

## The Dunedin Town Belt

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When the town of Dunedin was first planned an area of the primeval forest stretching from near the Southern Cemetery to the site of the present Botanic Gardens was set apart as a reserve to be preserved as a remnant of the forest as the early settlers found it, and for the recreation of the people. It was not then realized that the removal of the surrounding forest to make room for settlement would create such a new set of conditions that changes would inevitably occur in the composition of the Town Belt forest. The setting apart of such a forested area in what was sure to be the centre of the city was an excellent idea, and "the sanctity of the Town Belt was jealously guarded by the pioneer settlers."

To ensure that the Belt would be preserved for its original purpose, the Provincial Council vested the Town Belt and several other reserves in a Board of Trustees who were given authority to eject any person who might camp or build on the reserve, and to prosecute anyone causing damage to the forest, or cutting down trees, or shooting the birds. At least one man was prosecuted, found guilty, and fined one shilling as a warning to others; but a number of buildings were erected on the area in the following years, and in 1859 a further warning was given that the owner of any building so erected must remove it or face a fine of £50.

In 1854 people living nearby complained that persons with shotguns were firing at the birds and causing great danger to the residents. They too were warned that the law would in future be enforced. There is no known record of what tall trees existed in the Town Belt, but they would doubtless be those of the immediate area which included totara, miro, black and white pine, rimu, pokaka and lacebark. Now such tall trees were in great demand for timber to build houses and by 1870 not a single tall tree remained in the Belt ; whether consent was given or withheld is not certainly known.

In 1860 some fifty or more sections bordering the Belt, each a quarter of an acre in size, were sold to the settlers at an average price of £13 each; but when six years later there was a sale of Town Belt leases a public meeting of protest followed immediately. Following this the Provincial Government vested the whole of the Belt in the Town Council, hoping thereby that better supervision would result. Again, some nine or ten years later, it was proposed to erect a hospital on the Town Belt and a public meeting of protest quickly followed showing that the residents valued the Belt very highly and were prepared to see it properly preserved for its original purposes.

As the years passed, people almost forgot the Town Belt and the rapid changes taking place were scarcely noted at the time. In place of the stately pines, what is commonly known as second growth forest had been established in which the dominant trees were the broadleaf, tree-fuchsia, whitey-wood, teatree and fivefinger. In the succeeding years gorse, broom and elderberry gained entry as well as numerous deciduous trees of which the sycamore was dominant. These last were purposely planted and the thousands of seedlings that came up ensured the sycamore was there for all time. The carpet of fallen leaves that covered the ground in late autumn destroyed any possibility of the native herbs, unaccustomed to such a cover, ever again being found in company with the sycamore. Garden escapes that gained entry into the Town Belt included ivy, holly, hawthorn, barberry and numerous weeds.

Now what is known of the composition of the plant life in the Town Belt a hundred years ago? So far as we know no full list of the plants was ever compiled, but the Hon. G. M. Thomson, who arrived in Dunedin in 1871 has written most of what we now know. In a small book entitled, "Dunedin and its Neighbourhood," he records the trees then to be seen (1904) as True Fuchsia, broadleaf, pepper tree, black mapau, white mapau, wineberry, ribbon wood, tree tutu and five-finger ; climbers and scramblers as two species of Clematis, two species of lawyer, Parsonia or Climbing periwinkle, and Meuhlenbeckia or pohuehue, as well as supple-jacks in the denser parts of the forest. Manuka and teatree occupied drier parts of the area.

In that fascinating book "A New Zealand Naturalist's Calendar," the same author makes numerous references to the Town Belt, "of plants formerly present but now (1909) rare or absent" he mentions the spider orchid and that other strange orchid *Gastrodia*, with flannelly, grey flower-stalks up to a foot tall, as well as the lily known as *Dianella* which in early autumn bore tall branching stems bearing bright blue berries of most attractive appearance.

Also included in the list of plants that had disappeared were the parsley fern or moonwort, the adder's tongue fern, and numerous filmy ferns as well as a small native cress.

The Dunedin Naturalists' Field Club has been in continuous existence since 1874 and it has recorded from the Town Belt a dozen species not previously mentioned. These included a native St. Johns wort, the patete or nine-flnger, the climbing senecio, the native verbena (*Teucrium*), two species of hook sedges, two species of oat-grass (*Microlaena*), and several other herbs. Of these the St. Johns wort, the climbing groundsel, and the verbena have disappeared.

Plants that have survived to the present include several species of *Coprosma* or mikimiki, including the obnoxious-smelling shrub known as stinkwood. Its botanical name *Coprosma foetidissima* translated into English means 'vile-smelling excrement'. The rohutu or native myrtle still persists as does the pepper tree but in much reduced numbers. A tiny orange-fruited and orange scented heath may still be found on dry grassy soils on the upper fringe of the Belt. Several mistletoes are still present including a tiny, leafless one only an inch or so tall which occurs on various shrubs exposed to the light and in particular on *Melicope*, a shrub related to the orange and lemon.

From what has been said it is clear that one of the principal reasons for the Belt being set aside as a reserve for the preservation of a typical sample of the original forest no longer holds good, and that for a variety of reasons; but the presence of a forested area within the confines of the city not only adds to its scenic assets, but provides for the recreation and enjoyment of the public.

The changes that have occurred during the past century apply no less to the bird life than to the plants. Where native pigeons, parrakeets, kakas, native canaries, saddlebacks, moreporks, robins, tuis, warblers, fantails and tomtits were the usual bush birds seen when the first settlers arrived, today only the pigeons, tuis, warblers, fantails and tomtits have survived and these are far from numerous. The imported blackbirds, thrushes, and sparrows have usurped possession of the Town Belt forest. The introduced blackberry is an uninvited guest and the *Muehlenbeckia* on the forest margin has in places smothered the native vegetation also to the stage of proving a menace. Where the air in the forest was once calm and moist at all times, wind now gains entry, creating a drier atmosphere that has caused the death of scores of mosses and hepatics once present as well as the filmy ferns and other plants that can thrive only in a moisture-laden atmosphere. Nevertheless the Town Belt remains a distinct asset and it behoves the citizens to cherish it and to see that it is never converted into building sections.