

# The protection of Pirirakau

by Gerard Hutching

**I**t is not difficult for the visitor to pinpoint the exact location of Michael and Pam Garrett's Roto-o-rangi farm, for their impressive stand of kahikatea contrasts sharply with the exotic vegeta-

tion in what is one of the most closely settled landscapes of the New Zealand countryside.

The changes that have been wrought would be startling to someone coming

from the nineteenth century. A visiting historian then reported that Lake Roto-o-rangi — with a recorded depth of 25 feet — looked like a vast inland sea. However, European settlers were swift to exploit the fertile land, and by the early twentieth century the lake was no more.

Lying a few miles south of Cambridge, the Garrett's bush property, in the Waipa county, is now secure from development under a QEII National Trust open space covenant. By the standards of other reserves the area might not appear large — 7.2 hectares — but in the context of what remains in the Waipa County it is significant.

In fact, well before the arrival of the European, the Waipa plains had been largely deforested, as a result of fire. Today, remnants of indigenous vegetation are small and scattered; the Garrett's reserve is one of the largest.

Protection had not come without sacrifice, however. Out of a total of 63 hectares, one eighth has been set aside, a sizeable chunk of prime Waikato dairy land. In a candid moment Michael reveals that if the area had been developed their mortgage would have been paid off some time ago.

However, the couple's feeling for the bush would not allow them to cut it down. Michael, an Englishman who arrived in New Zealand in the 1950s, was struck by how much native forest was being felled at that time, and determined to make good some of the loss.

"When I first came to New Zealand, bush was being felled and I made a vow to myself that if I bought a farm I would create a piece of bush. I wasn't looking for a farm with native bush on it. That was the last thing on my mind," he says.

While no member of his family had ever farmed, he had grown up with a respect for natural values that he regards as part of an English tradition.

"We are here today and gone tomorrow but the land is always there. And there's another saying: 'The best manure for the land is the master's foot'."

Between 1961 and 1968 the Garretts sharemilked north of Cambridge until the property at Roto-o-rangi came up for sale.

So pleased were the previous owners to find a buyer keen to protect the bush that they offered to leave money in the property; if they hadn't, the Garretts would

This kahikatea is estimated to be about 250 years old. Drainage over the past century has caused the peat to shrink, resulting in roots standing high out of the ground (Inset).

Photo: G. Hutching

