THE CHANGING FACE OF CHURCH GULLY

By M.M. Hunter

The following is an endeavour to record some of the changes in the flora of the Hunter Native Forest Reserve, that have been noted by Oliver Hunter during his long lifetime and by myself since I first visited this Church Gully reserve twenty seven years ago. Hopefully it may, in the future, aid some botanist who is studying or listing the plants in the reserve.

In order to make locations clear I have, roughly, traced a copy off a surveyor's map of the said reserve of about 20 acres, and have numbered and listed some recognisable features using the old original names.

The steep-sided gully has a spectacular series of volcanic rocky outcrops and bluffs; terraces where the soil is rich and deep.

No living person knows this gully better than Olie who, in November, 1882 (95¾ years ago), was born in his parents farm cottage west of the lassers gate and above Church Bay. So first of all I shall write of the plants that grow on "the lasses gate sideling" and in the gully in Olie's childhood and of those of which Olie says "have been there all my time". The upper part of the lasses gate sideling and along from "the top of the rocks" towards "nostril knob" was well covered with lovely coloured manuka (Leptospermum scoparium). There were white to pink and red flowers all a-hum with bees gathering nectar. Various coloured manuka was still there when Olie's eldest daughter was a child. But now there is only a bush or two of white manuka on the west side near the top of the rocks. Many whiteberry (Muehlenbeckia complexa) bushes grew on the sideling in spite of frequently being cut and grubbed as well as occasionally being razed by fire. Olie had his favourite bushes which grew larger white-berries that he gathered and took home to eat with cream. Muehlenbeckia persisted and still grows in its favoured spots as does the almost leafless lawyer (Rubus cissoides) which was also cut and burnt. The small daisy-like plant Vittadinia grew there too. The large tangled mass of plants of prostrate kowhai, muehlenbeckia etc., just above the tank and geranium cliff has always been there as has that "old man coprosma". About and near the geranium cliff grew small cranesbill (Geranium microphyllum), the native oxalis and a small ground-hugging New Zealand convolvulus - the larger climbing New Zealand convolvulus grew on shrubs near the creek.

Prostrate kowhai (Sophora prostrata) has always grown on the rocky ledge inside the lasses gate and on the rocky outcrop above where the harebell (Wahlenbergia gracilis) still graces the area with its dainty blue-bells. At the top of the rocks rushes are growing where they "have always been" and still at least two Spaniards (Aciphylla -) grow in the "spear-grass area". A few matagowri as Wild Irishman (Discaria toumatou) are still growing down and north-east of nostril knob. In this vicinity there still grows the dwarf prickly heath (Cyathodes fraseri) with its delightfully scented flowers and its lovely orange berries. Tussocks and some of the old grasses remain too. Celmisia gracilenta still favours the upper western slope of the gully.

Corokia cotoneaster is thick where it has always grown, up from the main road bridge with more on the side facing north-east as well as scattered in other places of the gully. It makes a good nurse-plant for the hardy slow growing red matipo (Myrsine australis) a few of which have always grown near the creek. Some Pittosporum tenuifolium and Olearia paniculata survived by growing in the rocky and more inaccessible places. In the gully there have always been kowhai trees (Sophora microphylla). Most of the present trees are seedlings from kowhai felled for fence posts in early days. One below the upper fall was a tree when Olie was a little boy so it must be over 100 years old. The largest of these has a Parsonsia rosea which was climbing about there when Olie was a child and because his sister Mary claimed the flowers it was thereafter known as "Mary's plant". There is another of the same variety draped over a large rock, just upstream from the main road bridge, on the western side. A place where he saw pink geckos was in the heap of rocks just below the lasses gate where a five-finger (Neopanax arboreum) now grows. Just near the lower Parsonsia rosea there has always grown Macropiper excelsum and Teddington and Charteris Bay children have, on occasion, been sent to Church Gully to gather some of its leaves to act as a poultice to cure someone of boils. Tree-fuchsia (Fuchsia excorticata) and broadleaf (Griselinia littoralis) are indigenous to the gully as is whitey-wood or mahoe (Melicrytus ramiflorus) sometimes called cour-leaf as some plants were, every year, well eaten down to a protective niche between large rocks. Pigweed (Rhagodia triandra) still grows as it always did hanging mat-like over the rock faces below the lasses track and on small shrubs at the foot of the cliff. Its small red berries, hanging like bunches of grapes fall easily if handled. On the same side of the gully in and on rocky outcrops and above broadleaf corner there grows as it did in former days a pretty little sun-loving rock fern. Aniseed once grew where German owls had holes in the top of the bank at broadleaf corner until opossums ate it all out.

In the lower portion of the gully the spring area on the eastern side of the creek had no watercress, instead it had "curldodies and cockeries" and was well clothed with many wet-area plants: tall grasses, N.Z. flax, a large triangular sedge, several kinds of cutty-grass, ferns and a few clumps of toi-toi (Cortaderia richardii).

Following up the creek from the lower waterfall there was a sunny open area near "the washing place". Here in rock crevices at the edge and in the creek-bed grew the dainty little jointed rush, N.Z. chickweed and epilobium or willow-herb and linum further up the bank.

The steep rocky ravine near the upper fall always gave partial protection to a fragment of old Peninsula bush but it was not until Olie, at the age of twelve or thirteen, gained his father's permission to fence this portion, of about one acre, off from stock that it had a chance to regenerate and this it gradually did with a little help here and there from Olie. The maidenhair fern in the upper waterfall was planted there by Olie when he was eighteen. Subsequent periodic floods have kept it from increasing. The spore-bearing Pyrrosia serpens grew mostly over rocks but now it has increased and grows up trees as well. In niches of the hill of rocks above the fall grew and still grows Celmisia gracilenta and on the lowest shelf bank of the same rock hill grew the star-lilly (Arthropodium candidum) - it's still there. There was a tutu tree (Coriaria) below the upper fall but it died. Another plant died out; currant-wood (Aristotelia serrata) - present plants are seedlings from afar. Myrtus obcordata favoured being near the upper bridge and on at

least one occasion was used as a Christmas tree. Coprosma of many varieties thrived in the protected area. The New Zealand iris (Libertia ixioides) could and can be found near the creek in many places.

The east side or "Sams side" of the gully was generally drier especially in areas catching the hot north-west winds, but it had interesting flora too. Thelymitra was and is found on the higher more open area of grassland east of the upper fall and in other places where there was and is no cocksfoot or tall grass. Onion-leafed orchid (Microtis unifolia), Linum monoginum, Geranium microphyllum, native oxalis, bidi-bidi and groundsel are still plentiful. But to Olie's sorrow the redish-leafed native cabbage which grew in crevices of the cliffs on the east side died out. But a shy little localised plant that grew on a ledge below the "long rock" has survived. It is the jersey fern (Anogramma leptophylla.). The sun-loving rock-fern still thrives with its roots in crevices of unshaded rock on the east side too. Also there is still plenty of that hardy hard fern which does not seem to mind sunshine either. The native pincushion (Cotula squalida) has always grown on this side as well as the west side. Below and above the pigeon cliff several large clumps of leafless clematis (Clematis afoliata) thrive in the same places they favoured years ago and the cabbage tree (Cordyline australis) above the roadside quarry has an old history. To the south end of the pigeon cliff is the "black cave" atop of which in a split of rock grows a fairly large healthy five-finger that has been there all Olie's time. There is an old Olearia paniculata near the old Diamond Harbour survey line between the pigeon cliff and the creek - its leaves are a greyer green than nursery specimens, with the same name. There is growing near "observation rock" an old semi-shruby climbing fuchsia with leaves somewhat like fuchsia procumbens but does not seem to flower. Kanuka (Leptospermum ericoides) is self introduced to the gully within Olie's lifetime.

Olie mourning the loss of his first wife, who had a great love for the enclosed area by the upper waterfall, was inspired with the idea of enclosing the whole gully as a native forest reserve. In 1932-33, during a slump, he finally had the area surveyed. It took 28 survey pegs to define the boundary. Then came the mammoth task of securely fencing the area. The rocky nature of the area made drilling rock and sometimes blasting inevitable in certain places. The scarcity of money was another problem. Meanwhile the livelihood of his family and himself had to be considered, so it took a long time for him to fence that area in his own spare? time.

However his dream of having forest trees in the reserve never diminished. From that time on he lost no opportunity to plant in his enlarged reserve. Seedlings of trees and shrubs already in the gully were carefully transferred to bare parts; seed was collected and sown. As buying plants was costly, and money scarce, more reliance was made on growing seed at home. I remember one large silver-grey opossum - caught later - in one night, followed our trail in the grass to every newly planted white pine (Podocarpus dacrydioides) in the lower springs area and broke up all 30 of the young trees that I had, the day before, so proudly taken out of containers ready for Olie to plant.

Olie on his last walk down the gully of the Hunter Native Forest Reserve was gratified and thankful to see the area in such good heart.

Except for a few special plants to be planted by someone who knows the gully well and has knowledge of the habitat of the particular specie,

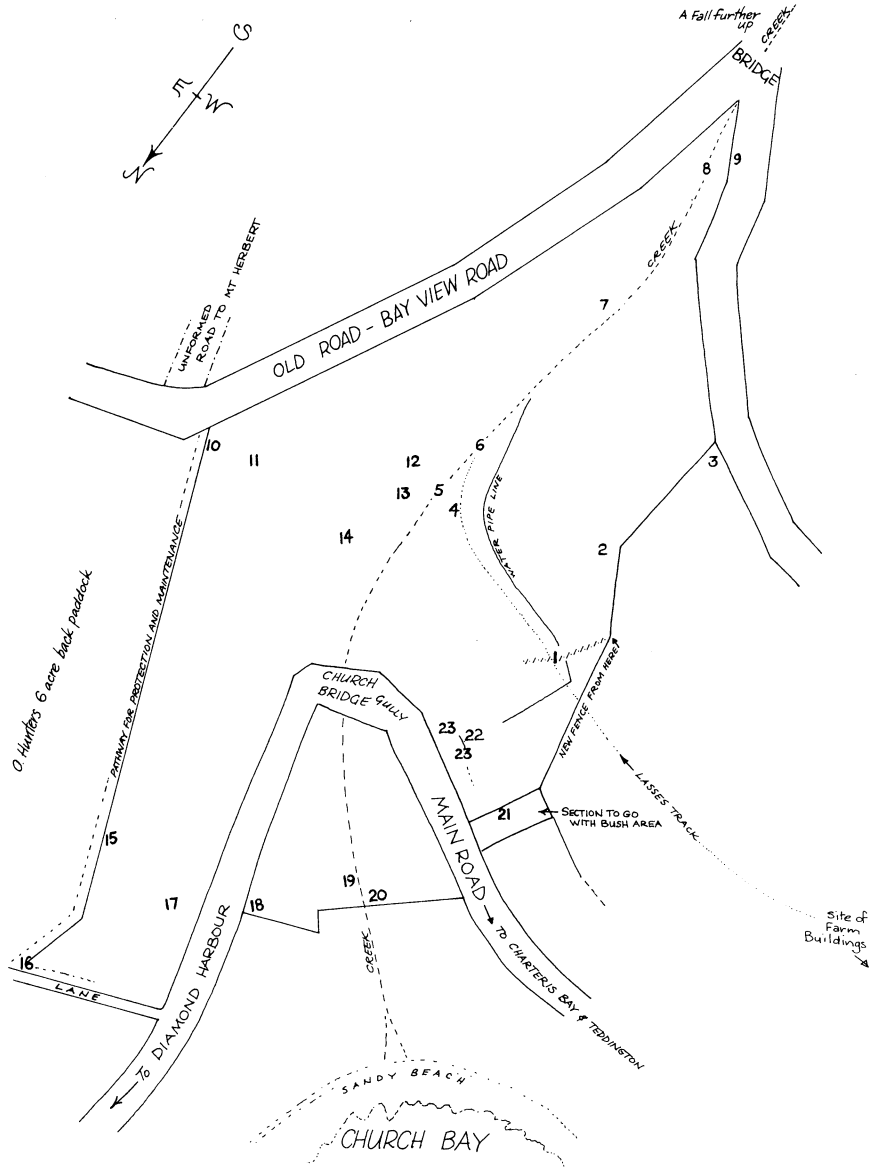
there need be no more general planting days. These days could, however, with advantage, be replaced with "maintenance days".

The reserve will respond magnificently if it gets care, protection and respect from the general public. Like a child it has needed some tender, loving care and is now ready to grow up. Olie, these days, looks at the gully from the roadside and says "I've been privileged to see all this change during my lifetime".

KEY TO NUMBERS ON MAP OF

HUNTER NATIVE FOREST RESERVE

No:	
1	"Lasses gate" (Olie's mother and aunts went through it to the "washing place". They boiled water in cast iron boiler).
2	"Top of the rocks"
3	"Nostril Knob" (was thought to be a volcanic cooling steam vent)
4	"Broadleaf corner"
5	"Lower waterfall" (the largest fall)
6	"The washing place"
7	"Madmans cave" (a harmless weak-minded hermit lived there for a time and occasionally went to farm cottage for buttermilk from Olie's mother)
8	"Upper waterfall"
9	"Trapdoor" (in netting fence)
10	"The style" (from back paddock into reserve)
11	"The long rock"
12	"The bad place"
13	"Black cave"
14	"Pigeon cliff"
15	"Observation platform" or "picture-rock" where photos taken
16	Gateway into bush part of "lane"
17	Spring area - continues below road
18	Spring area
19	The pool - part of creek
20	Spring on east side "good water"
21	A step-through in fence
22	Tank
23	Geranium cliff


A Fall further up
CREEK
BRIDGE
S
E
W
N
8
9
UNFORMED ROAD TO MT HERBERT
OLD ROAD - BAY VIEW ROAD
CREEK
7
10
11
12
6
13
5
4
WATER PIPE LINE
3
14
2
1
NEW FENCE FROM HERE
O Hunters 6 acre back paddock
PRIMARY FIRE PROTECTION AND MAINTENANCE
CHURCH BRIDGE GULLY
23
22
23
LASSE'S TRACK
21
SECTION TO GO WITH BUSH AREA
15
MAIN ROAD
TO CHARTERS BAY & TEDDINGTON
19
20
17
18
Site of Farm Buildings
16
LANE
CREEK
TO DIAMOND HARBOUR
SANDY BEACH
CHURCH BAY