



## From the Secretary

Welcome to the August 2013 newsletter. As you can see, quite a lot has been happening since February. At long last we can make some progress on access to Ohinetahi Reserve. The work parties are as active as ever. The Board continues to have a full agenda at its monthly meetings, and has had some interesting discussions on topics such as the pest free Banks Peninsula concept referred to later. Our Activities & Promotions Committee is being reconvened and will be looking at outings and events, publicity and increasing membership. Membership numbers remain positive, and I'd like to take the opportunity of thanking all those who have renewed their subscriptions. We are delighted to welcome the following new members: Lyn Allen & Ian Palmer, Peter Hansen, Kaiapoi Walkers Group, Andrew Luddington, Dave Mason and Christine McCausland. I hope you enjoy this newsletter. Please contact me if you need more copies to pass on to family, friends, acquaintances or organisations that may be interested in our work.

## Ohinetahi Reserve

Keeping Ohinetahi Reserve closed to the public has been frustrating for everyone. However, the safety of our volunteers and public users is paramount, and we make no apologies for the action we have taken. We identified an area where we were satisfied that there was minimal risk to our volunteers, and the team has been continuing its track maintenance work, planting, weed and animal pest control here. As indicated previously, we accepted a proposal, subject to funding, from Aurecon to carry out a geotechnical survey and to make recommendations about which tracks we can reopen, and the nature and scale of any remediation work on those where this is not currently possible. Whilst it is now some considerable time since the earthquakes it is important to recognise that, in addition to the risks of further earthquakes diminishing, the engineers and Council staff have built up considerable knowledge and expertise, which will now enable us to make good, informed decisions on the next steps. We anticipated that the results of the survey would be only the start of a fairly lengthy and possibly expensive process, so were reluctant to use members' funds to pay for this and applied for external funding. We are delighted to report that an application to the City Council's one-off projects in their Capital Endowment Fund was successful. We would like to thank the Community Board chairs for supporting this application.

As we go to print, the Board and the Ohinetahi team are still analysing the report. Ella's, Totara Log, Bivvy, South and North Boundary, Titoki, Faulkner's and O'Farrell's tracks will have to remain closed for the time being. Re-routing of parts of some of these might be a solution, and there may sections of others than can be reopened. Cass Ridge, Bush Road, Watlings, Dukes, Kanuka, Wai-iti, Trig V and Ngaio tracks can be reopened. However, the reserve will have to remain closed until we have in place permanent warning signs for hazards that the report has identified and for the tracks that are closed.



Trussed boulder above Faulkner's Track. Ohinetahi Reserve remains closed—safety of our volunteers and public users is paramount!

## Other news

### Omahu

Routine maintenance of tracks, clearing of weeds, and animal pest control continues. Visitors will see new **metal signs**, hopefully vandal-proof, at the entrance to the reserve, courtesy of Bill Woods, our President. Further ones are planned. On the grassland area of the reserve there is a historic stone 'watershed' (photos page 2), which was constructed to collect and distribute spring water. This has suffered the ravages of time and earthquake damage, and it would be a worthwhile project to restore this. The Historic Places Trust is unable to help and 'has wished us well in our endeavours'. If we have someone amongst our members with suitable skills and enthusiasm prepared to take this task on, the Society would be very grateful.



Society members Paul Tebbutt and Grant & Marilyn Nelson (who gifted the reserve to the Society) stand beside the new metal sign at Omahu Reserve and which we hope is vandal-proof. Courtesy of Society President Bill Woods. More signs like this are planned.



## The Watershed

Paul Tebbutt inspecting the historic "Watershed". This structure was built on the grassy slopes near Omaha to distribute spring water, but is now looking a little worse for wear and needs restoration. Any members with time, skills and enthusiasm prepared to restore this small monument to Port Hills history, please contact the Society. What worthy project has such magnificent views as a backdrop!



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| <b>Vice-President</b>        | Jeremy Agar    | 328 9956    |
| <b>Secretary</b>             | John Goodrich  | 326 3035    |
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| <b>Board Members</b>         | Tony Edney     | 329 9868    |
|                              | John Hayman    | 335 0984    |
|                              | Anne Kennedy   | 337 0364    |
|                              | Paul Tebbutt   | 384 3086    |
|                              | Annette Foster | 347 8651    |
| <i>Honorary Life Member</i>  | John Jameson   | 354 5925    |
| <b>Representatives</b>       |                |             |
| Selwyn District Council      | Malcolm Lyall  | 347 2800    |
| Hagley/Ferrymead             | Islay McLeod   | 389 0954    |
| Lytelton/Mt Herbert          | Jeremy Agar    | 328 9956    |
| Port Hills Rangers           | Paul Devlin    | 332 5627    |
| <b>Eastenders work party</b> | Paul Tebbutt   | 384 3086    |
| <b>Ohinetahi work party</b>  | Anne Kennedy   | 337 0364    |
| <b>Omahu Bush work party</b> | Paul Tebbutt   | 384 3086    |

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.

## Eastenders

Our dedicated team continues to meet twice a month, and has worked in a variety of locations, including, reopening the Eastenders Track in Barnett Park, the new start to the Captain Thomas Track, Rapanui Bush and on the Crater Rim Walkway.

## Track opening

A major milestone was reached at the end of June when the Bridle Path, Eastenders, Scarborough Bluffs and the Captain Thomas track from Summervale were reopened. A significant amount of remediation work and some re-routing was involved, and the Council and the Port Hills Rangers team should be congratulated. Plans are in hand to continue with the slow, but necessary process of opening more tracks.



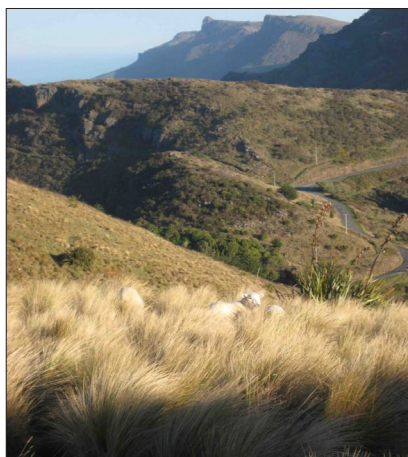
## Annual General Meeting

The AGM was held on 27 March. Unfortunately this was not well attended, and the Board will be looking at an alternative venue and the start time for next year's meeting. Nick Singleton from the Port Hills Rangers gave an excellent talk about their work in the immediate aftermath of the earthquakes, the on-going efforts being made to reopen tracks, the process involved, and plans for the future. Treasurer Paul Loughton presented the financial reports, which showed that, again, the Society is in good financial 'heart' with a small surplus, and that the Harry Ell Summit Road Memorial Trust's bank balance continues to grow. Copies of the audited accounts are available on the website.

We are delighted that all the Board members agreed to stand again, were re-elected unopposed, and will continue their voluntary commitment to the affairs of your society. There are still two vacancies on the Board. If you feel that you can contribute to the Society's governance, please contact the President or Secretary.

## 'Port Hills Master Plan'

Prior to the earthquakes, the City Council was about to start consultation on a comprehensive management plan for the Port Hills. Work on this will resume shortly with a view to it being completed in 2014. The Society will be consulted as one of the major stakeholders. The plan will be an important document and public consultation is likely to take place early next year.



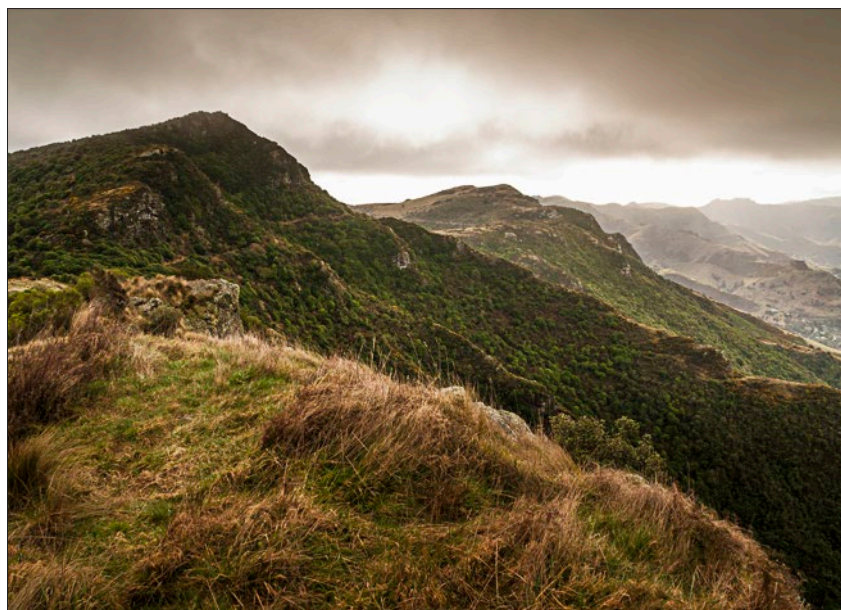
## BPCT Conservation Forum

The forums, which are organised by the Banks Peninsula Conservation Trust, have been mentioned in previous newsletters. The last one was held on 1 July, and as usual was well attended by a wide range of people from agencies, the City Council, Lincoln University, Landcare Research, runanga, and local groups. It's always good to hear what is going on in other areas, and there were two very interesting presentations. The first was by David Mules from WWF on 'Reconnect Northland'. This is a new initiative and a huge undertaking which "...will restore a range of natural processes and ecosystems across the whole region, while also building environmental, social, cultural and economic resilience." In the first instance they are concentrating on protecting kiwi in an area on the east coast and will be linking a range of reserves, covenanted areas, and groups of locals already carrying out trapping and other conservation work, to increase the protected area. Details are available on the WWF and the Landcare Trust websites.

The second presentation was by Rik Wilson, the project officer for 'A Pest Free Otago Peninsula'. This group was established three years ago and has concentrated on possums in the first instance, making good progress on reducing them to an acceptable level across the whole peninsula. The plan has generated good support from farmers, landowners and residents on the edge of the peninsula where there are around 200 traps in gardens. Further details are available on their website: [www.pestfreepeninsula.org.nz](http://www.pestfreepeninsula.org.nz)

Both of the above are ambitious projects, and Banks Peninsula Conservation Trust chair, Rick Menzies tabled an equally ambitious one—"Banks Island Project", a suggestion that we should work towards a pest free Banks Peninsula. The concept is to split the Peninsula into three 'islands', the western and eastern sections and the Port Hills, separated by intensively trapped corridors, which is a concept already in use in other areas. The Society Board has discussed this and fully supports the initiative. If you have any views on this you can contact the Secretary for further information or let Rick know that you support the concept ([rgmenzies@farmside.co.nz](mailto:rgmenzies@farmside.co.nz)).

The last part of the Forum was an opportunity for everyone there to talk briefly about their current work. The amount being done by the Council, other agencies, landowners and local groups is really encouraging, and whilst a pest free peninsula will clearly be a long way off, we should not underestimate the progress being made already.



Appropriately named 'The Crater Rim' (walkway), this range of peaks is notable for its significant geological, environmental and recreational importance.



## Arbor Day 2013 & tree planting on the Port Hills

The Society's traditional Arbor Day plantings took place on the 6th June. We were again in upper Victoria Park, the area that has been planted by school students annually for the last few years and where the native trees are now becoming established and very obvious. After a very wet spell, the ground was wet and muddy, and many parents would have been greeted by very dirty children. Cashmere Primary School, St. Anne's School, Woolston and Opawa School took part. The Eastenders prepared the site; the Port Hills Rangers supplied the trees, and were on hand to help.

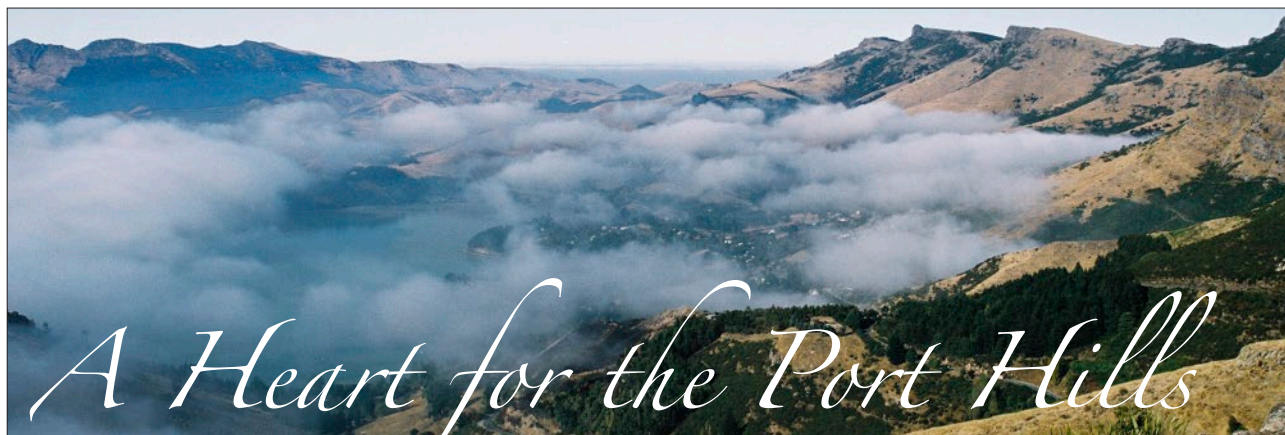
To put 'our' 300 or so trees into context, combining a programme of volunteer planting and work by contractors, by the end of the winter, the City Council will have planted a total of 37,761 trees and silver tussock on the Port Hills! This work gets little publicity and the general public is probably not aware of the scale of the planting that takes place. Di Carter and the Rangers team have developed considerable expertise over the years, and with a loss rate of only 5–10% losses in the first year of planting, have put in a staggering 282,811 plants over the last 13 years. The locations are too numerous to mention, but include mixed species for bush regeneration, the stabilising of slopes and gullies with flax, and on the more open areas silver tussock. In the coming years, the planting budget will reduce due to earthquake recovery work, and the Rangers will concentrate on consolidating the sites developed over the 13 year period.



*In years to come these enthusiastic children may revisit 'their' trees as adults and experience a special connection to the area.*

Other tree-planting projects include Gloomy Gully above Sumner Valley (A CCC and Forest & Bird restoration project). Volunteers are needed to help with plant maintenance and weeding.

The following is the second part of the 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](http://www.robbrown.co.nz))



By the end of 1916, the Summit Road Scenic Reserves Board was in debt to the tune of a staggering £4,000. As Ell had spent this money without its authorisation, the board was left with no choice but to take action against him to recover it. Once again friends came to the rescue, yet it is likely such generosity played a part in encouraging Ell to amass fresh debt.

The Summit Road Association, in limbo since the transfer of its financial affairs to the reserves board, was eventually resurrected as the Summit Road and Reserves Association, under the chairmanship of Christchurch solicitor George Harper. The association consisted of a number of committees for dealing with everything from tree planting to the management of the rest houses. Ell, of course, had a seat on each. The new association found itself confronted with a debt of £5,000 which Ell had built up in just a couple of years. While it dealt with this through the combination of a government grant, public subscriptions and a bank overdraft, the ever-impatient Ell formed the Port Hills-Akaroa Summit Road League to raise more money for further work.

In 1919, Ell lost his seat in Parliament. He had decided to stand in the Lyttelton electorate so that he might represent the area that included the Port Hills, but the tactic backfired. If he had

stayed with his loyal working-class voters in Christchurch South, his seat would probably have been safe, but “safety-first” was not in Harry Ell’s make-up. The loss brought its compensations: free of parliamentary duties in distant Wellington, Ell threw himself ever more fervently into his beloved Summit Road project. By 1920, the Summit Road and Reserves Association was in a position similar to that of its predecessor: struggling for financial survival. It was at this juncture that a new face appeared on the scene in the shape of William Machin, a recent immigrant from England. Having business with George Harper, Machin was approaching Harper’s office one morning when the “door burst open and down came a most extraordinary figure, who seemed to be one of the old prophets of Israel—wispy hair, lined face, thin, with piercing eyes. He was muttering to himself all the way down the stairs, and when he got into the street



Mr Harper turned to me and said, “That is the famous H. G. Ell.” Such pressure was Harper under with his dealings with Ell that Machin soon took over the chairmanship of the association, bringing a fresh outlook on the Summit Road scheme and a no-nonsense approach to financial management. Predictably he proved to be Ell’s nemesis, although not, despite a struggle, his vanquisher.

The lines of battle were as before. “Your job and that of your committee is to find the money,” Ell told him. “I’ll spend it, and don’t try to mould the policy of the association, because that’s my business.” Machin, for his part, was determined that the association should be the only authority in the matter of money, and did his utmost to apply the brakes to Ell’s spending. As a last resort he placed an advertisement in the Christchurch papers declaring that the association would not be responsible for any bills unless it had approved them in writing. Ell was incensed and threatened to resign. Machin called his bluff and said his resignation would be accepted if formally offered; furthermore, he would advertise it in the next day’s papers. Ell was momentarily flummoxed. But by this stage he had been too long engaged on the Summit Road, and become too deeply involved, to be thwarted by rules of fiscal prudence. He gave vent through the press: “*This new chairman... is fighting me for possession*

*of the whole of my life's work...I am not hampering or in any way hindering the Summit Road Committee (of which I am the senior member) and I only claim freedom to work for the further development of this undertaking according to the ideals which prompted me to start it over twenty years ago."* Such protestations aside, he simply became sneakier, and expenditure continued unabated.

The next flashpoint was not long in coming. Ell and his wife had been trying to keep the financially ailing Sign of the Kiwi afloat, covering its losses both by forking out large sums of money from their own pockets and, as usual, by relying on the goodwill of others. When the caretaker resigned because "it was quite impossible to make the house pay under that gentleman's authority," the new Commissioner of Crown Lands, in his capacity as chairman of the Summit Road Scenic Reserves Board, innocently appointed Ell to replace him. The Summit Road and Reserves Association took exception, and the commissioner, once the association had filled him in on the nature of its relations with Ell, was persuaded to cancel the appointment. But before a replacement could be found the Ells moved into the Kiwi anyway and made it their home. Infuriated, the association tried everything in its power to remove Ell, and threats were made on both sides. Ell put his eloquent pen to use and conjured up a flood of public support from prominent citizens urging the association to leave him be. "Some people would say Ell is fanatically inclined," wrote one admirer. "Well, one has to be fanatically inclined to do any good in this world, the half-hearted never do any good. All the world's thinkers and big men have been fanatics in their own sphere." In the face of such fervent support, the association backed down. No doubt a contributing factor in its doing so was the fact that Ada had swiftly turned around the catering business

at the Kiwi, and the establishment continued to turn a profit until she retired in 1926 through ill health.

For a couple of years in the 1920s an uneasy peace ensued. Ell went so far as to make a written undertaking to behave more responsibly in his dealings with the association, even though, like an addict unable to break the habit, he

*asset, which will be an attraction also to the Dominion and overseas visitors... This road will run from scenic reserve to scenic reserve; and for a good deal of the way it will be fringed by beautiful bush, where may be seen and heard many varieties of our pretty native birds."* "The trust" was the Port Hills-Akaroa Summit Road Public Trust, Ell's latest administrative



*Afternoon tea at the Sign of the Kiwi tearooms, circa 1925. An example of a dry stone wall features in the foreground, many of these well-made walls still exist today. During the depression, a similar wall adjacent to the Sign of the Takahe became the subject of heated debate later in the story.*

continued to spend on the sly. Some members of the association even abetted the miscreant: one raised a chuckle all round when he openly admitted to "having given Ell a tenner yesterday." But it was merely the calm before the next storm, for Ell was about to reveal the true extent of his plans—plans that would make the cost of the Summit Road to date appear trifling. Not only was he thinking ahead, he was thinking big. A newspaper report explained that the road was now to extend from Godley Head to the Pigeon Bay saddle, halfway along the north coast of Banks Peninsula—a distance of 85 km. Ell elaborated in a letter: "Along the roadway there will be about 15 stone houses whose sites I have already selected...I am convinced that, with the sympathetic support of the trust, I can provide the people of Christchurch and Canterbury with a great pleasure

creation, designed to rid him of the meddling Summit Road and Reserves Association and the painful Mr Machin. It was brought into legal existence in 1926, the trustees being handpicked by Ell himself, and under its trusteeship fell all the existing reserves, roadways and rest houses.

But Ell had merely replaced one rod for his back with another. He still spent money when there was none to be had, was careless in recording his outgoings and concealed accounts from his fellow trustees, who were soon telling him that they would not accept responsibility for debts run up without their authority. Many of those debts resulted from the construction of the most imposing of the rest houses so far, the Sign of the Takahe. More than any other feature of the Summit Road project,

the Takahe is a manifestation of Ell's self-belief and dogged determination and an expression of his increasingly extravagant dreams for the Port Hills. Situated on Dyers Pass Road at the edge of Cashmere, it was initially promoted by Ell as the "Tram terminus Rest-house"—a staging post before the traveller launched out on the Summit Road proper. It opened in 1920, beginning life as a simple establishment—"one room and a rough lean-to of wood...four small tables, very common crockery and no pictures or ornaments by way of furnishing."

on the Takahe was soon consuming Ell as never before. Ironically, the project received its biggest boost from the Great Depression. The Labour Department, faced with finding jobs for increasing numbers of unemployed, sent them up into the Port Hills. At last Ell had a workforce that could do justice to the majestic structure he had in mind – and at an affordable cost. He did his best to employ each man according to his trade, be he a carpenter or bricklayer, painter or sign-writer, gilder or stonemason. Ell having no tools, the men

of the Takahe slowly but inexorably took the shape we know today: a Tudor-Gothic "phantasy in stone" inspired by the manor houses and inns of England. An architectural anachronism it may have been, all the more remarkable for the fact that it was built without plans, but this only added to the sensation it caused.

Ell's dreams were not limited to roads and tea houses. Adding a touch of romance to the vision was an old-English coach-and-four rolling along the hilly highway—horses sweating and snorting, paintwork and polished brass gleaming, coachman and guard resplendent in red coats, striped waistcoats, breeches, boots and topers. Ell signed a contract for the construction of a carriage in 1918, but the never-ending problems with debt on the Summit Road itself and, come the Depression, the accusations of indulgence that surrounded the project, rendered this an obsession too far. Ell did acquire an old Cobb & Co. coach that had worked the Arthur's Pass route between Springfield and Otira. He used this cumbersome conveyance to promote his coaching aspirations and to raise funds for the Summit Road by giving sightseeing tours around Christchurch and parading it on special occasions, including the Duke of York's visit to the city in 1927. For all his efforts, though, he only managed to run a three-seater brake for a time between the Takahe and the Kiwi, a modest affair compared to the equipage of his imagination.



*The Sign of the Takahe during construction phase, circa 1922–25*

In 1926, it became the responsibility of the trust, which completed construction of the ground floor, added a proper roof, and at that point considered the job finished. But Ell had hardly begun. With the help of half a dozen stonemasons he set about adding a second floor. By 1928, the trust was facing bankruptcy, a situation averted by increasing the number of trustees and by Ell's reluctant agreement to put off further development until all debts had been paid. Needless to say, this fragile truce didn't last, and work

brought their own; others were fashioned from scrap using a Public Works Department forge. Rock was quarried from the hills themselves and laboriously transported by horse and dray. Local firms donated other materials. In a time of severe want, Ell fired the men with his own indomitable spirit, and inspired loyalty among those delighted to be doing something creative with their hands.

Although shortages continued to impede progress, the Sign

While the Takahe's praises were sung in distant England and America as well as closer to home, Ell continued to clash with officialdom, this time in the shape of the Unemployment Board. By 1932, 300 men were employed in the hills, most of them building the road house and making pathways, but the board, which was footing the bill, took issue with what it considered the frivolous nature of the work to which some were assigned. Two

bookbinders, rather than being handed shovels, were directed by Ell to bind volumes of illustrated papers for patients at the Cashmere tuberculosis sanatorium—a waste of public money in the board’s opinion. A surveyor was described as “messing about...taking altitudes from sea level at different points along the Summit Road Highway... More of Ell’s damned waste of public money.” There were accusations of loafing among men now dubbed “Ell’s angels,” and of poor supervision by Ell himself.

While such attacks appear to have been exaggerated, or to have failed to take into account the difficulty of overseeing such a large workforce over such a wide area, not to mention the fact that Ell had been given no clear definition of what authority he wielded, they proved a constant strain. Vandals added to Ell’s woes when they wrecked the workers’ shelters along the road. “All this worry is making my life a hell,” Ell was once moved to exclaim, but his missionary zeal remained unquenchable.

It was during the Depression that the “Battle of the Stone Wall” hit the headlines. Ell and the Heathcote County Council had been sniping at each other for years, and the council at last saw its chance to bring down “the little king on the hill.” Ell had built a wall on the south side of the Takahe himself—a 5m-high, dry-stone construction. He had done so without a permit, and although there was considerable evidence that members of the council had been aware of its erection, yet had raised no complaint at the time, the council now considered it dangerous. It also encroached on the road by about a metre. In reality, the wall was as solid as the baronial edifice within, but the council declared it would be pulled down. Not only was Ell incensed by this bureaucratic interference, his pride as a builder was hurt. Using his customary public-relations savvy he shifted the argument to the newspapers, and as usual made



Summit Road toll gate, circa 1919

such a convincing case that public support swung behind him. The wall was “built like a castle,” declared one reader, while an architect of Ell’s acquaintance assured him it “would last like Stonehenge.” Wrote another correspondent: “*I can quite understand the concern of the council as its [own] walls usually fall down.*” The council was unmoved, and sent out a lorry with a gang of men to realign the offending structure, only to find Ell and his men already on the job, with a newspaper photographer there to record the deed. The council had won on points, but Ell gained the moral victory. As one correspondent was inspired to write; “*the public would prefer ‘a little king at the hill top’ to a blustering fool at the hill foot.*”

No sooner had this debacle died down than Ell was in trouble again with the council, this time over the toll-gate at the Kiwi. The Canterbury Automobile Association had argued for years that the toll should be optional, and when the Main Highways Board took over the section of the Summit Road between the Takahe and the Kiwi — meaning motorists’ taxes now went towards its maintenance—it began to object to what was in effect a second charge and to call for the toll-gate’s abolition. In the Heathcote County Council it found a willing ally. Knowing the tolls were part of the Summit Road’s lifeline, the council saw another opportunity to cut Ell down to size. It was an attack on a man who was now nearly 70, yet Ell, his passion undimmed, gathered a petition on favour of keeping the gate, headed by two members of the CAA, and submitted it to the

Minister of Public Works. He also wrote a near hysterical letter to the paper, declaring that “I am making my will tomorrow, and am going to live in the toll-house myself – and I am not coming out alive!...I am going to move up there and take the tolls myself, until they kill me.”



Site of the toll gate, present day

Both the Heathcote County Council and many among the public were unmoved by these theatrics, and in October 1932 the council demanded an end to the collection of tolls. Fortunately for Ell, a short way up the road, between the Kiwi and the Bellbird, the road passed through the jurisdiction of the neighbouring Halswell County Council, and it was this body that came to Ell’s rescue. Ell was allowed to move the toll-gate one mile up the road from the Kiwi, Halswell welcoming the increased income to maintain its part of the road. Once again Ell had outmanoeuvred his opponents. Only when the Main Highways Board finally took over the whole of the Summit Road after Ell’s death, was the toll-gate removed.



The final part of this article, covering Harry Ell’s death, the war years, the formation of the Summit Road Society, and bringing the story to the present day, will appear in the next newsletter.