

"Style that leaves nothing to be desired": Wanganui's Ladies Club of 1897

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ABSTRACT: In 1897, a new, purpose-built institution made national headlines when it opened in the colony's fifth-largest centre. The Wanganui Ladies' Club was marketed as the first and only club of its kind, and was based on a Gentlemen's Club model catering to the upper classes of town and country. Designed by local architect William Pinches, a public tea room allowed non-members access to part of the building and much was made of its points of difference. In the immediate wake of women's suffrage being granted, proprietor Harriet Cameron was riding the crest of a wave of local women leading new, public-oriented lives. Described as artistic and luxurious, the interior was perhaps the most lavishly decorated in town. Photographs of it were widely published and the Ladies' Club seemed poised to become a fashionable social and political hub of the district. Yet within five years the club had dissolved, and the building would be lost only twenty-five years later. Its demolition reflected a wider shift in values and aesthetics, and the declining influence of the British-modelled established gentry over the region's cultural life.

This paper will visit the interior of the lost Ladies' Club through sharing recent research on the building. It will examine a few contemporary local 1890s interiors which have survived, and look at high society club culture which has survived in the town against the odds.

Introduction

On Whanganui's Taupo Quay, between Drews Avenue and the Whanganui City Bridge, a coherent turn of the century streetscape has sat for many decades as a nondescript, industrial-oriented relic of different times.¹ The area is adjacent to a number of current and former transport hubs: the Awa itself, the meeting place Pākaitore, the local branch railway terminus (closed to passengers in 1959), the tourist tram, the Paddlesteamer Waimarie moorings, and the

bridge which has allowed easy access over the river since the 1870s. It is a streetscape newly appreciated by visitors, especially since the i-Site and temporary Sarjeant Gallery has made it home.

Land reclamation undertaken by the local Harbour Boards along this stretch of the Quay from the late 1880s, into the 1890s enabled the development of two storeyed buildings right up against the river, servicing mercantile needs in the bustling town of about 5000 people. While Whanganui was expanding outwards – and rapidly in the 1890s – land at the heart of the town centre was appealing indeed. The Wanganui Ladies Club was at the centre of commercial life when constructed on the Quay, offering a rare semi-public space for

some women to find comfort and connection. No physical trace is left today of the Wanganui Ladies' Club at the site. It was removed without announcement or objection to make way for the large Martin and Vernon Omnibus Depot, completed in 1923 and today restored as an upmarket and boutique shopping arcade. By the end of the First World War, industrialisation had changed the character of the area profoundly as mercantile influence through the local port weakened in the face of road and rail's growing share of the transport sector.

However, the Ladies' Club seemed poised to become a fashionable social and political hub of the district when it opened. Marketed as the first and only club of its kind, it was based

¹ In this paper, references to the locality use the modern spelling of Whanganui, while historical references to institutions which did not utilise the "h" will be referred to with their historic spelling. If the locality is referred to within a quote without the "h", that is how it was spelled in the primary source.

on a Gentlemen's Club model catering to the upper classes of town and country. Designed by local architect William Pinches, a public tea room allowed non-members access to part of the building and much was made of its points of difference.

Although the high society club culture it exemplified has survived in the area against the odds, the Wanganui Ladies' Club has never been studied or appraised, and is currently a footnote in local history overshadowed by other institutions and buildings which have survived, such as William Pinches' grand Cosmopolitan Club building of 1900, which has now been restored. But recently uncovered, rare photographs only published in a small circulation weekly newspaper for local audiences, coupled with extensive written descriptions, allow its interior design to be understood in considerable detail. The pioneering Ladies' Club exemplified local aspirations and has left a surprising legacy.

The Wanganui Context

Wendy Pettigrew and Mark Southcombe have previously summarised Wanganui's architectural and social context in the 1890s in their paper "The End of the Wooden Shop."

	Rural (county and suburban) population	Urban (borough) population	Combined population
1891 Census	4,105	5,074	9,179
1901 Census	5,366	7,329	12,695

Table 1: Population growth of the Whanganui area between 1891-1901 (from New Zealand Official Yearbook, 1893; 1902)

Helpfully summarising some of the driving factors behind the settlement pulling out of the Long Depression and becoming an economic powerhouse over this decade, they draw attention to completion of the Whanganui Meat Freezing Works, the opening of the Wellington-Whanganui railway, and Alexander Hatrick's endeavours to secure government support for river steamer services, culminating in the 1891 maiden voyage of the *Wairere*.² The fact that Premier John Ballance was from Whanganui, and representing its electorate, helped bring the centre to the forefront of new developments. Whanganui also had a strong local suffragist and women's rights movement.

As well as summarising the broader context, Pettigrew and Southcombe also typologise some of the key new styles of building in the town at the time: cultural institutions like the

² Pettigrew & Southcombe "The End of the Wooden Shop" p 77.

Museum (1893), Opera House (opened 1900) and substantial extensions to the Public Library (from 1898); large commercial warehouses like Thain's on the reclaimed Taupo Quay (1895); and free-standing villas in outlying areas such as the Paul family's Riverlands estate (1893). There is also a fourth class of building that can be identified which was new in Whanganui at this time: the inner-city townhouse, more akin to houses seen in larger centres like Dunedin, Melbourne, San Francisco or London. They often served dual residential-commercial purposes – and sometimes they weren't intended for accommodation at all. Occupying most or all of a street frontage, they embodied the aspiring cosmopolitanism of the centre at that time.

By the end of the 1890s, Whanganui was the largest centre that didn't hold formal city status. In the space of ten years, the town and its immediate surrounds increased by over three thousand people from 9,179 to 12,695 –

increasing by one third of its 1891 population.³

"A Conspicuous Ornament in the Architecture of the Town"

The general public learned of the Ladies Club through an advertisement in the *Wanganui Herald* in June 1897, placed by architect William Pinches seeking tenders from builders.⁴ Harriet Cameron, the proprietor, was not named. The *Wanganui Chronicle* was subsequently able to view the drawings, and in July offered extensive commentary on the design:

From a glance at the plans it is evident that the ladies interested knew just the kind of building they wanted, and that Mr Pinches, in rafting the plans for an attractive, roomy and well-arranged Club House, has thoroughly provided for all requirements ... the tea-room 30x20 feet, communicates by means of a sliding panel with a commodious kitchen, 16x12 feet, the latter of course fitted with range, dressers, cupboards, etc. On the same floor, at the rear of the tea-room and in line with the kitchen are two bedrooms, one 10 feet 9 inches x 12 feet and the other 8 x 12 feet, presumably for the use of the servants, while space is also found for convenient store room. On the upper floor the principal apartment is the handsome club room, of similar dimensions to the

³ Registrar-General *The New Zealand Official Year-book* 1893 np; Registrar-General *The New Zealand Official Year-book* 1902 np.

⁴ "To Builders. [Tender notice Ladies' Club on Taupo Quay]" p 3.

tea room, a sitting room, 16 x 12 feet, a servants' bedroom, bathroom, lavatory, etc.⁵

Construction swiftly began, undertaken by large construction firm Russell and Bignell. Robert Russell and Arthur Bignell were in partnership as carpenters in Greymouth, subsequently setting up business in Whanganui in 1892 where they acquired the business of builder James Tawse who was going into retirement. The firm built the new brick hospital complex opened in 1897 on the outskirts of the town, and the *Cyclopedia of New Zealand* declared this "not only marked a new era in the building trade in Wanganui, but stands as a monument of their skill."⁶ Arthur Bignell later served as Mayor of Whanganui, from 1904-6.

The Ladies' Club was one of their jobs carried out shortly after completion of the new hospital, and construction only took about three months. Several articles were published locally in the lead up to its opening on 1 October 1897. These generally praise the number of rooms, multiple entrances for both the public and for members of the Ladies' Club, and a spacious wainscoted reception

⁵ "The Ladies' Club: An Attractive Building" p 2.

⁶ "Russell and Bignell" p 1413.

hall lit by amber-coloured fanlights and a stained-glass skylight, in addition to the provision of indoor toilets, baths, fixed dressing tables and supply of hot and cold water. The *Chronicle* noted that:

the lady principal – Miss Cameron – has avinced very great taste in the decoration of the building, both as to the exterior and the interior, and we understand that Miss Cameron has expressed herself entirely satisfied with the manner in which the whole of the work has been carried out.⁷

Harriet Cameron was taking on considerable risk in developing the Club, although 70-100 women enrolled as members before it even opened.⁸ Very little research has been undertaken on early women's clubs explicitly modelled along those for gentlemen, but primary research carried out for this paper indicates there was an 1893 attempt to launch a club in Napier using rented rooms in an existing hotel.⁹ It did not become successful, and may be one of the earlier attempts to form a club alluded to in the Whanganui paper. Cameron likely planned the public tea room as a way of increasing income for the Club

⁷ "The Ladies' Club: A New Institution for Wanganui" p 3.

⁸ "The Ladies' Club to be Opened Tomorrow" p 2.

⁹ "Napier Ladies' Club" p 2.

beyond membership subscriptions, thereby and reducing the overall economic risk of the endeavour. *Wanganui Herald* journalists were invited to visit just prior to opening and they described its interior in rich detail. Of the public tea room, they said:

Seating room, at ten small tables divided from one another by handsome and artistic screens, is provided for 40 persons, and lunch, afternoon tea and supper will be provided at any hour of the day between 11am and 10:30pm ... at usual town prices. The floor is covered with a substantial linoleum, and tasteful drapings and choice pot plants are not the least attractive features of the room. At the rear, and connected with a slide, is the kitchen, fitted up with all modern appliances, including gas stove and one of Luke's ranges with double oven and high pressure boiler.¹⁰

Of the interior offerings of the members-only area of the Club, the *Herald* described the following:

After mounting a well-carpeted flight of stairs, we found ourselves in the members' quarters. The principal room is the club-room, available only for members and their visiting friends from the country. A handsome and costly velvet pile carpet covers the floor, and the walls are adorned with pictures and photographs, some of them being rare and valuable. No expense has been spared in furnishing this room in a most complete and up-to-date manner... a valuable piano and magnificent

couches and easy chairs (large and comfortable) form a very important feature, while there are several tea-tables, writing-table supplied with all materials, and magazine-table. The latter is quite a novelty, and we were informed that fully thirty different kinds of periodicals and magazines have been promised ... Near the entrance to this room is a well-appointed lavatory, which will also prove of great convenience to the ladies, especially after a dusty ride on a summer day. Opposite this is an office, supplied with couch, chairs, writing-desk, shelving, etc ... From the enthusiastic manner in which the ladies of Wanganui have taken the matter up we feel sure that the experience here will be different from that of other towns, and that Miss Cameron will be amply repaid for her energy and enterprise.¹¹

The explicit attribution in these articles of Miss Cameron to the exterior and interior decoration, rather than William Pinches, is notable. She acted as a decorator, rather than one of the trained women designers identified as participating in Whanganui's Arts and Crafts Movement through the Technical School system like Ivy Copeland or Edith Collier.¹² In addition to the written descriptions which were widely published, several photographs were also placed in local and national periodicals. These give a very clear impression of how Harriet Cameron

executed her vision of a cosmopolitan and genteel establishment.

The praise heaped by the *Herald* on the Club's design, particularly the velvet pile carpets and heavy drapings, contrasts with criticism Beatrice and Sidney Webb made privately the same year when they visited two houses belonging to Auckland's mercantile and business class:

The two homes we visited – the house of the editor of the *Star* and of a large importer lacked taste; the ugly bamboo furniture, plush and silk drapings, thick common carpets, hideous chromos, typical of the ordinary lower-middle-class English household.¹³

One photograph published in *The New Zealand Graphic and Ladies Journal* shows the exterior frontage of the club, and names it as the "only Club of its kind in the colony." Set very close to Taupo Quay behind a dark-painted, low picket fence, and with minimal space for planting, the building appears on face-value like a grand townhouse. The photograph presents a glimpse of a woman seated in the window bay (possibly Harriet Cameron herself), attended to by a maid, as well as a young boy by the front door dressed in what may be an attendant's uniform. With no less

¹⁰ "The Ladies' Club to be Opened Tomorrow" p 2.

¹¹ "The Ladies' Club to be Opened Tomorrow" p 2.

¹² Calhoun *The Arts and Crafts Movement in New Zealand* pp 103-104.

¹³ Webb & Webb *The Webbs in New Zealand* 1898 p 26.



Figure 1: The exterior of the Ladies' Club, *The New Zealand Graphic and Ladies Journal* (19 March 1898) p 342. (Source: Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections NZG-18980319-0342-02)

than twelve large sash windows on its front bay, and with ornate fanlights over each window, the ground floor public tea-room would have been highly visible from the street

and was likely intended to showcase the elite women of Whanganui taking tea at the Club to any passers-by, boosting the prestige of the establishment.

Ben Schrader has considered historical street life as part of his wide-reaching history of New Zealand's urban centres, *The Big Smoke*. He emphasises the gendered, segregated nature of street life and highlights the more recent assumed restrictions that middle-class or upper-class women faced in the public realm, lest they risk transgressing social class norms and being viewed as public women – that is, of the working class or even fallen women class.¹⁴ Under this process, middle-class or upper-class women would only have been present on the street as window-shoppers, passers-by or fundraising philanthropists. The performative act of visiting spaces like tea rooms challenges that notion. Schrader argues that townspeople managed the impressions they gave to others through performances, expressed as formal rituals other than everyday informal behaviour. He gives the example of "doing the block" as a formal ritual expression of material consumption, body display, and spectacle –

¹⁴ Schrader *The Big Smoke* pp 218-220.

often on a Saturday evening when the working week for many came to a close, and also when concerts and events were likely to be on, enabling mixing of those of various backgrounds.¹⁵ In frequenting spaces such as the Ladies' Club tea room, patrons were essentially able to make use of its street-facing bay windows and uphold their social identities as middle-class urbanites.¹⁶ This had a flow-on effect of making Taupo Quay and the mercantile quarter of Whanganui more gender inclusive by the sheer visibility of the Club patrons.

Additional photographs of the interior of the building were published in a photographic supplement to local weekly newspaper *The Yeoman*, a subsidiary of the *Wanganui Herald*. They indicate the Ladies' Club favoured the maximalist Aesthetic Movement rather than the incoming Arts and Crafts Movement, puritanical in comparison. Some architects active in the Whanganui area were already working in this style, such as Charles Tilleard Natusch or Alfred Atkins, and their interiors are relatively pared back in comparison with High Victorian interior tastes. Yet William

¹⁵ Schrader *The Big Smoke* pp 226-227.

¹⁶ Schrader *The Big Smoke* pp 258-259.

*Interior View of
Wanganui Ladies' Club.*



This Club, which has been recently opened, is situated on the reclaimed land, on the Quay, next Messrs Johnston & Co.'s premises. It is the only one of its kind in the Colony, and is owned and conducted by Miss Cameron.

Pinches' Ladies' Club is more conventional, especially the outside of the house, with neoclassical features like dentils prominent at the pediment over the bay window. Club architecture nationally did tend to be conservative, with reliance on neoclassical elements to flag the gentility of an establishment.

The images of the tea room and the club room confirm that the interior design and furnishings are domestic in nature. Mantelpieces are fairly basic, with only decorative corbel brackets relieving the cast iron registers. The wallpaper in the tea room is floral chintz, paired with a floral frieze, and bentwood chair and table sets fill the spaces between potted plants and folding screens. In the club room, an acanthus wallpaper paired with matching frieze can be seen, showing the influence of William Morris' work in what was marketed as an inner sanctum. A variety of chairs in completely different styles are arranged throughout this room seemingly at random, along with pot plants, bamboo tables and folding screens. The tea room had a linoleum floor (of unclear pattern) and the club room featured a large floral carpet. The ceiling in both rooms was oiled timber board and batten.

Figure 2: Interior views of the Ladies' Club, photographic supplement, *The Yeoman* (8 January 1898).

Several New Zealand art and design historians have posited that the Aesthetic Movement arrived in New Zealand with about a 20-year delay in impact, and that its arrival overlapped roughly with that of the Arts and Crafts Movement.¹⁷ The 1898 interior of the Ladies' Club would seem to reinforce this claim, with Morrisian-influenced wallpaper paired with Japanese screens and bamboo furniture. In Britain, the Aesthetic Movement, decadent style, and Anglo-Japanese design rapidly fell out of the mainstream in the wake of the 1895 trial of Oscar Wilde, and the Arts and Crafts Movement swept in with a much more stripped aesthetic.¹⁸ New Zealand, far-removed physically from the scandal and thereby softened from its effect on design tastes, seemed more willing to amalgamate these styles together.

One amalgamation seemingly absent from the Ladies' Club was any kind of nod to Māori design practice. Inclusion of raranga (woven) or whakairo (carved) objects or elements as an accent or theme had become popular in cosmopolitan domestic interiors, especially for

the wealthy. There was generally no understanding of what Māori design elements may have signified in their earlier contexts or of the negative aspects of cultural appropriation, and they were viewed in these contexts as purely decorative art for art's sake. Because of the then-new mainstream interest in Māori art and design, it is notable that none of these elements are on display in the tea or club rooms, but this may simply signify the overall conservatism of the Ladies' Club.

From all accounts, the Club was immediately successful upon its opening. Harriet Cameron had successfully identified a gap in the social and cultural architecture of the town and filled it. With an outlying rural population roughly equal to the population of the township, the clientele would likely have been spread across the two, although membership was likely limited to Pākehā upper-class women. Given there were two bedrooms upstairs, these rooms may have been made available for country members and their friends who required somewhere to stay overnight, though there is no clear evidence this facility was available as with larger contemporary establishments, such as the Wanganui Club or the Cosmopolitan Club. A registry office for servants was established in

the clubhouse in 1898, called the Club Employment Bureau. The office was marketed as a place "where all enquiries for domestics or applications from servants will be courteously and promptly attended to," and was modelled on an office established by a Ladies' Club operating at that time in Sydney.¹⁹

Not long after opening, the disadvantages of its riverside location started to become clear. As the *Chronicle* reported one day in 1898,

this afternoon we noticed the carcass of a beast, from which a strong aroma was arising, floating in the river at the back of the Ladies' Club, just above the Bridge. We trust that the authorities will see to its removal at once, if they have not already done so.²⁰

The Club continued as a feature of the local social scene for several years, and the Club Employment Bureau became especially prominent in the local classifieds as a go-between for local women to find domestic staff. It was host to a number of social events, such as wedding breakfasts, school reunions, and Ladies' Liederkrantz.

Despite the fact the Ladies' Club was

¹⁷ Campbell "True direction" pp 6-7.

¹⁸ Lambourne *The Aesthetic Movement* pp 215-225.

¹⁹ "Local stories" p 2.

²⁰ "Local and General" p 2.

identified as the only successful example of its kind in the country to be run on par with other gentlemen's clubs, and that Harriet Cameron was praised for her business and design abilities, it was apparently not host to events organised by local political activists such as Jessie Williamson or Margaret Bullock of the Whanganui Women's Political League (this group instead met regularly at the Borough Council Chambers). From surviving accounts of the club and its events, women striving towards the New Woman ideal of the 1890s were not typical attendees.

There were also conservative, patriotic women's political groups active in Whanganui as the South African War broke out, and they are not linked in contemporary media to the Club either.²¹ The absence of explicitly political events suggests the Ladies' Club was popular with women comfortable with the societal status quo, or who shied away from public expressions of political opinion.

Closure of the Club, and its legacy

Towards the end of 1903 the club quietly wound up. At a meeting of the Commercial Travellers' and Warehousemen's Club

approached Miss Cameron's agent for the lease of the building, without the furniture, and she agreed that night to relinquish the premises with only a few weeks' grace period to leave.²² In the new year of 1904, it was announced she had taken a lease of the substantial townhouse known as Wharenui, and intended to run it as a high-class boarding house establishment. This may have been a blessing for Cameron, as this stretch of Taupo Quay and lower Victoria Avenue was badly flooded in May 1904. Numerous photographs document this flooding event, showing people traversing the area by rowing boats and waka.

Wharenui was similar in style to the Ladies Club, and built in 1895 as a home for dentist George Parker. Sited on Victoria Avenue, across the road from the Collegiate School (prior to its relocation in 1911 to College Estate), Wharenui was designed by Thomas Henry Battle, at that time an up-and-coming house designer. The house was notable for its concrete foundations, exaggerated and asymmetrical Tudor stickwork, octagonal hall, and floor-to-ceiling sash windows. It was comparable in construction quality, form, scale and setting to the Ladies' Club and could

also be grouped into the 1890s Whanganui grand townhouse typology. Harriet Cameron remained there for many years as a boarding-house keeper and agent for domestic servants and prospective employers, passing away in 1932 at the age of 72.²³ Wharenui was demolished in the 1970s as the middle, predominantly residential stretch of Victoria Avenue was redeveloped for the erection of office buildings and car yards.

Only a few examples of the Whanganui grand townhouse typology survive. One is Ballymena House, the Foster family home built in 1894 on the same block as the Ladies' Club, also two-storey and integrating domestic household needs with those of the mercantile and middle to upper classes, with two large front rooms able to be used as showrooms for merchants staying across the road at Fosters Hotel who required somewhere to display their wares. Ballymena House was named in one article as having been commissioned by Sarah Foster, the wife of hotelier William Foster. As proprietors of a prominent hostelry, they were able to commission Swiss builder Nicholas Meuli to design and build a large house with market

²¹ Flutey "Ladies at Arms for Empire" pp 21-23.

²² "C.T. and W. Club" p 7.

²³ "Funeral Notice" p 1.

garden facing the river, as well as an extensive rear balcony. Like the Ladies' Club, it featured a grand stairway

it by a skylight, the light falling through a colored stained glass ceiling ... At the extreme end of the passage is an alcove which affords room for the display of pot plants and giving opportunity for a quiet lounge, while there is to be obtained a fine view of the Quay from the large windows.²⁴

Mrs Foster was praised in public for her new house with mercantile potential in the future:

Mrs Foster has now a house for her family which must be a boon to their comfort and convenience, and at the same time affords increased accommodation for the boarders and visitors at the hotel, which later is now undergoing some necessary alterations and additions since the family have removed to their new premises. The probabilities are that in the future, taking into consideration the progress of Wanganui, the new building may be required as a warehouse, and accordingly it has been designed and built so that it may be readily converted into such.²⁵

In the period of interwar industrialisation on Taupo Quay, this building narrowly survived demolition around the time that the former Ladies' Club was removed. About two metres of the façade actually was demolished, to

make room for the Bacon Factory, an art deco style building designed by Clifford Newton Hood (and the only commercial new build in Whanganui of the 1930s).²⁶ In the 1990s, the upper storey was brought back into residential use as a family home.

Many of the late Victorian-era gentlemen's and workingmen's clubs in Whanganui which built substantial clubhouses in the 1890s do still survive in one form or another – but only the Cosmopolitan Clubhouse, opened formally in August 1900, has escaped destruction. This was also designed by William Pinches in ornate Palazzo style. An additional 1910 extension to the building by George MacLachlan was heavily fire damaged in the 1990s but the façade was able to be retained. Other surviving clubhouses post-dating 1900 include the Wanganui Club (1915, designed by William Rush and Edwin James) and the Commercial Club (1925-26, designed by Leopold Atkinson).

A final legacy of the Ladies' Club is the current Wanganui Women's Club. After the Ladies' Club was wound up in late 1903, it took nearly 20 years for an equivalent club to

reform, although somewhat similar groups appeared in the interim such as a local branch of the Victoria League. The Lady Jellicoe Club was eventually formed in Whanganui in 1920 by Helen Garden Moore, who had been a founding member of Masterton's Ranfurly Club for women in 1899 (the next women's club established after the Wanganui Ladies' Club). The Lady Jellicoe Club has utilised a number of premises over the years, both commercial and residential, and changed its name to the Wanganui Women's Club in 1938. It remains an incorporated society today, and quietly celebrated its one hundredth birthday in 2020.²⁷

²⁴ "Mrs Foster's New Premises" p 4.

²⁵ "Mrs Foster's New Premises" p 4.

²⁶ Southcombe & Pettigrew "The End of the Golden Weather" p 59.

²⁷ "Whanganui Women's Club celebrates 100 years" np.

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