

## "Money makes the rooms go round": effects of affluence on room size and functions in 1890s houses

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**ABSTRACT:** The 1890s was a decade in which a number of very large houses were either built or added to throughout the country. Their owners were commonly wealthy landowners or skilled businessmen. Room numbers and functions reflected the Victorian lifestyles of such people and tended to reflect similar trends in England although on a somewhat lesser scale. Room numbers of between 20 and 50 contrasted sharply with the four to eight rooms in an average family home of the time. In the latter the rooms were largely functional with the main family life centred around the kitchen and bedrooms. The big houses by contrast had extra rooms such as servants' quarters, ballrooms, billiard rooms, libraries, and dressing rooms and were often designed for entertaining and catering for visiting parties. The economic problems of the late 1880s and early '90s seem to have had little effect on those who might have been regarded as being on "The Rich List" whereas those on low incomes would not have been able to add more rooms such as parlours and bathrooms which became more common as conditions improved.

### Introduction

The 1890s saw the end of the preceding depression which had lasted since the mid-1870s. Consequently, general living standards started to rise as economic conditions improved. However, the recovery for the average worker was comparatively slow and the building of new homes did not speed up much until the early 1900s with improved public transport leading to suburban expansion around the main cities. The situation for major landowners and highly placed businessmen was quite different as they were largely cushioned from economic fluctuations by their wealth. The export of frozen meat from the 1870s and improvements in shipping generally had led to those in commanding positions becoming even richer than they had been before.

Statistics on those who might have been considered on an early form of rich list must be largely deduced from the values of the land they owned and/or the amounts they left when they died. Records of those owning properties valued at over £50,000 still exist and estates probated were often reported in the newspapers of the day. Past research on house designs in New Zealand has mainly concentrated on how house styles evolved for "middle New Zealanders" rather than looking at those owned by the most affluent or those of average or very low income. A single major work on grand houses is titled *The Big House* by Terence Hodgson (1991). House evolution has been covered by Salmond in *Old New Zealand Houses* (1986) and in *Built in New Zealand* by William Toomath (1996). All contain general statements about numbers and functions of rooms in different types of

houses, but these are mostly unsupported by statistics.

### Current study

To contrast the extremes of house building with the more normal sizes in the 1890s we selected five big houses from Hodgson's detailed study of 36 and then looked at building permit data for Wellington houses at three points in the 1890s: 1893, 1896 and 1899. The five big houses were all built or modified in the 1890s and covered a geographic range from Canterbury to Hawkes Bay. In alphabetical order they were Gwavas (Hawkes Bay), Holly Lea (Christchurch), Meadowbank (Leeston, Canterbury), Orouawharo (near Takapau, Hawkes Bay) and Strowan (Christchurch suburbs).

Strowan was the oldest house, built in 1856,

but the very extensive modifications in 1890 turned it into an opulent house with the additions of a billiard room, morning room and several extra bedrooms.<sup>1</sup> The original Gwavas was a large single-storey house first built in 1890. It was substantially modified in 1899 with the addition of a second storey, tower, billiard room and more bedrooms.<sup>2</sup> Meadowbank was built in 1891 as a huge rambling Victorian Elizabethan style mansion with tower, all designed largely for entertaining.<sup>3</sup> Orouawharo was originally built in 1879, but was greatly enlarged in 1899 with the addition of a ballroom and extra bedrooms.<sup>4</sup> Holly Lea was built between April 1899 and September 1900 and is reputed to be the largest timber-built house in New Zealand.<sup>5</sup>

### Indicators of affluence for the principal owners of the five big houses

Most of the owners of these big houses were wealthy landowners and sheep or cattle farmers at the time they had them built. The exception was George G Stead, a Christchurch

businessman and racehorse owner, who bought an existing house and had it transformed into a mansion. Determining the incomes of the various owners while they lived in the houses has proved difficult and we have therefore sought indirect indicators of their wealth such as lists of landowners with land valued at over £50,000, and money left when they died according to probate reports. This follows the methods of evaluation suggested in *The Rich List*.<sup>6</sup>

George Edward Rhodes of Meadowbank: George Rhodes' estate was valued at £26,138 in round numbers when he died in Christchurch city in 1936.<sup>7</sup> He had sold Meadowbank in 1914 and retired.<sup>8</sup>

Arthur Spry Gwavas Carlyon of Gwavas: Arthur Carlyon died at his own house in 1929, leaving £136,160 in round figures.<sup>9</sup> The additions and alterations to Gwavas were quoted at £1,600 in November 1889,<sup>10</sup> enough to build two or three quite substantial smaller houses at that time. Carlyon was listed as one

of the landowners with land valued at over £50,000 in the 1905 Return of Owners.<sup>11</sup>

George Gatonby Stead of Strowan: George Stead's estate was valued at £176,000 when he died in Christchurch in 1908.<sup>12</sup> Although his widow moved to a smaller house in Christchurch, Strowan was not bought by St Andrew's College for Boys until 1917.<sup>13</sup>

Sydney Johnston of Orouawharo: Sydney Johnston, who died in England in 1917, had his estate valued for probate purposes at "under £300,000."<sup>14</sup> The original part of Orouawharo before additions cost around £4,000 to build.<sup>15</sup>

Allan McLean of Holly Lea: Allan McLean died in Christchurch in 1907 leaving an estate valued at £506,904<sup>16</sup> - by far the largest amount of the five men we discuss. His house was always intended to be used as accommodation for impecunious ladies after

<sup>1</sup> "To Builders" p 1.

<sup>2</sup> Hodgson *The Big House* p 74.

<sup>3</sup> Johnston & Johnston "Orouawharo Homestead" np.

<sup>4</sup> Hodgson *The Big House* p 112.

<sup>5</sup> Hodgson *The Big House* p 78.

<sup>6</sup> Hunt *The Rich List* p XII.

<sup>7</sup> Rhodes Probate Files.

<sup>8</sup> "Obituary, Mr G E Rhodes" p 12.

<sup>9</sup> Carlyon, Arthur Spry Gwavas, probate files.

<sup>10</sup> "[Untitled]" p 3.

<sup>11</sup> "House of Representatives" p 6.

<sup>12</sup> "The Late G G Stead's Estate" p 4.

<sup>13</sup> "The City, Christchurch Day by Day" p 3.

<sup>14</sup> "About People" p 5.

<sup>15</sup> Johnston & Johnston "Orouawharo Homestead" np.

<sup>16</sup> "Mr Allan McLean's Bequest" p 1.

his death, hence its very large size.<sup>17</sup>

**Contrasts in rooms – numbers and types**

Many of the big houses started out just as large family homes in the early to mid-1800s; hence they had "usual" rooms such as drawing rooms, dining rooms, kitchens and bedrooms, possibly also with some rooms for servants. However, by the mid to late 1890s, many of the big houses had expanded to include libraries, studies, billiard rooms, morning rooms, and smoking rooms, with some even including ballrooms. The numbers of bedrooms also increased as had the size of the servants' quarters. Specialist rooms such as breakfast rooms, offices and dressing rooms might also have been included, and most were of larger size than might be found in the average family home.

**Table 1** gives approximate numbers of rooms and room types for the five large houses studied. Most of the information is summarised from Hodgson (1991); the Heritage New Zealand List was consulted but the information given there was insufficient for our purposes. Without access to the early plans for most of these houses, it is difficult to

	Gwavas	Strowan	Meadowbank	Oruawharo	Holly Lea
<b>Total rooms</b>	8 originally; 16 after addition	8 originally; 18 after addition	20	21 originally; 30 after addition	30+
Drawing Room	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Morning Room			Y		Y
Dining or Breakfast Room	Y		Y	Y	Both
Study			Y		
Library or Office		Y			Y
Billiard Room	Y	Y	Y	Y	
Ballroom		Y		Y	
Smoking Room					Y
Kitchen	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Dressing Room			Y	Y	Three
Bedrooms	12	13	13	24	17

**Table 1:** Room numbers and types of rooms for five large houses studied. Source: Taken from Hodgson (1991).

be precise about total numbers of rooms - particularly those that were assigned to servants. Although numbers of servants were known for Oruawharo, the wing housing them was demolished leaving no trace. Plans for Holly Lea still exist but the functions of certain of the servants' rooms are now unknown.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, total room numbers could vary if more information could be found.

Publications on New Zealand houses such as

*The New Zealand House* by Salmond (1986) and *Built in New Zealand* by Toomath (1996) outline the number and types of rooms in the average family home and to some extent how they vary with time and style. However, they provide little statistical information to back up the statements made. Wellington City Council Archives holds building permit application records from the 1890s, which we have used to show trends in room numbers and types in Wellington city over this decade. Based on the Wellington City Council Building Permit registers, permits were issued to build 812

<sup>17</sup> "The Late Mr Allan McLean " p 2.

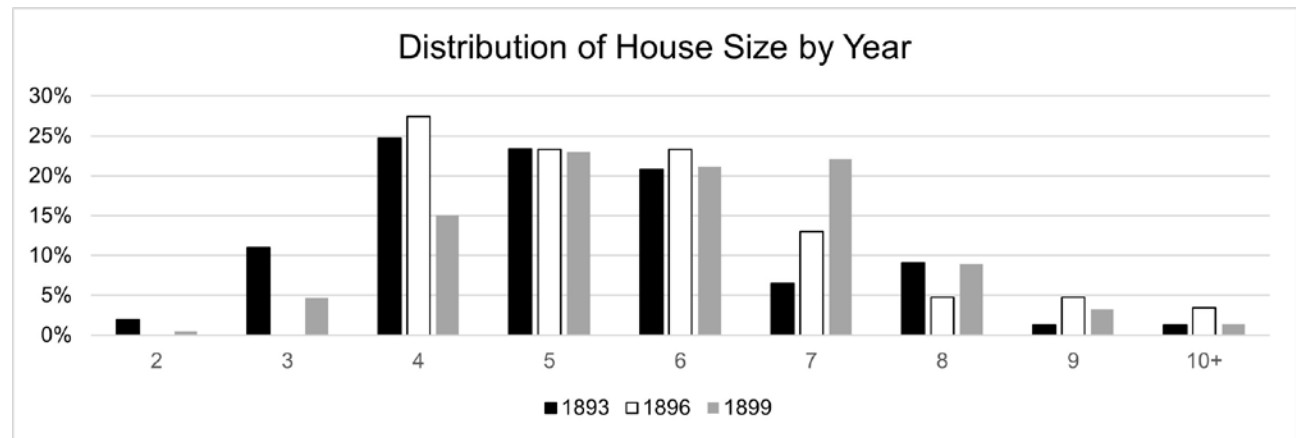
<sup>18</sup> Holly Lea Mcleans Mansion.

houses for the years 1893, 1896 and 1899. Not all the actual physical permits have survived, with about 270 having been lost, destroyed, or simply mislaid.<sup>19</sup> Proportions remaining were 75.2% for 1893, 51.7% for 1896 and 75.5% for 1899. These were physically checked, and calculations made of the average number of rooms per house for each of the three years.

The room count includes the main and largest separated spaces on the plans, either labelled or assumed to be parlours, dining rooms, kitchens, and bedrooms. Sculleries/pantries, washrooms or wash houses, toilets and bathrooms were not included in the counts.<sup>20</sup> Data collected suggests the average numbers of rooms did not vary greatly over the 1890s. In 1893 the average was 5.1 rooms; in 1896 it

<sup>19</sup> In terms of data analysis, it is assumed the loss of items is due to general neglect. As far as we are aware certain time periods or types of plans were not targeted for destruction or theft.

<sup>20</sup> Where plans were labeled with room types this detail was recorded. Where plans were not labeled just a count of the rooms was taken. As a way of checking which rooms were counted and which weren't, where the application form or specification referred to "permission to build an *x-roomed* house," this number was compared against the rooms shown in the plan. This helped confirm which rooms were included or not, and to ensure consistency of data.



**Figure 1:** Graph showing distribution of new houses built in Wellington City by number of rooms for 1893, 1896, 1899. Source: Calculated using data taken from building permit applications, Wellington City Council Archives.

was 5.4 and in 1899, six rooms per house. The slight increase may be attributed to the increasing setting aside of a parlour near the front of the house or additions of one or more bedrooms as villa sizes expanded.<sup>21</sup>

**Figure 1** graphs the distribution of houses by their numbers of rooms, for each of the three years. Only a very small number of houses had two or three rooms and at the other end

<sup>21</sup> Bedrooms were separated from other rooms, and both increases similarly – the average number of bedrooms per house was 2.7 (1893), 2.9 (1896) then 3.1 (1899); the average for all other counted rooms changed from 2.6 (1893) to 2.5 (1896) to 2.9 (1899). The 1896 count may have been impacted by that year having a much smaller sample size.

of the scale were a few houses with nine or more rooms;<sup>22</sup> not quite mansions but certainly large villas – mostly two-storey.

Combined data for all three years was also split by suburb, as shown in Table Two.<sup>23</sup> For each suburb the table records the smallest and largest house build, and the average number of rooms. Houses with the smallest numbers of rooms were in Newtown, Te Aro and Mount Cook - Newtown being a major area of

<sup>22</sup> The largest house found was built in 1899 for A H Miles on Hobson Street. Designed by McKay & MacGregor, it had 18 rooms, including a nursery, study, bicycle room and two dressing rooms.

<sup>23</sup> Note this is based on current suburb boundaries.

development at this time. The largest houses according to numbers of rooms were in Wellington Central, the proto-suburb of Kelburn (lower slopes above The Terrace), Oriental Bay, and Thorndon - all known to be well-to-do areas at this time.

**Additional detail**

All the five very big houses studied here were either designed and/or enlarged by well-known architects of the day except for the initial Christchurch house which became Strowan. This may have been architect-designed but the architect has not been traced. Using the permit data for Wellington, it was possible to quantify numbers of houses designed by builders or architects. Rounded figures show many more houses being designed by builders over the three years studied (77%, 68% and 72%), although architect-designed houses had increased slightly in 1896 and 1899 (23%, to 32% and 28%).

It has not been possible to produce quantitative data for costs of building Wellington houses as most of the available statistics relate to rentals quoted in cost-of-

Suburb	Sample size	Smallest (rooms)	Largest (Rooms)	Average rooms
Aro Valley	50	2	9	5.06
Berhampore	18	3	6	4.94
Kelburn	9	6	12	7.89
Mt Cook	89	3	8	5.26
Mt Victoria	73	3	11	6.07
Newtown	144	2	9	4.69
Oriental Bay	18	3	9	6.56
Pipitea	7	4	8	6
Te Aro	48	3	9	5.88
Thorndon	51	3	18	6.29
Wellington Central	27	3	14	7.41

**Table 2:** Range of room numbers and average numbers of rooms by suburb for new dwellings in Wellington City. Source: Building permit applications for new builds for years 1893, 1896, 1899, Wellington City Council Archives.

living estimates.<sup>24</sup> However a study of houses for sale advertisements in Wellington newspapers for the 1890s using Papers Past gives some idea of the variation in house prices linked to number of rooms and to a lesser extent location within the city. An advertisement by Harcourt and Company in the *Evening Post* of 17 March 1894 included the following houses for sale: three-room cottage in Hanson Street, £250; four-room house in Howard Street also £250; six-room house in Alpha Street, £350m and a six-room house in

Aro Street, £450.<sup>25</sup> Prices were very similar in 1898 but larger houses cost more. For example, an eight roomed house in Salisbury Terrace was offered for £600.<sup>26</sup>

**Discussion**

It is clear from the data presented that there were huge differences in the numbers and types of rooms in the largest, most affluent houses in contrast to those built for most of the population, assuming Wellington is

<sup>24</sup> Fraser *Report on the cost of living in New Zealand from 1891 - 1914* 168pp

<sup>25</sup> "Harcourt and Co have for sale the following City Properties" p 3.

<sup>26</sup> "A J McTavish & Co" p 8.

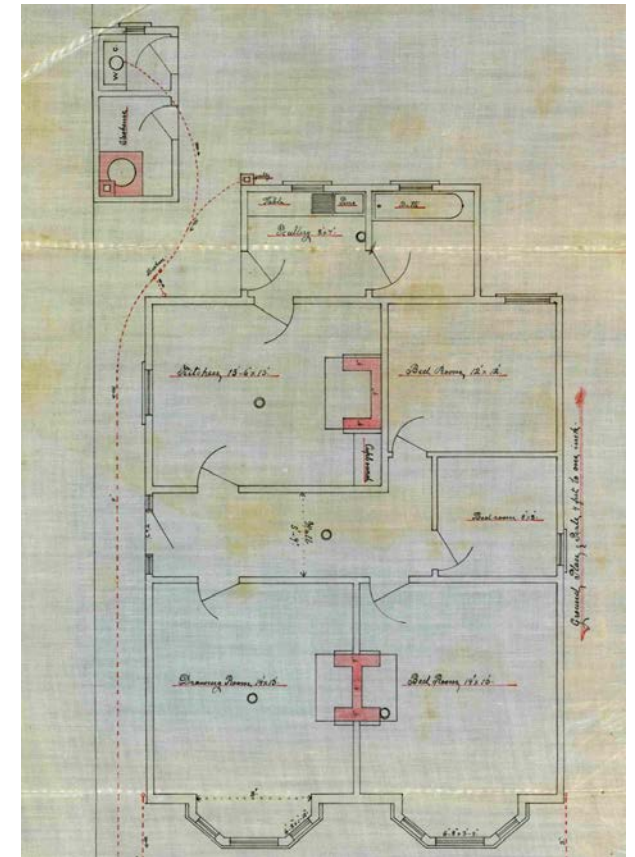
reasonably typical of what was happening in New Zealand in the 1890s. Of course, the really large houses were relatively uncommon in the country as were the numbers of owners with enough money to build and run them. Hodgson (1991) has shown that these houses were not confined to country estates but had in common many large rooms designed for entertaining as well as housing families - with servants to cater for them.<sup>27</sup> House parties of visitors were relatively common in the 1890s and might stay for several days, particularly from other large country houses. Hence the need for billiard rooms, ball rooms and libraries. Holly Lea, although designed to show off the affluence of its owner, did not fit in this category. It certainly had many large, spacious, and well-furnished rooms, but Allan McLean had intended from the outset that it should become an early type of rest home for hard-up ladies after his death.

We have also noted that three out of the five houses we considered were considerably enlarged during the 1890s, providing more bedrooms and other, specialised, rooms. This was almost certainly in response to the improving economic conditions as the 1880s

depression came to an end and greater exports were possible such as frozen meat. The numbers and types of rooms in the average Wellington house changed very little over the 1890s. The basic rooms were dining rooms, kitchens, bedrooms and sometimes parlours or sitting rooms. In houses with more rooms, there were generally more bedrooms and towards the end of the century there was a definite trend for the water closet (WC) to be in the house rather than in the garden. Rooms for entertainment were almost universally lacking.

We have insufficient data to determine whether average house prices changed much through the 1890s, but indications are that there was limited variation between different parts of the city at any one time. Also, somewhat obviously, the larger houses in the better suburbs were more expensive to buy, but in no way approached the very large sums needed to build or modify the type of big house that we have discussed. The money to build, establish and run these big houses mostly came from very large estates which, in the late 1890s, were little influenced by economic fluctuations.

The contrast between the rarefied, opulent



**Figure 2:** A "typical" five room house; in this case built for J J Webb on the Clyde Quay (Oriental Parade today) in 1896. Wellington City Council Archives, 00053-1771

houses scattered through New Zealand in the 1890s and the ordinary houses of the working population may seem obvious, but little quantitative data on differences has seldom been previously presented. While only

<sup>27</sup> Hodgson *The Big House* p 48.

generalisations can be made about the big houses nationwide, the data for Wellington shows the average room numbers and types of rooms in all newly built houses together with the extremes from 3-room to 18-room houses and their distribution though the city.

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