



# MT VICTORIA

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## Historical Society News

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Firstly, apologies for the long silence since the last newsletter for members! There's no excuse, except 'other commitments'. The committee has not been inactive, though. Thanks go to David McCrone, who volunteered to join it after the AGM and has been gratefully co-opted for the year. We have been looking at projects for our tenth anniversary, a website for the society, and putting together our first event for the year.

## *Walking Tour of Northern Mt Victoria*

**Sunday, March 12**

**Starting from Queen Vic statue, Kent/Cambridge Terrace at 2.30 pm**

This year our March walk is a guided tour of Northern Mt Victoria. Starting at Queen Vic, we will take a circular route up to the monastery and back again, sharing with you stories about poets, quacks, murders, fires and other associations with the places we pass.

Timed to finish 3.30-4.00 pm.

For more information contact Alan Olliver on 385 1022.

Postponement date: March 19

Run in association with Wellington City Council's Stepping Out Programme. Look out for their brochure soon to learn about more great walks.

### **Stepping Out – can you find it?**

In our Historical Note this month, you will read about the plaque marking the existence of gun emplacements on Mt Victoria once upon a time. We are offering a prize to the first member to locate the bench with its plaque! When you spot it, call Joanna Newman on 385 2254 to claim your prize. It's a good excuse perhaps to explore parts of the hill you haven't yet visited.

### **Historical Society Tenth Anniversary Projects**

To mark the tenth anniversary of the Mt Victoria Historical Society this year, we are proposing to have one significant project which will contribute to our knowledge and understanding about the history of Mt Victoria and its people and at the same time raise the profile of the Historical Society and the heritage value of the suburb. The plan we are developing is for a photography and oral history project, possibly ending in an exhibition.

If you would like to be involved or can suggest long-time residents of Mt Victoria who would be able to share stories about life here and reflections on our suburb with us, we would love to hear from you. Please contact Joanna Newman on 385 2254.

We have also written to the Council about historical panels on the Majoribanks St walls of the Embassy Theatre and would like to see this achieved in our tenth anniversary year. (The Society offered two years ago to provide information for it.)

### **Wellington: Telling Tales**

With this newsletter you will find a brochure about Chris MacLean's latest book, *Wellington: Telling Tales*. MacLean describes it as "a series of brief historical vignettes, one for each year" and, with a double-page spread of text and photographs for every year between 1900 and 1999, it is a beautiful, reasonably-priced coffee table book on our history. The inspiration for the book grew out of his work on the new long-term exhibition at the Museum of Wellington City and Sea, so do go and see the exhibition at the Museum, too.

## HISTORICAL NOTE

# Defending Wellington

By Joanna Newman

On bush-covered, peaceful Mt Victoria today there is no evidence that it was once an integral part of Wellington's World War II defences. And yet, from 1942 to 1945 it was one of a system of heavy anti-aircraft installations, including Tinakori Hill, Mt Victoria, Johnsonville, Point Halswell, Somes Island and Pol Hill in Brooklyn. All that is left now of the four-gun battery with its massive concrete gunpits and command post, is a plaque on a bench placed by the gunners who used to man the site.

The Mt Victoria installation was very similar to the one at Point Halswell, so to get an impression of what it would have once looked like you can go to Michael Biggs' website on Wellington's Coastal Defences.<sup>1</sup>

The installation was built by the Ministry of Works and the young men who enlisted for the war effort. One of these was 21 year old Vic Newman from Christchurch. By natural inclination, he would have been a conscientious objector but considered it selfish to shame the family by taking such a stance. He arrived in Wellington in 1941 and went straight into training in Trentham. In August that year it was decided to put heavy anti-aircraft batteries on the hills surrounding Wellington to form the basis of the city's defence as the Japanese pushed south. The control of the batteries was to be exercised through a combined HQ built under the Dominion Museum. The first was installed on Mt Vic with two regiments, the 28<sup>th</sup> Heavy AKAK and the 29<sup>th</sup> Light AKAK and a searchlight unit. When Vic emerged from Trentham, he joined the 28<sup>th</sup> Heavy Anti-aircraft Regiment and was sent to Mt Victoria, which was also the regimental headquarters. Another group of the Heavy and Light AKAK regiments was split off and sent to Tinakori Hill.

The troops worked all day building the concrete gun emplacements and bunkers for ammunition. They were on four-hourly standbys, day and night; one watch was on guard. Practice call-outs were held throughout the night. Vic Newman was based on Mt Victoria for a short time, living in a two-man hut on the hill. He was then sent over to Tinakori Hill, although the AKAK batteries on Mt Victoria were manned until the end of the war.



Vic Newman, from a photo in Trentham, 25.



The military camp on Mt Victoria – Constable Street coming round to Moxham Ave on the left; Hataitai in the foreground.  
Wellington City Archives 000138:0:

Vic's memories of Tinakori Hill are that it was always in the cloud and damp – the soldiers used to send their clothes over to Mt Victoria to dry. Rations were sent to Tinakori from Mt Victoria, too. The main meal for soldiers digging gun emplacements was one cubic inch of smoked fish, one slice of bread and one cup of tea. Food sometimes ran out on Tinakori Hill. Vic was one of a number of soldiers who didn't believe it was reasonable to expect men to do the physical labour of digging gun emplacements on such small rations and led a strike for more food. The soldiers waited till they were up on the guns, then refused to carry out maintenance. The soldiers were arrested, threatened with court martial and put under guard in their huts. The District Commander was sent from HQ to investigate and decided the men had a valid case. He ordered hot meals for all and, in due course these were served to the 'freed' soldiers by their former guards!

After the war, the Mt Victoria emplacements were quickly seen to be an eyesore and in 1946 the Council investigated their removal. It decided total demolition was not necessary, but that the Government would be required to fill in the area between the emplacements to serve as a look-out area. A plan was drawn up by the City Engineer but, while one emplacement was partially back-filled, the full plan was not carried out. No further demolition steps were taken until 1969, when (after Tinakori had been demolished) the Council asked the Ministry of Works to investigate the demolition of the Mt Victoria site. While the design of the emplacements was similar to those on Tinakori Hill, however, the site was far more difficult. The hillside was steeper, with less room for machinery to manoeuvre, explosives could not be used because of the proximity to housing and there was no suitable area nearby for disposal of the rubble. The works would also have to be carefully managed to keep concrete from damaging the adjacent road or houses.

A site for the disposal of the rubble was eventually found half a mile away in a gully near the fever hospital off Alexandra Road. The Ministry of Works started demolition in May 1970. The work proved far more costly than originally estimated, because the Council requested that the five concrete bases also be removed, but finally every sign of the gun emplacements was removed.

<sup>1</sup> Michael Biggs, Wellington's Coastal Defences, <http://www.geocities.com/kelburn.geo/index.html>, 2006