

Thomas Andrew Knight (1759 – 1838)

Thomas Andrew Knight was born in August 1759 at Wormsley Grange, Herefordshire, England, the second son of a country clergyman, who had left his calling in 1748 after inheriting large estates at Downton and Wormsley. Andrew was five years old when his father died. He attended schools at Ludlow and Chiswick, and at Oxford was reputed to have spent more time rambling about with a gun, observing wildlife, than studying Greek and Latin. Nevertheless he had an exceptional memory, and when prompted, could quote page after page of the classics. For the next ten years he lived with his mother at Maryknowle, pursuing the study of natural science, and in 1786 began experiments with grafting fruit trees.

In 1791 he married Frances Felton and went to live at nearby Elton Hall; they were to have four children. He acquired a farm and a hothouse, and as well as the multifarious activities of a general farmer, stockbreeder and fruit-grower, he carried out a programme of horticultural and agricultural experiments that was to continue for 47 years. In 1795, through his brother, he became acquainted with Sir Joseph Banks, who read the first of his many papers to the Royal Society, and the following year he began a 20-year correspondence with Banks. Knight was elected a fellow of the Royal Society in 1805, and in 1806 was awarded the Copley Medal for his papers on vegetable physiology. He also became very friendly with the distinguished young chemist and inventor Humphry Davy, who visited Elton that year.

In 1808 when his elder brother relinquished the responsibilities of Downton Castle, Andrew Knight and his family moved there. He took over management of the 10,000-acre estate and for the next thirty years lived and worked there as landowner, farmer, stockbreeder and horticulturist, while continuing his diverse research programme in plant breeding, pomology and plant physiology. The death in 1827 of his only son, killed in a shooting accident, was a great blow, but he threw himself into all facets of his life at Downton for eleven more years. In May 1838 he made his annual journey by coach to the general meeting of the Horticultural Society of London, of which he had been president for 27 years; he became seriously ill on his arrival in London, and died on 11 May 1838.

Thomas Andrew Knight was a pioneer physiologist and horticulturist, well ahead of his time in many aspects of his experiments. He is perhaps best remembered through the Royal Horticultural Society's Knightian Medals, awarded "for excellence in the arts which he adorned", and *Knightia*, a small genus of trees in New Zealand and New Caledonia, which was named in his honour by Robert Brown in 1810. Brown's paper on the taxonomy of the plant family Proteaceae, published by the Linnean Society of London in March 1810, included an illustration by Ferdinand Bauer of *Knightia excelsa*, the type species for the genus *Knightia*, which was found at Tolaga Bay by Banks and Solander in 1769 during Cook's first voyage of discovery.

Knightia excelsa

Knightia excelsa (Latin *excelsus* 'lofty' or 'high'), commonly known by its Māori name rewarewa, is an evergreen tree to 30 metres tall, with a narrow crown. Leaves are alternate, leathery and coarsely serrated. Dense racemes of flowers form singly or in pairs on woody twigs, and begin to open in October. The flowers have no petals, but a showy calyx with one stamen fused onto the back of each of its four rust-red furry-coated sepals. Four nectar glands at the base of each style attract insects and birds, and are a source for honey production, and the ornately patterned timber is prized for inlay work. European settlers called it New Zealand honeysuckle. It occurs in lowland to lower montane forest from near North Cape to Marlborough Sounds.

