



# MT VICTORIA

---

## *Historical Society News*

Website: [www.mtvictoria.history.org](http://www.mtvictoria.history.org)

Facebook: MVHS.Inc

Email: [jonewman@xtra.co.nz](mailto:jonewman@xtra.co.nz)

## No. 103, March 2023

### **Top secret radar research on Matairangi/Mt Victoria**

Join us for an 'unveiling' of the information panel commemorating the work of Elizabeth Alexander, a scientist and researcher who helped establish radar technology in New Zealand during World War II.

**Sunday March 26, at 2.30pm, at the bus stop in the top carpark near the lookout**

This will be followed by afternoon tea at Innermost Gardens, to which all are welcome (koha, please, from non-members). Peter Cooke, military historian, will give a brief talk putting radar in context and Simon Nathan, science historian, will talk about Elizabeth Alexander – her background, work at the radar station, and what became of her.

Please RSVP to [jonewman@xtra.co.nz](mailto:jonewman@xtra.co.nz) so we know numbers for catering.

And here's another MVHS event date to put in your diary:

### ***Digging up the past – life as an NZ archaeologist***

**Sunday 21st May at 2.30pm, Society of Friends Hall, Moncrieff Street**

Mary O'Keefe, a professional archaeologist, will talk to us about her work. Mary has run her consultancy, Heritage Solutions, since 1996. Prior to this she worked for Historic Places Trust and Department of Conservation. Mary's work has taken her all round New Zealand, to see some special places and hear some remarkable stories, including projects in Mt Victoria.

### **District Plan**

Hearings in front of a panel of Commissioners are now underway in what is the final regulatory stage of approving a new District Plan for Wellington. Stream 1 of those hearings has recently finished. MVHS didn't make a presentation to that stream but is preparing to speak in Stream 2, which deals particularly with medium density and character precinct provisions (amongst others), on March 31. We have 20 minutes to present our case and will circulate it to members once the written version is complete. A couple of our key points will be the fact that the location and size of character precincts proposed for Mt Victoria is not based on evidence, and the adverse impact of six-storey buildings immediately adjacent to heritage areas or character precincts.

Meanwhile, on March 2, the Council issued its S.42 report for this stream, in which officers have endorsed their own original recommendations for character precincts. While this is more than the Proposed District Plan allows, it is still not as extensive as we currently have (with the pre-1930s demolition rule) or as Boffa Miskell (commissioned by the Council) recommended.

### **Murder and Mayhem**

Alan Olliver ran a repeat of his Murder & Mayhem Heritage Week tour for a group from the New Zealand Forensic Science Society, following one of their member's participation in a scheduled walk. The Society kindly offered a generous donation to MVHS in appreciation.

## Historical Note

### The YW in Brougham Street

From 1915 until 1966, 115 Brougham Street, now Rowena's Lodge mainly housing men, provided shelter and friendship for generations of young women as the Young Women's Christian Association Hostel. From its founding in Wellington in 1906, the YWCA was keen to provide accommodation which would be a safe haven for young women. In 1911 they had opened the McDonald Crescent Hostel and enlarged that accommodation in 1913 by opening an Annex across the road. But wartime brought an ever-greater influx of young women into the city desperately needing places to live. Responding to that need the YWCA found a suitable property to lease at 115 Brougham Street, then known as 'College House', owned by Mrs & Mrs W.F. Ward. The house was described as having a nice garden and a beautiful view and the Wards were generous in helping equip the house for its new life as a hostel.



Photograph 1950s.  
Alexander Turnbull  
Library PA-Coll-  
7688-03.30-3

By the end of May 1915, a Miss Houghton had accepted the position of Matron at £72 pa salary (equivalent to \$12, 000 today), with accommodation. The resident tariff for room and board was to be 15/- per week (about \$123 day). The rooms were redecorated with help from YWCA members, and the original big classroom was 'divided into dainty white cubicles', each nicely furnished and with pretty curtains. Upstairs the rooms were large and cheerful, with a wide balcony at the front, regarded as 'very suitable for outdoor sleeping'. Plenty of bathrooms were provided with 'a capital hot water service'. The kitchen was a 'model of comfort and convenience'. The drawing and dining room were described as 'fine large rooms and wonderfully furnished', including with a piano. An electric iron stood at the ready on a hall table upstairs for the girls to use after paying a small sum.

Rules included 'no raffles or other forms of gambling' and that 'a blessing be asked at each meal'. Girls were required to be in by a fixed hour, unless special permission was gained otherwise. The aim was not to make 'goody goody girls or prisoners of them, but bright, healthful, self-respecting young women'. By 1916, the crowding in the hostel was such that all girls over age 25, who had been in residence for over a year, were asked to leave in thirty days. Any girl entering the hostel aged 25 could only stay for one year. In order to help the leavers' find somewhere else, the YW placed advertisements for accommodation in suitable private homes. The true purpose of the YW was said to provide 'special care for the young girl who needed the influence of a home when absent from her own friends.' The danger to girls was clear when on two occasions girls were 'molested by men in uniform' and the police were notified.

The demand for working 'girls' as they were known was so strong that business and government were forced to make changes. For example, the Wellington branch of the BNZ employed no women before the war but by 1915 had thirty women working in subordinate positions, such a shorthand-typists, that did not require them to service customers – a task reserved for men. Such was the demand for workers that the government decided to permit girls to sit the Public Service examinations for the first time in 1916. Women clerks were needed, for example, to keep track of male enlistments for the services. By the end of 1918, 873 of the 1207 public servants working directly on war-related activities were women, regarded as temporary employees. The average annual pay for women public servants was £117 compared to £173 for men. Women were expected to vacate these positions at the end of the war and by 1924, only four women clerks remained in the Defence Department.

Such was the demand for accommodation, the YW added additions to the building, adding a two-storey dormitory at the rear of the original building, 'together with the necessary lavatory and other conveniences'. Given their investment in the building, the YWCA decided to purchase it in 1918 and extend it further. By the time the building work was complete in August 1919, the '40 new and completely refurnished rooms' were taken immediately.



In the 1950s, the pressure on the Hostel diminished a little and women were no longer asked to leave after a certain period or a certain age. The demand for women's labour was strong as the New Zealand economy flourished. Wool was in high demand because of the Korean war and women had proved themselves capable workers in a variety of fields.

Here's one description of life in the 1960s hostel by Frances Porter, chair of the Residence Committee:

*Girls running up and down the corridors, ironing a frock, trying to get their hair dry, their nail polish and eye shadow on before [meeting] with their boy friends. [Look in a room] and you see the dressing table covered with boxes and jars of cosmetics, the framed photograph of mum and dad, the boyfriend or a young sister, the nylons drying, the Beatles beam down on you from the walls, and the room is attractive simply because of the personality in it.*

By the 1960s, although the Hostel's permanent residents were young women, there were also a few elderly women transients, whose social security benefits had declined in value. The building was a continual source of problems. The roof and drains had aged and decayed. The drains were described as being 'held together by faith, will power and all that plumbing ingenuity can devise, even, one may imagine, to chewing gum and sellotape.' Any consistent flushing of the toilets seemed a 'minor miracle'.

The hot water apparently relied on something called a temperamental and out of date 'donkey'. The hot water pipes had rusted. To stop the rust getting into the water, the plumber added oatmeal to the donkey on the theory that 'the oatmeal sits heavily on the rust and anchored it in position.'

*The only catch being that if some enthusiastic cook or matron, in an effort to make the water really hot, overstoked the boiler, then what was likely to come out of the tap was not rusty water but porridge!*

By that date the YWCA had embarked on building a new hostel in Willis St. When the hostel girls were told that they were celebrating what would be the last Christmas party in Brougham St, they were unified in regret 'not for small rooms, uncertain toilets or creaking floor boards, they didn't see those things as important – what they saw was a home which generations of staff and girls had made a happy one' – and they 'were doubtful about whether this intangible spirit of friendship could be carried into a large, new, even imposing building.