

History of the Wellington Botanical Society

Recollections of some Foundation Members

Introduced and collated by Agnes Hutson
Wellington

When asked if I would write up a history of the Botanical Society (Bot. Soc.) I demurred, saying that I was not an original member and in fact was not a member until 1946. There were 51 people present at the inaugural meeting on 18 July 1939 so we thought that *they* could perhaps tell us about our beginnings as a Botanical Society.

After much searching, reading, writing, ringing people up and asking questions it soon became apparent that there would be only a handful of the original members left to tell their story, about where the idea/ideas came from for the formation of the Society and of its early activities. A circular letter was sent to all of the Foundation Members whose addresses were available.

My own early memories of the group are as follows. I had been able to attend the Tararua Tramping Club Botanical Circle for a short time by changing my tea hour on the appropriate Friday night. I am sure that I met some of the Foundation Members but can only recall Mr Beddie, Mavis Davidson, Max Roberts and a very enthusiastic lady member (who eventually became a Bot. Soc. Foundation Member, as I have found by reading our Minutes) who chided me for my pronunciation of "thelymitra" but that didn't squash my love of orchids!

My grateful thanks to those who have helped me in so many ways to trace our Foundation Members. A.H.

Durward, Miss M – Both Lady Corbet (Nee Lorimer) and I have written to Miss Durward but I have not received any information from her as requested.

Gibbons, Miss M (= Harrison) – was a student under Prof. Kirk. Like some of the others she has no very clear memories of how it all started. I have had several conversations with her on the phone. She has some very vivid recollections but not of the beginnings of the Bot. Soc.

Given, K – Wrote "As to how it started, I confess to being rather hazy as to whether this was promulgated through the Press, the 'grapevine' or whatever. Perhaps you may learn something of this from some of my contemporaries whom you have written to and are still living. I was saddened to learn that many are deceased.

I was brought up in Whangarei where I was introduced to the native flora, by my father. When, in 1937, my occupation took me to Wellington, I relished the prospect of seeking specimens from a lower latitude, but higher altitude. Consequently I joined the Tararua Tramping Club (TTC). The excursions with which, I found very rewarding. I would pluck specimens *en route*, and those I was unable to identify from my Cheeseman, would take to the Museum where Valerie Norman (I am sorry that she is deceased) proved most helpful. I recall well the Botany Circle members of TTC. On one occasion I went with Andrew Beddie on a tramp into the Mt Arthur Range, out of Nelson. . . My time with Wellington Botanical Society was brief, as I enlisted early in 1940 and did not return after the War.

Hunt, M E Miss (= Fisher) wrote – “My involvement came through belonging to the Botanical Circle of the Tararua Tramping Club. We used to meet once a month at the TTC Clubrooms – and what stimulating meetings they were – How I used to look forward to these meetings and that rich association with people as Andrew Beddie, Mavis Davidson, Ken Given, Mrs Martin and her sister Miss Neumann, Max Roberts, Miriel Mumby, Ruth Mason (whom I see from time to time) and Mr Zotov.

I have faint recollections of an announcement being made at one of the meetings that Dr Oliver felt it would be a good idea (and the time had now come) to form a Wellington Bot. Society – for one had already been formed in Auckland and was well attended. The nucleus was made up of members of the TTC Bot. Circle, but once the Wellington Bot. Society was formed it went from strength to strength. I would be most happy to write something about those early days with the Society. I have fond memories of same.”

Fifty years ago is a long time ago, but to the best of my ability I will endeavour to record what I believe led to the formation of the Wellington Botanical Society.

Auckland Botanical enthusiasts had already formed a Botanical Society – Oct. 1937 – news of the activities enjoyed by them kept filtering through to different ones in Wellington.

After all, the Botany Division DSIR was in Wellington at the time, so there were plenty of knowledgeable people to draw on; and, with Victoria University staff, getting suitable lectures shouldn't be difficult to find.

Those of us in the Tararua Tramping Club's botanical circle were proof that there would be sufficient interest to form a Society in Wellington.

So Dr Oliver took the initiative and provided a venue at the Dominion Museum and the Inaugural meeting was held on the 18th July 1939.

I have vivid recollections of Katie Reynolds (Pickmere) being at the meeting and she conveyed greetings to the assemblage from the now established Auckland Society. Also a few guidelines were outlined.

It was unfortunate that in less than three months the second world war broke out – thus restricting outings and of course some of the keenest members entered the armed forces.

In those early days I particularly remember Andrew Beddie and what an enthusiast he was! Furthermore, he owned a truck and so we were able to go on a few trips, bearing in mind there were petrol restrictions; petrol coupons were saved up to enable this to happen.

Above all, Andrew Beddie loved *Celmisias*, tussocks and plants of the montane sub-alpine region – plants which were my favourites then, and still are today. He grew a number of *Celmisias* in pots at his home in Petone, and I can remember a talk he gave on the subject and showed the different species, some of which were in flower – I was fascinated!

Although Otari was in its infancy at the time, it was always rewarding to go there. I still remember the collection of conifers at the front gate and seeing for the first time such species as *Agathis australis*, *Phyllocladus trichomanoides* and *Dacrydium kirkii* – to mention but a few.

One experience which will always remain with me was when I went on a trip to Mt Holdsworth. It was only a small party and Dr Oliver and Mrs Samson were on it.

Although what is to follow is more gastronomical than botanical, I feel it is worthy of note.

Slowly but surely we worked our way up through the beech which clothes the steep ridge – then into more open scrubland – and finally, the old mountain house.

It was pretty bleak and raining, so as soon as we got into the hut we got the fire going.

As usual we shared what we had to make a stew – although it wasn't very wonderful, at least it was hot.

Imagine my astonishment when our two senior members produced their sustenance – Dr Oliver climbed Mt Holdsworth on water and biscuits only and Mrs Samson's food consisted of a few dainty sandwiches which were packed neatly in a shoe box. To an old Tararuvian, it was a revelation!

Just one further happening in that first year: on the 17th-20th January 1940, the Society staged an exhibition at the Dominion Museum.

Perhaps it was the intention to follow along the lines of the Auckland Botanical Society's Spring Show – on Cheeseman's Show which incidentally was an annual event until 1961.

Anyway, resulting from that exhibition in 1940 is one of my most prized possessions – a copy of Dr Cockayne's book, "The Cultivation of New Zealand Plants" which was signed by Dr Oliver as President of the Society and presented to me for my display."

Hunt, M M Mrs (= Davidson) – wrote "My only real memory of the foundation meeting of the Bot. Soc. was seeing Ruth Mason for the first time – to become a lifelong friend, but at that time we had Bot. Div. DSIR in Wellington, and the strong TTC Bot. Circle with Miss Neumann and others so it was a natural progression I would think, to form a Botanical Society. Sorry to have been so little help, Agnes; I went into the Army at the end of 1942, and out of the picture for some years."

King, Miss D (= Stone) – Have had several telephone conversations with her, but she has no very clear memories of how it all started. She mentioned several of the Foundation Members.

Lannie, C wrote – "I am afraid my memory fails me to remember very much of those early days. I do remember this, at about that time there was a growing concern among the young staff at the Botanic Gardens to have some aid to help us, and to increase our knowledge "botanically". We found there was no organisation to help us in any way. Not even the NZ Institute of Horticulture had gatherings or meetings to assist us. (It is different now, of course, there is an apprenticeship course, and the young people are helped immensely.)

Jim Stirling was very vocal about these concerns; he was foreman at the Botanic Gardens at this time. Mrs Knox Gilmer was chairman of the Parks & Reserves Committee and of course G J McKenzie was Director of Parks & Reserves. Both were at the inaugural meeting.

I would not like to be adamant, but there could have been an approach from the Park's Department to Dr Oliver. Six of the Botanic Gardens' staff were at the inaugural meeting as well as Mrs Knox Gilmer and Mr J G McKenzie.

We held our evening meetings at the Dominion Museum. Our outings were Saturday afternoon. Not many cars in those days. We visited Days Bay, Eastbourne, Petone (Percy's Reserve), Tawa, Botanic Gardens, Otari Bush, etc.

Two Foundation Members' names I noticed, Mr D A McLaren, was a Botanic Garden staff member, who has now passed on. Mr H Muysers also on the Botanic Garden staff was Dutch. He was very knowledgeable and helped the

rest of the staff quite a lot. We heard later that he went on to become Curator of the Leydon Botanic Gardens, Holland. Probably retired by now, he married a Wellington lass."

Lorimer, Miss A E (= Lady Corbet) – "How good to have my memory stirred about the botanical society fifty years ago – no remembrance of the meeting has come to me but I knew Dr Oliver and his wife. . . I am still a personal friend of Marjorie Durward who has been in England for many years – now a retired educational psychologist. . . We are both of the opinion that our friendship with the two Lucies (Moore & Cranwell) would have stimulated our interest in the Society all these years ago."

Mason, Miss R – "I came to Wellington at the beginning of 1939 so I did not know many people there, nor was I known to many when the Wellington Botanical Society was founded and I have no recollection of how I heard of the inaugural meeting, but it was certainly through the Botany Division in some way. As I understood it Dr Oliver was the moving agent in founding the Society. He wished the Dominion Museum to run native flower shows similar to those held by the Auckland Museum, and a local society would be helpful in the same manner as the Auckland Botanical Society was. The Museum helped by providing rooms for meetings and to a certain extent with clerical work.

If the list of members at the inaugural meeting is scanned it is seen that: – two came from the University; six were from the Tararua Tramping Club which had a very active Botanical Circle; Mrs Martin and Mr Andrew Beddie were old associates of Dr Cockayne, and Miss Monica Neumann was both a sister of Mrs Martin and a member of the Tararua Tramping Club Botanical Circle; at least seven others would very likely be approached individually because of their occupations or well-known interest in native plants viz. Mr S Duncan, Mr W H Field, Mrs Knox Gilmer, Mrs R A Gower (a member of the Gibbons family), Mr W M Martin, Mr W A Scarfe and Mr J G Stirling; besides Dr Oliver a number of others, six I think, were either employed at the Dominion Museum or closely associated with those that were. This leaves only twenty others, but there is reason to believe that a few came into the "well-known" category or as friends of those mentioned. Thus notification of organisations likely to have interested members and personal contact could well account for the majority of those at the first meeting. But I have no idea how Mrs Samson knew of the meeting. Her interest in native plants was intense but fairly recent. She is remembered particularly for the enthusiasm with which she helped the Society by distributing seeds of native plants.

In 1939 of course not so many people owned cars and when petrol restrictions were imposed fairly early in the war their use became much restricted so that trips were mostly confined to those within walking distance of public transport. However, when the Dominion Museum held a Native Flower Show and Society members one weekend collected specimens from Mt Holdsworth – alas, without by-your-leave as I recollect – private transport was used. At one stage on the return journey Mr Beddie, who on occasion helped with the use of his little van used in his trade as a monumental mason, announced that he had seen a rod hanging down beneath the van before he started back, but had no idea what it was. I had the horrified thought "brake rod!" and our exceedingly smart descent of the Rimutaka Hill showed that indeed it was.

The earlier journals by the use of such inferior material as newsprint and the crowding of as much material as possible on the page, show the effect of the increasingly strict economy in the use of paper. I typed the stencils of a number

of Journals during tough times on one of His Majesty's written-off typewriters, and copies were run off at the Museum. Greta Cona drew many of the illustrations for the covers."

Mumby, Miss M (= Sinclair) wrote - "I contacted Francie Duguid whom I thought may be able to relate earlier activities of the Society. She was not a member but had close association with Lucy Moore and early field days in this area. . . . At the conclusion of one of our field trips around the Wellington Bays we were invited to look at Dr Oliver's garden in which the *Xeronema callistemon* was in flower. Quite a limelight! If I remember correctly, this flowering was the first for Dr Oliver's plant. The Field Day would have been one of our earliest. Sorry so little assistance." NB Our records show that Mrs Duguid joined our Society on 15.8.44 as a Country member and is still one. A.H. 1989.

Pickmere, Miss E K (= Reynolds) wrote - "I had helped Lucy Cranwell at Auckland Museum with the Annual Spring Show of Native Flowers, Cheeseman Memorial - for several years. I think they started in 1934 and grew into a very big - and wonderful - show. L M C thought it would be a very good idea to form an "Auckland Botanical Society" to help organise and run these shows and accordingly this was formed in 1937. Thus it was that when I was at (then) Dominion Museum in 1939 I discussed forming a similar organisation. Lucy Moore thought it was a good idea. She knew the Cheeseman Shows well and was a Foundation Member, Auckland Bot Soc. By this time Lucy B M had joined Botany Division with Dr H H Allan. Lucy thought it a good idea so I took it to Dr Oliver, who was enthusiastic. Dominion Museum had just run its first big show of Native Flowers, a very good one.

Bot. Soc. was started - get off to a good beginning. At that time there were several dedicated, enthusiastic people at the Museum - let's us hope that it will always be so! - and Botany had encouragement from all other Departments. The Bot. Soc. grew - ran meetings and outings to further knowledge and produced newsletters - then good bulletins. . . . The professional botanists contribute enormously, helping to make the societies really worthwhile, sharing and increasing the knowledge and, not infrequently, starting the footsteps of the young in the right direction. I can say with pride that a long lifetime friendship with the two Lucys (Dr Lucy B Moore and Dr Lucy Cranwell-Smith) has greatly enriched my life, and has led to other worthwhile friendships. I should say that 80% of my friends are botanists. This must have happened to other people like me, and this makes OUR Botanical Societies really worthwhile. The diaries I wrote during my years in Wellington unfortunately were discarded during two moves (house)."

Poole, A L - Background to the Formation of the Wellington Botanical Society 18 July 1939

"At the time Wellington was the major stronghold of Botany in New Zealand. At the forefront of this strength was the Botany Division DSIR, that was just being built up and had been moved from Palmerston North to Wellington. H H Allan, the Director, and Lucy B Moore had close links back to Leonard Cockayne who had been the greatest influence of anybody on NZ botany. He especially had greatly influenced Wellingtonians in their botanical leanings. He persuaded the city to set up Otari, and carried out important ecological work for the Departments of Agriculture and Lands and Survey and the State Forest Service. When he died, Lord Bledisloe gave a public oration on the man and his work. No doubt Cockayne's influence on the Wellington scene decided DSIR to move the Botany Division there.

The Director of the Dominion Museum, W R B Oliver, was also a keen and

able field botanist and an influence in the Wellington botanical scene. Professor Kirk had a strong School of Botany at Victoria University College. The Wellington Botanic Gardens had several trainees anxious to pursue their field botany. There was a strong contingent of amateur botanists, including people like Andrew Beddie and Mrs Sampson. They had originally been stimulated by Cockayne and the setting up of Otari.

Wellington provided an excellent setting for both professional and amateur field botany. The Botanic Gardens and Otari were almost in the heart of the city, the Tararua and Rimutaka Ranges were not far away. They had both forest and alpine vegetation. The coastline was exceptionally interesting. South Island alpine vegetation was just over the Straits. The place was made for field botany.

Tramping organisations had become very strong and they contained many people who wanted to know about the plants they walked through.

With people at the ready, and a fine setting, it only needed somebody with the energy to call a meeting for the society to start."

Salmon, J T (Prof.) wrote - "The idea of forming a botanical society in Wellington had been talked about among the scientific fraternity for quite some time and the initiative to form the Wellington Botanical Society was taken as I recall, by Dr W R B Oliver and Mr W H Field. Mr Field, was I think the MP for Otaki at that time and a keen amateur naturalist. I think Lucy Moore played an active part in the Society's formation; she was certainly a keen member up till Botany Division moved to Lincoln. I was personally invited by Dr Oliver to become a member and I think all those present were invited there in the same way. I cannot recall any circular or other written document.

At first the Society was very active; there were several very good lectures and a number of outings to places such as Wilton Bush, Johnston Hill, Butterfly Creek, Khandallah Reserve and Mrs Knox Gilmer's garden at Te Marua. These were well attended and I can remember many of the people who were early members. After its formation the Society enrolled many more members including a number of junior members. Meetings were held in the Dominion Museum."

Self, Miss P (= MacFarlane) wrote - "When I started part-time work at the Museum in 1938 Shirley Donne was in charge (temporarily, I think), in the Botanical Section. In those days it was the custom to mount "Plant Shows" and we had great collecting expeditions to Mt Holdsworth, etc. when other people interested in native plants would also help. I recall one occasion when Shirley and I travelled in the back of Mr Beddie's truck (he was a monumental mason!) and all the way over the Rimutaka Hill we seemed to straddle the middle line and just hoped we wouldn't meet another vehicle doing the same thing.

After Shirley Donne left to work at the Wallaceville Veterinary Laboratories, Katie Pickmere came - she was a Whangarei person always interested and knowledgeable about native plants and knew Lucy Cranwell, botanist at the Auckland Museum. I rather think that Lucy Moore and Ruth Mason, who were then at DSIR (Bot. Div.) with Dr Allan, had come from Auckland and am pretty sure the idea of a Bot. Soc. came from Lucy and Katie. . . Val Norman and Diana King also worked at the Dominion Museum and Miss Mulholland was typist there. John Salmon was Entomologist at the Museum at that time and I suppose word spreads quickly to interested people,

Ken Given was a keen trumper with Tararua Tramping Club.

Mr J G Stirling was Head Gardener at Wellington Botanic Gardens.

Vic Zotov probably worked at DSIR.

Dear old Prof. Kirk and Dr Newman were at Victoria University, and so on."