

The Recreation Grounds Maze

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Did you know that at one time Pukekura Park had a maze? In fact the maze existed during the last decade of the nineteenth century, to be precise. It was the idea and brainchild of New Plymouth local Mr Archibald Hood who approached the Recreation Grounds Board and put forward his idea.

As reported in the 5 September 1892 edition of the Taranaki Herald on page 2: "Mr Hood waited on the Board and submitted a plan for a 'maze', which he and others proposed to set in the Grounds. The Board accepted the suggestion, and decided to offer Mr Hood and those interested every facility to carry the idea into execution."

By the following month things had moved along and were obviously ready to go. The October 6 1892 Taranaki Herald printing the following: "It will be remembered that some time ago Mr A. Hood interested himself in making 'a maze', an intricate walk formed by planting a hedge in a coil shape, in the Recreation Grounds. Permission was obtained from the Recreation Grounds Board to carry out the work, and Mr Hood soon set to work to accomplish the project. Under Mr Hood's supervision 'a maze' of box thorn (between 3,000 and 4,000 roots being used) has been made towards the head of the gully above the lakelet. In a few years this work should prove an especial attraction to the grounds."

The mind boggles somewhat at the thought of a maze being formed using box thorn, *Lycium ferocissimum*, and in such numbers as 3,000 to 4,000 roots or plants. It would have been formidably prickly and ferocious as the species name of this plant, 'ferocissimum', would surely imply, with box thorn being one of the prickliest hedging plants imaginable. The Taranaki Herald newspaper on 23 May 1893 suggests that the hedges must have established quickly: "The 'maze' that has been formed at the southern end of the reserve will, in the course of a couple of years, be one of the attractions of the place, as the box thorn hedges are growing vigorously." Interestingly, in the same newspaper article mention is made about the formation of a new 'lakelet', which is a reference to the lake that we know of today as Fountain Lake.

Obviously having a feature such as a maze has costs associated with it and a report in the Taranaki Herald dated 4 December 1893, about a meeting of the Recreation Grounds Board, says: "Mr C. Edgecombe's account, £3/3 for labour at the maze was passed for payment. The Board resolved that no further expenses in connection with the maze be incurred for six months." (Mr C Edgecombe was the custodian for the park at the time.)

In order to help the board with the costs involved with the maze, Mr Hood took it upon himself to help out by writing a story for sale to raise money for upkeep of the maze, which is noted in the Taranaki Herald on August 9 1894: "Mr A Hood has now in press a novelette, entitled 'Johnny Fro, a fairy tale with a tragical wind up in New Plymouth Recreation Grounds,' which will be published shortly." On October 15 1894, Mr Hood's story was advertised in the Taranaki Herald: "To the Public. To assist in partially recouping outlay connected with the Maze in the Recreation Ground, the local Fairy Tale of Johnny Fro is now being sold by the publisher (Mr T Avery) and others in the trade, at the very moderate charge of Sixpence. Freely should this entire price forgo, the tale to buy of Johnny Fro and those its worth deem cost amends, may further buy to post to friends."

On 3 December 1894 had the Taranaki Herald publishing this: "JOHNNY FRO; A FAIRY TALE. We have received from the author, Mr A Hood, a little book bearing the title of 'Johnny Fro; a fairy tale with a tragical wind up in the New Plymouth Recreation Ground'. The tale is supposed to have emanated for the brain of a 'sixth standard boy', just recovering from 'some sort of fever' which had been the means of laying him up for a fortnight. Johnny Fro finds himself in the Rec 'one clear night' and whilst leaning over the rail of the Poet's Bridge, thinking of nothing in particular, he sees a young lady with a horse, who introduces herself as Marimmemonia Breenge. She asks Johnny to look after her horse whilst she goes on an errand, which he does, and on her return sees the young lady safely off. On going home Johnny finds himself surrounded by fairies, who describe themselves: 'We are folks jolly, who scorn melancholy, and never a wrangle e'er causes a strike. Ay! we are the fairies controlling the

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dairies, and turn from the churn any butter we like'. After such a night as he had with the 'wee people' it is not surprising to find that Johnny found himself in bed next morning, but being of adventurous disposition we are told he got up and dressed himself and was soon ready to seek fresh novelties. He again meets Miss Marimmemonia, who tells him her father is 'going to put her up to the highest bidder for her hand'. Johnny, who had got quite smitten with the young lady, determined to secure her, and with the assistance of the fairies lays down before the girl's father gold enough for the purpose. Johnny and his sweetheart find themselves together again in the 'Rec' and Miss Marimmemonia suggests they should be married in 'the Maze'. A rival claimant for the girl's hand appears, but the fairies soon settle his claim by turning him into an islet, which goes by the name of Novey-yea, even to this very day. The purport of this little book – to draw attention to 'the Maze' in the Recreation Grounds, which Mr A Hood has taken a great interest in – and the revenue derived from the sale of the brochure will go towards recouping the author for the very great outlay he has taken in connection with the maze. The book is to be obtained from all good booksellers, and we hope soon to hear that the edition is out of print."

However towards the end of 1895 things in relation to the maze were starting to become complicated. In the 9 November 1895 letters to the editor: "An appeal for the Maze: To the Editor. Sir, seeing in your column an appeal for assistance to maintain the maze at the Recreation Grounds from Mr A. Hood, I sincerely hope the public will cheerfully respond, and enable Mr Hood to complete the task he has undertaken to keep the maze in order until sufficient growth is obtained, and it is fit to hand over to the Recreation Board, when, no doubt, it will be a source of revenue to them and endless amusement to the public. Hitherto Mr Hood has done the work of weeding, trimming and keeping in order personally, but failing health prevents him from further exertions of this nature and it now becomes the question whether a little timely assistance from the public will allow us to have a maze in our beautiful grounds or merely an overgrown mass of weeds, I am, G. W. Browne." In the December 7 1895 edition of the Taranaki Herald, it shows: "Mr A Hood wrote, informing the board that owing to illness he reluctantly compelled to hand over the further conservation of the maze. The Board decided, that the thanks of the Board be tendered to Mr A Hood for his past services and labour in planting and the attention to the maze, and the Board regret that, owing to illness he is unable to render any further assistance." In the same paper in the advertisements column: "We are asked to state that Mr Austin has been employed today (Saturday) by Mr G. W. Browne to continue the work of putting the maze in the Recreation Grounds in order. On Monday he will be employed by Mr R. Bayley and as it will still take some five or six days to complete the work, Mr E. Humphries will be glad to receive the names of others who are willing to contribute." In the 11 December 1895 Taranaki Herald it says: "Mr H.F. Knight has employed Mr Austen at the maze in the Recreation Grounds today. At least three or four more days work is required to finish the job and unless someone rolls up this evening Mr Austen will have to do the work on 'spec' tomorrow."

It would appear that despite all the efforts, mentioned above, to keep the maze going it probably all became too difficult to find and fund labour because as the Taranaki Herald 11 August 1900 indicates, the maze was obviously no more: "The custodian reported that a good deal of planting had been carried out during the month, 200 native trees being put down around the site of the old maze."

So where was the maze situated within the park? It was actually situated roughly where Rhododendron Dell is now and it is specifically mentioned in reply to correspondence that took place between a local resident and the Board via letters to the editor relating to the extension of the main lake.

On January 27 1908 it is reported in the Taranaki Herald that there are plans to extend the main lake: "During the past few weeks a notable transformation has been effected by the Pukekura Park Board. Some little time ago the Board had placed at its disposal a sum of £300 through the large-heartedness of members of a well known local family, and it was decided that this very acceptable sum should be devoted to a permanent improvement in the form of an extension to the large lake. Plans were prepared by Mr S. Percy Smith, F.R.G.S., and under this gentleman's supervision the work has been successfully carried out." The completion of this project obviously piqued the interest of a local resident, who commended the Board on this project via a letter to the editor in the January 29 1908 Taranaki Herald: "(To the Editor) Sir, after reading your description of the work approaching completion in the park, I thought that as some time had elapsed since my last visit I could not do better than have a stroll round and see what the Board have been doing. As you say, a very striking improvement has been effected, and the extension of the large lake will add greatly to the beauty of the already lovely domain. It is evident that whoever laid out the new work is a master in his art and that the Board is most fortunate in its advisers. But I

hope matters will not be permitted to stand still, for there is much to be done to give a finish to this new piece of water. There is a good deal of work needed in the way of finish to this new piece of water. There is a good deal of work needed in the way of lowering, grading and otherwise improving the paths which run round it, and beautiful effects may be produced by the judicious planting of its banks with flowers and shrubs. Then, too, there is one spot near the upper end of the lake, which appears to have been created specially as the site for a bridge like the one we used all to be familiar with on the willow pattern plate. Such a bridge would be quite a unique and fitting embellishment and I commend the idea to the Board's consideration – I am, etc X.Y.Z.”

The Board chairman Mr Corkill replied to the correspondent's letter in the Taranaki Herald dated January 30 1908 and clearly references the location of the maze: “(To the Editor) Sir, - The appreciative remarks of your correspondent, 'X Y Z,' are gratefully noted. The Board is doing its best with the means at its disposal to maintain the park, as the finest domain in the Dominion, but unfortunately financial considerations prevent us from carrying out our friend's suggestions and a good many other improvements which we have in view. The windfall which we had to expend was £200 – not £300 as the Herald had it a few days ago – and this has all gone now, and we are nearly up to the overdraft limit which the Bank allows us on the personal guarantee of certain of the Trustees. If some good soul will give us the 'willow-pattern' bridge, or the means to build it, we will gladly reserve for him a line on the open page of the book of Deceased Benefactors. The same distinction awaits the public-spirited citizen (or citizeness) who will give us £25 for the purpose of lowering the path round the extension of the lake and depositing the soil where the maze used to be. We want to lay out a beautiful garden there, and that swamp stuff will make an ideal mould for growing flowers and flowering shrubs. I shall be very pleased to tell any liberally minded friends of other directions in which spare cash can be advantageously laid out for the public weal– I am etc., F P Corkill, Chairman, Board of Trustees January 29th 1908.”



Photo Derek Hughes

Rhododendron Dell - imagine this full of box thorn!