



MT VICTORIA

Historical Society News

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Oral Histories

**Sunday, May 21, at 2.30 pm
At Crossways in Elizabeth St**

Well-known writer and Mt Victoria resident, Jane Tolerton, will talk to us about the joys and challenges of recording oral histories.

Author of *Convent Girls*, *Sixties Chicks Hit the Nineties*, and *Ettie: A Life of Ettie Rout*, Jane has vast experience not only in recording people's memories, but turning them into something accessible to us all.

At this meeting we will also officially launch our Tenth Anniversary project to capture and present a unique social history of Mt Victoria.

Report on the Wakefield Memorial

The Council has recently advised the Society of its plans for the William Wakefield memorial on the Basin Reserve, as we had made a submission on it through the Annual Plan process. They plan to remove the memorial in the next 6-8 weeks, to start restoration. It will then be relocated inside the Basin Reserve, on a concrete platform built into the grass mound at the top of the egress steps to Dufferin Street. Work on the new site is expected to start towards the end of April, with the memorial restored and in its new home by the end of July. The existing wooden gates at the bottom of the Dufferin Street steps will be replaced with new metal gates to allow better viewing of the memorial. Appropriate interpretation panels will be placed beside the memorial and by the gates, to explain the history behind William Wakefield and his memorial.

Historical Trivia

Searching website of the Dictionary of New Zealand Biography the other day, I discovered a Mt Victoria association. Billed as being "Born on this day" (which happened to be March 25), was **Joseph Firth**.

Firth was headmaster of Wellington College for 29 years, from 1891 to 1920, and is credited with establishing the school as the successful school it is today. When he arrived, the school was in financial crisis, occupying a wooden building in rough grounds on a bleak hillside. He soon gave these grounds his attention, with a fund-raising drive to improve playing fields and a weed-spraying wand of his own invention to keep the grass in good order. He was no great innovator in education but was one of the most popular masters the college ever had. His philosophy was that it was not by being whipped that a boy could be made to do his best, "but by causing him to look at his school life from the right point of view. This result depends very largely upon the parents' attitude towards the school and its masters". His success made him the acknowledged leader in education in Wellington and a respected authority throughout the country.

Firth's wife was also an important part of school life. Janet Firth was an imposing six feet tall, matching her husband's massive six foot five. They had no children themselves and the pupils (especially the boarders) were the family they never had.

The Historical Society Ten Years ago

This time ten years ago, the soon-to-be incorporated Mt Vic Historical Society was advertising an April visit to Wellington City Archives for its members. Wellington City Archives also celebrates a tenth anniversary this year – in April 1996 it hadn't yet opened to the public, but was to do so a few months later. The source of a lot of the historical information we share with you through the newsletter, walks and talks, it too has seen a lot of changes over the past ten years. It now collects archives, as well as holding the Council's own historical records, and will have its collection database online by the end of June.

HISTORICAL NOTE

Hymns and Aerated Waters

One of the interesting characters whose life revolved around Mt Victoria at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth was Alfred Maurice Lewis. Evidence of his life today exists in 19 and 21 Porritt Avenue, both of which houses were built for him in 1900, and the Cambridge Terrace Congregational Church. (The Church is on the corner of Cambridge Terrace and Lorne Street.)

Lewis was one of Wellington's best-known businessmen in the early 1900's. Born in London in 1862, he was apprenticed to the aerated water trade and came to New Zealand at the age of 17. He arrived in Wellington after a year in Auckland and worked with Strike and Fairlie Ltd in Wellington and Nelson. After a year in Dunedin he returned and was put in charge of Strike and Fairlie's business here, then known as the Wellington Aerated Water Company. He later bought the business and carried on in partnership with Alec Thomson, acquiring premises in Tory St. In 1903, the journal *Freelance* described him as having supplied the brains of the business, while Thomson provided the capital and the name. From 1903, he carried on the business himself, expanded its premises and set up provincial branches.

Lewis was also one of the founding members of the Courtenay Place Congregational Church in 1887 and on its first management committee. In 1912 the church decided to move to a new location. Lewis owned the land on Cambridge Terrace where the Church now stands and, as it was too large for his purposes, he sold them the corner frontage. He became a Trustee for the church site. When the Church came to be built in 1916, he gave funds to construct a gallery in it. His vision and determination is credited with bringing the plans to change site and erect a new building to fruition.

Unfortunately, owing to a disagreement over a certain policy which arose between Lewis and a Church Meeting in 1922, Lewis and his wife asked for their transfer to the Newtown Congregational Church. By then he had been secretary on three different occasions, totalling 19-20 years. He was described as one of the "strong men" of Wellington Congregationalism and was extremely generous in his gifts to the Church throughout his life. A church historian summed him up in this way: "Although a man of strong and forceful opinion and possibly not always easy to work with, nevertheless the Church owes a great debt to him and his family."

Lewis was also choirmaster at the Congregational Church for 27 years and successfully led the choir in the Congregational Choir Competitions in 1907. In the Wellington Grand Choir Competitions of 1911, the choir gained third place under his baton. He assisted the Church in obtaining a pipe organ. His interest in music extended beyond the church because he was Honorary Secretary of the Wellington Music Union for many years, including in 1904, the year it provided the inaugural concert for the opening of the Town Hall.

Lewis died in 1945 and was survived by his wife. His wife was formerly Lilian Tonks, daughter of William Tonks, one of Wellington's early settlers.



Choir Master, Alfred Lewis, with the Courtenay Place Congregational Church Choir in 1906.
[from the *Cambridge Terrace Congregational Church Centenary booklet*, 1987]