

John Turnbull Thomson (1821 – 1884)

John Turnbull Thomson, the third child of Alexander Thomson and his wife Janet Turnbull, was born on 10 August 1821 at Glororum farm near Bamburgh, Northumberland, England, and grew up with horses and books. After his father was killed in a hunting accident in 1830, he spent time on his grandfather's farm, Earnslaw, and with his mother's family at Abbey St Bathans. He was educated at Duns Academy in Berwickshire, where he mixed with the sons of Malay estate owners. After completing a mathematics course at Aberdeen University and engineering at Newcastle upon Tyne, he left with a commission to survey estates in Penang.



Chionohebe thomsonii

Chionohebe is a genus of four, mainly New Zealand, species of snow hebes. *Chionohebe thomsonii* forms dense, rigid, dull greyish-green moss-like cushions 5–15 cm across and 2–4 cm thick, with distinctively patterned broad, hairy leaves tightly packed so that only the tips show. Flowers are white, with a pair of purplish anthers and a protruding style. Largely confined to the ranges of Central and eastern Otago, *Chionohebe thomsonii* clings to wind-swept rock outcrops and loose fellfield debris, often with other cushion plants, on the high plateaus.

From 1838 to 1841 he led a rough, hard and isolated life. Often the only European in the vicinity, he learnt the languages and studied the customs and traditions of the local people. The quality of his maps came to the notice of the Singapore governor, and in 1841 he was appointed government surveyor and engineer. Over the next twelve years he produced maps of Singapore town and island, and a marine survey of Singapore Strait. He also constructed roads, bridges, and buildings, including the fine Horsburgh lighthouse, which is still in use. His health suffered, however, and in 1853 he returned to England.

Seeking a more temperate climate, he arrived in Auckland, New Zealand, in February 1856. He was appointed chief surveyor for Otago, with his first assignment to select a site and lay out the town of Invercargill. During 1857 and early 1858 he reconnoitred the whole province on horseback. It is said that his intention to use traditional Māori names for many of the features was thwarted by the surveying authorities, and that he responded by using prosaic names, even Northumbrian dialect names of animals. The Maniototo region is still sometimes referred to as Thomson's Barnyard! From his survey the first map of the interior of Otago was published in 1860. As engineer to the province he was also responsible for major earthworks and the construction of main roads and bridges. In 1876 he became the country's first surveyor general and moved to Wellington where he introduced a uniform system of surveying and compiled his manual of instructions for surveyors. John Thomson married Jane Williamson in Dunedin on 7 October 1858. After his retirement in 1879 they and their eight daughters moved to Invercargill where another daughter was born the following year. The New Zealand Historic Places Trust now maintains their home, Lennel, which Thomson designed. He died there on 16 October 1884.

He was a founding member of the Otago and the Southland Institutes, to which he contributed many scientific papers. He wrote six books, including *Glimpses of Life in the Far East* (1864), *Rambles with a Philosopher* (1867) and in 1874 a translation of his Malay language teacher's autobiography. He was a self-taught artist, and his oil paintings and watercolours are of considerable historic interest. Many places, roads and buildings in Singapore and New Zealand are named after him. An alpine plant collected in 1881 from Mt Alta, near Wanaka, by botanist John Buchanan and surveyor Alexander McKay, was named *Pygmaea thomsonii* (now *Chionohebe thomsonii*). Although there is no citation it is believed to honour John Turnbull Thomson.

