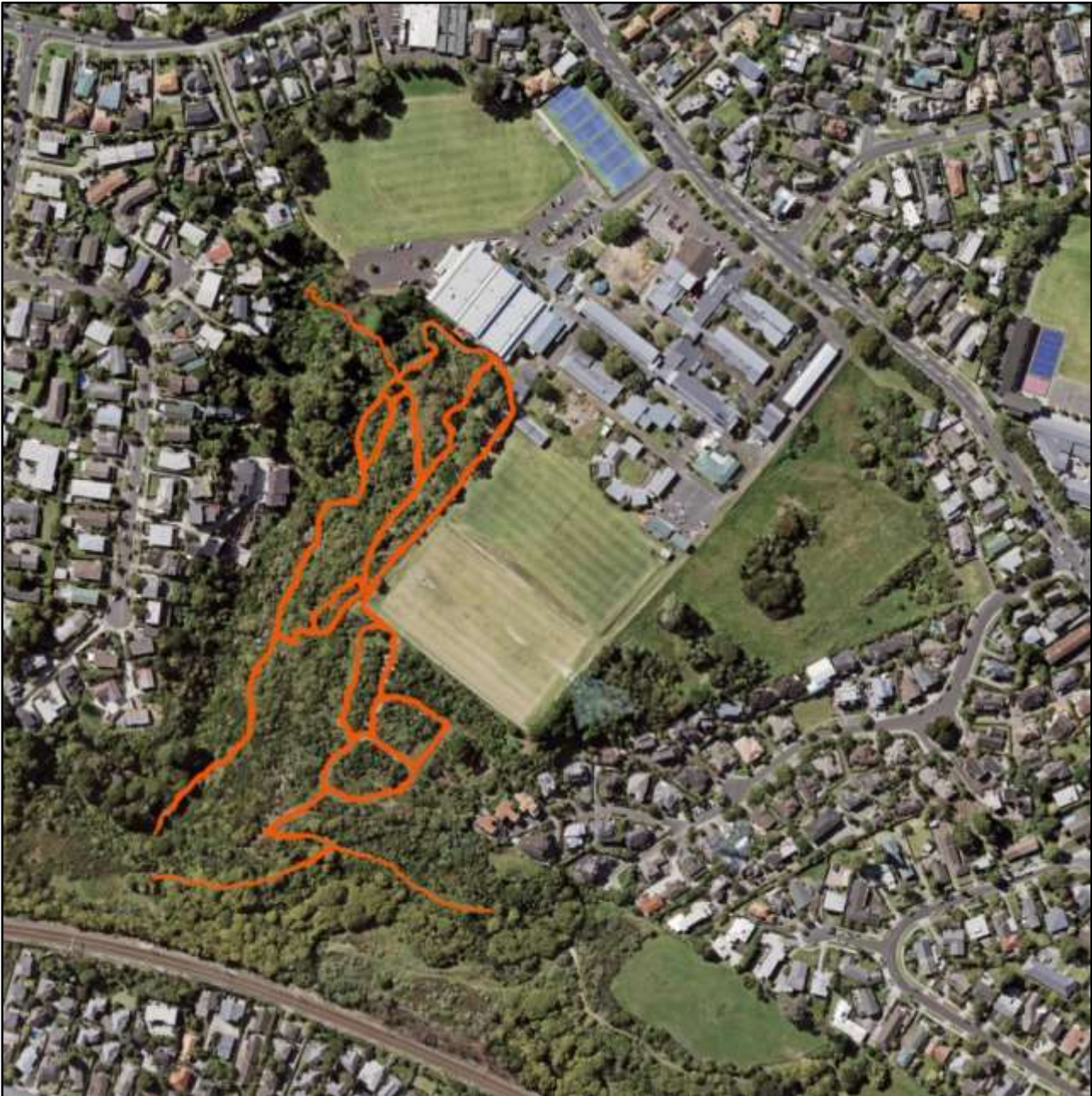


# Selwyn Bush Development Story

## Twenty Years of Voluntary Dedication



***Selwyn Bush with pathways shown in red.***

*Image prepared by Sue La Roche on Auckland Council 2017 GeoMap base*

The areas located behind Selwyn College and the Barfoot and Thompson Stadium (formerly ASB Stadium) in Kohimarama Road were allowed to become weed infested illegal rubbish dumps. The achievements over 20 years by dedicated volunteers have turned the area into a wonderful example of clearing a wilderness to become an area of thriving native trees. Many thousands of hours of work have gone into clearing weeds, planting new trees and maintaining this significant ecological area.

The 3.2 hectares of land for Selwyn College was taken from St John's College Trust Board Farm under the Public Works Act for educational purposes in 1943.<sup>1</sup> Included was a substantial area leading into Pourewa Valley including sections that are precipitous and unstable. These steep sites presented a major maintenance problem. When the land was used for farming and grazed by stock it was to be kept clear of noxious weeds such as gorse, an Auckland City Council requirement until 1964.

## A Neglected and Weed Infested Area

After the College was established, unused areas outside cleared playing fields became progressively overgrown and a place for dumping rubbish. Pest trees such as privet, hawthorn and willow, plus great stands of ginger, pampas and gorse took over.



Shrouding all this was a canopy of tangled vines – madeira, moth plant, bindweed, ivy, jasmine, etc. Some not so helpful neighbours had used the place as a dumping ground for house renovation debris (including asbestos), bits of concrete, whiteware, used tyres and even a car, a trailer and a concrete mixer.

For the college, there were big issues associated with major and expensive land clearance and the continuing burden of maintaining difficult and unstable land. Schools are not funded for this sort of thing. So how to turn a big liability into a splendid asset?

There was a hopeful sign. Amongst all the rubbish, a native forest was struggling to be born. The foundation plants such as coprosma and matipo were already established; colonies of ferns, both ground cover and tree ferns, were quietly asserting themselves and already quite large forest trees such as pūriri and kohekohe were demonstrating promise of what could come.



*A Mamaku tree fern poking up through the tangle of vines*

## **Project Establishment in Association with the Refugee Education Centre**

In 2001, Roy Clements, at that time Lead Teacher at the Refugee Education Centre for Adults and Families (REAF), the facility for refugee families at Selwyn College, came up with a proposal using his 20 year experience of recycling 'surplus land' at Mt Albert Grammar School. Inspiration came from two remarkable models: the Otari Plant Museum within Wilton Bush in Wellington and Muriel Fisher's pioneering creation at Fernglen in Birkdale, Auckland. Both of these combine an educational 'museum' section with an extensive area of restored bush.

This concept provides huge potential for student involvement in environmental studies, as well as a delightful area that the public should be able to enjoy. Pathway links along the Pourewa Stream to Kepa Bush and Pourewa Valley make this an exceptional facility that will become a treasure for Auckland and the eastern bays region.

An earlier beginning had been made to rescuing the valley. Owen Lewis, an outstanding educationalist and the second Principal of Selwyn College from 1966 to 1979, had made a start on planting. After retirement, Owen became a founder and long-term chairman of the NZ Native Forests Restoration Trust, an organization successful in returning large areas of marginal lands to native forest.



***Former Principal Carol White and Mick Foley***

The Principal, Carol White, was enthusiastic and took part in clearing and planting. The Board of Trustees, the Property Manager, and a number of staff all participated in some way. A keen team of students propagated, potted and planted.

For about 14 years former refugees at the REAF programme did much of the heavy clearing and track formation, especially in the Selwyn Bush gully. An associated course in plant propagation combined language learning with acquiring a practical skill, as well as supplying the needs of the project. The symbolism of 'planting a tree in your new land' seemed to appeal to the new kiwis.

Community-minded folk instituted a series of clearing and planting days, an initiative that continues today with annual attacks on accumulated inorganic rubbish. An immense amount of clearing was done, a lot of it by the then groundsman, Mick Foley and his assistant Pat Holloway. There were many workdays.

Thanks to the Property Manager Maria Moppett, the school provided funding for the initial purchase of hand tools and fuel for power tools, volunteers providing their own scrub cutters and chainsaw.

A St Johns service organization provided a ride-on mower which was essential for weed control in the early years. Scarbro Contractors performed extensive clearing at minimal cost.



***Refugee ladies taking a break during clearing in 2010***



***Close to the same spot in July 2020 with two healthy Kahikatea trees in a proposed wetland area***

## Selwyn Park and Selwyn Bush

There are two distinct areas: Selwyn 'Park' area being rather different from Selwyn Bush, which is the gully on the west side. Selwyn Park is a hillside running down, steeply in places, to the main Pourewa Valley. Apart from some bush fragments, most of the vegetation here was rubbish. An acmena hedge had, over half a century, developed into a gigantic acmena forest. As well as this pest there was a lot of gorse, privet, pampas and blackberry.

Here almost total weed tree cover is being replaced by a potential educational facility, a botanical garden demonstrating plant associations, specimen trees, and a possible nursery. All this providing a place for people to relax and a place for young children, from the two pre-schools on the campus, to play and hide safely, and to grow with nature.



*Mick Foley cutting out the acmena and privet 2001*



*Now thriving native trees can be accessed from mown pathways providing view shafts*

### Pathway construction

An out-of-office City Councillor, Graeme Easte gave many hours making tracks down the lower part of Selwyn Bush and along the Pourewa stream to Kepa Bush Reserve. In later years, Graeme continues his voluntary work to maintain this now very popular pathway alongside the stream. He expects usage to grow when the new Te Ara Ki Uta Ki Tai, the shared Pathway is opened.



*Graeme Easte on one of his timber bridges along the path to Kepa Bush*



*Track making volunteers from Myanmar and Afghanistan in 2009*

## Planting over cleared areas

The Refugee community continued working and providing many plants from the REAF Centre nursery until Roy Clements retired at the end of 2013.

An impressive part of their work was the conversion of a very rubbishy area pictured below into the Refugee Garden. The refugees continued the heavy work of clearing and track making on the larger site.



*Group of students busy potting in the glass house 2001*



*Clearing an old tip for the Refugee Garden in 2012*



*Above: Selwyn Park Refugee Garden January 2015 with pathways funded by Doug Bates*

For the first two or three years the group worked mainly on clearing and preparing 'Selwyn Park' for planting. The first big planting took place in 2003 when Auckland City provided the bulk of the trees for that event. From mid-2004, the group were able to move seriously into 'Selwyn Bush'.

*Below: Refugee workers in 2007 with Martin Heffer & Roy Clements at the rear along with four College staff members*



The 'team' from Myanmar. It includes Abdul Ansorali; he played a big role in the later history of the project as the grass and weed cutter, paid for by local retired businessman Doug Bates for one day a week. It used to take about 45 hours of quite heavy work for Roy to get round once. Doug employed Abdul so that Roy could be freed for other activity. The system worked well for several years. Also interesting in this photo is the fact that there are four Selwyn College staff members included.

## Unstable Land

Due to the volcanic ash overlay from Ōrākei Basin and other eruptions, sloping areas behind the College are unstable.

They are best suited to vegetation rather than buildings or sports fields as some have suggested.



*Retrolens Survey No SN 146, Run 64 Photo 19*

<https://retrolens.co.nz/map/#/Kohimarama%20Rd,%20Kohimarama,%20Auckland,%201071>

An aerial photo taken on 22 April 1940 showing Kohimarama Road and the intersection with Kepa Road on the right, the gully between the College site and undeveloped Kempthorne Crescent in the centre. The recently formed railway is on the left. Slump scarps showing unstable ground are clearly obvious on land below the College site.

## Selwyn Bush and Pourewa Restoration Group

From mid-2004 a lot of heavy work was done in the “bush”: creating access in several places, felling and stacking a considerable number of large trees, especially tree privet, hawthorn, and large willows. These were disposed of on site by cutting them into small sections to stack. These great mounds have now almost completely rotted away. With considerable assistance from the refugee communities, the volunteers cleared areas for planting, discovered and cleared areas for tracks and formed most of the now existing tracks.

Following the earlier work of the refugees, a new stage of community commitment came in 2006 when Eastern Bays Fitness Centre gym members, Martin Heffer and Pat Northey looked up from their treadmills and saw a valley in desperate need of care.

They set up the Pourewa Restoration Group which has met to do clearing and weeding on most Sunday mornings for the past 16 years. This is dedication! Many people have had their introduction to the joy of bush restoration through the enthusiasm of this group. The most notable achievements of the group have been in three areas near the head of the Selwyn Bush Valley: (1) the slope behind the stadium (2) the “mini slope” below the car park and (3) the extensive slope from the Coral Tree down to the “Water Meadow”. They have, of course, undertaken weed control in other sections of the valley.



***Selwyn Bush volunteers at Christmas 2020,  
Back row, Gordon Whiteacre, Sel Arbuckle, Martin Heffer, Nigel Ironside,  
Middle row, Derek Ashcroft, Peter McLaughlan, Roy Clements, Pat Northey,  
Front, Vivian Han, Turfa Chowdhury***

### **Royal Forest and Bird Protection Society Involvement**

From 2012 the Forest and Bird Group arrived to help. They did extensive clearing in the “bush” and having provided a couple of large truck loads of plants they proceeded to plant extensively in both “bush” and “park”. The Society funded the expenses of fuel, spray, blades and nylon, repairs, and even a replacement scrub cutter.

Their dynamic leader was Jane Ferguson, before she moved a year or two later to do other amazing things with a bird sanctuary in the Kaipara. Jane prepared an excellent report to the College Board of Trustees in 2014, describing the high ecological significance of Selwyn Bush.<sup>3</sup>



***Forest and Bird group in 2015 with Roger Johnson on the left  
Doug Bates centre back row and Jane Ferguson on the right***

The Forest and Bird group continued till about 2019 with people gradually facing advancing years. The connection with Forest and Bird then lapsed and the people morphed into the “Wednesday Group” which in 2021 has a regular team of six led by Roy Clements. Roger Johnson, second from the left in this picture, has been a major contributor as well as maintaining and managing the bait trapping lines throughout Selwyn Bush and Selwyn Park. Similarly, Derek Ashcroft on the right has contributed significantly by maintaining the tracks, draining systems throughout the whole area, and clearing large weed trees.

### **Conservation Volunteers Group**

About the same time the Conservation Volunteers became involved, 8.30am to 3.30pm five or six times a year, with often with about 10 participants. Conservation Volunteers is an amazing New Zealand-wide organization that encourages volunteers to get involved in planting and caring for native trees, eradicating pests and weeds, protecting threatened species, and helping to make our natural spaces accessible to everyone. This Conservation Volunteers group usually led by Wendy John, is made up mainly of young people including those from East Asia and Europe as well as some faithful kiwis.

Wendy’s outstanding contributions to the Oakley Creek area and walkway make her the ideal person to lead participants to live and learn in New Zealand, while giving very active support to environmental projects under expert guidance.

They come to Selwyn Bush and Park about six times a year. Six times a year doesn’t sound a lot, but when you think of this as about 400 hours a year of hard work, it is a very precious gift indeed.



***The Wednesday People,  
Bruce Murdoch, Roger Johnson,  
Lloyd Albiston, Martina Bohm and  
Derek Ashcroft***



**Wendy John (centre) with a Conservation Volunteers group**



## **Auckland Council and Ōrākei Local Board Support**

Auckland Council has provided support from the start of the project, providing hundreds of trees, some funding and friendly encouragement by Council staff while interest and support from the Ōrākei Local Board has grown over the years. The intention of the present Board to achieve the establishment and restoration of the Pourewa Valley as an outstanding inner-city park and reserve, is being watched with amazement and delight. There are already easy links from the Valley to the Selwyn Bush area.

### **Other Assistance**

Businesses and service organisations have been generous over the years. Some companies run a community service day from time to time. Doug Bates has been a generous donor of material for making tracks.

The project has also benefited greatly from having people such as Jane Ferguson, Wendy John, Melissa Marler<sup>2</sup> and Sel Arbuckle – people with immense knowledge of New Zealand vegetation and practical skills acquired through long years of work in various environmental schemes in Auckland and beyond. Mark Williams, the present groundsman at Selwyn College, maintains the grassed areas with care.

The best educational use of the park at present is provided by the two adjoining early childhood centres: one at the stadium, the other (the Carol White Child and Family Centre) attached to REAF, the adult refugee programme. One of the delights of spending a morning working in the park is seeing and hearing these little kids enjoying learning 'how to live in nature'.

### **Lady Elizabeth Scott Memorial Garden and Plaque**

A magical section of Selwyn Park is developing as the Lady Elizabeth Scott Memorial Garden. Sir John Scott, the eminent physician, started this by donating a number of trees in memory of his wife who had been counsellor at the College.



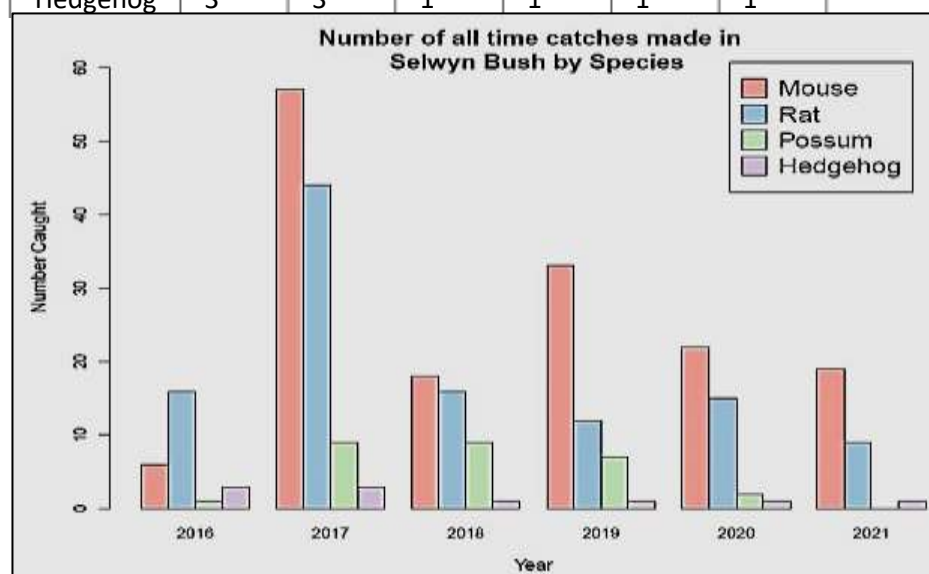
*Lady Elizabeth Scott memorial plaque*

## Rat and Possum Trapping

The rat and possum trapping programme started in Selwyn Bush in May 2012 by Martin Heffer, has been continued by an enthusiastic team since that time. The first line was installed around the lower part of Selwyn Bush and consisted of 14 rat traps and 4 Possum traps. As indicated below there have been significant reductions in the numbers of possums, rats and mice providing significant benefit for bird life.

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Mouse	6	57	18	33	22	19
Rat	16	44	16	12	15	9
Possum	1	9	9	7	2	0
Hedgehog	3	3	1	1	1	1

**Overall Predator Trapping Data Table (Selwyn Bush - Species)**  
Note the 2016 results are for only part of a year.



### Getting Involved

Both Selwyn Reserve and Selwyn Bush groups would welcome more volunteers. The best way to see this wonderful area is to become involved with the Pourewa Restoration Group who get together on Sundays 9am-11am. Their website <https://www.pourewavalley.org/> where you can offer to help. For the Wednesday group 10am-12am contact Roy Clements Phone 022 107 3305.

### References

#### Selwyn Bush Development Story

- 1 Papers Past *Tāmaki School Site* Auckland Star, 19 October 1943.
- 2 Marler Melissa 2013 *Restoration Plan for Selwyn Bush prepared for the Pourewa Restoration Group*, Auckland Council <https://purewa.webs.com/Ecological%20Plan/Restoration%20Plan%20for%20Selwyn%20Bush.pdf>
- 3 Ferguson, Jane 2014 *Report to the Selwyn College Board of Trustee on the High Ecological Significance of Selwyn Bush* on behalf of Pourewa Restoration Project Volunteers

### Acknowledgements

#### Roy Clements and Martin Heffer

All colour pictures have been provided by Roy.

This Selwyn Bush Development story has been compiled from material prepared by Roy and Martin. Over the past 20 years they have submitted many reports to Auckland Council and Selwyn College. Their contribution along with many others to this area has been huge, and it is still on-going.