

# **STAGLANDS**

## The First Forty Years

By John Simister  
with Sarah Purdy

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## Introduction

The Wildlife Park industry is not a road to fame and fortune. It is one littered with casualties. Those few that have survived, have done so through skill, determination, love of what they are creating, an awareness of why they are doing it and – above all – single bloody-mindedness.

No-one I know fills the bill better than John Simister, an all-round Englishman who would never fit into a square hole. John, and his supportive partner Sarah, are a Kiwi couple who are doing a great deal for conservation and environmental awareness in New Zealand.

John is one of that highly endangered species that is seldom recognised – Homo Absurdii or ‘The True Englishman’. The British Empire was founded by and littered with such creatures; waving walking sticks and waxing moustaches as they strode across continents achieving dubious goals with righteous zeal. The classic tales of survival, colonialism, adventure and conquest are a treasure trove of such inspired individuals, along with other idiots who don’t deserve mention.

Unlike other true Englishmen, John wasn’t interested in dubious goals and righteous zeal. He didn’t stride across continents, he came overland to New Zealand in a Jeep shorter than he was long. He’d much rather be called a Kiwi than an Englishman; he was expected to be a huntsman like his father but that was not at all what he wanted. From boyhood he loved to be alone in the woods and fells, watching animal and bird life; he shrivelled in cities and yearned for open sky and a world where birds and animals lived freely in their natural habitat. Staglands had its beginnings in John’s childhood and a life in his dreams long before it became a wildlife park in the Akatarawa Valley. A true Englishman, yes, continents away from home, adventurous, bloody-minded, rather idealistic and isolated, his British Land Rover always parked outside and a labrador by the fire – but an Englishman who says he has found Home at last at Staglands in New Zealand. A conquering Englishman, yes, if conquest is what you would call the steady and meticulous re-cycling and sculpting of 113 acres of bush and farmland and water and thousands of tonnes of clay into an idyllic natural home for unusual and iconic and endangered species – and crowds of appreciative families.

I was introduced to John and Carole by a close friend a few years after they had opened the park. That chance meeting with John led to a

close bond, friendship and laughter, travel and adventure. Together we live and breathe the Wildlife industry. We would travel New Zealand regularly, studying other wildlife facilities and meeting breeders. We were always striving for a better way of doing things. I also studied Staglands. How did it work? Why did people react the way they did? There were no prides of lions, no towering giraffes. So what was it?

For me the answer lay in John's attention to the smallest detail. Like a simple globule of water, channelled and released at a height. It was pretty as it dropped off a rock, but did it land correctly? Did it make the right sound? Was the impact enough to create ripples in the water below? Did it create a rainbow spray of droplets? Did it go on to feed and water a micro garden of ferns and mosses? Did it create a suitable environment for the other inhabiting species? John was uncompromising and relentless in his pursuit of illustrating nature, its properties and effects.

That detail to me is the essence of Staglands. John's skill in creating a world that no one knows has been created, is rare indeed.

Michael Willis

Willowbank Wildlife Reserve, Christchurch, NZ

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## **The very beginnings**

The first bird I was allowed to keep was a caged canary in my bedroom. Mainly to stop me shooting the crap out of the furniture.

The problem was the homework! Boredom inevitably and quickly set in and I used to ease it by lying on my bed and seeing how many air rifle pellets I could put in the brass keyhole of a set of drawers on the other side of the room. I had this self-imposed rule: if I missed, it was back to the books. So I had every incentive to become quite a good little shot. But sooner or later miss I did and there was another chip out of the drawers. That's why I think Mum reluctantly agreed I could keep a canary in my bedroom. Surely I wouldn't want to frighten the bird by shooting up the bedroom. However canaries are remarkably tolerant little birds; it didn't give a damn. So the outside toilet was converted to a small aviary and I and the bird were banished.

I grew up in the heart of the English countryside: a few early years on the Welsh border, then Northamptonshire and then the part I loved most, on the edge of the Cumberland Fells. I was nine when we moved to Northamptonshire. A wood ran behind our house, and I spent a lot of my time there, to avoid my father and because I loved it. After a snow fall I would go to my special clearing and be amazed at the variety of different animals and birds that had left tracks only a few hours after the snow had stopped falling.

I knew that clearing well and saw many animals and birds there, but I only ever saw at any one time a fraction of those whose prints were all over that beautiful little clearing. That experience stayed with me right through until the Staglands idea developed. I believed that if people could be guaranteed the opportunity to see a variety of animals and birds in a beautiful natural setting, such as that clearing, they would be bowled over by the experience. In fact, this clearing became the inspi-



In the foreground, the banished bird enjoying a bit of fresh air. Behind it, the woods in which I spent so much time

ration for the original circular group of Staglands' aviaries which later evolved into our first walk-through aviary.

And then there was Cumberland! I so loved the fells of Cumberland, their bare, stark bleakness, so real, unpretentious and undecorated, not mellowed and flossied up by people. And then those few, brief weeks at the end of summer when the heather came out in flower – far prettier than anyone could believe or imagine.

Another formative moment for me was when I visited a private park in

Northamptonshire. I was in one particular area of the park for only a few minutes, but it had a lasting effect on me. There was an area, quite small, enclosed by a 6ft fence: tall, old trees covered in the delicate greens of spring, lush vegetation everywhere, bluebells, golden pheasants and white doves – so simple, so beautiful, magical in fact, and it made quite an impact on me and on Staglands.

## Driving to New Zealand

Leaving England was a difficult decision. I loved the countryside – the more remote the better, but I was working in a city. I thought there was a reasonable chance I would do OK financially, providing I continued to work hard, but I would be bound to the city. Finding, affording and developing a few acres of land to support myself and Carole my wife, would be difficult. Such a lot of English land is and has been owned and controlled by the same few families for generations and is never for sale.

Loans were obtainable reasonably easily, but only for those who didn't really need them.

Carole's mother and brother had emigrated to NZ. I was 22 and I wanted to be my own man. I applied for my passport. It was time to go.

We could fly or we could sit on a ship for six weeks. What a waste of an opportunity! But to drive out! Now that sounded more like it! We visited a dealer of ex-army 4-wheel drive vehicles. He opened a farmyard door and in we went – to find ourselves in what looked like a forward supply base in some unknown war zone. Row upon row of Austin Champ Jeeps, their bodies looking as though they were made by a blacksmith rather than churned out by a giant press. They were rugged little canvas-topped vehicles, with Rolls Royce engines.

So we bought one, filled it with fuel, oil, water, spare parts, tools, food, and a tent and drove to Calcutta. Carole and I slept beside it from Dover to Istanbul and in it the rest of the way, I was 6'1" tall before the trip, and it was 6' from tailgate to windscreen. Uhm!

I think Carole thought it was going to be a pleasant little sight-seeing tour and perhaps it should have been, but I wanted to get on with it. We had a long way to go and a lot to do and I don't mean just the trip. We did have a short break in Turkey (where this stupid Englishman lay on the beach in the mid-day sun and got sun stroke) to prepare for the more interesting part of our little journey. From there on it was mostly unsealed tracks or no track at



**Top:** Carole and I in England, formally posing after work with our jeep for a newspaper article

**Bottom:** It got a bit tedious – every night all the gear had to come out of the jeep and then be neatly packed away again every morning

# 10,000 mile journey in ex-WD vehicle

John and Carole Simister, both 23, left their home in Chapel lane, Easton, on Friday for a new life in New Zealand. Most of their 10,000 miles journey will be overland in an exWD Austin Champ.

The Simisters feel their transport should stand the strain of the trip very well — it is equipped with a Rolls Royce engine. John certainly hopes this will be so, he has never been one to mess around with cars, and made this confession to his colleagues at Baker Perkins Limited who presented him and Carole with car tools and camping kit as a farewell gift.

Both have worked for Baker Perkins, John as a production controller in the firm's experimental department, and Carole as secretary to the Group controller.

They will be carrying over 80 pounds of canned food. "No cosmetics" said Carole, She is confident that she should develop a tan that will be the envy of all her friends for she will be dressed in shirt and shorts for most of the journey, much of through sun-drenched territory.

From Belgium they travel through Austria, Germany, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India and Ceylon. They plan to have a short holiday in Turkey.

It will be nights in a mos-

quito net in a 50 shilling tent until they arrive at Ceylon. Here Carole says it will be a nice change getting into a pretty dress for the first time in months. John's comment was perhaps typically male — "It will be a change to eat something other than pilchard and prunes."

Their ultimate destination is Wellington, New Zealand, where they intend to start their own dairy business. This apparently is not what it sounds but is the New Zealand equivalent of our general store.

They should make a go of it for they are a very determined and unusual pair. The reason they have chosen New Zealand in preference to any other part of the Commonwealth they say, is because they think the cultural gap is less marked than in other parts of the Commonwealth, and that it offers greater opportunities.

"Very important too" says John, "the sea is always within easy motoring distance, and after our trip we'll certainly be experienced motorists."

all; just a compass bearing — though, would you believe it, we did find ourselves on a 200 mile motorway in Afghanistan, complete with the latest service stations, but no power??

So, through Turkey into Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and down through India to Calcutta. Many interesting experiences and one close to the Afghanistan-Pakistan border that was frightening!

It was no holiday, but it was a great adventure. Carole became quite sick and it was only her tough determination that got her through. Sight-seeing it wasn't! But there were so many amazing sights and experiences. And our sturdy little Jeep never missed a beat. Yeah Right!

Two weeks recuperation with relatives in Malaya then on to Thailand, Australia and finally NZ by air. My first impressions as they opened the plane doors? What a lot of paint they use in NZ!

Looking back I think I left the UK a boyish man and arrived a man, or as close as I was ever likely to get.

## Earning, dreaming, planning and purchasing

We arrived in NZ in November, 1967.

On our very first day Nicky, Carole's brother, drove us through the Akatarawa Valley. A property called Shangri-La caught our interest. We



**Top:** On the roadside in Afghanistan dealing with the inevitable repairs

**Bottom:** Carole washing her hair. Even the most basic chores were a mission

John and Carole's 10,000 mile trip was written up in the Huntingdonshire newspaper, Hunts Post on September 28, 1966





**Above:** The new sign, erected just before opening  
**Below:** The latest sign being erected



thing had felt like home other than Cumberland.

There are so many subtle and not so subtle differences between NZ and the UK. A raindrop that falls on an English hillside is claimed and owned on every part of its journey, down every stream, lake and river till it crosses the ocean beach. Only then can a person have reasonable access to it. Except in rare circumstances you cannot, without the owner's consent, walk along its banks, fish its water, or even swim in it. But if that same drop of water falls on a NZ hillside you can almost without exception walk with it on its journey to the sea, catch its fish and swim where ever you wish.

weren't to know it then but a few years later a new sign was nailed up there, "Staglands".

NZ is amazing: the country, the give-anything-a-go people. To try and write of my feelings in those first few months is beyond me. All I can say is that I seemed to be in some exciting dream. Though I didn't talk about it, deep down, I thought NZ was just part of my journey around the world. But it quickly became my destination, and started to feel like home, for about the first time any-

In England a salmon egg hatches in the headwaters of a river far from the sea, the young fish makes its way to the sea where it lives until it finally returns to the same headwater, often a surprisingly small and shallow stream where its eggs are laid and fertilised and then it dies. That fish as it returns to its birthplace may only be caught with the consent of the owner of that part of the river. You may get your consent on some rivers, but you will need a very large cheque book. There is no such claim made on a salmon in NZ. If you want to catch a salmon, you pack your lunch and go fishing. If I'm starting to sound like a redneck rabble-rouser, I'm not, it is just that these are a couple of the many things that make NZ a very special place indeed, and we should guard it well.

Whatever we were eventually going to do in NZ – and it was definitely going to be rural – we needed more money than we had or could reasonably expect to earn over the next few years in a 9 to 5 job. We decided that if we bought a dairy or a coffee bar, that might just do it and we thought we knew what made a successful dairy. But we didn't know what made a successful coffee bar, so a dairy it was and after a pleasant chat with the bank, Raukawa St Dairy, Strathmore, Wellington, was the chosen one. To say we worked our butts off would be a gross understatement. Dairies are not super profitable businesses; we simply worked long very, very long hours, Nicky ran a second dairy that had gone broke and somehow we got through three years three weeks and one day of dairy ownership. We met many great people, like Peg, Claude and Tracey Reeves who became long term friends and played an enormous role in Staglands' early days. We weren't in an upmarket area of Wellington, far from it. Many people bought their goods on account, yet we left with only \$32.00 in outstanding debts; what great, honest down-to-earth Kiwis.

But I had never lived anywhere larger than in a very small village, and I yearned for open spaces. So we built an attractive aviary at the front of the shop and I reckon those birds just about kept me sane. Our customers, especially children, loved it.

I didn't like the zoos of 50 years ago and I still don't like concrete and iron bars. With about one year of dairy ownership still to go we decided to build a wildlife reserve. It would be in a beautiful location, it would be natural, people would be involved and interact with our animals and birds, it would be beautiful and above all else it would be fun and entertaining.

We went looking for land and purely by chance re-discovered Shangri-La in the Upper Akatarawa valley. What's more it was on the market. Subject to planning approval, the contract was signed.

Our 40 years-and-counting Staglands adventure had begun.

What are the three essentials for any property purchase? Location, location, location. 400,000 people within an hour's drive – that was good! On a road that was legendary for its beauty – that was good. Half an hour up a narrow, winding, logging track, which was also legendary, with very little passing traffic – that was not so good. But two out of three ain't



bad, as Meat Loaf, my favourite rock'n roller, says, but there was no way I was going to live beside a main highway. Oh, and then there was the rain, but it is after all a rain forest with its beautiful, lush, native bush. And, of course, the magnificent Akatarawa River!



**Top:** Taken in 1971 from where the deer park is now, looking at the original river terraces that are now the picnic area, Toetoe Aviary and Secret Garden. Staglands has always been about using the natural features of the land to best advantage

**Bottom:** Taken recently from the same place in the deer park. After all the development and planting the river terraces are now hard to see

All in all this was and still is the spot for me. With plans approved and the dairies sold we were once more on our way.

### **Building Staglands – fun with logs and creosote**

When we moved to the Akatarawa Valley we didn't have enough money, or the skills to build Staglands. But we did have enough food to last 12 months, including 13 of the oldest sheep ever to be eaten by man or beast, and a huge burning desire and determination to create a very good, little wildlife reserve. It was a tremendous challenge! We had to be open in 12 months. I loved it.

We had chosen the property very carefully. It obviously had to be very attractive and at least 25 acres (it was in fact 113 acres), but it also needed to be and was rich in the materials we needed to build Staglands. There were pine and macrocarpa trees, water, plenty of stone for landscaping and building car parks and tracks, old native logs and stumps left abandoned on the hill or washed down river by previous floods. And there was a large supply of plants to propagate and transplant. These natural assets helped to make it possible.

Nicky, Carole and I were not the most formidable team ever to set foot in the Akatarawa Valley, but we had a plan – “Aha, yes, we have zee plan.” I had spent a lot of time working on the plan in the dairy, and more importantly a schedule of the order of jobs that needed doing and when to start and finish each job. Much of it was little more than a calculated guess but providing we somehow stuck more or less to “The Plan” everything should come together so we could meet our deadline of Christmas 1971 – opening day. We couldn't go wrong, could we? Well, that is more or less what happened and had it not been for the council insisting we move the position of the toilets at the last moment we would have made the planned opening date. But we still managed to open in January.

But the three of us didn't do it alone. No way! We had the most wonderful group of friends including Carole's mother, Pat, and Aunt Ella, but huge credit has to go to Carole and Nicky. I was a man on a mission and still am. I'm not I think, the easiest person to live with.

The first job was to fell the trees we needed to build the aviaries, shelters, fences and so on. Basically the trees were up the hill and we wanted them at the bottom. We had the technology, that is, “Billy” the Clydesdale. Oh, and a chainsaw. We felled and limbed the trees, hitched





Technology "Billy". Once we sorted out a few hitches he proved to be a great help. Carole only wished he could learn to peel posts as well as haul logs

them onto Billy and down the hill he charged. Boy, did he motor! Well, wouldn't you with a bloody great log chasing you down a very steep hill? There was a rough sort of track but Billy liked the direct approach to life so he ignored the track. When we finally caught up with him he had this pained, disdainful look on his face, "No boys, I am not going up that bloody hill again". Another way had to be found. Basically Billy remained on the flat at the bottom of the hill connected by a long, very long rope to a log at the top of the hill. He pulled, I prayed, and that was more or less that.

Some of the logs we milled into rough boards and half rounds on a very basic tractor-driven saw bench, and a few others were cut to length. Then all Carole had to do was peel the bark off by hand, lay them out

to dry and preserve them with creosote. Pretty simple really. There were only a few hundred or maybe 1-2000. Anyway not much to it and once again we had the technology.

This time it was in the form of a 44 gallon drum with its top removed. Posts were placed upright in the drum and creosote poured in. The theory goes that warm creosote penetrates warm timber better than if one or both are cold. So we lit a fire under the drum, stood back and marvelled at technology in action. Or rather, expansion. The creosote warmed up, quickly climbed up out of the drum and on to the fire. Quite the most spectacular fire I had ever seen: an enormous column of flame and dense black smoke shot into the air together with a volcanic type lava flow of burning creosote that took off downhill. "Uhm." Fortunately we had laid a 50mm water pipe close to our volcano so we quickly fired up the chain saw, zapped through the pipe and the fire was out in no time. Water and burning creosote are not a good combination but it

worked. Things got a bit tense when I told Carole she had to peel more logs, but apart from that no harm was done.

And that was pretty much how things went: learning from our mistakes, doing it together with any one whose brains could help us, trial and error, common sense, books and most importantly, the will to succeed. I have felt for a long time that anyone can do anything they really want to do. So many people seem to have so many reasons why they can't do something. But give it a go; make a start no matter how small. Persevere, never give up. You will find a way if it is what you really want to do.

During the building of Staglands I encountered something I had not experienced before: the freely offered, totally voluntary and generous help of people in time, labour, advice, support, humour and encouragement. It was amazing. Without it Staglands would not have been built.



Carole, Nicky and myself having a well-earned break. I'm not sure how long Carole spent peeling posts but things were getting pretty tense near the end. It would have been a brave man who suggested we didn't have *quite* enough

In all honesty, when I started, I didn't know how we were going to finish the job. Quite simply we did not have enough time, money, or skill, yet we succeeded. But it was only through the help of other people, some of whom we had only known for a few months. It was an incredible and new experience for me.

## What is good design?

I have always had a good imagination and I love trying to create what I believe is a natural balanced design, be it a simple path, pond, or building.

Some years ago I watched as a very large dislodged boulder bounded down the hill, slewed to one side and came to rest. It looked perfectly positioned. Over the next two or three years it settled into the earth, moss and lichens started to climb over it, and on its sheltered side ferns began to grow. It had settled into its new home and it looked perfect.

The question and the challenge is: if I dug out that same boulder and positioned it in the same area would it look as good? I use the phrase "natural, balanced design," but I am not really sure what that is, or how to create or describe it. But design seems to be a word that is used a lot these days so I may as well join in. The dictionary defines design as "the arrangement of" something. Perhaps a better term for me to use is "a natural, balanced arrangement" – though that still doesn't sound right.

I've certainly never had any formal training in design and arrangement. I read a lot, I'm reasonably observant and curious about how and why things happen and come together, and why they look the way they do. I make lots of sketches of what I am trying to achieve, and then by trial and error arrange the components into what I think looks right. It can be frustrating for those I work with when I say, "No, it doesn't look quite right, let's try again, only this time let's put this over there to improve this or that effect"... But I know of no other way.

Often even at the end of a reasonably-sized project it can be quite a small thing that makes or breaks the overall effect we are trying to achieve. But it is that attention to detail and doing it to the very best of our ability that I think is so important and what makes Staglands, "Staglands". Each area needs to be fun and interestingly different from, yet complementary to, the others, the paths and views encouraging and drawing you into another encounter, rather than, say, a fenced, concrete path dictating the way you go. Does it work? Well, you be the judge. We

want everything we do to support and promote our vision, which is "to inspire a love of wildlife, the need to protect our natural environment and to enhance our visitor's experience".

We have kept pretty well to the plan I drew up 42 years ago, which has given Staglands consistency and allowed nature to work its natural magic. Of course it also hides my cock-ups. Staglands has given me an enormous opportunity to be creative. It seems not many people dream then create their dream. I am very fortunate.

## What's in a name?

The name "Staglands" seemed a reasonably good name in 1971. We hoped it would convey a feeling of a wildlife area rather than just a deer or bird park. Later, when deer farming flourished, the name didn't seem such a good idea, but we stuck with it as it had become such a very well-known name. But there were no deer farms back then. In fact we had difficulty convincing the relevant government departments that we be allowed to keep deer at all, even though there were more wild deer running round Staglands than we ever wanted to hold in Staglands.

They viewed anyone wanting to keep a



**Top:** Red deer in the deer park not long after we opened

**Bottom:** In the late 80s we changed to fallow deer which meant people could walk through the deer park. This has allowed much more interaction and is in keeping with the way we wanted Staglands to develop



few deer with anything from suspicion to derision. Certainly there was a pronounced lack of encouragement. There can be no denying the huge negative impact deer have had on NZ's native bush, but what the difference was between our deer and the large number of wild deer living all around us, which didn't seem to concern the ministry at all, was beyond me.

The fencing requirements the department insisted upon were, to say the least, tough. The wild deer who regularly called in for a chat through the fence with our deer, must have found it all rather silly, like me, but at times it is easier to go along with bureaucratic nonsense than fight it. Attitudes were changing and deer farming took off throughout NZ. Interestingly deer farming was responsible for the only worthwhile reduction in wild deer numbers because people started to use helicopters for live capture of deer for farming and shooting for meat.

In about 1980 we switched from Red to Fallow deer to enable our visitors to hand feed and walk amongst them, the goats, sheep and "Bob" the Clydesdale. Fallow deer are not as majestic and awe-inspiring as red deer but the fallow are very pretty smaller animals and better suited to Staglands' purpose. Those people who walk to the top of the hill get a great view of the valley and Staglands.



We quickly had to improve the infrastructure to cope on busy days such as this. Early on the park layout was less formal but it was difficult to manage. More paths were needed and now we seem to have directional signs everywhere

## Crowds, creaking infrastructure and disaster

After Staglands opened it quickly became very popular. The numbers of people who came greatly exceeded our expectations. It was very gratifying, but our infrastructure wasn't up to it. We needed more and better metalled paths and roads, another car park, and another entrance. I felt we needed to develop Staglands quickly, as we had opened with the bare minimum and I worried that we had not done enough to retain people's interest and keep them coming back. However the infrastructure had to be improved and it gobbled up a lot of time and money.

But slowly we were developing Staglands. We built a craft shop and as everyone seemed to want a cup of tea, a tearoom. Until the tearoom opened early in 1974 Staglands had been a lot of hard work, fun, and adventure. Now it was becoming a real business, especially for Carole, as it was her lot to run the tearoom.

Then disaster came a-calling in the form of a heavy snowfall. One big old tree came down killing 13 peacocks, and flattening some aviaries. It was bad, but very beautiful. For some time I had been thinking about building a large walk-through aviary and trout pond, and now we had the perfect opportunity. Roger Reddington, the local contractor, brought up his "Drot" – a machine that is a cross between a bulldozer and loader – and dug out the trout pond using the fill to form a natural looking bank, creating a little valley. All we had to do was put wire netting over the top, add some water, a few logs, rocks, plants, fish, birds and Hey Presto! We had the beginnings of what has become



It was devastating to see the snow damage to the original aviaries but it did give us the opportunity to get on and build the walk-through aviary I had been dreaming about



The Toetoe Aviary is a delightful opportunity for people of all ages to interact with the birds. The end result has probably been far better than I could have imagined all those years ago

over time a very beautiful, natural walk-through aviary. It's a wonderful place for our visitors to see and to interact with our birds and trout. It is still one of my favourite spots. We call it the Toetoe Aviary and Trout Pond.

## **Kunekune**

Early in the Staglands saga I got to know Michael Willis. He and his wife, Kathy, had started a wildlife reserve in Christchurch called Willowbank, and we became good friends, enjoying endless wildlife conversations over almost endless bottles of red wine.

On one occasion we had reached that stage in the evening when we were starting to make complete sense of all manner of difficult and complex issues and Kathy and Carole had long since given up and gone to bed. I happened to mention a funny little Walt Disney-type pig I had recently seen and that I hoped to get a few of. Michael sat bolt upright, his sparkling eyes about to pop, red wine spilling from his glass as he thumped the table. "We have to find them! Save the breed", he roared. Carole thought she was having a nightmare and she probably was.

So we made plans and off we went with a stock crate on the back of the Land Rover. I don't know how many miles we drove or the number of times we circumnavigated the North Island. One person led to another to another and it was always the same story, "Yes I remember kunekunes! Great little pigs! Live on a few scraps and a bit of grass! Haven't seen one for years."

We did eventually track some down and managed to buy or were given a few. They were not all what we thought or had been told they would look like but they were good enough to start a breeding programme and hopefully ensure the survival of the breed. Clearly there were not many left.

We met some great people, heard lots of stories about this remarkable pig, and theories about where they may have originated. For what it's worth, I think they were probably put on board Chinese sailing ships long ago, possibly before Cook in 1769, or on ships trading with China and carried live as fresh meat for the crew to eat. The lucky ones were eventually dropped off in NZ. At some point in their journey from China or later in NZ, they crossed with other breeds of pig and the kunekune breed evolved.

Why China? Well, a similar pig exists in China today and given they can get extremely fat and need little other than their own fat, a few food scraps and water to keep them alive, they would have been very useful on long ocean voyages, and so much easier to carry than sheep or cattle. It meant seafarers could carry fresh meat great distances. Galapagos Island turtles were put in the holds of sailing ships in much the same way – needing even less sustenance than kunes – and eaten en route.

One thing is certain, kunes are a NZ pig and had it not been for the Maori, who long ago kept these pigs to eat and for their fat, they would not have been around for Michael and me or anyone else to enjoy. The Maori used to preserve kune and other meat such as native pigeon (kereru) by storing the meat in rendered kune fat. Today kunes are doing well and you now don't have to drive far to find one contentedly waddling around its paddock.

Many times over the years I was to hear those words, "We must find them and save the breed".

Michael made another comment about kunes that caused a bit of a stir around New Zealand. "To save the breed we need to eat them", he said. But as far as spontaneous comments go it's absolutely spot on. The simple truth is that if they are recognised as good, worthwhile,





**Above:** The kunekune pig has many admirers – large and small – and so it should! It's NZ's very own unique breed of pig though it may have had Chinese origins. Once hard to find kunekunes are now doing well

**Below:** An attractive well-planted enclosure for the kune pigs has been an enormous challenge and taken a lot of patience. Slowly over the years, by using logs and some old farm implements to protect the plants, we are starting to get ahead of the pigs and now have some well established ferns, flaxes and trees



affordable food, people are far more likely to keep, breed, sell and eat them. And by giving them economic value it helps to ensure their survival.

We had often talked about this issue and I firmly believe if we had the same attitude towards, say, North Island weka, they would not be in such decline; people would be breeding them for the pot. They are not difficult to breed but when did you last see a weka? On the Chathams large numbers of weka are breeding and being eaten quite legally. And why not? Though, of course, some sort of user-pays system of checks and balances needs to be put in place.

If an economic food value attitude had not been attached to kunes they would probably not be around today. Well, yes they would be, but in small numbers at only a few places like Staglands and Willowbank. And that would have put them, sooner or later, at great risk of extinction...

### **What we're trying to do here**

I believe it undervalues an animal or bird to see it in a bare concrete and steel enclosure. When we started Staglands, I had developed our plans around rural NZ in the 1900 to 1910 era when horses reigned supreme but change was on its way.

As I've already said, each area had ultimately to be natural, beautiful, interesting, fun and entertaining, different to, yet in harmony with the next. We did not want our visitors to use only one of their five senses e.g., sight, but also to touch, hear and smell our birds and animals, plants, fish, insects, soil and water. We wanted to stir the memories of times past and provide inspiration for the future.

I don't claim Staglands has achieved its lofty aims. We can always do better, but that is part of what we strive for.

We generally start by making one hell of a mess with a bulldozer or digger, forming a pond, streams, paths and a vehicle track. We have many kilometres of pipes supplying our water needs, we bring in large and small boulders, tree stumps and logs, in fact anything that fits in with the theme of that area. Then we push things around till we have what we think will look good in ten years' time, put a fence around the perimeter and any special feature needing protecting, plant several hundred plants, shrubs and trees, throw some grass seed and fertiliser around, and that's it.

But what we have then is a bare enclosure with a pond. Animals, ducks and geese are introduced, but it's not very attractive. It needs



**Right:** The walk-through Toetoe Aviary just completed. The left side is a natural river terrace we enhanced and the right side is a bank we created from logs and excavated earth



**Left:** A few years later the planting finally starts to get ahead of the birds that are always hell-bent on eating it. Even though it's a large aviary, some 50m in length, it has a very intimate feel about it

**Right:** Now the aviary is a mass of growth and activity. Small birds are always so busy and great to watch. If I'm ever down about things, a quiet wander through here always lifts my spirits and reminds me why I'm here



more plants, lots more, but don't those animals and birds just love those delicious little plants. Slowly, oh so slowly, the area starts to look like what was envisaged years earlier.

Each year more and more plants have to be planted until suddenly the plant growth reaches a point where growth is faster than the livestock's ability to eat and destroy the plants. Finally it becomes a beautiful natural area. The animals and birds look fantastic living there; wild birds and insects move in and make it their home. And we sit with them and hope they and our visitors enjoy it as much as we do.

But until we reach that point visitors needed patience and understanding, for it takes time, quite a lot of time, for each area to start to reach its potential. Ideally, after developing an area we should padlock the gate and go fishing for ten years. To those visitors who came in the developing years and returned, thank you for your tolerance because there were no ponds, streams, waterfalls or bush, and only a few interesting natural features when we started developing Staglands.

As one young friend said many years ago, "They even built a river!" Well, of course he wasn't quite right but I'm sure you know what he meant.

A regular visitor who knew more than I about who made the river was a well-known senior figure in the church. He frequently brought his grandchildren to Staglands so, as he put it, "they could feel the shit between their toes".

He felt they were growing up in an unreal world. They walked only on concrete, tarmac and carpet; they had no garden and bought only washed, wrapped and packaged food from the supermarket shelf. For them meat, milk, eggs, wool and leather had nothing to do with animals and birds. They spent long periods watching television, occasionally seeing New Zealanders experiencing a life they had no experience of. So he brought them to Staglands to briefly be part of real, rural NZ, to experience and learn to use all their senses, including common sense, and to get to know and hopefully love and appreciate the real, natural, beautiful NZ.

He was a very interesting man to talk to 35 years ago. To have the same conversation today would be even more interesting.

When we started Staglands there were few wild native birds and they were becoming fewer. But they started to increase as our planting became established, increasing their natural food supply and forming a more suitable microclimate in which they and the plants could thrive.





Supplementary bird feeding. At certain times of the year the cafe is kept busy making all the nectar we feed out. Native waxeyes come in their hundreds

We then started a continuous trapping and poisoning programme to reduce the numbers of possums, stoats and rats. We now have 50 trap stations and 100 poison bait stations which we service regularly.

The Regional Council has also done a great job in recent years, extensively poisoning and trapping large areas in and around the Akatarawa Valley greatly reducing the numbers of pests, especially possums. This, together with Staglands' supplementary nectar feeding programme for wild birds, has resulted in significant increases in the numbers of wild birds that live in and visit the reserve. Kaka have recently returned to the valley after an absence of 30 years.

In winter, especially during bad weather, the nectar feeding station outside the Staglands Café can be spectacular with dozens of bellbirds and tuis, and hundreds, perhaps more, waxeyes visiting. They easily drink 20 litres of nectar each day.

## A horse trek and a breakup

I cannot remember who started the discussion or around whose dinner table we were almost certainly seated at the time, but the idea gradually developed, and by the time we reached Staglands it was on, providing Carole and Kathy agreed.

Carole's response was, "Go for it"! Kathy's took a little longer.

A couple of months later we found ourselves at Cape Reinga, the northern-most tip of the North Island, Michael with his two Welsh Cobs and I with two Clydesdales. We rode them to Bluff, the southern-most tip of the South Island, avoiding roads wherever possible, especially in the South Island where we left the road west of Blenheim at Rainbow

**Heading out on South Island leg**

JOHN SIMISTER, owner of Staglands Wildlife Park at Akatarawa, and Michael Willis led their horses through Upper Hutt last week on the way to the inter-island ferry.

Mr Simister, his two Clydesdales Debbie and Bob, and Mr Willis with his two Welsh Cobs Bella and Bev were at the halfway point of their charity trek from Cape Reinga to Bluff.

The pair have so far raised only \$1000 for the Salvation Army, without covering their own costs of mounting the trip which approach \$4000, but are hoping that more donations will come in as they near the end of the trip in the middle of December.

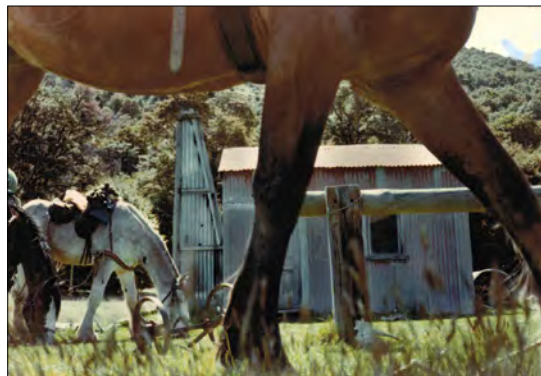
The trip has already had its share of excitement with the men sleeping anywhere from beaches to haystacks and pig sties.

Similarly to Mr Simister, Michael Willis runs a wildlife reserve with his wife. Theirs is in Christchurch.

Passing though Upper Hutt on the way to the inter-island ferry. We were starting to feel a bit weary but the best part of the trip, the South Island, was yet to come. This newspaper clipping appeared in Wellington's *Evening Post*

station and rode on through the high country, down broad river valleys, through the snow on high alpine passes, over rivers and alongside lakes, rejoining the road south of Lake Wakatipu, Queenstown. It was an extraordinary trip, tough, exhausting, challenging and an experience I was fortunate to have.

But it was quickly overshadowed when Carole and I split up shortly after I returned home. We had been together for 16 years. Divorce is cruelly awful; there were no winners.



**Left:** One of the many back-country huts we were able to use thanks to the generosity of the high country station owners

**Below:** Bob and Debbie, the two Clydesdales I rode on the trek. The country in the South Island was absolutely magnificent



### Life at the bach and a few floods

I moved into a bach we had built a few years previously on the far side of the river below Staglands and at the foot of Mount Horrid. I added a fireplace and shower. It was small and rustic, with a long drop toilet. It was a lovely little place and I lived there for eight years.

Sarah Purdy was about to have a family dinner to celebrate her 21st birthday and mentioned to her parents she thought John was a bit lonely. I had known and been friends of the Purdys since we started Staglands. So I was invited and as they say, one thing led to another and we are still together 30 years later. There is a 17 year age difference, and that and the fact that I was close friends of the family must have made it difficult for Barry and Mary, Sarah's parents. Our relationship stuttered along for what I thought was about three to five years, though Sarah thinks it was more like five to eight years before it settled into any degree of consistency and certainty. She would not marry me then and still won't, but it works, it works well.



The bach just after we built it. A lovely simple building, it was basically one room with a loft that we slept in and an area partition off for the shower and the sink bench

Living in the bach was fun! Two floods went through it, one huge "Mount Horrid" boulder went round it, and a logging truck more or less flew over it. We often, perhaps too often, finished work, had a quick shower and headed to the Waikanae pub. Usually some considerable time later we crawled home, sometimes in the pouring rain to find the river raging, and the ford impassable. Options being somewhat limited, we would curl up and try to sleep in the Land Rover. Cold, tired, stiff and hung-over we inevitably convinced ourselves the river had dropped and was fordable, so after starting up the Land Rover we would edge our way slowly into the river, but as the water built up inside the cab, we would know we had made another bad decision. The engine would splutter and die, and we were once more stuck in the middle of the roaring river. Since I was the longer one it fell to me to wade back to the bank, walk next door for the tractor, pull out the Land Rover (and – in comparison to me – a warm, dry Sarah), and tractor Sarah and myself to the bach. Then it was a cup of tea and two hours sleep on a good night, and off to a full day's work we go.





The bach in the background. A river in flood is an awesome sight but, boy, it can cause a few problems!

## The café and more fun with logs

Finally we decided we needed to build a café and convert the existing tea room to a house; living in the bach was getting a bit messy. Marlon Kruijer, a great young lad from the end of the road, was helping us at the time and he was keen to learn how to build a traditional log building. A Canadian, Allan Mackie, had built a small log building near Masterton and he was keen to return to NZ and run a log building course at Staglands.

So in the middle of the winter, 1986, a group of about ten people started building the café. Obtaining that building permit was something I never want to go through again, but at the end of the course, to the credit of the council officers, they came up, looked, listened, questioned and finally congratulated Allan Mackie on the building, which was more professional and soundly built than they had expected.

In due course a temporary permit was issued, and after 25 years the building was re-inspected and passed with flying colours. We had been told a permanent permit would then be issued. Why oh why is it so difficult to be a little innovative, and different? Once you get your head

around a few basic log building principals and skills it is fascinatingly simple.

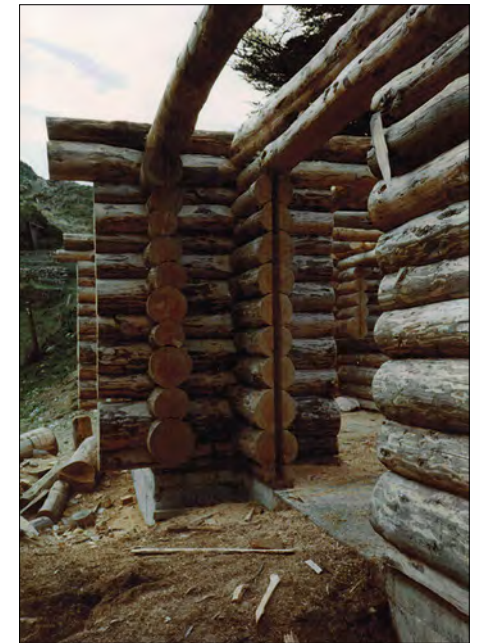
Half way through the course we realised we needed more douglas fir logs, so Sarah and Michael – the “eat it to save it” man – headed off on the tractor to fell and cart home more logs. When building had finished for the day, I went to lend a hand. It was snowing and starting to get dark and there in the middle of the roaring river were Michael and Sarah each with clenched teeth and maniacal grin, desperately trying to steer the tractor towards me whilst the river was doing its utmost to drag them, the tractor and log out to sea. The water was up to the tractor bonnet! What if it stalled? Slowly they bounced their way forward, got stuck, were washed sideways, made a little more ground, were washed sideways, got stuck again.

The truck arrived, the driver rushed down to join me and only one word passed his lips, “Jesus!” They made it across and weren’t impressed when I said I was concerned they might have lost the log.

The truck driver had wanted the tree lengths shortened a bit, because they were trailing on the ground several meters behind him when they were loaded on his truck, but after witnessing the crossing he didn’t have the heart to insist.



One of the big log trusses that we used in the café. They were bolted together in the carpark and then carefully manoeuvred into place using a lever and the front end loader of an old David Brown tractor



Slowly the café takes shape



We headed home and by now it was dark. Of course the tractor's electrics had gone and the engine didn't sound good; there was water in the diesel. We had a can of two stroke petrol. Sarah drove and Michael sat on the tractor bonnet. Each time the tractor was on the point of stalling he poured the two stroke down the air intake. A sheet of flame would shoot out, warming him up a bit – quite a bit, once or twice – and the tractor would surge forward. They made the trip home in record time.

The course ended and everyone went home, Graham and Gill Bond to build their own log house in the superb garden they had created down the valley. We had made a little progress with the café but there was a long, long way to go. Marlon plugged away at it month after month, and slowly it was completed. Marlon was only 19 years old when he started, so it was quite an achievement.

We have added to it several times and are about to again. It's a great building and fits perfectly into Staglands. The day before we were to move the tea room into the café there was a storm. The river rose several meters in the middle of the night washing away our two swing bridges. The water was up to our chests as Sarah and I, with our dogs and cat, left the bach, scrambled up the hill and headed north through the bush to find a bridge that was still intact. It was dark, we were cold and wet.

Slowly warming up over a cup of tea beside the tea room fire we made our plans. The move was off. The first job had to be replacing the main swing bridge. By now it was dawn. Animals and birds had to be fed and quarters cleaned out, there were materials to buy and a bridge to build. One of Sarah's and my faults is that we find it difficult to ask for help. But it wasn't a problem, we found Shirley Cosgrove from Efil Doog, the gardens down the road, digging the mud out of the bach, then Barry, Sarah's Dad, arrived to help replace the bridge.

It was Christmas day! They and many others were amazing. Writing about it now many years later I become strangely emotional.

We eventually moved into the café, and it has been a tremendous success. Sarah looks after the café, but we don't find it easy. It's no more difficult to run than any other café, it's just something we both would rather not have to do.

### **Recycling, and house-building with Mum around**

It was now definitely time to move from the bach, so we started to convert the old tearoom to a house. When I built the tearoom back in 1974 I



**Above:** Inside the café. As with all the buildings at Staglands it is only complete with the fireplace. This is the sixth one I have built during my time at Staglands and probably my best. We used riverstone in most of them, but in the first we used rock flown down on flying fox from above the deer park. **Below:** Outside the café







Inside the tearoom. We made a basic box-shaped building interesting with the clever use of materials

had never built anything like it before so it was obvious it needed to be of simple shape and construction, so we essentially built a rectangular box. But to make it more interesting we installed heavy ex-Silverstream railway bridge timbers as posts and beams, swapped a cockatoo for a truckload of old gas works bricks, bought some beautiful demolition rimu and or-

egon planks for the tables and benches, picked up some cart wheels and other interesting bits and pieces from farm auctions, built a big open fireplace, and we had an interesting attractive building, which wasn't too bad.

Now all that was needed to convert it to a house was to add on a bit here and there. Yes!! Well, actually, No! There was of course a little more to it than that. Sarah milled all the timber we needed, macrocarpa, rimu and an old totara log we found up the hill.



**Below:** Sarah milling the timber for the house. Unlike today's portable mills this one was physically demanding, but way superior to the first one we had in 1972



All was progressing quite well until we received a phone call from Mum. She had bought a bargain basement air ticket and would be in NZ in 6 weeks to stay for 6 weeks. "Couldn't you postpone the move for a while?" No. We were still living in the bach and we had not replaced the bridge. My 84 year old Mum fording the river? Not likely. Bob Munro was just finishing off the plumbing as I drove home from the airport and bolted as I drove up to the house.

"Do we have any water?" I whispered to Sarah.

"Don't know, I've been putting in her bedroom window."

"Where's Fred? (a mate of ours who was helping with the building)

"Oh, he's putting her ceiling up".

"Come in Mum, can I get you a drink?"

"No thank you, I'd rather have a cup of tea".

Uhm, that means water!

"I'll just go to the toilet", said Mum.

Hell, do we have a toilet? We certainly didn't when I left for the airport.

"Then I think I'll have a little lie down," Mum said. That'll be nice for Fred, I thought...

Anyway Mum tumbled to it all pretty soon, and we all had a good laugh later.

Recycling is something we have always done at Staglands, partly out of necessity but mainly by choice. We always try and use local materials. It's amazing what's available if you hunt around: old bricks from that abandoned fireplace, that large rotten looking log which was about to be cut up for firewood but produced fine totara boards when milled, that discarded hunk of rimu that machined into beautiful timber. Old jarra railway sleepers, rough looking timber from a demolished building and manky looking logs washed downriver in the latest flood all produce fine timber. Sure, some may have cracks and discolouration but they give it character and a patina antique lovers would die for. There's just one drawback but isn't there always? They take time and effort to find, drag home, and clean up, which is expensive. But for us the results are so worthwhile.

The logs we used to build the café were from trees that would otherwise have been cut out as thinnings and left to rot. The weathered stone we use is from here. Even the roughest macrocarpa logs produce some excellent timber; the café windows, weatherboards and tables are macro-



The window frames and door posts are all 8x4s that were milled at Staglands by Sarah. Here she is, left, checking the accuracy of her cutting with the help of her dogs



The front door of the house. I always like the look of heavy chunky timber, so we milled a truck-and-trailer load of macrocarpa logs into big beams and posts. I am often accused of over-building



Sarah and I enjoying a cup of tea with Mum as we finally get to relax and enjoy the new house

carpa – it grieves me to see so much used as firewood – and the branches make attractive fences. Those fantastic, big, old hardwood posts at the barn and café entrance were from Wellington wharf and were donated by locals, Sue Davidson and John Bryce. Thank you! Half rotten old logs covered in moss and seedlings are carefully moved and become beautiful natural focal points. Another great source of interesting and weathered materials we now use is from an old piggery we built 35 years ago. It's a veritable treasure trove. We built it and the bach from what was deemed to be rubbish native timber we bought at auction for a song. Now, with careful selection and sanding we have gorgeous aged timber. The end result of using these types of local materials is that they are attractive and of the area. They belong here; they help to settle Staglands into the magnificent landscape of the upper Akatarawa. For me that's so important. Sarah built a house along these lines not far from here; it's a very beautiful house.

### Blue Duck (Whio)

While Mum was in NZ we found we had a good chance of housing a pair of endangered Blue Duck if we had a satisfactory aviary. I had occasionally seen these ducks in the wild while I was away fishing, and we were very keen. Mum, Jan and Brian, a couple of local writers, encouraged us to take up the challenge, and we built a “wee gem” of an aviary replicating a mountain stream. The aviary was located on a steep bank approximately 12 meters high. Ray Purser, an upper Hutt contractor, got to work with his digger removing soil to expose a rock face down which water trickled, and large boulders were brought in to form waterfalls, small pools and a cave to provide shelter. Big old macrocarpa tree trunks were planted at the front to support the netting and for our visitors to walk through, and appropriate flora was planted in and outside the aviary, including epiphytes high up on the tree trunks.

This aviary is typical of what we try to achieve. A lot of thought, planning, time and effort go into these projects. A concrete, fibreglass and pipe construction is infinitely quicker and cheaper to build, but it's simply not good enough. We need to do more to convey the blue ducks' true story: where they belong, their life in the wild world beyond humans; something that is as close to the natural environment of the blue duck as we can make it. I think this is what they deserve. Many talented people can make brilliant plastic and fibreglass boulders, cliffs and



logs, but they are false. They do not belong in the wild world or at Staglands. From the very first day they are installed they start to deteriorate and the lie reveals itself more and more with the passage of time. But



The construction of the Blue Duck Aviary. A big macrocarpa that had blown down provided a great framework. Much to the frustration of those working with me, I am very particular when working on a project. I can visualise the result I want and it's the small details that matter. You have to be prepared to keep nudging things around until it "looks right"



Before the netting went on, lots of planting was done. This provides a natural environment for the birds with lots of shelter and an attractive aviary to look at



The Blue Duck Aviary today is a mass of plants, mosses and ferns. We have been told a number of times that we were so fortunate to have the pond and waterfall to build the aviary around

natural rocks or logs belong. They just get better with every passing day, and can be used again in 10 or 100 years time.

The Department of Conservation (DOC) approved the aviary, and we were privileged to be entrusted with a pair of these unique birds. They were extremely successful in rearing 38 birds from that one pair. Each season we remove their first clutch of eggs, encouraging them to lay again, while we hatch the eggs in our incubator and rear them to maturity. The second clutch is left with their parents to hatch and rear.

Peter Russell, the species coordinator, asked me to give a little talk on the breeding of blue ducks. John as a public speaker is not something many people have chosen to experience more than once. Fortified with a small bottle of cherry brandy he launched forth with an alcohol-induced sense of self-importance, an expert on all things blue duck. But ever since that little talk we haven't bred many blue ducks. Our original birds grew old and died, and no others have done nearly as well. They were, of course, an exceptional pair of birds to do so well with the minimal amounts of expertise we may have added.

Breeding the blue duck is important. But it is perhaps even more important for us to give people, especially children, the opportunity to readily see and interact with them, in an attractive natural environment such as Staglands'. If people are to be expected to fund through their taxes DOC's very necessary on-going attempts to ensure the survival of our native flora and fauna, people must have reasonable access to these treasures. Realistically only a few people will see them in the wild. Staglands can make a difference and this is what I set out to do many years ago. It has been fun, enjoyable, and I hope worthwhile. The last blue duck to be seen wild in this region was just upstream from here. We hope one day to facilitate their return.

### **Expansion, The Barn and self-funding**

George lived with his sister, Edith, and brother on a two hectare block next to Staglands; they had become recluses, hiding away from the world. When brother Jack died it was his and Edith's first trip out of the valley for 18 years. They decided to move and we bought their property and in due course developed it by extending our bottom pond and building "The Barn." It's an attractive area and building which is used frequently for parties, weddings, schools, clubs, and all manner of functions. Anyone visiting Staglands can use it for picnics, barbecues and so on. It has





Landscaping the area around The Barn. By now I had been encouraged to buy a digger. There was no limit to the mess I could make and the hours of fun I could have doing it



With some imagination a basic design was turned into a lovely, attractive building and has proved to be a huge asset to Staglands. It's been great to see how much use it gets, from school groups to weddings

proved to be a very worthwhile addition, giving us new opportunities and making Staglands less dependent on the weather.

For as long as I can remember I have had the opinion that if Staglands is good, enough people will visit. Then I started to think, is one widget so very much better than another? They look and perform equally well, yet one sells in the \$millions, the other only \$thousands. It all seemed to me to come down to trends and marketing. So, three years ago we decided to give marketing a nudge; we now have our own little marketing team.

It's an exciting new era. Money has never interested me greatly; I have always been able to somehow find enough to do what I wanted to do, but if Staglands is to continue to flourish for at least another 40 years, it must continue to be profitable and able to afford top people. We have proudly shown a wildlife reserve can be successful without local or central government financial support. We receive no funding other than what our visitors pay at the gate. It hasn't grown as fast as those who fund development and sometimes operating costs, from rates or the taxpayer's money, grants and interest free loans and so on, but it's a damn good little wildlife reserve.

## The road

The road to Staglands has over the years been a constant source of frustration. In Staglands planning stages and before applying for the necessary council consents, I spoke to all the councils in the Wellington region about the road. Without exception they assured me the road would be upgraded, especially as it was recognised as one of the few routes connecting Wellington, the Hutt Valley and Kapiti Coast. And should an emergency such as an earthquake occur it could be vital. Also, the Akatarawa weather pattern is often very different to that in other parts of the region and it's not unusual for heavy rain to cause closures on the main state highways while the Akatarawa Road remains usable.

I was assured that in five to ten years there would be a significant improvement. However little has been done except to reinstate the road following endless slips and washouts, though under Upper Hutt's mayor, Wayne Guppy, more progress has been made in the last eight years than in the previous 34. Let's hope the benefits of a reliable, safe, country road are being understood and actioned at last.

The road is a scenic gem. The last thing I want to see in its place is a major highway. It was built by men with picks and shovels for people in horses and carts. It has been in use on the Upper Hutt side since at least the 1880s and was finally put through to Waikanae and officially opened on March 7, 1923. Time has moved on and so must the standard of this road. Speech over.

The weather that causes problems on the road is more extreme than I am about to write of, but wet, windy days at Staglands are great. I do



Looking up at the croft in the mist. Some of my favourite times at Staglands are in the mist and rain

so enjoy them. I like to lean against the croft out of the rain listening to Bob eating his hay and oats and the river way below, the wind swirling the mist around the hills and constantly changing the scene, opening then closing one view after another. I am well wrapped up, warm and dry, I feel cosy, vital, alive and exhilarated. I walk quickly to the next shelter, not as exposed as the croft, but still good, and enjoy another part of Staglands. Why do so many people only venture out in fine weather? They are missing out on so much. A well-known Swedish lover of the outdoors said, "There's no such thing as bad weather, just the wrong clothes".

### **Filming, The Settlement and a bit of local history**

Many films have been made at and around Staglands. They started with Bob Barton, an Australian film director who made a series of five minute films, Take Five. Later he was instrumental in moving film sets from the TV series, The Governor and using them to erect what we now call "The Settlement". The idea was to make a separate charge to see The Set-

tlement but it never took off and in due course it became part of Staglands. It fits in well with our overall theme of rare breeds and the 1910 era. We are refocusing on The Settlement and developing it a little further by making it more fun and interactive. Rodney is currently digging a tunnel.

Some of the films that have been shot at Staglands are the *Worzel Gummidge* series, featuring John Pertwee, Enid Blyton's Famous Five series, Peter Jackson's *Forgotten Silver*, a *Cloud Nine* production and many others. We were also involved with George Lucas and Ron Howard's *Willow* and lots of commercials. It has been an interesting aside to Staglands.

The Akatarawa Valley has a fascinating history, its name loosely means "place of the hanging vines". Large scale logging and milling of the native forests took place from the 1890s and continued on in the upper Akatarawa till 1940-41 providing timber for settlement in the Hutt Valley and Wellington. Many fascinating stories are told by local historian, writer and contractor, Peter O'Flaherty. The Junction Sawmill used to sit just 1km past Staglands at the bridge where the Bull Stream meets the Akatarawa River. Logs were railed down a steep hill on a self-acting gravity tramway and seeing those huge logs coming down the steep hill must have been pretty spectacular. Then logging was replaced by farming which gradually gave way to trees once more. But this time they were pine trees, though where no one planted pine trees, native bush is now regenerating and doing very well. The three old wooden truss bridges at this end of the valley have recently been replaced, and we are fortunate to have obtained one of those bridges. We intend to re-erect it at Staglands, so people can see an example of those great old bridges.

Speaking of old mills and bridges, and in keeping with our 1910 theme I am keen to build a bush tram type railway. Big job! Could be a lot of fun! Now the thought is committed to print "we" almost have a duty to build it! "We" can't go back on "our" word can "we", darling? Regardless, there are other largish projects that don't seem to go away, such as a craft and souvenir shop. We are always being asked about all types of accommodation, about a long, very long, flying fox and another large walk-through aviary.





The settlement is all about nostalgia. It is a part of Staglands that people interested in heritage really enjoy. It is loosely based around the old Akatarawa Valley bush settlements when native logging was taking place at the beginning of the 1900s



Lots of time was spent collecting bits and pieces to put in the hardware shop when we did some work on it recently. Thank God for TradeMe



The cellar that Rodney has recently dug behind the hardware store. It's a great place for the kids to explore

## Falcons

Rodney, the tunnel-digger, developed a keen interest in native falcons whose numbers have declined significantly over the years to approximately 6000. That's not many when you think of the size of NZ. In 2001 we developed and built an aviary around the theme of the bush edge where they hunted and found easy pickings in early settlers' hen houses. Except we extended our artistic licence somewhat and built an old woolshed instead, which I thought was potentially more interesting.

It's a very good little aviary. Visitors stand in the gloom of the shed looking out of a glassless window at the falcons. To see these fearless birds at close range with no barrier in the way is pretty good. They have bred well, and their chicks are released at various DOC approved locations in the North Island.

Releasing falcons and any NZ native species is quite involved. A thorough health examination is carried out including blood and faecal checks, and in the case of falcons, a "hacking box" (an aviary and shelter) is erected in the chosen location. The birds are then fed and housed in the hacking box until ready for release, then the door is quietly opened one day and they are free. Feeding continues till the birds have learnt to



Our recently bred falcon chick getting its pre-release check-up at Massey University. The bird was released in the Waikato



Jen and Rodney putting two of our falcon chicks into a hacking box just out of Palmerston North. Food is dropped down a chute to the chicks to minimise human influenced behaviour. After a month the door is opened, but supplementary feeding continues until the birds stop returning to the box to feed

catch their own prey and is then gradually reduced until the young falcons are totally independent.

The whole process demands quite a commitment in time and effort, but the reward makes it all worthwhile: the sight and knowledge of falcons flying free once more in another corner of NZ.

### **Another favourite**

The Kea Aviary is another of those, for me, special places. These birds are old and like me enjoy a little nap now and then.

We developed this aviary to give the feeling of a narrow little alpine gulley high up in the mountains, with large boulders, logs, plants and water. To my knowledge no one had attempted to house kea in a walk-through aviary before, so it was a bit of a gamble and quite a costly project in time, effort and money. If it didn't work it wouldn't be easy to adapt the aviary to suit the needs of another species of bird.

I sought the opinion of industry colleagues and all but one response was negative. "No, won't work!" "Can't have people going in with kea!" "Lock them away or they won't breed!" And so on. Well it has worked. It has been very successful, and they readily breed when we are allowed to breed them.

Both the kea and our visitors benefit from the stimulation of the interaction, and the experience for our visitors is so much better than standing behind a heavy wire netting barrier. Since then several walk-through kea aviaries have been built, and this is now officially regarded as the preferred way to house kea.

I often sit with the kea for a while with a few of last night's chop bones, which they love. Actually that got wild kea in a bit of bother a few years back. Always opportunists they learnt that fat on a sheep's back was very tasty and they didn't just limit themselves to dead sheep! Live sheep were very tasty too, thank you. Understandably this got them in a lot of trouble with the runholders. A bounty was put on their heads, a special purpose "kea" gun was developed and many were killed. Kea are now fully protected and many areas of the high country retired from grazing, so removing temptation. Now if a "rogue kea" is identified (which is very rare) it is moved to an area where it is unlikely to cause trouble.

These remarkable birds live high up in the South Island mountains surviving metres of snow, ice, torrential rain, howling gales and



Despite their powerful beaks, kea have a beautiful gentle nature and are perfect in a walk-through aviary

baking hot summers. They must need every bit of their considerable intelligence to survive. Recently kea have been shot by "rogue humans". Poison, lead-head roofing nails, stoats, ferrets, rats and cats also take their toll. Life is tough for a kea. DOC and the Kea Conservation Trust always need your help and support.

### **Local identities**

The valley seems to attract all sorts of interesting and different people and we all seem to have a purpose in life – not just filling in the days. Some say you have to be a bit odd to live here, and if so, were we odd before we came or is it something in the water, as Dave Hope, a long-term resident who has helped us many times over the years, assures us is definitely the case.

Bob and Jo Munro bought a property just north of us and while we were building Staglands Bob was building their home. Bob has an amazing mind and an extensive and diverse collection of interesting books. He likes nothing better than to be challenged with a new problem, which was invaluable to me with my constant flow of how to do this, this and this, questions. He and Jo created a very beautiful garden, Moss Green Garden, which they opened to the public. In one area of the garden they formed an enchanting pond – the most beautiful, natural, man-made pond. Both were very talented potters, writers, sculptors, painters and especially gardeners. I say "were", because sadly Jo died a few years ago and the garden is now closed. Perhaps their sons will take up the



challenge one day. Meanwhile Bob's inventive mind keeps him stimulated with new and exciting projects.

Local artist, Miranda Woollett, rotates some of her paintings through the café. She and her husband Kevin live just down the road, in an old converted woolshed. What a wonderfully imaginative job they did on their house. Miranda's paintings are based around the Akatarawa Valley. Call in and see them, they are very good. Her Studio of Art is at 1945 Akatarawa Road.

The Garden of Art, "Efil Doog" is close to Miranda's studio and was started by Ernie and Shirley Cosgrove when they retired from a successful business career. They have an art gallery and many sculptures throughout their large, spectacular garden. If you spell Efil Doog backwards you'll find it reads, Good Life.

Another local gem is Brian Birchall, who 64 years ago, aged 14, wrote to writer and Master of the London Docks, Captain Course (somewhat to the Captain's surprise), asking if he could help Brian get into a rather elitist merchant navy officer training school. The Captain had "influence", his application was accepted and Brian's seagoing career began. He trolled around the world for a few years eventually fetching up on the shores of NZ where he became editor of the School Journal and an expert wood turner, but was probably best known for his home brew. Not many can actually remember the taste of the stuff but it must have been good or we wouldn't have drunk so much of it. He also did a bit of writing, at last count 50 children's books which were snapped up by various publishers and sold around the world.

Jan McPherson, his co-author and photographer, wrote and photographed for some of their books based on and around Staglands, its bird and animals and Sarah. Brian lives nearby in the upper level of a two story house and has a pet goose called "Goose Goose". Twice a day "Goose Goose" taps out a message with its beak on the wall below, out rushes Brian, puts wheat in a bucket and lowers it by rope to his mate, muttering about the bloody goose. He returns inside, and a couple of minutes later he's off again to check if "Goose Goose" has had enough to eat. More muttering about the b... goose. "John do you think Goose Goose's had enough to eat?" Out we go again. It is a lovely little scene, they are a devoted couple!

Another "devoted" couple, but of a more traditional kind are Paul and Steph Lambert. Paul is the Upper Hutt Promotion Manager, also in charge of the i-site. He never seems to stop working and thinking how

he can help Upper Hutt. He regularly offers us ideas, experience and insight to help promote Staglands; marketing and promotion is a bit of a mystery to us, but we are learning. Paul and Steph have that wonderful knack of ringing at just the right time and asking if we would like to pop down for a couple of hours, no fuss, drama or self-interest, just nice caring people.

There are lots more "Oddies", but she who must be obeyed tells me I am meant to be writing about "Staglands". But one more quickly, the Coopers at Blue Bank Blueberry and Emu Farm, their blueberries and fudge are just so good. You can as they say, "Bank on Blue Bank Blueberries". I can't say the same about Terry, Sandy's husband, of course, but Sandy is OK. We have had lots of fun with these friends over the years.

### **Retirement? No! But what about boats and brushes?**

Retirement, definitely not, but there were a couple of little projects I wanted to do: paint two pictures that sold for \$2000 each and build a boat.

Why two pictures? Well, I may just fluke one but surely not two. My painting was always getting bogged down in the day-to-day pressures of life at Staglands. It seemed to me that if talent was somewhat limited, then lots and lots of practice might get me through. And I find that when I put the time in I become totally absorbed and absolutely love it.

Boats? Well, one of the plans in the back of my mind when I arrived in NZ was to sail back to the UK. That idea never totally left me; it was just that things I wanted to do more got in the way. Building a boat from scratch



One of my first paintings, still some way off reaching my goal. I find it so enjoyable but I need to make time available, which I find difficult as I am still so stimulated by Staglands

was not on, but if we could find a beautiful, old, wooden boat that was down on its luck, maybe I could do a bit of work on it, learn to sail, put my paints on board and earn that \$2000.

Eventually we found “The Boat”. She was beautiful, bigger than I really wanted (I had wanted something I could comfortably sail alone) but the hull, mast, rigging and deck were basically sound, though the interior needed work. She had been owned by the same lovely couple for 30 years. Ian, the former owner, loaded “Iona 1” on a truck and she was unloaded by our back door.



Iona I in the Marlborough Sounds

We went below and over the next two or three weeks slowly realised the enormity of the task. I rang Malcolm Collins, an exceptional boat builder and violin maker, who had built and owned several boats designed by Athol Burns, and said we had bought just such a

boat. “Right I’m coming up now,” he replied. Over the next three and a half years he was fantastic, giving advice, and quietly encouraging and guiding me through the project. We returned her to the sea, in Wellington harbour.

I so love playing with her in the wind. I think I left my sailing a little late; my skills will never match Ian’s. Sailing in Cook Strait in 40 knot winds once or twice – I hope never again! Sailing in and around the Marlborough Sounds – magic!

After spending so much time on the boat there were now many things I wanted to do at Staglands, and that has once again become my main focus. Retire? Oh no! So many fascinating things to do!

## Signage

Informative signage is one of my pet hates; maybe it comes from all those negative Keep off the Grass sorts of signs I saw in England! Nothing I have found or been able to produce blends with our landscape; they detract from the visual experience. But I have to concede they are very important for education and information, and that is a major reason for our existence.

Yet, perhaps Staglands’ greatest contribution is to offer everyone, especially children, the opportunity of an interactive moment of such intensity with an animal or bird in our beautiful surroundings, that it may kindle a lasting love of wildlife. The Kea Aviary and many other areas of Staglands, I hope may just do it: that’s what Staglands is all about.



I hope moments like these will stay with a child for a long time and allow them to grow up with a real appreciation and understanding of wildlife. For me, this is what Staglands is about

## Staglands friends and staff

Many people have been involved with and left their mark on Staglands, both individuals and whole families. I can see them now.

Tracey, rushing up, total excitement, “I’ve found a cave! I’ve found a cave!” So, of course, that became “Tracey’s Cave”. She and her parents came every weekend to help us get established.

Peg, Claude and Tracey, you were fantastic.

David Underwood did so much more for us than acting as Staglands accountant. Thank you very much David.

Glen Jowet, racing down to where I was working, legs and arms churning in uncontrolled windmill frenzy, “Can I have the job?” He is





**The team:** Posing for our 40th anniversary photo. Any excuse for a drink but would you believe it was only lemonade! Clockwise from front right: Jen Waterhouse, Shona Drake, Charlotte Mills, Sarah Purdy, Lydia Cossey, Wendy Robinson, Rodney Owen, John Simister, Jayson Davis, Chris Martin

windows down, dogs on the back seat, heads out of one window, “Woof, woof, woof”, then over to the other window, more woofing, back to the first ... Sharon, fag in her mouth, hands clamped on the steering wheel, car swaying from side to side, careering down the valley. Sharon you were great, thank you.

Rodney Owen, been here for ages, knows more about Staglands than I do, his considerable building and other skills keeping the place moving forward.

Christine Watt, looked after the café for years and was known to us all affectionately as the camp mother, such a lovely person.

I cannot name everyone but you are all appreciated and not forgotten. We could not have done it without you. Except that is for Jamie Cooper, Terry and Sandy’s son, poor sod. Worked part time and then full time till he finally managed to escape to Glasgow and is now back at Otago University. “But we know where you are hiding!” and we’ll drag you back one day. What a dedicated young man, passionate about his birds! If you know what I mean.

And Cheryl Johnston, who worked, as many others have done, part time at weekends and school holidays. She was here for many years until she qualified as a teacher. Hard working, fun and capable, she epitomises the many students who have worked here on their way through

now a famous photographer.

Guy Hartley, who perhaps should have developed his own wildlife reserve and creativity, now runs his successful building company in Rotorua.

Sharon Humphreys helped us for many years. She and her two Alsatian dogs, on their way home in “The Yellow Viva”,

university towards their chosen careers. We watched them grow up, enjoying their humour, and often benefiting from what at first seemed wacky ideas that developed into very good ideas.

I remember talking to Jamie about a path route that wasn’t working well. Quick as a flash he said, “Put it through the Kune area”. “No you can’t do that”, I said, but we did and it is much, much better. I had puzzled over it for ages and literally couldn’t see the wood for the trees. We are so fortunate to have shared a little of their lives

Working at Staglands is not an easy, laid-back sort of job. We set a high standard, which must be maintained and we pay considerable attention to detail. Both Sarah and I are totally focused and committed to Staglands; little else gets a look in. Sarah would probably say something like, “You speak for yourself. You don’t have to look after the café!” But she loves it really! Staglands is a place where everyone can actually see what they have contributed. Whether it’s raking a path, developing an aviary or baking a cake, they can look at, and feel good about, what they see.

One of my pet hates is the use of the word “I”, the implication being that I alone did this or that. If you believe, as I do, that we are all more or less merely the sum of our experiences, the words “I” and “original” probably should not exist. I mention this only to emphasise how much I appreciate the huge contribution so many people have made to Staglands, and to make me feel better about my frequent use of the “I” word in the writing.

## To wrap it all up

As your walk through Staglands comes to an end you find yourself in the Secret Garden. This area is unashamedly just for children, and I love it. There are great big rabbits, fluffy silky bantams, peacocks, Chip the Cockatoo chattering away, turtles, goldfish, doves, pheasants and more... lawns with plants and flowers and trees and an old gold mine. Parents sit, children explore, chuckle with delight, marvel and wonder. It can’t be real, yet it is. I do hope you have enjoyed your time at Staglands. Thank you so much for coming.

I recently googled the house where I grew up, with its wood and beautiful clearing. When I lived there no other house could be seen, in fact none existed within a mile. The big old trees and my clearing are gone, along with the fields where I learnt to ride and saw my first fox as



**Top:** The Secret Garden has a magic all its own. It can't be real, yet it is

**Bottom:** The mine railway with the goldfish playing among the water lilies adds to the intrigue of the Secret Garden



it appeared out of the mist. Scamp and I caught our first rabbit in those fields and watched so many birds rear their young in the trees and hedges. They're all gone, replaced by houses, hundreds perhaps thousands of them, all connected by ribbons of tarmac. The world's ever increasing human population! It's just plain crazy; we must somehow learn to control our breeding.

Wouldn't it be great if our wildlife, plants and trees existed in such abundance that there was no need for Staglands and it disappeared. Wouldn't it be great if there were an old-style farm just down the road, with hens, pigs, cows and horses, and kiwi, weka, and tuatara wrecking our gardens; fantails, bellbirds and saddlebacks flying into our houses because there were no possums, stoats, rats or ferrets. Sadly, not a chance

now, so places like Staglands are probably here to stay for a while yet, evolving and changing as ideas and trends come and go. I fervently hope "real NZ" won't be forgotten and children will always be able to "feel the shit between their toes".

Sarah Purdy and I are partners in all meanings of the word, both personally and in business. Sarah is involved in all facets of Staglands on a daily hands-on basis, implementing and coordinating our decisions, and we jointly determine all our plans, goals, and aspirations. No one has, or could have, worked harder or been more supportive, in the good times and more importantly the tough times, than Sarah. Without Sarah Staglands quite simply would not be Staglands. A few years after we started Staglands we bought a portable sawmill and milled all the timber we needed for Staglands. What we didn't need we sold to boost Staglands' coffers. Sarah took over the mill, bought a flash 4WD tractor and started logging. Sarah is an intelligent, pretty, and petite woman. She and her helper felled the 40 year old pine trees, limbed and hauled them out, cut the logs to length, loaded them onto the sawmill, cut them into planks, stacked, sold and loaded them onto a truck. It was hard, physical work. There are not too many people who can mix a load of concrete, look after the café and the office, be a wiz on



The pony I learnt to ride on in the fields where I spent so much time. The fields have been replaced by rows and rows of houses



This was taken just after we opened in 1972 but it could just as easily have been yesterday. A "real Staglands" experience is timeless!



the chainsaw and the computers, and who can scrub up in minutes to look sensational. If it were not for that brown, furry thing, Tas, that she humorously calls a dog, life would be just about perfect.

I have learnt much from Sarah over the years: girls can do anything, and some do, but once again it comes down to drive, determination, and a bit of lateral thinking. Could absence of this be part of the reason for the disparity between male and female pay rates and positions? I am absolutely certain nothing would stop Sarah doing whatever she sets her mind on doing and God help anyone who didn't pay her appropriately. We make no distinction at Staglands between male and female roles and pay, something people of either sex, surprisingly, have occasionally to be reminded about. It works well.

As Staglands has grown, the demands have increased, but on Christmas day Sarah and I have the place to ourselves. It's the one day of the year we are closed and on that day we are totally self-indulgent. I do the feeding and cleaning in a lazy, relaxed manner and then meet up with Sarah in the Secret Garden for a glass of wine and a long leisurely lunch which we share with whatever animals and birds care to join us. This is our Staglands, and it's pure magic.

Not long ago a friend received an email from the UK asking if it was true that an Englishman was instrumental in ensuring the survival of the kune pig. He replied, "No that's not correct, the man you're talking about is a Kiwi."

I can't think of a better thing anyone could have said. It means a great deal to me.

Thank you. I'm Home at last.



My Christmas Day dream

