



MT VICTORIA

Historical Society News

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**Sunday 16 October at 2.00pm
Ace House, 111 Brougham Street**

Annual General Meeting, followed by

Prefabrication in New Zealand - past, present and future

From railway houses to Victorian villas, pattern-book houses are part of New Zealand's built environment history.

Join us as we hear from Pamela Bell, author of *Kiwi Prefab* and Chief Executive of PrefabNZ <http://www.prefabnz.com/> about the history, current exemplars and futuristic precedents of prefabricated housing.

Annual General Meeting

With the closure of New Crossways' premises in Roxburgh Street, we are holding our 2016 AGM, most appropriately, in an historic venue, Ace House. There is an article on Ace House on the Society's website <http://mtvictoria.history.org.nz/> - use the link on the Places page.

Mt Victoria Heritage Study

Last month Wellington City Council's Senior Heritage Advisor, Vanessa Tanner, and heritage consultant Michael Kelly presented preliminary results of the Mt Victoria Heritage Study to Mt Victoria Residents' Association and MVHS committee members. Maps have been produced from data collected during field work showing the building style and integrity of houses and other types of buildings within the study area.

Michael's team is now looking for further information on individual buildings and attempting to date every house in Mt Victoria. Specific research is not being undertaken on the majority of the houses in Mt Victoria and Michael says it would be very useful if MVHS members were able to provide him with accurate historical information about their houses.

If you know when your house was built or can contribute other information about its history, please contact Michael at mpkelly@paradise.net.nz or 21 Myrtle Crescent, Mt Cook, Wellington 6021.

Basin Reserve redevelopment

On 24 August, representatives of local community groups including two MVHS Committee members attended a meeting with the Wellington City Council and the project architects to provide input for informing concept designs for redeveloping the Basin Reserve.

Apart from maintaining the Basin's status as the premier test cricket venue in New Zealand, an aim of the project is to strengthen its value to and connection with the community by opening up the ground and enhancing it as a recreation space for community use and enjoyment.

St Gerard's Church and Monastery: Seismic assessment

It is planned to carry out an engineering assessment of the seismic strength of St Gerard's. MVHS has provided a letter of support for a grant application to help finance this work.

Keeping it in the family

A property for sale in Majoribanks Street was in the news recently. Built in 1866 by Richard Henry Edwards, the great grandfather of one of the owners, it had been in the same family for 150 years. Edwards, a JP and a carpenter, had 15 children, all born in the house, to two wives. A building on the property was once a workshop for carpenters in the family who made coffins.

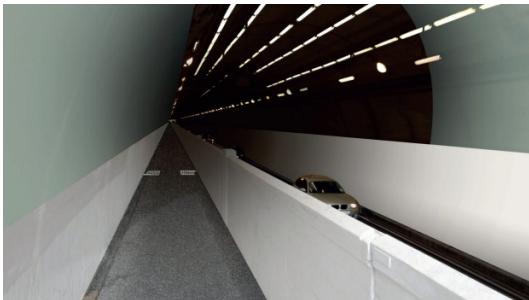
A fistful of summer

If you haven't read it already, a book of delightful reminiscences of a childhood growing up in Mt Victoria and visits to Christchurch in the 1920s and 1930s is *A fistful of summer* by Peggy Dunstan, with illustrations by Jean Oates. It is available at the Wellington Central Library, but not for loan.

85 year-old has a \$30 million makeover

The most extensive upgrade in the history of the 85 year-old Mt Victoria Tunnel was completed on 24 June 2016, 14 months after it began, at a cost of around \$30 million. The use of innovative engineering and communication technology has brought the 623 metre State Highway One tunnel up to 21st century safety and operating standards. The tunnel now has:

- **'intelligent' lighting to brighten the gloom.** The energy-efficient and electronically-controlled LED (light emitting diode) lighting system dims or brightens to help drivers' eyes adjust to changing light levels through the tunnel. There are 1000 light-reflecting white panels on the walls on each side of the vehicle carriageway and glowing 'cat's eye' markers along the sides and centreline, electronically programmed to guide people towards the safest exit in an emergency by pulsing and strobing in sequence.
- **better ventilation and air quality.** The tunnel was the first in New Zealand to be mechanically ventilated, with two large fans pushing in fresh air and two extractor fans sucking out stale air. In 2009 NIWA reported that since 2003 air quality in the tunnel had substantially improved with the increasing number of new technology reduced-emission vehicles, and levels of carbon monoxide in the tunnel all but met recommended guidelines. The existing ventilation system was retained during the upgrade but made to work more effectively by replacing or reconditioning the fans.
- **seismic strengthening of the elevated pathway** used by cyclists and pedestrians, by means of diagonal bracing with steel straps and anchors, designed to prevent the pathway detaching from the tunnel lining in the event of a major earthquake.
- **increased fire safety** through the installation of fire-resistant cement panels and fire hydrants.
- **a new plant room.** Controls for the new technology in the tunnel are contained in the Hataitai control room and a new plant room in Paterson Street fitted with: the back-up power supply; a computer "brain" which receives and acts on information from sensors mounted in the tunnel ceiling; and an information gathering and transmitting system linked with the Wellington Transport Operations Centre in Johnsonville.
- a state-of-the-art **emergency communications system**, including facilities to broadcast emergency messages via car radios and loudspeakers, a pilot trial of thermal imaging cameras, and new and updated cameras for incident detection purposes. The new rebroadcasting system enables travellers to listen to FM radio while driving through the tunnel.



The tunnel has been repainted in a colour named Mt Victoria Robin's Egg Blue inside the portals and along the walkway, soft white on the lower walls and new carriageway wall panels, and black on the ceiling.

Looking back: Tales of the tunnel

Construction of the tunnel by the Hansford and Mills Construction Company began in December 1929 and was completed in 15 months (about the same time as the recent upgrade), at a cost of £132,000. The chief engineer was Arnold Downer, who later started his own construction company, Downer New Zealand, one of the Memorial Park Alliance partners that carried out the upgrade.

The tunnel project provided work for relief workers during the Depression. One of them recalled that he worked alongside doctors and lawyers as they hacked away at the rock. Some men would come to work in their suits and only then change into overalls, so that their neighbours would not know they were doing relief work.

Two parallel 2.5 metre tunnels about 3.7 metres apart were dug by two teams of diggers, one from each side. The initial breakthrough occurred at 2.30pm on 31 May 1930, when they reached the middle. The Evening Post reported that the tunnellers "could hear the drills on the other side, growing louder and louder as they approached the break. Then the first pick went through and a few minutes later the hole was widened sufficiently to allow a man to wriggle through". A steady torrent of water was pouring down from the roof.

A month or so later, work on the tunnel was halted when a massive search began for Phyllis Symons, a pregnant 17 year old, who had disappeared. Her 29 year old lover, George Errol Coats, a widower with six children who were being raised in an orphanage, had been arrested after being seen digging at the site in Hataitai where spoil from excavation of the tunnel was dumped and he had been employed as a relief worker until he lost his job. More than 100 police and relief workers shifted tons of rock and soil at the earthworks site before Phyllis's body was found on Sunday 12 July, face down and with her head wrapped in a scarf. Crowds of spectators who had been watching the digging had swelled to around 600 by the time the pathologist arrived. His view was that Phyllis had been made to kneel, then hit over the head with a spade and tipped into the hole. She had tried to get up and been struck again. There was evidence that Phyllis was still alive when earth was thrown on top of her, and that she had died of asphyxiation.



Phyllis Symons

George Coats, flanked by police

Searchers at work on the Hataitai earthworks site

Coats was tried, found guilty of murder, and hanged at Mt Crawford Prison on 17 December 1931. He had been a model prisoner, discussing many topics with his wardens, but avoiding talk of his crime. On the morning of his death, he was sleeping so soundly he had to be woken, and asked for a glass of brandy with breakfast,

The tunnel was opened on 12 October 1931, three months ahead of schedule. During the opening ceremony the Mayor of Wellington, Thomas C. A. Hislop, noted that his father, former Mayor Thomas W Hislop, had opened the tram tunnel in 1907. The Mayor's car was first through the tunnel, followed by hundreds of other cars and pedestrians during the afternoon.



Tooting in the tunnel has long been a popular, if illegal, activity of motorists, and an annoyance for pedestrians and cyclists. Legend has it that it began as a mark of respect for the murdered Phyllis Symons, or to keep her ghost away, and over time became a tradition. The appeal to motorists of gratuitous horn honking was articulated by journalist Jane Bowron when she wrote: *Me, I've just tooted all these years because it was such an asinine act of sheer joy and how friendly to get a reply back from another Mr Toad in his cart hitting the horn for the sheer hell of it.*

The push for a second tunnel

In the 1970s the Wellington City Council spent \$250,000 on excavating a pilot tunnel, to investigate the technical feasibility of building a second Mt Victoria tunnel to be financed by the National Roads Board. Shortly after 10:00 a.m. on 7 February 1974 four hot, weary and dust-covered tunnellers emerged at the Hataitai end, climbing out of the hole to shake hands with the Mayor, Sir Francis Kitts, and down bottles of cold beer waiting on the footpath for the occasion. The district civil engineer of the Ministry of Works, Mr A T Proffitt, said that no date had been set to begin construction of a second tunnel and warned that it could be some years away. Sir Francis replied “We’re keeping our fingers crossed”. In 1981 plans for a second tunnel were shelved indefinitely when budget cuts were made by the Muldoon government.

Another setback for proponents of a second Mt Victoria tunnel occurred In July 2014 when the Environmental Protection Authority Board of Inquiry declined a resource consent application from the New Zealand Transport Authority (NZTA) to build a flyover (termed the “Basin Bridge”) located 20 metres north of the Basin Reserve, a decision later upheld by the High Court. The NZTA had planned to construct the flyover as the first stage of its Mt Victoria Tunnel Duplication project, with a second tunnel to be completed by 2022.

In the wake of the Basin Bridge decision, *Let’s Get Wellington Moving*, a joint initiative of the Wellington City Council, Greater Wellington Regional Council and New Zealand Transport Authority, was established to “take a fresh look” at Wellington’s transport system, with a focus on the corridor from Ngauranga Gorge to the Airport. The 2015 Wellington Regional Land Transport Plan proposed duplication of the Mt Victoria and Terrace tunnels as a key strategic measure. Advocacy for a second Mt Victoria tunnel continues, currently during campaigning for the 2016 local body elections. Two leading candidates for the mayoralty have blogged “Everyone agrees we need a second tunnel at Mt Victoria”, and “I have campaigned hard on double tunnelling the Terrace and Mt Victoria tunnels and four lanes to the planes”.

- David McCrone