

Thomas Tanner (1830–1918)



Thomas Tanner was born in Wiltshire, England, on 31 October 1830 and baptised at Devizes on 31 July 1831. He was the son of Joseph Tanner, a landowner, and Mary Pontin. After briefly studying medicine, he emigrated to New Zealand in 1849 aboard the *Larkins*, working as a cadet on a sheep run near Whanganui. There, he became familiar with Māori culture and was given a Māori name: *Tanera*.

By 1853, Tanner had taken up a large run named *Milbourne* on the Ruataniwha plains in Hawke's Bay. He helped promote horse racing in the region and selected the course at Clive for the first formal race meeting in 1856.

He returned to England a few years later and married Julia Denton at Hartlepool, Durham, on 5 May 1859.

The couple returned to New Zealand around 1862 on a chartered ship, bringing with them servants, pedigree animals, books, and furniture. They would eventually raise ten children, eight of whom survived to adulthood.

In 1864, Tanner became the chief lessee of the Heretaunga block—an area of around 19,385 acres (7,844 hectares) bordering what is now Havelock North. Unlike other major locations in Hawke's Bay, Hastings was not a government-planned town when it was formed in 1873. Initially a swamp, Heretaunga would become some of the most valuable land in New Zealand. One portion was leased by William Rich until his death in 1866.

With Tanner unable to shoulder the entire lease cost, the block was divided in 1867 into twelve shares for seven men, including Tanner himself. This group, later nicknamed *The Apostles* due to the twelve blocks of land, purchased the Heretaunga block outright from Māori in 1870.

James Nelson Williams, son of missionary and later Bishop of Waiapu William Williams, had first choice of the land after Tanner. He selected two shares of the Heretaunga block totalling 2,462 acres (996 hectares) adjoining Tanner's land, which he named *Frimley* after a village in Surrey. Williams later purchased more land, increasing his holdings to 3,405 acres (1,378 hectares).

Tanner retained four shares, including a substantial area he called *Riverslea*, located near the old Ngaruroro River (now the Karamu Stream). Around 1871, he built the grand 22-room Riverslea homestead, widely regarded as one of Hawke's Bay's finest. The home included a ballroom, 12 bedrooms, five bathrooms, smoking and dining rooms, parlours, and was lavishly fitted with silver-gilded tapware, marble baths, and gold-gilt-edged china. Even the nearby coach house reportedly had Turkish carpets and silver fittings. A gardener imported from England tended the three-acre (1.2ha) grounds, which featured a croquet lawn and tennis court.

Tanner would ford the riverbed on horseback, crossing over to St George's Road. Living near Havelock North and being a devout Church of England follower, he was instrumental in the founding of St Luke's Church in 1874. He was its principal benefactor, vicar's warden, and synodsmen, and planted many of the trees in Havelock North and Hastings—most famously *Tanner's Oak* outside the church.

Although Tanner initially planned to farm all of Riverslea, the expense of draining the swampy land soon overwhelmed him. By 1870, despite having freehold title, he was struggling financially. Francis Hicks was the first among the Apostles to subdivide and auction his land in 1873. Others, including Tanner, followed, giving rise to the town of Hastings—an organically developed settlement, unlike other government-planned Hawke's Bay towns. Before 1873, the area was generally known as *Karamu*.

Tanner saw himself as the "father" of Hastings because he owned much of the land and gave the town its name. He donated land for a school, church, public park, and municipal buildings, even guaranteeing some construction costs. He also promoted small-scale settlement, subdividing his land and advertising Karamū sections for sale.

In 1873, his land dealings were scrutinised during a royal commission led by C. W. Richmond and F. E. Maning. Though no fraud was proven, Tanner and The Apostles were accused of pressuring Māori into "grog mortgages" and forced sales. Despite controversy, Māori often continued to work with Tanner, appreciating his cultural understanding and his custom of negotiating through tribal chiefs.

Tanner's fortunes continued to decline. In 1879, under financial pressure, he auctioned 1,200 acres on the Havelock side of Hastings, divided into 240 quarter-acre sections, 66 suburban plots, and 14 larger farm allotments. A second major sale followed in 1885, but this only temporarily delayed financial collapse. In 1889, facing mortgage arrears to the Northern Investment Company, a forced sale saw the last of his remaining Riverslea land—2,389 acres and unsold 1885 sections—auctioned off.



Nearly bankrupted, Tanner managed to retain the Riverslea homestead, thanks in large part to his son-in-law Frank Gordon of Clifton. But in December 1896, the homestead was destroyed in a mysterious fire. Although many family members were away, and no lamps or candles should have been lit, rumours swirled of a party held by staff. The fire consumed everything—furniture, heirlooms, and Tanner's private papers. Long-time employee John Flanders later purchased the homestead block.

Thomas and Julia moved first to *Balquidder* on Napier Hill and later to a more modest home named *Endsleigh* in Havelock North. After Thomas's death on 22 July 1918, Julia sold the house in 1919 and went to live with one of their daughters.

Throughout his life, Tanner remained a tireless advocate for Hawke's Bay. He helped found the Hawke's Bay Agricultural and Pastoral Association in 1873, was active in the Education Board, Philosophical Institute, and many civic organisations. He also served on the Heretaunga Road Board, Hastings Town Board, Borough Council, and was a Hawke's Bay County councillor from 1878 to 1893. Politically, he sat on the Hawke's Bay Provincial Council (1867–76) and represented Waipawa in Parliament from 1887 to 1890.

Although his financial ventures often ended in failure, Thomas Tanner's vision, energy, and deep involvement in civic life left a lasting legacy in Hastings and the wider Hawke's Bay region.

For further information please see:

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