

2000-year-old tree in centre of town

New Plymouth has a tree that is both historic and invisible — in the sense that it is difficult to see.

If you are in the city branch of the Taranaki Savings Bank dealing with a teller on the right-hand side, look left to the rear courtyard. You may see the gnarled roots of an old tree.

It is a puriri with claims to being the sole survivor of the bush that covered central New Plymouth when the first of the 1841 settlers arrived.

As a specimen of the puriris that flourished — and still flourish — around the city, this tree is puny beside the 2000-year-old giant of Brooklands.

That is the way of puriris; they do not grow as kauris do, in erect form like well-drilled soldiers. The puriri is wayward, often with gnarled roots and twisted trunks.

Wind and erosion may topple puriris but they will grow again, rooting where boughs touch the soil. Small wonder the tree is called the New Zealand oak. Indomitable is the word.

In 1958, when the extension of the savings bank required demolition of the adjoining gas

Of people and places —

By Brian Scanlan

company building, Devon St shoppers were stopped in their stride by the view of a large puriri at the back of the section.

It is still owned by the Taranaki Women's Club; it is not "protected" by the city council, but its history gives it unofficial immunity.

John Veale, who arrived with his family in the Amelia Thompson on September 3, 1841, was present for the first drawing (or ballot) for quarter-acre sections in the centre of the town.

He drew three Devon St sections, 663-665 and later acquired section 678, backing on to 664. His daughter Prudence married Thomas Kingwell Skinner snr and became owner of No 678. This is where the Taranaki Women's Club now stands.

Well known

In brief, this property fronting on to Powderham St remained in the family for more than a century so that its history became well known to the brothers, W. H. and T. K. Skinner. They firmly believed that the puriri at the bottom of the garden formed part of the original forest in New Plymouth.

It is appropriate that such a tree (*Vitex lucens*) should have this honour. Many authorities declare the southernmost limit of the puriri is the Waikato. In fact, the coastal strip of North Taranaki is famous for them.

First, there is the giant Brooklands tree. Seventy-years ago, writer and tree-lover Sir Rider Haggard declared it to be at least 2000 years old. It was more than guesswork, apparently based upon a study of the growth rings of another puriri.

In 1969, S. W. Burstall, commissioned by the Forestry Department to measure and record large and rare trees, declared it to be the largest seen in any New Zealand city and one of the best of its species.

This tree is no freak of nature. In the neighbouring bush there are at least 20 other puriris probably aged be-

tween 1000 and 2000 years.

It may be asked why in this antique company there are no large rimus. The answer seems to be that the building demands of infant New Plymouth were met by the felling of Brookland's large rimus. The remains of a sawpit are still visible near the main pathway.

The large puriris' survival was not due to uselessness. Indeed, a mature puriri produces one of the hardest and most durable timbers known to man, second only to the *Lignum vitae* of the West Indies. It was invaluable for bridges, railway sleepers, and building piles.

It could be fashioned

into bearings for waterwheels, lubricated only by water.

Local folklore says that puriri logs from Ratahipihi, now a beautiful reserve a short distance south of New Plymouth, were used in the construction of the first bridges across the Wanganui and Patea rivers.

The problem of the puriri is that while it is tough and hard it has an irregular grain. Difficult to work in the mass-production methods of today, it has become rare. But with a finished appearance comparable with American or Italian walnut, it was popular with furniture-makers 60 to 80 years ago.

For years the timber has been sought as old bridges have been replaced or demolished. The well known castle-like residence of the late C.A. Wilkinson above

Wai-iti Beach, Pukearuhe, has puriri framing, the huge hand-hewn beams giving a massive solidity to the structure.

Contrast

Appropriately, Devon Mall features two young puriris. With their graceful appearance, small pink flowers and ripening berries, they contrast with a huge, old misshapen puriri near Brooklands Bowl described by Burstall as an enormous malformed tree of national interest.

Such a tree cannot be conquered by the northern rata. There is photographic evidence of a puriri tree severing the strong enveloping arms of the rata.

Not surprisingly, according to Thomas King, the old-time Maori climbing steep Paritutu relied on pegs of puriri driven into crevices in the rock.



Believed to be the sole survivor of central New Plymouth's original bush. This puriri, with its gnarled roots, is at the rear of the Taranaki Women's club in Powderham St. Foreground is the wall of the Taranaki Savings Bank's courtyard.