



MT VICTORIA

Historical Society News

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Basin Reserve Tour

Sunday, March 10, 11.00 am

Join Joanna Newman for a guided tour of the Basin Reserve - hear about its unique and precious heritage. You are welcome to bring friends along.

This is an outdoor event, so come dressed for the weather!

(The walk will be postponed in the event of seriously adverse conditions, so please register your interest in joining us so we can contact you if necessary: email jnewman@xtra.co.nz or phone 385 2254).

Earthquake resilience

In the wake of the Canterbury earthquakes, awareness of risks – and insurance premiums – have risen dramatically. Wellington has always been better prepared than most cities to deal with an earthquake, but even here the imperative to address ‘earthquake-prone’ buildings has become more urgent. There is debate about issues such as the percentage to which buildings should be strengthened and timeframes but the government and Wellington City Council appear to be adopting a measured approach to the whole issue, including widespread consultation. (Check out <http://www.dbh.govt.nz/current-consultations> if you’d like to know more.) In the meantime, however, heritage buildings which do not meet the current building code will be at risk. There has, for instance, already been a proposal to demolish Category 1-registered Harcourts building, on which a decision is due before the end of the month.

Mt Victoria Historical Society is particularly aware of the potential threat to Art Deco apartments in our suburb. We have some superb examples of this era of architecture, including two buildings by the great Wellington architect Edmund Anscombe, Fountain Court, Owd Trafford and 123 Brougham Street. One of the priorities for the Committee this year is to ensure we have good information about these buildings and to raise awareness of their significance.

For individual home owners there is a useful publication put out by Wellington City Council in conjunction with BRANZ titled “Earthquake strengthen your house”, also available on their website (<http://www.wellington.govt.nz/news/display-item.php?id=5125>). (BRANZ also has a series of publications on renovating homes of different eras, which might be of interest to members: http://www.branz.co.nz/cms_display.php?sn=52&st=1 .)

Basin Reserve Flyover

Opposition grows to the Basin Reserve flyover as a solution to traffic issues in this area, with both the Regional Council and Wellington City Council coming out against it, along with many individual Wellingtonians. If you would like to keep informed or become more involved by being on the Save the Basin email list, contact tjonescan@gmail.com . You can also see what’s happening on www.stoptheflyover.com and www.savethebasin.org.nz

Incidentally, while on the subject of the Basin Reserve, the old Pavilion (now known as the Museum Stand) is one of the heritage buildings at risk because it is earthquake prone. It is a New Zealand Historic Places Trust Category 2-registered building but, unfortunately, has received little maintenance for many years.

An event to look out for . . .

As we start to plan events for the year, one to look forward to is a talk by Bee Dawson, author of “A History of Gardening in New Zealand”. This will be scheduled for June or July. We will let you know about other events in due course.

Historical Note

You will see that the Historical Note in this newsletter has a different heading at the top of the page. Since the unveiling of the heritage panel on the side of the Embassy Theatre at the end of last year, we are providing a clear link to any articles which provide background to sites featured on it. We also have a project to go back and do this with past articles already available on our website, and to write up in more depth the history of sites which have not yet been covered.

46 Roxburgh Street

Standing out as boldly different from all its Mt Victoria neighbours is No. 46 Roxburgh Street. Not only is it brick, when every other house in the suburb up until then had been built of wood, this unique combination of Italianate and Palladian styles has a distinctly foreign cast. With these European styles, it combines decorative iron work and leadlight windows of a more New Zealand character.

The house was designed for M G Treadgold by James Bennie in 1904. Bennie was a Scot who emigrated to New Zealand in 1880 and settled in Brunnertown near Greymouth. In the early 1890's he went to Melbourne to study architecture at the Working Men's College. In 1903 he came to Wellington and went into practice with E C Farr before establishing his own practice in 1905. Some of Bennie's other designs which still exist include the Albermarle Hotel (1905) and the Paramount Theatre (1917).

It's not clear exactly when the house was constructed, but the first residents appear to have been James Robin JP, his son Alfred Wm Robin (Col. CB, Chief General Staff Defence Forces) and probably Alfred's sister. They lived here from 1909-1916.

Alfred was born in 1860 in Australia, where James worked as a coachbuilder. The family moved to Dunedin about 1861, and James established what eventually became a thriving coach and carriage building business. James proved successful in public life, too: he was chairman of the Otago Harbour Board and, on the inception of the first Hospital and Charitable Aid Board, became a member and then chairman for a number of years. He was also a member of Dunedin City Council for two years. James came to Wellington at the end of 1907.

When he left school Alfred had joined his father's business as an apprentice, and later became a working partner. From a very early age, though, he was fascinated with military affairs. He was battery bombardier in his high school's artillery cadet corps, and between 1878 and 1883 served with voluntary regiments. From 1891 to 1898 he commanded the Otago Hussars, regarded as the most efficient volunteer corps in the country. Alfred Robin was considered the 'smartest Commanding Officer in the Colony'.

In early 1897, he was appointed to select, train and command the mounted section of the Maori and Pakeha military contingent sent to Queen Victoria's diamond jubilee celebrations. In London he was chosen to command the colonial section of the bodyguard escorting the Queen on her return to Windsor after Jubilee Day. The following year he resigned his partnership in the family business, was promoted to major and given command of the newly formed Otago Battalion of Mounted Rifle Volunteers. He accepted a commission in the New Zealand permanent forces in September 1899 and, as instructor to South Island mounted rifle units, established a tactical school for officers. He then commanded the First Contingent, which was dispatched to the South African War in October 1899. Over the next few years he was promoted a number of times and on three occasions was mentioned in dispatches for his leadership and personal exploits. He was appointed a CB on 19 April 1901 and became a national celebrity, his portrait being included on commemorative medals, post office stationery and Christmas cards. It was in 1906 that he was appointed to the newly established Council of Defence as chief of the General Staff, the position he held when he took up residence in 46 Roxburgh Street with his father and (probably) sister. This made him the first colonial to hold the country's highest military position and in this role he helped to implement the system of compulsory military training which was introduced in 1909.

On the outbreak of war in 1914, Robin offered to serve overseas. The government, however, considered his experience too valuable at home and appointed him commandant to the military forces within New Zealand. He was promoted to brigadier general in 1915 and in this capacity organised reinforcements and training for the Expeditionary Force.

In 1916, Alfred Robin, Commandant of the New Zealand Forces, was knighted – “a first tribute to the splendid work done by Sir Alfred Robin and the General Staff in the making of a New Zealand Army”. He was also promoted to major general.

Alfred never married and his sister accompanied him to many official functions in Wellington. He was noted for his dedication, enjoyment of working long hours and his thorough understanding and knowledge of military affairs. He was idealistic and patriotic but modest, and immensely proud of having risen from the ranks of the volunteers. An accomplished artist who had exhibited at the Otago Art Society between 1885 and 1906, this talent was apparently also demonstrated in his military plans and maps.

After the Robins, Thomas Burt of the firm A&T Burt occupied the house for two to three years but by 1929 it had become a boarding house; a fate suffered by many of Mt Victoria's larger houses.

A more recent famous resident has been writer, Marilyn Duckworth. A long time Mt Victorian, she lived here from 1984 to 1994. The photograph shows her standing in the entrance hall of 46 Roxburgh Street, framed by the impressive leadlight windows.



(Photograph courtesy of Marilyn Duckworth)