

Thorndon News

The Newsletter of the Thorndon Society Incorporated

NEWSLETTER 128

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Also in this issue:

Hobson Street. Historical background to Part I of the north Thorndon walk



From the Treasurer: 2001 Subscriptions

Reminder notices are being delivered with this issue for members who have not yet paid their subs for the 2001 year. Your prompt attention would be appreciated as our financial year ends on 31 December.

From the Editor: Seasonal thanks

As this is our last issue for the year I would like to take the opportunity to thank contributors, advertisers, Fleet Printers, sundry librarians and archivists, our volunteer distributors and the Society committee for their support and assistance during the year.

We plan to be back in February and to publish four issues during 2002. Prospective new advertisers are welcome to contact us.

If you can help to distribute Thorndon News please contact Gillian on 499-1944.

Change in Editor's phone number

My phone number is now 972-4024. This change has been forced on me by the need for satisfactory television reception and does not represent support for SaturnTV's policies. I continue to believe that Saturn should be a better citizen in respect of its overhead cables and that Saturn subscribers should bear the resulting cost. Thorndon News will continue to carry information and contact details for CORA periodically.

Gardens and houses walk successful

It was touch and go with the weather up to last minute on November 4 but the decision to go ahead with the walk was amply justified by an enjoyable walk. Bruce Lynch led the walk with historical assistance from the editor. Background to the first half of the walk is featured in this issue.

Some 30 walkers visited five gardens in northern Thorndon finishing at the Italian Embassy in Grant Rd. We record our thanks and appreciation to the Ambassador and his staff for their welcome and hospitality.

Notable Homes Plaque at the Italian Embassy

We are pleased to announce a successful outcome to negotiations to erect a plaque at the Embassy commemorating its construction in 1877 by the prominent architect Thomas Turnbull as his own home and also its association with the Italian government since 1961.

Thomas Turnbull was a leading local practitioner of "Italianate" design which he had worked with in San Francisco in the previous decade. We plan to feature Turnbull and a range of related building styles in forthcoming issues.

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To advertise contact the editor or secretary.
Next issue February 2002

Historical background to the North Thorndon walk Part I: Hobson Street, Hobson Crescent and Fitzherbert Terrace

Hobson St forms the heart of a sub-area that is physically distinctive for its comparative flatness and which - in varying degrees through time - has been socially distinctive.

The basic structure of roads and subdivision in the locality is determined to a remarkable degree right to the present by the original NZ Company property plan that was compiled in a couple of months to meet an urgent need.

Hobson St runs along the raised beach above the Thorndon Quay cliff line. The locality forms the northern end of the comparatively flat area that the early settlers called "Thorndon Flat" (less than half the area that we call Thorndon today). At the northern end, a deep gully cut off Hobson St from Tinakori Rd until linked by a footbridge in 1878. Vehicular linkage came only with the motorway over-bridge in the late 1960's.

One row of fifteen rectangular "town acres" - not actually all exactly one acre in size - was laid out along the northern side of the street going right through to Thorndon Quay which runs parallel along the original shoreline. Two rows of town acres bridge the area between the southern side of Hobson St and Murphy St, though with variations from the rigid grid pattern at either end.

The present day boundaries constitute progressive subdivision of the original one acre sections with only occasional amalgamations across those boundaries. The frontage lengths of the subdivisions inevitably affected the size and style of the houses built on them. There was therefore a progression from mansions on whole acres to wider or narrower houses in response to how demand at the time was translated into subdivision decisions.

Late development

Many town acres in Hobson St and large parts of Tinakori Rd were not built on for many years after initial settlement. They were used for grazing horses and cows, if at all. The locality was simply the outer fringe of the initial concentrated settlement and for many years experienced little outward pressure. Until the impact of the shift of central government to Wellington and the assisted immigration of the 1870's, the population of the whole city rose scarcely above the number of original NZ Company settlers despite a high birth rate and low death rate (implying emigration exceeding the immigration).

At the Tinakori Rd end, housing development was stymied on the Fitzherbert Tce side by the early reservation of several acres for college and hospital endowment purposes. Right into the mid-1870's the centre of these reserves was occupied by barracks buildings for which the original need had long dissipated, although with the scale of the land wars up north and the activities of Te Kooti up the East Coast it was probably not perceived that way.

Most of the rest of the street was purchased by a number of the city's leading merchants, lawyers and provincial runholders - by no means all of whom actually lived there. They were under no financial pressure to subdivide to take advantage of the demand for housing in the 1870's, although that was the path by which men such as Charles Cottle, George Drummond and Joseph Saunders sought to advance their fortunes in Tinakori Rd.

Even 30 years after initial settlement, Hobson St had only five major houses on its seaward side and one on the southern side. The north-side houses were occupied (from the Tinakori Rd end) by the merchant William Bannatyne about where the

Australian High Commission is now situated, then merchant C. W. Schultze, James Crawford (in Bishop Abraham's house that still exists at No. 52), then land agent Robert Hart followed by solicitor and provincial councillor Alfred de Bathe Brandon (1809-1886) and a few small cottages on the Maori-owned land on the Davis St corner.

On the southern side of Hobson Street there was only Sir William Fox in a large house on leased land (now occupied by Wellington Girls' College grounds) which was one of several Thorndon acres owned by Sir Charles Clifford.

Changes in the 1870's

The number of mansions on the seaward side doubled during the population explosion of the 1870's and early '80's but there was still less than one house per acre. Notable additions to the residents were merchant Walter Nathan, "settler" Harriett Riddiford, solicitor Charles Izard, land agent Oliver Clayton, and "settler/gentleman" Charles Pynsent. George Waterhouse (also described as a "settler") had moved into the Bishop Abraham house previously occupied by the Crawfords.

In 1874 William Clayton, the Colonial Architect, built his own mansion on the southern side. After his death in 1877 this was acquired by the runholder Thomas Williams and extended. It later became the initial core building for Queen Margaret College of which the original portion stood until 1988.

At the Pipitea St end a house designed by Thomas Turnbull was built in 1877 for the merchant Jacob Joseph. Another alongside was built for Robert Stains (of Kirkcaldie and Stains) about the same time. However, the three town acres in between them and the Queen Margaret's site were not built on for many more years.

Well south of the Clayton house a large mansion, also designed by Thomas Turnbull, was built for the

Hon. John Johnston in 1875. It was inherited by his daughter Emily in 1887 and stood until the mid 1930's when Katherine Ave was carved out of its grounds.

The pattern in 1891

For 1891 a detailed record is available for every house in the locality and elsewhere in Thorndon. It is impossible to reproduce any large part of these maps in a publication of this size - A3 size is the optimal size for reduction. However, the houses can be described in relation to the modern street numbering system in a way that should enable Thorndon-walkers to recognise the sites and - just as importantly - the scale of the gaps in between and the magnitude of subsequent change.

From the Davis St end, a 16 room mansion occupied the sites of the present day numbers 10-16, followed by a ten-room house on the site of #18, then another 16 room mansion on the sites of numbers 22-28. Indications are that the heirs and descendants of Alfred de Bathe Brandon (senior) owned all these houses, with the one nearest Davis St occupied by the Barbers (a runholding family) and one of the other two by Mrs Lucy Brandon. Brandon's identically named son (soon to become Mayor of Wellington) built yet another house nearby.

There was then a big gap until the Hon. Robert Hart's 12 room house in the middle of the site now occupied by "Highwic". Four smaller, recently constructed houses then occupied the sites of numbers 38-46. These were followed by a succession of mansions on single acres right through to Tinakori Rd (sometimes minus a few perches on their Thorndon Quay beach fronts below the cliff-line).

Robert Maxwell occupied the original Bishop Abraham house (#52), James Haywood (Secretary to the Treasury) a 15 room house going back to Charles Schultze at #56, then Lloyd Williams (manager of Sargood, Son & Ewen) at #70 (the original Bannatyne site), then an unbuilt acre at

72-78 used by William Levin (who lived at "Pendennis", now 15 Burnell Ave) for grazing and stables. On the back of the sites of the modern numbers 80-86 the Hon. Robert Pharazyn had just recently completed a 12 room house. (Earlier Pharazyns had occupied a mansion in Tinakori Rd for some decades.)

Next were the houses of land agent John Bateman Harcourt and solicitor Charles Izard right out in the middle of large sections behind the modern numbers 88-92, and where 96 would be if it had not been taken for the motorway.

Beyond that, the gully separated Hobson St from Tinakori Rd and the Nathan house at 100 Hobson St and a couple of Hobson St numbers on the opposite corner, linked only by a footbridge to their other Hobson St neighbours. These houses could have been allocated Tinakori Rd street numbers when the numbering system was introduced but other than briefly they have always been treated as Hobson St addresses.

On the southern side of the street, a couple of ten-room houses had joined the Jacob Joseph and Robert Stains houses where the school grounds are now but there were still three completely unbuilt on acres before the Williams house on the Queen Margaret's site, though beyond that Fitzherbert Tce had been developed.

House character

Almost all the houses in the street had 10 to 14 rooms, while a number had 16 and the Williams' mansion had 30, at a time when the Wellington norm was four to six. None had fewer than eight rooms. All were two-storied. For comparison, the Bishop's residence in Murphy St had 20 rooms and Premier House 25. Probably only the Governor's residence was larger than the Williams' mansion.

Most of the houses were iron roofed, but the Haywood house (#56) was completely shingle-roofed. The Lloyd Williams house (#70) and the

Jacob Joseph house (#21) were slate-roofed, which was never common in the city. The Johnston house where Katherine Ave is now, had 20 rooms and was also slate-roofed.

Almost all of the houses on the seaward side were built to take advantage of the harbour view with verandahs along their seaward sides. As the houses on the southern side of the street naturally faced the street anyway, this means that almost every house in the street was oriented towards the morning and noon-day sun. With most of the later houses built on the smaller subdivided sections there was no option but to orient the house to the street frontage, though none seem to have done badly in terms of light and sun.

Fitzherbert Terrace

By 1891 Fitzherbert Terrace had been developed as two parallel roadways, one along the line of the present street with another on the Tinakori Rd side and a wide planted area in between.

Two 12-roomed houses bridged the gap between the Johnston house and Murphy St while several 8 to 10 roomed houses had been built along the northern terrace. The remainder of Fitzherbert Terrace from the Johnston house through to Hobson St and the Williams mansion was unbuilt.

The City Council which had pioneered the planting of pine trees at the Botanic Gardens, also planted the central strip between the two roadways of Fitzherbert Terrace in pines. To the modern reader, pines are an industrial crop but at this time they were simply (along with Eucalyptus) one of the happier experiments in trialing plants and animals in the new land. Queens Park at the corner of Grant and Wadestown roads was also planted about the same time.

The Fitzherbert Terrace pines stood until the 1930's when they were felled and formal gardens laid out. These gardens were developed into their present form when the motorway knocked out the northern half of the terrace.

The late 1890's and early 1900's

Most properties were at least partly subdivided during the 1890's and 1900's and many more houses built. Many of these houses survive.

It is this phase of development that established the basic structure for Hobson Street's present character.

A few houses were built in the late 1890's, notably numbers 82 and 86, of which at least #82 is a Clere, Fitzgerald and Richmond design.

Round the corner in Davis St, four close-together houses (of which numbers 10 and 12 survive) and the surviving private hospital building (#8) all date from 1902 or 1903. Numbers 2-8 Hobson St (on the same town acre as the Davis St houses) were built at the same time, also in the sort of style and proximity more characteristic of Tinakori Rd.

The remarkable building known as "Duncan's castle" designed by John Swan was built in 1902 at #72. This stood until demolished in 1975 for the Australian High Commission. Some of its stained glass may still be seen mounted in the entrance to the Commission.

The really spectacular development was the almost overnight creation of Hobson Crescent out of three town acres. The whole block was subdivided into 27 lots. Three of these were sold ahead of the others (the house at #29 was commenced in 1897) but 24 were auctioned together in March 1899. Many were built on in 1899 or 1900 - often with houses built over two lots - and the remainder by 1907. Numbers 33, 35 and 39 Hobson St derive from this subdivision. All three were built in 1899 or 1900.

The "puffery" in the advertising for the auction, highlights perceptions of the locality with references to "the ultra fashionable quarter of the city", "the finest building sites in the city" and "the finest and most valuable block of residential land now left in the city". That these expectations were realised is indicated by the first issue of the NZ

"Who's Who" compiled in 1908. This includes no fewer than four Hobson Crescent residents. Given the number of houses, this is very probably the highest ratio for any street in the country. Nevertheless, the houses were built much closer together and with much smaller gardens than had hitherto been the pattern.

The later Edwardian era

Much of the remainder of Hobson St was built on in the ten years leading up to World War I.

Numbers 18-22 were built in 1905 or 1906 as was "Cranbrook" at #48 and a number of others only a few years later. Permits were issued for #24 in 1910, #56A in 1909, and three houses at #60-64 in 1914. Number 20 was built for Mrs Rosa Harding who had only just built #8 three years earlier.

Later changes

By this time there was little scope for further subdivision of sections at more than a few at a time if the resulting sections were to be suitable for the size and type of houses for which there was still an obvious demand. Small clusters were still possible, however. Permits were issued for new houses at numbers 54A, 56, 68, and 70 in 1922 or 1923.

Also during the 1920's, #33 became a private hospital, #32 a hostel for the Girls' College and #80 ("Mowai") became a Red Cross home after being a hospital during the war.

In the gap between Hobson Crescent and Queen Margaret College, houses were built at numbers 45, 47, 49 and 51 in 1934 and 1935. At least two of these were designed by Stanley Fearn and one by M F Johns and Sons.

Nearby, a King, Cook & Dawson design was built at #43 as recently as 1952. This was effectively the last house to be built in the street.

The 1940's through to the 1970's saw Hobson St further affected by changes of the type occurring

throughout Thorndon and for which the larger houses of Hobson St were particularly suited. Several were divided into flats and a number acquired office uses, most notably the use by the Correspondence School of houses in and adjoining Hobson Crescent. The Education Department used a number of houses where the school sports grounds are now. The Ministry of Works, Forest Service, and Oceanographic Institute occupied others.

A number became hostels, notably the Public Service girls' hostel at #39, the Post & Telegraph hostel at #33, the dental nurses' hostel at 24-30 and the Colombo Plan hostels at 44 and 52. Several west Hobson St and many Fitzherbert Tce houses were lost to the motorway. The motorway overbridge was constructed giving Hobson St full vehicular access to Tinakori Rd for the first time.

Revival

The revival of inner-city living since the 1970's has seen some of those changes reversed. Some flats and hostels have been returned to single residences and one office building converted to apartments. Number 39 persisted in hostel use (for the Salvation Army) until very recently.

However, several older houses have been lost. Highly visible to any present-day walker are Hobson Court apartments, the Australian High Commission and the German Embassy which are all on former heritage house sites.

Equally prominent are a number of modern multi-unit developments for which, regrettably, a number of heritage houses have also been demolished or removed. In some cases the same purpose could have been achieved profitably by restoring an existing building, or an existing building retained while building new units around it (as has been done in some cases).

The Society is keen to see all surviving heritage houses retained and will continue to promote and assist the concept.

Further Reading:

Colonial Capital, Terence Hodgson, Random Century, 1990 gives valuable coverage of the period to 1910 and includes photographs of the Hobson St swing-bridge (p 137), a general view of much of the area about 1880 (p149) and of "Duncan's Castle", the Jacob Joseph and Robert Stains houses and the John Johnston house (pp 155-57).

In Praise of Older Buildings, David McGill & Grant Tilly, Methuen, 1980 features Hobson ("Snobson") St at pages 38-39.

The making of Wellington 1800-1914, (ed) David Hamer & Roberta Nicholls, VUW Press 1990, includes highly relevant chapters by Roberta Nicholls on "Elite Society in Victorian and Edwardian Wellington" and by Chris Cochran on "Styles of Sham and Genuine Simplicity: Timber Buildings in Wellington to 1880".

Refer to *Thorndon News* issue 121 p 5 for a reference to photographs of the Crawfords at #52, issue 112 p 7 about the detailed 1891 maps, issue 108 p 7 for 23 Hobson Cres., issue 96 pp 4-5 for the feature on Arthur Miles who built #39, and issue 90 pp 4-5 for an interview with Maude Stott of 100 Hobson St. Back issues are available at the National and public libraries.

Plaque for 20 Hobson St

We are also pleased to announce the erection of a plaque at 20 Hobson St commemorating it as an example of its period and also as the residence from 1948 of Music Professor Frederick Page and painter Evelyn Page. The architect is not named on the plans

February issue

We plan to feature the extension of the north Thorndon walk to lower Tinakori and Grants roads and also Queens Park at the junction of the Wadestown Road.

I would like to hear from anyone with first-hand or reliable second hand accounts of the use of the Queens Park (Grant Rd) spring as a water supply.

THORNDON MEDICAL CENTRE

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