



## Historical homestead “Oruawharo”

Dianne and Peter Harris never have any trouble directing visitors to their home. “Turn down Oruawharo Road and you can’t miss us”, the often misleading reassurance this time proves true. Even on the Takapau Plains’ big landscape, 12 bedrooms’ worth of two-storeyed colonial grandeur can not be overlooked.

The glimpse of Victorian and Edwardian society leaders, red-coated hunting parties, or horses and carriages that once greeted visitors approaching Oruawharo Homestead along the treed driveway has long-gone, but true to its historic tradition, the 150-year-old house is still offering hospitality.

If they called to tea today, those gracious ladies and their partners would find proceedings little different from those they knew. Group booking for tea are served on the veranda or in the formal dining room, the tables are laid with fine china and silver, linen napery, and there is a selection of teas, all blended especially for Oruawharo (and available for purchase in attractive canisters).

And Dianne follows the pattern of her predecessors, preparing a selection of delicate sandwiches, scones and cakes to serve on pretty tiered stands.

She and Peter have also opened Oruawharo as a wedding venue. Having received the first of what became many requests even before they moved in, they have made special provision for catering, so people can enjoy Oruawharo’s romantic atmosphere for both ceremony and reception.







Neither teas nor weddings were on the agenda when the Harrises bought Oruawhoro in 2000. They simply wanted more space than at their Devonport home and a new project as Peter bowed out of a highflying career in imaging technology.

**"It was to be our retirement folly, a hobby where we could take off to the Pacific for winter,"**

Not much of that – the past few years have been dawn-to-dusk work, but there are no regrets.

"It's completely do-able and if we get it right, the property has a feasible lifespan of 1000 years yet," he says.

Perhaps though they think longingly of the 12 house staff and eight gardeners who lived-in during the original owners' day. The disappearance of the staff wing is almost the only change Sydney and Sophia-Johnston would notice today.

They completed Oruawhoro in 1879, having added to an earlier homestead built by Sydney's father. The hub of a 27000-acre station, it also recreated England's gentry world. By the early 1900s they had added a billiards room, more bedrooms, and the English-style parkland around the house was flourishing.

Their constant house parties played tennis, croquet, and picnicked, in winter the hunt was entertained with the traditional lavish breakfast and tea. Taking a lead from English manorial villages, part of the property was used to establish Takapau and the Johnstons became ongoing benefactors to the town.

Oruawhoro also took part in national life, a World War I territorial army camp there witnessed the birth of the lemon-squeezer, and as a vice regal holiday retreat while the Johnstons made regular trips 'home', many a titled lady and gentleman stayed.

Apart from a four-year interlude in the 1960s when the Catholic Church was gifted it by the then owner, Oruawhoro

has been in family hands its entire life. Not always occupied however, after a personal tragedy in 1953, the family lost heart and a long period of neglect began.

Beyond the scope of the Church to maintain, Oruawhoro was repurchased by a family trust in 1970. Idle or tenanted, and subject of two protracted legal wrangles, it limped through the next 30 years, so when the Harrises bought it, it was "hugely derelict", but fortunately in original condition structurally.

"The timber was solid and we've done virtually nothing apart from clean up," Peter says. Nothing obvious although a small fortune has gone into invisibles – new water and sewage systems, underground power and telephone cables, relining chimneys – a brick-by-brick process still incomplete – Oruawhoro has 23 fireplaces.

But most of the work has been on the grounds. With truckloads of overgrown plants cleared, an old-fashioned vegetable garden thrives overlooked by a spruced-up original shed, there is a huge







new peony bed, a vineyard, citrus and olive groves. Masses of daffodils will soon flower beneath the old trees and on the hill behind the house, the woodland is almost returned to rightful state.

So too are the farm buildings – “restored but not over-restored”, an implement shed, abandoned on its side, has been resurrected, and with the efforts of a German craftsman joiner, one of several WOOFERs who have helped over the years, the coach house is ready for another century.

Looking ahead, Peter and Dianne are planting oaks and hazelnuts for a truffiere, a longterm project to pass on to their three daughters, all now pursuing careers.



Diane Harris serving tea at Oruawharo Homestead, Takapau, owned and operated by Diane & Peter Harris.

