

# For Ken's a jolly good fellow!



**A**t a recent meeting of the Rotary Club of Havelock North, Ken Kiddle, who has been a member of the Club for 35 years, was made a Paul Harris Fellow - one of the most prestigious awards to be given within the Rotary movement. He was taken by surprise at the announcement and had to borrow a tie from fellow Rotarian, Ian Abernethy, before receiving the award! Ken (pictured here with Rotary President, Max Baty) modestly told us that he couldn't say he'd made a major contribution to Rotary, but the award made more sense when he read the inscription on the presentation certificate: *...for tangible and significant assistance given for the furtherance of better understanding and friendly relations among the peoples of the world.* In his role as chairman and deputy chairman of the Apple and Pear Board, Ken travelled the world - in search of new markets, consolidating existing markets and always keeping New Zealand growers' interests in mind. He has a string of honours to his name - including a CMG - but Ken is an unassuming kind of man who downplays his achievements, is always ready with a witty response and who confesses that after decades of orcharding, he still loves apples....

That Ken and his wife Marion should become orchardists was by no means a predetermined fate. Ken, with a Masters degree in chemistry, was an industrial chemist in Christchurch, whilst Marion, with her Masters in Zoology was a lecturer at Canterbury University before the wheels of fortune spun them in the direction of Hawke's Bay. Being ensconced in the world of industry was light years away from life on the land, but Ken's early career stood him in excellent stead in latter years.

"I was a chemist with Fletcher Industries at their plywood plant to start off with before I had a philosophical disagreement with them over a policy matter," explains Ken. "They put off a lot of staff with very little notice and I didn't like that, so I got a job at a commercial cleaners - training staff, mainly. All very useful background stuff, really. But I believed that

if I was going to teach people what to do, then I'd better know what I was talking about so I also worked as a cleaner in hospital wards and cleaned windows." (Just as an aside, Ken, what is the best way to clean windows? "Get somebody else to do them for you!" he quipped. "But screwed up newspaper, slightly damp, is pretty good...")

During these years in Christchurch, Ken and Marion built themselves a house - literally - and Ken recalls the way his 1927 Buick Tourer carted 17 tons of cement up the Huntsbury Hill - not to mention the slate for the chimney!

## A lot of commonsense

However, there came a time when Ken was sick and tired of working for other people and he decided he wanted to be his own boss - it was 1956. "I didn't like people telling me what to do," he explains. "So we picked on orcharding and we chose Hawke's Bay because I looked around New Zealand and decided that the houses and cars the orchardists had here were the best! But we knew nothing about orchards and learnt all we needed to know in those early days from books, neighbours and commonsense, says Ken."

The Kiddles bought a property on the corner of River Road and Waimarama Road (now known as *Cross Roads Orchard*) where some of the trees had been planted in 1908 by a Mr Bray. "Some of them are still fruiting today - the Bon Chretien pears still go into Watties for processing."

The support Ken and Marion received from their neighbours was nothing short of wonderful and Ken bemoans the demise of such sharing of goodwill today.

"It's one of the tragedies of our time

that people are not so good at sharing their knowledge. There is not the closeness we had back in those early days of orcharding," reflects Ken. But no amount of neighbourly-ness

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could shield the Kiddles from one of the inevitabilities of orcharding - hail.

"In our first year, we had the worst hail I can remember - we only sent half of our crop in that season." To make ends meet, Ken worked in a bakery at night, and sorted spuds for Watties in the fields!

But, always after a new challenge, Ken's friendship with the late Doctor Don McKenzie of Havelock North got him involved in the growing of new varieties, and in trialling different methods of growing.

"Don and I planted up the first Gala apples in the district and we were the first to go into semi-intensive growing using Don's centre-leader growing system. That system changed

the face of apple production in New Zealand and variations of it are still used today," says Ken, adding that the Gala apple was, and still is, a real asset to the fruit-growing industry.

"It was developed by Mr Kidd in Greytown and he gave the crosses to the research orchard. Dr Don thought it had good export potential and we named it up at my place in Waimarama Road over a pie one day at lunch. We decided on the name Gala because it had a nice sound!" says Ken, and later, he and Don patented the sports, Regal Gala and Galaxy Gala. "Gala's been good for the industry - it was one of the apple varieties that saved it. In 1974, the industry was virtually broke but through these newer varieties and newer methods of production, the apple industry could cash in, and in 1977 we (NZ) recorded the best profit ever. That was the start of the halcyon years of apple growing..."

## **Co-operative approach**

His time with the Apple and Pear Board and the world-wide travelling that went with it, were far more than a public relations exercise for Ken. "We were hoping to sell our apples - a lot of apples. If you're into exporting, you can never take anything for granted and maintaining a presence in markets was vital. I believe that if we do away with the single-desk selling of apples, it'll be the death of the industry," says Ken. "A greed philosophy seems to have crept in and like so much of what has happened in our country, a co-operative philosophy has tended to become lost. We have to market our apples effectively - New Zealanders can't eat them all! We produce over 20 million apples, yet New Zealanders only eat 3.5 - 4 million."

So, have we gone too far down the "greed track", or can we get the co-operative approach back again? "Yes, I believe we can. Everything goes in cycles - even land-based things. Of course, if we can foresee things we are in a better position to do well. We can still be a world leader in the industry provided other people don't spoil it. The government needs to keep its nose out of it and let the industry decide what it wants," says Ken adamantly. And he continues: "The industry, on its part, must retain the desire to look at new possibilities, new varieties and new methods and make changes for the right reasons, not just for change's sake."

Ken continues to work on the orchard and is delighted to have his family involved in the business of growing. "It makes me happy - there's nothing nicer than having a whole lot of grandchildren around. When we have a family dinner, we can have 25 people around the table..." And if Ken has his way, there'll be apple pie on the menu! Even after 40 years-plus on an orchard, it's still his favourite dessert...