ARCHITECT - or Painter, Politician, Forger, Farmer: Multiple careers a necessity in 1840s New Zealand
Adrian Humphris, Wellington City Archives & Geoff Mew, Independent Scholar

ABSTRACT: Emigrants arriving in New Zealand in the 1840s who had some architectural training were rarely able to find full-time employment in that profession. Some sought to make a living in related fields where their drafting skills could be used (as artists or surveyors); others changed completely to become farmers or real estate agents. A few sought civil service positions or moved into politics. The most persistent bided their time in other employment but moved back to architecture when conditions became more favourable.

Here we describe a number of examples from these categories. Edward Ashworth arrived in Auckland in 1842. Unable to find architectural work, he taught drawing to the Governor’s children and also produced several paintings of early Auckland. Henry St Hill arrived in Wellington as the New Zealand Company’s Architect - but followed a career as magistrate and sheriff. W Robertson practised as an architect in Auckland from 1847 - but also advertised as a real estate agent. S Kemptthorne arrived in 1842 as a church architect but did not adapt well to New Zealand conditions and fell out of favour with Bishop Selwyn. By 1864 he was Secretary of a Public Buildings Commission. Reader Gillson Wood, famous or infamous for New Zealand’s first parliament building, the “Shedifice” in Auckland, became a well-known politician - but returned to practising as an architect several times during a long career. William Mason thought he was coming to New Zealand as Colonial Architect in 1840. Downgraded to Superintendent of Public Works, he resigned after two years. Mason then moved into auctioneering and farming for the next ten years before returning to architecture and, later, a highly successful career in Dunedin. T O’Meara of Wellington claimed to be an architect but was probably a builder. Either way his drafting ability was found to be wanting when he forged a series of government debentures and tried to pass them for payment. (This resulted in a ten-year jail sentence, with transportation to Tasmania).

We also explore some of the social reasons for the apparent lack of work for early skilled architects, including the slow-growing economy, immediate needs for basic shelter/food production and major differences in building material resources compared with settlers’ countries of origin.

Introduction
The numbers of architects, trained or otherwise, arriving in New Zealand at the start of the decade from 1840 were very small, even in relation to the relatively limited numbers of European settlers. The chief settlements at that time were Auckland, New Plymouth, Wellington, Whanganui and Nelson. Dunedin and Christchurch were founded right at the end of the period. The majority of new arrivals were at first too busy worrying about the necessities of life to bother about the refinements of architecture. The embryonic government began in Russell and moved to Auckland as the capital on 14 March 1841. It might have been expected to start erecting substantial public buildings, but was chronically short of money, and to begin with had no control over other centres settled by the New Zealand Company. In the earliest days the lack of population precluded a need to establish municipal authorities and, when numbers were sufficient, some people argued against them, fearing huge rates bills. The church, particularly the Anglican Church, was the one body that showed some inclination to provide architecturally-designed buildings for its adherents; followed eventually, in halting fashion, by the government and some of the more wealthy settlers.

Two other factors are of importance when considering the uncertainties of an architectural career in the early days of European settlement: the youth of most of the emigrants, and the time needed to set up a successful export-based economy.

The first architects in Auckland have been...
identified in Stacpoole's classic book on William Mason.¹ Mane followed this with a 1990 article on the first European architects in New Zealand.² We have built on and added to this information, considering also the social and economic trends influencing the success or otherwise of aspiring architects during the 1840s.

**Youth of "Architects" and other emigrants**

Of the 15 emigrants who we have identified who attempted architectural careers (this appears to be the total number for the 1840s) we have "age at arrival" data for 13, which gives an average age of 26. However, if we remove the three over 30, the average reduces to age 24. These figures are generally comparable with averages for early emigrants as a whole, as Table 1 shows.

Around half our 15 arrived as survey assistants, but, as was the fashion of the times, this frequently meant that they also had some architectural, as well as possibly engineering, training. Seven men were initially employed in a survey capacity; four in Wellington, two in Auckland and one in Nelson. Another seven arrived specifically with the intention of practising as architects. Of these, Walter Robertson of Auckland was the oldest at 44, but did not arrive until 1847. Henry St Hill of Wellington was 33 when he landed in 1840, the same year that William Mason (30), potentially the best qualified architect, arrived at Kororākepa from Australia. Sampson Kemptorne, also aged 33, came by ship to Auckland in 1842 and Timothy O'Meara (age unknown), who professed to being an architect, was in Wellington by 1843. Nor do we know the age of Edward Roberts when he came to Wellington about 1847 in a mixed official and private capacity as engineer and architect attached to the Royal Engineers. Edward Ashworth was another early arrival at Auckland in 1842 (see below). Frederick Thatcher was the odd man out; although a trained architect, he actually came to New Plymouth in 1843, aged 29, with the intention of farming - but his church interests soon led to architectural work there, which continued when he moved to Auckland in 1845.

The youth and backgrounds of the large numbers of settlers who came to New Zealand either to farm, to trade as shopkeepers or merchants, or to become manufacturers was generally associated with a lack of investment capital except in very limited instances. In the period when land had to be cleared of forest, and exploration was still being carried out to determine the extent of mineral and other resources, there was little surplus money available for any but the most basic buildings - hence the difficulties potential architects had in finding work.

**Youth and Adaptability**

Of the seven men with some architectural training, who began their New Zealand careers doing survey work, only one, James Baber of Auckland, was considered to be an

---

1 Stacpoole William Mason.
2 Mane "The First New Zealand Architects" pp 37-41.
architect at the end of his life, and that was after several periods in alternative jobs such as Deputy Waste Lands Commissioner (1858) and Inspector of Buildings (1861). Reader Wood, who later in the 1860s would entrust Baber with his architectural practice while overseas, became a prominent politician, as did Thomas Fitzgerald, who moved from Wellington to Hawke’s Bay and then to Queensland.

Thomas Brunner did not start advertising as an architect in Nelson until 1849 and then only had limited work, gaining a much greater reputation as an explorer and surveyor. Albert Allom, initially based in Wellington, is only mentioned briefly in the literature in connection with a possible design for Judge Chapman’s house in the suburb of Karori. Although he spent much of his later life in New Zealand, he was mainly concerned with mining ventures around Auckland and on the Coromandel Peninsula.

Henry Cridland worked in Wellington as an architect from about 1845 and was moderately successful as he also ran a saw mill and a brick works. He moved to the then-new settlement of Christchurch in 1849 as Superintendent of Public Works, carrying out both survey and engineering tasks so enthusiastically that he died of overwork in 1867. Robert Stokes, aged 30 on arrival in Wellington in 1840, only lasted two years doing survey work. He then advertised as an architect, land surveyor and agent, getting limited architectural commissions in the single year he practised. From 1843 he ran the local newspaper, the New Zealand Spectator and Cook’s Strait Guardian, also entering politics and becoming a landowner. He made no further attempts at an architectural career.

Of the first seven, discounting Robert Stokes, the average age was 20 (age range=17-23) at time of arrival. It is clear that most of these young men, having relatively soon finished with survey work, also realised that their architectural backgrounds were not going to provide viable alternative careers, at least in the short term. Henry Cridland was the only exception, perhaps because he also had a hand in supplying the required building materials to go with his designs. The others recognised alternative opportunities and were sufficiently adaptable to take full advantage of them.

An eighth relatively young man, Edward Ashworth (28) came ashore in Auckland in 1842 from the same ship as James Baber. Ashworth was a qualified architect, having trained in Exeter and London, but was singularly unsuccessful in finding suitable

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Arrival in NZ</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Located</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Allom</td>
<td>1842</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Wellington</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baber</td>
<td>1842</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Auckland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brunner</td>
<td>1841</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Nelson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cridland</td>
<td>1843</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Wellington</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fitzgerald</td>
<td>1842</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Wellington</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stokes</td>
<td>1840</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Wellington</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wood</td>
<td>1844</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Auckland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Architect</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashworth*</td>
<td>1842</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Auckland</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: “Surveyors” age on arrival in New Zealand and place of settlement. Note Ashworth has been included; despite his formal architectural training and qualifications, he best fits in with this group.

---

3 Platts Nineteenth Century New Zealand Artists p 28.
4 Platts Nineteenth Century New Zealand Artists p 28.
work in Auckland. His skill as a talented artist
gained him employment as a tutor to the
Governor’s children and he also left a valuable
record of the appearance of early Auckland in
his paintings and sketches. However, in 1844,
he moved briefly to Sydney, then to Hong
Kong where he did find some work designing
commercial buildings over a two-year period.
Returning to Exeter in 1846, he made a name
for himself restoring old churches in the west
of England.

**Age and Persistence**

A group of six architects who were somewhat
older on arrival also had varying fortunes in
the courses of their subsequent careers. Their
ages varied from 29 to 44 and the most
ultimately successful was William Mason (30
when he came from Sydney), although the
Auckland part of his life was beset with
difficulties as he alternated between
architecture and farming before removing to
Dunedin and full-time architectural work in
1862.

Sampson Kempthorne was perhaps the least
successful, although he arrived aged 33 in
1842 with excellent credentials as one of the
first members of the then Institute of British
Architects. Kempthorne preceded Frederick
Thatcher in working for Bishop Selwyn in
Auckland, designing the Parnell St Stephen's
Chapel, St Thomas' at West Tamaki and some
of the St John’s College building. For various
reasons such as subsidence and unsuitable use
of materials, all were found to be faulty and
the bishop dispensed with Kempthorne’s
services. By early 1864 he was Secretary of a
Public Buildings Commission and proposed
an idea for a planned group of government
and other buildings systematically laid out
like the Whitehall area in London. This was
seen as too ambitious for the times and was
rejected. Kempthorne died in 1873. As already
noted, Kempthorne's replacement, Frederick
Thatcher, did not intend to practise
architecture on arrival, but was drawn into it
in New Plymouth, Auckland, and finally
Wellington, leaving a legacy of fine colonial
churches before his retirement to England and
death there in 1890.

Walter Robertson arrived in Auckland from a
roller coaster career as a builder/architect
across the Tasman somewhat later than the
others in 1847. He was also older at 44 and
probably more experienced at finding work
under colonial conditions. To begin with, he
advertised as an architect, surveyor and land
agent but he was soon publishing so many
tenders for architectural work that the other
advertisements ceased. It may be that he
simply took on too much work, as he died in
1851 aged only 48. We do not know how old
Edward Roberts was when he arrived in
Wellington in 1847 but he was probably in his
thirties judging from a carte de visite
photograph taken a year or so after his 1856
departure. Although his official position
appears to have been that of a military
engineer and surveyor, he also practised
privately and successfully as an architect in
Wellington, clearly having access to the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Arrival in NZ</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Located</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kempthorne</td>
<td>1842</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Auckland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mason</td>
<td>1840</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Auckland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roberts</td>
<td>1847</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Wellington</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robertson</td>
<td>1847</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Auckland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St Hill</td>
<td>1840</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Wellington</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thatcher</td>
<td>1843</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>New Plymouth</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: ‘Architects’ age on arrival in New Zealand and place of settlement.
developing upper echelons of society from Governor Grey down. His case differs from most others in that he was a salaried official throughout his term in New Zealand and therefore not necessarily affected by economic fluctuations. Despite this he seems to have been singularly energetic (and experienced) in seeking out extra work across a wide variety of disciplines.

By contrast, Henry St Hill, aged 33 on arrival in Wellington in 1840, despite being described as "the architect of the [New Zealand] Company," received hardly any commissions for architectural work, although he does not seem to have tried very hard to pursue such a career. Instead he became a magistrate and administrator, but returned to England and died there in June 1866.

Black Sheep and a Gentlemen Architect
None of the previous studies of early architects in New Zealand has mentioned the strange and somewhat embarrassing case of Timothy O’Meara, described as an architect on the 1843 Burgess Roll for Wellington and hence a land owner at that time. No tenders for architectural work by him have been found and on an early 1845 list of persons qualifying as jurors he had altered his profession to "builder." His next appearance was in court in June of the same year accused of forging several debentures on which he had sought payment. Found guilty, he was given a 10-year sentence to be served in Tasmania.

Another unexpected find was the architect Henry William Appleyard - only discovered through his death notice and subsequent advertisements for the sale of his considerable Auckland estate. No tender notices were placed by him, although he was stated to be an associate member of the Institute of British Architects. We can only conclude that having inherited what was presumably a considerable fortune on the death of his father in 1843, he had no need to practise and had invested the money in land and buildings hoping to profit as a speculator.

Social and Economic Factors
Auckland and Wellington shared several characteristics regarding incoming architects and development. They were significant entry ports for settlers and needed strong teams of land surveyors to lay out towns and also to establish boundaries of country sections.

Many of the surveyors among the first immigrants were trained in both surveying and architecture (and also engineering in some instances) because that was common practice in the British Isles at the time. Even some of the military personnel who were part of the Royal Engineers sent to New Zealand had some architectural personnel, as they were expected to design barracks and fortifications. Once the initial flurry of surveying was over in the first three to five years, a number of these surveyors attempted to turn their hand to architectural design.

The problem with finding work as an architect was not so much lack of skill but lack of opportunity to practise, at least in the earliest few years, compounded with the need to adapt to using timber for most building purposes. Many architects would have been much more familiar with the use of stone, brick, tiles and slate.

Another problem seems to have been the disproportionate distribution of potential clients for architectural services in what was a largely rural economy. Despite Wakefield’s utopian ideas of importing ready-made segments of society, from rich landowners and merchants to lowly tillers of the soil, with

---

5 "[untitled]" p 107.
6 "Full Particulars of the intended Sale ... [Sales by Auction]" p 1.
everyone in between, the reality of immigration was the dominance of not very affluent potential settlers determined to improve their lot in a new country. Few of these were going to be able to afford an architect for a long time to come. Thus, some of the potential clients for architectural work were church groups, societies and a government in need of schools, court houses, prisons, hospitals, post offices, customs houses etc. All of which took a long time to develop.
REFERENCES

Burgess Roll for Wellington (1843).
"Full Particulars of the intended Sale ... [Sales by Auction]" New Zealander (1 September 1847): 1.
Phillips, Jock "British and Irish immigration 1840-1914" NZ History https://nzhistory.govt.nz/culture/home-away-from-home/sources#findings