AHA: Architectural History Aotearoa (2007) vol 4:28-33

Carpenter, Artisan, Architect; Status In Late Nineteenth-century Wellington

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ABSTRACT: The distinction between a minor professional architect and a leading builder in Wellington was considerably more blurred in the late nineteenth century than it would be today. However, busy architects could make a lot of money and the term "architect" carried status that might open more doors than would be available to a mere builder. Late nineteenth century Wellington is now apparently only represented by a handful of buildings by prominent architects. Most people automatically think of the CBD and names like Thomas Turnbull & Son, William Chatfield, Frederick de Jersey Clere, John Campbell and perhaps William Crichton. Clayton, Toxward and Tringham were dead or almost gone, and new generation architects were barely emerging. We contend, however, that this picture is an oversimplification and considerably more of 1890s Wellington remains, as does the evidence for a much longer roll-call of architects, some of whom practised on the fringes, both of the city and of their profession. The architects we discuss here did not generally design large, flamboyant buildings, nor did they cater for rich company clients. Many of the lesser-known architects were particularly susceptible to boom-bust cycles and were forced to seek other employment in lean times - hence their rapid arrivals and departures from the trade listings in the directories of these years.

Status in Wellington in the 1890s

By the 1890s, there was a distinct stratification of society in Wellington, brought about by a greatly improved economy, a settling down of political and other systems in the country as a whole, and some attempts to perhaps imitate the upper classes at "home" - then still largely regarded by many as England. The so-called elite were a propertied class, many of whom employed servants to help run their homes and cater for other needs. This upper stratum included wealthy landowners, professional people, politicians, government officials, army officers and clergymen. Wealth, distinguished ancestry and/or selected occupations were all criteria for inclusion. This elite society in Wellington, which virtually disappeared at the time of the First World War, has been described in some detail by Roberta Nicholls in her chapter in the 1990 book *The Making of Wellington*.[1] Several leading architects were regarded as being part of this group; they qualified on various grounds as we shall see. Many minor architects aspired to become part of it, by attempting to acquire wealth, property and other trappings, but only a few succeeded. Some of their stories are told here, as they made various contributions to the fabric of 1890s Wellington and increased its diversity.

The elite tended to live in particular parts of the city, although some of the streets in those areas no longer have the characteristics of the 1890s. Willis Street and Abel Smith Street contained many more large, elegant houses than they do today. The whole of the Terrace was seen as a highly desirable residential location, as were parts of Mount Victoria and all of Oriental Bay. Hobson Street and much of Tinakori Road were as popular as they are today, but with the houses surrounded by gardens on large sections, which often included stables and other outbuildings.

Other status indicators were memberships of special clubs or societies, participation in particular sporting bodies or events, involvement in civic affairs, and even the acquisition of property, preferably in the countryside, where a country home might also be built.

Three major Wellington architects who were active in the 1890s are considered to have been part of this upper stratum of society, but they appear to have qualified on quite different grounds, thus giving hope to some of the up-

[1] Nicholls "Elite Society" pp 195-225.

and-coming people that they too might rise to join them.

William Chatfield was at the peak of his powers at the time of his second marriage late in 1897, his first wife having died. The marriage took place in what is now Old St Paul's and was performed by the Bishop of Wellington.[2] This was definitely a high society occasion and the list of wedding gifts and their donors reflected it, occupying over a full column of newsprint, and including names such as Seddon, Pearce, Riddiford, Bethune, fellow architect E Coleridge and those of 15 building firms, the latter presenting a solid silver tea service. Chatfield could demonstrate an old English lineage and had worked within the New Zealand civil service before establishing himself as an independent architect. He had lived in Willis Street, but, as he prospered, bought property in Island Bay where he built a huge house for his first family. Clearly, he mixed with all the right people and achieved considerable social status when he became the first president of the embryo New Zealand Institute of Architects in 1905.

Charles Tringham was nearing the end of his career as an architect in the 1890s and in fact retired to the Wairarapa to farm before the turn of the century. One of his last roles in Wellington was as President of the Wellington Association of Architects in 1895.[3] Arriving from England as a carpenter in 1864, he soon formed a partnership with a Wellington builder, William Lawes. This lasted until the end of December 1866 when Tringham branched out on his own. Within a year, he was advertising himself as an architect and gaining a considerable number of contracts for houses, churches, hotels and a wide variety of other commercial premises. His rise in Wellington society was undoubtedly helped by his marriage to Margaret Hunter Bennett in 1868. She was the daughter of Dr John Bennett, the first New Zealand Registrar-General. Lucrative contracts followed, including the Italianate house "Westoe" near Marton for Sir William Fox, and the extensions to Clayton's former home in Hobson Street, now the nucleus of Queen Margaret College.

Thomas Turnbull was a well-established architect when he arrived in New Zealand in 1871 and was a major figure in 1890s Wellington, being responsible for many prominent buildings in the CBD. His own house in Thorndon, which survives as the Italian Embassy, was built in 1877 in a flamboyant Italianate style on what was then a huge section. It competed in size and opulence with the neighbouring Levins, Ronaynes, and even with Premier House which was just up the road, looking down on the grand houses of Hobson Street. Despite his commercial success, Turnbull was often involved in controversy in his later years, particularly in challenging decisions when his own designs were passed over. He served one term as City Councillor, but was not re-elected. Towards the end of his life in 1907, his son William was largely running the business, although he never changed the title of the firm which was by then Thomas Turnbull & Son.

Aspirations for status

The names mentioned above are examples of people who were unquestionably regarded as architects of standing in 1890s Wellington and who had built up the capital to buy property and to spend relatively lavishly. But they were by no means the only people designing buildings in the growing city of Wellington. Searches of the City Council building permit

[2] "Wedding: Chatfield – Tuckey" p 11.

[3] Fearnley *Early Wellington Churches*

records and Post Office directories have revealed over 50 people who at some stage in their careers called themselves architects and who were active in the 1890s. The numbers and types of buildings they designed ranged very widely, as did their success or otherwise in trying to join what seems to have been a rather small exclusive group at the top. Here we describe briefly the careers of a cross-section of those aspiring to gain the status that being a successful architect carried at that time.

William Christian Smith designed at least 37 buildings between 1890 and 1900. Most of them were dwellings but a few shops were included. We know little about his early life, but he first appears as a painter on the burgess roll for 1879 living on Cambridge Terrace. By 1882, he is listed as a carpenter and in 1885 he was calling for tenders to build his first dwelling. As he gradually gained more experience he took to calling himself an architect, presumably because he expected more business to come his way. Many of the houses he designed were in Newtown where he himself lived, but they also ranged from Mulgrave Street via The Terrace to Oriental Parade. Basically they were relatively simple villas, but some had interesting ornamental touches like his own home at 1 Nikau Street. He survived to the age of 80, dying in Wellington in 1916.

Two aspiring architects who ultimately seemed unable to handle their financial affairs were William Heginbotham and Holland Andrews. Heginbotham was English-born and spent time as an office boy with a firm of architects in the Midlands. He later became a carpenter before emigrating to New Zealand in 1880. In the 1890s he is known to have designed at least 10 buildings, finally signing himself "architect" in 1895 rather than builder or carpenter. Although his main output was shops and dwellings in the Te Aro area, he went on to design an elaborate church in Nelson, as well as a complex sawmill and joinery factory in Courtenay Place. Heginbotham did achieve status in local politics, becoming Mayor of Melrose Borough for two terms, the first commencing in 1888. All was not well with his finances however, and he was twice declared bankrupt. He died in Wellington in 1905, aged only 49.[4]

Holland Andrews was also bankrupted at a relatively early stage in his career, despite constantly seeming to try to better himself. He apparently arrived from Australia in 1895 having undergone some technical college training in architecture and set himself up as an architect - but received only a few commissions for dwellings in the 1890s. He then went back to being a draftsman, at first with Clere & Richmond, then with J.S. Swan, meanwhile also getting good passes in architectural courses at the local Technical College. In 1907 he again set himself up as an architect, but was declared bankrupt in 1910, despite a number of commissions. By 1915 he was working as a clerk; later a shipping clerk and was last noted in Christchurch in 1927 - one architect who definitely did not make the grade.

Peter Frank Jacobsen did make a success of his architectural career, but was unfortunate enough to contract typhoid in 1893 when he was 42. He had however been responsible for the design of at least 20 buildings in those first three years of the 1890s, mainly dwellings in the Te Aro area, but including two club buildings (one in Petone), a shop in Willis Street and the Shamrock Hotel, then sited in Molesworth Street. Prior to 1890 he had worked in partnership with his brother Theodore from 1888 producing a wide range

[4] "Deaths: Heginbotham" p 1.

of designs for villas, offices, stores, a hall and shops spread over the greater Wellington area, but including Mount Victoria, Molesworth Street and Lambton Quay in the inner city. Both brothers had been trained in architecture by their father, himself formerly an architect in Canterbury. Peter Jacobsen had been a Freemason which would have provided a valuable social network for him.

John Huntley Allan was an architect active for only three years in Wellington in the early 1890s during which he had at least 15 contracts. He lived in Tinakori Road, but most of the houses he designed were in Newtown; there were also some shops and alterations to hotels. By 1894 he was in Hastings as a junior partner in the architectural firm of Sollett and Allan. He exemplifies the difficulties of locating biographical details of some early New Zealand architects. We have so far found no trace of his activities prior to his first Wellington tender notice, nor any information concerning his subsequent career in Hastings. He does not appear to have married, nor have we found a birth or death notice. At least in the case of Herbert Mason, another enigmatic character, there was a report of his death in 1892 when he fell in Cuba Street and fractured his skull. Although said to have been an architect there is little evidence for this in New Zealand. According to the *Evening Post*, he was "supposed to be the son of Mr Mason, a well-known London architect."[5] It was also claimed that he was a remittance man, so payments from England may have been sufficient to cover his living expenses.

Edward Wade Petherick is a particularly interesting example of a self-made man. He was amongst the first children to be born at Petone in 1840 and, as he grew up, trained as a builder. He was on the gold diggings in Otago in the 1860s but returned to Wellington about 1865. Living in Willis Street, he was variously listed as a carpenter, a blind maker and a builder - a true artisan in fact. From a study of tender notices, he apparently did not superintend a great deal of building work until the late 1880s - which is when he first began to put the word "architect" after his name. In the 1890s decade he designed at least 15 buildings, two-thirds of which were dwellings. The rest included a factory, a private school and a shop. During this period he moved from Willis Street to a better location in Mount Victoria, although he continued a long-standing association with the Vivian Street Baptist church.[6] He was an avid collector of curios which he donated to a museum he helped to found in Newtown. He went on to design five churches in the early 1900s spread from Petone to Island Bay. Petherick enjoyed shooting for sport and was a keen chess player, sometimes judging competitions. He also invested shrewdly in land. His children married well and it is clear from descriptions of their marriages that the Pethericks were considered newsworthy within the social fabric of the city. When Petherick himself died in 1915, his estate was valued at just over £11 000.

Measures of success

From this point in time, it appears that architectural design in 1890s Wellington was dominated by a handful of architects who became well-known mainly through their involvement with major businesses and/or the government of the day. Multiple lucrative contracts ensured a relatively rich lifestyle, a place in the upper levels of society and the ability to mix with potential future clients in a club or other social situation. However there were at least 40 others who claimed the status of architects, seven of whom we have

[5] "Death of Architect" p 2.

[6] "Death of Mr E.W. Petherick" p 8.

mentioned. How successful were they in comparison with their peers?

Probably the most successful was Edward Wade Petherick who acquired property and standing in the community through his involvement in the church, in clubs and societies and through his collecting activities, as well as mixing with other businessmen. The value of the estate he left, over £11 000, in fact exceeded that of Thomas Turnbull by nearly £3 000, a remarkable feat for a considerably lesser known architect.

Peter Frank Jacobsen was clearly a competent architect who could adapt readily to a wide range of styles and circumstances, even after the partnership with his brother was dissolved. Both had the initial advantage of having trained under the apprentice system with a competent architect to begin with. Masonic connections would have helped them in their business. Jacobsen was highly unlucky contracting typhoid at such a young age. No will or estate values have been located for him. John Huntley Allan seems to have displayed a similar level of competence, but the paucity of information about him means his success cannot be judged effectively. The latter phrase also applies to Herbert Mason, the enigmatic remittance man.

Neither William Heginbotham nor Holland Andrews made great successes out of their architectural careers, although Heginbotham showed superior competency and persistence. He also attained a degree of status through being both a councillor and Mayor of Melrose Borough. Bankruptcy would have been a severe trial for both of them. Andrews had tried to set himself up by living in a good area, Oriental Bay, but the house was forfeited when he got into financial difficulties his status was seriously reduced, ending his working life as a shipping clerk.

William Christian Smith remained a minor architect despite his relatively high output of design work, probably at least in part because of his age; he was 64 in 1900. Also, most of his designs were workers' cottages built in the poorer parts of the city. At the time of his death in 1916, his estate was valued at £1 092, a minute sum compared with the £34 500 left by Charles Tringham, who died in the same year.

Conclusion

Despite the varying degrees of success or otherwise of the above characters, a considerable body of their work still forms the mainly domestic fabric of parts of Wellington city, in Newtown, Mount Cook, Te Aro and even in parts of Mount Victoria and Thorndon. Preliminary results from our studies indicate that approximately 40 little-known architects competed with about ten prominent ones and designed nearly 400 Wellington buildings in the 1890s.

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