

Ground floor Attics: Canterbury's V Huts

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ABSTRACT: Alfred C. Barker's 1864 photograph of V-huts amidst unkempt grasses bracketed by flax bushes is well-known. Less often reproduced are his drawings of his own V-hut: Studdingsail Hall, though texts, such as Anna Petersen's *New Zealanders At Home* and the Drummonds' *At Home in New Zealand*, reproduce two similar Barker sketches drawn on the 27th and the 28th February 1851. The drawings were also reproduced three dimensionally, almost 100 years after they were drawn, as part of Canterbury Museum's "Canterbury Colonists Exhibition" (1950-1951). This paper examines the references to V-huts which permeate 1850s journals, diaries and newspapers, concluding with an examination of the Barker drawings and the Canterbury Museum replication of one of them.

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A V-hut is a prism, an extruded triangle of space, enclosed by weather-boarded gable ends and a thatched inverted-V-shaped roof, supported by inclines of horizontally-lapped, rough-sawn boards.¹ Its front gable end accommodates its only windows and door. The most pervasive images place the door and windows symmetrically, but other photographs and drawings indicate that high levels of variation, improvisation, and asymmetry pervaded the position of fenestration/openings in this building type.

V-huts are conventionally thought of as temporary housing deriving from the initial period of Pākehā settlement in Canterbury. They seem to have existed from 1850 until

c1913, but published accounts and newspaper reports of the buildings are focussed on the 27 years between 1850 and 1877. The earliest reference to a V-hut appears to date from a Charlotte Godley letter, which was written in November 1850, but published much later in 1936. In it she described the V-hut as: "a mere sloping roof of boards overlapping, set on the ground without any walls to stand on, and of course removable without loss, except of a little labour, when they know where they will finally settle,—or by wind."² The *Lyttelton Times* likewise refers to the mobility of the building-type, and, in its first mention of a V-hut, it records the author's knowledge of "one V hut being blown away."³ This apparent lack

of attachment of V-huts to the ground is repeated in several colonial accounts, which often imply the V-hut as a floor-less, as well as a wall-less, building. One settler attributed his lack of a floor to "wood being so awfully dear. It is all imported into Canterbury."⁴ Eliza Withell recalled that "'One man, who was a carpenter, built himself a V hut. One day while he and his wife were at dinner, a whirlwind lifted the hut over their heads and left them seated at the table.'"⁵ Rev. GTB Kingdon recalled experiencing a "severe earthquake" in a V-hut located close to St

huts" Johnson *The Story of Lyttelton* p 38.

⁴ Boot & Boot "A Lively Picture of Canterbury" p 2.

⁵ Eliza Hanna Withell nee Corlett quoted, Canterbury Branch, NZHPT "Bridal Path" n.p. c.f. "Fancy one, the other day, from having no door, caught up by the wind, and shoved bodily away, and the people inside discovered eating chops!" Godley *Letters from Early New Zealand* p 151 [26th November 1850]

¹ William Pratt quoted, Special Reporter "Old Canterbury" p 6. Also "and some of rough sawn timber" *New Zealand Houses Past and Present* n.p.

² Godley *Letters from Early New Zealand* p. 151 [26th November 1850]

³ "Journal of the Week" (1 February 1851): 3. Also "the sou'-wester ... even blew away some of the tents and V-

Michael's Church, but "on going outside [he] found that a cow was leaning against the side of the hut tilting it up and down."⁶ In Lyttelton, a whare, shaped like a V-hut, which was used as a prison, was reputedly "so small and light in weight that ... one night a prisoner walked off with it!"⁷

This volatile relationship with the ground is complicit with more general notions of temporality. These situate the V-hut within the architectural impatience of colonisation, those perceptions of insufficient settlement and a hankering for architecture to articulate permanence. "Impatience" by definition is a spatio-temporal tension - the knowledge of, and desire to be, in some other time or place. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "impatience" more detachedly as "Intolerance of delay; restlessness of desire or expectation; restless longing or eagerness." It is the desire to disturb time, and to bring the future more immediate or present than the status quo constraints of the physical universe appear to allow. Impatience imagines the possibility of another state, another time and/or place, and feels the pressing need to be there. As such,

⁶ "Christchurch Revisited" p 3.

⁷ Johnson *The Story of Lyttelton* p 67.

impatience is spatially a condition of dual or trans-location, a state interested in moving on rather than standing still. It is a condition satisfied only with the temporary, or perhaps more accurately, the transitional.

The term "hut," appears to be critical to this association. It is a primitive *hut* from which Laugier stages his origins of architecture, not a primitive *house* or *building*, though it might be that a notion of impatience distinguishes the primitive from the colonial. Physically the primitive and the colonial illude to each other - but the colonial condition is counter to contentment, indicative of an inability to securely call a place home, to be settled. While Canterbury's Pākehā settlers used the terms: V-tent, V-hut and V-house, it is "V-hut" which most persistently sustains the architectural image of colonial transition. Only on a few occasions did newspaper advertisements refer to V-houses, and these are prefaced as "substantial," and "strong and well-built."⁸ One Lyttelton V House, for example, contained "three sleeping apartments, and a sitting room."⁹ In contrast, V-huts are usually described as insignificant (e.g. "*only* a V hut"¹⁰),

⁸ "Substantial V House [advertisement]" p 1.

⁹ "V House For Sale [advertisement]" p 8.

¹⁰ emphasis added. Butler *A First Year in Canterbury* p 83.

primary ("*first* a V hut"¹¹), and unspectacular ("The other buildings scarcely call for remark. There are ... V huts"¹²). In advertisements they were usually unembellished by adjectives, suggesting that the term "V-hut" was a commonly understood one, twinned to utility rather than status, though JC Watts Russell's advertised efforts to sell his 1851 V-hut on Lyttelton's Section 38 is an almost exclusive example of the application of both informative and persuasive adjectives to his V-hut. It was: "desirable," in "good condition," "commodious," and "recently erected."¹³

Descriptions of V-huts can be derived from letters, advertisements, newspaper articles, auction reports and magistrate court reports. They were sold and let, usually explicitly with the land they were situated on.¹⁴ Physical characteristics were also sometimes described. The "commodious" V hut was 16 ft x 12 ft (4.9m x 3.7m),¹⁵ one V Hut was advertised

¹¹ emphasis added. Mosley *Illustrated Guide* p 42.

¹² "Journal of a Trip to the Diggings" p 1.

¹³ "A Desirable V Hut to be sold [advertisement]" p 8.

¹⁴ e.g. "A Desirable V Hut to be sold [advertisement]" p 8. "Important Sale By Auction" p 1, "To Let, in Christchurch" p 4, "Sale by Auction. Mr. Alport will Sell [advertisement]" p 3.

¹⁵ "A Desirable V Hut to be sold [advertisement]" p 8.

"with lean-to attached,"¹⁶ another had a "brick chimney attached thereto."¹⁷ A published list of voters "not being entitled to have their names retained on the List of Voters for the Electoral District of Akaroa," listed John Ruddings' Okain Bay V-hut, in May 1861, as "not of the value of £5 per annum," the property qualification required to qualify for male suffrage.¹⁸ Auctions selling V-huts with no reserve also suggest the low value of the structures.¹⁹ Nineteen months later though, in December 1862, the *Hawke's Bay Herald* reported the sale of a V hut for £16.²⁰

As an interim stage, beyond which the "civilised" fruits of colonisation lay, "V-huts

¹⁶ "For Sale, A V. Hut with lean-to attached [advertisement]" p 2.

¹⁷ "Horse Sale on Saturday Next [advertisement]" p 2.

¹⁸ "The Following Persons are Objected to" p 3; The New Zealand Constitution Act (1852) required the rental value of a house to be at least £10 (in town), or £5 (in the country) for a householder to qualify for male suffrage. "Voting Rights" *Te Ara* n.p.; also "The Future of Government of Canterbury" p 2.

¹⁹ e.g. "without reserve" "Sale by Auction. Mr. Alport will Sell [advertisement]" p 3; and "without the slightest reserve" "Unreserved Sale of Freehold Land [advertisement]" p 5.

²⁰ "Commercial Summary" p 2. £16 in 1862 is equivalent to \$1,760.08 (usin g CPI) "New Zealand Inflation Calculator" n.p.

sufficed until a better makeshift for a house could be devised."²¹ They were "the main temporary homes until more durable residences gradually replaced them."²² As such, V-huts were an architecture whose very act of construction (as an initial, but knowingly transitional, stage of European notions of civilisation), desired their own redundancy and destruction. Rykwert likewise reminds, with respect to the primitive hut, that: "the first object ... must be a memory of something which cannot but be lost ... It is a collective memory kept alive within groups by legends and rituals."²³ A built-in loss, saturated by memory, is equally critical to the architectures of both the primitive hut and the Canterbury V-hut.

Consequently, while in the early 1850s V-huts were conceived of as a forward step towards "civilisation," as an historiographic idea, the V-hut represents a backward stage. From the safe distance of Golden Jubilees and centenaries, one can nostalgically, but thankfully, recall that: "the whare and V hut stage of civilisation [had] passed away and the

²¹ Morrison *The Evolution of a City* p 128.

²² Johnson *Story of Lyttelton* p 38.

²³ Rykwert *On Adam's House in Paradise* p 14.

capital began to look like a town,"²⁴ observing "the change those old colonists have made ... from the tiny tent or hastily-constructed V hut to the comfortable hotel,"²⁵ while imagining that "[b]efore us stretched away the expanse of plain, with but a single sod Whare, V hut or tent, where now stand streets of handsome modern buildings."²⁶ In a similar vein, the President of a 1909 conference of musicians in Auckland's declaration, that: "the time was not "yet ripe" for a Conservatorium," was scorned because: "If we had always waited until the time had been "ripe" to do anything, we should still be in the V hut and bullock wagon stage of development."²⁷ The V-hut hence signifies development, but a phase which, if dwelt in, signals an inappropriate stagnation. The V-hut is an architecture to temporarily visit, not to settle in, and one in which the achievement of "civilisation" threatens to vanish.

The anxiety of a lengthy occupation locates V-hut etiquette in terms of brevity. It was fast to build, and it was temporary accommodation. For Charlotte Godley, it required only "a little

²⁴ "Old Christchurch" p 72.

²⁵ Old Settler "The Late Mr. Samuel Deighton" p 3.

²⁶ G.R.H. "Some Old Time Reminiscences" p 5.

²⁷ "Musicians in Conference" p 6.

labour,"²⁸ though contemporary accounts vary. Pascoe in 1940 stated that "[a] Canterbury settler was able to build one of these in a day,"²⁹ but Samuel Butler, speaking from experience, described V-hut construction as "so small an undertaking ... It should have taken us about a couple of days to have done in first-rate style; as it was, I am not going to tell you how long it did take."³⁰ Kennaway is less evasive, but equally vague, describing one V-hut as having been "knocked up."³¹ Perhaps more telling was the length of construction time needed when a V-hut was constructed for the 2003 Reality TV series *Colonial house*. Building took longer than expected so "[t]he production company ... brought in ... [an] electric saw to help speed up construction of the house."³²

This speed of construction (imagined, desired or actual) supports the idea of the V-hut as an interim vehicle of progress, quickly bringing settlement closer. As a step beyond the tent,

²⁸ Godley *Letters from Early New Zealand* p 151 [26th November 1850].

²⁹ Pascoe *Making New Zealand* p 5. also: "could be built in a day." Drummond & Drummond *At Home in New Zealand* p 75.

³⁰ Butler *A First Year in Canterbury* pp 73-74.

³¹ Kennaway *Crusts* p 89.

³² King "Colonial Life" p 3.

the V-hut entered into a materiality that tantalisingly suggested a building, albeit timber, with its accessories of windows, a door and sometimes a chimney. Consequently, the V-hut is an architecture of partiality. It is a tent slipping into building, or vice versa. Straddling across these states of the temporary and the permanent structures, the V-hut is an architecture of both impatience and aspiration. Its tent-like form denotes a lack of settlement, its materiality an earthquake-resistant architecture of New Zealand. Its incomplete action of colonial settlement is matched with its lack of the provision of conventional architectural structure between roof and ground.

For Butler the V-hut "consists of a small roof set upon the ground; it is a hut, all roof and no walls,"³³ for Godley, it was "a mere sloping roof of boards overlapping, set on the ground without any walls to stand on,"³⁴ and for another woman settler, the V-hut was "exactly as if you took the roof off a house, and stood it

³³ Butler *A First Year in Canterbury* p 73. Butler is later referenced by Morrison *The Evolution of a City* p 128 and Lewis "2.06 Timber and Grass" n.p.

³⁴ Godley *Letters from Early New Zealand* p 151 [26th November 1850]

on the ground."³⁵ One English immigrant to Christchurch was unimpressed with this idiosyncratic character of the V-hut, writing to the *Nottingham Guardian* of "the roof slanting to the ground, and there being no walls, nor any floor save the ground you walked upon."³⁶ *The Press* was equally unimpressed with the writer, referring to "his pathetic description of the miseries of living in a V hut."³⁷ The reference to the roof persists beyond contemporary accounts, with later accounts describing V-huts as looking "like a roof that had been set on the ground,"³⁸ or appearing to be "all roof; the sides sloped from the ground up to a peak."³⁹ Pascoe described the V-hut as having "Its side walls sloped inward from the ground to the ridge, like a ridge roof."⁴⁰

Studdingsail Hall

Well-known V-huts include those occupied by the Godleys, and Samuel Butler, but perhaps the most famous V-hut was Alfred C. Barker's Studdingsail Hall. Its lineage dates from a tent

³⁵ Simpson *The Women of New Zealand* p 97.

³⁶ Boot & Boot "A Lively Picture of Canterbury" p 2.

³⁷ "Mr Boot's idea of Canterbury" p 2.

³⁸ MacGregor *Etiquette & Elbowgrease* p 3.

³⁹ Drummond & Drummond *At Home in New Zealand* p 75.

⁴⁰ Pascoe *Making New Zealand* p 5.

made of blankets and the Studding Sail from the *Charlotte Jane*.⁴¹ Barker "removed"⁴² the resulting hut to Christchurch and "substituted sawn rafters for the sticks which had supported the tent ... and boarded up the two ends,"⁴³ forming the recognised form of a V-hut. Relocating and rebuilding the V-hut/tent took almost a month; Barker's wife, Emma, staying at a hotel in Sumner in the interim.⁴⁴ The hybrid building was close to the Land Office, on Worchester Street,⁴⁵ and was described both as "a long V hut,"⁴⁶ and a tent.⁴⁷ The *Lyttelton Times* located it "'immediately opposite the Land Office, and ... constructed of an immense studding sail, formerly belonging to the "Charlotte Jane," [It] was remarkable for its seasonable hospitality."⁴⁸

⁴¹ Wigram *The Story of Christchurch* pp 50-51.

⁴² Barker quoted, Andersen *Old Christchurch* p 63.

⁴³ Barker quoted, Andersen *Old Christchurch* p 63.

⁴⁴ Barker quoted, Andersen *Old Christchurch* p 63.

⁴⁵ Wigram *The Story of Christchurch* p 44.

⁴⁶ "Death of Dr. Barker" p 2.

⁴⁷ Wigram *The Story of Christchurch* pp 44, 50-51; "Death of Dr. Barker" p 2. There appear to have been a number of similar structures in Christchurch. See G.R.H. "Some Old Time Reminiscences" p 5, *Canterbury Old and New, 1850-1900* p 18.

⁴⁸ "Journal of the Week" *Lyttelton Times* (22 February 1851) p 5, quoted, Wigram *The Story of Christchurch* pp 50-51.

In addition to its "seasonable hospitality," the fame of Studdingsail Hall can be attributed to multiple modes of representation: primarily Barker's letters, his drawings, and a reconstruction in the Canterbury Museum's "Canterbury Colonists Exhibition," erected to acknowledge the centenary of the province 1950-51. Barker wrote that:

"While the fine weather lasted, living in the tent was very tolerable; but how can I describe the misery we underwent in the great south-west storms. When they did come on they did so with a vengeance; the strong rafters bent like osiers before the wind, while the rain squeezed through the painted sail-cloth as if it had been a sieve, wetting and drenching everything in the tent, and this not for an hour, but for two or three days at a time without a moment's cessation. Frequently at times the fire would be put out, and we had nothing but to sit shivering in cold and hunger from morning till night, while all around the country was in deep pools of water. As soon, however, as these south-westerns pass over, the sun bursts out with brilliancy, and in an incredibly short space of time everything dries up again."⁴⁹

Barker's drawing, the "Interior of Studding Sail Hall, Christchurch, N. Zealand, Feb. 28/51," was sketched during the summer months. The slightest triangle of sky, top right, is unclouded paper white. A scene of domestic bliss: two women (Emma Barker and Letitia

⁴⁹ Barker quoted, Andersen *Old Christchurch* p 66.

Bowen) and a child (AL Barker) sit content, while Barker draws. The gable roof of the V-hut draws the eye in amplifying the interiorising condition of a one-point perspective. Centre stage a clock pictorially demonstrates a desire to measure time, and hence perhaps progress. The pencil and pen drawing is a crude perspective, fixated on the material detail of the building, its interior and its occupants. The roughness of the pencil conveys the rawness of the hut. The evenness of this material investigation, measured by a consistent line weight, means the detail of the farthestmost of the interior (the clock, floorboards, rafters), resist conventions of pictorial recession, and is brought representationally forward on the drawn paper. Scale and perspectival vanishing instead convey distance. The female occupants, busy with needlework, are seemingly oblivious to the sketcher, and equally oblivious to their surroundings. If the V-hut is an impatient aspirational architecture, its spatio-temporal disjunction is apparent here as the occupants behave as if they are not of this time and space.

The axiality of the drawing is effected by the constrained pictorial framing of the open door. We look in, because this is the only view into

the interior. As such, the V-hut becomes camera-like: a box controlling the production of the image. V-huts reputedly had either no windows,⁵⁰ or, like whare, one window adjacent to its door. The front elevation consequently controlled both visual and physical entrance, and managed relationships between public and private realms. The openness of colonial life, for example: the requirement to cook outdoors,⁵¹ and the closeness of occupation, tested English customs of domestic privacy. While Studdingsail Hall was reknown for its "seasonable hospitality," Barker equally struggled with social interactions, over which he had no control, due to the central location of the V-hut:

"unluckily a sort of path had got to be made just in front of my tent door, and I had some difficulty in preventing people from still using it - and then a public house was set up with the appropriate title of the Golden Fleece, and we were much annoyed by the drunken vagabonds who would keep tumbling up against our tent at all hours of the night."⁵²

⁵⁰ Pascoe *Making New Zealand* p 5.

⁵¹ "all household operations, cooking, etc. Are carried on outside to the great edification of passers-by." Godley quoted, Morrison *The Evolution of a City* p 218.

⁵² Barker quoted, Anderson *Old Christchurch* p 64.

Almost 100 years later, the Canterbury Museum built Barker's drawing.⁵³ The drawing's depiction of tightly controlled access, and the cramped interior limiting "camera" position, determines the exterior location of the sketcher, but this axial image possibly also determined its selection for three-dimensional replication in the museum, because the architecture of the V-hut is also the architecture of the museum exhibition, one which desires its audience to be external, and restricted to visual access.

The drawing crops the building's triangularity, forcing it into the more conventional domestic geometry of a gable house form. The door frame, and furniture placement similarly edit the interior, pictorially supplying the interior with vertically where walls *ought* to be. The museum exhibit, in contrast, celebrates the idiosyncrasy of the V-hut's external form as originary architecture, cloaked in the sail of Canterbury's first ship, the *Charlotte Jane*. The accompanying catalogue asserted that: "[t]he

⁵³ "This reconstruction of the living-room end of the sail-covered V-hut follows his [Barker's] sketch of 28th February, 1851" *Canterbury Colonists Exhibition* p 9.

first home ashore is represented by the V-hut, which was a tent in wood and thatch."⁵⁴

⁵⁴ *Canterbury Colonists Exhibition* p 1.

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