



MT VICTORIA

Historical Society News

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Mr Wrong

Saturday, June 23 at 4.30 pm, at the Film Archive

A special showing of Gaylene Preston's film, *Mr Wrong*, which features Mt Victoria as one of the principal characters.

It would be more than unusually unfair to reveal much more of the engrossing plot which is divulged in true thriller/ghost story fashion and makes ample use of its many red herrings, each of which has a neat ideological kickback. Thriller expectations are juxtaposed and interplayed with the expectations and fears of everyday life with which Preston displays a genial, perceptive familiarity. As the mystery thickens, MR WRONG builds up into a funny, nervy funk. . . .

[Bill Gosden, Wellington Film Festival, 1985]

\$8.00 per person

Historic Thomas Ward maps

Mt Victoria's streets still follow the pattern laid out many years ago, some as early as 1840. In 1892, surveyor and engineer, Thomas Ward, completed a series of maps showing the streets, property boundaries and buildings of Mt Victoria and other inner-city suburbs. Many existing Mt Victoria houses can be found on these maps. You can explore them on line through Webmap on Wellington City Council's website, along with aerial photos dating from 1996 and current data about Wellington's built environment at <http://www.wellington.govt.nz/maps/webmaps/webmap/wccmap.html>. You can also find them on the Wellington City Archives website in their original sheet form, at: <http://www.wellington.govt.nz/services/archives/historicmaps/maps.html>. For easy reference in future, we have also put links to the Webmap and information about the Thomas Ward maps on the MVHS website.

The Embassy Panels

The Historical Note in this newsletter features the Embassy Theatre, which is such a landmark on the edge of Mt Victoria. Its long, bare walls on Majoribanks Street have been strictly functional for many years, but all that is about to change. Our project to develop and install a permanent heritage display in one of the large cases on that wall is now well under way. The opportunity for Mt Victoria Historical Society to use this space was a condition of the resource consent granted at the time of the restoration. It has taken a long time for it to become a reality but we have now seen a first concept drawing from the designer. The panel will share Mt Victoria's wonderful history with visitors to the city as well as residents. We know that tourists are attracted to Mt Victoria and often want to know more about it. We hope it won't be too many more months before we'll be able to invite you to an 'unveiling'. This is another very significant project for the Society, like the oral history project of 2006.

World Heritage Day Picnic

Our Victorian picnic at the top of Mt Victoria last month, to mark Mary Taylor's climb to the top of the hill in 1848 to look for a ship that would take a letter to her friend Charlotte Bronte, was a great success. Not only was the weather mild and still, but all agreed that the company and the repast were most delightful – in other words, it was great fun. Given the interest shown by visitors, we probably enhanced Wellington's tourism image, too. It was such a success, we hope to make it a regular event.



MVHS on Facebook

The Historical Society is now on Facebook, for those who look for their information through this channel.

Date for your calendar: Sunday, September 23, 2.30pm at Crossways for our AGM and 'Tales of the Sea' - a presentation of Mt Victoria nautical-themed stories. This is Wellington Region Heritage Month, with the theme 'Our Heritage – Our Stories', so we also invite you to share stories of ancestors' connection with the sea and Wellington.

William Robert Kembell: Man of Theatre and Business

The Embassy Theatre (formally the De Luxe Theatre, NZHPT Register no. 7500, Category I) is a landmark building that occupies and defines the corner of Kent Terrace and Majoribanks Street. Imposing in size and scale, the building creates important vistas at the end of Courtenay Place and along the Terraces. It was designed by Llewellyn Edward Williams, architect and structural engineer A.R.I.B.A, M.I.S.E (London), for the theatre magnate William Robert Kembell (1881-1969).

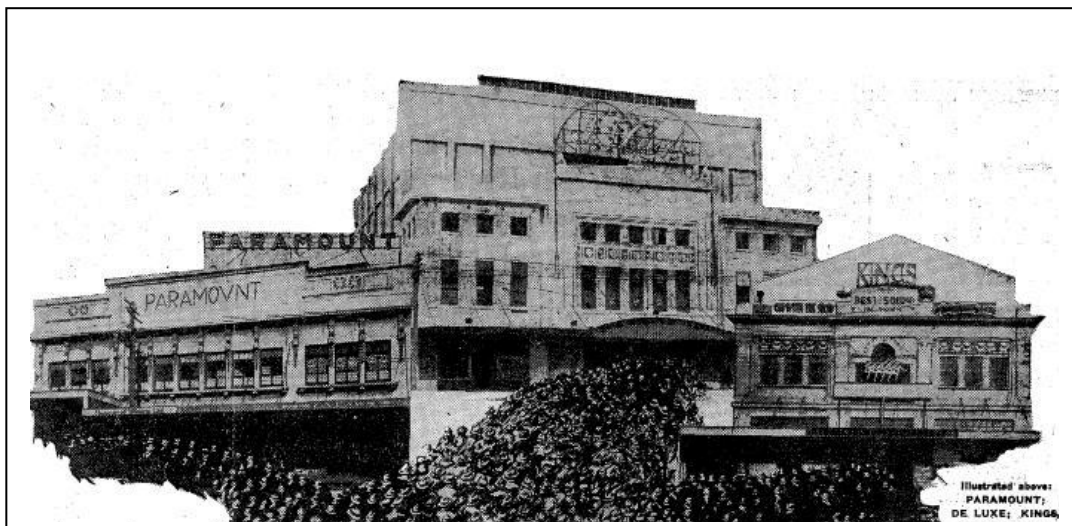
Williams was Sydney born and trained. He came to New Zealand in 1917 and joined the notable Wellington architect Frederick de Jersey Clere in practice. In 1923 he formed his own practice and went on to design a number of prominent Wellington buildings. He designed or remodelled a number of theatres, including the Regent and Kings Theatres in Wellington (both demolished) and in other cities, such as the Embassy Theatre in Auckland (1936), the Avon Theatre in Christchurch (1934) and Regent Theatre in Greymouth (1935). Many of his theatre designs were art deco in influence but the De Luxe displayed the neo-classical style with Grecian-inspired detailing for the exterior and the interior.

Kembell had already built up a successful company, Kembell Theatres, by the time he began to acquire the Mt Victoria sections for the site of the De Luxe. He planned one of the biggest and grandest theatres yet erected in New Zealand and initially envisaged a four-storey theatre. The theatre was reduced to three storeys and it is unknown whether it was the costs involved or other factors. The Wellington City Council had received a number of complaints from concerned Mount Victoria residents about the projected size of the theatre.

The final cost of the building, including the land, the quality materials utilised and the furnishings, seating, electric lighting and machinery, was nearly £100,000. The theatre was officially opened by the Mayor, B.A. Wright, on the 31 October 1924. The mayoral address was reported in the *Evening Post*, with an interesting comment about the theatre business:

‘The proprietors in their enterprise had shown their faith in the future of the city of Wellington; and he believed their faith would not be misplaced. The mayor expressed the hope that the erection of picture theatres would not be overdone, and he was inclined to think that we now have enough picture theatres to last us ten years.’

Detail from the Kembell Theatre Company advertisement, *NZ Truth*, 17 July 1930, p.11. PapersPast



In 1928 Kembell purchased land along Oriental Parade. He had previously lived in Masterton but no doubt, with an expanding theatre empire, a Wellington address was more befitting his status. A permit for the construction of a dwelling at 298 Oriental Parade was granted on the 22 June 1928. The architect was Reginald Thorrold-Jaggard (1889-1960) and the application value was £5,115. Thorrold-Jaggard had immigrated to New Zealand in 1913 and initially worked for a Palmerston North firm before starting his own in 1915. He was responsible for the design of several prominent Palmerston North buildings and a number of houses in the wider Manawatu area and Wellington. The building at 298 Oriental Bay is still extant and is reflective of Thorrold-Jaggard’s architectural signature, the English Cottage Style, which was his idiom for a number of his other domestic designs.

Former residence of William Kembell. 298 Oriental Parade. Google StreetView, 2012.

The De Luxe theatre was the flagship in the Kembell business, which expanded to 28 theatres in Wellington, Hawkes Bay, Taranaki and the Wairarapa. In 1930, Kembell Theatres as a company became incorporated. Advertisements appeared in the newspapers offering stock and shares in the highly profitable company. Kembell was bought out by an Australian, Arthur Davis, who took over the company in 1936 and reorganised it as New Zealand Theatres Limited. Kembell and his son continued to run the business until 1939 when the family returned to Melbourne permanently.

The Embassy Theatre remains an iconic heritage building in the inner city and its significance has only increased with the loss of its contemporaries over the decades. The building also serves as a reminder of the business acumen and entrepreneurship of William Kembell who recognised moving pictures as a lucrative business that continues to provide entertainment to New Zealanders today.