

Picnic Parties, Photography and Primates: Heginbotham's Tea Gardens, Kilbirnie

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ABSTRACT: Heginbotham's Tea Gardens was the last of Wellington's five pleasure gardens to open and it was at its peak in the early 1900s. Opened in Kilbirnie in 1891, the gardens advertised its summerhouse, ocean views, and "endless amusement in the antics of ... monkeys in a cage," as well refreshments in a curated outdoor recreational space. These were fairly typical attractions for New Zealand's pleasure gardens, but Heginbotham set his venue apart by having a photographic studio onsite. From 1842, when the country's first tea garden opened, pleasure gardens had a popular form of entertainment, and made "a major contribution to the social life of Wellington" in the nineteenth century. These were public places that women could visit unaccompanied by men and socialise outside the home. By the early-twentieth century, however, interest was waning in this form of entertainment, and the expansion of Wellington's suburbs was encouraging subdivision. Alongside sweeping urban and social change was a growing appreciation for New Zealand's natural environment. By the mid-1920s, Wellington's pleasure gardens had largely disappeared. This paper explores the role of these gardens and considers their legacy.

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Wellington's Tea Gardens

On 31 January 1843, Ellen Petre recorded her first impressions of Wellington in her diary: "I much admired the many little cottages with a small patch of cultivated ground about them, the rest being wild forest."¹ Historian Jock Phillips noted that early Pākehā settlers found New Zealand's untamed landscape to be unwelcoming, seldom beautiful, monotonous and dull.² Turning the wilderness into civilised land was regarded as progress, and from as early as 1842 Wellingtonians could locally source a range of vegetable seeds and fruit trees for their patches of cultivated ground.³ Fragrant flowers and trees "from

home" were also valued as "living ties to the old world," although most early European settlers necessarily focused on food production rather than beautification.⁴ Furthermore, the majority of these settlers were not landowners.⁵

Tea gardens were first established in New Zealand's main centres from the 1840s, often as part of plant nursery businesses, offering recreation as well as familiar natural settings for new settlers.⁶ They were modelled on London tea gardens, which developed after the decline of the city's coffee houses, and they commercialised the custom of afternoon

tea, which had been established in England and Scotland in the 1840s.⁷ New Zealand's fledgling towns had limited entertainments – parks, museums and seaside promenades were still to be developed. Tea gardens established in Christchurch and Dunedin in the 1860s were very popular, with Dunedin's Vauxhall Gardens (1862-71) quickly gaining a "racy reputation," according to garden heritage researcher Susette Goldsmith, with one citizen claiming it to be "the haunt of prostitution and debauchery on a grand scale."⁸

The country's earliest and longest-running tea

¹ Petre, Diary p 39.

² Phillips "Perceptions of the Landscape" np.

³ Phillips "Perceptions of the Landscape" np; Lawson "For Sale [advertisement]" p 4.

⁴ Raine "1840s-1860s" pp 65-66; Morris *Common Ground* p 69.

⁵ Dawson *A History of Gardening* p 137.

⁶ Shepherd *Wellington's Heritage* p 185.

⁷ Goldsmith *Tea* pp 54, 85.

⁸ Goldsmith *Tea* pp 52-53; J. G. S. Grant quoted, Goldsmith *Tea* p 54.

gardens were in Wellington. David Norman Wilkinson opened a nursery and tea garden on Christmas Eve 1842 and by 1850 he had relocated to a two-acre property in Oriental Bay.⁹ The garden could host large numbers of people, including 300 teetotallers on New Year's Day 1858.¹⁰ It offered free admission and sold fruit and flowers, including roses and grapes, that were grown in large glasshouses.¹¹ As well as providing entertainment and refreshments in cultivated outdoor spaces, tea gardens offered a sort of freedom for women – they were a socially acceptable space for women to socialise outside the home, not necessarily accompanied by men.¹² Ellen Petre visited Wilkinson's gardens several times shortly after her arrival in Wellington, walking through the bush to the gardens with three friends, carrying their lunch with them.¹³

In 1853, Robert Donald bought five acres in Karori and established Donald's Tea Gardens,

which he later expanded to occupy 20 acres.¹⁴ Like Wilkinson, he also had a market garden and nursery. In the 1870s, patients from the nearby Karori Lunatic Asylum would make regular visits.¹⁵ After Donald's death in 1895, the tea garden was run by Lucy and William Henry Young; it became known as the Karori Pleasure Grounds and grew to include prominent holly hedges, conservatories, a summerhouse, croquet and tennis courts, fishponds, a lake, and "beautifully shaded walks."¹⁶

There were several short-lived offerings, including the Portobello Tea Gardens, opened by nurseryman William Mansill at the top of Willis Street in August 1860 as "a place of recreation and amusement," and Newtown Tea Gardens, which advertised for one season from 24 November 1881 to 21 March 1882.¹⁷ By the late-nineteenth century, the most highly regarded tea gardens in the region were McNab's Gardens in Lower Hutt, Karori

Pleasure Grounds, and Heginbotham's Tea Gardens.¹⁸ Mason's Gardens, also in Lower Hutt, was the fifth tea garden in the region, "once reputed to be the finest garden in the southern hemisphere."¹⁹ Until the turn of the century these tea gardens were credited with making a major contribution to the social life of Wellington and the Hutt Valley.²⁰

Heginbotham's Tea Gardens, Kilbirnie

The Heginbothams' contribution to Wellington's tea garden scene came relatively late. Local newspapers anticipated its opening in spring 1891, with the *Evening Post* announcing that "Kilbirnie will distinctly gain by this added attraction to its other charms."²¹ By the late-nineteenth century, interest in tea gardens was waning. Despite this general trend, Heginbotham's Tea Garden was at its peak in the 1890s and early 1900s. The tea garden was owned by Joseph Alfred Heginbotham and managed by his wife Mary. Heginbotham had purchased land from the original estate of James Coutts Crawford, later acquiring a further two acres and developing a private garden before it was turned into a

⁹ Wellington Nursery "David Norman Wilkinson [advertisement]" p 2; Dawson *A History of Gardening* p 206; Wilkinson, David "Notice [advertisement]" p 2.

¹⁰ "New Year's Day" p 3.

¹¹ Cyclopedia Company "Private Gardens" p 223.

¹² Goldsmith *Tea* p 87.

¹³ Petre, *Diary* p 55.

¹⁴ *Karori & its People* p 279.

¹⁵ Williams *Out of Mind* p 19.

¹⁶ Cyclopedia Company "Private Gardens" p 797; Shepherd *Wellington's Heritage* p 193.

¹⁷ Willis Street Nursery "Portobello Tea Gardens [advertisement]" p 2; "Newtown Tea Gardens [advertisement]" p 4.

¹⁸ Cyclopedia Company "Private Gardens" p 223.

¹⁹ Dawson *A History of Gardening* p 209.

²⁰ Shepherd *Wellington's Heritage* p 185.

²¹ "[untitled]" (6 November 1891) p 2.



Figure 1: Kilbirnie, Wellington, taken 1880s by Burton Brothers. Te Papa, C.018210

tea garden.²² Kilbirnie was rapidly changing

at this time, including land being reclaimed to form what is now known as Kilbirnie Park.

²² B. W. S. "Old Houses with Charm" p 22.

When the tea garden first opened, Kilbirnie was part of the Melrose Borough, not yet on the tram network, and had just over 400 residents, which meant it sat apart from Wellington and was a good destination for excursions.²³ Wellingtonian Joe Parker recalled:

one of the amusements of the better class was to hire a four wheeler cab and set off through town, around Oriental Bay, along Queen's Drive to Kilbirnie, stay at Higginbottom's Gardens [sic] for tea and look at the monkeys.²⁴

The same route could be taken on horseback, alternatively, visitors could take a tram to Newtown and make a 15-minute walk over the hill from there.²⁵

No photographs or written accounts of Heginbotham's Tea Gardens have been located but newspaper advertisements and articles show that the premises included a summerhouse, gardens of flowers and shrubs, and monkeys in a cage. Heginbotham's advertisements highlighted the gardens' monkeys, claiming in 1896 to have the first

²³ Statistics New Zealand "Results of a Census"

²⁴ Interview with Joe Parker by Roberta Nicholls (July 1981) quoted, Nicholls "Wellington Magnate" p 119.

²⁵ Cyclopedia Company "Private Gardens" p 799.



Figure 2: Alice, taken between 1895 and 1900 by Joseph Heginbotham of Heginbotham's Tea Gardens, Kilbirnie, Wellington. Te Papa, O.022201

monkey to have been born in New Zealand.²⁶

²⁶ "Heginbotham's Tea Gardens, Kilbirnie [advertisement]" (28 November 1896) p 1.

He even placed a notice in the *Evening Post* to mark the birth of a son to "Dolly, the Wife of Celebrated Monkey Jacko ... Both are doing well."²⁷ It is likely that exotic animals were a popular attraction – Wellington Zoo, the first in the country, did not open until 1906, and Heginbotham's garden featured 30-40 monkeys as well as caged exotic parrots.²⁸

In 1901 Sir Joseph Ward led 1,000 cyclists on a "moonlight run" from Wellington's General Post Office to Heginbotham's Tea Gardens, where a concert programme was held and refreshments were available in the garden, which was lit by Chinese lanterns and acetylene lamps. This event was repeated the following year and Wellington Harriers held regular runs that started at the tea garden.²⁹

Notably, Heginbotham's appears to be the only tea garden where visitors could have their photographs taken by a professional photographer. Joseph Heginbotham was a keen photographer; he was elected secretary of the Wellington Camera Club in October

²⁷ "Birth of a Monkey [advertisement]" p 1.

²⁸ B. W. S. "Old Houses with Charm" p 22.

²⁹ "[untitled] [advertisement]" (15 January 1902) p 1; "Local and General" (9 May 1904) p 4; "Local and General" (28 April 1905) p 4.

1897 and participated in amateur photography exhibitions, winning numerous prizes for prints with titles such as "Toilers of the Field" and "Declining Day."³⁰ His work was published in the *Weekly News* and *Progress*, the latter printing Heginbotham's article "A Plea for the Pictorial in Photography." By mid-1897 he had established a photographic studio at his tea garden, capturing groups in the gardens.³¹ Although clearly drawn to pictorialist photography, no doubt he saw the financial benefits of engaging in commercial portraiture.

It is rare to find accounts of people having their photograph taken at this time, but Wellington resident Herbert Spackman visited the studio in 1898 to have his "Baby photoed by Mr Higginbotham."³² It is likely that Heginbotham and Spackman had already met through the Wellington Camera Club, of which they were both members. Spackman had emigrated from Bristol in 1891 and was joined by his fiancée Daisy in 1893, whom he wed several days later. In early 1898, the

³⁰ "Wellington Camera Club" p 2.

³¹ "Heginbotham's Tea Gardens, Kilbirnie [advertisement]" (17 June 1897) p 6.

³² Spackman, Diary, 24 April 1898.

couple had their first child, Sylvia, which spurred his interest in photography.³³ Spackman noted in his diary:

I held her [Sylvia] on the cushion, being at the same time out of sight, and Daisy stood a little in front to attract her attention. She was very good on the whole.³⁴

Spackman doesn't provide a description of Heginbotham's studio, and photographs and descriptions of studios' interiors for the first decade of the twentieth century are scarce. Photographer Haruhiko Sameshima has provided a vivid description of the working spaces of nineteenth-century photographers though:

Mechanical, optical, chemical and electronic apparatus in darkened studios and smelly darkrooms; it was all reminiscent of the Gothic, of mad scientists and Frankenstein obsessions in nineteenth century laboratories.³⁵

By the first decade of the twentieth century, however, photography on a relatively small scale could be less dramatic – ready-prepared plates were widely available, and both development and printing could be

³³ Schrader *Big Smoke* pp 153-157.

³⁴ Spackman, Diary, 24 April 1898.

³⁵ Sameshima "Nineteenth-century Photography" p 13.



Figure 3: Kilbirnie, Wellington, taken 1895 by an unidentified photographer. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand, PAColl-1166

outsourced to professional photographers and shops.

A subdivision plan from 1909 shows

Heginbotham's studio as a small rectangular structure situated along the northern boundary of Heginbotham's property. Typically, skylights provided natural light for

portrait photography, which was necessary before the advent of flash photography. A photograph of Edward George Child's photographic studio in Ohingaiti around 1900 shows a small space crammed with props and backdrops, paperwork, and prints in the process of being coloured by hand. It is possible that Heginbotham used his space as both a studio and a darkroom, although he may have processed negatives and prints in the house.

In the early-twentieth century, as suburbs grew and ways of living changed, many large gardens were subdivided.³⁶ By the early 1910s Heginbotham's land had been subdivided for residential development, and it was not long before he had sold his monkeys to a circus and moved into his studio, where he continued to pursue photography as well as painting.³⁷

The Demise of the Tea Gardens

Wellington's tea gardens demonstrate a nineteenth-century desire to create familiarity far from "Home," using introduced species in the curation of natural spaces. The early-

twentieth century, however, saw a growing appreciation for New Zealand's natural environment, which coincided with "a gathering sense of nationhood," resulting from a growing number of New Zealand-born Europeans.³⁸ Writing under the pseudonym Julian Mark, Katherine Mansfield's story "In the Botanical Gardens" describes walking up a steep track away from the "orthodox banality of carpet bedding" to where there is "bush, silent and splendid."³⁹ Conservation efforts began to grow, alongside increased access to the country's forests and mountains.

Susette Goldsmith notes that the "tea-garden fashion was largely over" by the 1920s and this form of entertainment was "beginning to seem irrelevant."⁴⁰ Reasons for this shift may be due to expanding cities, improved roading, the dress reform movement, vaudeville, the cinema, and the bicycle.⁴¹ As early as 1897, *White Ribbon*, the magazine of the New Zealand Women's Christian Temperance Movement, had noted the effect of the popularisation of cycling:

ladies do not care so much about afternoon teas now as they did before this most welcome pastime was in vogue.⁴²

After Wilkinson's death in 1903, his son built a row of houses along Oriental Parade, halving the size of the garden.⁴³ What had once been "the lover's lane and promenade garden of Wellington" had largely disappeared by the early 1920s when further houses were built on Grass Street.⁴⁴ Wilkinson Street and a giant mulberry are the main remnants of a time when "a quiet stroll 'round the rocks" and a cup of tea at Wilkinson's was the most popular of Wellington's limited recreations."⁴⁵

The owners of Karori Pleasure Grounds, previously known as Donald's Tea Gardens, were feeling economic pressures by the end of the nineteenth century and by the mid-1910s most of the garden had been sold, the house was empty, and the grounds had deteriorated. Little remains although a holly tree, reportedly planted by Sir George Grey in 1867, is scheduled as a notable tree by

³⁶ Dawson *A History of Gardening* p 178.

³⁷ B. W. S. "Old Houses with Charm" p 22.

³⁸ Morris *Common Ground* p 93.

³⁹ Mark "In the Botanical Gardens" pp 285-286.

⁴⁰ Goldsmith *Tea* pp 58-60.

⁴¹ Goldsmith *Tea* pp 58-60.

⁴² Porowhita "Cycling Notes" p 7.

⁴³ Shepherd *Wellington's Heritage* pp 187-188.

⁴⁴ Shepherd *Wellington's Heritage* pp 187-188.

⁴⁵ Shepherd *Wellington's Heritage* pp 187-188; "Historic Gardens" p 6.

Wellington City Council.⁴⁶

Little remains of Heginbotham's Tea Gardens too, although established trees, including a Norfolk pine, and the Heginbotham's house are still present. The site is now residential housing, having been subdivided multiple times. Examples of Heginbotham's portraits and pictorialist images are held by numerous collecting institutions including Te Papa and the Alexander Turnbull Library, but there is no documentary record of his tea garden.

⁴⁶ The tree is at 22 Donald Street. Wellington City Council "SCHED6."

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