

## Father of the Park?

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To me the title of “Father of the Park” suggests the person that gave birth to the park, so who deserves that title?

For many reasons Robert Clinton Hughes has always been recognised as the “Father of the Park”. He was involved in forming the original Board of Trustees, and he spent 60 years as a Board member. However, a closer look at the events that led up to the Park being created made me question that notion.

Until 1875 New Plymouth was basically devoid of recreation areas. The emerging rugby fraternity were playing games on Poverty Flats, a lifeless piece of open ground on the site of the present-day Central School, and social functions like fetes and Christmas parties were generally held at private estates or farms owned by prominent locals. On January 15, 1874 the Church of England Sunday school held its annual festival on the ground of Brooklands, then owned by George Cutfield. In April 1874 the Sunday school children belonging to the Scotch Kirk were treated to a picnic held in a paddock on the Avenue Road (Coronation Avenue), owned by Thomas Colson. Arthur Standish, the first Mayor of New Plymouth also held many similar events on his farm.

An extract from a letter printed in the Herald on January 14, 1874 shows that the citizens of New Plymouth felt it was time that the town had a proper Recreation Ground.

“Sir. - Where oh! where are our public recreation grounds, along whose winding paths the good citizens of Taranaki may wander at their ease, or rest beneath a wealth of shade, 'mid trees from every clime? Our picnic loving people up to the present have been indebted to the courtesy of private gentlemen for the use of their grounds, to whom our thanks are due, for they cannot but have suffered some little in broken fences and other annoyances. I would suggest that the fern and furze covered land immediately behind Marsland Hill (disgracing the name it bears of our gracious Queen) be converted by degrees into a public pleasure ground.”

Board member James Davis gave a speech at the opening day of The Poet's Bridge (which he funded) during which he commented “that when he arrived in New Plymouth, he saw that the great want of the town was a public pleasure gardens, and he at once commenced to agitate the question”.

In January 1875 the Provincial Council went into session, at which a young solicitor Robert Clinton Hughes (who had just been elected to the council) tabled a question, asking if the Government had at its disposal any land in or near New Plymouth that could be used as a recreation ground.

In reply, Thomas Kelly (Provincial Secretary) said the only land the Government had at its disposal was an area of land at the back of the cemetery, known as the \* “Botanic Gardens”. Many of the reserves around town had been made over to the Education Board, and the only way to get the land from them would be to alter the trust.

In his speech at the handing over of the Park to the Borough Council in 1929, Hughes revealed that the question he had tabled was in fact on behalf of fellow councillor Peter Elliot.

Things went quiet for a few months, after which some resident's started making noises and in May or June 1875 a petition signed by 112 prominent residents, calling for a recreation area, was presented to the Provincial Council. The petition signatories vowed to look after any land given. It may well be that James Davis initiated the petition.

Thomas Kelly must have had the idea of a recreation ground in the back of his mind and one day while out looking for a piece of land on which to build a lunatic asylum he spotted a piece of land that he saw had potential for converting into a recreation ground. He wrote the following letter to Fred Carrington, who was the town's Superintendent at that time.

#### “RECREATION GROUND AND WATER SUPPLY.

THE following letter from Mr. T. Kelly to his Honor the Superintendent, relative to reserving land for recreation ground and water supply, has been laid on the table of the Council: -

Now Plymouth, June 8, 1875.

Sir,—In looking for a suitable piece of public land within a convenient distance from the town for the site and grounds of a Lunatic Asylum, the fact forced itself on my notice that in the immediate vicinity of the site I have selected, and which I submit for your approval—viz., Mount Herbert—that the interest of the whole community would be well consulted by making the balance of the reserve in the vicinity, by Ordinance of the Provincial Council, an endowment for public recreation grounds. The stream of water which flows through the reserve might be impounded and utilised for the ornamentation of the grounds, for watering the streets of New Plymouth, extinguishing fires, and providing for public baths.

The land to which I refer lies between Carrington Road and the Racecourse, and consists of exchanged town sections set apart for educational purposes. The area of this land, including roads which could be closed by Ordinance, is about 35 acres. It has not been a source of much revenue to the Educational Establishment, having only averaged some £15 per year, and is gradually deteriorating in value by the growth of furze, which successive tenants have failed to eradicate, or even keep down.

The reason of this is that the land is of inferior quality and very broken, rendering it unsuitable for cultivation. But it is admirably adapted by nature for forming recreation grounds, as the scenery is diversified, and winding paths could be made at small costs, and several small sheets of water made by dams of an inexpensive character. Although I propose to divert the purpose of this reserve from education to other public purposes, I do not think it would be desirable to take it without giving to the educational establishment either money compensation to compensate for the rent lost (£15), or to give, by way of exchange, other provincial lands of equal value; but I think the opportunity should not be lost for securing to the public of New Plymouth for all time these grounds which are capable of being made very beautiful for recreation purposes, and the other public services which I have named. The land is situated less than half-a-mile from the centre of the town, and if suitable paths and foot-bridges were made it would be at once used by a large section of the public on holidays, and by the various public organizations on special occasions—such as Templars' Fetes, Band of Hope, and the various denominational schools for the children's annual parties. Provisions could be easily made for making it accessible from various parts of the town, such as from the Carrington Road, from Liardet, Gover and Wakefield-streets. While these grounds might be made use of at a small cost to provide rational amusement to the public, the water, while affording a means of beautifying the grounds, could be utilised at a comparative small cost to furnish a supply for watering the streets, extinguishing fires, and providing for public baths; or even for supplying water for domestic purposes for the present population; but I propose to confine myself to the

first-named purposes more within the menus of the provincial revenue. The stream which flows through the reserve takes the drainage of about three hundred acres of land roughly estimated, and therefore the annual rainfall, less that lost by evaporation and other causes, could be impounded and made available for the purposes I have named.

Assuming that 6 - 10ths of our average annual rainfall could be collected and impounded, this would give a total quantity of 260,000,000 gallons for the twelve months, or a daily supply of about 360 gallons per head on the present population of the town if the whole of the water was impounded and stored up for daily use. The level of the water when damned back would be sufficiently high to flow to any part of the town not higher than 70 feet above the Huatoki River in Devon-street. And thus an abundant supply of water could be obtained at any time if pipes were laid from the reservoir, to the most densely built portion of the town. Public baths are now getting an urgent necessity, and facilities ought to be given for their promotion, and nothing would tend more to do so than a good and cheap supply of water. The financial part of the question I leave for further consideration; all that I have at present to urge is that the land be for ever secured to the public for these necessary public purposes during the present session of the Council.— I have, &c.,

T. KELLY.

His Honor the Superintendent.”

On June 12, 1875, the Taranaki Herald reported that the Public Reserves Board had agreed to release the 35 acres of land identified by Kelly in exchange for eighty acres of land at Mangaone (Smart Road) on the inland side of the Devon Line as a reserve for educational purposes.

Once given the green light, Kelly went about creating “The Botanical Garden and Public Recreation Grounds Bill, 1875”. This vested approximately 39 acres of land for recreational purposes.

During a Provincial Council sitting on the 24<sup>th</sup> of June 1875, Kelly moved the second reading of the Bill. The Government considered that the body that should have control of the grounds was the Town Board as it was felt they were best suited for the task. Before the final reading of the Bill Kelly arranged to meet with the Town Board on June 26 to present this proposal.

On June 29 at 2pm the Provincial Council went into Committee to consider the Recreation Ground Bill. Thomas Kelly stated that the Bill had been delayed in order to allow the Town Board to give an opinion on the question. The proposal included 39 acres of land, a cottage and a sum of £200 for clearing and fencing. Unfortunately, the Town Board rejected the offer as it considered the ratepayers would not consent to be rated for the purposes of keeping it in order. Kelly was confused by the Town Board’s reasoning considering the petition that had been received representing a reasonable percentage of the population. After some discussion it was decided to postpone consideration of the Bill to enable the Government to alter it, in order to convey the reserve to a Board of Trustees.

Before Kelly could present the Bill for its final reading a group of trustees had to be found to control the reserve, which meant a possible delay of several months. Knowing this Robert Clinton Hughes asked Kelly if he could amend the Bill the next day if he (Hughes) could

overnight persuade seven people to act as trustees, which Kelly agreed to.

The next morning Hughes presented Kelly with a list of proposed trustees; Thomas King, Robert. Joseph Collins, James Thomas Davis, Isaac Broad, John Gilmour, Harris Ford and himself. The Bill was amended and given its final reading and passed.

The overnight task of finding the trustees may seem to have been a tall order, however, Hughes did have a list of 112 people who had signed a petition pledging that they would be willing to manage a reserve if land was made available. At that time the population of New Plymouth was approximately 2000 and I have no doubt that all the appointed nominees to be trustees were well known to Hughes and on that list.

The Recreation Grounds Bill, which passed on June 30 1875, was the last piece of legislation to be passed by the Provincial Council.

The trustees met at the Park for their first meeting at the beginning of August 1875 and got stuck into the huge task at hand of planning development of the Park.

Before being finalised the Recreation Grounds Bill had to be ratified in Wellington by the Legislative Council. This process was delayed when the Solicitor General took exception to two of the clauses in the Bill. Kelly subsequently made the necessary changes, and the Taranaki Botanic Garden Act 1876 was passed in September 1876. The original 1875 Bill was 39 acres but the final Bill which passed on September 29 1876 was 49 acres, 3 roods and 6 perches.

The Lunatic Asylum mentioned in Kelly's letter to Carrington was never built.

The question of who should be called "Father of the Park". My vote goes to Thomas Kelly, he clearly had the vision of turning what was a neglected swampy valley into an amazing recreational area. He is the reason Pukekura Park is situated where it is today, and unfortunately, for the vast majority of people he is just a side-note in the history of the Park, if that!

\* "Botanic Gardens". This area had been identified by Frederic Alonzo Carrington on his original survey of the town. The site is next to the Te Henui Stream adjacent to Puketarata Pa.