

Historical Note

Up the Hill and Around the Corners

This month, in our historical section, we are publishing extracts from recollections by Miss E. Ashforth of Austin Street. Miss Ashforth kindly wrote these down for the Historical Society but, unfortunately, space constraints mean we can only print part of it.

Leisured times to recall such things are rare enough – recording them shows how much we have missed and how, year by year, traces of the pioneers' world have given way to our modern capital city even just in one small section. Sleeplessness can have its uses at times – maybe if I walked in my mind – systematically up Marjoribanks Street from Courtenay Place, I could recall some of the scenes of forty years ago, when I first came to live in the city.

. . . one couldn't miss the big hotel on the northern side of Marjoribanks Street and Courtenay Place corner, or the De Luxe Theatre across the south side. According to older residents that theatre had had an excellent orchestra in the days before talkies.

So, going up Marjoribanks Street, on the north side one couldn't miss the remnant of Chinese habitation – an old wooden two-storey shop and residence, an old-fashioned laundry where collars were stiffened for the city businessmen and sheets flapped in the wind on an upper-floor area. . . . Further up was the big, multi-storey Engineering department of Broadcasting Department (which has recently been reconstructed into city flats), the current vogue of the late 1900's.

Now Marjoribanks Street starts to become more steep and the back part of the sections up to Port Street is an almost perpendicular bank. . . . A little old fencible cottage on its own section claimed place and occupancy until about 1996 when one day a bulldozer and other great modern machines tore down the tiny home and replaced it with two large house units, the back one of which is right against the cliff. Port Street must surely be one of the steepest streets in Wellington, and is a well-known nightmare place for tests for new motorists. . . . A wonderful view of the city to the south is reward for climbing Port Street up to Stafford Street, which runs parallel to Marjoribanks Street and is the home place of some twenty or thirty villas and fencible houses, the latter having been remains of the days when the military forces of all ranks were supplied with homes of varying types and sizes according to ranks.

However, the south side of Stafford Street from Port Street towards the west was unoccupied for many years. Then, one quiet Sunday morning a big house-moving vehicle travelled up Austin Street and up Port Street bearing a huge house which was to be placed at the far end south side of Stafford Street. Two more large double-storey houses were erected up on the remaining sections and must have destroyed the views of the neighbours over the road. Part of the embankment had to be cut away to allow one of these big vehicles with their loads to go around the corner at the top of Port Street and another house had to have its top storey removed and left on a spare section on the corner of Austin Street, to be taken up at a later date. Now one would never guess that they had been dropped from long years established on a southern part of the city.

Even in 1961 there were remnants of early Wellington surviving among the new residential and commercial buildings. On the eastern corner of Austin and Marjoribanks Street was the small piece of land on which were four little fencible cottages squashed together and ready to tumble down any time. They were only one room and passage wide and had about four rooms with a small area of land at the back. The third one along was a favourite lair of the homeless alcoholics and tramps but one winter's night it caught fire and probably only the closeness to the local fire brigade saved all four from being completely burned. A year or so later they were demolished and as the contractor squashed one of the little houses in the grip of the crane and held it high, only sawdust sprayed down onto the ground, so it must have been held together by cobwebs. Next door in Austin Street was the old house called Ettrick Cottage, said to have been the Hannah family's beach house, situated down near the Oriental Bay. . . . However, it was moved to another site in Mt Victoria and was replaced after many delays by more modern flats, advertised as 'a touch of the Mediterranean' design.

The old home at the top of the steps at 11a Austin Street, with its nice concrete entrance and once-beautiful garden had long ago been acquired by the Education Department as a home for Welfare Department boys in trouble but was also burnt and eventually demolished. . . . There was only the road to the new bowling green and the boys home, beyond, for many years. Finally the ownership changed, new roads were formed and plans made for a residential city area – houses and apartments more numerous than we could expect from its earlier appearance – became Lawson Place. Now it is called a desirable residential locality.

Perhaps now this corner of Mt Victoria has undergone its planned development from baches and rooming houses to the state of gentrification that some city fathers envisioned. Perhaps?