

A SOUTHERN KAURI BEYOND ITS NATURAL RANGE?

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Some months ago I was given a large number of back issues of the *Journal of the Royal New Zealand Institute of Horticulture*. In the June 1940 issue, between 'Tree ferns and other ferns' (Banks Lecture) by Professor H.B. Kirk, and 'Historic Trees in New Zealand' by H.H. Allen, was nestled an intriguing article by F. Sydenham, titled 'Pen-Otara'.

This title referred to a property beside the Otara River, which is located a few kilometres to the east of Opotiki in the Eastern Bay of Plenty. The Otara River is a tributary of the Waioeka River, joining the latter near the centre of Opotiki. F. Sydenham, at the time he penned the story of Pen-Otara, was an assistant horticulturist at the Department of Agriculture, in Wellington.

Pen-Otara homestead was located on a small plateau beside the Otara River, and a probable site for it may be found by looking at Google Earth ($38^{\circ}04'48.05''$ S, $177^{\circ}22'02.55''$ E). In the Welsh and Cornish languages, 'Pen' refers to a hill or headland, hence the derivation of the name of the property. The plateau appears to have made up only a small part of the total property of 426 acres (172 hectares) at Pen-Otara.

The property was purchased by Mr and Mrs. T.M. Lewis around 1875. Mr Lewis carried on 'general farming operations' on his property. He was Vice-President of the local Acclimatisation Society and established a trout hatchery on his property, from which the local streams and rivers were stocked. More information about Mr Lewis may be found at <http://nzetc.victoria.ac.nz/tm/scholarly/tei-Cyc02Cycl-t1-body1-d3-d5-d27.html>

Pen-Otara was thought to have originally been a mission station, and by the time that the Lewis family settled there, a number of European trees were well established. One of these was a walnut, which the author of the article considered to have been planted no later than the 1850s. This leads on to an interesting paragraph in Sydenham's article:

“Within view of the walnut is a kauri, the top of which may be seen on Fig. 1. This specimen was a sapling beneath a larger tree that was felled and pit-sawn to provide material for the construction of the historic St. Stephen's Church in Opotiki. It is interesting to note that the kauri is rare in the Bay of Plenty.”

Kauri are generally recorded as not occurring south of 38 ° S and in Poole and Adams (1963) they are noted as occurring naturally from ‘North Cape to Maketu and Kawhia’. The particular large specimen, mentioned above as being felled and pit-sawn, is significantly further south than Maketu. It is also well south of the natural southern limit as illustrated in Steward and Beverage (2010). If it was large enough to be used to build a church in the early 1860s, it must have been of considerable bulk, however some sources describe the church as being built of rimu from Waioweka. Others describe the pit-sawn timber as coming from both the Waioweka and Otara valleys. So the actual source of the timber is unclear. Elizabeth and I paid a visit to the Otara Valley on 19 November 2016, and we were able to ascertain the probable site of Pen-Otara due to its location, as previously described, on a small plateau or headland, its proximity to the river, a stand of a large bamboo as described in the 1940 article, and last but not least, by the presence of a sizeable kauri, partly obscured by a rewarewa, on a nearby hillside (see photograph below). Note that this hillside area seemed to be largely clothed with indigenous vegetation, but with some pines also. We hope to return and investigate this area more closely. Discussions with a friend who grew up in the Otara Valley revealed that the author of the 1940 article, Frank Sydenham, was also born and grew up in this valley. As a

postscript, it is encouraging to think that, while Hitler's forces were over-running Europe, gardening journals were still being published!



A kauri tree, partly hidden by a rewarewa, on a hillside in the Otago Valley
Photo: N.C. Miller

References

Poole, A.L. & Adams, N.M. 1963. Trees and shrubs of New Zealand. Government Printer, Wellington.

Steward, G.A. And Beveridge, A.E. 2010. A review of New Zealand kauri (*Agathis australis* (D.Don) Lindl.): its ecology, history, growth and potential for management for timber. *NZ Journal of Forestry Science*. 40 (2010) 33-59.