

## **BLAKE: COLLIS JOHN and HELEN LOUISE**

Known as: Collis and Helen

Collis born: 6 March 1931

Helen born: 30 August 1936

Married: Autumn 1958, St Mark's Church, Wellington

Collis died: 10 November 2012, Palmerston North Hospital  
buried, The Avenue cemetery, Levin

Helen now lives in Orewa, Auckland (in 2022)

### **Collis's Honours**

2000: Member of the New Zealand Order of Merit

2011: Kapiti Horowhenua Business Awards Hall of Fame

### **Collis's Service**

The Pest Destruction Board (Chair)

Justice of the Peace

Rotary - member from 1972; President Levin Rotary 1981/82

Paul Harris Fellowship 1989 for services to farming and his community

Kapiti-Horowhenua Business Development Board

The Life Education Trust

Board of Waiopahu College 1976-82

1987 Chairman, Provincial Support Group. ***The role for which he is best remembered - his part in the formation and achievements of this activist group that worked to keep financially stressed farmers safe from their creditors and on their land.***

Massey University - active member, President of Alumni Association, member of the University Council. Collis supported the university with an agricultural research endowment, fought those who proposed the Agriculture section be closed and was a major benefactor of the Interdenominational Centre.

## **Helen's Honours**

2013: Queens Service Medal for services to philanthropy.

## **Helen's Service**

Long-time supporter of St Johns in Levin and continues to support the service.

Funding University of Auckland's School of Optometry and Vision Science  
(SOVS)

### ***Collis and Helen had two children:***

Susan Louise Blake (Maiava) (1960 -

Barbara Mary Blake (1964 -

They have four grandchildren and one great grandchild

### ***Collis's Parents were***

David Blake and Hazel Moffat.

They married in spring 1929 in the Methodist church, Otaki.

Collis was their only child, born in 1931.

### ***His grandparents were***

Jack and Maud Blake and

Herbert and Julia Moffatt (Julia divorced Herbert in 1913 and remarried him in 1933, five days before his death).

### ***Helen's Parents were***

George Cox (1909 – 1968) and Edna Cox

## **Early Lives**

**Collis** was born in Otaki, March 1931 the only child of Hazel and Dave Blake. Dave worked a small dairy unit on the Waitohu Valley Road. In those hard depression years there was never very much to spare. Collis was a cherished child and Hazel a very protective and ambitious mother. During World War II

Hazel was a leading light in the community when Otaki folk hosted the American soldiers from Mackay's Crossing, both at dances and in their homes. From his parents Collis inherited a strong set of values (caring, integrity and generosity) and a sense of community and service. From his mother he learned a 'can-do' attitude.

He attended Otaki School. He would ride his pony there and leave it in the horse paddock. He was a good student and Hazel's ambitions for her son grew, undertaking to find the money to send him to board at Wellington College. She did this by growing flowers which she sent to the Wellington Market. Collis told of how when he returned to school from a visit home his mother would always give him a bunch of flowers for the House Master.

Wellington College and the Boarding House, in the years 1944 to 1948, introduced Collis to a wider world and a broader spectrum of people, an experience that would stand him in good stead. His confidence grew as did his network of friends. In his life he was to mix easily with people from the widest possible backgrounds and stations in life.

Hazel had decided Collis would be a vet, a career choice Collis was not fully consulted on. As he told it, he was at Victoria University for "a very good year" and at its end he had passed nothing! His mother was not impressed but Collis was making his claim for independence. The next year he embarked on a course that met his interest and ambitions: an agricultural diploma at Massey. Collis wanted to be a farmer.

He did very well at Massey, graduating with his Diploma in Agriculture in 1951. At the end of the course, he received a letter from the head of Ruakura Research Unit near Hamilton inviting him to join a research project. But Collis wanted to be a farmer on his own account. He worked for a time on a dairy farm in Taranaki and later returned to Horowhenua and bought a farm in South Manakau. There followed years of hard work and growth as a farmer and businessman.

Shortly after he took up his farm, Collis was introduced to Helen.

**Helen** was a city girl, but they were to forge a wonderful relationship and she became a partner in all his enterprise in the proper sense of partnership.

She was born in Wellington and grew up in Island Bay and Mount Victoria, attending Queen Margaret College. After finishing school she trained as a secretary and worked for an architecture firm in the city. Her father George Cox was a prominent optician in Wellington and a pioneer of optometry in New Zealand.

Helen and Collis were married in 1958 and Helen found herself a farmer's wife living in a little house that had passed its used-by date. Mother-in-law Hazel put herself in charge of training Helen in rural ways and most other matters!

Helen's father weighed in by providing the frame of a new home leaving the young couple to finish it together as time and money allowed.

### **Farm Life**

For their two children, Susan and Barbara, the South Manakau farm would become their home. Helen brought them up but they remember being with Dad. Susan recalls going down to the shed trailing along with Dad. *"He had time to point things out and teach me about farming."* She could drive the tractor by twelve. Barbara was to become a dab hand at sorting bulls. A piece of black alkathene pipe was all you needed. In Helen's and Collis's eyes, girls could do anything!



They ran sheep on the hill of their farm and also leased land. In time they bought and sold land and attained a good grasp of the essentials of land trading. In addition to dairying and sheep, they would grow a crop or run some beef cattle. One year a bumper crop of potatoes in Levin brought in a really good return and provided capital which they could use to advantage. They would work the potatoes in the early morning before returning home to milk cows. Initially, in 1956, Collis was milking 40 cows for town milk supply but when they left eighteen years later their herd had grown to 120.

A farm in Ohau/Muhunua that they turned to raising beef didn't produce the figures so they bought two butcher's shops, one in Weraroa and the other at Otaki Rail. That part of the business began to look much better and their farming success was becoming matched by their remarkable business acumen. Hard work was an essential quality, but astute, analytical minds and a willingness to experiment with new ways of doing things and taking the bigger view added a special dimension.

Collis learned fast. He had a very interesting relationship with banks. As a youngster he had seen the banks foreclose on his grandfather. Later there was a time when he found himself stretched. The banks wanted to tell Collis

what to do. There was no way he was going to let that happen! They struggled, worked even harder and smarter, and made a resolution that they saw as being the foundation of their success. *"Never owe the banks a penny! Work your butt off and manage on what you have and free yourself of debt or one day they will call you to account."*

### **The Move from Manakau to Ihakara**

In 1972 Collis and Helen moved to The Farm at Ihakara – it was actually three farms they made into one - and began the next stage of their life.

In the mid 1980's, "Rogernomics" deregulation arrived and farming was targeted first. Subsidies were removed, the dollar floated, and interest rates cut loose. Farmers were paying up to 25% interest rates, and when they could not pay it, found the bank raising the rate to 36% to cement in the dilemma.

At the time Collis said, *"I wonder what gives any sector of society the right to destroy another sector, by charging 36% interest."* In typical Collis fashion he decided to do something about it.

Ultimately farmers defaulted and farms went up for auction. Collis started attending auction days, asking other attendees to support farming families by not bidding.

This was just the beginning and his activism would make Collis a nationwide figure in farming – and banking! This was his time.

### **The New Zealand Provincial Support Group**

Mortgagee sales were becoming much more public. TV, radio and press were on site, and by now with legal help Collis had worked out how to stop any mortgagee sale in the country. Armed with these legal tools, he went in to bat on radio, calling for tractors, combines, trucks and farmers *'en masse'* to block the highways and byways as a protest to stop these sales. One of the first efforts was in Palmerston North. Farmers came from everywhere. Needless to say, the sale was stopped. Farmers had won this time.

The problem was the phones started to ring; not in the ones and twos but in the tens and twenties. There were hundreds of farmers in trouble out there all needing Collis's help.

Not deterred, he set off, one by one, boardroom after boardroom, bank after bank, he battled for farmers. He is quoted as *saying "the only time I see Helen these days is when I drop off my dirty shirts and pick up a clean set as I take off for the next problem"*.

Eventually the task was just too big, so the call went out again, and from every corner of New Zealand helpers gathered to form what was called the New Zealand Provincial Support Group. Armed with Collis's knowledge and

guidance learned so far, farm debt was restructured nationwide. It was here that real progress was made.

Testament to Collis's and the Provincial Support Group's work was when the Bank of New Zealand hosted a banquet, champagne included. It was at the conclusion that the CEO made it clear as he stood up to speak: *"This lunch", he said, "is a little something from us here at the BNZ to say thank you for everything you have done Collis. You see, if the banks had got away with selling all the farms they intended to, two things would have happened. 1) the value of the farms would have crashed. 2) along with the value of the farms, the value of the bank's mortgages and securities would also have crashed. In the case of the BNZ it would have placed our balance sheet at risk, putting us under."*

On the way down in the lift, Collis said *"Do you realise that in all this time, we have actually been working for the banks, and what's more, we've saved the bastards."*

Collis obtained hundreds of millions of dollars of debt write-off for hundreds of farmers, many of whom still own and enjoy their farms to the second and third generations today.

The following years were quieter but no less significant.

### **Leisure, Further Community Service, and the Adventure Park**

The Blakes loved to hang about in boats. Holidays, the girls say, always seemed to involve a boat and boats featured in their travel. Collis travelled to Australia on the *Endeavour* replica (they got in a storm and almost didn't make it,) plus journeys to the Arctic and Antarctic and on the *Spirit of Adventure*. They enjoyed travelling and learning more about this amazing world. Collis embraced the company of mates – sharing a beer at the rugby, sharing his love of old farm machinery, or yarning at Rotary.

A long-term Rotarian, Collis was a foundation member of the Otaki Club before joining the Levin Club in the Seventies. The Rotary mantra of service before self sat easily with him.

Helen was a long-time supporter of St John in Levin and continues with her support. Together, their service extended to many groups over the years.



Perhaps the finest testament to their energy and generosity is the Levin Adventure Park. Collis used to grumble about the state of the old Levin School grounds on Oxford Street South and complain that something must be done about it. A voice he knew so well replied, *"If you feel so strongly about it Collis why don't you do it yourself."* In 2001, he did. It was the start of another big project, a family one, with Susan playing a big part in their very significant contribution.

It demonstrated their compassion as well as their determination and, being the practical people they were, it got done. It is a tribute to them but they insisted it be named for the town and they insisted that it be free.



**(thisquality.com)**



**(healthykids.org.nz)**

But that is not it all. Their vision and generosity have been seen in various projects that benefit this community: Collis shared in construction of the club house at Lake Horowhenua; for the hockey turf they provided an interest free loan; they supported the AP&I Stadium; at Waiopahu College they have been instrumental in the Health Centre; and there have been contributions to Te Takere and to Ronald McDonald House.

They loved to be involved. Sometimes Collis could be a *"minor irritation"*; *he had some difficulty when people couldn't see it his way*" but he was genuinely interested. Their passion for the land and for farming grew to encompass a passion for this community and the people in it.

Much of what they did remained unseen. In their work with farmers and the Provincial Support Group we only know the smallest part of it. Everywhere they were helping people, Collis witnessed more than his fair share of poverty and sometimes he took real risks to help people. Courage was never in short supply. This was a couple enthusiastic about life, who believed things could be done. Mentors, benefactors, educators, and negotiators ... they were all of these and more.

Of paramount importance, though, was family. Collis and Helen were devoted to them and found great joy in their grandchildren, a love and devotion that was, in turn, paid back.





**Collis, aged 80 (stuff.co.nz)**

Collis passed away in 2012, at the age of 81. In 2020, Helen, now in her mid-80s, moved to Orewa, north of Auckland, to be close to her daughter Susan and her grandchildren and great grandchildren. She continues to support her local Anglican parish of St Chads and the Auckland City Mission.

### **The Community Spectacle Scheme**

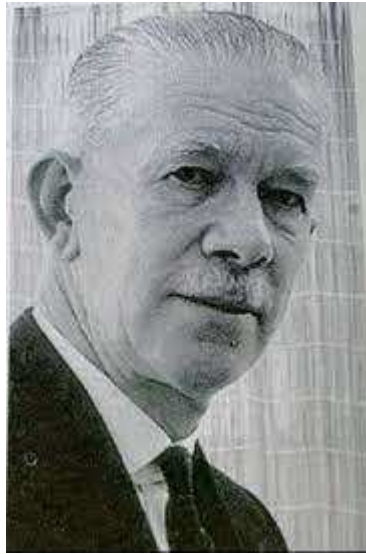


**(auckland.ac.nz)**

Helen's latest venture to help those less fortunate in life than herself was launched in 2021. Called the Community Spectacle Scheme, it's designed to identify people in the greater Auckland area with poor eye health who lack the means to have it corrected – through eye tests and prescription glasses. Along with daughter Barbara, Helen has donated \$100,000 to support the School of Optometry and Vision Science (SOVS) at the University of Auckland in carrying out this work in deprived communities.

A pilot survey in selected suburbs was begun in July 2021 and an Aotearoa Vision Bus fully equipped for optometry screening, including specialised

investigations, can now visit communities, making access to the school's services much easier and at little or no cost to the sufferer.



**George Cox ([eyeonoptics.co.nz](http://eyeonoptics.co.nz))**

It's a particularly interesting 'full-circle' involvement for Helen and Barbara, as their father and grandfather, George Cox, designed New Zealand's first vision bus in Wellington to serve the army during World War II. A pioneer in the optometry profession, George also established the University Education Fund that paved the way for the New Zealand Optometry School (SOVS, as it is today).