

Gentlemen's residences in 1850s Christchurch: an examination of the home of Joseph Brittan and John Cracroft Wilson

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ABSTRACT: The Canterbury earthquakes have seen the demolitions of many buildings in Christchurch, including some of the city's earliest building stock. Linwood House was built for John Brittan at around the same time as John Cracroft Wilson built Cracroft House. Although both men would have been members of the elite in the new settlement, the first houses they built are quite different. The houses were recorded by archaeologists prior to and during demolition, using the techniques of buildings archaeology. This paper discusses the results of those investigations and considers the similarities and differences between the two houses in terms of both style and construction techniques.

John Cracroft Wilson – later Sir John – and Joseph Brittan both arrived in Canterbury in the 1850s and promptly built houses for their families. The two men were probably of similar social background – the former a civil servant in India and the latter a doctor in England – and the two would go on to have not dissimilar careers in Christchurch, albeit much shorter in the case of Brittan. The paths of the two men are likely to have crossed often in the city, both socially and in their working lives, and it is even possible that they visited each other's homes. And yet the two built quite different houses – why?

Brittan's Linwood House and Cracroft Wilson's Cracroft House were both demolished following the February 22 earthquake in Christchurch, and both were recorded by archaeologists prior to and during their demolition, under the archaeological provisions of the Historic Places Act. The recording process favoured

Cracroft House, which was largely intact post-earthquake and was thus able to be recorded in detail prior to its demolition. By comparison, Linwood House was in a state of partial collapse when first visited by an archaeologist in May 2011. Furthermore, considerable experience of recording houses (and other buildings) had been gained in the 18 months between the demolition of the two houses, and we knew much more about what could be recorded – and what it meant – by the time we recorded Cracroft House in August of this year.

Demolition revealed the original 1850s house in both cases, and the differences between the two houses were striking, given the similar social status of the men for whom they were built. These differences are particularly striking with regard to that key indicator of social position (or aspirations), appearance, and also fabric.

Joseph Brittan was a doctor and the older brother of William Guise Brittan, the Commissioner of Lands for Canterbury. The older Brittan arrived in Christchurch in 1852 with his wife, three sons and a daughter. In September 1850, Joseph Brittan had bought 50 acres of land adjacent to the Avon River, in an area that would become known as Linwood. The property was adjacent to that of his younger brother and was selected for its proximity to three key features – the river, the centre of the new city and the proposed canal, which the Brittans no doubt hoped would become a key part of the city's transport infrastructure and thus increase the value of their land. Brittan retained 10 acres of his property for his house, a garden and an orchard, farming the remaining 40 acres, although the land was fairly sandy and probably quite unproductive. Brittan and his family moved straight to the land he had purchased, living in a small house there until Linwood House was completed by at least

1857 (apparently the foundations had been laid in 1852).¹

Brittan pursued a political career in Christchurch, as well as being part-owner and editor of the *Canterbury Standard*, a publication he helped found in 1854. He served as an elected member of the Canterbury Provincial Council from 1855-57 and again in 1861-62, holding the post of Provincial Secretary and standing for Superintendent in 1857 (he was defeated by William Moorhouse). He and his brother were also important in the development of the city's sporting life, being instrumental in the development of cricket in Canterbury and breeding racehorses – Joseph's land at Linwood was the venue for the first steeplechase in the province. He was also on the Board of Education and was a member of the Vestry of the Avonside Holy Trinity Church. Brittan died in 1867, apparently leaving substantial debts.²

Linwood House had a number of occupants following the death of Joseph, the most famous being his daughter and son-in-law, Mary and William Rolleston. In the twentieth

century the house became a school and was later converted to flats. There were two major additions to the house during its history, one in 1889 and the other in the 1920s, and a number of modifications to the 1850s building as well.³

John Cracroft Wilson was born in India on 21 May 1808, and went on to attend Oxford in the mid-late 1820s. He married Elizabeth Wall (with whom he would have eight children) during this period and subsequently returned to India, where he joined the Indian civil service in Bengal. He pursued a successful career there before his health led him to leave in October 1853, along with his second wife, Emma, and one of his daughters from his first marriage. The family made their way to Melbourne and then Sydney before eventually arriving in Lyttelton in April 1854, along with various servants and an interesting array of livestock.⁴

Upon arrival in Canterbury, Cracroft Wilson set about establishing himself, buying land at the foot of the Port Hills (which he named "Cashmere") and leasing three pastoral

stations – Broadlands, High Peak and Cracroft.⁵ At 54,000 acres, this last was the second largest property in Canterbury at the time.⁶ He was also instrumental in founding the Canterbury Jockey Club before leaving for India at the end of 1854⁷ - William Guise Brittan was another founding member of this club.⁸ Back in India, Cracroft Wilson was first appointed judge and was then instrumental in putting down the Indian Mutiny, for which he received various honours, including being knighted in 1872. He returned to New Zealand in April 1859, with more servants and livestock, including a Bokhara jackass. By this time Cracroft House had been built (the house was completed in 1856).⁹

Once back in New Zealand, Cracroft Wilson threw himself into local affairs, serving as a member of the House of Representatives for various electorates off and on from 1861 to 1875 and, from 1862-76, as a member of the Canterbury Provincial Council. He was active in the Canterbury Volunteers, a member of the Canterbury College Board of Governors

⁵ Kristiansen "Wilson, John Cracroft" n.p.

⁶ Acland *The Early Canterbury Runs* p 143.

⁷ Kristiansen "Wilson, John Cracroft" n.p.

⁸ "Local intelligence" p 4.

⁹ Kristiansen "Wilson, John Cracroft" n.p.

¹ Pearson "Linwood House, Christchurch" pp 8-9.

² Pearson "Linwood House, Christchurch" pp 15-16.

³ Pearson "Linwood House, Christchurch" pp 11-15.

⁴ Kristiansen "Wilson, John Cracroft" n.p.

and chairman of the Canterbury Acclimatisation Society and the Amuri County Council, as well as being a patron of the arts and a keen flautist.¹⁰ According to his entry in the *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, he "conducted himself as a self-conscious descendant of the landed Cracrofts of Hackthorn, Lincolnshire" and one of his ambitions was to "put together a property worthy of being entailed on his eldest son."¹¹ He spent a considerable amount of money on his Cashmere property (on which Cracroft House was situated) and was known as "Nabob" Wilson.¹²

Cracroft Wilson died in 1881, and the house remained as such until used by the Womens Auxiliary Air Force during World War II and then given to the New Zealand Girl Guides Association in 1959.¹³ There were a number of modifications and additions to the house between 1856 and 2011, with the most significant being in 1990. None of the modifications or additions were on the same

¹⁰ Kristiansen "Wilson, John Cracroft" n.p.

¹¹ Kristiansen "Wilson, John Cracroft" n.p. (n.b.: The *DNZB* entry does not give the source for the second quote.)

¹² Kristiansen "Wilson, John Cracroft" n.p.

¹³ Kristiansen "Wilson, John Cracroft" n.p.

scale as those seen at Linwood House.¹⁴

The c1857 Linwood House was a two-storey house in the Georgian style, designed by the architect CE Fooks. The house was brick (triple brick on the ground floor, rising to double brick on the first floor) with sandstone detailing. The source of the bricks has not been established yet, but a number bore the frog mark 'F R', while the sandstone is believed to be from a quarry in Lyttelton Harbour. The internal walls on the ground floor were brick timber-framed walls, and some of the walls on the first floor were of the same form, while others were timber with lath and plaster cladding. The ceilings throughout the c1857 house were lath and plaster, with the laths being identified as white oak. The floors were 4-inch rimu tongue-and-groove, sitting on Canadian oregon joists. The bearers sat on bluestone piles. Canadian oregon was also used for the trusses, while the struts and sarking were rimu and the shingles were Canadian oregon or cedar. Some of the beams in the first-floor ceiling were identified as keruing, a Malaysian hardwood that I understand is very difficult to get nails into. All the joints in the wall framing were mortise

¹⁴ Watson & Hill "151 Cashmere Road, Christchurch"

and tenon, and all the original nails observed in the 1857 part of the house were of a square or rectangular cross-section. The house originally had French doors on the ground floor and casement windows on the first floor, and the original verandah was confined to the north elevation. Recording during demolition established that the staircase that remained in this part of the house was not original.

The exact number of rooms the house originally had is not clear but there were at least five rooms on the ground floor and an unknown number on the first floor – it was not possible to observe the demolition closely enough to determine the latter. It is possible that there were more than five rooms on the ground floor, but what is clear is that the house was not the full rectangle suggested by Fooks' drawing of the building. A range of original decorative features remained in the house at the time a conservation plan was prepared (in 2005), including the timber dado, picture rails, moulded plaster cornices and marble mantelpieces.¹⁵

Cracroft House was a one-and-a-half storey mud brick house (although some fired bricks

¹⁵ Pearson "Linwood House, Christchurch" pp 44-61.

were also used), with a gable roof that may originally have been thatched but was later shingled and, later still, clad in corrugated iron. There were three dormer windows in the roof, facing north. The external walls in the gable ends were clad in weatherboards, above the ground floor. There was a verandah on the north elevation, which was at the same pitch as the roof. The main door opened off this verandah and originally had French doors on either side, while all the first-floor windows were casement windows. The internal walls were of mud-and-stud construction, while the studs and top and bottom plates were jointed with mortise and tenon joints. The timbers from the house have yet to be identified, but other fabric has been identified, including basalt piles under the building and basalt rubble foundations. The layout of the house was largely original, with at least seven rooms on the ground floor (five in the main part and two or three in the lean-to at the rear) and five rooms on the first floor. There were at least five fireplaces on the ground floor but none on the first floor, which would have relied on heat rising from below and radiating from the chimneys. The fireplaces and chimneys were brick. The only original decoration that survived to 2011 were picture rails and some painted embossed panelling on the internal

doors.

So why did two men of such similar social standing build such different houses? The reasons behind Cracroft Wilson's selection of house style and construction techniques are reasonably self-evident, and no doubt stem from the fact that he was brought up and lived most of his life in India. The house, however, is at odds with some of the details recorded about Cracroft Wilson, although it should be noted that I did not locate the primary source for any of the information in the *DNZB* (but nor did I look particularly hard for it). Perhaps the question should really be, why did Joseph Brittan build a house that was so different not just from Cracroft Wilson's, but from most other houses in Canterbury in the 1850s? The word "pretentious" is one that springs to mind, particularly given that Brittan arrived in the colony with no particular political experience or standing, but knowing that his brother was Commissioner of Lands in the new settlement. It was certainly a house that spoke of aspirations, whereas Cracroft House was perhaps a little more honest, and certainly less obvious. In fact, the only feature of Cracroft House that suggested relatively high social status was its size – at some 13 rooms, this

was a big house – and this suggests that the size of a house is perhaps a more important indicator of status than appearance, or ornateness of decoration. It may be worth noting that Brittan was the subject of a scandal: two years after his first wife died in 1849, he married her sister at Gretna Green. According to some, the newlyweds fled to Canterbury to avoid the scandal.¹⁶ Perhaps Brittan hoped that building such an impressive house would forestall the inevitable gossip.

The extent of the differences between the two houses led me to examine them more closely to see what similarities there might be between the two, however small. The following were identified:

- (a) the minimal use of (local) timber
- (b) some of the construction techniques represent "old" or at least uncommon techniques, such as the brick-and-stud internal walls of Linwood House and the mud-brick of Cracroft House
- (c) mortise and tenon joints
- (d) square/rectangular cross-section nails
- (e) casement windows

¹⁶ Starky "Rolleston, Elizabeth Mary" n.p.

- (f) basalt piles
- (g) a verandah
- (h) the use of French doors

These similarities can be divided into the "old" and the "new" – the older styles and construction techniques of where the two men had come from (such as the casement windows and the mortise and tenon joints) versus the new styles and traditions that would become part of the fabric of Christchurch houses, such as the verandahs and the basalt piles. These are small things, but they demonstrate that these were "transitional" houses – houses that fell between the styles and construction techniques of the country of origin of Brittan and Cracroft Wilson and the styles and construction techniques that would come to characterise houses in Victorian Christchurch.

From an archaeological point of view, the houses were built in the period defined by Ian Smith as the Pākehā period of New Zealand's culture-history sequence, a period that began in 1792 (when the first Europeans were left in New Zealand) and extended to 1860, when the Māori population of New Zealand was first outnumbered. This was a period of transition of the cultures of all in New

Zealand at the time, as Māori came to grips with the new arrivals, and Europeans came to grips with their new home, and the differences in climate and resources.¹⁷ The houses Cracroft Wilson and Brittan built demonstrate both of these attributes, from the French doors and verandahs to the minimal use of timber in both houses. It was out of these challenges, and the mixture of backgrounds and influences of New Zealand's new settlers, that a new culture – defined by Smith as the Kiwi culture – grew, along with a new type of house: the villa.

¹⁷ Smith "Maori, Pakeha and Kiwi" p 9.

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