

CHAPTER TWELVE

NZGA EVENTS OVER THE YEARS

From Deric Charlton

In the nine decades of NZGA certain events have occurred when matters did not go quite according to plan. These are worth recording in a section of their own.

Overnight trek

It began with those remarkable pioneers AH Cockayne and Sir E Bruce Levy. In 1917 the Central Development Farm was established on the southern side of Levin at Wereroa. Cockayne moved the Biological Laboratory and the Fields Division there that year, and he employed a staff of 12, enabling him to delve increasingly into grassland research.

One day he and Levy visited several Taranaki farms, according to Levy in an address to the NZ Animal Production Society in 1947. He and Cockayne “tramped the hills, long and at a prodigious rate,” and then they drove back to Levin in an old Model T Ford. But when fog developed on the Himitangi Straight, Cockayne became confused and drove into a pile of railway sleepers.

It was midnight by then, so they seized several bags and Levy’s half-plate camera, and set off walking to Levin, 21 miles (34km) away. They arrived at the Central Development Farm at 6.30 am, with Cockayne well in the lead, recalled Sir Bruce...

Secretary and Wonder Woman

In 1955, Mrs Hazel Foster was a clerk in the Wellington Head Office of the Department of Agriculture. Her husband had died and she missed him dearly, so she worked in the male-dominated office to help her to bear her grief. She worked for Russ Scott who was elected as NZGA Secretary in 1955, and in those days, nearly all that extra workload inevitably fell upon Hazel.

So she tackled the NZGA administration and often worked in her Central Wellington office alone through the weekend. The NZ pastoral industry developed quickly after the Second World War and NZGA membership also increased rapidly, so Hazel had plenty to do.

She organised the annual conferences and handled all communication associated with them. During a weekend she often wrote more than 50 letters in her neat, easily-read handwriting. She acted as Secretary, Treasurer and Editor, in addition to organising the conference, and all this was done in addition to her regular MAF work.

Sadly, she had to tolerate harassment from her male colleagues during those years. She would arrive at the office on a Monday morning to discover all her files boxes had been emptied into a heap on the floor.

However, Hazel persisted with her effort and in 1957 she was elected Secretary instead of her boss. She went on to hold the position until 1973, well after she had retired from what had become the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries (MAF).

In 1970, NZGA funded her attendance at the Tenth International Grassland Congress held in Surfers Paradise, Australia. Later, she undertook a tour in Japan, where she was given VIP treatment. NZGA made Hazel a Life Member, presenting her with an engraved clock that she had beside her to the end.

In her retirement Hazel worked as a teacher's aid in Kilbirnie, near Wellington Airport, but she continued to write by hand every year to the NZGA President, Secretary and Treasurer just before the annual conference. She told me that she followed the daily events by reading her conference programme and afterwards the Conference Proceedings. Hazel lived to her late eighties but she suffered from failing health and died in January 1991.

Charlie Hamblyn

At the 21st AGM in Gisborne (1959) the NZGA Award for Betterment of Grasslands was made to Charles James Hamblyn; t Charlie walked back to his seat in the audience, sat down - and quietly died. The meeting was postponed for six months and continued as a special meeting in Wellington.

Throughout his career Charlie Hamblyn was an enthusiastic advocate of many outstanding changes in grassland farming practice.

He was one of the first to see the potential of pasture renovation on the second-class North Auckland soils, and recognising the value of applying basic slag there, before the discovery of molybdenum showed the reason for this.



Charlie Hamblyn

He was a staunch advocate of using subterranean clover on the dryland areas of Manawatu and the North Island East Coast; and a crusader for mob stocking in hill country pastures. He travelled through these lands persuading famers to adopt periodically spelling pastures, for the benefit of both pasture and livestock.

He was an instructor with the Department of Agriculture in Whangarei for many years before being appointed fields superintendent in Palmerston North. His advocacy of better pasture management was a mission rather than a vocation. He preached his

messages from dawn to dusk, and was serving on the NZGA Executive Committee when his life suddenly ended.

Grassland Memorial Trust established 1964

In 1963 the well-known Dr Peter Sears, director of DSIR Grasslands and strong supporter of NZGA, died suddenly, and as a result the NZGA agreed to set up a Grassland Memorial Trust with a view to commemorating great leaders in grassland progress, in New Zealand and other countries.

By 1970 three such leaders were honoured - Peter Sears, Sir George Stapledon who pioneered pasture improvement in Britain, and Alfred Hyde Cockayne, the man who established NZ agricultural research and NZGA.

Others added later included leading North Island farmer Dr RA Candy and geneticist/breeder Dr Lionel Corkill.

In 1993 the XVII IGC organisers invested the surplus funds from the Congress in the Trust, and the trustees opted to maintain its capital fund value while financing a range of awards from the interest received. In 1994, the Ray Brougham Trophy was instigated to recognise significant achievement in NZ pastoral agriculture, when the Brougham family donated a bronze sculpture of a sower to the Trust.

The trustees then decided in the mid-1990s, to place the Memorial Trust closer to NZGA and its name was changed to the NZ Grassland Trust, with an emphasis on encouragement of younger people starting their careers and recognition of achievement, in addition to farmer awards in the conference regions. NZGT is now the investment arm of NZGA and its funds have recently been boosted by a bequest from the late David Scott, who contributed to pastoral improvement in South Island high country.

The NZGT continues to work with the NZGA Executive to main the close links particularly given the challenges around Conferences having to be delayed due to COVID.

AC Hurst Prize

In 1966, an award of £ 50 (later \$100) annually was established by the estate of the late AC (Archie) Hurst, a livestock farmer from Waimate. He was an NZGA regular attendee and said that “some presentations had encouraged him to doze”. So he made this award “to the person who delivers the most instructive and wittiest paper” at the annual conference. His son, Bill was later made a life member, and great nephew Russell Hurst is also a past President.

The prize encouraged better presentations through the years and is continued by the NZGA Executive Committee. In recent years the poster papers have had their own Award as an incentive to enhance their clarity and understanding.

Overseas interest in NZGA

In 1967 successful negotiation with NZGA counterparts in Uruguay enabled them to translate the Proceedings into Spanish; and in 1987 Yutaka Miyawaki, the Japanese agent for Gallagher Industries, obtained consent to translate the Proceedings into Japanese, submitting over 50 annual membership fees to NZGA. However, these arrangements only lasted up to five years.

Forgettable Field Trip 1979

In 1979 the Annual Conference was held in the Travelodge Hotel, Rotorua, with the second day, as usual, being a field trip to properties in the Bay of Plenty. Unfortunately, for once the weather turned against us, with over 70 mm of steady and heavy rain descending all day. Many visiting attenders thought this was the reason for the region's name!

Several coaches headed for Murupara and I was in the last coach with my DSIR Grasslands colleagues John and Mike Hay, Cyril Armstrong, and about another six others. The Hays had brought along a bottle of New Zealand red wine to enjoy and when the coaches halted in the vision-limiting rain, they set about trying to uncork it. The cork failed to come out, so Mike Hay spotted a gatepost auger laying just outside the coach door and he quickly retrieved it.

This auger did the job by pushing the cork inwards and the bottle was duly passed around for those who were tempted to quaff a sample. The trip then progressed to the coast near Whakatane and everyone disembarked into a large hall for lunch.

Instead of visiting the farms, those attending stayed for about two hours in the hall, while the farmers used a portable loudspeaker to describe their properties and farming. Unfortunately, the hall had a galvanised iron roof, so no one could hear much from the stage. However, a few of us cringed at a reporter cleaning her camera lens on her Swandri, a rather rough garment for cleaning such a delicate lens!

We eventually boarded the coaches and returned to Rotorua, where the hot pools were relished. The only sensible person attending that conference was Euan Vartha from DSIR Lincoln, who decided against the field trip and stayed in a hot pool all day.

Longest Conference Dinner 1980

The 50th Annual Conference was held in Greymouth, and the Jubilee Dinner venue was the tourist attraction of Shantytown, a replica of the old towns when the gold rush was in that vicinity. A good collection of Life Members was present and that evening, everyone gathered in the old pub for liquid refreshments before dinner, which had been arranged as a buffet. The well-known Kakatai Band was up on stage and playing happy music as the evening's entertainment, so everyone was enjoying the event. At one time Alan Harris from Gore also entertained us with a Scottish medley on the bagpipes.

Unfortunately, the caterer decided, at the last minute, to change his format to a sit-down meal. Because of the numbers, there were three sittings - 8.00 to 10.30 pm, 10.30 to 12.30 am, and the final sitting ran from 12.30 until 2.00 am, or whenever everyone had eaten.

The first sitting went well but those in the pub were truly merry by the time the second sitting took place, and the concrete floor was awash with spilt beer. The final dinner sitting also went well but ended a little late. Not long before 3.00 am two well-oiled Life Members tried to get in through John Lancashire's room window as the front door of the King's Arms Hotel was locked! He managed to let them in, somewhat grumpily, no doubt! The following morning, the first conference session was very quiet...

1981 Downs and Ups in New Plymouth

At the 1981 New Plymouth Conference, certain members celebrated too much and too early. When a music hall group performed during the Conference Dinner, a couple of the lads crawled up to the stage and harassed the women, so LOC Chairman Hank Hockings and I had to try calming them and we gave them profound apologies afterwards.

But we did recruit our thousandth member that week, a local dairy farmer of course!

However, Ray Brougham didn't enjoy his hotel room at the venue, when he began washing before retiring to bed and the hand basin tap came away, causing a fountain in the basin!

He went and told Reception and they gave him a key for another room, but he found that was already occupied by a couple who weren't pleased to be woken when he entered. So a second visit to Reception got him another room and he thankfully fell asleep there - only to be awoken by a phone call at 4.30 am by a new receptionist, who told him the tap had been repaired and that he could return to his original room! Ray tried but failed to find another hotel that could accommodate him that week - they were all full!

1982 - Praying Pasture People

Blenheim was a new start for around 400 NZGA conference attenders - they met in a church! The venue was a brand-new hexagonal building in central Blenheim - a Methodist building that had been built for conferences as well as Sunday church meetings. NZGA was the first to hold a conference in it.

The Wesley Centre was purpose-built and even featured a projection room. Unfortunately, nobody had tried it before for its purpose, so when we set up a projector the first day before the conference began, we discovered that it was too far from the screen, by miles!

LOC chairman and regional MAF adviser Peter Yeoman contacted MAF Head Office in Wellington and they sent a telephoto projector lens over by ferry. This enabled the projected slide to show up well on the screen, but every time the projectionist moved, even slightly, the table vibrated and the slide wobbled on-screen. In addition, the small room had no ventilation so the projectionist grew hot and sweaty. A morning in there would be too long for him to survive! So we gave up and used a normal projector in the main aisle of the ground floor, just like every other past venue.

The Methodists had erected their new church right next to the Presbyterians (and by now may be a Uniting church with them), but they agreed to their hall being used for morning and afternoon tea breaks and for lunch.

We held the Conference Dinner as a barbecue at the beautiful Portage Hotel facing Kenepuru Sound, and to reach it, 169 of those attending were bussed to Picton and ferried over Queen Charlotte Sound, where they then walked over the hill to the Portage Hotel.

Luckily, it was a perfect evening weatherwise, so everyone enjoyed it. But inevitably two or three overindulged at the bar, and as we returned to the boat taking us back to Picton, two of them tried to cast off before we were all on board. The Captain grew angry and threatened to leave them on land to walk to Picton on the 55 km track. However, Ray Brougham persuaded him to take them along, giving an assurance that they would behave well. So we all returned to Blenheim for the rest of the Conference.

Marae Session 1983

The next year NZGA chose to visit Gisborne once again and while the conference was based at the Sandown Park Hotel that week, for the first morning we were hosted on the PoHo-O-Rawiri Marae in Kaiti, a pleasant Gisborne suburb.

This was another milestone for NZGA, especially when President Jon Toxopeus thanked the hosts in their own language, a rarity in those days. We went in and heard an address by Minister of Science and Forestry Dr Ian Shearer (who had previously worked on pig research at Ruakura); and pioneer aviator Ossie James tell us about the state of agricultural topdressing.

However, it was fascinating to hear the Maori perspective of pastoral agriculture for the first time at a conference. Gisborne farmers Doc Wirepa and Bill Christy presented the Maori viewpoint regarding land ownership and the multi-ownership concept. Finally, Charlie Rau gave an excellent overview of land use and district planning in the Gisborne area.

During the week, John Hay was awarded the MIG (“mugged in Gisborne”) when he debated the 1981 Springbok Tour with some locals in a pub, and temporarily lost his wallet... and I was amused to hear Gavin Sheath (then an NZGA Executive member and now a Life Member and Ray Brougham Trophy winner) being taken to task by his

MAF Whatawhata OIC, Peter Rattray, for his pronunciation of their work base “Gavin, this week you’ve called the place Whata-whata, Farta-farta, Farta-whata and Whata-farter – just which one is it?”

1984 Mile record broken

John Lancashire stood in for NZGT chairman Jim Inglis, who was in hospital during the 1984 Timaru Conference, in presenting the Awards at the end of the first morning, but suddenly remembered the award scrolls were still in his motel room. He probably broke the New Zealand mile record retrieving them in time to make the presentations, though he was a little breathless!

1985 Trevor Ellett recognised

At the 1985 Conference in Whangarei, Ray Brougham did not want to give Trevor a Grassland Memorial Trust Award for his endeavours to release his privately-bred ryegrass Ellett, so the Northland farmers awarded him instead at the conference dinner.

1986 - Alexandra

The Proceedings (Volume 48) was the only one to include the Conference Digest - the summaries of conference papers were referred to by the delegates during the conference sessions, as they were usually more easily understood than the actual papers! And then, Malcolm and Betty Guy of Levin managed to break their bed during the night in the Bendigo Hotel!

At the field trip stop on Bendigo Station we stood beside Barry Wills’ extensive field evaluation of alternative dryland forages for well over an hour, listening to two Invermay researchers, who had already given papers the day before. Field trip chairman Ron Duffy allowed them to talk on for 90 minutes, when they weren’t even scheduled to speak at Bendigo (home of Shrek the sheep!). This left Barry Wills with only ten minutes to show us all his alternative dryland forages! He consulted a lawyer re the possibility of suing NZGA over this...

Horizontal snow in Balclutha

At Balclutha in 1988 the snow blew horizontally when NZGA visited the Lochindorp upland farm during the field trip. Four attenders from the USA’s Deep South remained in their waterbeds with room heaters going full blast. Seed production researcher Phil Rolston presented his paper in the Telford Gymnasium while wearing a beanie and parka, announcing that he had found the ideal cool store for his nucleus pasture seeds!

Canine branding on 1989 field trip

The field trip in Whanganui in 1989 featured a small male dog with a large and full bladder. He moved quietly through the crowd of attentive attenders, raising his back leg and leaving his mark on the trousers of those who didn’t notice...

1994 Memorable speech in Ashburton

Farm Award winner Jeanette Tarbotton gave one of the most stirring appreciation speeches at the 1990 Ashburton Conference, on how she and her husband survived the farming turndown in recent years after Labour had swiftly removed farm subsidies. She went on to lead the Canterbury branch of the Women's Division of Federated Farmers.

And DSIR Grasslands director John Lancashire told everyone that he was proud that the first British convict to arrive in Tasmania was called - John Lancashire...

1994 Hanmer blew us over

The venue in Hanmer Springs during 1994 was a huge rented marquee by the now renovated hotel, until a gale blew it down in the night. The Executive Committee worked hard to resurrect it the following morning and two large stock trucks were parked on the windward side to give shelter.

However, AgResearch senior scientist Steve Goldson almost suffered a heart attack during his presentation when one of the stock trucks suddenly started up its engine. It failed to prevent him from winning the Best Spoken Paper Award that week.

Professor Tom Walker received the inaugural Ray Brougham Trophy Award during the conference dinner, and Deric Charlton was elected a Life Member at the AGM.

1996 Summer meeting for a change

1995 saw NZGA break a longstanding tradition - the conference was held at Waitangi in summer weather, ostensibly to see what a Northland drought looked like. Of course there was no drought that year and Kikuyu grass was rampant everywhere!

1996 Back to normal in North Otago

Oamaru in November 1996 brought the spring conference back on schedule. It featured two fascinating meals - Colin Brown organised an impressive breakfast featuring ostrich meat, a very low cholesterol meat.

And then for the Conference Dinner we had a delicious barbecue at the Kuriheka Estate homestead near Maheno, but inland from Oamaru. After the barbecue, they opened the amazing farmhouse for us to enjoy the largest private collection of war medals in New Zealand; and an amazing collection of armaments, flintlock pistols and swords from previous centuries. It was a rare treat. Our thanks went to local organisers led by Russell Hurst and Gail Meikle.

1997 Cosmopolitan venue

1997 saw us meet in Mangere, very near Auckland Airport - hardly the place for a grassland conference but the first time we had met in the province. It proved to be just as popular, however, with Frank Torley, TV producer of *Country Calendar*, receiving

the Ray Brougham Trophy. Well-known dairy farmer and ryegrass grower Trevor Ellett, who lived just along the road, was awarded NZGA Life Membership.



Murray and Mrs Auld

LOC chair, regional adviser Murray Auld did a marvelous job keeping the conference running to schedule. I suspect that he was the last regional adviser to be persuaded to run an NZGA conference, as the MAF Advisory Service had been bought by Wrightson Limited the year before, to become Agriculture New Zealand.

1998 Upland Nelson a Big Hit

In 1998 the NZGT farming award judges Deric Charlton and Jim Inglis, were blown away by the beautiful and sustainably productive Speargrass Station near St Arnaud in Upper Nelson. Doug and Bronwen Thorneycroft had farmed in Wales for a few years before moving here in the 1960s.

With their sons they ran Speargrass and another farm nearby, and another son worked for the Department of Conservation. The judges were only sorry that NZGA attenders weren't able to visit the property, but Deric prepared a version of Doug's application for publication in the *Proceedings*.

1999 Corporate Farm featured at Napier

Brownrigg Agriculture, near Te Aute in Hawke's Bay was awarded the Ray Brougham Trophy at the 1999 Napier Conference, mainly because of the Livestock Division run by David Brownrigg. His brother Jonathan ran the Cash Cropping Division.

This year it was possible for the delegates to visit the enterprise and they enjoyed a pleasant field trip to the main area, one of six farms run by Brownrigg.

The other unforgettable, and yet one we would like to forget, event in Napier was a Billy Connolly lookalike who performed at the Conference Dinner. Although he had promised to minimise his vulgarities, he was soon far worse than The Big Yin, and people walked out in droves. LOC leader Maurice Grey apologised the next day to everyone.

2000 The ground moved

Not long after the 2000 Conference dinner had almost ended, those still enjoying Southland hospitality were sobered by a sudden earthquake! That certainly ended the event... The quake didn't create any damage as it occurred in Fiordland and wasn't too heavy, but it made us realise that we live in an uncertain world.

2001 Fencing featured in Hamilton

Retired physicist, Doug Phillips, was finally recognised by NZGT awarding him the Ray Brougham Trophy at the 2001 Conference. Doug had developed the low-impedance electric fencing system at Ruakura after a director's wife had complained to him about the "sea of fences" across the campus grazing land.

MAF then patented it in 1963 but never acknowledged Doug's invention that the local Gallagher Company went on to commercialise. Bill Gallagher's father had started this type of fence in the late 1930s. Bill travelled the world to persuade farmers that this was the way ahead, and he received the Regional Award that evening.

Background Noises in 2002

President Derek Woodfield had to contend with flapping marquee canvas noises as he deftly ran the 2002 Conference in Greymouth.

An inventive farmer who had flipped his soils at Cape Foulwind received a farming award that week. His cows, who were grazing without their legs sinking into mud, appreciated the situation even more!

2003 Encore for Derek

Palmerston North's 2003 Conference was an encore performance for Derek Woodfield as he led the LOC in organising yet another well-attended conference. Derek was awarded his Life Membership at the Conference dinner.

A workshop that featured use of poplars and willows on farms as valuable supplementary fodder during dry summers. Those attending saw these trees being selected for leafiness by Crop & Food Research at the Aokautere research site that was used for developing these conservation trees by the old Ministry of Works in the 60s and 70s.

NZGA was also blessed with fine weather during this and conferences in Ashburton (2004), New Plymouth (2005) and Dunedin (2006) and the delegates at the Otago meeting returned on the well-known Taieri Gorge railway after an enjoyable field trip and a barbecue meal in Middlemarch.

I retired from my work in 2006, so didn't enjoy conferences after that, having attended well over 30 of these events, I needed a break and wanted to enjoy other activities. Patricia and I have been fortunate to enjoy our lives since, but I have found much pleasure from reliving the NZGA life while researching and writing this account.

Deric Charlton 2021