

# Philanthropic couple gave to returned soldiers and the city

**A** former mayor and his wife were two of New Plymouth's greatest philanthropists. Charles and Ann Burgess lived through times of great change and upheaval and spent much of their time supporting the community they lived in. They both received an MBE for their leadership in patriotic work.

Both Burgess Park and the Teahouse in Pukekura Park were donated by the couple to the city of New Plymouth.

World War I brought Mrs Burgess to prominence when she began organised relief efforts. She formed the Women's Patriotic Committee, held fundraisers for food parcels for soldiers leaving for war and made her home available for returned soldiers' various functions.

She is credited with organising the first Anzac Day gathering of returned soldiers and relief workers in 1918, which she continued to do until ill health forced her to hand it to the RSA in 1947.

Mrs Burgess organised the afternoon teas held after each Anzac Day reunion, but when these became too large to be accommodated in the Burgesses' home in Mangorei (then named Hapurunui, now known as Burgess Park), they were held in the Army Drill Hall in the town.

About 1000 people would attend these teas, after the small beginnings of just a few and, after the death of Mrs Burgess, they continued as a memorial to the woman lovingly known as "Mother" to so many returned servicemen.

The RSA acknowledged her efforts with a Gold Star award, their highest honour, and life membership.

As members of the War Graves Committee, the couple helped set up the Soldiers' Plot in Te Henui cemetery.

The house still standing at 7 Ridge Lane was designed for the Burgesses by architect Frank Messenger in 1897. The construction company Boon Bros built the two-storeyed home, which later had plans drawn up for additions and a stable and loft.

Looking out over the city, it was a suitable residence for the future mayor of New Plymouth, who held this role from 1915 to 1919.

Mr Burgess ran one of New Plymouth's longest-running businesses, Burgess Fraser & Co. The importing merchant company was registered in 1918 and continued long after his death, until 1992. The building was on lower Currie St, opposite where the post office is on the corner.

Here, there was a bond for the customs department, as well as wholesale sales of items such as Asthma Powder, Witch's Oil and Premier Egg Preservative ("Rules the roost, 300 and 700 eggs preserved for 1s and 2s 6d").

In 1923, a Hawera branch was added. In 1909, a fire destroyed much of the second storey of the Jubilee Boarding House belonging to and next to Burgess, Fraser and Co in Currie St.

Many of the guests were people from out of town visiting for the horse races, and all sleeping in the building just escaped with their lives, clad only in their nightwear. Fortunately, many of the town's fire-fighters were attending a social function at the nearby Brougham St hall, so were quickly on the scene at the sound of the fire bell.

The gift of the Burgesses' home and grounds at Mangorei, next to the Meeting of the Waters picnic spot and now known as Burgess Park, was well received by officials and the public in 1936.

Described as magnificent, the property had been given in commemoration of the borough's diamond jubilee.

The Burgesses' land of nearly five hectares (13 acres), which was to be a public reservation "for all time" adjoined not only that of the Meeting of the Waters, but also 10ha surrounding the hydro-electric powerhouse that had been bought by the council from the estate of the late Henry King.

Further to that, leased farmland and that surrounding Lake Mangamahoe made a total of 225ha in public hands.

Mayor ERC Gilmour moved the resolution that "this council in the name and on behalf of the people of New Plymouth gratefully accepts the gift of the property Hapurunui tendered by Mr and Mrs CH Burgess as a public resort for the recreation and enjoyment of the people and

undertakes that it will be faithfully maintained for the purposes for which it has been given". It was decided to name the property Burgess Park.

The gift of Burgess Park was considered a climax to the generosity already shown by the pair and it was suggested that the park would come to be regarded as "one of the most beautiful spots in the dominion". People from abroad had already said it was one of the most magnificent seen anywhere.

The park was sure to become one of the borough's finest assets in terms of public reserves. It would be "appreciated by the present generation and perhaps still more by succeeding generations".

One of the councillors, Stanley Smith, said Mr Burgess' wish as mayor was that ratepayers

should always receive full value for what they paid. The one condition attached to the gift of the property was that the council maintain it "for the use and benefit of the people".

The Burgesses were, indeed, very generous people. Not only did they donate the Teahouse and kiosk to Pukekura Park, but they included all its equipment and the furniture inside needed to run it. It was a gift to mark the couple's golden wedding anniversary in 1931. They also paid for a playground in Wallace Place, which was well received by the children living there.

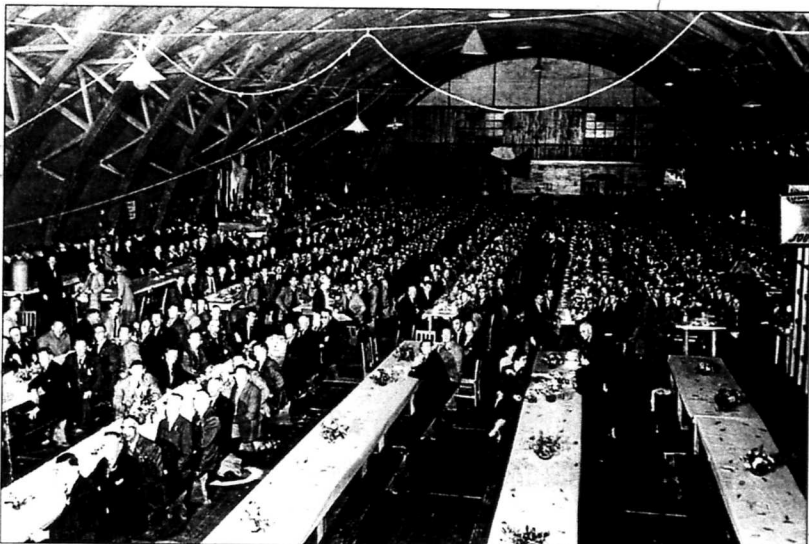
But it was the public-spirited attitude of the couple that was so well received. Of the many organisations they were involved in, the couple are remembered and celebrated for their work with soldiers heading off to war and supporting



**Handing over:** Charles and Ann Burgess are flanked by MP Sid Smith and Dr Peter Allen during the gifting of Hapurunui, now Burgess Park, to the city of New Plymouth. Photo: PUKE ARIKI PH02102-0482



**Civic leader:** Charles H Burgess, MBE, was mayor of New Plymouth from 1915 to 1919. Photo: PUKE ARIKI A66-388



**Huge gathering:** The Ann Burgess Memorial afternoon tea was held for returned soldiers and relief workers in the Army Drill Hall from the 1950s to 1960s. Photo: PUKE ARIKI PH02009-174

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them while they were away and for many years after they returned. At the receiving of the gift of Burgess Park, Gilmour said: "As such, it will remain for all time as an abiding memorial of the public spirit of Mr and Mrs Burgess and of the warm affection they have always evinced for the town of their adoption and for the people among whom they have lived for so long".

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