Welcoming our Warriors Home
Wellington’s Pohutukawa

By Angela Kilford
**Pohutukawa Timeline**

**7 August 1935**
Two pohutukawa are planted in the formal garden plots at the base of the National War Memorial by Governor-General Lord Galway and Lady Galway.

**21 October 1936**
Sixteen pohutukawa are planted beside the National War Memorial in memory of the 16 men of the HMS Philomel who fell during WWI.

**1938**
The eastern side of the Dominion Museum and National Art Gallery along Tasman Street is planted with 500 pohutukawa trees supplied by the Wellington Beautifying Society.

**7 August 1940**
Twenty-five pohutukawa are planted on the eastern flank of the Dominion Museum and National Art Gallery for Arbor Day.

**1945**
The grounds of the Dominion Museum are seriously affected during WWII years by the building of air raid shelters and air force headquarters.

**1945**
The Wellington Beautifying Society supports the planting of pohutukawa of which they have 10,700 available.

**Late 1945**
The 28th Māori Battalion is welcomed back to New Zealand via Wellington. Pacific Island volunteers who fought and died with the battalion are honoured with plantings of pohutukawa by local iwi Te Atiawa throughout Wellington, particularly at the National War Memorial.

**Late 1970s**
Pohutukawa are planted on the western side of the National War Memorial.

**26 October – 3 November 1995**
When the Dominion Museum (now known as the National Museum) moves to the newly built Te Papa Tongarewa on Wellington’s waterfront, local iwi follow protocol by moving a pohutukawa to the new site. This recognises the importance of the trees planted to honour Pacific Island soldiers.

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**A Deeper Understanding**

The Memorial Park Alliance, recognising that its people work near the pohutukawa trees established beside the National War Memorial, commissioned this research paper in 2014 from Angela Kilford, Master of Fine Arts candidate, Massey University, Wellington. The Alliance wished to understand the significance of the pohutukawa trees to better inform its work on the National War Memorial Park (Pukeahu) and Underpass, and to ensure their legacy remained intact.

Cover photo: Arts, Culture and Heritage Minister Christopher Finlayson and Governor-General Sir Jerry Mateparae pay their respects at the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior. Source: Ministry for Culture & Heritage. Photograph Andy Palmer 2012.
Significance of the Pohutukawa

Tāne Mahuta, god of the forests, separated the sky from the earth, bringing light into the world. Now, the trees as signifiers of this powerful act have their roots in the ground and their branches extending upward to hold the weight of the heavens above.¹

Trees are an essential part of city life; they cleanse the air that we breathe and are a constant reminder of our connection to nature. The pohutukawa tree is hardy in harsh coastal conditions, an attribute that has made it popular for amenity planting.

As an acknowledgement of the pohutukawa trees planted around the National War Memorial and Pukeahu Mount Cook area – as well as elsewhere in Wellington - this booklet binds the stories and threads surrounding the trees together to form a deeper understanding of the significance they hold.

The pohutukawa tree is a New Zealand icon with deep spiritual meaning for the Māori, connecting the beginning and ending of human life. Pakeha soon adopted the Māori tradition of planting a pohutukawa as a living memorial to the dead.

In Maori mythology, the red flowers represent the blood of the warrior Tāwhaki, a spirit ancestor who showed the way from earth to heaven but fell and died in doing so.² The gnarled pohutukawa at Cape Reinga, the northernmost tip of New Zealand, is known as “the place of leaping” from where the spirits of the Māori journey to their traditional homeland of Hawaiki.

Lush Gardens Disappear

Following the settlement of Pakeha in Te Whanganui-a-Tara (Wellington), the lush gardens leading down from Pukeahu Mount Cook to the harbour entrance began to disappear.

By 1932 when the National War Memorial Carillon was dedicated the hill was barren.

In 1935 groups such as the Wellington Horticultural Society and the Wellington Beautifying Society embarked on a scheme to beautify the city.

The Carillon tower in front of the recently opened Dominion Museum and National Art Gallery, Buckle Street, Mount Cook, Wellington in 1936.  
Source: Alexander Turnbull Library; Ref: PA Coll-6585-62, Photographer Unknown.
Welcoming our Warriors Home

Tree Planting at the Carillon

In a function organised by the Horticultural and Beautifying Societies, the Governor-General Lord Galway and Lady Galway planted two pohutukawa in the formal plots at the base of the National War Memorial Carillon on 7 August 1935. Lord Galway spoke to the children attending the ceremony about selecting suitable trees for the location and for the need to nurture young trees.3

Lord and Lady Galway yesterday afternoon took part in the ceremony of planting pohutukawa trees in the formal plots at the base of the War Memorial Carillon. Lord Galway was assisted by the Director of Parks and Reserves in planting one of the trees. Evening Post.

Source: National Library Wellington; Ref: 16827035; Evening Post.

The planting of pohutukawa along the Thorndon Esplanade in 1880 had demonstrated the tree’s resistance to sea spray and the effects of Wellington’s harsh north-west wind.4 The pohutukawa’s strength and resilience showed the tree as a good choice for planting and reinforced the value of planting native trees in Wellington.

Photograph: Angela Kilford; Pohutukawa trees at the base of the National War Memorial, 2014.

Government MP C E Macmillan plants one of the first pohutukawas on the Hutt Road on 29 July 1935, assisted by Lady Myers. A number pohutukawa trees were planted in the vicinity as the commencement of the Beautifying Society plan to plant trees right around the harbour.

Source: National Library Wellington; Ref: 16865092; Evening Post.

1 Evening Post, Volume CXX, Issue 34, 8 August 1935, Page 17
2 Duthie, Donal. Wellington’s Pohutukawas. New Zealand Gardener, Apr 1993; v.49 n.4:p.24-25
Living Memorials

Pakeha have planted trees as living memorials to commemorate people and events in Aotearoa New Zealand since the first settlers arrived in the 1840s. In a ceremony to commemorate 16 men of the HMS Philomel who died during WWI, 16 pohutukawa trees were planted at the National War Memorial Carillon on 21 October 1936.5

“...a live memorial was immeasurably better than a dead one, as the spirit of life in trees, and beholders of the future would link them in memories”.

William Parry, Minister of Internal Affairs. 1945.6

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5 Evening Post, Volume CXXII, Issue 97, 21 October 1936, Page 12
6 Evening Post, Volume CXL, Issue 27, 1 August 1945, Page 8
Mass Planting Begins

In an employment promotion scheme implemented by the Government in 1938, people were employed to plant trees on the eastern bank of the Dominion Museum and National Art Gallery which had opened two years earlier in August 1936.

Until then the area beyond the Carillon tower had been mostly left untouched, except for the road kerbing and levelling that had taken place for the opening ceremony of the Carillon in 1932.7

At least 500 pohutukawa were planted on 19 May 1938 at the Dominion Museum as a result of the government scheme. The Wellington Beautifying Society supplied all the trees as part of 1,000 trees and shrubs donated to Wellington City Council.9

It was remarked on the day of the mass planting that in a nearby grove of trees which divided the National Art Gallery and Dominion Museum property from the Wellington Technical College grounds, there stood a pohutukawa that had been planted by the late Governor-General of New Zealand, Earl Jellicoe.10 The Director of Parks and Reserves Mr J. G. MacKenzie oversaw the planting. Mr MacKenzie persuaded garden groups and citizens to plant pohutukawa in Wellington suburbs. His influence over planting native trees in the Wellington area earned him the name “Pohutukawa Mac”.11

“A Big Task: A grader and a road roller have been brought into use at the Dominion Museum and National Art Gallery, where the slopes of the ground around the Carillon tower are being prepared for the laying out of gardens and lawns”.

Evening Post, 14 May 1936.8

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8 Evening Post, Volume CXXI, Issue 113, 14 May 1936, Page 14
11 Duthie, Donal. Wellington’s Pohutukawas. New Zealand Gardener, Apr 1993; v.49 n.4:p.24-25
Arbor Day

“Arbor Day is of great significance to those who love beauty. Even in these hard and difficult times do not let us lose our balance, or neglect what is beautiful. If we plant trees we will have something we will be proud of. While I am planting this tree, I hope that it will flourish, as all the other trees planted here today” Lord Galway, 1940.

World War II

In the years following Pakeha settlement in the Wellington area, Pukeahu Mount Cook was utilised as a location to establish military defence. Prior to the land being cleared to build the National War Memorial in 1932, the hill had housed an army barracks, a police station and a gaol. In 1942 during World War II the prominent hill was again occupied by armed forces. On 8 June 1942 a large part of the Dominion Museum and National Art Gallery was taken over by the Royal New Zealand Air Force at short notice and the reference collections and displays were abandoned.13

Post World War II

In a memorandum to the Wellington City Council dated 1 March 1945, the Director of Parks and Reserves Mr J. G. MacKenzie advised the council on the condition of the Dominion Museum and National Art Gallery grounds. The air force had seriously affected the grounds during the war years due to the installation of underground air raid shelters and the occupation of the buildings. The director hoped to improve the condition of the grounds during the winter months.14

A year later the Dominion Museum had not been returned to civic use and the Government was criticised for not taking any action. With the sustained occupation by the air force, the buildings and the grounds remained in a “disgraceful mess”. It was thought it would take up to a year to repair the 250 broken windows, replace five miles of broken shelving and to restore the damaged walls.15

When the Dominion Museum finally re-opened in September 1949 under a new director, Dr R. A. Falla, it had taken 11 months to restore the building and to re-establish roles for the museum staff. During the seven years that the museum and art gallery was closed to the public, staff had mostly focused on research and curation of collections.

With the museum experiencing a new beginning, it was time to rehabilitate the grounds and gardens surrounding the building and the National War Memorial Carillon.
10,700 Trees for Planting
The formation of bomb shelters at Parliament House and at the Dominion Museum and National Art Gallery had seriously affected the surrounding landscape. Arbor Day 1945 saw a great many trees being planted at the Parliamentary grounds and all over Wellington.

From the 10,700 seedlings raised by the Wellington Beautifying Society, trees were being sent out to Paraparaumu, the Hutt Valley and even to Picton. The majority of the trees were pohutukawa, although a few notable oaks were planted in public ceremonies too. Three official oaks were planted which were robustly opposed by the pohutukawa supporters. The support of the Wellington Beautifying Society enabled the people of Wellington to resume the planting of pohutukawa.

As Pukeahu Mount Cook recovered from World War II, the nation was still scarred by the loss of 11,900 men and women who had served in the war.

The people of Wellington had supported service men and women during the First and Second World Wars in various ways. In World War I Lady Pomare and Lady Liverpool organised Māori and Pakeha women to raise money and knit woollen items for soldiers on the front. Women and children from all over Aotearoa New Zealand devoted time to the cause in both world wars.

A power shovel excavating soil for the removal of the air raid shelters from the grounds of Parliament, Wellington, March 1945.

Source: Alexander Turnbull Library; Ref: 1/4-001857-F; Photograph John Dobree Pascoe

Members of the 28th Māori Battalion returning home on the troopship Monarch after World War II; Wellington Harbour 23 January 1945.

Source: Alexander Turnbull Library; Ref: 1/4-001635-F above; Ref: 1/4-002079-F below; Photograph John Dobree Pascoe.

16 Evening Post, Volume CXL, Issue 27, 1 August 1945, Page 8
17 Evening Post, Volume CXL, Issue 8, 10 July 1945, Page 6
Te Atiawa Iwi Honour Pacific Island Warriors

During World War II, Wellington’s Te Atiawa iwi formed an important connection with the Pacific Islands through the marriage of a prominent Te Atiawa descendant and a Rarotongan ariki (chief).

Te Atiawa, as tangata whenua of Wellington, farewelled troops as they left from New Zealand, either from Featherston, Palmerston North or Wellington and then welcomed them back to Wellington on their return home.

When the Pacific Island volunteers fought for New Zealand they were sometimes enlisted in the 28th Māori Battalion.

With a long history between local Wellington iwi and the Pacific Island people it was appropriate to acknowledge the service of Pacific Island volunteers in a distinctive way. Pacific Island people celebrate their warriors with red flowers. The only trees to grow red flowers in New Zealand are the pohutukawa and northern and southern rata.

In recognition of the fallen Pacific Island whanau, Te Atiawa iwi planted pohutukawa all over the city, in particular at the National War Memorial so that the trees would bloom red flowers to welcome the warriors home.

Pohutukawa bloom at the National War Memorial service to mark the winding up of the 28th Māori Battalion Association on 1 December 2012.

Planted “Thick as Cabbages”

The long-awaited Hall of Memories was officially opened on 5 April 1964. It was built below the Carillon to become the second part of the National War Memorial.

In a letter dated February 1964, the Director of the Dominion Museum, Dr Falla expressed his appreciation of the improved grounds to the Director of Parks and Reserves. Dr Falla reflected on the earlier interest of the previous director, Dr W R B Oliver in the planting of native trees and shrubs, some of which had disappeared and others that were still flourishing in the grounds of the Dominion Museum and National Art Gallery.

The loss of a pohutukawa at the request of the Carillon Committee was especially disappointing as the committee had removed a tree to improve the viewing of the Carillon for a royal visit which was later cancelled. Staff at the museum sought to improve future communication involving tree planting and removal.18

The response from the Director of Parks Edward Hutt showed the Parks and Reserves Department was eager to work with the museum to avoid mistakes made in the past, in particular in the 1930s when “native plants, including forest trees, were put in almost as thick as one would plant cabbages, with the inevitable result”.19

“Native plants, including forest trees, were put in almost as thick as one would plant cabbages”.
Edward Hutt, Director of Parks, 1964.

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Developing the Driveway Gardens

Communication between the Dominion Museum and National Art Gallery and the Parks and Reserve Department continued, resulting in further plans to develop the gardens at the driveway entrance and in the formal plots at each side of the National War Memorial fountain.

In 1970 it was suggested that trees be planted near the wall on the western side of the National War Memorial to close any gaps in previous plantings.  

Source: Wellington City Council Archives; 1968 Planting Schedule.

Pohutukawa Ceremony

By the 1980s the National Art Gallery and Dominion Museum had outgrown the building. The pohutukawa trees, like the museum’s collections had continued to gain in significance.

When the Dominion Museum was transformed into Te Papa Tongarewa and moved to the waterfront, it was agreed that a pohutukawa tree would go with it. The company that had been hired to move the tree was unaware of how deeply embedded the tree roots were. It took 11 days to safely remove the pohutukawa tree and transport it to its new home in front of Te Papa.

A group of Taranaki kaumatua led by Koro Sam Raumati conducted a removal ceremony on 26 October 1995. The tree arrived safely at Te Papa on 3 November.

“This is just one way that Te Atiawa continues to maintain the relationship between our taonga and the land. By moving the pohutukawa tree to the place where our taonga reside, the spiritual safety of our nation’s treasures is being preserved.” Liz Mellish, Te Atiawa.

The tree at Te Papa. Source: Memorial Park Alliance; Photograph Colin McLellan, 2014.

Te Atiawa kaumatua from left, Te Ru Wharehoka, Ted Tāmati and Koro Sam Raumati at the ceremonial removal of the pohutukawa. Source: Te Papa Tongarewa 1995
Plans for the Tangata Whenua Gardens

The building of the Dominion Museum and National War Memorial has somewhat subdued the deeper history of Pukeahu Mount Cook but, as the excavation of Buckle Street has proven, the archaeology of the landscape remains buried underneath. The pohutukawa trees are a reminder of the rich heritage of Pukeahu and serve to reconcile the values of the tangata whenua with the concept of a national site for remembrance.

Within the park an area titled Tangata Whenua Gardens is being constructed with beds on either side of the National War Memorial. The gardens celebrate the special relationship between Māori and Pakeha and will include plantings, paved areas, rock features and a sculpture of cultural significance.

Source: Ministry for Culture and Heritage; National War Memorial Park Planting Plan 2014
**Summary**

Although so many trees were planted at the National War Memorial and within the grounds of the Dominion Museum and Art Gallery in the past 100 years, the occupation of the Armed Forces at the site during World War II caused significant damage to the grounds, meaning that further planting was necessary. The trees that remain will gain even more significance as they are integrated into the new National War Memorial Park and Mount Cook hill will be known again as Pukeahu.

*Source: Te Papa Archives: MU000345/002/0002; Matthews. M. Pencil Drawings;1936.*
Facts about Pohutukawa

Scientific name: Metrosideros Excelsa

Pohutukawa grow naturally in the northern part of New Zealand and are prominent around the northern coasts of the North Island. The tree is known also as the New Zealand Christmas Tree due to the timing of its flowering and has been widely planted along coastal areas as far south as Dunedin.

The most famous pohutukawa tree marks a special place of significance for Māori, Te Rerenga Wairua (Cape Reinga). This place is known as the last departure point for spirits leaving our shores as they slip down the roots of the ancient pohutukawa and into the sea on their way back to the place of the ancestors, Hawaiki-a-nui.21

Pohutukawa trees are also valued for their strong durable timber and were used by both Māori and early settlers as a building material.22 Bees, birds and humans have collected the nectar from the pohutukawa flowers. Māori used the nectar for food and to treat sore throats and the bark also exhibited medicinal qualities as a treatment for dysentery and diarrhoea.23

Source: Alexander Turnbull Library; Sarah Anne Featon, 1848-1927; Pohutukawa. Metrosideros tomentosa