

# Keirunga Gardens

## A Glimpse into the Past

People will not look forward to prosperity,  
who never look back to their ancestors  
(Edmund Burke – 1729-1797)



The Keirunga Gardens Arts & Crafts Society Inc. who are the present “residents” of Keirunga Home-stead and surrounding buildings, have been preceded by only three other residential “ancestors” - Reginald Gardiner, Charles Tanner and George Nelson, the first named having been an intellectual, Charles Tanner a gentleman of leisure in his Keirunga days, and George Nelson,

an engineer, and who gifted the property to the local Borough Council in 1957. The pattern of their pursuits is appropriate, for the Keirunga Gardens Arts & Crafts Society encourages both the use of intellectual and physical skills in the members’ leisure time.

This leaflet takes a peep through the window of George Nelson and his wife Elizabeth’s Keirunga world to see what it was like just before the middle of the last century. Mr. Nelson was a plant lover, meticulous and thrifty. Writing to a friend he said: “What would the world be like without trees? No better than a house without furniture.” Amongst George Nelson’s favourite items of “furniture” were the “twin oaks” standing at



The twin oaks

the top of a gully to the west of the Live Steamers station; beneath the twin trees is a rustic seat.

The car park is the site of the former vegetable garden and its associated jumbo-sized compost heap, a garden where grew the biggest carrots in the Bay, says Les Jardine, as well as Mr. Nelson's favourite kumi kumi. The garden was backed by a buddleia hedge, and fronted by a line of feijoa bushes, the first young Les had seen.

Moving down to the present courtyard, old faithfuls still to be seen on the western side are the gnarled pepper trees, under which cinerarias once grew, a cherry tree, and by the back door of the Homestead, the old camellia, probably a seedling. At the western end of the Homestead are the purple-flowered Lasiandras from Brazil, Les Jardine's favourites. Elizabeth Nelson's favourite may have been the big orangey-red-flowered gum tree at the other end of the house, for it was a frequent subject of her paintings. Elizabeth's niece, Lois Dolbel (born McBride), remembers pictures of the tree were regular family gifts at Christmas time and on birthdays. An initialled survivor of this family of tree portraits still hangs in a corner of the Homestead.

Down the bank above Pufflett Road and just to the south of the red gum is an old plum tree, whose fruit ripened at Christmas time when "birds ate them by the million", and close by are the terraces contained by George Nelson's beloved stone walls. Lois Dolbel recalls the lower terrace beds being built to such a height that violets grown therein could be picked without stooping.



George Nelson

Stock were never allowed at Keirunga, not only because of the danger to young trees, but also to the stone walls. "I don't know how [they] would stand up to the attentions of sheep," wrote Mr. Nelson, "it might be necessary to protect them with a covering of wire netting of a smaller mesh than sheep netting."

Perhaps the best remembered feature in the Homestead area is the yellow banksia rose that scrambled along the verandah, growing so wide in the mid-1940s that Les Jardine was anchored by a rope held by George Nelson as he leant out to

prune it. A clump of this rose remains in the north-east corner, close to the melia tree, parent of many of those now growing in the Village – at one time the ground under the tree was liberally watered, encouraging the golden-green bead-like berries to germinate the seedlings.

Below the sweep of the front lawn, reminders of the past are the grapefruit trees, the crouching figure of the old fig tree, remnants of a sweet-scented “garden of repose” purportedly planned by Elizabeth Nelson, wintersweet and lemon-scented verbena, and in the north-eastern corner the big loquat tree.

In his engineering life, George Nelson appears to have had affinity with water, being associated with flood control and hydro-electric schemes, and from the front lawn the main gardens seem to cascade down past “Reginald Gardiner’s cypress“, planted by the Homestead’s first owner at the beginning of the last century, to the northern end of Pufflett Road. This brings us close to the gully running towards Tanner Street, below the cemetery, and the scene of George Nelson’s “unfinished business” at the time of his death.

The main part of this gully was to be his “Rhododendron Dell”, and though this ambition was not achieved in his lifetime, in 1995 the Hastings District Council, present administrators of the Gardens, planted a wide variety of rhododendrons in this area, with further plantings in 1997.

Keirunga Gardens, is the home of the Keirunga Gardens Arts & Crafts Society Inc, and the Havelock North Live Steamers, thus giving comfort and pleasure to the Society’s 400 odd members – painters, potters, spinners, weavers and their like – but also to young and old trundling along the railway tracks, or walking the dog along the several pathways.



An earlier sketch of the “Chalet”, since refurbished by the Keirunga Quilters, and renamed the “Quilters Quarter“.

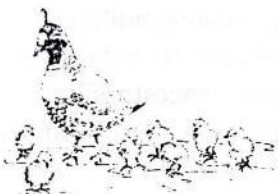


Elizabeth Nelson

Elizabeth Nelson had an absorbing interest in gardening, painting and poetry; her verse revealing the origin of the twin oaks:

A man's green fingers stole acorns  
From beneath St. Luke's oak tree  
And in the garden planted them  
As cosy as can be.

Mrs. Nelson also had an affinity with the garden's birds, naming song thrushes she'd tamed, Pavlova, Chirpy and Selina, and once recording that



While weeding down the catmint way  
Some little quail ran over my legs at play

Returning to Mr. Nelson's meticulousness, a good example can be found in a letter telling of his battle with tall fescue (a grassy weed growing in clumps like a small toetoe):

If the plant is already mature, I have first stripped [the seed] with a sickle; putting the proceeds into a bag to be...destroyed. When "chipped" the plant tends to stand up...[and] liable to take root again, so care should be taken to see that the plant is not left standing up.

Of Mr. Nelson's thriftiness, one-time gardener Les Jardine remembers the sawhorse being marked so wood for the house could be cut in precise 18 inch lengths, for the longer pieces would not fit in the fire, and shorter were a waste of the gardener's time. Mr. Nelson was still wearing his 1915 boots when Les left in 1949.

Thrifty with minor details, his ideas for the garden were far-sighted and expansive, for example, the gum trees below the eastern side of the present car park were planted specifically to attract tuis, who now hold regular winter concerts, chortling collectively amongst the red blossoms.