

REMNANT

STAVELEY CAMP FOREST

A Social and Ecological History

Edited by Gen de Spa and Coby Snowden

© 2026 Staveley Campsite Committee
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Printed in NZ by The Copy Press
141 Pascoe Street, Annesbrook, Nelson

ISBN: 978-0-473-79351-7

Cover photographs: Staveley Camp aerial photos
front and back cover: Cam Luxton.

Beech heart: Mid Canterbury TimeBank.

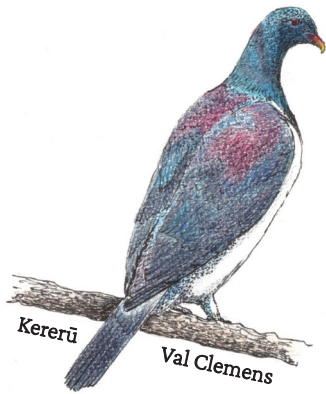
First buildings: Staveley Camp archive.

Sawmill workers: Staveley Museum.

Kererū: Staveley Camp archive.

E. Totty and committee members inspect the site
1958 L to R: E. Totty, R. Shaw, J. Seaton, R. Jones, D.
Gill, G. McArthur: Staveley Camp archive.

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Introduction

Imagine Canterbury before humans: a mosaic of lush eel-filled swamps, shimmering grasslands, braided rivers and dark forests, towering trees and outlandishly oversized birds.

When people arrived, their impact was profound. The story of colonisation in Aotearoa New Zealand played out here much as it has elsewhere in the world, with the loss of species and ecosystems that once seemed infinite. So when a tiny remnant of the once widespread foothills forest survives on Sawmill Road, it begs the question: how?

This book is our attempt to answer that question - but it is also the story of a church camp, a forest, and a community of people whose relationship with nature has changed over time.

Staveley Camp, established in 1959 by the Mid Canterbury Presbyterian Bible Class, sits beside almost ten hectares of regenerating black beech forest near Bowyers Stream, close to the village of Staveley in Mid Canterbury. What was once valued

simply as welcome shade and shelter is now recognised as a rare remnant of a once-common ecosystem of the Canterbury foothills and plains.

The nucleus of this book is an oral history project conducted by Belinda Meares, supported by Environment Canterbury's Waitaha Action to Impact (WAI) Fund and now archived at the Ashburton Museum and Historical Society Collection. These interviews, together with a later conversation with Arapata Reuben, have helped us trace both the social and ecological history of this place: the natural features of the site, the vision of the camp's founders, the work of building and sustaining the camp, and the growing recognition of the forest's ecological significance, culminating in its protection with a Queen Elizabeth II National Trust covenant.

We hope these pages capture the enthusiasm, care and persistence that has shaped Staveley Camp and helped ensure the survival of this small but remarkable community asset.

The stories are presented as narratives. In preparing them, we have omitted some sections of the recordings and lightly edited others for clarity and flow, while working to preserve each interviewee's voice and original meaning. As with all oral histories, these accounts are shaped by memory and recollection; while we have verified information where possible, we have sought above all to honour the stories as they were told.

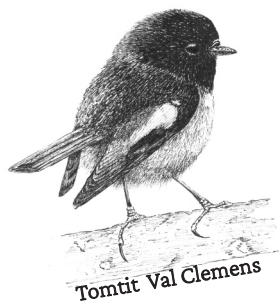




Photo Ian Spilman.

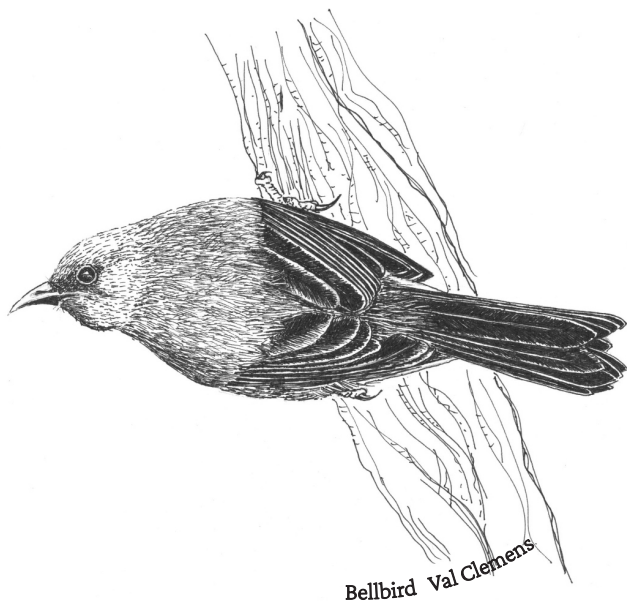
What is a remnant forest?

Remnant natural areas are described as being ecologically intact or having a biological integrity comparable to the original characteristics of the area. Generally, a remnant would not have been significantly disturbed by agriculture, logging, fire, development or invasion by non-native animals and weeds, which all reduce an area's naturalness.

While there is no doubt that Staveley Camp Forest has been affected by logging, agriculture and exotic plants and animals, the length of time over which it has been left to regenerate, the seed bank, the protection provided by the deer fence, and the native bird populations present here have resulted in a regenerating forest with a diverse understorey. It is a forest with a complex

native ecosystem that can be considered natural, but pressure from weeds and pests, coupled with its relatively small size, means it cannot function as a healthy ecosystem without help: weed and pest control will probably always be needed.

In 1995, botanist Dr Colin Burrows wrote the following about Sawmill Road Bush (now often referred to as Staveley Camp Forest): “As the *Nothofagus solandri* [*Fuscospora solandri* black beech] dominated forest is one of the largest surviving patches of the abundant forest which covered this part of the Canterbury Plains in 1850, it is important in its own right. It is also important for the insights about the former forest which can be gained by studying it and as an example of the reactions of native vegetation to invasion by introduced plants over the last 140 years.”





The 7th Ashburton Boys Brigade Company camp November 1962.



A large school or church camp, probably mid 1970s, unfortunately with no identification.



Staveley Camp and forest 2026. All photos Staveley Camp archive.



Rifleman Val Clemens



Olive Philpott (née Hobson)

“It was the bush that actually drew us in because it was quiet and isolated.”

Olive Hobson (later Olive Philpott) grew up at Clandeboyne, the daughter of Irish immigrants, and was deeply involved in church activities from an early age. The Mid Canterbury Presbyterian Bible Class was an important social activity for children in the district.

“We used to have a strong Sunday school connection at Clandeboyne. And when I got older and moved through to Mid Canterbury, I became very involved in Bible Class. At first I was in the Bible Class at the Methven parish and then that brought me into the Mid Canterbury District Bible Class committees and Easter camps and things like that.

“The young people looked to the Bible Class for activities, because those were the activities in those days. There weren't the sports activities that there are today.”

As the numbers attending the camps increased, Olive found the effort required to set up Easter camps in different halls and schools throughout the district became overwhelming.

“We used to have Easter camps and we went to various parishes and would camp either in the church hall or the school. In fact, many times we used both, according to the number of people we had and the size of the buildings that the parishes had in their area. Some parishes didn't have a school and a hall so we had to go to the bigger districts like Tinwald, Mayfield, Hinds and Methven and camped in their buildings and used those.

“As the numbers got bigger, there was hardly anywhere we could go and we were acquiring a lot of our own equipment which we had nowhere to keep, to store, and it was difficult to organise moving these things out of other people's buildings to take up to camps. It was a huge ordeal and this is when I just felt, well I just couldn't cope with this anymore.”

Even the mattresses the children slept on - called palliasses - all had to be stuffed, and presumably emptied again, at the beginning and end of each camp.

“They were just like a casing and then we used to fill them for Easter camps with straw, somebody must have helped us or supplied us and we used to have those to lie on when we went into the various schools, and if you ran out of straw, some of the mattresses were a bit thin so the smallest ones got the thinner ones because there wasn't much of them!

“I remember long before we went to Staveley we had an Easter camp here at Tinwald one year and we got a flu bug through, and the palliasses were that close together you could just step between one and the other and I think nearly every child at some stage of it was sick, it was unbelievable. So we really felt when we built our own camp and had proper bunks to sleep in, well we only had to do it once, once they were filled and on the bunks they were there. It made such a difference, we really felt we were in heaven!”

The young people she led were enthusiastic and determined to establish their own permanent camp. Olive played a crucial role in helping turn this idea into reality.

Black Beech / Tawhairauriki

Fuscospora solandri

and the Beech Honeydew Ecosystem



Mary Ralston

The beech honeydew ecosystem is a specific forest community unique to New Zealand, especially the South Island. The three important species are black beech; the tiny scale insect that sucks the sap of the tree and excretes drops of sweet honeydew through a hair-like filament; and the sooty mould fungus that feeds on the honeydew, covering the tree trunk with a black velvety material.

The honeydew is a vital high-energy year-round food source for many native species including birds, insects and lizards, which feed on the honeydew without harming the scale insect. Heavy rain can wash the honeydew off the trunks of the trees, adding to food supply stress for insects and birds. Wasps are now part of the community: robbing honeydew, competing with native biota and posing a hazard to people.

Beech tend to grow from seed dropped near the parent tree, whereas conifer seeds are dispersed randomly throughout forests by birds. Beech forest spread is also slow because they are dependent on a symbiotic relationship with underground fungal networks that grow in beech forest soil.