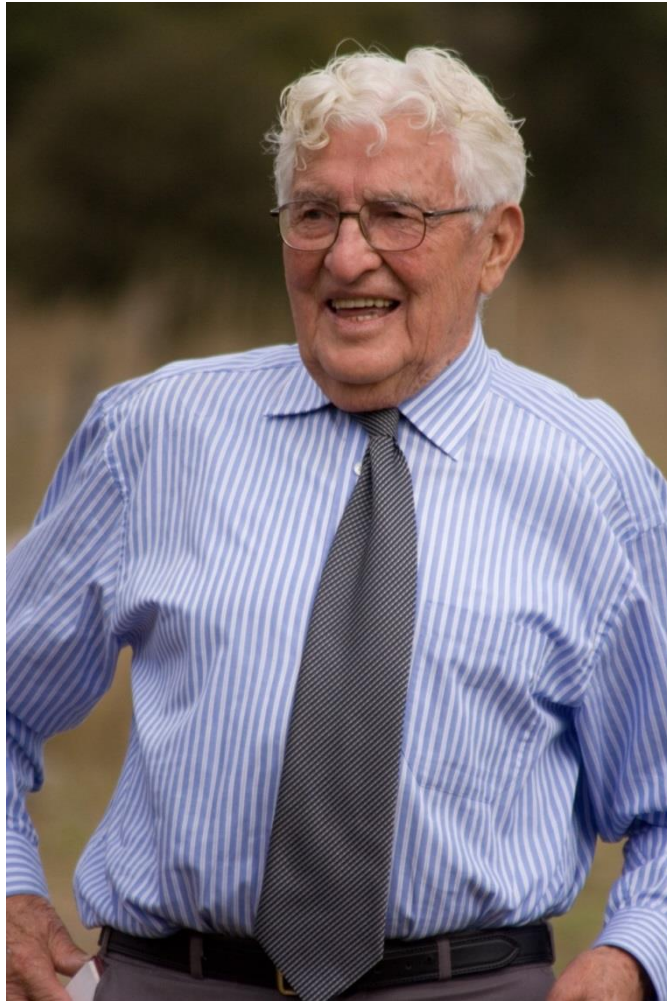
### Reserve establishment

In 1995 the farm was sold to the then Ashburton County Council as a site for a landfill, but when it was found unsuitable, the area was leased. The covenant was neglected and when Forest & Bird (F&B) members visited in 2006 they found the fences in poor repair with evidence of stock being among the kānuka.

Discussions with the Ashburton District Council (ADC) were initiated by F&B members. After the significance of the site was described to councillors by Dr Colin Meurk, and with strong support from Mayor Bede O’Malley, the Council agreed to lease the 2.4 ha covenant, plus an additional paddock of 8.6 ha between the covenant and Lovetts Road, to the Ashburton Branch of Forest and Bird on the condition that a trust be formed to administer and develop the Reserve. As a result the Ashburton Community Conservation Trust was formed in 2010 and took over management of the now 11 ha Harris Scientific Reserve (Fig. 1, p. 53). A management plan was written and has been regularly updated.

When the remainder of the farm was sold by the Council, there was a shelterbelt of large kānuka growing on the roadside along Lovetts Road. To the horror of F&B members, the new owner of the farm removed the large kānuka beside his land, despite the ADC being in negotiation with QEII to protect them with a Landscape Protection Agreement.

Planting began in the interior of the covenant in 2007. Inexperienced and naïve as we were, there was little success on a site with very low fertility, masses of weeds, and a nearest water source 300 m away. With some very dry summers and unusually heavy frosts, the attrition rate was very high, and the outcome for the Reserve was looking bleak.



**Figure 1.** Arthur Harris at the official opening of the Reserve on 18 March 2010.

### **Living Legend Days**

A turning point occurred when Gordon Hosking visited in 2010. He was the coordinator of the “Living Legends” project set up to commemorate the 2011 Rugby World Cup. Across the country, 17 sites were chosen to receive funding and support to hold three annual planting days. The Harris Scientific Reserve became one of these sites.

This impetus changed the Reserve in a significant and fundamental way. Money was available to buy plants, fertiliser, combi guards and a pump to fill water tanks. The Lismore silt loam in the area is stony and very well drained, so watering was critical. Teams filled tanks on trucks from the water race, and individually watered plants throughout dry summers ensuring a very high survival rate (Fig. 2, p.54).

The first Living Legends Day in September 2011 was a resounding success. Over 300 people planted 3000 plants in the paddock area on a site that had been sprayed and ripped beforehand. Forest & Bird members and others became designated planting supervisors, and offered help and advice when needed. Our Living Legend, ex-All Black Jock Ross, brought his family, ADC councillors mucked in, the Harris Family were out in force, and after this huge effort, the Reserve has never looked back (Fig. 3 left, p. 54).

Forest and Bird members had propagated thousands of plants sourced from the plains of the Ashburton District and this has determined the species mix that has been added to the Reserve. Plants from both Low Plains and High Plains Ecological Districts have been included because of the scarcity of most species.

Living Legends Day number 2 in 2012 was wet and miserable, but 50 volunteers planted 2000 plants, and in 2013, hard work from 50 volunteers resulted in another 1300 plants in the ground (Fig. 3 right, p. 54).



**Figure 2.** A watering crew in the covenant in December 2014. From left: Vince Rouse, David Strong, Peter Smith, Ricky Knight, and Kevin Challis. (Photo: Edith Smith).

The Living Legends project resulted in 2 ha being fully planted in 3 years. Watering became a weekly job during dry summers and each plant was watered individually. Support from Gordon Hosking and the Living Legends sponsors continued until 2017 and was always much appreciated.



**Figure 3.** Left: Planting on 4 September 2011 for Living Legends 1. Right: Mayor at the time, Angus McKay, with other volunteers on 12 August 2012 for Living Legends 2.

Once the Living Legends plants were established, apart from some spraying, they have been left alone. *Poa cita* and *Festuca novae-zelandiae* have self-seeded and are replacing exotic grasses. *Coprosma intertexta* is spreading to form larger clumps and kānuka seedlings are appearing.

Since 2015, funding from ECAN has supported the appointment of a caretaker, retired farmer Dave Strong. His input has allowed F&B members to step back a little and his campaign to wipe out cocksfoot has been significant. His knowledge of herbicide use has been helpful and we have benefitted from the ability of kānuka to colonise bare ground. Where tracks and areas to be planted were sprayed, there has been significant germination on the north side of mature kānuka, a characteristic that has been exploited with little effort. Dave also found that with appropriate herbicides he could overspray kānuka to reduce competition from grasses.

There has been some hesitancy in using chemicals but the weed growth has been impossible to deal with in any other way.

Community input has come from many individuals and organisations:

- Ex-All Black Jock Ross paid for a stile to allow public access from Lovetts Road.
- Hinds Lions helped clean up windblown trees, grubbed weeds, and helped with watering.
- BNZ staff members help out on their “Closed for Good” days.
- School groups have planted and learned about their native flora as they go (Fig. 4).
- A local beekeeper has hives in the covenant and provides old bee boxes which we find useful to keep hares from eating plants.
- In 2016, Brian Patrick was commissioned to conduct an insect survey and noted 33 species in seven insect Orders.
- Scouts and Guides, Kiwi Conservation Club members, Ashburton College students and many other groups have helped with mulching and planting.
- ADC and ECAN have both provided funding, and ADC’s ex-Open Spaces Manager, David Askin, continues as a trustee.
- A local contractor mows and bales remaining grass areas in mid-summer, and pays us for the hay.



**Figure 4.** St Joseph’s School students in November 2019, delighted to see an earlier photo on the sign of themselves planting in 2013.

### Recent developments

Since 2013, annual planting days have been held to fill in unplanted areas. About 6 ha has now been planted intensively, and a kōwhai savannah has been established over half of the remaining area. This was dedicated to the late Ian Glassey who bequeathed money for environmental projects.

The rest of the open field is currently used by the Ashburton Model Aeroplane Club. The frequent presence of their members provides some security for the Reserve as it is quite remote from the town and therefore vulnerable to vandalism.

With the closure of many stock water races around the district, there was concern that the Reserve would be left without a water source. However, ADC agreed to leave the existing race and allow it to be run into a small pond which spills over into a wetland area. The water race was moved and reshaped in a more natural way providing the space and conditions for a new suite of plants.

The Reserve continues to develop, despite frequent assertions that “this is the last planting” – we have had at least four “last plantings”.

Our latest project has been to set up a tiny plants enclosure to house those species that are easily smothered by exotic weeds. This will include *Carmichaelia corrugata*, *Acaena buchananii*, *Geranium retrorsum*, and a local *Craspedia*.

In September 2021, there will be another public planting day as the ADC nursery has produced 800 kānuka, and Southern Woods Nursery has propagated shrubs for the Reserve.

Mention must be made of the support and reassuring protection the QEII National Trust provides to the trustees. Firstly, Rob Smith, and now Alice Shanks have always been available to discuss plans and to encourage appropriate developments. We have learned a great deal by drawing on Alice’s encyclopaedic knowledge of Canterbury dryland plants and her sharp eyes. Her spotting of a *Wahlenbergia* in an open grassy area was a delightful surprise.

On their travels around the district F&B members have collected seed and cuttings to grow plants for the Reserve. These have been sourced from “waste areas”, such as unkempt roadsides, old shelterbelts and hedges, floodplains, and weedy terrace risers. Only two *Aciphylla subflabellata* come from farther afield – Woolshed Creek via Motukarara Nursery, as two individuals at Mayfield never produced viable seed.

A pink *Clematis marata* was found near a pine shelterbelt near Tinwald, but as the trees grew it almost disappeared. This is the only plant that has been transplanted into the Reserve. Many other plants have simply disappeared. Two clumps of *Coprosma intertexta* on the roadside are now surrounded by substantial wooden fences with “NO SPRAY” signs on, but that didn’t stop the recent spraying of part of one clump. Luckily, *C. intertexta* is flourishing inside the Reserve.

Undoubtedly the stars of the show are the kānuka (*Kunzea serotina*), with both a white flowering, green leaved form and a pale pink flowering form with reddish leaves. The survival of these original trees in the covenant perimeter has occurred thanks to the foresight of Arthur and Shirley Harris. They are a local and national taonga.

The experience and expertise gained during the Living Legends project have been invaluable and other F&B projects in the district have benefitted. Ashburton Community Conservation Trust trustees have all willingly contributed their time and practical skills over the 10 years since its establishment.

Chairperson Edith Smith has ably led the Trust, supported by her husband Peter as secretary/treasurer, and their contribution has been integral to the success of the Reserve. Peter’s attention to detail has ensured that Health and Safety requirements are met, fire regulations are upheld, and finances are meticulously recorded. Edith leads by example, and is generally the first to arrive and the last to leave.

With the land use changes seen recently on the plains of Ashburton, the significance of the Harris Scientific Reserve is evident. Irrigation of previously dry soils, and large machinery and herds of cattle moving on roadsides that once harboured a few remnant native plants, mean that every surviving native plant is significant. However, the vigour with which many species grow in the Reserve has been rewarding. Once established, most have grown well, flowered and set seed – they’ve come home. That so many species have been gathered and nurtured in one place has created a legacy that, we hope, will persist and flourish well into the future (Fig. 5, p. 57).



**Figure 5.** Our large sign erected near the stile thanks to ADC funding in 2020, with flourishing plantings into the distance.

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## **Banks Peninsula Conservation Trust 20<sup>th</sup> birthday greeting**

**Hugh Wilson**

Kaitiaki, Hinewai Reserve

Kia ora and greetings, 20 year celebrants! I'm really sorry I can't be with you in person. Your wonderful new Chairperson used her gently persuasive powers and talked me into sussing out how I could manage a mad March mission to Orton Bradley, but my ruthless calendar told me I had school groups coming to Hinewai just before, and just after, this Big Day Out. Even with an electric bike (and of course I'm not old enough for one of those yet) travelling thither and hither in such short time was not only a challenge, it was impossible. But I am with you in spirit.

20 years is a great milestone. The road behind is littered with achievements. Many more doubtless lie on the road ahead. Golly, is it really 2 decades ago when we sat through those long meetings at Little River and elsewhere trying to thrash some practical realism in to the District Plan?

In the end it astonished me – (conservation-focussed and some would say bordering on the fanatical) – that the Conservation Trust largely grew out of a farmer initiative, not just from frustration at coercive and patronising bureaucracy, but also – I have to say it – because Banks Peninsula farmers were clearly more conservation-minded that they were often judged to be.