

## Fearsome Horses: the nightmares that wrecked Lambton Quay

Adrian Humphris, Wellington City Archives & Geoff Mew, Independent Scholar

**ABSTRACT:** The 1970s saw an unprecedented wave of building demolition along the western side of Lambton Quay as well as in other parts of central Wellington. A 1972 survey carried out by the City Corporation identified buildings they determined to be at risk of collapse in a moderate earthquake, with "A" being the highest risk category. Those classified as "A" were then targeted for demolition. The survey followed a Chamber of Commerce discussion paper produced in November 1971 that was concerned with future regional development. As a result, many small buildings were replaced with fewer, much larger tower blocks. These tower blocks were built to maximise returns on investment according to the size of the footprint (with little or no regard for aesthetics). Although some were completed in the 1970s, others were not topped off until the 1980s.

This paper evaluates the reasons for the apparent sudden upsurge in awareness of "awesome forces," the publicity given to the survey, and the likely outcomes for building owners. It traces the building history of a varied selection of "at risk" commercial premises; a few of which have survived - at least partially in façade form - and some of the buildings that succeeded them. At the time there seems to have been little historical consideration or awareness of what was being lost, and strengthening options were seldom explored in depth. Hence many varied two- to five-storey buildings erected in late Victorian and early Edwardian times were irreversibly pulled down to be replaced by characterless, anonymous and overbearing tower blocks.

### Introduction and First Survey

Many of you will have heard the grinding and crashing noises associated with the recent earthquakes - such a one affected Wellington on the first of November 1968 at about 1.30 in the afternoon. The epicentre was some 40km southeast of the capital at a depth of 33km and the intensity was recorded as 5.5 on the Richter scale - a moderate 'quake.

Early reports indicated minor damage to many buildings in the central city. The subsequent surveys, carried out by both government agencies and what was then the City Corporation, together with pressure from the Chamber of Commerce, led to large-scale replacement of older buildings along the

western side of Lambton Quay in the 1970s and '80s - although all those examined in 1968 were in a zone of least damage at that time.

### Existing buildings in 1970

In 1970 the western side of Lambton Quay consisted of a highly varied mixture of commercial premises including small shops, hotels, banks and some larger shops with several floors of offices above them. *Wise's Directory* for 1969/70 indicates 84 separate premises from number 78, Davies the chemists at the northern end, to 362-366, Stewart Dawson's, at the southern intersection with Willis Street. It appears that these premises were located in some 69 buildings, the majority of which were two to three

storeys high and dated from the early 1900s. The exceptions were in two small groups - the Massey House/Manchester Unity buildings at about nine storeys high, the former dating from 1952, near the northern end. The second group, built between 1933 and 1936, and six to eight storeys high, were contiguous from 326 to 340 Lambton Quay, almost opposite what was the corner MLC Building. Something of an oddity was the isolated seven-storey Druids Chambers building on the corner of Lambton Quay and Woodward Street erected in 1923.

Most of the smaller buildings were in late Victorian or Edwardian Free Classical styles, designed by a series of prominent Wellington

architects to impress the buying public in what was, and is, one of Wellington's premier commercial streets. Names such as Charlesworth, Chatfield, Turnbull, Penty, Blake, Clere, and Swan occur frequently in the lists of buildings demolished in the 1970s and early '80s. Specific examples include the Gear Meat Company's premises, designed by Thomas Turnbull in 1896 (94-98) and demolished in 1973; the Wright Stephenson Building (206-218) designed by John Sidney Swan in 1903 and demolished in the mid-1960s; the Kelburne and Karori Tramway Building (280-284) designed by Frederick de Jersey Clere in 1900 - demolished 1982; and what was latterly known as the Kodak Building, but designed for the *New Zealand Times* at 290-292 in 1908 by William Chatfield, which fell to the wreckers in 1978.

### **Reasons for wide-scale demolition**

The reasons for such wide-scale demolition remain somewhat obscure, although almost certainly related to plot ratios. A plot ratio is: a ratio representing the density of building in a specified area of land. In the late 1960s Lambton Quay had a much lower plot ratio than other areas of the CBD; a likely justification to demolish and build high rise structures which could be seen to give better

returns on investment. The fact that the majority of buildings were old and small acted against their survival, even when they were still apparently structurally sound.

The initial earthquake damage report immediately following the November 1968 shaking was written by TL Grant-Taylor of the Geological Survey and was later included in a bulletin on micro zoning for earthquake effects published in 1974. He and a small team had examined cracking patterns in over 400 buildings in central Wellington, mostly less than six storeys high, ranging from very old to completely modern. The results were used to produce a map showing four zones with increasing degrees of damage from 1) no cracks or few hair cracks in gypsiferous plaster or concrete panels, to 4) cracks in floors and ceilings. It is of interest to note that the most affected areas were around upper Willis Street and Tory Street, with Zone 3 being mainly along Waterloo Quay. Most of the Lambton Quay and Lower Willis Street areas were in Zone 1. Eleven buildings were examined along the western side of Lambton Quay - all had either no cracks or a few superficial hairline ones.

This initial report was relatively rapidly followed by an assessment carried out by

Wellington Corporation staff in 1972 under the direction of the City Engineer, JS Roberts, which checked which buildings had suffered damage in the 1942 earthquake, also their age and condition. A classification system was devised with three categories;

- A. buildings which should be demolished;
- B. buildings which might be subject to detailed examination to determine whether they should be demolished, strengthened or allowed to remain in current condition
- C. buildings which should remain.

Many of the west Lambton Quay buildings were assigned to Category A even when they had showed no damage in 1942. Specific examples were the three-storey Gresham Hotel (242) built in 1901 and the four-storey Whitcombe and Tombs building (312-316) dating from 1907. The four-storey Barretts Hotel (242-252), built in 1903 which had suffered some damage in 1942, was also classified "A." Although the draft material for this report was marked "Confidential" it seems likely it would have become public knowledge in a fairly short time as the Chamber of Commerce had already been pushing hard for modernisation and

redevelopment in the CBD in November 1971 through its Regional Development Committee.

### **Examples of building replacements in the 1970s**

One of the earliest buildings to disappear from Lambton Quay at this time was the former Bank of New South Wales (BNSW) at 318-324, demolished in 1972. This was a fine-looking three-storey Edwardian Academic Classical style building put up in 1905 to the design of Crichton and McKay. Although it had suffered a fire in 1906, it had been completely refurbished and continued in use as a bank and offices. The building that replaced it was 18 storeys high, completed in 1974 to a design by Stephenson and Turner for Westpac, the firm which had superseded the BNSW. It is a bland rectangular tower block said to have been influenced by the former World Trade Centre in New York with no variation at all in the wall to window distribution, or in any other distinguishing features. However, it undoubtedly maximised its plot ratio and conformed to the city ordinances regarding shape and height at the time of construction.

A second relatively early building (completed

in 1978) was Pastoral House near the northern end of Lambton Quay to a design by Ronald G Henderson Associates. Another 18-storey block, it once again totally dominates its surroundings, although the glazed infill panels on the façade separated by nine vertical concrete columns, add some interest to its appearance. One of the buildings it replaced was the Gear Meat Company's premises described above dating from 1896.

A slightly later series of demolitions (1981, 1982) removed the five-storey William Chatfield-designed *New Zealand Times* Offices, latterly known as Kodak house, and the adjacent former Kelburne and Karori Tramway Company building to create a site (280-292) for what became the Phoenix Centre in 1983, to which was added the Caltex Tower in 1985. Both were designed by the Structon Group. The tower is 18 storeys high and is exceptionally bland in appearance - only being noted for its rounded corners.

Barrett's Hotel at 342-352 Lambton Quay was replaced by the 16-storey AA Centre in 1984. At four storeys and with a long frontage, the former was a significant building on the Quay. It had been designed by Edward McCallum Blake in 1903 just before the

partnership of Penty and Blake was formed. The ornate façade was an early Wellington example of Edwardian Baroque, later used by John Campbell for the Public Trust Building, showing broken pediments, Gibb's surrounds and other decorative features. Refurbished several times, it had suffered some damage in the 1942 earthquake, but this had been repaired. This was one of the few buildings discussed in the newspapers when demolition was proposed - but more in terms of the long history of the name rather than with any great concern over the potential loss of the building itself. The AA Centre, designed by Warren & Mahoney, is an undistinguished tower block, noted originally only for the light balcony rails - the balconies themselves were apparently inaccessible from inside the building!

In total, 18 new skyscrapers replaced the 69 small premises which had been present prior to 1970 - although the total number of actual shops increased dramatically, with the creation of malls and shopping on two levels in many of the new buildings.

### **Public perception of potential changes along Lambton Quay**

Some idea of awareness of the changes that

were to occur and did happen along Lambton Quay can be obtained from the newspaper clipping books housed in the Alexander Turnbull Library and which were compiled during the 1970s and 1980s. In January 1977<sup>1</sup> members of the Thorndon Society drew attention to the potential loss of historic buildings. A piece headed "Move to Keep Lambton Quay's "Original Look""<sup>2</sup> suggested that at least some of the façades of historic buildings should be preserved, but Ken Clarke, the City Planner, replied that this was impractical and suggested the set back of some of the tower blocks with lower parts fronting the street was the best solution that could be achieved.

A significant article from the *Evening Post* of 22 August 1978 was headed "Council Names Buildings in Golden Mile Considered Quake Risks."<sup>3</sup> It went on to state that the list had just been released by Mayor Michael Fowler - five years after the buildings had been surveyed. The printed list in fact consisted of owners' names and addresses - not necessarily which

---

<sup>1</sup> Moran "Quay Preservation Efforts Applauded" p 3.

<sup>2</sup> MacIntyre "Move to Keep Lambton Quay's "Original Look"" p 5.

<sup>3</sup> "Council Names Buildings in Golden Mile Considered Quake Risks" p 1; also "Quake-Risk Buildings" p 19.

buildings they actually owned. The council later decided to extend the grace period for either strengthening or demolition by an extra five years from 1983 to 1988 - after which the council itself would organise demolition. Clearly building owners had already been notified of this situation some time previously, as a number of demolitions had already taken place. However, the rate then sped up. As the *Evening Post* reported on the 18th of August 1979, concerning Lambton Quay levelling, a boom was taking place that would soon wipe out most of the Quay's remaining history.<sup>4</sup> The new city council planner, Peter Saxton was quoted as saying that "the Council can do little [to stop this] if the property owners won't."<sup>5</sup> It had been suggested that they could be paid a plot ratio bonus if they retained their buildings but none had taken this up. Then followed more discussion from concerned Wellington residents, suggesting small pockets of old buildings be retained, or at least some of their façades. These ideas were almost totally disregarded, the City Council's only concession to preventing the Quay becoming a deep, narrow canyon being the condition in

---

<sup>4</sup> McGill "Lambton Quay levelling" p 6.

<sup>5</sup> Saxton quoted, McGill "Lambton Quay levelling" p 6.

the District Plan that the new skyscrapers should be set back 10m from the edge of the footpath, with a maximum height of 10m over that distance.

In 1980 David McGill had an article printed in the *Evening Post* headed "How to Save an Old City,"<sup>6</sup> which discussed how attitudes to retention of historic structures needed to be changed, but, for many Lambton Quay buildings, it was already too late.

The Historic Places Trust, which fought to retain such buildings as the former Missions to Seamen Building and the Public Trust Building through vigorous public campaigns, apparently did not consider the commercial buildings of western Lambton Quay of sufficient merit to justify much effort, although in fact the City Council had flagged eight buildings of historic interest for notification if changes were to be made to them in its district plan from 1962 onwards. Five of these buildings were removed without much debate; the façades at least of three of them remain. The *Evening Post* of the 4th of June 1982 reported that Barrett's Hotel was to be demolished within three weeks and

---

<sup>6</sup> McGill "How to Save an Old City" p 6.

outlined its early history.<sup>7</sup> Several other similar articles followed, but none included any calls to prevent the building being replaced by a 14-storey tower.

### **Buildings which "survived" the demolitions**

Although the predominant impression gained from walking along the western side of Lambton Quay is that it is a totally modern sequence of shops with towering office blocks above, there are a few examples of older buildings, the shells of which remain to give some idea of earlier evolutionary stages. The oldest of these, at 280-282, currently houses a travel agent on the ground floor and has two floors above. It previously had a long association with the jewellery trade. Designed by Clere and Swan in 1900, in Victorian Free Classical style, only the façade remains relatively unaltered, the interior having been modernised in 1981. At 312-314, the façade of the former Whitcombe and Tombs building, four storeys high, shows mainly Edwardian Academic Classical features with paired giant Corinthian columns and a broken pediment. The architect was William Turnbull and the original structure dates from 1907 although it has been strengthened and considerably

modified internally, mainly in 1984 by Warren and Mahoney. Stewart Dawson's Corner at the junction of Willis Street is also representative of the older buildings of the Quay.

Three buildings from the mid-1930s survive at 326-340, formerly known as the South British Insurance (1936), the Commercial Bank of Australia (1935), and the Prudential (1934). The first two are relatively plain, in the Stripped Classical style, whereas the Prudential is a good example of Inter-War Art Deco, notwithstanding the ugly modern addition on top.

### **District Plan changes which allowed for very tall office blocks**

From the late 1950s the rules governing the height of buildings began to change with the development of planning rules and the District Scheme. Prior to this point Bylaws placed a maximum height of 30 metres (100 feet), based on structural and safety considerations. Buildings tended to be squat, for example the DIC building.

By the late 1950s planners were advocating controls to encourage modern tower-like buildings. The first (undisclosed) District

Scheme in 1959 introduced peripheral height lines to promote improved daylighting and limit density. While these rules were applied, it was not until 1968 that the draft District Scheme was notified. Peripheral height lines were retained, but linked with plot ratio control. Provisions around voids and encroachments were introduced to ensure adequate daylighting, and to encourage podium tower development.

The District Plan became operative in 1972, and allowed developers to apply for dispensation from the void and encroachment provisions, which many did. High rise development increasingly became a significant public issue. In 1976 the Capital Plan was launched to help provide public input into the District Scheme. This initiative supported a limit on high rise development, which would control out of character development and protect views of the harbour and hills.

District Scheme provisions were simplified in 1979, when building heights in the CBD were limited to retain views and maintain the existing scale of development. This led to further review and a view protection and urban form study being completed in 1985. By

---

<sup>7</sup> "Barrett's Hotel for demolition" p 11.

this stage however, significant development had, and was, occurring along Lambton Quay.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

The decade of the 1970s saw major, even catastrophic, changes to the architectural character of the western side of Lambton Quay, the heart of Wellington's CBD. Although there had been previous periods of significant alteration, the principal one being the transition from largely timber structures to those built from brick and cement render in the early part of the twentieth century, later changes had for the most part been gradual and piecemeal. Hence by the end of the 1960s a distinctive streetscape of low-rise, elaborately decorated, mainly Edwardian shops, offices and hotels existed. Levels of maintenance varied, but most buildings had come through the 1942 earthquake with minimal damage which had been repaired. It could be argued that at approximately 50 years old, most of the buildings were at or nearing the end of their useful lives, were old-fashioned, did not meet newer standards for resisting earthquakes, and because of their small size, did not provide sufficient financial returns for their owners.

New building codes in the late 1960s, coupled

with the Chamber of Commerce's desire and advocacy to see a modern, vibrant centre developed for Wellington, put pressure on the then Wellington City Corporation to survey inner-city buildings and categorise them basically for either potential strengthening or demolition. Most of the owners faced with either of those recommendations had no option but to sell their sites to large corporations that had enough capital to amalgamate land parcels and commission the building of high-rise towers which, when rented out, would provide high monetary returns. Retention of the small buildings through strengthening and modernisation was simply not seen as a viable alternative in terms of the plot ratios and land values.

In the late 1960s/early 1970s appreciation of historic buildings in New Zealand was gaining some momentum but preservation and/or finding suitable alternative uses could not be legally imposed. Vociferous advocacy and intense publicity campaigns sometimes resulted in individual buildings being "saved" - such as the former Missions to Seamen Building in Stout Street - but that was not until 1986. Calls for preservation of substantial parts of Lambton Quay were relatively muted and development commenced before there

was much organised opposition. Buildings fell like a row of dominoes through the 1970s and high-rises followed relatively rapidly in their wake. While many of these more recent buildings may be safer than their unreinforced predecessors in the event of a major earthquake, their generally ugly shapes and forms do little to enhance the beauty of Wellington as a capital city. For western Lambton Quay, the 1970s saw the turning point from what would now be regarded as an outstanding example of a classic early twentieth century streetscape to a line of post-modern skyscrapers with little form and no ornamentation to distinguish them.

## REFERENCES

- "Barrett's Hotel for demolition" *Evening Post* (4 June 1982):11.
- "Council Names Buildings in Golden Mile Considered Quake Risks" *Evening Post* (Tuesday 22 August 1978):1.
- Grant-Taylor, T.L. "Earthquake damage survey: Pattern of building cracking in Wellington from the earthquake of 1 November 1968" *Microzoning for Earthquake Effects in Wellington, Bulletin 213, New Zealand Department of Scientific and Industrial Research Wellington: Government Printer, 1974:43-51.*
- Kernohan, David *Wellington's New Buildings*. Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1989.
- Kernohan, David *Wellington's Old Buildings*. Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1994.
- McGill, David "How to Save an Old City" *Evening Post* (29 November 1980):6.
- McGill, David "Lambton Quay levelling" *Evening Post* (18 August 1979):6.
- MacIntyre, Dave "Move to Keep Lambton Quay's "Original Look"" *Evening Post* (24 September 1976):5.
- Moran, Paul "Quay Preservation Efforts Applauded" *Dominion* (17 January 1977):3.
- "Quake-Risk Buildings" *Evening Post* (Tuesday 22 August 1978):19.
- Roberts, J.S. City Engineer, Memorandum for the Town Clerk, from 29 February 1972; Earthquake Risk Buildings – Your Minutes 19.11.71 and 19.1.72. Copy held on 00009:6/391 Part 3: Building: Inspection of buildings in city with regards to degree of safety in event of earthquake, 1968-1972, Wellington City Council Archives.
- Wellington Chamber of Commerce, Report of City and Regional Development Committee, Earthquake Vulnerable Buildings in Wellington, from meeting held Tuesday 9 November 1971, copy held on 00009:6/391 Part 3: Building: Inspection of buildings in city with