

To the Maori it was Matiu, named by the great explorer Kupe. The first European settlers named it Somes Island after the deputy governor of the New Zealand Land Company. We think of it as Jack's Island because of the way in which Jack Whiteford has devoted himself to his dream.

"I have a dream, that one day you'll be able to drive into Wellington along the Hutt Road and look out onto a dark green island," Jack says.

Somes Island has long been a place of refuge. Long ago it lost all its bush cover, and the local Maori used it as a refuge from invading tribes. During the days of European settlement, it was a quarantine island and the memorial on the island testifies to the people who died before landing on the mainland. Later it was used to intern aliens and New Zealanders of both German and Italian extraction during both WWI and WWII. Since the 1920s the island has been used only for the quarantine of animals being brought into New Zealand.

In the last seven years, Jack has supervised the planting of over 13,000 native trees on the windswept slopes of Somes Island at almost no cost to the branch, using local branch members as planters. This task, each tree having a weed-suppressing mat pegged to the ground and a colour-coded stake, would be enough to exhaust someone even half of Jack's 81 years.

JACK'S ISLAND



Above: 81-year-old Jack Whiteford has been the driving force behind a project to clothe Somes Island — in the middle of Wellington Harbour — with bush. Photo: Tony Burgess

Below: The north-west side of Somes Island on a blustery northerly day. In the seven years since the programme began, more than 13,000 trees have been planted. Photo: Tony Burgess

Jack's "gang", mainly retired folk, make regular trips to Somes Island to look after the trees that have been planted, and to prepare for the three annual winter planting days.

He describes a number of micro-climates on the island, which have enabled us to find a suitable place to plant even the most tender of local native plants. Those of us who have been tree-planting on Somes Island are amazed at the quality of the soil there, which Jack attributes to "lots of bird droppings". When you see how many black-backed gulls roost there, his statement makes sense. The plants which are coping best with the salt and winds are taupata, ngaio, hebe, karo, flax and senecio. Jack's project for 1987 is to get manuka and kanuka growing there, too.

At different times people eye Somes Island and we hear suggestions that there could be a casino there, or a major tourist attraction. But as long as it is used as a quarantine station, the birds which nest on its rocky shores are protected. There are no longer tuatara on the island, but there are several species of gecko and skink. It has no possums but unfortunately rats were accidentally introduced in the 1960s. And what of the island's future?

"There's rats we'd like to be rid of," says Jack, "and just think what endangered birds could be introduced onto a rat-free bush-covered island. . ."

