

The oldest exotic fruit tree in New Zealand?

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The Bay of Islands in the north of New Zealand was the meeting point between Māori and world travellers, explorers and traders. Here in the late 1700s and early 1800s many ships visited and traded produce. In 1812 the Rev Samuel Marsden set up a Mission Station at Rangihou and in 1818 set up the Kerikeri Mission Station. The Rev John Butler accompanied Marsden and was left in charge of the new Mission at Kerikeri.

Records at Kemp House (which is part of the wider Mission Station and now comprises only two buildings – the Stone Store and Kemp House) show that Butler planted 100 fruit trees at the Mission Station on 5th October 1819 and a further 85 the next day. This was part of the garden development that Marsden had devised as a plan to make the Mission self sufficient and to provide training

through the ‘useful arts’ that, it was hoped, would provide a framework for Christian instruction.

Today surviving in this area that Butler planted is one lone pear tree, *Pyrus communis*, possibly a Bon Crétien variety, which is thought to be the sole survivor from this original planting (Fig. 1). A plaque nearby provides some details from its listing in the Royal New Zealand Institute of Horticulture Notable Trees Scheme². There is no list of tree types planted by Butler on those two days but there are records shortly after reporting the growth of a number of different fruit trees.

However, nearby are the remains of other fruit trees that could easily date from this period. They appear to be plum trees or similar. One is reasonably intact although one

large branch is leaning over onto the ground. The other two appear to be shooting from a very large basal stump. They could have been damaged or even cut down at one time and this is regrowth. Further investigation into these trees is required. Marsden records in 1820 that orange, lemon, apple, quince, pear, peach, apricot, almond and plum trees were growing at Kerikeri. There is no doubt the surviving pear tree is very old and easily dates from that period.

Interestingly H.H. Allan (1940) in developing the first preliminary list of historic trees identified two pear trees which he described as being “...brought to NZ by Rev Samuel Marsden in 1818 or earlier”. One was on the property of Miss Kemp being 50 foot [15 m] tall with a 39 foot [12 m] spread and the other on the property of Mr Wallace also being 50 foot [15 m] tall with a 46 foot [14 m] spread and girth of 13 feet [4 m].

Burstall (1984) states that the Kerikeri pear tree used to be much taller than it is now. “The top was blown off it in a storm (it was struck by lightning) and the subsequent pruning has probably helped it to survive. Although partly hollow it still seems healthy, blossoming and fruiting regularly” (Burstall 1984). When visited by the author in 2008 it was still in good condition and growing well. In 2010 Kent Thwaites visited the tree and his images are on the New Zealand Tree Register still showing it looking in good condition.

On investigation a second pear tree was found in the “Kemp Orchard” located at the rear of Kemp House (Fig. 2). Although this separate orchard was not developed until about 1828 the tree there is nearly as old but not in such good condition as the ‘Kerikeri pear’ and requires some care and attention to bring it back to good health. There are no



Fig. 1 John Butler pear tree said to have been planted in 1819. Photo: Alan Jolliffe (March 2008).

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² Now administered by the New Zealand Notable Trees Trust.



Fig. 2 Kemp pear tree said to have been planted in 1828. Photo: Alan Jolliffe (March 2008).

signs of any other original fruit trees in this orchard. However plantings of heritage fruit trees have been undertaken here over the years.

Whether or not this tree was transplanted from the Butler orchard is conjecture but this could have happened as such a tree would have been difficult to obtain, and probably only from Australia, or propagated from one of the original trees. In 2008 this pear tree (in the Kemp orchard) was not of the dimensions stated by Allan (1940). Further investigation into this tree is required, if possible.

There is an element of doubt about the Kerikeri pear tree raised by Easedale (1991) in her personal thoughts on the tree. In it she has carried out investigation into settlement and roading patterns.

It is her view this tree was planted in 1828. Again this tree could have already been planted and growing here and only transplanted to its current position. In reality we will never know.

There is no doubt the Kerikeri pear tree is very old and consensus is that it was planted by Butler in 1819. There is also no doubt that the Kemp pear tree is also very old but could have been transplanted to its current position in as late as 1828.

The key thing is that both pear trees are significant trees in this area and for New Zealand. They should be cared for and managed as the oldest exotic fruit trees in New Zealand.

References

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- The New Zealand Tree Register: NR/0668: <https://register.notabletrees.org.nz/tree/view/668>