Don’t Pine the Pines

By Barrie Woods

If you’re a Heathcote local you can’t help but have noticed that the pine trees along the Ōpāwaho Heathcote River, between Tunnel Rd and the golf course, have been cut down.

Contractors at work cutting the pine trees.

This is not because the mayor and councillors are short of firewood, but is actually part of the first stage of the Ferrymead Regional Park Development Plan. The area will be replanted with almost 12,000 native plants this season to create a restored corridor of indigenous vegetation along the Ōpāwaho River Track. In fact, as I write this, the planting is already well under way. In a later stage further planting will be undertaken in the paddocks to the south that are currently used for grazing.

However, my article is not about the development plan, which is just the latest of many changes this part of the Ōpāwaho Heathcote River has seen over the years. I thought it might be interesting to take a look back in time to see just how much the area has changed.

The pine trees first appear in aerial photographs in the early 1940s and appear to have been planted in stages. They were probably planted as shelter belts for cattle as the farmland was used for dairying at the time, or maybe as a future firewood supply. The first farmer of this land was Mr George Scrutton, after whom Scruttons Rd is named. Scrutton farmed the land from at least 1861, until his death in 1874 at the age of 55 years. At the time the area was known as Ashley Farm. Dairy cattle continued to be farmed on the land until at least 1961. The area now used for horse grazing is council-owned. This is part of the Ferrymead Regional Park which extends from Tunnel Road, through the golf course and the Matuku Lakes area, to the sports fields.

Talking of horses, do you know there used to be a Heathcote Race Course? It was located on Ferry Rd in the area that is now Settlers Crescent.

Aerial photograph from around 1925 showing the racecourse

Conveniently the Heathcote Arms Hotel was on the other side of Ferry Rd. Apparently the first trotting meeting in New Zealand was run on a track in Heathcote in 1875 in what was then called "Brown's Paddock". About 1880 the Lower Heathcote Racing Club was founded and set up a track complete with a grandstand. Regular races were held there up until 1894 but after that date it appears the course was used only as a training track up until the 1920s. From 1889 the Heathcote racecourse was also a popular venue for pigeon shooting matches.

In the early days of Christchurch settlement, goods were ferried from the port at Lyttelton across the Sumner bar to Heathcote Harbour. The deeper water where the river cut in near the base of Canon Hill was a suitable place to build a wharf and within a short time docking and storage facilities were established.

An early view of the wharf from Canon Hill.

From about 1850 a punt service operated to carry people and goods to the other side of the river until the Heathcote bridge was completed in 1864. One of the punt operators, James Townsend, built a nice homestead near the wharf. When he sold up the new owner called the house Ferry Mead Hotel, from which the Ferrymead suburb takes its name.

In December 1863 New Zealand's first public railway opened to link the Ferrymead wharf to Christchurch City. Once the railway tunnel to Lyttelton opened in 1867 the Ferrymead line was relegated to the status of a siding and the station buildings were relocated to Heathcote and Christchurch stations. Today the only remaining signs of the wharf are a few posts at the riverside near Ferrymead Reserve. The railway line remains in place as part of the Ferrymead Heritage Park.

Ships at the Ferrymead Wharf alongside the railway.

From the 1850s several other wharfs were built along the Ōpāwaho Heathcote River. These were generally known by the owner's name, so we hear of Montgomery's Wharf, Landown's Wharf, Aikman's Wharf, Milton's Wharf and Thacker's Jetty. They were mostly used to service the local industry that sprang up along the river. Before the advent of steam power, boats were navigated along the river by means of tow-lines, with tow paths for horses along the river banks. Land for the tow paths was reserved as far upstream as the Radley St bridge. These strips of land along the river still show in the council maps to this day. The stretch near what is now Calder's Green was known as Devil's Elbow due to the difficulties with navigation around the bend. Many a boat became cast in the shallows. Draglines were used to keep the river clear of silt ensuring adequate depth for the boats.

The original 1864 Heathcote bridge (which today we call the Ferrymead Bridge) was a swing bridge which could be lifted to allow boats to pass

through. A toll needed to be paid to cross the bridge, and at half the rate for a punt crossing, the ferryman soon found himself out of a job. The swing was replaced by a cantilever bridge in 1907, but poor design meant it did not close properly.

The Heathcote cantilever bridge at Ferrymead.

With a reduction in river traffic it was eventually decided to leave the bridge closed. In 1923 tramway tracks and overhead electric cables were installed across the bridge and the lifting mechanisms were removed. I remember crossing the bridge as a young lad and remember it as being pretty rickety. This bridge was replaced with a conventional fixed bridge in 1965. The current bridge opened in March 2015 after the 1965 bridge was damaged in the 2011 earthquake.

Many of us who grew up in Christchurch will remember the Heathcote dump. For those of us who lived on the east side of town, it was a good alternative to the Bexley tip and was a bit cheaper. I remember trips to the dump with my dad when we would return home with almost as many treasures as trash we had taken – an early kind of recycling I suppose. The dump was initially located in the area now called Woodhill, which is where the Tamaki brothers built the short-lived Tamaki Christchurch Maori Village around 2005. Later, in 1978 the dump moved across the railway line to what is now the golf course. The dump was closed on 1 July 1985, but it was not until 2004 that proper remediation work began. Interestingly the hill that covered the landfill site (Woodhill) was built from soil excavated to form the Matuku Lakes which are a storm water catchment area.

So why is the dump important to the river? Being all but adjacent to the river and with an open tip-head, the dump was a major contributor to pollution in the river and across the tidal mudflats.

Rubbish encroaches on the banks of the Lower Heathcote River in 1972.

A strong southerly blow would see all manner of rubbish swept across the railway line and into the river. On an incoming tide it would drift up into Woolston and on an outgoing tide it some would flow back down and lodge on the mudflats. The cycle would repeat until a good rain flushed the river out into the estuary. On the other hand, a north easterly wind would blow plastic and cardboard across much of what is now the Ferrymead Park area. While the landfill site was predominantly at what are now Woodhill and the golf course, there was plenty of 'fly tipping' in the nearby area particularly when people arrived after 4pm closing time. This was also a popular place to dispose of old car bodies and this practice does not appear to have been actively discouraged by the Council and local petrol-heads would visit to scavenge for parts.

Over the years the Heathcote dump was the subject of many complaints to the County Council and letters to the editor. It is said that a fire burned

almost continuously at the dump and the smoke would be carried up the valley on a north easterly wind making life unpleasant for local residents. Perhaps as a side-note, but also important, as happens with dumps, seagulls were the dominant birdlife in the area, to the exclusion of other species.

Pollution the lower Ōpāwaho Heathcote River is nothing new. From the early days of European settlement industry began to grow along the river. Not only did it provide a source of water, but it was also a convenient way to dispose of waste water. By 1873 there were 7 wool-scouring works and 5 tanneries in the area, all discharging into the river. Their pollution was recognised at the time, but considered a necessary compromise in order for industry to flourish. There also seems to have been a thinking that industrial waste was better discharged into the Heathcote than the Avon.

By the early 1900s locals were beginning to complain about the state of the river. Not just from industrial pollutants, but also from household sewerage. Many septic tanks discharged to the river, but just as many new 'water closets' were piped directly to river outfalls. The water at Ferrymead was rank to say the least. The Acclimatisation Society attempted to introduce trout and perch into the river, but they did not thrive in the lower reaches due to the foul water. Prior to the arrival of European settlers the river had been rich with tuna (eels), pātiki (flounder), whitebait, koura (crayfish) and shellfish on the mudflats, and was an important source of kai for local Māori. Raupo and flax would have been the predominant vegetation along with seagrass on the tidal flats.

It was not until the mid-1920s that the Drainage Board began to tackle the problem of industrial pollution. The pollution of the river below the tanneries was described as 'abominable' and 'scandalous'. Industries were encouraged to trap solid matter before discharging effluent. The resulting 'sweepings' were deposited onto low lying land along the river for reclamation purposes, not that it really helped the problem. In 1926 the New Zealand Glue Company faced legal action for failing to manage solid effluent effectively, but it seemed that efforts to reduce pollution were mostly futile, particularly as the city continued to grow. It was argued the clearing of the river by dragline only exacerbated the problems with pollution as it stirred up sediment, but this was deemed necessary to reduce flooding further upstream.

It was not just the river that suffered, but also the estuary. A study in 1953 found the water was rife with bacterial coliforms and organic matter It noted a striking change in plant life in the estuary, with the once dominant zostera (eel grass or sea grass) having been displaced most completely by ulva (sea lettuce), the latter being responsible for an offensive odour that characterised the estuary, especially at low tide on a hot day when it began to decompose. Much of the pollution was deemed to have come from the Heathcote river. It was noted at the time that there had been a surprising increase in the variety of birdlife since a previous study in 1929.

The water pollution was to continue for many years. In 1970 the Woolston industrial sewer was commissioned, along with sewerage reticulation systems linking Sumner, Redcliffs, Mt Pleasant and Heathcote to the city's main sewerage plant, rather than discharging straight into the estuary. This improved the river pollution somewhat, but it was not a complete cure as the outfall from the Bromley Treatment plant was still into the estuary. The sea lettuce continued to flourish in the estuary along with its accompanying stench. In 1971 marine biologist Professor G Knox estimated that there were 120,000 tons of sea lettuce in the estuary. It was eventually determined that the only solution to the estuary pollution would be an ocean outfall for the discharge from the Bromley treatment plant.

This would finally be realised with the commissioning, in March 2010, of a new pipeline discharging 3Km off the coast from New Brighton.

Closure of the dump site provided an opportunity for redevelopment of the surrounding area and a reduction in pollution has allowed the river to begin healing. The establishment of the Matuku Lakes has improved storm water drainage together with creating some new walking tacks. Along the river we now have the Ōpāwaho River Track, which runs from Ferrymead Park to Tunnel road, passing by the Calder Green Reserve and lizard sanctuary. The planting of the saltmash and river banks with indigenous vegetation (including marsh ribbonwood, mingimingi, mānuka, kānuka, tōtara and ake ake) will encourage the return of native birdlife and provide a new parkland we can all enjoy.

New planting along the Ōpāwaho River Track