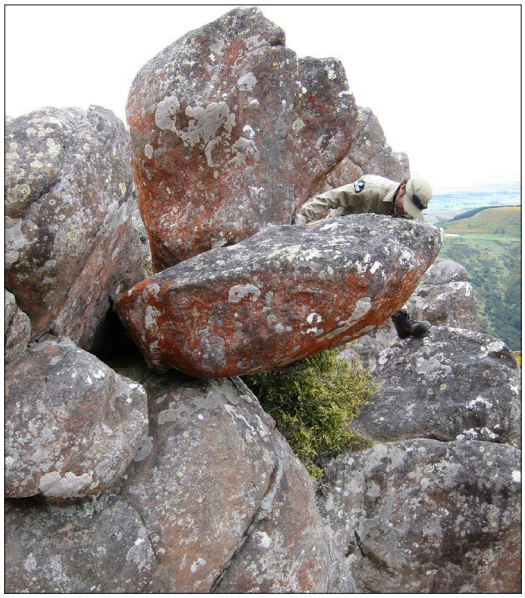
a passion for the Port Hills

Newsletter, February 2013

Volunteer, Ohinetahi Reserve & Omahu Bush update

Our work parties remain as active as ever. Despite being unable to access many tracks in the Sumner/ Redcliffs area, the **Eastenders** are meeting regularly in good numbers with undiminished enthusiasm. Recently they have worked on tracks in upper Victoria Park, Coronation Reserve and the Crater Rim Walkway at Mt Ada, and there is definitely no shortage of work to keep them occupied. Similarly, with **Ohinetahi Reserve**, Anne Kennedy and her group continues to meet weekly, but are restricted to the safe working areas we have identified. Whilst the impact of the earthquakes is just a 'blip' in the regeneration of the bush and its wildlife, there are going to be issues in the foreseeable future with track maintenance and dealing with weed and animal pests. As with the Eastenders, there will be no shortage of work. Paul Tebbutt's small group managing **Omahu Bush** goes from strength to strength, and in addition to combatting the on-going problems of vandalism and rubbish around the car park area, is spending time on maintaining the tracks, tackling gorse and broom, and the animal pest programme. We were delighted to be awarded a Selwyn Environmental Grant from the District Council amounting to $4,882.30 which will equip the group with tools and supplies to help with maintenance and to step up its fight with plant and animal pests.



Boulder above the climbing area at Gibraltar Rock

Fallen rocks at Ohinetahi

Mt Pleasant gun emplacements

The Society is delighted that our volunteer hours are still averaging over 4,000 annually. It also needs to be remembered that we have a committed and enthusiastic Board, all of whom give their time voluntarily to ensure the smooth running of your Society. If you feel that you are able to give some time to one of our work parties, please contact one of the convenors. Everyone involved will tell you that it is very rewarding, and that we really can make a difference.

At long last, we are making progress on access to Ohinetahi Reserve. As a small voluntary organisation, the Society makes no apologies for taking a very cautious attitude to public safety, but it has been a very frustrating time for all involved. One of the problems has been that geotechnical work and the interpretation of information has been complex, and the process for reopening tracks continually under review. There is also a big difference between tramping in the back country or the mountains where there is a greater awareness of risk, and areas like the Port Hills, close to urban centres, where a significant proportion of visitors are there for 'an afternoon stroll'. The Board has agreed a proposal for a survey of Ohinetahi which will identify tracks or sections of tracks that have a normal and acceptable risk, and that can be reopened, tracks that will require minor work, and those areas which will need further investigation and more substantial remediation work. To carry this out will not be cheap, and an application for funding has been submitted.

By contrast, the situation at Omahu Bush is much more positive. As indicated in previous newsletters, the bush area was unaffected by the earthquakes and has been open throughout. Following a request from the Alpine Club to allow rock-climbing at Gibraltar Rock, we have investigated this area in more detail. The conclusion was that it is safe to reopen Prendergast's Track, access to the summit of Gibraltar Rock is safe, and that by the Alpine Club removing one boulder from above the rock-climbing area, this can also be reopened. Work is currently in hand to install appropriate signage.

See page 2 for latest track access information...

Access to other walking tracks —latest information:

Christchurch City Council continues to work hard to reopen walking tracks, and recognises how important this is.

- Remediation work has started on the Eastender's Track from Barnett Park and this should reopen shortly.
- The Captain Thomas Track will be re-routed from Lower Sumnervale Drive, and this, plus the Scarborough Bluffs Track on the other side of the valley will be open by June 2013
- Work is in hand to re-route part of the Bridle Path on the Lyttelton side of the hill. Remediation work to open the Bridle Path on the city side starts in February. The track will be open by June 2013.
- Tracks in Urumau Reserve will be open by June 2013.
- The rock climbing area at the end of Albert Terrace will be available by June 2013.
- A new track has been formed from Mt Cavendish saddle above the bluffs in Lyttelton Reserve which goes to Mt Pleasant Summit and the gun emplacements.
- DOC is investigating the reopening of the Major Hornbrook Track.

For up to date information, visit the Council website at:

http://www.ccc.govt.nz/cityleisure/parkswalkways/popularparks/theporthills/index.aspx

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We are a voluntary society working to enhance, preserve and protect the natural environment, beauty and open character of the Port Hills of Banks Peninsula for people to enjoy.
We need and welcome contributions to our work through memberships, donations and corporate sponsorships, participation in work parties (non-members welcome - but why not join us as well!), and bequests.

EDITOR: **JOHN GOODRICH** DESIGN: **THOMASGRAPHIK**

Membership

It's that time of year again—when I thank all our members for their support during the past year. Not surprisingly given the on-going challenges that face many of us, membership had reduced slightly to 377. However, we still have a number of tramping clubs and walking groups as members, and together with the reciprocal membership arrangements with other local conservation-based groups, our total 'constituency' remains significant. For those whose subscriptions are due this year, an invoice is enclosed with this newsletter. Once again, I'd like to stress that the most successful way to recruit new members is 'word of mouth', so please talk to your family, whanau and friends about our work and show others our newsletters.

Outings

Many thanks to all those members who responded to the request for views about the Society's outings programme. Only a few members responded, and from this, it is evident that a majority feel that outings and events are not a particularly important part of our activities. This is borne out by a notable reduction in members attending. Notwithstanding this, the Board will have another look at organising something for the coming year.

Animal pest control

As you will be aware from previous newsletters, the Society carries out animal pest control at both **Ohinetahi Reserve** and **Omahu Bush**. Target species are possums, stoats, ferrets, weasels (mustelids), and rats. All these species are recognised as serious enemies of New Zealand's biodiversity. Feral cats can be a problem, as can that supposed-friend-of-the-gardener, hedgehogs. Pest control is by poison bait stations for possums and kill traps for mustelids and rats. At Omahu, there is also evidence of feral pigs, and deer have been seen on several occasions. Whilst there is no doubt that are efforts are paying off, as witnessed by the 'health' of the regenerating bush and the increase in bird numbers, we have still a long way to go in monitoring and understanding the real impact of what we are doing. At **Ohinetahi Reserve** Tony Edney has been keeping records of our trapping since 2009. Whilst the number of animals caught is not great, generally, successful kills, with the exception of rats, has reduced, and we seemed to have solved a minor problem we had with feral cats. Interestingly, the most numerous animal caught is the hedgehog, with a total of 35 so far this year. It is important to remember that all these animals have no natural predators in New Zealand. In their natural habitats, the predator/prey relationship controls populations—low prey means low predator numbers, and vice-versa. Here are some facts about these pests:

Continued next page...

Possums

- The possum found in New Zealand is the Australian brush-tailed possum, a protected species there.
- Here, they have no natural enemies, and our native trees have not developed any defence against browsing such as spines, prickles or poisonous leaves.
- Possums are found all across New Zealand, with the exception of the mountainous high rainfall areas of Fiordland.
- It is estimated that there are 30 million possums in New Zealand, and that they eat around 9,000 tonnes of leaves, berries and fruit each night.
- They were introduced for the fur trade, which at its height accounted for 20 million animals a year. However, even this had no impact on overall numbers.
- They will literally 'eat a tree to death', returning each night until all the leaves, berries and fruit have gone.
- In addition to destroying native bird habitat, they will also take eggs and chicks, and have been known to evict kiwi from their burrows.
- Possums can spread bovine tuberculosis.

Mustelids

- Stoats, ferrets and weasels are part of the mustelidae family, all of which are carnivorous, members of which occur in many areas of the world. The family includes such diverse animals as wolverine, otters and martens.
- They were introduced to New Zealand to control rabbits, and were released onto farmland, despite the protests of bird experts.
- Whilst by 1903 the government had changed its policy on releasing mustelids, they remained protected until 1936.

Ferrets

- Ferrets are the largest of the three introduced mustelids, growing to 48-56cm, about the length of a small cat.
- They are successful breeders, producing four to eight kittens a year.
- Ferrets hunt at night, and are good climbers, meaning that nests in trees are not safe from them.
- They are one of the few predators that are able to kill adult kiwi.
- Ferrets were first introduced in 1878 into the Conway Valley.
- Unlike the other mustelids in New Zealand, ferrets are kept as pets and are farmed for their fur. Farms were established in the 1980s, but many escaped or were released when the market collapsed.
- Recent reports show that ferrets have extended deeper into the bush from farmland, scrub or the edge of forested areas.
- New Zealand has a dubious claim to fame—it has the largest population of wild ferrets of any country in the world.

Stoats

- Stoats, which were introduced in 1884, are the most common of the introduced mustelids and have adapted the most successfully.
- They can be found almost anywhere from beaches to high country (and the Secretary's friends' kitchen!).
- Stoats grow to 34–40cm long and are about half the size of a rabbit.
- They are fierce fighters, will mesmerise birds by circling round them, can attack prey larger than themselves, and will kill more than they require for food.
- Female stoats can carry fertilised eggs inside the body from mating in summer until the following spring. Young stoats are adult at two months, and female kittens can be mated whilst still in the nest.
- It is estimated that stoats kill an average of 40 North Island brown kiwi chicks a day, a total of 15,000 per year.

Weasels

- Weasels are the smallest of our three mustelids, growing to 20-25 cm.
- They are not as common as ferrets and stoats, but nevertheless still have a major impact on native fauna, especially lizards.
- As there isn't the same prey available for them, weasels have not adapted as easily to the New Zealand environment as ferrets and stoats. They are usually found where there are good supplies of mice, such as gardens and near buildings, rather than open paddocks.

Rats

- There are three types of rat in New Zealand, the Pacific rat or kiore, the Norway or brown rat and the ship or common rat.
- Kiore, which were introduced by Maori settlers, and have cultural and spiritual significance to some Maori, are now found only in Fiordland, Stewart Island and some off-shore islands.
- The Norway rat is the larger of the two European rats. Both are associated with human activity and are found in houses, tips, waterways and cropland.
- Rats have a major impact on New Zealand's wildlife as they eat birds, their eggs and chicks, lizards and invertebrates.
- They also eat a wide range of native fruits and other plant material which puts them into competition with native wildlife.
- Ship rats cause the most damage as they are good climbers. However, Norway rats are large enough to kill nesting adult seabirds.

We urge you to read the article "Why I enjoyed the Rena disaster" by Graeme Hill in the November issue of the Forest and Bird magazine. This draws attention to the staggering fact that every year, 26,000,000 native New Zealand forest birds are killed by mammalian predators. This was highlighted in a paper by John Innes of Landcare Research.

All of the above can make depressing reading. The Department of Conservation openly acknowledges, for instance, that trapping alone will not solve the mustelid problem. However, there is a significant amount of research being conducted, and everyone involved hopes that it is only a matter of time before more effective methods are found. For example, a poison effective on feral pigs should be available in the near future. There is no debate about the impact of introduced animal pests, but a new debate is starting, and this is around ethics of the various methods of control. It can be argued that there is a significant difference between an instant kill, and the administering of poison that in some cases can take up to two weeks to take effect. It will be interesting to see what impact this debate will have on pest control.

(Sources: Christchurch City Library, Department of Conservation, Kiwi Conservation Club, *Wild About New Zealand*)

Hedgehogs

- Hedgehogs were first brought to New Zealand by acclimatisation societies to remind settlers of their homeland, and were later introduced in greater numbers to control garden pests such as slugs, snails and grass grubs.
- There's now estimated to be between 2–4 hedgehogs per hectare with as many as eight in some areas.
- Hedgehogs, which hibernate in winter, produce two litters per year of 4–7 young.
- The preferred habitat is lowland pastoral areas, but recent studies have found them in large forest tracts, for example Rotoiti, and above the bush line in extensive forest areas such as the Kawekas.
- Despite their numbers, the impact on the New Zealand environment is only recently beginning to be understood in detail.
- They have a voracious appetite for invertebrates and take many endemic species. One hedgehog was found with 283 weta legs in its stomach.
- The eggs of riverbed breeding birds such as banded dotterel and black-fronted terns are at severe risk from hedgehogs, and chicks of a variety of ground-nesting birds are also taken. Lizards are also predated on a regular basis, particularly in cooler periods when lizard activity slows.

Feral Cats

- Feral cats have been branded as 'the ultimate predators' in New Zealand and have been nominated as among 100 of the "World's Worst" invaders. Our unique native wildlife is particularly vulnerable to predation by cats.
- Responsible ownership of domestic cats and de-sexing help minimise the negative impacts cats have on NZ wildlife.

The following is the first part of an article that appeared in the November-December 2002 issue of New Zealand Geographic. It is reproduced here with kind permission of the author, photographer and writer, Rob Brown (www.robbrown.co.nz)

A Heart for the Port Hills

I hunkered down in my jacket as the evening breeze rustled the tussock. In the distance two climbers made their way up one of Castle Rock's more prominent turrets. Close by an elderly couple approached their car at the end of an afternoon's walk. Chatter from a small gaggle of mountain bikers floated up on the wind before they turned off the main trail and sped back down to the city. My dogs, panting with exhaustion after another fruitless rabbiting expedition, collapsed in a contented heap next to me. As the sun sank over the Southern Alps, Christchurch's Port Hills were, as usual, emanating their powerful aura of freedom. I grew up in a small Waikato farming community, and an enduring memory of my youth is the sense of space and liberty I felt walking the backblocks of my parents' farm. University, work, the search for adventure— all contributed to a move to the city, something of an inevitability for my generation of farm kids. I am still an uncertain city dweller, for whom the proximity of the Port Hills is a godsend. Without the opportunity to roam across them, to revisit the "landscapes of the mind", I don't think I would survive here for long. For many years I happily explored these hills without ever wondering how they came to be a public asset. Now I rarely visit them without paying silent homage to the heroic efforts of one man: irascible, audacious Harry Ell. The struggle to see the Port Hills preserved for public enjoyment, and, central to this, the dream of creating a walkway between Christchurch and Akaroa, was an obsession Ell pursued for some 30 years, until his death in 1934.

Growing up on his father's farm at Halswell, now an outer suburb of Christchurch, Harry Ell had the Port Hills on his doorstep. He regularly rode his white pony up the bridle path through Kennedys Bush, on the hills' western flank, to the ridge crest. At that time native flora and fauna still had a grip, albeit a weakening one, on the slopes, and Ell's boyhood rambles instilled a love of nature that stayed with him all his life. It was at Kennedys Bush that Ell's crusade to protect the Port Hills would start, although not until campaigns of a different nature.
In 1879, following short spells as a junior attendant at the Canterbury Museum and working on a sheep station and at a wool-scourer's, Ell volunteered for the Armed Constabulary. He served for three years, helping crush resistance by Taranaki Maori at Parihaka (although he was subsequently critical of the race policies of the time). Returning to Christchurch, he took up civilian employment once again, working in the printing department of *The Press* and later with a firm of manufacturing stationers. In 1892, aged 30, he married Adelaide (Ada) Gee, whose conservative parents the liberal-minded Ell seems to have had a harder time charming than their daughter, although with equal success. He and Ada had two sons and three daughters, to whom Ell proved a caring if disciplinarian father: physical fitness, clod washes and outdoor living were mandatory for the Ell offspring. Of gentler, more retiring disposition than her husband—yet no less determined—Ada provided something of an antidote to the animated idealism so characteristic of all he undertook.

The 1880's were years of depression in New Zealand; jobs were scarce, wages low, living and working conditions poor. Those bent on remedying matters were drawn to the reformist agenda of the Liberal Party, in opposition to the governing Conservatives. Ell was among them, joining a variety of political, educational and social-service organisations. He was also an ardent prohibitionist, and it was

as such, in the 1896 election, which revolved largely around the issue of liquor trading, that he first stood for Parliament, backed by the National Council of Women. During the election campaign, a newspaper drew attention to that characteristic of Ell's passionate nature that would become the running theme of his Summit Road crusade in years to come—his propensity for forging ahead with schemes close to his heart without the necessary funds: *Mr Ell out-crimsons even Mr Smith and Mr Taylor [two fellow campaigners] in the brilliant red of radicalism. His socialism does not even pretend to have regard for the practical side or the possible. Money with him is no object. He advocates, as all candidates do, the old age pension scheme. But, says Mr Ell very finely "cost is out of the question. If it is right to do it, it should be done and done properly." This sanguine young man has apparently still to learn the value of money.*

Harry Ell, 1904

2nd floor and part of top row, women's shelters, Cashmere Sanatorium, 1913

Failing to win a seat at his first attempt, Ell was back in 1899, when, as an independent Liberal in the newly formed Christchurch South electorate (today known as Wigram and represented by Jim Anderton), he topped the poll and embarked upon a 20-year parliamentary career. Zealous and primed for action, Ell threw himself into the many social issues about which he felt so strongly. Following his appeals in the House concerning the damage caused to the colony by tuberculosis, for which there were no hospitals, a sanatorium was established in Cambridge, followed by another in Cashmere. While pressing the prohibitionist agenda, he made it clear he questioned the gaoling of alcoholics: surely more appropriate supervision could be devised. He also urged more humane treatment of the mentally ill, commonly regarded as criminal rather than sick, and was successful in having the term "lunatic" abolished. Like his fellow Liberals and the House's few Labour members, he argued for widows' and old age pensions, a 40-hour week, and better employment conditions and housing for labourers. He asked the Minister of Railways to provide foot-warmers in the frigid second-class carriages, and, as Postmaster General in the short-lived administration of Thomas Mackenzie, oversaw the introduction of slot telephones into New Zealand.

Ell's greatest parliamentary successes, however, concerned the preservation of New Zealand's native fauna and flora. At a time when forests were still falling to the axe and the fire to make way for grazing, he unrelentingly championed the setting aside of scenic reserves—"one hundred to one hundred and fifty acres of bush land every four or five miles…not merely [for] ourselves, but for the people who come after us. When once the bush is destroyed there will be no possibility of restoring it to its native beauty." Largely as a result of his persistence, the Scenery Preservation Act was passed in 1903, providing for a commission to investigate which areas were suitable for preservation. This legislation was amended in 1908 to provide for the formation of scenic reserves boards, thereby accelerating the setting aside of areas of scenic value. By the time Ell left Parliament 11 years later, more than 500 reserves had been created throughout the country; there had been fewer than 100 when he entered. It was a remarkable period for New Zealand conservation, a time when people were slowly waking up to the thoughtless destruction of the settler years. The two-pronged case Ell put for reserves was the precursor of the conservationist argument so familiar in New Zealand today: preservation of native wildlife and provision for outdoor recreation. Many of the

early reserves, such as Mount Cook/Aoraki and in the Paparoa Range, south of Westport, formed the basis of future national parks, but perhaps of greater significance were the numerous small reserves, both rural and close to urban areas, from which people from all over the country could benefit more regularly.

By the time Ell entered Parliament, Kennedys Bush was one of the few healthy areas of native forest left on Banks Peninsula. Following the passage of the Scenery Preservation Act, Ell and a friend, the eminent botanist Leonard Cockayne, requested that the area be acquired as a scenic reserve. Sympathetic to their cause, Premier Richard Seddon made a government offer of $2 for every $1 of public subscriptions. With the help of a small honorary committee, Ell set about collecting the necessary cash to purchase the land. To encourage the donation of money, Ell organised a picnic at the bush, but evidently such a wilderness journey was beyond the capabilities of most townspeople. Of the 500 who set out from the tram terminus at the foot of Dyers Pass Road, some 200 failed to find the site. Nevertheless, by September 1906 Ell had raised sufficient funds for the purchase of 21 ha, and Kennedys Bush was declared a Crown Reserve. Today 90 ha in area as a result of subsequent donations, it is one of 32 publicly owned reserves on the Port Hills, managed by the Christchurch City Council.

Roadmen building the Summit Road. Looking towards Kennedy Bush. [ca. 1910]

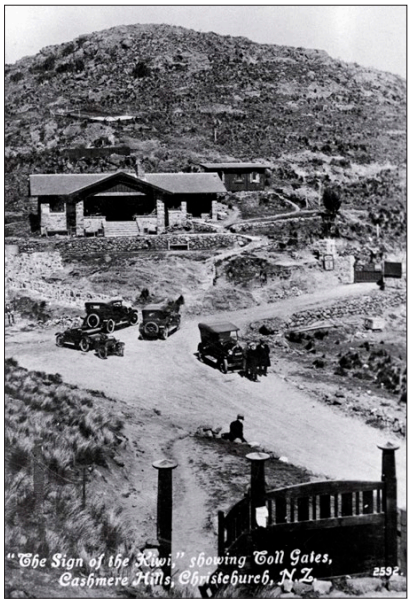
The idea of a summit road came to Ell during his drive to save Kennedys Bush, but it was originally the inspiration of another well-known Canterbury man, William Rolleston. In 1873, Rolleston had instigated the creation of the Summit Road Reserve, a strip of land extending 30 metres either side of the ridge crest. It was this reserve, which had lain idle for 30 years, that would provide the foundation for Ell's roadway. Ell's dream sprang from his unshakeable belief in a citizen's right to roam. At the time of his election to Parliament, local authorities were able to close roads with scant consideration for the wishes of the public, and there was a danger that such closures would soon deny ordinary people access to the Port Hills. To Ell this was an intolerable state of affairs, and he fought tenaciously – and successfully—for amendments to the Public Woks Act of 1900 that would prevent the closing of roads without the issue of public access being properly considered. It was a short step from maintaining access to increasing it. Ell's initial concept was for a continuous footpath along the top of the Port Hills from Godley Head (the northern headland at the entrance to Lyttelton Harbour) to Gebbies Pass (above the south-west corner of the inner harbour), linking a series of scenic bush reserves. Although his concern was primarily for the pedestrian, he envisaged the ultimate widening of the path for motor vehicles (still a rarity at that time). A complementary network of tracks would ensure walkers continued to be catered for. In time the vision would expand, the hill road stretching in Ell's imagination as far as Akaroa, graced with a chain of rest houses providing shelter and refreshment.

One of the first things Ell did to make his dream a reality was improve access to the Summit Road Reserve near Dyers Pass above Governors Bay, at the north-west head of Lyttelton Harbour. The road up from Hoon Hay, on the city side of the hills, had an impossibly steep gradient, and, following a direct appeal to the government for help, Ell saw to the surveying and laying of a new route which was gentler and extended all the way to the reserve. While legislation pertaining to the Dyers Pass Road deviation and extension made its way through Parliament, Ell, working almost entirely alone, pressed ahead with his plans for the Summit Road, identifying land for future reserves and forming a network of walking tracks. At an unofficial opening ceremony on November 28, 1908,

Mrs Ell cutting the ribbon at the opening of the Summit Road by the Minister of Public Works, the Hon. R. Semple [26 Feb. 1938]

the first sod of the Summit Road was turned—a small triumph, yet one, which was to usher in a decades-long period of toil, dispute and difficulty for Ell. Many in Christchurch would admire him for his single-minded pursuit of a dream that was undeniably in the public good, but there would also be many confrontations with those who saw his means of achieving that dream as bordering on the reckless.

Ell expected to continue with his self-appointed task in the easy, independent fashion to which he had become accustomed. At the first meeting, in November 1909, of the Summit Road Association—the first of a string of bodies he formed to help him in his endeavours – he made it clear that he saw the association's primary purpose as the collection of money to fund purchases of land and the construction of the road—matters he would oversee. The same went for the Kennedys Bush Scenic Reserve Board, constituted the same year, and the Summit Road Reserves Board, responsible for the management of all other lands secured by Ell and with which the Kennedys Bush board soon amalgamated. Initially, Ell kept the full extent of his plans to himself and set about spending money on further reserves along the route of the Summit Road faster



Sign of the Kiwi, ca. 1930

Sign of the Bellbird, ca. 1920

than the association could bring it in. By 1912, both association and board were in deep financial trouble, unable to meet the commitments Ell had made on their behalf. Hopes of a government bail-out were dashed by the administration's war expenditure, and despite the two bodies teetering on the brink of bankruptcy, Ell continued to buy first and worry about paying later. Ever more vigorous protests from his associates fell on deaf ears. Ell steadfastly refused to have his ideals compromised by a mere want of cash. To add further to his financial woes, he commissioned Christchurch architect Samuel Hurst Seager to design a small red-stone teahouse on a site at the head of Kennedys Bush close to the summit crest. The Sign of the Bellbird was opened in May 1914, the first building in Ell's grand scheme, and for a while, it doubled as a post office.

By 1915, Ell had committed the association to the acquisition of 23 reserves covering nearly 1200 ha of the Port Hills. That same year he acquired Coronation Hill, where Dyers Pass begins its descent to Governors Bay. His plan was to erect a "small toll cottage at Dyers Pass to place therein a toll-keeper rent free with the right to dispense refreshments and the profit thereon." The toll charge of one penny for pedestrians and one shilling for motorists would provide revenue for furthering his dream, but the Summit Road Association, determined to avoid yet further debt, refused to have anything to do with the scheme. Undeterred, Ell sought loans and promises of support from friends and sympathisers and pressed ahead, and after what Ell described as a "short, sharp fight", the Sign of the Kiwi opened in 1917. A toll-gate was installed five years later. This early bungalow-style building was another Hurst Seager creation. A third, commenced around the same time but opened the year before, was the smaller Sign of the Packhorse, erected at the top of the Kaituna Saddle, near Mount Bradley, south of Gebbies Pass. This gave a strong hint as to where Ell's scheme was heading: clearly the pass was not to be the end of the road, nor were the three refreshment stops already in place likely to be the only ones. To embark with such abandon, during a time of war, on a recreational endeavour could be regarded as a natural response to the times; nevertheless, it is surely remarkable that while millions were dying in the mud of Europe, Harry Ell was intent on building teahouses.

(This article will be continued in the next newsletter, detailing Harry Ell's continuing financial struggles to complete the Summit Road, and the construction of the Sign of the Takahe.)