

What did Mount Victoria look like in pre-European days?

The following extract is from a report prepared by Boffa Miskell last year for Wellington City Council, titled Wellington's Native Vegetation: A Brief Survey of Early Historical Records, which gives an indication of what Mount Victoria looked like when Europeans first arrived in Port Nicholson:



... Taine refers to flax and manuka occurring on the hilly ground to each side of the Te Aro swamp. He was not precise about the location, but this could refer to the lower slopes of Mt. Victoria. Other than this, no specific descriptions about the type of vegetation that occurred on this ridge have been found in the material researched.

In the early paintings the ridge is generally shown in the distance without very much detail. Nevertheless, Mt. Victoria is consistently shown to be much more bare than the hills around the west side of Port Nicholson (some of which were also shown in the distance, but clearly forested.) Brees' painting of 1847 is a typical example. This also correlates with Henry Petre's description: "*With the exception of the hills facing the Strait and the high land around Evans Bay, the hills around Port Nicholson are covered with the richest verdure to their summits*"¹.

Another painting by Brees in, c.1843-1845, shows the slopes of Mt. Victoria at closer range. This does show some taller vegetation in the background but, when compared to his other paintings, this is not the way he painted tall forest. Photos of Oriental Bay in the 1880's shows low scattered scrub (note by this stage this could be gorse²) and some remnant low forest that appears to have been more extensive not long before.

It is significant that early photos of Mt. Victoria show it to be in pasture yet with no sign of the tree stumps that so typically appear in early photos of cleared land. It seems that there was no tall forest to clear of the type found on the western hills, and this may account for the absence of descriptive references, since it would have posed less difficulty to the settlers.

Another clue that supports this is Kirk's documented finding of *Oreomyrris colensoi* on Mt. Victoria in 1878. This is a small perennial herb, which occurs in open country, and its presence indicates that this area had been of an open nature for a long time before.



1998/99 Membership

Our fault for not reminding you - but membership for 1998/99 is now somewhat overdue. We hope you're going to be re-joining!

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¹ Petre, 1842

² Joanna Newman has, however, recently seen a naïve painting dated 1884 in the Wellington City Council collection which shows Wellington from the slopes of Mount Victoria and depicts flax and low groundcover which are definitely not gorse.