

# Colonial NZ Fetes

## A Friendly Affair

Life in New Zealand during the nineteenth century was often brutal and tough. Isolation and plain old boredom were very real problems. Grog houses, gambling, prostitution and imaginative forms of violence were fairly standard forms of entertainment. People often lived uncertain existences in extremely difficult and unhealthy conditions. Government influence on society was quite limited.

From as early as 1842, the first Friendly Society was set up in New Zealand (based in the UK) and many more sprang up in the following years. Ordinary working men paid into these societies as a form of insurance against loss of income and to offer some form of protection to their families. These Friendly Societies and their importance to colonial New Zealand are largely forgotten, but in the absence of a Government welfare system they served a vital function throughout the nineteenth century. In fact, it was not really until the Labour Government's Social Security Act (1938) that Friendly Societies became largely irrelevant and consigned to history.

While financial security was a major reason for settlers choosing to join a Friendly Society, for many people it was the social activities which encouraged them to become members. Interestingly, one of these groups had a very close affinity with archery and its traditions: this was The Ancient Order of the Foresters (AOF). The AOF was formed in Britain in 1834 and the first 'Court' was set up in NZ at Christchurch in 1852. Sports days, fêtes, picnics and concerts orchestrated by local Friendly Societies were a focal point for social and recreational activity for the whole community. The AOF quickly became the second largest Society and whenever they were involved in a fête, archery was very often offered as one of the entertainments.

The AOF traced their mythical beginnings to the Forest of Sherwood, and the Robin Hood story was central to their initiation ceremony, and to much of their symbolism and ritual. Foresters held meetings in 'Courts' and their initiation ceremony involved acting out a scenario based on Robin Hood and his merry men. Often it even involved at least one person carrying a bow and arrows to threaten the initiate until their formal acceptance into the brotherhood. Once accepted, a member would be issued with a membership certificate. The characters depicted on the certificate (pictured) are dressed in formal attire and one of them is an archer.

It is impossible to be sure just when the AOF had their first fête and when archery definitely had its first appearance but it was most likely sometime in the early 1860s, as indicated by newspapers of the time. It is known that there was an AOF fête in 1863 at Kohler's Gardens in Christchurch. Throughout the 1860s, newspapers advertised either Forester Fêtes or Combined Friendly Society Fêtes. These often promoted themselves as including archery. There is a lack of recorded detail on these events but newspapers talk about fêtes at Nelson, Wellington, Timaru, Auckland and New Plymouth. At Nelson in February 1865 a young boy was accidentally shot by an arrow in the hip at a Forester fête; he survived.

At a fête at Auckland in 1866, a 14 year old boy by the name of Munday was struck in the neck by an arrow which protruded two inches on the other side. One Doctor Peirce (no joke!) was on hand to assist. He extracted the arrow and dressed the wound. The police arrived and conducted the unfortunate boy to hospital



and it was uncertain at the time whether he would survive. Messrs Smith and McMahon who were the side-show operator and the errant archer were taken to the police station pending an inquiry and by evening it had not been decided if charges should be laid. After this time, it became quite common for the archery to be advertised for 'Foresters Only'.

The resulting investigation revealed that the bows and arrows used were sourced from the South Seas trade (Polynesian). The Forester Society stated that an 'itinerant speculator' had erected his target at about 30 paces and invited the general public to shoot. The young lad survived his injury and the Police Court Bench discharged the two men but ordered them to pay any medical expenses incurred.

While often available, archery was not always a very popular participation activity but it was usually watched with interest because of its novelty value. The quality of the shooting was not generally very high and there were usually no more than half a dozen shooters. Theoretically the archery

was supposed to be a money making exercise but it is sometimes difficult to see how it could have been. Prizes could be quite expensive at times, for example:

From the Taranaki Herald 13th February 1869 the prizes were:

### Ladies

First Place: Gold Pencil Case  
Second Place: Silver Shawl Brooch  
Third Place: Lady's Card Case

### Gentlemen

First Place: Watch Stand with Glass Shade  
Second Place: Table Book Stand  
Third Place: Pocket Book Porte-Mounaie

By the 1870s there were archery clubs operating in Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch and the fêtes at those places almost always had archery as one of the attractions. The entrance fee for the archery competitions was anything from 1 to 3 shillings and sometimes cash prizes were offered. Shooting was at distances of between 20 to 80 yards with up to 24 arrows being shot per contestant. Scores tended to be very unimpressive.

Archery was still on the agenda until about 1890 but after that time the fêtes continued without it. This corresponds to about the time that the archery clubs of nineteenth century NZ began to disappear.

The clubs were dominated by lady archers and the Foresters were exclusively male until the early twentieth century. It is unlikely that NZ Forester archery was ever anything but a minor diversion that was more symbolic than it was a serious pastime.

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