

The Tūārangi Old Men's Home

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ABSTRACT: The "old men" of the Ashburton Old Men's Home were relocated from their former Immigration Barracks site to a purpose-built campus on the outskirts of Ashburton in 1902. Their new home, named Tūārangi Old Men's Home, quickly came to be upheld as one of the premier institutions of its type in New Zealand. The early history of Tūārangi Home, both before and after this move, provides an insight into the changing status of both the "poor" and the difference that a modern building, designed on approved principles, might be able to make for their lives - in this case: those "destitute old men" from Ashburton and beyond.

Introduction

This promise of modernity was heralded internationally by exciting shifts in architectural thinking and design in the last decade of the nineteenth-century. Harry Mallgrave writes:

Formal innovation was widespread. In 1889 there was the great tower and buildings of the Paris Exposition. There was also the Catalan architect Antonio Gaudi putting the finishing touches on his Palacio Güell in Barcelona. In 1890 Louis Sullivan rushed into the office of his chief draftsman, Frank Lloyd Wright, in Chicago and (with the design of the Wainwright Building in his hand) proudly announced that he had solved the "skyscraper" problem. In 1892 Victor Horta designed the Hôtel Tassel, the building that is said to have started the fashion of art nouveau. And it was in Vienna in the early 1890s that a middle-aged and successful architect demanded that his art purge itself of its historical past. His name was Otto Wagner.¹

While turn of the century architectural developments in this country might have been

somewhat less radical (young nations have much more fundamental preoccupations after all), the first decade of the twentieth-century nonetheless ushered in a new era - even in this part of the world.

The research presented in this paper is a brief foray into the beginnings of a typology for aged-care facilities in New Zealand, looking at a specific case study: the Tūārangi Home for Old Men. This narrative reaches back to the Selwyn Home for Old Men of the late 1870s (housed in a former railway station building) and lands at Netherby, just outside of Ashburton, where "inmates" were relocated into purpose-built facilities in 1902. The shift from and through borrowed accommodation to modern purpose-built facilities is emblematic of a developing attitude to welfare and care manifesting legislation and subsequently through necessary architectural development in this country. In this we can see "modernity" at a pragmatic level rather

than the outcome of paradigmatic shifts alleged by Mallgrave above.

Selwyn Home for Old Men

Margaret Tennant writes that, from the 1880s and 1890s, the natural ageing patterns of a young nation emerging from a pioneering phase meant that "an undeniably needy section of the poor" were the many itinerant elderly, mostly men, who were without family or other means of support. Benevolent refuges, essentially the equivalent of an English "poorhouse," were few and far between and, as a consequence, elderly in need of care often found themselves consigned to hospitals or asylums.² This was becoming an issue for the running of these institutions where, according to various reports of the Inspector-General of Hospitals and Lunatic Asylums, services were being

² Tennant "Elderly Indigents and Old Men's Homes" pp 3-4.

¹ Mallgrave *Modern Architectural Theory* p 204.

impeded and wards overcrowded by the "accumulation of old people within" and their "constant discipline problems."³

A "refuge for infirm and destitute old men"⁴ existed at Selwyn, a small village located about halfway between Ashburton and Christchurch. The Selwyn Home for Old Men, like most of the few other refuges that existed at this time, was housed in a repurposed building - in this case a disused former railway station.⁵ In May 1878 the Christchurch newspaper *Globe* concluded, after a lengthy and rather negative description of the conditions at the Home, that its horrors were such that the building was "not suitable or in any way adapted for its purpose."⁶ In writing the article the author also demonstrated the underlying values that were driving changes at this time, stating that:

³ Inspector-General quoted, Tennant "Elderly Indigents and Old Men's Homes" p 4.

⁴ "The Selwyn Home for Old Men" p 3.

⁵ Tennant also lists former immigration barracks, troop barracks, school buildings and, in the case of Christchurch's Samaritan Home, the former Addington gaol, as places that were re-used to accommodate benevolent refuges. See: Tennant "Elderly Indigents and Old Men's Homes" p 5.

⁶ "The Selwyn Home for Old Men" p 3.

it follows that it is a mere matter of duty that the Home should be at least something more than a mere "refuge for the destitute" in its fullest and most vulgar meaning. In point of fact, no amount of money could be profitably expended in patching up or renovating the ruinous building which has been successively a railway station, a refreshment room, an immigration depot, and now the home for the aged poor. What is really wanted is a convenient, commodious building, specially constructed for its intended purpose, not necessarily costly, but at least a comfortable place, where the remaining days of those whose circumstances unfortunately compel them to seek its shelter may be passed in decent comfort.⁷

Only a couple of months later, a report in the Christchurch *Press* provided details of a visit to the Home by Christchurch Mayor Henry Thompson, who was also the Chairman of the newly-legislated Canterbury Charitable Aid Board, and other members of the Board. Having only to step off the platform to visit the Home, the party were at once:

shocked at what they saw ... unanimously [coming] to the conclusion that the place was utterly unsuitable for the purposes of a Benevolent Asylum, and that there was urgent need of a prompt removal of the inmates to a more fitting building ... which, if possible, should include accommodation for the aged and infirm of both sexes, and be a credit instead of a disgrace to Canterbury.⁸

⁷ "The Selwyn Home for Old Men" p 3.

⁸ "The Charitable Aid Board and the Selwyn Home" p 3.

While the Immigration Barracks at Addington were first assessed for their suitability as temporary accommodation for the Home, they were rejected as also being unsuited to the Home's needs (not to mention the fact that a new group of immigrants were on their way and would soon be requiring the accommodation).⁹ The Ashburton Immigration Barracks were assessed the following week and were deemed suitable.¹⁰ In relatively little time at all, the "old and infirm men" arrived on the 10:30am train to Ashburton on 23 August 1878 to take up residence there.¹¹

Ashburton Old Men's Home

The Ashburton Immigration Barracks were built in 1874 as part of a rapid province-wide response to meet the needs of an incoming wave of immigrants announced by Premier Julius Vogel that year (Canterbury apparently receiving "twenty-five shiploads").¹² This influx was a part of Vogel's nation-wide immigration scheme that began in 1854 and lasted into the late 1880s.¹³ Because the South

⁹ "The Charitable Aid Board and the Selwyn Home" p 3.

¹⁰ "The Charitable Aid Board and the Selwyn Home" p 3.

¹¹ "The New Old Men's Home" p 3.

¹² "Early Immigration" p 6.

¹³ Schrader "Housing and Government" np.

Island broad gauge railway had recently been extended to have Ashburton as its terminus, the town was seen as being accessible to host a reasonable number of new immigrants, despite its distance from Christchurch - the nearest major port.¹⁴

Various immigration barrack designs (also called immigration depots) were built around the country. While some barracks were designed by the Colonial Architect, William Clayton, many others were privately commissioned.¹⁵ The latter was the case at Ashburton, which was designed by prominent Christchurch architect, Frederick Strouts. At Ashburton, Strouts rejected the linear planning that typified most barrack designs. The Ashburton barracks were instead laid out to a cross-shaped plan, with the central axis containing a large dining hall and kitchen at one end and accommodation and offices for the Barrack's manager at the other. Projecting at right angles from the central building were two dormitory wings. Each wing contained shared conveniences for that wing and ten rooms able to lodge six persons in each - eight if really necessary according to a report in the

¹⁴ Norris "North Canterbury Hospital Board" p 190.

¹⁵ Stacpoole *Colonial Architecture in New Zealand* p 130.

Press.¹⁶ A less elaborate immigration barracks completed the following year in nearby Southbridge shares distinctive details (but not the cross-plan) and is also likely to have been designed by Strouts.¹⁷

In its new function as an old men's home the barracks could accommodate 50 residents (who were mostly known as "inmates") - two to each dormitory room.¹⁸ By the mid-1880s the Home had already exceeded that capacity, however.¹⁹ Calls to increase the capacity of the home had already begun from as early as from 1879 - the year after the Home was established at the barracks.²⁰ According to Norris, by 1892 the situation had deteriorated further still and an additional accommodation for 20 residents was required.²¹ Although there are no details of exactly how it was managed, the barracks were to remain available, at 24 hours' notice, for the building's original immigration purpose - accommodating the arrival of the "new chums," as an 1878 *Evening Echo* article put

¹⁶ "Ashburton Immigration Barracks" p 3.

¹⁷ "Shortly to be Demolished" p 39.

¹⁸ "A Visit to the Ashburton Old Men's Home" p 6.

¹⁹ "Hospital and Charitable Aid Board" p 5.

²⁰ "The Old Men's Home" p 2.

²¹ Norris "North Canterbury Hospital Board" p 190.

it.²²

Problems at the barracks were not confined to accommodation shortfall. In 1885, the Ashburton Home Committee reported that the current condition of the buildings was "most unsatisfactory" - noting that:

they are infested with vermin to an almost intolerable extent, which defies any hope of purification, and that unfortunately, from all the above circumstances, they are not worth any expenditure saving such repairs as cannot be avoided to keep them healthy and weather-tight.²³

Thought was being given to the relocation of the Home and the Board had already applied to the government for 200 hectares at the former Highbank Estate, some 30 kilometres north of Ashburton, as early as 1886.²⁴ This application was rejected by both Lands and Survey Department and opposed by the Borough of Ashburton itself.²⁵

Reports of the conditions were much more hyperbolic in the following year when the Public Works Department had made a sum of £120 available for extending the building.

²² "The New Old Men's Home" p 3.

²³ "Charitable Aid Board" (24 December 1885) p 6.

²⁴ "Brief Mention" p 2.

²⁵ Norris "North Canterbury Hospital Board" p 190.

Information provided at the Charitable Aid Board meeting at the beginning of that year described conditions such that it was impossible to visit the place at night "without an umbrella" – thought had even been given to providing the residents with tents during the summer months, when vermin-related issues were much worse.²⁶ Despite the "inhuman" conditions described, it was felt that remediation was out of the question and the Charitable Board rejected on the grant on the grounds that the buildings themselves were "quite unsuitable and not worth adding to."²⁷ The Board ultimately batted the issue back to the Ashburton Home Committee at that same meeting. From that point on, however, the discussion would exclusively be about finding an alternative location for the residents.

Tūārangi Old Men's Home

In 1898, several potential sites were inspected by the Home Committee - they decided upon a disused former Police Reserve at Netherby as being the most suitable.²⁸ An Act of Parliament was necessary to vest reserve land to the Charitable Aid Board, however, and

²⁶ "Charitable Aid Board" (13 January 1887) p 2.

²⁷ Norris "North Canterbury Hospital Board" p 190.

²⁸ "Local and General" (3 November 1898) p 2.

this was duly enacted and the land acquired for the Home in the following year.²⁹

The architect hired to prepare drawings for the new home, Richard Bird, was a local "early settler" who had emigrated from England in 1874, after gaining his apprenticeship as a carpenter and joiner in his birthplace, Exeter, and subsequently studying architecture at the School of Art in London.³⁰ Bird had served as a Borough Councillor and one term Mayor of Ashburton in the 1890s. His architectural commissions at the time of the Tūārangi commission consisted of a broad range of domestic, commercial and public buildings in and around Ashburton - among them the Ashburton Oddfellows' Hall (1883)³¹ - and the Flemington Presbyterian Church (1885).³²

In July 1901, tenders were called for the erection, in brick, of new buildings at Ashburton for the Old Men's Home.³³ The contract was awarded to Peter Gourie of Ashburton at the price of £5,474 the following

²⁹ "News of the Day" p 4.

³⁰ "Obituary: Mr Richard Bird" p 5.

³¹ "Ashburton Oddfellows' Hall" p 3.

³² "Flemington Presbyterian Church" p 2.

³³ Bird "Tenders are invited" p 8.

month.³⁴ The foundation stone was laid by a local politician, William Campbell Walker (then Minister of Education), in November 1901.³⁵

On 20 August 1902, after the hoisting of the Union Jack and cheers given for the new King, a public ceremony was performed to officially open the completed and occupied Old Men's Home.³⁶ The *Press* provided full coverage of the opening and the Charitable Aid Board meeting that preceded the official declaration. The name, Tūārangi, was decided upon at that meeting - selected from among five other te reo Māori names. The article noted that, although not seriously entertained, it had been suggested naming the place "Old Men's Paradise," in view of the vast improvement in the condition of the accommodation in contrast to the former home at the Immigration Barracks.³⁷

The Home consisted of series of low brick buildings arranged around a central quadrangular court. Each perimeter wing had a timber verandah, similar in detailing to

³⁴ "Local and General" (6 September 1901) p 2.

³⁵ "Brevities" p 1.

³⁶ "The Public Ceremony" p 2.

³⁷ "The Tuarangi Home" p 5.

what might be expected on a domestic villa of the time. The hipped roofs are similarly familiar. The whole complex was single-storeyed, except for the front-most buildings, which housed the staff and management functions. This consisted of a double-storeyed block and, abutting that, a crenelated tower rising to three storeys - the whole ensemble of brick construction. The *Press* noted that the "imposing" tower was not merely an aesthetic fancy at the entrance façade of the building (although it served that purpose too), but actually held the tanks that supplied water to the complex.³⁸

The *Press* article also noted the £6,000 completion cost and provided a description of the accommodation arrangements, which consisted of four "large and airy" dormitories containing double rows of beds (24 in each dormitory) and a further six smaller twin rooms for residents who "require special consideration." The complex was completed with a "cheerful" dining room, "well-appointed" kitchen and scullery, a series of smaller outbuildings and a windmill (which presumably powered the pump that drew the artesian well water up into the tower's tanks).

³⁸ "The Tuarangi Home" p 5.

One of the outbuildings was actually removed from the former site at the Immigration Barracks, renovated and repurposed at the new home as a smoking and reading room. Adding to the comfort and convenience of the residents was the provision of modern services throughout the Home: hot and cold water and acetylene gas. The courtyard even sported asphalted paths, complete with hand rails, to aid the residents' walk between the dining room and their dormitories.³⁹

The success of the newly opened Home was conveyed to both houses of the General Assembly by Duncan MacGregor in 1903 - as part of his Inspector-General of Hospitals and Charitable Aid Institutions report. The Inspector-General wrote:

Of the charitable institutions for old and destitute persons, the Ohiro Home, Wellington, the Jubilee Home, Christchurch, and Tuarangi, Ashburton, are the most satisfactory: the food, clothing, cleanliness, and comfort of the inmates all that could be wished.⁴⁰

Further improvements were made at the Home throughout the decade. More of the original Immigration Barracks buildings were

³⁹ "The Tuarangi Home" p 5.

⁴⁰ "Hospitals and Charitable Aid" (22 September 1903) p 6.

transported to the Tūārangi site in 1904.⁴¹ The original Ashburton Barracks site, now cleared of buildings, was subdivided in 1905, with the intention of letting the sections to add to the Board's income.⁴² Difficulty in finding anyone willing to take up leases on the sections saw the Board move to sell the properties later that year - with the proceeds to be put toward paying off the debt that had been incurred in the construction of Tūārangi.⁴³ Work by able-bodied residents on the Home's piggery, poultry-raising and vegetable gardens helped to cover some of the running costs of the institution.⁴⁴

In 1905 mains gas pipes were laid to bring reticulated gas to the home to replace the acetylene lighting.⁴⁵ Steam heating apparatus was also tendered for in that year.⁴⁶ More significant additions designed by Collins and Harman, the well-known Christchurch architectural practice, were added later in the decade to accommodate an infirmary ward for

⁴¹ Norris "North Canterbury Hospital Board" p 192.

⁴² "Charitable Aid Board" (25 May 1905) p 4.

⁴³ "Charitable Aid Board" (17 November 1905) p 3.

⁴⁴ "Town and Country" p 6.

⁴⁵ "Charitable Aid Board" (25 May 1905) p 4.

⁴⁶ "Tenders for Steam Heating" p 5.

"incurables."⁴⁷ The incurables annex was opened in 1909 and the 28 existing Tūārangi patients of that designation moved into the new ward. Further patients were expected from Ashburton Hospital and, in fact, there was some consternation expressed by hospital staff about the four-month delay in accepting them. Tūārangi countered that they were awaiting the brick construction to dry, but also noted their wariness about indiscriminately receiving the hospital's incurable patients unless they were properly destitute.⁴⁸

Notwithstanding issues with the heavy-handed application procedures for admittance to the Home and other staffing issues recorded in local newspapers from time to time, the Tūārangi Old Men's Home generally enjoyed a good reputation as a model institution and was either fully or oversubscribed for much of its first decade. In the following decades the Home would continue to be expanded, accommodating 142 men prior the beginning of World War II - roughly double the original capacity of the newly-opened Home in 1902.⁴⁹ The

⁴⁷ "Charitable Aid Board" (2 July 1908) p 3.

⁴⁸ "Care of Incurables" p 1.

⁴⁹ Newman "Ashburton's Hospital grew with the Town"

Canterbury District Health Board closed the site in 1995, opening a new Tūārangi Resthome in Cameron Street, Ashburton.⁵⁰ Since then it has been used as a back-packers and, at the time of writing this paper, is listed for sale on Trade Me website for \$1,250,000.⁵¹

Conclusion

There is much more to be unpacked in the early history of the institution and its antecedents that has not been attempted here. For example, Tennant's work on the relationship between legislation and the development of the various old men's homes of the 1880-1920s provides fruitful frames of reference within which Tūārangi might be placed - either as an early step toward realising an infrastructure for the welfare state or, perhaps, even in terms of an argument relating to national settler-based/pioneering identity that is just hinted at in Tennant's writing. That consideration of the effect of legislative change is an important omission from this work.

It might also be productive to draw

p 18.

⁵⁰ Newman "Tuarangi to go under auctioneer's hammer"

p 9.

⁵¹ "Make no Mistakes, it's Sell Time" np.

comparisons with well-known contemporaneous developments in the United Kingdom, the United States, and closer to home in Australia, especially given legislative differences. There are also tangential studies that might bear further investigation - the architecture of colonial immigration barracks for example and/or the adaptive reuse of these and other buildings for benevolent refuges around New Zealand in the late nineteenth-century.

Such directions are intended to be pursued as extensions of this work at some future time, but the modest outline of the history of the Home that is presented here acts instead as a test, of sorts, of the availability of relevant material and the possibilities that lie within it (there is a lot more material, including drawings and plans - should they exist, that is yet to be investigated). This work nevertheless demonstrates that, at Tūārangi at least, the turn of the century brought with it the reality of a future that might be improved by purposeful and humane architectural developments in this country. Tūārangi might be thought of in that respect - as a built manifestation of the first steps toward an egalitarian modernity that would come to define the new century.

As Richard Westenra signalled in his "Chairman's statement" at the meeting of the North Canterbury and Ashburton Charitable Aid Board meeting in February 1885, the solution to the ills being experienced by the "old men" who were then were residing at the Ashburton Immigration Barracks lay in "modern buildings designed on approved principles."⁵² This might be a modernity on a different order than the bombastic deliverances that Mallgrave presents us with as defining the *fin-de-siècle* period in Europe and America (quoted at the beginning of this paper), but it is nonetheless profound and, in its own way, questions the need for histories to be fashioned around the iconising narratives of this or that "master" and their canonic works.

⁵² "Charitable Aid" p 3.

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