

Ghosts of a kauri forest past in Warkworth

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I am sure that many New Zealanders, particularly those with a botanical bent, have often tried to visualise the historic cover of our modified landscape. Around Warkworth and the Mahurangi District this is not difficult to imagine, as there is still much evidence to show that the land was once largely under kauri (*Agathis australis*) forest. Remnants abound along the Mahurangi River, both on the saltwater and fresh water reaches, and the two giants in Parry Kauri Park are reminders of the magnificence of that which has been lost. Indeed, between 1820 and 1840 (when the ship was wrecked on Buffalo Beach) *HMS Buffalo* was often busy along the Mahurangi, felling kauri rickers for masts and spars for the British Navy as it had taken forcible possession of standing trees (Mabbett 1977). This was necessary as Britain didn't grow the conifers needed, and the traditional supplies were curtailed when Napoleon closed the Baltic to Britain. The specific instructions were for trees with straight trunks that were 74 to 84 feet long (22.5–25.5 m) and 21 to 23 inches (53–58 cm) in diameter at the base. Some people call any small kauri tree a ricker, but this is incorrect – small conical-shaped trees are too small to be considered rickers, and massive trees are too big (these facts, and an interesting explanation for the origin of the word "ricker", can be found in ABS Newsletter by J. (James, not Jessica)

Beever 1983). The private loggers who were busy in the Mahurangi District at the same time as the men from the *Buffalo* were unable to persuade Maori labourers to work for them, as the Navy could afford to pay more than they could.

So why is it that I should bother to write about a scattering of kauri trees found growing in suburban gardens along the North West end of Pulham Road, and the upper reaches of Bertram, Palmer and Percy Streets in Warkworth? Partly it is a personal indulgence, as this was my childhood stamping-ground, and partly because I think it is unusual, in that these trees were not planted, but are remnants of the original cover of this ridge.

The house that my parents rented (now 24 Pulham Road) (Fig. 1) had a paddock attached where we kept our house cow, and growing in this paddock was a small, conical kauri tree. Along the road, in the garden of the house that was owned by Stan Moore (brother of Lucy Moore), grew another, bigger kauri (Fig. 2), and at the back of Moore's bush grew an even larger tree. At the NW end of Pulham Road a clay track (now Palmer Street) led downhill to what was then the main highway. In the late 1940s the scrubby manuka (*Leptospermum scoparium*), gorse (*Ulex europaeus*) and bracken (*Pteridium*

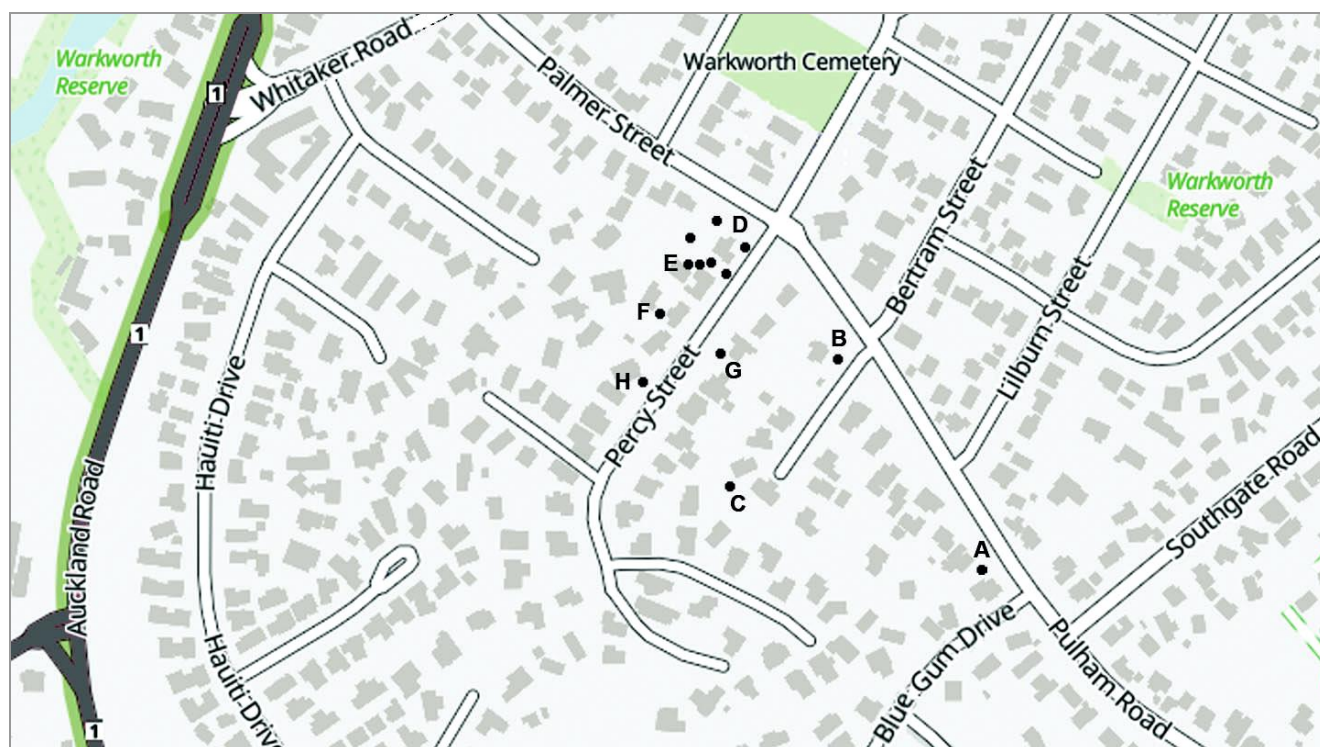


Fig. 1. Map showing the roads and streets with the thirteen kauri (black dots), in Warkworth. See Table 1 for details of trees at A – H. Online Michelin map, modified by Joshua Salter.

esculentum) that grew on the south side of this track were crushed, with a view to subdividing the land. On the higher land (now an extension of Percy Street) were a number of conical kauri, standing like sentinels above the devastation. In what can only be considered a small miracle, these trees were not felled when the land was cleared but were included in several of the sections that were then put up for sale. In the other direction along Pulham Road, in the 1.5 kms between No. 24 and Parry Kauri Park (as the swift flies), the land was farmed efficiently and so no remnants of the original cover survived, but no doubt the whole ridge would once have been under kauri forest.

When I started taking an interest in the thirteen surviving trees, which would now be a hundred years old or more, I decided to record their size and condition. I usually take note of the head of "our" kauri when I walk along Pulham Road, but when I went to measure the height (only a guesstimate) and diameter at breast height (DBH) I could see no sign of the tree above the surrounding roof tops. By dint of sneaking up driveways I managed to locate it, lying, alas, prone on the lawn of one of the houses. The lady inhabitant was very upset when I told her of my interest, explaining that they had no alternative but to fell it, as it had kauri dieback. A good look at the trunk showed where the gum had bled and the bark had loosened in large slabs. Together we made a stab at working out where "breast height" would have been, and where the ultimate branches would have reached (See Table 1).

In about 1960 the Moores cleared their bush and subdivided the land. Bertram Street was extended to service the new sections. On the back boundary of one of these Bertram Street sections grows the biggest of the trees, the one that was previously situated at the back of Moore's bush (see Table 1).

The lady who rents the house at No. 4 Pulham Road, which was formerly the home of the Stan Moore family, had heard that Lucy Moore had planted the kauri that still grows in the garden there (Fig. 2). When I contacted Lucy's nephew, Kerry Moore, he put paid to that rumour – when his father, Stan, purchased and cleared the land to build his house in c.1930 the tree was a sapling and Stan reached to the top of it and tied a knot in it. It had a bulge at the top for many years afterwards. When a kauri grows surrounded by other trees it develops the clean trunk with which we are familiar, but when it grows out in the open and in sunlight, the bark becomes knobbly and a number of small shoots (epicormic shoots) grow around the trunk. This tree shows this growth form.

The house on the corner of Percy and Palmer Streets (20 Palmer Street) has five kauri growing around the edges of the garden. Two of these are mostly surrounded by other trees and so have reasonably clean trunks.

The tree growing near the front of 59 Percy Street is rather scruffy with a thinning crown. I was interested on 1 August 2020, to observe four kaka (*Nestor meridionalis*) landing on the branches while I was talking to the owner. He built his home in the late 1950s and had to fell one kauri to make room for the house.

When I approached the inhabitants of the various houses to ask permission for my activities most of the tenants of rented houses were indifferent, but the owners, all bar one, were very proud of their trees. The one exception, who would fit neatly into the category of "grumpy old man", said to me, "Put a bit of dieback on it!"

Acknowledgements

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Fig. 2. The Moore kauri tree, 4 Pulham Road, Warkworth. Photo: J Warden, 9 Aug 2020.

Table 1: A summary of the size and condition of thirteen kauri trees (see Fig. 1) growing along Pulham Road, Bertram, Palmer and Percy Streets, Warkworth; remnants of the original forest cover observed August 2020. Locations A – H shown on Fig. 1.

	Warkworth address	DBH (cm)	Height (c.) (m)	Condition of the kauri
A	22A Pulham Rd	54	12	Cut down because of kauri dieback. Weeping gum still obvious. Some epicormic shoots & branches (cut off).
B	4 Pulham Rd	64	18	Many epicormic shoots, 1 st branch at c.5 m. (Fig. 2)
C	56 Bertram St.	72	22	Very branched, 1 st branch at c.3 m. & a few epicormic shoots. Some gum oozing.
D	20 Palmer St.	31	10	Top 2 m of tree dead. Small epicormic shoots, 1 st large branch at c. 5 m.
		49.5	20	Surrounded by garden trees so only 3 epicormic shoots low down, 1 st big branch at c. 7 m. A healthy tree.
		45	15	A few small epicormic shoots, 1 st branch at c. 4 m. A healthy tree.
		32	16	Surrounded by trees so has a clean trunk, 1 st branch at c. 5 m. A healthy, conical shaped tree.
		33	15	Many small epicormic shoots, 1 st branch at c. 3.5 m.
E	56 Percy St.	53.5	18	Growing in the open, so epicormic shoots up one side, 1 st large branch at c. 7 m. Rather open crown.
		39.5	17	Dead, with signs of kauri dieback (much weeping gum, and bark peeling), epicormic shoots, 1 st branch at c. 8 m. Very sparse crown. The summer drought of 2020 may have hastened its demise.
F	58A Percy St.	57.5	20	Large epicormic shoot from base, 1 st major branch at c. 3.5 m. A healthy tree beyond the conical life-stage.
G	59 Percy St.	38	18	Many small epicormic shoots, 1 st branch at c. 5 m. A rather scruffy tree with a thinning crown. Another kauri was cut down when the house was built.
H	62 Percy St.	59	17	3 large epicormic shoots + several smaller ones, 1 st branch at c. 4.5 m. A very leafy tree beyond the conical life-stage.

Reference

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