



MY ASSOCIATION WITH PUKEITI – A PERSONAL RECOLLECTION

David Harrop

It was 1969. Pukeiti. What was this place? I was about to find out. My godmother, Moyra Todd from Wellington, was a keen gardener and if I tell you she was a good friend of Russell Matthews from *Tupare*, you will make the connection.

We had just moved from South Taranaki to a run-down sheep farm near New Plymouth which we were converting to a dairy farm so, as you can imagine, although we were really interested, gardens were not high on our agenda. However Moyra, together with Russell, made a persuasive pair and my wife Margaret and I soon found ourselves members of the Pukeiti Rhododendron Trust which had then been running for 18 years.

Moyra and her sister Kath had a garden, *The End House*, at Melling, on the hills above Wellington's Hutt Valley, which featured in Mary Burnard's splendid 1984 book, *Garden Heritage of New Zealand*. This book also included Russell and Mary Matthew's *Tupare*. There was also another link; my mother, then Hilda Valentine, taught Mary Matthews, then Brodie, at New Plymouth Girls' High School, from 1923-1926. After school they remained friends for the rest of their lives.

The Todd family had arrived in Otago from the lowland area of Scotland in 1870 and soon established themselves as astute business people. They were among the first importers of motor cars to New Zealand and from 1959 were part of the group developing

New Zealand's first natural gas field at Kapuni in South Taranaki.

My godmother was a special person in my life and I saw a lot of her in my early years. Moyra and Kath were born at Heriot in Otago and in 1926 they embarked on an extensive OE to Europe so Kath could extend her studies as a doctor. The sisters set up house in London and there they met my parents, also recently arrived from New Zealand. Later I regularly spent time with Moyra at their house in the Hampstead Garden Suburb, right next to Hampstead Heath. The following photo shows Moyra encouraging my early gardening efforts.

After the war, in 1947, Moyra and her sister returned to New Zealand and were early supporters of Pukeiti. In 1967 they donated £100 a year



Moyra Todd and DNH London 1938



Moyra Todd and Rob Hair Pukeiti 1959

for three years to the Summit Road Project, one of the schemes Russell Matthews was especially promoting.

This is not the place to set out full details of Pukeiti's early years but some explanation is required. Pukeiti Rhododendron Trust was set up in 1951 by a group of 25 rhododendron enthusiasts from all around New Zealand. They contributed the initial funds to get the place going and along with other volunteers, many of them were involved in the physical work on the property. The early days were not easy, goats, possums and rabbits had to be dealt with, access was difficult, there were no buildings and the rain seemed endless. However, the number of members of Pukeiti kept increasing and by 1960 some 2,400 people had

joined. A planting plan was drawn up, a water wheel was installed to both pump water and generate electricity and the original Members' Lodge was built. Unbelievable today, thanks to volunteer labour and donated material, this cost only £4,189.

So things were looking up and the Trust was able to employ a curator. Les Boisson, then Rob Bayly were first, and in 1960 Rob Hair, ably supported by his wife Ina, was appointed. Prior to this time the basic layout of the garden had been established and Rob Hair's stewardship was a time of consolidation. A count showed some 800 varieties of rhododendron had been planted with around 8000 plants in all.

Attention was now turning to looking after visitors and Ina Hair

was a particularly skilled hostess, who set a high standard which was later followed by many others.

1969 saw the appointment of Graham Smith, which really was a turning point for the garden and for the Trust. He was a young Englishman with a five-year Regent's Park apprenticeship and a three-year Kew diploma behind him, so he was very well qualified, although gardening in the New Zealand rain forest was a new experience for him. It is fair to say that for the next almost 40 years Graham became the driving force behind Pukeiti and an international figure in the world of rhododendrons. A remarkable achievement.

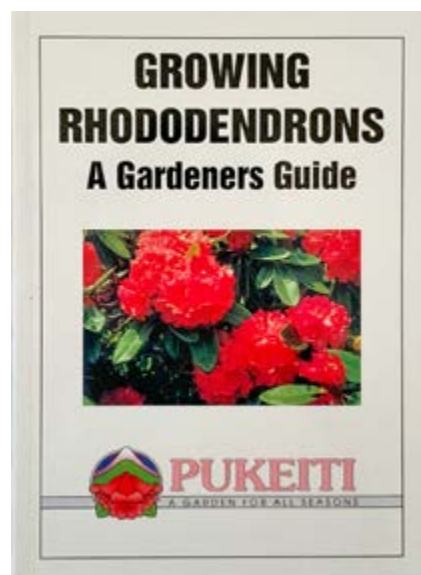
Andrew Brooker is another who should be mentioned. Andrew has shown his ability by rising through the Pukeiti ranks from garden labourer to garden manager, and now Collections and Projects Officer. He has a great knowledge of the plants at Pukeiti, and in conjunction with the New Zealand Rhododendron Association, as well as working at Pukeiti, his main task today is tracking down and saving endangered rhododendrons through the *ex-situ* programme.

As I said earlier, Margaret and I also joined Pukeiti in 1969, but apart from visiting from time to time and helping with the Cyclone Bola clean up in 1988, we took little active part. I retired from my job as a Farm Appraiser with the Rural Bank in 1991 and then, from 1992-2008, became more involved at Pukeiti, serving on the Members' Committee, the Board and as newsletter editor.

I then eased off, and in 2010 came the most significant event in Pukeiti's 60-year history. From being a self-supporting private trust, Pukeiti formed a partnership with the Taranaki Regional Council who took over full management of the garden. Negotiated by Pukeiti stalwart, Lynn Bublitz, this has proved to be a happy arrangement, with Pukeiti developing into a wide-ranging community facility, while still working with Pukeiti Rhododendron Trust's original aim, 'to encourage the cultivation, the study and the improvement of rhododendrons'.

From my active years at Pukeiti, I have selected four topics to expand:

- Growing Rhododendrons: A Gardeners Guide 1993
- Cardiocrinums 1993-94
- The Carvings, Te Whare Taonga 1996
- The Jubilee Rimu 2001



Growing Rhododendrons: A Gardeners Guide 1993

Although I had determined to spend more time with Pukeiti when I retired, I quickly realised that I really knew very little about rhododendrons, so I came up with the idea of asking all the knowledgeable people connected with Pukeiti to contribute to an easily understood book about the plant. There were some doubters, but after answering some searching, mainly financial questions from the Board, I was given the go-ahead. All 17 people I asked to help really did contribute willingly. In 1993 the book had a spectacular launch in the Penthouse of the Richmond Estate, then just re-built by Willie Still and his team. Willie was always a passionate supporter of all things Pukeiti.

The book was well reviewed in a number of publications with the *New Zealand Herald* writing: 'they have assembled an array of information with a fine economy of words.' The book sold well and many people found 'Growing Rhododendrons' useful. In 2019 it was re-printed by the Taranaki

Regional Council to support a Puke Ariki (New Plymouth's Museum, Library and Information Centre) exhibition. This was 'Pukeiti - The Living Museum', featuring Susan Worthington's botanical paintings of Pukeiti's large-leaf rhododendrons and the conservation efforts of the garden as a living museum.

Cardiocrinums



Cardiocrinum giganteum at Pukeiti



Gerry Paulin preparing for export

These amazing plants, *Cardiocrinum giganteum*, or as Graham Smith tells us, 'the Giant Lily' from the Himalayas, have been a feature of Pukeiti since 1963. In that year, Michael Hudson, a founding member from Hawke's Bay, introduced the seed to Pukeiti, where the spectacular plants soon flourished. In 1993 Gerry Paulin was chair of the Members' Committee. Among his other interests he and his wife Beryl grew proteas for export to Japan. At this time Pukeiti was particularly short of funds and Gerry came up with the idea of including cardiocrinums with his proteas to send to Japan. For one year this worked very well and useful dollars were earned, but the next year

MAF biosecurity found insects in the flowers and they were returned to us. We were left with some 70 of these beautiful blooms - what could we do? After a rapid ring round the Members' Committee we decided to distribute them to shops around New Plymouth. The flowers were very well received and acted as a promotion for Pukeiti.

Today cardiocrinums are not seen so much at Pukeiti. Andrew Brooker explains, 'Over time it was observed that the cardiocrinums were spreading into the forest margins beyond the garden beds.... To manage this Graham had us removing the seed heads before they ripened to slow the spread. This practice continues today and we only allow a few key clumps to set seed. Unfortunately this has been perhaps too successful, thus explaining the lack of a display.'

Te Whare Taonga 1996

For some years the Board had been looking at ways to mark the work of our Founder Members and the Maori contribution to Pukeiti. It was decided that carved panels telling the story of creation through the eyes of the Maori cultural tradition would be a fitting tribute. Robin Mason and others had found a suitable totara tree in the bush near Lake Taupo. With the required consents they broke the timber down and brought it to Taranaki. The panels were designed and carved by Rangi Bayley and his team in the traditional Taranaki style.

In November 1996 the unveiling and blessing of the carvings was led by Archbishop Paul Reeves, Governor-General from 1985-1990, in a most impressive ceremony. A large number of us had gathered well before dawn and the darkness was palpable. As



Te Whare Taonga



Governor General Dame Patsy Reddy with the panels now at Pukeiti's main entrance

the light strengthened the outline of the bush appeared, and the birds' dawn chorus began. Flood lights were turned on and the beauty of the carvings became apparent. It was an awe-inspiring moment. Speeches were made and my over-riding memory of the event came in the words of the kuia who said, 'If only the people could grow up in harmony as the trees do'.

In 2017 the new Rain Forest Pavilion was opened by the Governor General, Dame Patsy Reddy. At this time the carvings were moved to Pukeiti's main entrance and are now placed to welcome visitors as they enter the garden.

The Jubilee rimu

When Pukeiti was established in 1951 the land had been owned by the New Plymouth Sash and Door Company. By 1931 that company had milled all the suitable timber trees, particularly the rimu, to go towards building houses in New Plymouth. They had even removed trees suitable for firewood, leaving the land to the mercy of goats and rabbits.

Accordingly, as the Pukeiti Rhododendron Trust got going, planting rimu became an ongoing task. Many were planted in the early days and these trees are now mature enough to provide a seed source for ongoing re-generation. In 2001 it was decided planting more rimu trees would be a suitable 50th Jubilee project. Members were asked to donate a tree and it would have the name of the donor or the person for whom it was planted on an engraved label placed beside the tree. Members mostly planted their own tree but in some cases the Pukeiti staff did it for them. John MacIntyre contributed a coil of yellow gas piping to mark the small trees. Originally 100 trees were planned but in the end the scheme was so successful that 426 rimu were planted.



David Harrop at the 2014 Rhododendron Conference



Margaret, in 2001, planting her Jubilee Rimu which is now well established



A planting plan is available so that families can find their trees. Some release maintenance has been carried out by students from the Coastal Taranaki School, but most of the trees are now

big enough to look after themselves.

My wife, Margaret, planted her tree in 2001 and these pictures show how well it has grown.