



MT VICTORIA

Historical Society News

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Sunday, July 6 at 2.00 pm
Crossways, 6 Roxburgh Street

Mary O'Keefe

An archaeologist abroad – in Wellington

followed by afternoon tea

The next meeting after this will be our **Annual General Meeting on Sunday, September 21**. A speaker has not yet been arranged for this.

Wellington East Girls College

As you might remember from Newsletter No.65 Wellington East Girls' main building has a Category 1 heritage listing. We have learned that there are plans to demolish all except the facade and vestibule because of earthquake strengthening issues. A December 2012 WEGC Newsletter advised that "The proposed first stage of the plan is to replace the main building. This would involve retaining the façade of the building and the vestibule, which are historically significant, while constructing a new building behind the façade. An extra storey is to be added so more teaching spaces are provided." Their July 2013 Newsletter said: "The current plan is to retain the historic façade/vestibule and to build a new building behind the façade which will incorporate modern learning spaces." We will keep tabs on developments, as this is a very important historic building for Mt Victoria.

Committee member moves on

In March, the Committee regretfully said farewell to longstanding member Judy Southworth, who has moved to a new life in the South Island. Judy has done a huge amount for the Society over the past few years and will be greatly missed.

43 Kent Terrace and Sir James Elliott

Continuing our series of Historical Notes catching up on the stories behind sites marked on our Embassy Theatre heritage panel, this issue features 43 Kent Terrace. The photograph below shows Sir James's house beside the Presbyterian Church, at which his father was minister. The house is still there, but KFC has replaced the church – which many older residents of the suburb will remember.



Left: Kent Terrace Presbyterian Church and James Elliott's house, c.1913.
[Alexander Turnbull Library 1/2-077762-F]



Right: James Sands Elliott, photographed by S P Andrew in 1916.
[Alexander Turnbull Library 1/1-013864-G]

Sir James Elliott

James Sands Elliott was born in Ireland in 1880, the son of James Kennedy Elliott, a Presbyterian minister. When he was four he came to Wellington with his parents, and soon after his father became minister at the Kent Terrace Presbyterian Church. On arrival in 1884 they were accommodated on The Terrace by a minister of the Church of Scotland and one of James's first and lasting memories of the town from this time was looking out the window of the manse early one morning to see the minister with "a bucket in one hand and a coal-scuttle shovel in the other, gathering soft, moist, golden, irregular heaps off the roadway", for his garden.

After going to a dame school (presumably somewhere in Mount Victoria), James was one of first entrants at Clyde Quay School when it opened in 1889, starting in the third standard. He recalled, of those days, in his rather flowery style:

It was a State school, nominally of a Christian State, but never once during school hours was heard the name of Christ or His message to mankind . . . The playground was too small and hard for practice in the essential subject of football, so a new but similar game was invented . . . The Queensberry rules also were often invoked on the clear space across the road from the school beside a great and unsavoury open wood-lined sewer which emptied itself near by into the sea. . . . It was a disgusting practice of some of the bolder boys to fall deliberately into the evil-smelling and turgid drain, and return to the class-room as popular as a polecat in a drawing-room. The unsavoury boy would be promptly sent home to be dried and cleaned, happy as one who had really earned a holiday. . . . There was a morgue near by, and sometimes the rumour would circulate in the school that there was a man in the morgue. The minds of children are often morbid, and it was a great thrill to peep into a crack in the fence and through a window to see on a slab two ankles and feet white, hard and still like marble sticking out from under a white sheet, the ensign of mortality.

He then went on to Wellington College, and described the contrast between Clyde Quay and College like this:

There was no homework at my last school, and far too much at the next, a grammar school of no mean fame. The head master, J.P. Firth, was a Saul among men, and had a heaven-sent helpmeet as his wife; both of them won devotion from the boys, and exerted an influence on their young lives and future careers that will have a lasting benefit. While a student at this school in my last year I was helped with my Latin by a very old Congregational minister who, years before, had coached no less a person than the great David Livingstone.

Elliott then spent one year at the University of Otago Medical School before his father sent him to the University of Edinburgh to complete his medical course. While a senior student, he served with the medical corps in the South African War (1899–1902). As a result his father, who was ideologically opposed to the war and upset that Elliott had interrupted his studies, withdrew further financial support. Elliott had to do odd jobs and use his savings from military service to complete his medical education. (He later repaid his father and the rift was repaired.)

Graduating in 1902, Elliott returned to New Zealand the following year and was the first house surgeon at Wellington District Hospital. He then began a surgical and general practice, serving also as honorary surgeon to the hospital. In 1905 he was married by his father to Annie Forbes from Edinburgh; they were to have five children.

Dr Elliott bought the site at 43 Kent Terrace, where his former home still stands, in 1906 and the house was built in 1913. He also conducted his practice from here with a consulting room and surgery at the Kent Terrace end of the building. Now a Category 1 registered building, it is one of William Gray Young's first Georgian-styled houses and one of his best known.

During the First World War, Elliott was medical commander of the hospital ship *Maheno*. The *Maheno* arrived at the naval base of the Gallipoli Campaign on 25 August 1915, and the next day was off ANZAC Cove loading casualties from the Battle of Hill 60. It returned to New Zealand for a refit in 1916, and arrived back in the UK just after the start the Battle of the Somme. Until October 1916 it operated in the English Channel, taking large numbers of wounded troops from France to England. It was of one of those trips to Boulogne to pick up casualties that Elliott wrote in his memoir, *Scalpel and sword*, published in 1936: "We took on board a hundred mattresses, of which I was the proud inventor, for the use of deck patients. These mattresses were covered with American cloth, stuffed with coconut fibre, and could be washed clean of dirt and lice. They were very durable in constant use."

Elliott was a writer, as well as a medical practitioner. In addition to his memoir and other works, he also wrote *Firth of Wellington*, a biography of his old headmaster, in 1937, and a novel of early New Zealand life, *The hundred years*, in 1939.

Elliott became a fellow of the American College of Surgeons in 1926 and, the following year, a foundation fellow of the College of Surgeons of Australasia. (His former residence and surgery is now, appropriately, New Zealand headquarters of the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons.) An influential member of the New Zealand Branch of the British Medical Association, Elliott was chairman of council for three terms and president in 1929. His greatest service to medicine was his editorship of the *New Zealand Medical Journal* from 1911 to 1933. He did not hesitate to speak out when he thought the integrity of the medical profession had been impugned.

In the Second World War he was chairman of the Joint Council of the Order of St John and the New Zealand Red Cross Society. A leading advocate of cancer research, he organised the New Zealand Branch of the British Empire Cancer Campaign Society (later the New Zealand Cancer Society) and was its president from 1929 to 1955.

These are just some of the notable achievements and roles of this prominent Wellingtonian. He was knighted in 1936, one of the first two knights nominated by the Labour government. James Elliott died in Wellington on 26 October 1959. His wife, Annie, herself honoured with an MBE and a Dame of Grace of the Order of St John, had died in 1955.

By Joanna Newman