

Shy Times in 1850s Wellington: will the real architects please stand up?

Adrian Humphris, Wellington City Archives & Geoff Mew, independent scholar

ABSTRACT: Wellington was in a period of transition in the 1850s. The first flurry of settlement was easing somewhat and trading was becoming established. However, the earthquakes of 1848 and 1855 shook not only buildings not designed to withstand them, but also the confidence of the immigrant population. People were quick to realise that timber flexed better than brick or cob, but, in the process, they lost several of the earliest buildings with any pretensions to architectural merit. Together with the shaky nature of the economy, and the fact that Auckland was the capital city, there was little incentive for men whose sole training was in architecture to attempt to practice full time.

The paucity of architectural records from the 1850s further complicates accurate evaluation of the situation, but it is clear that many of the people designing buildings had multiple skills in several other fields besides architecture. Buildings definitely dated to the 1850s that remain in Wellington can be numbered on one hand and not one of them can be said to have been designed by an architect. The two men with the largest tallies of Wellington building designs in the 1850s also claimed skills in surveying and civil engineering, whereas the two (possibly three) trained architects that we know of seem to have obtained minimal work in their field and to have largely diversified into other occupations. A further five names are associated with Wellington architecture in some way during the 1850s, either with the design of single buildings or simply advertising their services in local newspapers - with no evidence they actually obtained any work. In this paper we look at the backgrounds of the major designers including the trained architects, their work and a few of the factors which caused most of them to seek alternative employment.

Introduction

The Wakefield-run Wellington settlement of the early 1840s had no time, place, or financial resources for elaborate architecture. Vernacular buildings were the order of the day, at first assembled by carpenters and builders with whatever materials came easiest to hand.¹ Not surprisingly, many resembled the late Georgian/early Victorian buildings of the smaller English towns from which the (mostly young) settlers had emigrated. The kit-set buildings that some brought with them were likewise of a simple and practical kind. Few public buildings existed at first and these too were of the most basic type. By the time

ten years had passed, conditions were starting to improve and, despite the setback of the 1848 earthquake, there was some interest and potential civic pride in having more attractive buildings in the expanding township, which became the centre for the Provincial Government in 1853.

Public Buildings of 1850s Wellington

Most of the buildings with identifiable architectural styles that we can recognise as having been erected in the 1850s only exist now in photographs, drawings or paintings, although written descriptions of a few also survive. They were almost invariably sited along the main streets of the settlement, and,

in many instances, there were notices in the newspapers of the day calling for builders to submit tenders for their construction. This was rarely so for private houses and it seems probable that, if an architect was employed in their design at all, their name was passed to the client by word of mouth and a builder employed on the same basis.

The public buildings we know about consist of some associated with: the judiciary, the government in the broad sense, the church, education and hospitality. They include a court-house, police station and gaol; a colonial hospital, legislative chamber and a Provincial Government building. Various church

¹ Cochran "Styles of Sham" pp 107-128.

organisations commissioned buildings for worship as well as a school and a combined convent/school and chapel. Other buildings for education or for meetings included an Athenaeum and an Oddfellows Hall. At least one hotel was architecturally designed at this time.²

Major and Minor Designers of the 1850s

Two names stand out as designing many of the above buildings: Thomas Henry Fitzgerald and Edward Roberts. Fitzgerald was an Irish-born Catholic who arrived as a surveyor for the New Zealand Company in 1842, aged 18. He had apparently also been trained as a civil engineer and was soon employed in designing some military structures as well as the gaol at Mount Cook. By the 1850s his Catholic connections led to him producing plans for a convent/school/chapel, then the first St Mary's Cathedral, and St Joseph's Providence (a boarding school for Māori girls), all on Golder's Hill adjacent to Hill Street in Thorndon. These were designed in three successive years from 1850. He was also asked to consider a new Colonial Hospital in 1850 following substantial earthquake damage to

² Mew & Humphris *Raupo to Deco* forthcoming

the original one in 1848, but the project was apparently taken over by Roberts in 1851. Fitzgerald moved to Hawkes Bay in 1853 as a surveyor, then became a politician before leaving for Queensland in 1862.³

Roberts arrived in New Zealand about 1847.⁴ He was a civilian attached to the Royal Engineers,⁵ nominally as a Clerk of Works, but was in reality a skilled civil engineer, architect and surveyor with a wide variety of other interests. His age on arrival is unknown, but he was probably in his late twenties or early thirties. He was on the general government payroll as well as that of the Provincial Government from 1852 until his departure for London about 1856. He also advertised for work as an architect in a private capacity. One of his first jobs in 1850 was to design the Athenaeum for the Mechanics Institute on Lambton Quay⁶ (he had previously drawn plans for a new Wesleyan church in 1848).⁷ In 1851 he was asked to

³ Bolton *Thomas Henry Fitzgerald* n.p.

⁴ Furkert *Early New Zealand Engineers* p 153.

⁵ "Beautiful Town Residence" p 2.

⁶ "Wellington Athenæum and Mechanics Institute" p 2.

⁷ "New Zealand Spectator, and Cook's Strait Guardian: Wednesday, February 13, 1850: New Wesleyan Chapel" p 2.

adapt part of Barrett's Hotel into a Legislative Chamber for parliamentary meetings and also planned the first area to be reclaimed adjacent to Lambton Quay. His new Colonial Hospital opened in 1852 in Pipitea Street, Thorndon. Also in that year he designed the first part of the Terrace Gaol and the New Wellington Hotel.⁸ Perhaps his best-known product was the Pencarrow Lighthouse⁹ which was not erected until after his departure but is still standing, now maintained as a monument by the New Zealand Historic Places Trust. Roberts was one of the commissioners who reported on damage caused by the 1855 earthquake. He is known to have designed several private houses, but apart from his own on The Terrace,¹⁰ their locations are unknown.

The above two men account for a large proportion of the professionally-designed Wellington buildings of the 1850s that we know of, the rest having only one or, in some instances, apparently no buildings to their credit. George Single is in the former category, although his claim to fame has been disputed.

⁸ "Opening of the New Wellington Hotel" p 2.

⁹ "A Lighthouse for New Zealand" p 2.

¹⁰ "[The whole of his Valuable Town Buildings]" p 2; "Important Town Freehold Property" p 2; "The New Zealander: Saturday, February 1, 1851" p 2.

He is popularly supposed to have designed the 1857 Provincial Government Building where the Parliamentary Library now stands in Molesworth Street. Close reading of newspapers and the research of Robin Skinner showed that Single was given the task of taking the best features of the prize-winning designs (of which his was one) in an 1856 competition to produce an affordable building.¹¹ A draftsman within the Provincial Government Survey Department, Charles Igglesden, later complained large parts of his design had been used without acknowledgement, but the rules of the competition stated that plans which were awarded prizes became the property of the Government to do what they liked with them. Single was, like Roberts, a civilian attached to the Royal Engineers¹² and may have been sent to replace him, as he arrived in Wellington in 1856. He moved to New Plymouth in 1861, having had little impact on Wellington compared with Roberts. Only a minor tender for additions to a residence in Dickson (probably Dixon) Street in 1857 by him has been found.¹³ Charles Igglesden (born 1832)

¹¹ Skinner Pers. Comm. 2010.

¹² "Names and Addresses of Subscribers" p 6.

¹³ "To Builders" p 1; also "Resident Magistrate's Court: Wellington: Tuesday, 7th February, 1860" p 3.

was actually a trained architect and civil engineer but those skills were not employed fully until the 1860s and '70s.

Of the other architects or quasi-architects in the Wellington area at the time, Henry St Hill and Octavius Bousfield are the only individuals who appear to have produced anything. St Hill was born in 1807 and arrived in Wellington in 1840. He has been referred to as "the architect of the [New Zealand] Company,"¹⁴ but his initial training and whether the title was actually official are unknown. In fact, he was responsible for very little architectural work; some in the 1840s and only one building in the '50s - a Church of England school in Thorndon in 1852. Early on he was appointed as a magistrate and Justice of the Peace¹⁵ - later he became Sheriff - but did not remain in New Zealand, dying in England in 1866.

Octavius Bousfield arrived as a 21-year-old surveyor, probably in 1851; he may have had some architectural training and was reported to be a skilled draftsman. He drew up the plans for the Taita Anglican Church in 1853

¹⁴ "Henry St. Hill, the architect of the Company" p 4.

¹⁵ e.g. St Hill "Notice" p 4.

and tenders were referred to his Wellington address.¹⁶ By 1858 he had moved to Napier in employment as a surveyor. He became an East Coast landowner and stayed there for the rest of his life, dying in 1882.

Robert Stokes is known to have had architectural experience in Cheltenham and London as well as training in surveying before he arrived in Wellington in 1840 as a survey assistant. He left the New Zealand Company in 1842 and advertised for a while as an architect, land surveyor and agent.¹⁷ In 1845 he became the editor of the *New Zealand Spectator & Cook's Straits Guardian*, then he became a landowner and moved into politics. While technically an architect in Wellington in the 1850s, there is no evidence he designed any buildings then.

Two so-called architects are known only from their advertisements in Wellington newspapers. Charles Nation described himself as a "surveyor, architect and civil engineer" using various addresses in the Hutt Valley from July 1850 to late September 1851.¹⁸ James Russell listed as an "Architect, Builder, etc.,"

¹⁶ "To Builders and Carpenters" p 2.

¹⁷ e.g. "A Card: Mr. Stokes" p 1.

¹⁸ e.g. "C. NATION" p 2.

with an address in Murphy Street, Thorndon Flat, in the *Wellington Independent* from early November 1858 to the end of January 1859.¹⁹ We have found no evidence from tenders or other sources that either gained any work as a result of their advertising. Nation moved on to Hawkes Bay as a surveyor, dying there in 1898. No further trace of Russell has been found.

A single architectural partnership has also been found. It designed just one building, in 1859. This was an Odd Fellows' Hall on newly-reclaimed land adjacent to Lambton Quay. It was a Victorian Free Classical design (at least on its street frontage) by the firm of Williamson & Bailey.²⁰ We have been unable to locate a Wellington address for this firm, nor any other designs by them. The individuals have also proved extremely hard to trace.

Factors Influencing the Diversity of Interests (of "Architects")

As we have discussed, many of the designers of 1850s Wellington buildings with some architectural pretensions followed other

interests later in their lives and few started out to be architects when they first arrived. In considering why this was, we need to look at how settlement was organised and then grew during the first ten years and the following decade. Edward G Wakefield's planned colonisation scheme was intended to create an idealised society free from overcrowding and poverty, but with a structure of landowners and merchants, with workers to support them.²¹

Age of Settlers, and growth of Wellington

The New Zealand Company deliberately limited settlers to those under 30 at first, although some exceptions were made in special circumstances. We have analysed the age data for settlers given by Ward in *Early Wellington* for three of the first seven ships (*Aurora*, *Oriental* and *Bengal Merchant*).²² For the first two, 85% of the passengers were younger than 31 and 78% on the third. In all instances nearly a quarter of them were 20 or younger.

Settlers were carefully vetted according to trade or profession, as well as health and

"moral standing." Obviously they were people ambitious to make a new life for themselves with all the talents they possessed or they would not have undertaken to emigrate. But their age meant that many of them, particularly those of twenty and younger, would have been unlikely to have gained much experience in their chosen field.

Early on Wellington also experienced slow population growth. Even after 10 years, at the start of the 1850s conditions were still relatively primitive in terms of roading, drainage, water supply and building. Although trade was beginning to pick up as the immediate hinterland started to be developed, there was little surplus money for building fancy buildings. By 1859 Wellington's population had only reached 4,516 - it was still hardly more than a village.

Selection of settlers, and Training of "Architects"

In the first shipments of settlers, the men were chiefly general labourers and building tradesmen; the women were mainly domestic servants or dressmakers.²³ A small number of

¹⁹ e.g. "James Russell" p 2.

²⁰ "Odd Fellows' Hall" p 6.

²¹ Hamer "Wellington on the Urban Frontier" pp 234-235.

²² Ward *Early Wellington* pp 23-26, 28-29.

²³ Calculated from data in Ward *Early Wellington* pp 331-364.

specialist surveyors (some of whose training included civil engineering and architecture) and other professional men also arrived on the first ships, soon to be followed by others, as the rate of job turnover was high.

Most of the men who advertised as architects, and who were so described in reports on their work in 1850s Wellington, also described themselves as civil engineers and/or surveyors. This is not surprising as there is no evidence that the New Zealand Company specifically recruited any architects, except possibly Henry St Hill who soon became a magistrate. Also, in 1840s Britain, there were many more generalists being trained to acquire skills in all three fields rather than necessarily specialise only in one of them, particularly outside the big centres of population. Edward Roberts was a classic example of a skilled generalist who was trained by the Royal Engineers by undergoing courses in the above subjects at Woolwich in England.

A Preponderance of Builders and Carpenters, and Potential for Advancement

In 1842 when the first burgess roll was published, over 15% of the 353 names on it were those of people engaged in the building

trade - builders, carpenters, bricklayers, roofers and others. Although several engineers and surveyors were listed, not a single person claimed to be an architect, although several are known to have designed buildings at that time. By the 1850s, the people designing buildings sometimes put "Architect" alone after their names, but were still also practising in other fields. In 1854 a published list of persons qualified to serve as jurors for the Wellington District did not include a single architect, although there were four surveyors and two engineers - one of the six is known to have advertised as an architect as well as a surveyor. Once again there were large numbers of people engaged in the building trade, 130 of them, of whom 89 were carpenters.²⁴

With the rapid growth of settlement, the ultimate collapse of the New Zealand Company, and experimentation with differing forms of government for the country as a whole, there were plenty of opportunities for versatile people to advance their careers. Surveyors in particular must have come to Wellington knowing their services would not

be required once the Company's initial requirements were met. Robert Stokes was an example who left the Company in 1842, advertised as an architect, but finding little or no work, moved into publishing, then politics, meanwhile becoming a major landowner. Thomas Fitzgerald appears to have had more success as a surveyor than as an architect. In politics he advanced to become Superintendent of Hawkes Bay Province before departing for Queensland.

Economic Situation

It is well-recognised that Wellington's economic situation was still precarious in the 1850s due to the lack of easy access to a large enough hinterland to supply exports for the developing port. Both the Manawatu and Wairarapa districts were identified as having that potential by people such as William Fox and Charles Rooking Carter. The initial track over the Rimutakas (open for cattle driving in October 1849) also helped speed the transport of wool from the Wairarapa to Wellington, but it was not until railways were built in the 1870s and '80s that the full potential of these regions was tapped. Wool was the most important export from Wellington in the 1850s. Hence in those early days only a very few reasonably rich clients existed with

²⁴ "List of Persons Qualified to Serve as Jurors for Wellington District for 1854" pp 21-29.

enough money to employ architects - most people just used builders and other tradesmen.

Class Structure of Immigrants

Although Wakefield had been determined not to import the worst features of the English class system into New Zealand he had still envisaged a structured society of landowners, merchants and workers. At the time of the first settlement of Wellington the numbers in the first two categories were relatively small compared with the rest, and there were no inherited artificial barriers to prevent interchange between any of them. Hence by dint of hard work and the accumulation of knowledge and capital, it was quite possible for a carpenter to progress to being a builder then an architect. James Russell, advertising in 1858, was almost certainly one of these, but they became much more common (and successful) in the 1860s when business improved.

Constraints of Materials and Environment - Fires, Floods, Earthquakes

The economic constraints mentioned above would also have had an influence on the types of materials used for building and the perceived risks in spending a lot of money on

a building which might be easily lost to flood, fire or earthquakes. Whereas stone buildings might have withstood fires, the cost of importing suitable stone to Wellington was prohibitive and the 1848 and 1855 earthquakes demonstrated that suitable building techniques to withstand such events were not yet in place. Simple, known styles from country districts in the United Kingdom could be relatively easily imitated in wood by skilled carpenters and builders, often without the overview (and cost) of employing architects as well. The downside was that such buildings were not always well-constructed (such as the 1863 court building of Charles Rooking Carter).

The 1848 earthquake was less severe than that of 1855 and although some buildings of cob, brick, and wattle and daub collapsed, the risk of fire seems to have been uppermost in people's minds when new building was contemplated before 1855. Hence several stores and warehouses were constructed using brick and it was these that suffered most severely in the second major earthquake. A long period of timber building then followed. Statistics from 1858 show that, out of 1,191 existing houses, 1,063 (89%) were

built from wood, only 12 from brick (1%) and 116 (10%) from other, unspecified, materials.²⁵

Fluidity of Government and Regulation of Building Activity

The equivocal nature of organised government from 1840 until 1853, when the Wellington Provincial Government was established, added considerably to uncertainty concerning types of buildings required and who might design them. As we have seen, the New Zealand Company initially employed several surveyors with architectural experience - when they left the company, either before or after it failed, there was no effective municipal authority they might have joined - the first Wellington Borough formed in 1842 lasted just sixteen months before being disbanded in September 1843, and Wellington did not have local representation again until the Wellington Town Board was formed in 1863. Initially, building regulations were almost non-existent - the only one passed was the "Raupo Houses Ordinance" (1842) forbidding raupo thatch because of its extreme fire danger. The Provincial Government was primarily

²⁵ *Statistics of New Zealand* Table 1. The volume also contains a comparative table giving data for 1851 which is on page iv.

concerned with establishing a practical infrastructure using surveyors and engineers but, although it did not have a designated government architect, it was prepared to use the talents of some of its staff who had some background in architecture. Local building bylaws or regulations would not be in existence until the early 1870s.

Adaptability and Ambitions

The fact that so many of the settlers who carried out some architectural work moved on to other careers shows that they were capable of seizing opportunities when they saw prospects for advancement. A classic example was Thomas Fitzgerald who moved rapidly up the ladder of promotion as a surveyor, transferring to Hawkes Bay in 1853 and becoming superintendent of the new province there in 1858. Although carrying out a number of commissions in Wellington, he clearly saw no future in making architecture his main career. The reasons for his migration to New Zealand are also of interest. Fitzgerald was born in Ireland, in October 1824. His early training is unknown but he acquired skills in surveying and civil engineering - possibly also in architecture. We know that Fitzgerald's father was an enthusiast for emigration to New Zealand as he supported colonisation by

the New Zealand Land Company at a promotion meeting they held in Dublin.²⁶ His son, Dr John Patrick Fitzgerald, was already on his way to Wellington as surgeon on board the *Oriental*. Fitzgerald followed soon after with his sister Emily. Michael, another brother trained in surveying and civil engineering, was the last of the family to make the voyage, and he too did well for himself, becoming Chief Surveyor of Wellington and Hawkes Bay. Circumstances in both Ireland and England were very unsettled in the late 1830s and early 1840s. Ireland was poverty-ridden and conditions for the lower classes in England were only marginally better. Clearly, emigration to New Zealand was seen as a major opportunity for betterment.

²⁶ "Colonisation of New Zealand: Meeting at Dublin" p 3.

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