

13 Acres of Gorse

The Story of Duncan Park

By Barrie Woods

You may have read about the revegetation work in Duncan Park fronted by one of our locals, John Marsh, or perhaps you have enjoyed a walk around the tracks, or you may even be involved with the Ferrymead Pony Club which is located in the park. In this article we explore the history of Duncan Park and how it came to be. But firstly, I'll explain a little about the park in case you are not familiar with it.

The entrance to Duncan Park is located on Port Hills Road, opposite Chapmans Road. In fact, there are two entrances. The one to the west is the entrance to the Pony Club and is technically part of Vega Place (as a paper road), the other end of which you will find further west. This is a public access-way and you can use it to enter or exit the park. The other entrance is just a little further east and is signposted as the entrance to Duncan Park. There's room to park a couple of cars by the gate and a space for a couple more across the bridge if the gate is open.

The late Mary Duncan bequeathed Duncan Park to the Christchurch City Council in 1947, for the purposes of a public reserve. Duncan Park consists of 23.4 hectares extending east from the Avoca stream over a steepish spur and down into Horotane Valley. The north boundary is on Port Hills Road and the south boundary adjoins rural/horticultural properties higher up Avoca Valley.

Our story begins in 1851 when the ship *Isabella Hercus*, the sixth to bring new immigrants, arrived at Lyttelton. On board were George Duncan, a 31-year-old agricultural labourer, his wife Jean, aged 25, and their first daughter, Catherine. George was born at Woodhead in Perth, Scotland, and Jane was from nearby Horsfield Farm.

To begin with they took up residence on the lower section of the Bridle Path where George undertook farming work in partnership with a relative, Robert Duncan. Records suggest that they worked on a farm owned by Rev. E Puckle, which was in the area currently occupied by the riding school. George Duncan is reputed to have been the first settler to have turned a furrow in Canterbury soil. Presumably this was on Rev. Puckle's land in Heathcote Valley. For many years George was an active member of the Canterbury Agricultural and Pastoral Association acting as a judge for ploughing matches and stock exhibits, particularly horses.

After a few years George took the opportunity to purchase land of his own at Earn Valley. Never heard of Earn Valley before? Neither had I, but that's not surprising because today we call it Avoca Valley. The name Earn Valley was given by George Duncan, but Avoca Valley, a more recent name given by landowner William Robinson around 1921, seems to have displaced it in common and official usage. Earn Valley, also known as Strathearn, is a river valley in Perthshire, Scotland near to where George grew up, so he saw fit to use a familiar name from his home country for his new estate. I haven't been able to find the exact date when the Duncans purchased Earn Valley, but the first mention of the property in the newspapers is in 1864, so it was some time prior to then. Over the years the farm has been variously described as part of Heathcote, Hillsborough and Opawa.

George and Jean built a house at Earn Valley, which they named Earnbank. It was a two-storey residence built mostly of pit sawn kauri and consisted of eight rooms and a sun porch. An advertisement for sale of the house in 1928



Earnbank Homestead.

From the Wenmoth and Harrison Collection.

described it as being 'papered throughout, wardrobe and cupboards built in, water laid on, range, scullery, washhouse, windmill and tank'. On the farm they bred horses and ran dairy cattle.

Back in Scotland George had undertaken some work under the direction of George Stephenson, the civil and mechanical engineer of steam engine and railway fame. The skills he had learned proved valuable in building a road at Earn Valley that local engineers had deemed to be quite impractical due to the boggy nature of the ground. Apparently, this road now forms part of Port Hills Road.

George Duncan, in good Scots tradition, was a staunch supporter of the Presbyterian church. He was instrumental in bringing the first Presbyterian minister, Rev. John Moir, to Canterbury 1853 and walked over the hill to Lyttelton to greet him on his arrival. However, Rev. Moir did not stay long before moving north to Wellington. He was replaced by Rev Charles Fraser in 1856. George Duncan, along with other notable early Presbyterian pioneers such as Mr John Deans and Mr Ebenezer Hay, was instrumental in establishing the St Andrews Kirk in Christchurch. George Duncan was elected as one of the first elders of St Andrews when it opened in 1857.

As well as serving the church, George was a member of the Heathcote School Committee, and then later was one of the founders of the

Hillsborough School which opened in 1872. The school was renamed as Opawa School in 1880.

Another snippet I discovered is that George Duncan was a first cousin to Andrew Duncan, the third Mayor of Christchurch (1869-70).

Jean Duncan shared the toils of running the farm at Earn Valley. With Lyttelton being the natural market for produce in the early days, she made frequent trips over the Bridle Path with products from the homestead and returning with supplies from the port. It was the custom for many local properties to accommodate travellers from Lyttelton overnight and Mrs Duncan would frequently offer a bed to people she had met along the Bridle Path. One of her guests was none other than the infamous James Mackenzie, a suspected sheep thief after whom the Mackenzie district in South Canterbury is named. He apparently arrived at her door hatless and shoeless, and left soon after in a similar state when he realised the law officials were closing in on him.

During her later years at Earn Valley, Mrs Duncan established a Sunday School in her Earnbank residence for the benefit of Presbyterian families in the vicinity. This later moved to St Peters church in Opawa, which was on the corner of Ferry and Aldwins Roads.

Earn Valley was at one time used as a shooting range and as a base for military exercises. An earlier article titled "The Battle of Hillsborough" discusses these activities. Please ask if you would like a copy.

The Duncans attempted to sell the Earn Valley property in 1878, perhaps because George was ready to retire, or maybe because the property was not paying its way. Records show that it was heavily mortgaged at the time of George's death. It seems the sale was unsuccessful and instead the farm was leased out. In 1883 one block on the west side was sold to William Neighbours who wished to expand his brickmaking enterprise, but

the greater part of the Earnbank estate remained with the Duncans. George and Jean moved to a smaller house at Railway Terrace (now part of the Brougham St expressway), in Opawa.

George and Jean had two sons and five daughters. Their oldest son Peter, worked on the farm for a time and described himself as a Cattle Dealer. He was bankrupted in 1881. He was still at Earn Valley in 1894 when he applied for a slaughterhouse licence. The younger son, John, moved to Petone where he worked as a carpenter. The daughters were Catherine, Janet, Isabella, Agnes and Mary. Agnes was the only one to marry.

George Duncan died on 2nd March 1894 at the age of 74, leaving his entire estate to his wife. Jean lived another five years, dying on 29 January 1899. Her estate was left to her seven surviving children, with daughters Isabella, Janet and Mary as trustees. Her instructions were for the property holdings to be sold, debts repaid, and residual funds distributed.

Sadly, the daughters could not reach agreement on the sale of the property. In 1908 the matter ended up in court and at first resulted in Mary being removed as a trustee. It seems she was refusing to sell a portion of the property due to what she perceived as difficulties with a right of way and inconsistencies with the title. The judge stood Mary down and instructed Isabella to sort out the title as soon as possible.

A year later, the matter was again before court, with Janet applying for the removal of Isabella as a trustee and asking that the Public Trust office be appointed as a replacement. Her reason for bringing the case was that Isabella was holding out for what she (and Mary) considered to be an unreasonable reserve price of £110 per acre. Furthermore, during the time since their mother's death Catherine had died (1906) without seeing any benefit from the estate, and the estate was unable to keep up with interest and rates payments, meaning the capital was being eaten

away. The judge suggested that those who wanted a higher price for the property could buy out the parties who would accept less. Otherwise, the property was to be sold at auction and Mary was reinstated as a trustee.

What happened next is unclear, but later in 1909 the property went up for auction, presumably at the behest of the court. The purchasers were Misses Mary and Janet Duncan and they paid the princely sum of £35 per acre. Who knows what the family relationships were like at the time, but in light of the prolonged court action and a low sale price it is likely they were less than perfect. Mary and Janet must have got along with each other and records indicate they lived together at Earnbank.

1928 we find Miss Mary Duncan in possession of the property and offering it up for sale. By this time her siblings, including Janet, were all deceased, so full ownership presumably passed to Mary. It seems however that the property didn't sell in 1928 and remained in Mary's possession.

Let's now take a look at Mary Duncan and find out a little about her life. She was born in Christchurch in 1872. She attended Opawa School (then called Hillsborough School) from 1878. In those days the school was on the corner of Opawa and Garlands Roads.

In 1884 we see Mary teaching at Opawa School where she spent much of her career. She trained as a teacher through the teacher-pupil scheme, whereby older pupils learned to teach younger students. In 1885 Mary was called as a witness for the defence in a court case where one of her fellow teachers was accused of assaulting a seven-year-old boy. Her testimony indicated the boy had quickly recovered from his punishment. Given other evidence the teacher admitted losing his temper and flogging the boy more than intended. He was fined £2 and kept his job.

Mary went on to become headmistress at Opawa School, then later at Papanui School. In 1914 she became the first principal at the new Blighs Road

School (now Waimairi School), which was an offshoot of Papanui, where she stayed until 1919.

Mary was a foundation member and active supporter of the Canterbury Women's Club, and a member of the Canterbury Pilgrims' and Early Settlers' Association. Like her father, she was a staunch supporter of the Presbyterian Church.



*CANTERBURY PILGRIMS' ASSOCIATION. —The eighty-fifth anniversary of the arrival of the First Four Ships at Lyttelton was commemorated by a garden party held by the Pilgrims' Association on Saturday afternoon at the home of Mr and Mrs R. E. McDougall, Papanui road. Mr Richard Evans and the Rev. F.G. Brittan were the only two present of the pilgrims still living. Period dresses were worn by several women members of the association. In the group are Mrs Lovell Smith, the Rev. F. G. Brittan (Sir George Seymour), Mrs Whitehead, Mr Richard Evans (Cressy), and Miss **Mary Duncan**.*

Mary decided to retire from teaching in 1919, perhaps to look after Janet who was described as being dependant on her. Janet died in 1921 and left her estate to Mary. I can't find much about Janet's life, but in her will she gives similar instructions for Earnbank to be given to the city if Mary predeceases her.

In 1923 Mary left to travel overseas for a world trip, planning to be away for two years. She was in Milan in 1924 and lost her handbag when on the train to Venice. In the handbag was an address book, which contained her address. It was somehow discovered in 1930 and returned to her in New Zealand by his Majesty's Consul General at Milan. How's that for service!

Mary did not return to live at Earnbank after her travels but instead took up residence with a friend

in Sumner. She attempted to sell Earnbank in 1928, but presumably no buyer was found.

As the last surviving member of her family, and with no descendants, Mary bequeathed the Earnbank estate to Christchurch City when she died. She asked that the reserve should be known as "The Duncan Park" and be kept to perpetuate the memory of her parents, George and Jean Duncan, and her sister, Janet Duncan. She asked that two oak trees and an ash, planted by her father to commemorate the wedding of Princess Alexandra and the Prince of Wales (later King Edward VII) in 1803, be preserved.

In her will Mary suggested the land might be used for "all or any of the following purposes: forestry, the planting of native trees and shrubs, botanical and ornamental gardens, and for preserving or furthering historic and educational interests".

The gift to the city caused something of a bureaucratic dilemma as the property was outside the city boundaries of the time, instead within the Heathcote County. There was no budget or desire to develop a property outside the city, so as a result, the land continued to be leased as a dairy farm for a while, and the Earnbank house was effectively abandoned. It was not until the 1960s that the City Council gave attention to the possibility of preserving the house, but by that time it had deteriorated to the extent that restoration was not practicable. During this time a large portion of the land was also neglected, and a City Council report described it as "infested with noxious weeds", and "an estimated 13 acres of gorse". Thanks to the hard work of John Marsh and his team, that situation has now considerably changed for the better.

The Duncan Park has been leased to the Ferrymead Pony Club since 1962 in an arrangement that preserves public access to the area. It's a fitting use for the park given George Duncan's keen interest in horses.