

Woodlands Historic Homestead, Gardens and Function Centre, has a very long history spanning over 140 years. Today it is open for public viewing and available for weddings, functions, meetings and celebrations. The estate is completed by the café “Prof’s @ Woodlands” open 7 days from 9am.

It all began in 1865 when the property was surveyed then in 1872 the estate was purchased by the Piako Swamp Company (later the NZ Land Company), known today as PGG Wrightsons. It went for a princely sum of 2/6 (25 cents) an acre – plus the undertaking to drain and clear the swamp, fence the same and build roads throughout the area. The area was mostly manuka and rushes although some areas were too wet to grow even those. It is one of the biggest pieces of reclaimed land in NZ.

The Homestead was built in the period 1872 – 1875 and today has a category 1 classification with the NZ Historic Places Trust. It is built of kauri and rimu and still has most of the original iron on the roof.

Originally the estate was 98,000 acres stretching to include Taupiri, Orini, Te Hoe, down to Eureka, Tauwhare, and Ruakura and back to Gordonton. The homestead is now set in 15 acres of gardens & reserve.

The first manager of Woodlands was **Henry Reynolds**, aged just 22. He started the job of turning the land into the productive farmland you see today. Henry was also the first person in New Zealand to export dairy products and Woodlands is the birthplace of his Anchor brand. It is said that he decided on this brand after seeing an anchor tattooed on the arm of one of his workers – an ex merchant seaman. A carving of the original Anchor Logo is on the Kauri fireplace in the Kauri room of the Homestead.

The property had its own sawmill, flourmill, baker, butcher, blacksmith, 200 horse stable and carpenter.

The mills used power produced from a water wheel not too far from the homestead and in those days all the water came down from Morrinsville to the Komakorau Stream.

The next manager at Woodlands was **John Gordon**, after whom Gordonton, originally Hukanui, is named. Woodlands was at the time the centre of Gordonton community life. Many great social occasions were held in the Homestead and grounds.

John Gordon enlarged on the tree planting done by Henry Reynolds. English Planes, Sycamore and Oaks were among the many trees planted and many still flourish today - a tribute to these two gentlemen. Some of the trees were hybrids and were not produced in NZ at that time so it is assumed that they came from England in pots as was common practice in sailing ship days. The older Camellia trees can be referred to as ‘antique camellias’ as they are over 100 years old and still producing an abundance of blooms.

An orchard was situated north of the present cricket oval. It was very large with several varieties of apples and pears, plums, grapevine, quince and hazelnut and walnut trees. A pear trees still remains.

The Homestead does reflect something of the uncertain economic times of the last century in that it is not as grand as one would expect for such a large estate. In the early days it did include a large scullery, servants quarters and a ballroom.

The land was subdivided in the 1890’s. By 1902 roughly 27,000 acres of swamp had been converted in to pasture, running 40,000 sheep and 3,000 head of cattle.

In 1903 John Gordon purchased 1,700 acres and moved to the other main homestead on the estate, Eureka.

He later sold 400 acres of the swamp to Mr Isaac Coates for £20. He purchased the Bankwood Estate after leaving Eureka – this is now the home of Waikato Diocesan School.

In 1902 Thomas Stone made an offer to purchase 17,500 acres. He was eventually able to resell and doubled his money. The Stone's were in residence for three years when the land was again subdivided.

In 1905 James Riddell bought 2,400 acres. 600 acres was in grass and the remainder in Manuka covered peat. Some parts are still being farmed by descendants of James and Mary Riddell - the fourth generation to do so.

In 1928 Don and Irene Riddell took over the Homestead and 300 acres. Don was a very active member of the Gordonton community including his membership of the Home Guard, who used the drawing room (today the Riddell Room) of the Homestead as their HQ. Four daughters of the Riddell family were also married in this room.

Don was a very resourceful man and invented the Riddell Easy Lift Hay Stacker and manufactured these at Woodlands, selling them all over the Waikato and King Country.

Don and his wife Irene (Auntie Rene to Gordonton residents and family) had no children and Woodlands was bequeathed to the Presbyterian Support Services on the death of Irene in 1983.

In 1988 the Homestead and surrounding 15 acres were gifted to the Waikato County Council (now Waikato District Council) for public use, and the restoration of Woodlands began.

Today it is administered by the Woodlands Trust Board, who employ one full time gardener who maintains the grounds with help council support and a dedicated team of volunteers.

Woodlands is a popular wedding venue and also hosts many other kinds of functions, the income assisting in the maintenance and administration of the Estate.

Woodlands gardens were designed around the existing trees by Dr Peter Sergel, also of Hamilton Gardens. This includes a lake complete with Monet type bridges. In 2012 a wet land (bog garden) garden was planted with money donated by Waikato Regional Council – 2500 plants were put in. This area will filter the water that runs off the farm in to the lake.

The gardens are open to the public to visit free of charge 10am – 4pm seven days a week.

The homestead is open Tuesday – Sunday 10am – 4pm – other times by appointment.

A full cricket oval, is next to Woodlands café, “Prof's @ Woodlands”. This was designed with help from ex NZ Cricket Representative John Parker when he was with Sport Waikato. Woodlands hosts school cricket during the summer season. It is also very popular with Waikato businesses and other groups who play cricket in the summer.

In 1996 the old Te Rapa Bowling Club building was moved next to the Oval and converted to a cricket pavilion. Around 2005 the building was converted in to a café and an awning added. The café is open 7 days from 9am and hosts tour groups and many small groups and functions.



