

George Matthews (1812–1884), pioneer nurseryman of Moray Place and Hawthorn Hill Nurseries, Dunedin

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A true pioneer nurseryman, George Matthews is a significant figure in the history of Dunedin's settlement and horticultural industry, having introduced and established many plant species into the Otago province through his Hawthorn Hill Nursery.

His son, Henry Matthews, inherited his father's passion for plants and through the nursery was especially involved in the promotion and exportation of native species. As an individual, Henry Matthews was also a driving force behind national forestry projects.

George Matthews arrived in Dunedin on the *Lady Nugent* in March 1850 with his wife Eliza (Fig. 1), their three children, and his younger sister. Having spent many years gaining experience in his native Scotland as a foreman gardener, estate gardener, nursery and farm hand since leaving school, then serving a period as head gardener on an estate in Ireland, Matthews, aged 37, like many of his fellow gardeners, brought with him extensive horticultural experience and passion to his new home. He had made the decision to move his family to the new colony with fellow Scotsman and gardener James Gebbie, with whom he had a close friendship.



Fig. 1 George and Eliza Matthews. Date and Photographer unknown. Collection of Toitū Otago Settlers Museum, Dunedin; CS/11149, F 1116.

Within several months of his arrival in Dunedin, George Matthews started in the seed and nursery business with a small wooden cottage and plot of land in Moray Place, facing the top of Burlington Street, which became Dunedin's first garden seed shop (Fig. 2–4).



Fig. 2 Matthews' Nursery at Bell Hill, Dunedin, with Moray Place at the top, c. 1860. Presbyterian Research Centre Archives, Dunedin, 498/104.

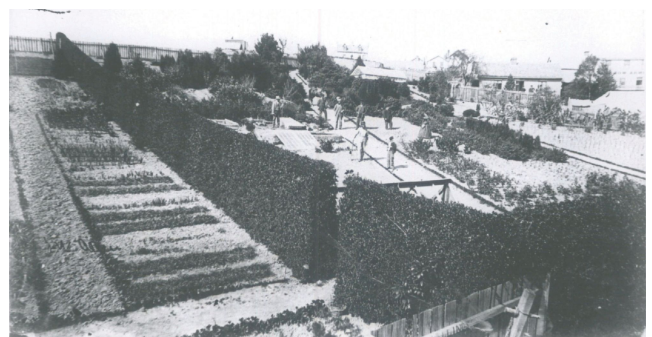


Fig. 3 A view of the Moray Place nursery grounds. *Mathews [sic] seedsman, Moray Place East, c. 1867–1869.* J.W. Allen photograph, P1910-046-046, Hocken Collections Uare Taoka o Hākena, University of Otago.



Fig. 4 Part of Matthews' Moray Place Nursery can be seen in the foreground, beyond the fence line. The roof of a large glasshouse can be seen in the lower right, with the small cottage in the centre. *Meluish, William, 1822?–1888.* Meluish, William, 1823?–1888 (Photographer) : Dunedin. Ref: 1/2-004373-F. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. <https://natlib.govt.nz/records/22846070>

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Here he used a range of seeds, trees, and plants that had travelled with him from Britain, including fruit and ornamental trees, horse chestnuts, lilacs, roses, mosses, cactus, and Japanese lilies. It was an ideal spot for a nursery garden to succeed: it was north facing, sheltered from winds, and sloped towards a small stream. Early adverts for the nursery refer to Church Hill (Fig. 5–6), as the nursery site was close to the First Church of Otago (Fig. 7). It had taken him many months since purchasing the land to build his own home there and cultivate the garden with stock ready for nursery sale, having to work other manual labour jobs during the daytime while only able to tend to his own property in the hours of the morning and evening.

FRUIT TREES ON SALE.

THE Undersigned begs to call the attention of Settlers to his one and two-year old Apple Trees, which are remarkable for bearing when very young. Also Pears—Plums—Peaches—Apricots—Cherries—Gooseberries—Black, Red, and White Currants—Raspberry Canes—Strawberry Plants—and a large stock of Rhubarb Roots. Forest Trees, consisting of Ash, Elm, Poplar, Locust, Laburnum, &c. Evergreen and Flowering Shrubs—Roses and Flower Roots—Lilies and other Flowering Bulbs, &c.

GEORGE MATTHEWS,
Nursery and Seedsman and Seed Grower,
Church Hill, Dunedin.

Fig. 5 *Otago Witness*, Issue 285, 16 May 1857, Page 4.

JUST LANDING PER *AFONVALE*,
CLOVER SEEDS and COW GRASS,
from one of the most celebrated Seeds-
men in Edinburgh.
GEORGE MATTHEWS,
Nursery and Seedsman,
Church Hill, Dunedin.

Fig. 6 *Otago Witness*, Issue 404, 27 August 1859, Page 5.

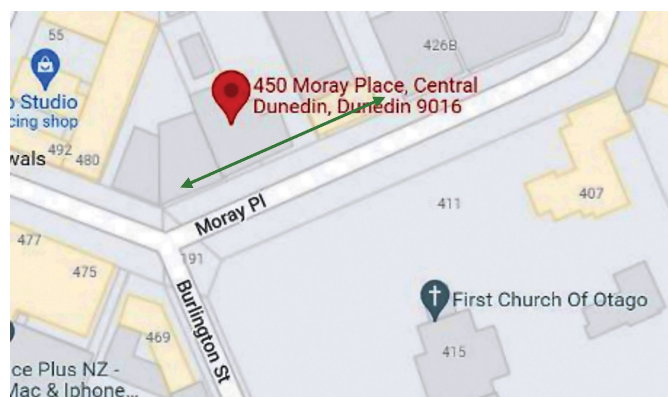


Fig. 7 The green arrow represents the former location of the nursery. Image via Google Maps.

Matthews was in a good position to start his own business because there was little, if any, competition in Dunedin in 1850 with only a handful of gardeners, like William Martin at Fairfield, and general stores selling seeds already operating. There was also soon to be a high demand for plants and garden seeds coming from a wave of new immigrants.

Demand, however, was not instantaneous, as basic provisions such as tea, flour, sugar, and sometimes rice and meal often ran in short supply and expensive nursery goods were not such essentials. Hard frosts and wild animals also killed many of his original plants and seeds, and imported seeds did not always arrive from Britain in the best condition for success. One early success for Matthews was the apple trees he had brought with him and continued to graft new productive and popular stock from. By the 1870s these trees were still recognised as his and stock in 1902 could be traced back to the original plants. Matthews also received many prizes throughout the early years of Otago's Horticultural Society existence (1860s) for newly introduced plants, such as a *Melocactus* and *Phlox drummondii* (commonly known as annual phlox or Drummond's phlox). The society also held its very first displays in Matthews' shop. The interest in plants and horticulture was high among the settlers early on even if a business was not yet sustainable.

That changed within a couple of years when the gold rush came to Otago. Matthews could turn his full attention towards his nursery business and the land at Moray Place was expanded to meet the increase. By 1853, a now flourishing business enabled him to purchase a second property of 10 acres in Mornington and establish a larger nursery there called Hawthorn Hill Nursery, to where the Matthews family relocated in 1870. Their house sat in grounds that soon doubled their original size (there is inconsistency amongst sources regarding the size of it) and were described by garden history researcher Helen Leach as a "horticultural show-place" (Fig. 8). Trees and plants in the tens of thousands were grown at Hawthorn Hill. Its large and varied stock included ornamental shrubs, timber trees for shelter, common fruits, roses, vegetables grown for seed, and rare plants. An account included mention of rock gardens and ornamental plantations with soil taken from a nearby mountain, Flagstaff Hill.²

In the 1860s, to support the demand for crop and farming land in the growing Otago settlement, Matthews' stock of agricultural supplies and hedging plants such as gorse, yellow broom and thorn quicks (*Crataegus monogyna*) increased and was widely advertised, as was clover, ribgrass plantain (*Plantago lanceolata*), cocksfoot, perennial and Italian ryegrass among other grass seed for pasture. As Hawthorn Hill was situated over 500 ft (150 m) above sea level and exposed to strong gales, although enclosed by a shelter belt of timber trees and hedges of thorn, laurel, and holly, the nursery provided proven hardy trees and plants for sale. Matthews was an early importer and exhibitor of conifers in the 1870s, some of which were rare at that time, such as species of cypress, pine, cedar, yew, and *Sequoiadendron giganteum* (syn. *Wellingtonia gigantea*). His 1876 catalogue has for sale 60 kinds of conifer including selections from California and Japan.

Alongside Hawthorn Hill Nursery, the Moray Place Nursery operated as the retail and seed warehouse but still provided herbaceous and bedding plants, a propagating house, greenhouse facilities for pot and flowering plants, and extra space for forest trees.

² A detailed account of the plantations in the gardens and nursery stock at Hawthorn Hill from 1878 can be read in the *Otago Witness*, Issue 1368, page 21.

In 1872 the seed store and wooden pioneer cottage built by George Matthews at Moray Place were replaced with a larger stone and brick building. Together, the nurseries catered for a huge range of plants and trees that were in demand and made available for the southern provinces (Fig. 9–12). In 1863, George Matthews even sent variegated European hollies (*Ilex aquifolium*) to nurserymen Thomas Lang in Ballarat, Australia, who very likely propagated and distributed them throughout Australia as he did with his huge quantity of other imported plants. The nurseries also took up a huge portion of the market for Dunedin's early nursery trade, with William Martin and James Gebbie the only other nurserymen in business for the first twenty-five years until 1874 when any serious competition arose.



Fig. 8 The Matthews home at Hawthorn Hill, photographed in the early 1900s. Image from Ruth Gow, *The Advance Guard*, p. 105.

HAWTHORN HILL NURSERY, DUNEDIN.

The planting season being close at hand,
Orders for

FRUIT TREES AND BUSHES
FOREST TREES, HEDGE PLANTS,

should be given without delay, so as to ensure
early delivery.

FRUIT TREES AND BUSHES.

The stock on hand comprises

All the best kinds of	{	Apple	1, 2, 3, and 4 years old.
		Apricot	
		Cherry	
		Nectarine	
		Peach	
		Pear	
		Plum	

Raspberry, red and yellow
Gooseberry, white, green, and red
Currant, black, white, and red
Almond; Black Bramble
Spanish Chestnut; Elder
Eugenia Ugni; Fig
Filberts and Nuts
Mulberry; Olive
Pomegranate; Quince; Walnut.

FOREST TREES.

Ash, Birch, Blue and Red Gum, Stringy
Bark, Elm, Oak, Limetree, Poplar, Hazel,
Sycamore, Laburnum, Horse Chestnut,
Pines, &c. &c.

GEORGE MATTHEWS,
NURSERYMAN,

Moray Place, Dunedin.

Agent at Cromwell:

J. A. MATTHEWS,
ARGUS Office.

Fig. 9 *Cromwell Argus*, Volume IV, Issue 183, 13 May 1873, Page 2.

[ESTABLISHED 1850.]

G. MATTHEWS' Seeds and Trees.

1888 PLANTING SEASON 1888

30,000 FRUIT TREES, clean
and healthy, including
Apples, Pears, Peaches, Plums, Cherries,
Apricots, two, three, and four years old.

Flowering Shrubs, Ornamental and Forest
Trees, Gooseberry and Currant Bushes,
Giant Rhubarb Roots, Grapevines, two
and three years old. All the leading
varieties. Boxwood, Strawberry Plants,
Laurel, Hollies, Thorn Quicks, Pruning
Knives, and Gloves. Garden, Agricultural
and Flower Seeds.

20,000 Roses, comprising all the newest
varieties introduced in England and
America.

Catalogues on application.

POT PLANTS IN GREAT VARIETY.

GEORGE MATTHEWS,

Moray Place, Dunedin, and

HAWTHORN HILL NURSERIES,

MORNINGTON.

Fig. 10 *Lake County Press*, Volume V, Issue 315, 11 October 1888,
Page 2.

BULBS! BULBS! BULBS!

1,000,000,000,000, more or less, of Hyacinths
Crocuses, Narcissus, Tulips, Snowdrops,
Ixiads, Jonquils, &c., &c.

Early planting is necessary to ensure a good
display of bloom in spring.

Do not delay; order at once. Catalogues
post free to any address.

GEORGE MATTHEWS,

Seed Warehouse—MORAY PLACE, DUNEDIN;
Nurseries—HAWTHORN HILL, MORNINGTON.

Established 44 Years.

8m

Fig. 11 *Otago Witness*, Issue 2090, 15 March 1894, Page 4.

PLANTING SEASON, 1894.

DURING the 44 years which this Nursery business has been established, no expense has been spared in placing in the market both Fruit and other trees which have been found most profitable for New Zealand culture. The largest and most varied Stock in New Zealand, and grown at an altitude 500 feet above sea level, without the slightest protection from the severest gales, thus making successful transplantation to any part of the Colony.

SEED DEPARTMENT:

"Quality is the True Test of Cheapness."

Cheap Seeds are Dear.

FLOWER AND VEGETABLE SEEDS

of the choicest strains obtained from the most reliable sources and carefully tested before sending out.

NEW ZEALAND NATIVE SEEDS AND PLANTS A SPECIALITY.

Send for Native Catalogue, also General
Priced and Descriptive Catalogue.
Post free to any address.

GEORGE MATTHEWS,

Seed Warehouse, Moray Place,
Dunedin.

NURSERIES: HAWTHORN HILL,
MORNINGTON.
Established 1850.

AGENTS—

R. Henry & Co., Cromwell.

Fig. 12 *Cromwell Argus*, Volume XXVI, Issue 1327, 25 September 1894, Page 2.

George Matthews died in 1884, by which time the management of Hawthorn Hill Nursery had passed to his youngest son, Henry. Despite an initial focus on exotic trees and plants, under Henry's management Hawthorn Hill expanded its range of stock, largely in part due to both his and foreman John McIntyre's special interest in native fauna and alpine plants. Together they worked to collect samples of alpine plants from remote locations across Otago and to scour the islands to find new plants to propagate, exhibit, and eventually export, in doing so raising the profile and appeal of New Zealand native garden plants in international markets. Many shipments of native trees and plants, including nikau palms, mountain lilies, and ferns (Fig. 13), were sent to Japan, Britain, Italy, France, and the United States. A shipment of 200 species was also sent to London's Kew Gardens with only nine losses due to the effective Wardian case storage. Some specimens of plants collected by Henry and cultivated at his garden can be found in the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa's collection.³

The increasing demand for these favourite plants has induced me to erect and furnish a Fernery second to none in the colony, and I am now in a position to offer every native variety worthy of cultivation.—GEORGE MATTHEWS, MORAY PLACE; AND HAWTHORN HILL, MORNINGTON.

Fig. 13 *Otago Daily Times*, Issue 9333, 26 January 1892, Page 3.

Separate catalogues were produced by the firm in the 1880s for ferns and other native plants emphasising demand and supply (Fig. 14). One catalogue lists 86 types of native ferns plus many species such as those from *Celmisia*, *Olearia*, *Senecio* and *Veronica*, for sale, with many yet unnamed plants also available. One plant listed was *Meryta sinclairii*, "one of the rarest plants in the world, being found only on one or two small islands north of Auckland."

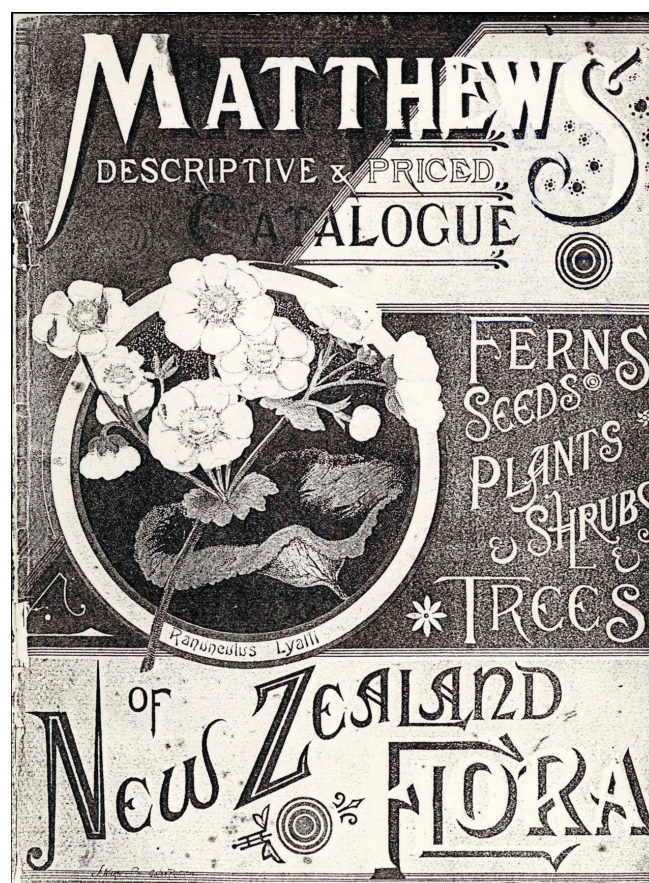


Fig. 14 The cover of an undated (post-1884) Matthews' catalogue.

In 1896 Henry Matthews was appointed New Zealand's first Chief Forester, a position created to ensure the re-forestation of timber supplies. Although replacing indigenous trees would have been preferable, Henry recognised the economic benefit of faster growing exotic timber trees. He led projects to plant state nurseries and forests with exotic trees in which his experience as a nurseryman and with the propagation and raising of timber trees saw him a suitable fit (Fig. 15). Seven state nurseries and thirteen plantations were due to his leadership, and up until his death in 1909, these had raised over 60 million trees.

³ <https://collections.tepapa.govt.nz/agent/16065>



Fig. 15 Henry Matthews (back right) with the rest of the Scenery Preservation Commission, 1904. *Christchurch City Libraries, File Reference: CCL-KPCD12-IMG0100.*

Henry Matthews had married Grace Annie Gordon, the niece of fellow Dunedin nurseryman William Martin. She was a talented photographer and accompanied her husband on his trips, providing many photographs of species for Henry's publications.

Henry's mother, Elizabeth Matthews, bequeathed to the Dunedin Botanic Garden a collection of native *Phormium* selections (harakeke and wharariki) shortly after his death in 1909. These plants were likely from the Matthews' garden or at Hawthorn Hill and had been collected from various unknown locations and over a period of time either by Henry or his father George, or both. The nursery advertised *Phormium* varieties for sale throughout the 1880s and 1890s as interest in the plant for horticulture and fibre purposes increased. Today, descendants of the original plants can be found in the native section of the Dunedin Botanic Garden.

So what happened to both nurseries (Fig. 16)? The central Moray Place section was leased to various businesses for a few final years and eventually sold in 1911 following Elizabeth Matthews's death that year. The nursery area and superfluous acreage at Hawthorn Hill in Mornington had already been sold off as residential sections since the late 1880s. The house and its immediate garden, including the rockery of native alpine plants (Fig. 17), remained intact and after 1911 was passed to Dr Irwin Hunter, a specialist in genito-urinary diseases and a keen horticulturist who shared the same interest in native flora as the Matthews'. After Hunter's death in 1929, the property was sold at auction and advertised with its "lovely garden of rare New Zealand trees, shrubs, and plants." Residential properties and roads now divide the land of the original Matthews property and, whatever the case for the survival of the original trees and plants, Hawthorn Avenue survives the name of Dunedin's once foremost nursery (Fig. 18).

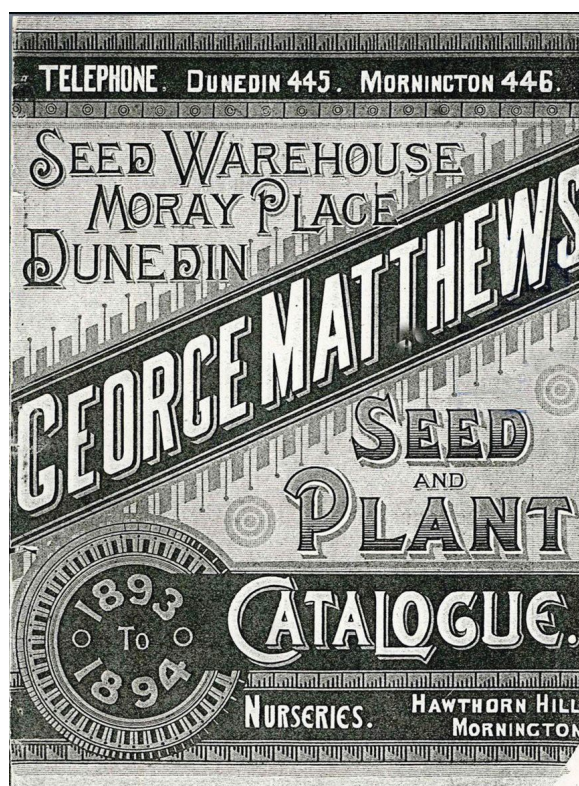


Fig. 16 The cover of Matthews' seed and plant catalogue, 1893–1894. This catalogue still mentions both nurseries.



Fig. 17 Dr Hunter's rock garden of native New Zealand plants, photographed by H. C. Gore. More photos of the garden available in the *Otago Witness*, Issue 3553, 25 April 1922, Page 33.

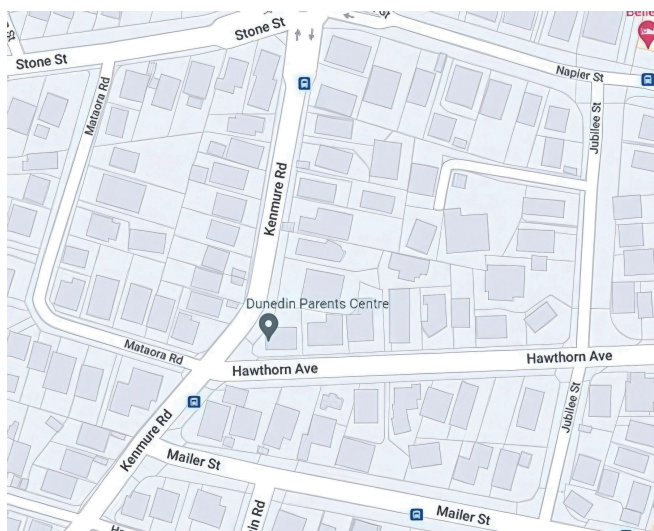


Fig. 18 The location today where Hawthorn Hill nursery was. The land is now bisected by Kenmore Road, with its southern boundary at Mailer Street and its northern tip extending as far as Napier Street. *Image via Google Maps.*

Acknowledgements

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