

ARTHUR COWAN, MBE, JP, Loder Cup. On this committee and that. Long-time member of Forest and Bird. Well known both for his actions and fearless advocacy for the protection of bush.

But none of this prepares you for the warmth, the gentle humour, and the humility that greet you when you first meet Arthur. Nor for the driving energy that at 76 years, leaves many a person half that age flagging in his wake.

Arthur and his wife Pat farm in the hills about 16 km south-east of Otorohanga in the northern King Country. The upper reaches of the Waipa River, the major tributary of the Waikato, flow down a steep valley a couple of kilometres to the east of their forest home. The Waipa was to have a pivotal role in their lives after they moved to their new undeveloped farm after the war with a returned service loan.

Arthur's father had farmed in the same area and, after years of "breaking in" the land, he had changed to loving the bush, and indeed converted a hectare of pasture near his home into bush by careful planting.

Arthur was infected by this love, although Pat says the first years on their farm were totally devoted to turning the scrub to pasture – but always fencing off the bush. Even then, they knew the crucial importance of preventing grazing of the bush.

It was events in the Waipa Valley that were the turning point in changing the emphasis from farmer to conservationist. From age 14, Arthur had been a keen fisherman. He fished the clear waters of the Waipa up the heavily forested valley floor, through the dense stands of kahikatea. After his return from six years overseas in the artillery, he noticed that the water was becoming discoloured from logging. "It did not please me at all," says Arthur. "Logging was extending right to the top of the river. All the giant trees beside which I'd fished were then being taken out."

The massive 1958 flood brought matters to a head. "All your concerns of the past faced you in a dramatic way. The erosion was incredible. The flood was from one side of the gorge to the other. Immense amounts of logs and roots and debris were coming down.

"From then on, we became more



GORDON STEPHENSON

Arthur and Pat Cowan at home on their Otorohanga farm.

In the 1970s, large-scale clearings were under way. The development, particularly for forestry, was often encouraged by government. Land was being cleared right down to the river banks. "Totally unacceptable," comments Arthur. "Very foolish. There was not even an economic return. Absolutely stupid."

He was accused of interfering in Waipa Valley issues when he did not even own land in the main valley. So when the opportunity arose, he purchased an additional farm which had 200 hectares of beautiful bush on the steep slopes on the west side of the river. He now had a direct stake.

There were farmers' meetings. "We opposed the logging with great vigour, but both sides agreed to disagree." It says much for Arthur's personality that even his opponents never became enemies.

ARTHUR COWAN MAN WITH A MISSION

*GORDON STEPHENSON talks
to a farmer who is one of the
most respected names
in conservation.*

vocal about our concerns." Arthur's conversation is full of the word "we". When pushed, he modestly concedes it really should be "I" or "Pat and I".

He led a campaign against the logging of bush. Although his actions stemmed from a love of the bush, its trees, plants, birds, and insects, "we always argued on the practical issues of soil and water because conservation is also supportive of our economic base." He became a thorn in the flank of the newly-formed Waikato Valley Authority, constantly challenging its decisions.

THEN IN 1979 1,300 hectares of bush on Mt Rangitoto at the headwaters of the Waipa in northern Pureora came up for sale. It had been logged for 23 years. Several farmers were interested in it for grazing.

The bush had been damaged by the timber extraction, but Arthur has always recognised the "extraordinary resilience" of logged or even heavily grazed bush to recover once it is given the opportunity.

The timber company that owned the land had received a firm offer of purchase. Arthur was given 24 hours to match the offer of \$125,000 (quite a sum 15 years ago). "We did a lot of fast work," Arthur says. "We tried the Valley Authority, we tried Lands and Survey and others." But he had no success. "We decided to buy it ourselves. We mortgaged the farm, took out family and other loans. We bought the land and held it for two years. Finally, the Wildlife Service purchased it off us."

What he did not realise at the time was that it was one of the major kokako breeding areas. Cowan's Block, adjacent to Pureora Forest Park, is now of enormous wildlife importance.

The next venture was the setting up of the Native Forest Restoration Trust. This followed the famous tree-sitting episode to stop logging in Pureora, a campaign initiated by Shirley Guildford of Auckland, and carried through by Stephen