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### **Native timber project breathes new life into Northland history**

Family politics, a 120-year-old love story and modern-day research to see if native wood can be harvested sustainably for commercial use have converged in an historic church in Northland's Matauri Bay.

The iconic Samuel Marsden Māori Anglican Church building is dedicated to the memory of Reverend Samuel Marsden, whose early missionary success can in part be attributed to chief Ruatara who provided the preacher a safe place to rest at Matauri. Marsden then sailed on to hold the first official New Zealand church service at Rangihoua in the Bay of Islands on Christmas Day, 1814.

The final step in the recent renovation of the 123-year-old building was a thanksgiving service held today for a wooden floor made from tōtara harvested on the Kaeo farm of John McGee.

In 2015 Melanie Chandler-Winters, a member of the Whangaroa Pastorate, spoke with John about the church floor. Her concern was that particle-board had been laid in place of the native timber floor which the church could not salvage during restorations. John revealed that he was harvesting tōtara on his farm as part of a study.

This was the Tōtara Industry Pilot (TIP), a two-year assessment of whether a business case exists for a new Northland industry based on the sustainable management of farmed tōtara. A small group of mostly Northland-based interests was driving the study. Current TIP partners include the Northland Tōtara Working Group, Tane's Tree Trust, Te Taitokerau Māori Forestry Collective, Northland Inc, Scion (New Zealand Forest Research Institute Limited) and Te Uru Rākau.

A decision was made to use some of the tōtara wood from John's farm for the floor of the church. Over a number of months the church and the TIP steering group worked together to mill and finish the timber and install the floor. It is fitting, given the tōtara was harvested only 20 minutes from the church, that the new floor is TIP's first demonstration of sustainably harvested native timber from Northland.

The floor was blessed today by Reverends Kevin Herewini and Wasine Stewart in the presence of members of the Anglican Church Pastorate and Reverend Canon Arthur Hokianga of the Anglican Diocese.

Also in attendance were Ngati Kura kaumatua Nau Epiha, other members of the Matauri Bay community and representatives from the TIP partner organisations including Minister Shane Jones, Minister of Forestry and Minister of Regional Economic Development; the head of Te Uru Rākau (Forestry NZ) Julie Collins; Paul Quinlan of the Northland Tōtara Working Group; Peter Berg, Chairman of the TIP steering group and Tane's Tree Trust; Pita Tipene, Chairman of Te Tai Tokerau Māori Forestry Collective; David Wilson of Northland Inc; and Arron Judson, general manager of marketing and partnerships at Scion.

The McGee family's bitter-sweet connection with the church stretches back to the early 1890s and involves young love, the racial divide of the day, family politics and an unexpected reunion with TIP unwittingly at the centre.

Mr McGee's great-grandfather, also called John, was a whaler and gum-digger who lived among the māori of Matauri Bay, learned te reo and married Harata Tame in 1895. Harata died three years later at the age of 24 and is now buried in the churchyard next to her mother.

Great-grandfather McGee then married again. His first union was never openly discussed in his new family and his living descendants had little information about his connection to Harata.

But this story will not end today, thanks to an entirely unexpected twist. Unknown to Mr McGee, Harata's namesake from another branch of the Tame family, Harata Toms, is a current member of the Church's congregation. Whether by chance or divine intervention, the families met only when organisers came together to plan the thanksgiving service - to the great delight of all involved.

Mr McGee, Ms Toms and other members of both families were also at today's ceremony.

"This story typifies the way that Northland communities are still brought together and bonded by the unique natural resources of the region," said Scion's general manager of marketing and partnerships, Arron Judson. "We think the region will be interested to see this beautiful native timber being used in home furnishings and interiors again, and to learn that the economic returns from tōtara are potentially significant, many times the value of Pinus radiata."

"The TIP project is also looking at the cultural and regional values associated with sustainably-managed and farmed Tōtara," said Pita Tipene, Chairman of Te Tai Tokerau Māori Forestry Collective. "There is old and new knowledge, that is distinctly Northland, locked up in our local and regional communities – skills, ideas about forestry and uses for timber and wood. We're thinking about the development of our mokopuna and what our land can sustain when we consider a future tōtara industry. So far we're encouraged by the results".

Northland was selected for the TIP project as it has an unusually large resource of naturally regenerated tōtara on farmland, the right weather and geographic attributes to support tōtara growth, the necessary infrastructure in terms of drying kilns and mills, and proximity to the high-value timber markets of Auckland.

Regenerating farm tōtara is fast growing, and the wood used on the church floor came from trees that were, on average, 80 years old. That is young for a tōtara, which can live for hundreds of years. The range in colouring is a feature of young tōtara.

### **About Scion**

Scion is a Crown research institute that undertakes research, science and technology development for the forestry, wood product, wood-derived materials and other biomaterial sectors. Scion's work contributes to beneficial economic, environmental and social outcomes for New Zealand. The institute employs approximately 300 people and has its head office in Rotorua. Scion is the trading name for New Zealand Forest Research Institute Limited. For more information, please visit [www.scionresearch.com](http://www.scionresearch.com)

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### **About TIP**

The Northland Tōtara Industry Pilot (TIP) is a two-year project which started in April 2018. It will assess the forest resource; harvest and process up to 500 m<sup>3</sup> of farm-tōtara logs; collect data and research results from drying studies and trials; conduct milling trials, product and market testing; and develop and analyse the business case for a regional tōtara timber industry. The project promotes the sustainable management of tōtara on private and Maori-land, for all the benefits that native forests can bring. For more information visit [www.totaraindustry.co.nz](http://www.totaraindustry.co.nz).