

Medicinal waters of Wairongoa Springs

In late June two carloads drove out to Wairongoa Springs, which is nestled up by the hills on the north west side of the Taieri Plains. There we were greeted cordially by our host and guide, Austen Banks. He told us that the Maori name for the area translates as 'medicine water', after the carbonated mineral springs there, which were the basis for the Thomson bottled drinks empire and presumably one reason that John Scott Thomson could afford to spend so much time collecting lichens in the 1930s. The main Thomson family home was further out on the plains, but one of John's bachelor brothers had a passion for planting trees and had established a very eclectic collection around the springs in the first half of last century.

On the upper slopes were tall wattles and larches, with an understorey of native vegetation, predominantly mahoe, *Melicytus ramiflorus* and *Pittosporum tenuifolium*, with a ground cover of ferns such as *Asplenium bulbiferum* and hound's tongue, *Microsorium pustulatum*. A patch of delicate *Blechnum chambersii* fern was thriving under an overhang, near some planted large-leaved rangiora, *Brachyglottis repandra* and healthy *Coprosma grandifolia*. Below the spring was a row of now magnificent red beech, *Nothofagus fusca*, with no sign of regeneration underneath. Lower still were slower growing rimu, *Dacrydium cupressinum*, amidst a large grove of kauri, *Agathis australis*, which were planted in the 1950's. Some of these kauri trees looked to be over 50 feet tall - a rather surprising rate of growth for so far south. Is this more evidence for global warming, or just a very favourable microclimate? The microclimate on the sheltered, northerly slope above the kauri grove is such that figs and lemons flourish by the homestead, where we were shown the window of the bedroom that actor Sam Neill occupied in his younger days.

The water from the spring was surprisingly delicious and refreshing and bubbled pleasantly in the tongue. It was even better with a dash of whiskey provided by our generous host. The spring rose deep in the plantation, and had none of the chill of the surface water. It was a surprise to come across the rather mausoleum-like brick tower, which had been built to protect the source from vandals, looming up out of the trees. Also looking mysterious and incongruous now in odd patches among all the trees were the crumbling stone arches of an old fernery and the remains of two very ornate fountains, their elegant swans and curling metal flowers now wetted only by the rain. We were shown the remains of the collecting tank for the spring water, where a complicated system of pulleys kept a lid over the surface so the bubbles would not escape before bottling. Also the bottling shed, now doing service as a storage and wool shed, with some of the old wooden Thomson cordial crates now acting as shelf-supports.

Footnote

The 1908 Year Book contains an entry on Mineral Waters in New Zealand by Arthur S Wohlman MD (Lond), Government Balneologist. He mentions Wairongoa Springs as a source of drinkable mineral water and classifies it as a "Calcareous or Earth Water" with 165.75 ppm of solids "together with a large excess of carbonic gas which is bottled with the water". He goes on to state that "... so strongly mineralised as to justify the title of "medicinal".