

PRESS CUTTING

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The Newborn Mission Anglican Church in Maclean Bay.

love
2 stories

A church renovation has revealed a past romance and a passion for a Northland resource which could grow into a sustainable industry, writes Lundy Laird

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We're looking at how we can have a sustainable industry as well as a viable market. It's the very definition of a 20th-century commercial model.



John McKean... The renovation project was a labor of love...



The Samuel Marsden Māori Anglican Church at Matauri Bay.



2 love stories

A church renovation has revealed a past romance and a passion for a Northland resource which could grow into a sustainable industry, writes **Lindy Laird**.

Family secrets, a 120-year-old love story and research into a Northland timber resource became entwined during the restoration of a historic church. The Samuel Marsden Māori Anglican Church building at Matauri Bay is dedicated to the memory of the man whose early missionary success is partly due to the powerful chief Ruatara who provided the preacher a safe anchorage in the bay.

Marsden sailed from there to Rangihoua in the Bay of Islands where he held the first official New Zealand church service on Christmas Day 1814.

The 123-year-old church named for him at Matauri Bay has undergone renovation over the last several years and, in January, a thanksgiving service was held.

It included the blessing of a new wooden floor made from tōtara harvested on the Kaoo farm of John McGee.

It was a thanksgiving also for the reuniting of two families, one of which had no idea about a 120-year-old love story and their connection with a Māori woman buried in the church graveyard.

The newer chapter of the story began in 2015 when a member of the Whangaroa Pastorate told McGee she was concerned the church renovation process would include particle board replacing the old native timber floor, which could not be salvaged.

McGee told her he was harvesting tōtara on his farm as part of a business case study involving government, iwi and other forestry interests.

It was agreed that tōtara from McGee's farm could be used for the church floor.

That involved the felled logs being shipped to Rotorua and going through a series of tests at the Scion facility (formerly the Forest Research Centre). The logs were then milled and shipped back to the little Northland church.

It was because of his offer to donate



John McGee speaking at the blessing of the new tōtara floor at Samuel Marsden Māori Anglican Church, Matauri Bay.

Photo / Due North PR

the tōtara that a lost chapter from McGee's family past was revealed.

His great-grandfather, also called John McGee, was a whaler and gum digger who lived among Māori at Matauri Bay, spoke te reo and married Harata Tame in 1895.

Neither of their families were very happy about the union.

Harata died three years later at the age of 24 and is buried in the Matauri Bay churchyard, next to her mother.

McGee married again, to a European woman, and his first union with the young Māori woman was never openly discussed in his new family.

The story of Harata, who was never

related by blood to McGee's descendants, slipped out of family knowledge.

Whether by chance or divine intervention, the two families' entwined story came to light during the planning of the thanksgiving service for the new church floor.

Harata's kinswoman and namesake, Harata Toms, is one of the church's congregation and knew the story of the earlier Harata and McGee.

John McGee said his family has since traced a copy of his great-grandfather's and Harata's marriage certificate, and have cleaned up the old graves of Harata and her mother.

That death, long ago in the 1890s, may have been the only bittersweet connection between the two families had it not been for McGee's offer of tōtara.

He's happy with the outcome all around.

"It's been one of those pleasant stories."

We're looking at how we can have a sustainable industry as well as a viable market... I'd be very disappointed if it ended up leading to a 20th century-style commercial model.





Paul Quinlan on John McGee's Kaeo farm in the stand of tōtara where some were milled for the church floor.

Photo / Due North PR



Another love story

That's one love story. The other involves a widely shared love of native timber and the efforts of a group of people to research a business case for a small Northland industry.

The timber is tōtara, like that which John McGee provided for the church's new floor.

McGee is owner of many tōtara he said grow like weeds on his Kaeo farm. He hopes a current study will shine a new light on the timber's future for many landowners.

A group of stakeholders are halfway through a research project into the viability of milling tōtara that have regenerated in paddocks, scrub, along riverbanks and hillsides.

Tōtara growing in small clusters or individually are called farm-tōtara, to differentiate them from old-growth, forest specimens.

While people who use timber already know this – and it's a fact proven in hundreds of years of first Māori, then European, practice – Podocarpus tōtara is an excellent native softwood timber, easy to mill, dry, work and finish, and suitable for a wide range of building and joinery application, from ancient waka to futuristic architecture.

McGee's tōtara went through rigorous tests because the regenerated resource is not the same as the old-growth trees that the traditional reputation and use was based on.

Without other trees competing with them, farm-grown tōtara grows quickly, and can be harvested at around 80 years old.

"The younger trees have less heartwood, different colour, more knots, and durability, drying time and performance is not quantified for comparison," tōtara researcher Paul Quinlan said.

"In some ways, we need to treat it like getting to know and understand a new timber species. It will need to find new and suitable uses.

"It is what we have to work with, so we need to understand all its attributes and characteristics, etc. Technology such as finger-jointing and lamination also

open possibilities to upgrade short pieces, etc. But we need to have a market."

While there is not yet a market, there are an estimated 200,000ha of the trees in Northland.

The Tōtara Industry Pilot (TIP) is a two-year assessment of whether a business case exists for a Northland industry based on the sustainable management of regenerated tōtara on private land.

It's not a new idea. Twelve landowners have been involved, but the Northland Tōtara Working Group (NTWG), established in 2005, has more than 300 contacts on its database.

So, tōtara research and the timber's potential stems way back before the advent of the Provincial Growth Fund, and \$1 million doled out by its purse-holding minister Shane Jones to investigate sustainable forestry in Northland. Part of that \$1m is going toward the tōtara pilot.

One estimate that boosted the tōtara study funding holds that the industry has the potential to produce \$7.5m per year, and if the wood is processed into higher value products, the industry could be worth up to \$60m per year.

But does that mean commercial scale operations, or the lighter footprint of selectively picking trees out of paddocks?

Landscape architect Paul Quinlan is the author of several older reports on the tōtara subject, is part of NTWG, is one of the current research leaders and was formerly on Northland's now defunct Landcare Trust.

"Sustainable" means not clear-felling but selective felling, and the TIP study is mostly focused on whether a business case supports that, not the timber's qualities, Quinlan said.

Also, as it currently stands the law is ill-suited to encouraging small-scale indigenous species forestry, because growing trees commercially naturally has harvesting as part of the goal – and the law designed to protect native trees now inhibits development possibilities.

But a landowner has the right to fell their own trees for private use under the Forests Amendment Act, with a "personal use permit". Larger and commercial harvests require commercial permits.

Currently, owners can bulldoze, burn or bury as much unwanted tōtara as they

like, or sell it as firewood, but they can't sell it as timber.

Possibly the steering group, with representatives from Scion, Ministry for Primary Industries, the Northland Tōtara Working group, Tai Tokerau Māori Forests and Northland Inc. will write into its report a call for law change.

While the pilot is not looking at a plantation model, the study's findings will likely go on to inform further research into commercial development.

Quinlan accepts that as inevitable, but is hopeful the pilot will change the way the timber is made available to its potential market.

It's a sometimes hard to swallow reality that the market always dictates what land use will be, and can have devastating outcomes on a region's ecology and landscape, he said.

Case in point: the development of huge-scale dairy farming in central Otago.

But tōtara, a sustainably managed resource with high market values, a pioneering species growing randomly among Northland's green pastures, streamlines, scrubby backblocks, collectively owned or unproductive land?

Collectivity, Quinlan adds, is key to the light footprint tōtara harvest/growing/selling dream and, with the right management model, will ensure a minimum impact on the landscape.

Integrating more native forest areas into farmland is a natural complement to the selective logging of existing specimens, and would be "incentivised" by a viable tōtara industry.

"We're looking at how we can have a sustainable industry as well as a viable market. I believe we can use the sustainable timber model to incentivise land-use, not have the market influence it," Quinlan said.

"The TIP project is focused on making sure this is not business as usual, but a new practice. I'd be very disappointed if it ended up leading to a 20th century-style commercial model."

He admits to a vision for the future, which he says everyone involved in the project shares.

"See a perfect little model of how business and people and the landscape can interact, in an ideal world."