

Report for Afternoon Tea – 28 June 2026

Our guest speaker was Matthew Bonnett, Marketing Manager for the Art Deco Trust. Matthew is highly knowledgeable about the history of Hawke's Bay, particularly Napier's early Regiments and historic homes. He is the owner of Scinde Island House in Brewster Street, which was built in 1866–67 and survived the 1931 Napier earthquake. Matthew also serves on the Historic Places Trust Board.

Matthew began by explaining the role of the Art Deco Trust. The Trust is a member-based organisation governed by an appointed Board and relies heavily on a dedicated team of volunteers. Its main income is generated through Walks and Talks, vintage car rides, and the two annual Art Deco festivals.

He explained that these events are becoming increasingly expensive to stage. For example, the cost of having Hato Hone St John on site for the three-day event has increased from around \$8,000 a few years ago to approximately \$20,000 today. Combined with road closures, traffic management and other event costs, the Trust depends on significant sponsorship to remain viable. Napier City Council provides some support, recognising the considerable economic benefit the festivals bring to the region. The events generate around 23,000 visitor nights, contribute approximately \$8.7 million to the local economy, and around \$20 million nationally. The festivals have also attracted support through Government tourism funding.

Matthew then spoke about Napier before the 1931 earthquake and displayed a fascinating map showing the original land formation. The main settlement was on Mataruahoe Island, also known as Scinde Island and Bluff Hill. He also highlighted Selwyn's Rock, located at the foot of Shakespeare Road, where Bishop Selwyn preached his first sermon in Hawke's Bay in November 1844.

Napier itself was named in honour of Sir Charles Napier (1782–1853), a distinguished British Army officer.

He also spoke about Captain Barnes of the 14th Regiment of Foot, which was deployed to New Zealand during the 1860s. The regiment played an important part in the history of Scinde Island.

Matthew then turned to the history of Scinde Island House, which he has been painstakingly restoring. The house is included on one of the Art Deco Trust's heritage walks. Over the years it has had several notable owners, the first being George Swan, who later became Mayor of Napier and for many years, held the distinction of being New Zealand's longest-serving mayor. He also served as a Member of Parliament.

Matthew recently discovered that a photographer named Orange and his family once lived in the house. This discovery filled a century-long gap in the house's recorded history.

He concluded with a personal family story. Matthew's great-great-grandfather was the first Pākehā child born in Napier in 1853. His father was the captain of a coastal trading vessel, and when his wife refused to give birth aboard ship, they came ashore in Napier, where they remained for three days until after the baby was born.

Matthew's presentation was extremely well received. His extensive knowledge, combined with an outstanding collection of historical photographs and visual displays, brought the history of early Napier vividly to life and made for a thoroughly enjoyable and informative afternoon.

