

Richard Henry Matthews (1835 – 1912)

Born at Kaitaia on 7 July 1835, Richard Henry Matthews was the eldest in a family of six, and the second Pākehā child born in the area. His father Joseph had arrived at the Bay of Islands in 1832, and the following year, with William Gilbert Puckey, established a mission at Kaitaia; his mother Mary Ann was a daughter of missionary-farmer Richard Davis of Waimate. At first the older children at the mission were taught to read and write by their parents, but when the services of a “Cambridge man” became available in 1843 a school was opened, with three pupils. There, after completing his primary course, Richard Henry got a thorough grounding in the classics and later, botany. He hoped to be ordained – but that was not to be!



Thelymitra matthewsii

The scientific name *Thelymitra* (from the Greek *thelys* 'woman'; *mitra* 'turban' – referring to the hood of the column) was given by J R and G Forster on Cook's second voyage. *Thelymitra matthewsii* is an occasional trans-Tasman vagrant, rare in Australia and New Zealand, where it was recently rediscovered in the Far North. It is a slender sun orchid with stems up to 15 cm tall, which during August-September bear one or two purple flowers with darker stripes, and fleshy bright yellow column-arms. The leaf is expanded at the base, and then narrows abruptly to spiral around the stem. The preferred habitat is bare broken clay or sandy areas, north-facing and protected from the wind. Natural succession to dense shrubland, and weeds such as hakea, are constant threats.

In 1860 Matthews married Clarissa Isabella Dunn from the Oruru mission near Mangonui, and family responsibilities ruled out theological studies. However his father had been granted land, and for a few years Richard grazed sheep and cattle on the farm known as Mangawhero, and also ran the first Kaitaia post office from his home. In 1864 he was appointed superintendent of native schools in the Far North, but due to lack of attendance these closed after five years. A search for gold in Waihi and a flax-milling venture both failed, and his father despaired – but Richard Henry became a successful builder, and also gave long service on many local committees.

In 1893, when he was 58, an exciting new phase in his life began. Harry Carse was appointed to the Kaitaia School, and although he was 22 years younger than Matthews, the two men became good friends and pursued a mutual interest in native plants. At the end of 1896 Matthews wrote the first of 113 letters to Thomas Cheeseman, enclosing an orchid for identification and a list of over 80 varieties of ferns they had collected in the vicinity. When teaching appointments took Carse elsewhere, Matthews continued collecting, often enlisting the help of his "Boys" (always written with a capital "B"), and bombarding Cheeseman with specimens, observations and questions. He concentrated on orchids, finding many rare and unusual species, but also extended the known range of numerous other plants. In his last letter to Cheeseman in March 1912, he gave information on the use of taraire and hīnau fruits, and added, "Am in a parlous state, heart given out, dropsy from toes to breast, helpless. Kindest regards, R H Matthews." He died two months later, on 25 May 1912.

A late starter in the field of botany, Richard Henry Matthews was an avid collector and seeker of knowledge, and our first New Zealand-born botanist. His work was carried on by his eldest son, Henry Blencowe (Blen) Matthews, and Harry Carse, and his name is commemorated in the sun orchid *Thelymitra matthewsii* found by the "Boys" near Lake Tangonge in 1909, and a native forget-me-not *Myosotis matthewsii* collected near Kaitaia in the late 1890s.