

# Nothing memorable about attitude to city monuments

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PUBLIC spirited moves by New Plymouth Rotary to do something about the city's neglected monuments have to be applauded. They show that there are those who do appreciate the importance of these reminders of the past and are prepared to contribute to their preservation.

This attitude does not excuse the neglect that allowed the Marsland Hill structures, and others, to deteriorate to this stage. District council parks director Grant Porteous has been quick to defend his organisation's restoration and protection record, and to be fair, there does seem to be a change of attitude by the local authority on this issue. It will take some time, however, to repair the omissions of past administrations.

While Mr Porteous makes some valid points and reminds the public of projects, such as the Pukekura Park gates refurbishment, the obvious question is why were these gates and other memorials of historic importance allowed to deteriorate to a degree where they needed extra attention anyway? The answer has a lot to do with public attitude and the same strange apathy about the past that has made getting a new museum in New Plymouth so difficult.

Compared to places like Europe, New Zealand has a very short history in terms of long surviving structures. Maori use of stone was limited and while some weapons and other implements survive from pre-European times, little of their wooden buildings remains. If we are not careful the same will apply to colonial structures made of much more permanent material. Already many fine old buildings have disappeared in New Plymouth and there seems to be an equally casual attitude to memorials.

The "fountain" on Marsland Hill is a perfect example. It was constructed there in 1911 from the same Australian blue granite that now paves Devon St footpaths. Unfortunately it was allowed to fall into disrepair until moved in as the centre-piece for the Devon Mall in 1979. There was talk, earlier, of shifting it to a grass plot in Gill St by Richmond Cottage, but public controversy prevented that. Even the move to the mall upset the RSA.

With the mall gone and pressure from the RSA continuing, the council could think of no better use for the structure than to return it to Marsland Hill to resume duties as an ornate, oversized, flower plot that, to date, has grown more weeds than perennials. The whole situation is an insult to the structure and the war dead it commemorates. If it must stay on the hill it should at least be as a working fountain and centre-piece of some sort of garden or walk. Right now it looks what it is, part of an untidy cluster of unwanted monuments that no one is quite sure what else to do with. They all deserve better and Rotary deserves support in seeing that this is achieved.