

Historical Note

Signal Stations and Mt Victoria

Remember the story in the last newsletter about Charlotte Bronte's friend rushing up to Mount Victoria to see if there was a ship bound for England in the harbour?

Mt Victoria was once part of a system of signal stations used to advise of the arrival of ships in Wellington harbour.

In 1845, a signal station was set up on Mt Albert, under the charge of Captain Robert Houghton, who was also in charge of the city's powder magazine. The station was later moved to Beacon Hill (called Barrel Beacon Hill at the time, because the signalman had to light a fire and in wet weather he sheltered in a barrel!) on the ridge between Palmer Head and Point Dorset.

The signals went up on Beacon Hill and were then repeated on Mount Victoria. When the vessels had rounded Point Halswell, the signals on Mount Victoria were lowered. In 1863 a Mr John T Platt offered to repeat signals from Mt Albert for ships' arrivals on a flagstaff that he had erected on his premises at the foot of Tory Street. This offer was not taken up, however, and in 1866 the signal station was moved to Mount Victoria.

Black painted metal shapes were used to signal the arrival of different types of shipping, for instance a square was used for a ship and a cross for a barque. News of the sighting of a ship was the most exciting, because it meant the vessel came from overseas and might bring letters from home, relatives in person and goods. A barque was the next size down and was also probably from overseas. Signals for schooners or brigs would indicate that the vessel plied the New Zealand coast or possibly came from Australia. A cutter indicated a short-distance coastal vessel. With the advent of steamers, flags were added to the signal station to advise of the shipping line.



The signal station remained on Mount Victoria for 74 years.

If you look closely at the 1851 map on the left, you can just make out the three signal stations on Beacon Hill, Mount Albert and Mount Victoria.

Sources:
Ward, Louis E., Early Wellington,
Whitcombe & Tombs Ltd, 1912
Talk by Roger Carter to the Mt Victoria
Historical Society, 1997
Map of Cook Strait, surveyed by Capt JL
Stokes . . . H.M.S. Acheron, 1849-51