



# The recycle caper

THREE weeks ago 67-year-old Kae Miller let her Khandallah home and shifted out to the Porirua dump.

Her new home is a shed made of car cases from Todds. There's no toilet, no hot water, no electricity.

"The council has really been very helpful," Kae says. "A little shocked, but very helpful."

The council tip-men have even run an extension phone across to the hut.

In 1976, Porirua City Council gave an acre of land above the tip for a recycling park. Kae spent \$3000 to build a recycling and storage hut.

Now she shares it with racks of coats and trousers, a busted sofa, broken chairs, a broken umbrella, a doll with no head, a 1950 set of Chambers Encyclopedia, piles of Readers Digests, cartons of Consumers, a recycled cat, five kittens and a papier mache dog with felt ears that flap in the wind whistling through the window-frames.

The hut used to have windows. But vandals kept breaking in, shooting the water-tank full of holes, stomping the furniture, and smashing the windows.

It's not so bad though, Kae says. The recycled tin roof hardly leaks at all, and she'll see the walls as soon as

someone dumps something suitable.

"You can find anything you want at the dump," she says. "We've all clothed ourselves, our friends and our descendants."

For herself, she's chosen grey woollen trousers, a thick

## BY CATHERINE WATSON

brown pullover, a long red waistcoat, and black school shoes.

It's difficult to imagine the acre of mud and paddock as a park, but the view from the couch perched on the edge of the cliff is striking — the sea in the distance, two tiny lakes at the foot of the hill, Colonial Knob (a city walk-way) straight ahead, and the dump to the left.

Kae spends most of her days in the Plimmerton swamp, doing research for a university botany paper.

Her university career has spanned 50 years. She did an MSc in the 1930s, an MA in the 1960s and three years of early morning cleaning in the 1970s, all at Victoria.

In between, she married the Rev Dex Miller in 1935. They left each other in 1937.

In 1948, Kae inherited a lot of run-down property from her mother, who'd started off with

£20 and ambitions to be a woman of property.

Kae still owns seven flats in Christchurch, eight in Kelburn and three flats, a house and five acres in Khandallah.

She says, "The financial aspects don't interest me. I just kept dreaming of how nice the flats would look when they were done up."

She's transferred most of her assets to the Box Trust, a private foundation for mental health, of which she's co-trustee.

Her lawyers and accountants tell her it's ridiculous to own so much property and get so little income. But she's got her pension, she says, and it doesn't cost her much to live the way she does.

She's planning a garden at the tip once she gets settled in. So far there's only a few faty leaks and an eau-de-cologne mint bush growing outside the door, but Kae knows the area fairly well.

## Cat mint

Down the hill there's a stand of cat mint. There's water-cress in the lakes, and land-cress on the banks. Onion grass salad is good, and sow thistle and dock leaves are all right.

The forests are full of Bullitts (the "mushroom") in a popular mushroom soup) and the paddocks are sprinkled with mushrooms and puff-balls.

She makes her own beer out of rimu leaf-tips and malt, and when she gets a stove rigged up she'll be able to make her own bread again (with orange skins and weeds).

Kae picked up a lot of her ideas from Frau Krebs, whom she met in Germany in 1938. The ideas grew on her slowly, but by the time Frau Krebs turned 100 last year, she was convinced.

They held a special ceremony at the park, dedicated it to Frau Krebs, and named the hut "Frau Krebs' House".

On any Saturday you can stand on the edge of the cliff and watch the streams of treacherous motorists dumping all kinds of treasures — grass clippings, newspapers, bottles, tins, old socks.

The waste never breaks Kae's heart. She's not allowed into the tip. But her eyes light up when she recalls past triumphs — an almost-new mattress, a carpet, a window-frame with the glass still in it! An occasional motorist turns off to the park. A car stops and unloads a broken lamp stand and a bag of old singlets, shirts and nighties.

Kae forages to the bottom and pulls out a cardigan. "Lovely thick wool," she says, delighted. "Lovely big buttons. Perfect!"

A young couple comes by to pick up some cheap timber for

a dome they're building. Kae holds the baby, fries mushrooms, hands round great hunks of bread and cheese and mugs of herb tea, and talks them into taking some sheets of glass.

## Ideas

She's got plenty of ideas for the park. Five special workers are being sent to help and then she'll really get going.

She's got plans for wind-power, a chip-heater water-heating system, a method of distilling drinking-water from sewage, insulation, a play centre, a workshop to repair the furniture, and a contract with Porirua City Council to collect rubbish from some households.

On Friday, her housing company and Action for the Environment (for which she's recycling convener) met to discuss cluster-housing. Next week she's off to Christchurch to see about turning her flats into halfway houses for psychiatric patients.

"I wasn't much liked when I was a child," Kae says. "I was miserable and self-absorbed. Life has steadily improved since then. I suppose it can't go on forever."

In the meantime, she's in an unusual prime of life. An age pensioner who wades through swamps and strides up hills.