Chapter Ten

FLOWER GROWING IN OTAKI

Raymond Buxton and Jim Kirkwood had decided by the later months of 1936 to branch out from goldmining and to try their hands at growing tomatoes at Otaki, between Wellington and Palmerston North in the North Island. Otaki had the reputation of being able to grow late season tomatoes at a time when no other district could, and thus it had the advantage in supplying Wattsies Cannery at that stage of the season. Precisely when this decision was made is uncertain. By the end of 1936 the Companies Office was informed that of the shareholders forming A W Buxton and Sons Limited, both Raymond Buxton and Jim Kirkwood had already been in the North Island for some months. 305

Meanwhile Alfred Buxton had continued landscaping in Otago and Southland. On 1st May 1937 he was still at 33 Papanui Road, according to the Horticultural Trades Association’s membership list, but by the next year had moved to Otaki. The precise date of moving is not given by the date of sale of 33 Papanui Road either. The property had been transferred to Mrs Emily Buxton on 28th July 1933 for the consideration of £200, but was not sold again until Francis Brown, a retired farmer, bought it on 9th September 1938 for £1400. The documents completing the sale had to be signed by Mrs Buxton who was then resident in Otaki. The sum paid included what was owed to the United Ancient Order of Druids under their mortgage, some £850. Perhaps the key date was determined by Alfred Buxton reaching 65 years of age and becoming entitled to the old age pension. When the Labour Government had come to power in 1935 it had promised to raise the pension, which in September 1936 became worth £58:10:0d. 306 His 65th birthday was on 17th September 1937. The net outcome of Alfred Buxton’s decision to move to Otaki was that some income was guaranteed even if no more could be earned. Landscape jobs now took a relatively less important place and the decision was made to go in to commercial flower production. It should be noted that one of the purposes of the shed at 33 Papanui Road was to store bulbs and seeds, often for flower species.

The flowers grown by Alfred Buxton included Iceland poppies, irises, gladioli, King Alfred daffodils, violets and sweet peas. The most important flower grown was probably the Iceland poppy. Everybody in Otaki in those days was growing a few poppies for a small cash income, but Alfred Buxton was by far the largest grower. Formerly there had only been bright orange and yellow shades, but Buxton saw the opportunity presented by pastel shades such as pink, cream, apricot, and soft orange. Some 20,000 to 30,000 were planted each year in late February for harvesting from the end of March to July. They were sent to Christchurch, Wanganui, and Wellington. Most particularly they were sent to Christchurch for the July-August races at the end of the poppy season, when flowers were needed. Because the poppies were picked in tight bud and had to travel quite long distances they needed to have their ends sealed. Sealing was achieved by boiling or burning the ends so that they arrived at their point of sale in optimum condition. By picking them in tight bud they opened on their way to market. Buxton’s habit of being late had not improved with advancing years. He was renowned for being late getting his poppies to Otaki Station, paying their costs of carriage and getting them onto the train. To help

To grow flowers land was required but no record of the purchase of any land in Otaki by the Buxtons has been found. In the absence of appropriate land records some kind of leasehold arrangement must be supposed. To grow flowers successfully some kind of annual tenancy seems most likely. As there is no evidence of the Buxtons and Kirkwoods occupying more than one site at Otaki it seems likely that the one eventually bought was at first leased. The most reliable informant of this period was not resident in Otaki in 1937-8. However, she reports the flower business as occupying about 30 acres, which suggests the land eventually purchased was not the whole site. The block eventually purchased on Waerenga Road was owned by Percival and Lawrence Kilminster who were both farmers. It covered just over 22 acres. Waerenga Road is situated just on the edge of Otaki township and the house is situated some 400 metres from Waerenga Road, in the direction of the Otaki River. Besides the house itself there was also a washhouse, a cabin occupied by Ray Buxton, and a packing shed. All were grouped around a ‘tear-drop’ turning space at the end of the drive. 307
with the flowers up to 17 staff were employed. During World War II employing labour was difficult because the use of labour was controlled. So young women aged around 20, or old or crippled men, were employed. Buxton would hire any women or girls available by going up to them and asking if they would work for him. At that time Otaki was quite a small community that was highly inter-related and such an approach was regarded as acceptable. Maybe the use of so many inexperienced staff was responsible for the sweet peas being dispatched with short stems. Aggravated florists sent them to the nearest auction! Staff were also aggravated by the late payment of their wages. When it was rumoured that a tax inspector was in the area a considerable number of tax stamps had to be affixed in a hurry! Flower growing was not a restful retirement occupation and Alfred Buxton was never known to sit down and read a book. He was very busy and even when faced with disliked office work would be dreaming of plans for bigger and better crops. Flower production was given a boost during the war. American soldiers, such as at the nearby base at Waikanae, were prepared to buy flowers whereas their New Zealand counterparts did not.

Alfred Buxton always had plans and probably spent far more than he earned. On a number of occasions there was a suspicion that he had to be bailed out by Jim Kirkwood, probably on Mrs Kirkwood’s insistence. Mrs Buxton accepted her husband’s actions as his right as head of the household and accepted his excesses without complaint. She was a quiet, gracious lady, who typically dressed in a black skirt or dress, and spent a lot of time away on holiday. The Buxtons and the Kirkwoods all lived together but had their own separate parts of the house, both bedrooms and living rooms. Ray Buxton lived in a separate old army hut behind the house, when he returned from the war. Mrs Elsie Morgan, who used to work for the Buxtons, recalls two memories of Alfred Buxton which seem to say something special about the man. First, his office was lined with photographs of properties he had landscaped and most of those photographs seem to have survived until today, being in the collection of panoramic photographs by R P Moore held by Ray Buxton. Secondly, she and her friends always thought his epitaph should have a little man with a rake on it because he always raked the metal in front of the flower shed. "Never waste a minute" could well have been his motto. 

The move to Otaki was accompanied by the loss of a number of friendships and relationships. During the 1930s the extended Buxton family had got together a lot,
with the cousins meeting regularly. Joseph Buxton’s children from New Brighton and Ernest’s from Philpotts Road often met with Merle, Trevor and Ray until Trevor moved to Palmerston North. The brothers all got on well and saw a lot of each other. Each had their own businesses of different types, with Joseph in coal and transport, and Ernest having a dairy farm. Visiting the dairy farm in Philpotts Road was always a highlight, as was visiting an uncle’s farm (a Bolt) near Cust. Philpotts Road was at least half an hour away then compared to today’s five minutes.

Another friendship was broken by the sudden death of James Campbell at the end of September 1938. He had worked for Alfred Buxton from the time of his emigration from Australia in 1897 until, as the Supervisor of Grounds at the Christchurch International Exhibition of 1906-7, he was noticed by the then Director of Horticulture who invited him to join the Department of Agriculture. Following appointments as an Orchard Instructor at Hamilton and Hastings, he was made Assistant-Director of the Horticulture Division in 1915 and Director, on the retirement of T W Kirk, in 1919. A frequent subject of conversation when Alfred Buxton visited the Campbells was of calling on prospective clients and talking them into having their grounds laid out to much better advantage. Then with the backing of the client’s family Buxton might also suggest alterations to the home which might produce a more attractive property. Buxton used to delight in talking about such a visit, especially when it concluded in him gaining a contract and the finished picture delighted all. Jim Campbell had taken a leading role in the formation of the Institute of Horticulture and became its foundation President. His understanding of land issues and producers’ problems made his advice sought after and highly valued in Government circles. Throughout his business and private life his motto was always ‘Service before self’. His death at the relatively early age of 64 was not only a loss to his friends but also to the whole horticulture industry. The lifelong friendship was not confined to just Jim Campbell but also to his wife, who died suddenly while visiting the Buxton’s home in Otaki in 1946.

Following the move to Otaki A W Buxton and Sons Limited ceased trading. According to the letter advising the Companies’ Office the company ceased trading about November 1937 and was struck off the register on the 28th April 1941. Interestingly, the letter is written on headed notepaper with the following heading:
Fig 10.3 Alfred Buxton's plan for 'Mona Vale'. Note that the subsequent lily pond replaced the rose garden on the opposite side of the road to the house.

Fig 10.4 The lily pond which replaced Alfred Buxton's rose garden at 'Mona Vale'. The planting around the pond is presumably that shown on the plan.
The 1938 Horticultural Trades Association conference was held in Christchurch. Alfred Buxton was not present following the move to Otaki. In the Landscape Committee Report business was believed to be as good as the previous year but there were problems:

"...as the new award in operation, wages have been increased and hours per week reduced, which has made it necessary to increase contract prices. The building of small houses has been fairly active, but the gardens being small are mostly laid out by the householders themselves."

Buxton was present at the 1939 conference which was held at New Plymouth. The landscape situation had improved with the increase in building activity, but J N Macleod, the chairman of the Landscape Committee, suggested that all qualified landscape gardeners should be registered to prevent poor service.

He also proposed a remit for recommendation to the Executive for a Dominion Wages Award for all operatives in the Horticultural Trades, which was accepted. However, Thomas Waugh warned his colleagues of ill considered wage conciliation proposals, because union policy was to play one Industrial District off against another to get higher wages. In 1940 Alfred Buxton protested about retired superannuated growers and civil servants competing for landscape work. He agreed to be one of a deputation to protest to the Minister. He did not seem to see the incorrigibility of his own position as a pensioner.

By the time of the next Annual Meeting he had resigned from all committees and was severing his formal attachment to the Association. He did attend the conferences at Massey College, Palmerston North, in 1945 and that at Hastings in 1947. At the latter he seconded a motion of V C Davies for a memorial library to Thomas Waugh, who had died since the preceding conference. For the remaining three years of his life Alfred Buxton kept up his Horticultural Trades Association dues, although he did not attend any further conferences.

Besides flower growing Alfred Buxton still maintained some landscape activity after the move to Otaki. In 1939 he began work on 'Mona Vale' in Christchurch for Tracy Gough. About 1941 he landscaped a domestic garden at Paraparaumu and about 1944 laid out the garden of 'Mahanui' at Waikanae for W M Angus. The final project he was involved in was at Seaview Road, Paraparaumu Beach, for Benjamin Sutherland's son John, and took place in the months leading up to his death.

The project at 'Mona Vale' necessitated living in Christchurch for some nine months. Buxton did this by lodging with his sister, Mrs Ford, at 71 Flockton Street, St Albans. Fortunately, a fellow lodger has left us details of this period. Apparently Alfred Buxton was a 'bright' man (in terms of attitude rather than just intelligence!), who enjoyed good music. He had plenty to say but was not domineering. He landscaped to suit Tracy Gough who had bought 'Mona Vale' about 1937, and worked on the project almost seven days a week. It appears that the work on 'Mona Vale' was a favour returned for assistance the Buxtons had given the Gough family about 1912 when their high class boot business had experienced economic difficulties. The assistance had involved accommodating the entire Gough family at St Martins for some two months. One daughter was Merle's age and the parents had been friendly. During this period Mrs Gough had experienced a nervous breakdown.

Alfred Buxton only travelled to and from Otaki about once a month. His dress was very handsome, and he was as fastidious about his dress as his landscaping. While he stayed in Christchurch he travelled to and fro from 'Mona Vale' by tram as he did not have a car.

The design at 'Mona Vale' is shown in Figure 10.3 and 4. One major difference between the plan and the modern layout is the Lily pond. In the original Buxton plan there was a rose garden in this section of the garden. Subsequently the rose garden was replaced by the Lily pond with a fountain by request of Tracy Gough. Lew Mitchell, who was one of seven men who excavated the pond, has recalled the rose garden which is shown in the original Buxton plan. The garden at Paraparaumu Beach, which was landscaped by Alfred Buxton about 1941, was awarded many prizes by the Kapiti Horticulture Society. This has been attributed to the skill of Buxton's design work. Until 1982 the garden was looked after by Miss Jean Collins who remembers Alfred Buxton as the man who told her how to hold hedge clippers when cutting a hedge.

The garden at Mahanui, Waikanae, landscaped for W M Angus, a prominent Wellington grocer and the father of the painter Rita Angus, may have been landscaped in stages. Alfred Buxton did the basic landscaping but nothing behind the house except some boundary planting and paths. The boundary was planted with Lawson's Cypress interspersed with Silver Birches, but
Fig 10.5 and 10.6 Two views of the lily pond constructed for the Angus family at Mahanui, Waianae, as it is today.
the latter were staked too tightly. They were not released until their trunks were damaged. Angus bought the property about 1938 from the executors of the estate of W H Barber, a wealthy but extremely mean man. The main Buxton plan is dated May 1944 but some features must have been constructed before the imposition of war time controls on building. Nobody was allowed to do unauthorised construction, for example using cement or bricks. Thus the ornate lily pond which has a rectangular brick surround was probably constructed nearer 1938. The pond used to be approached by a beautiful cherry walk but that has had to be removed. Azaleas from Edgar Stead of 'Ilam' used to line the drive down from the sunken pool. The area also contains many liquidambers, which are now large and beautiful trees. For some reason Angus was not satisfied with Buxton's work and it is rumoured that Buxton was never paid; certainly the job gives the impression of being unfinished. 322

The last landscaping project carried out by Alfred Buxton was for John Sutherland at his seaside house at Seaview Road, Paraparaumu Beach, in 1950.

"The work consisted of building 2 stone walls to retain a sand bank, one wall about 3ft 6in high in front of another about 7ft high and set back about 8 feet, creating a promenade, in the centre a pergola was built with steps leading up from the ground level, (in) which a tennis court was made."
Peter Eales, who worked on the project for about nine months, claims to have really enjoyed working for Buxton and to have learnt many of the 'practicalities' of his designs.  

Trevor Buxton does not appear to have been involved in these landscape projects although the pond at Mahanui may show his hand. After A W Buxton and Sons ceased to trade he carried on landscaping on his own account but mostly on the East Coast. He confided in one client and pupil, D Christie, that he did not want the bother of employing people.  

After the war he was employed by Richmond Harrison as a nursery manager until his early death in 1948.  

The year 1949 was when an unexpected cheque was received from W S Newburgh, allegedly from the proceeds of the liquidation back in 1926 of A W Buxton Ltd. Whether that cheque made it possible to buy part of the land the Buxtons and Kirkwoods were using for growing flowers or whether the profits of flower production had accumulated sufficiently; or whether the realisation had arisen that land prices would rise if the National Party's policy of freezing them from control occurred; in June 1949 Mrs Buxton and Merle Kirkwood bought just over 22 acres from their landlords, the Kilminsters, for £2500.  

The following May came the realisation that Alfred Buxton was not well. Carcinoma of the stomach was diagnosed and progressed rapidly. Nearly 12 acres of the flower gardens were sold to Francis and Jean Eales on 17th August 1950 for £3500. Just five days later, on 22nd August 1950, Alfred Buxton died in hospital in Wellington. The funeral was held at Otaki, where Alfred Buxton was buried. The family decided to move to Wanganui where some of the New Brighton relatives were already living. The remainder of the land was sold in May 1952, unwittingly, to a Chinese market gardener's nominee, who immediately transferred the land to his principal. Mrs Buxton and Merle Kirkwood had already refused to sell to the Chinese market gardener. The sale price for the remaining block of just over 10 acres was £6000 thus setting up the Kirkwoods and Mrs Buxton very nicely.  

Alfred Buxton did not leave any will and no letters of administration were granted. At his death he owned no real property and his effects were of a purely personal nature.  

The story does not quite end there for some years later Alfred Buxton's brass plate, which used to stand outside his office, was discovered on the beach at Otaki and was given to Bruce Buxton, one of the New Brighton branch of the family. The plate's wording is:

A W Buxton NDH(NZ)
Landscape Architect