

Why Not Live There?: Two 1908 houses in Addington and Hataitai

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ABSTRACT: In 1908 two houses were erected. They were both long and narrow. They both featured "stick" style half-timbered decoration. They both featured typical joinery of the era - double-sash windows, four-panel doors and elegantly profiled skirtings. And both were the product of speculative builders capitalising on an expanding housing market. One house was built in Hataitai, Wellington. The other was built in Addington, Christchurch. In the early twentieth century, the introduction of electric trams and an associated tunnel through Mt Victoria led to out-lying settlements like Hataitai becoming densely populated suburbs. In 1908 Addington was already an established inner suburb, but intensification was underway as remaining pockets of farmland were subdivided for housing. This paper will compare and contrast the respective careers of the developers of these two homes: JW Easson – an ambitious builder and joinery factory owner who oversaw the construction of 600 houses in the capital between 1905 and 1914, and Frederick Crawford, a smaller-scale speculator who built 50 houses in Christchurch in the same period.

Introduction

The genesis of this paper was a realisation by its authors at a previous symposium that they each lived in a small inner-suburban weatherboard house from 1908 - but in different cities on different islands. This resulted in a promise to prepare a paper when the decade from 1900 to 1910 was next the theme. Our initial research question was: "What led to similar houses being built in Addington and Hataitai in 1908?" Our hypothesis was that there were similar economic and environmental factors at play. Both houses are indeed by-products of a similar tale of urban expansion in Christchurch and Wellington, the latter topic already well covered by Adrian Humphris and Geoff Mew in their book *Ring Around the City*. From our early investigations, a more personal aspect emerged, being the stories of

the two men who built our houses - JW Easson in Wellington and Frederick William Crawford in Christchurch.

67 Waitoa Road, Hataitai, Wellington

The 1908 drawings for 65 and 67 Waitoa Road show two semi-detached single-gable weatherboard cottages, each of four rooms with a side entrance. The cottage at 67, although modest in size, was Italianate in style with elaborate half-timbering and fretwork to the street façade. Photographs soon after construction show a roof of terracotta Marseilles tiles, a popular choice at the time.¹

The drawings are marked "for JW Easson & Co" but the author of the elevations and plans is unknown. According to Adrian Humphris,

¹ Mew & Kiddey "Bus Shelter to Basilica" pp 9-12.

an expert on Wellington's early architects, Easson was known to have employed well-known architect James Bennie and then William Fielding. Humphris is well-versed in the drawing style of these two architects and is not convinced that either of them is responsible for the 67 Waitoa Road drawings.²

The career of the cottage's builder, JW Easson, has been easier to trace than its architect. Easson moved from the West Coast to Wellington in 1905 to capitalise on the opportunities presented by Wellington's electric-tram-driven suburban expansion, which led him to build houses near the small village of Hataitai.

Early Hataitai

Hataitai is located on the eastern side of

² Humphris Pers. Comm.

Wellington's Mt Victoria, the ridge which separates Lambton Harbour from Evans Bay. The name is derived from Whātaïtai, one of the two mythical taniwha who lived in Wellington Harbour. Whātaïtai is the Māori name for the whole Miramar peninsula up to the eastern side of Mt Victoria. Following the arrival of European settlers in Wellington in 1840, Hataitai was initially a farming settlement. By the end of the nineteenth century a few residences had appeared, mainly along Moxham Avenue.³

Wellington at the turn of the twentieth century⁴

Wellington's residential and commercial buildings were initially concentrated around Lambton Harbour and the small area of flat land at Te Aro. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Wellington experienced a significant suburban expansion driven by an improving economic climate, poor living conditions in the inner city and better transport networks. The population of Wellington had doubled between 1880 and 1900 and the total number of dwellings in the city also doubled over this time. Housing had

³ Kelly. Hataitai Shopping Centre Heritage Area.

⁴ The following section owes much to Humphris & Mew *Ring Around the City* pp 13-78.

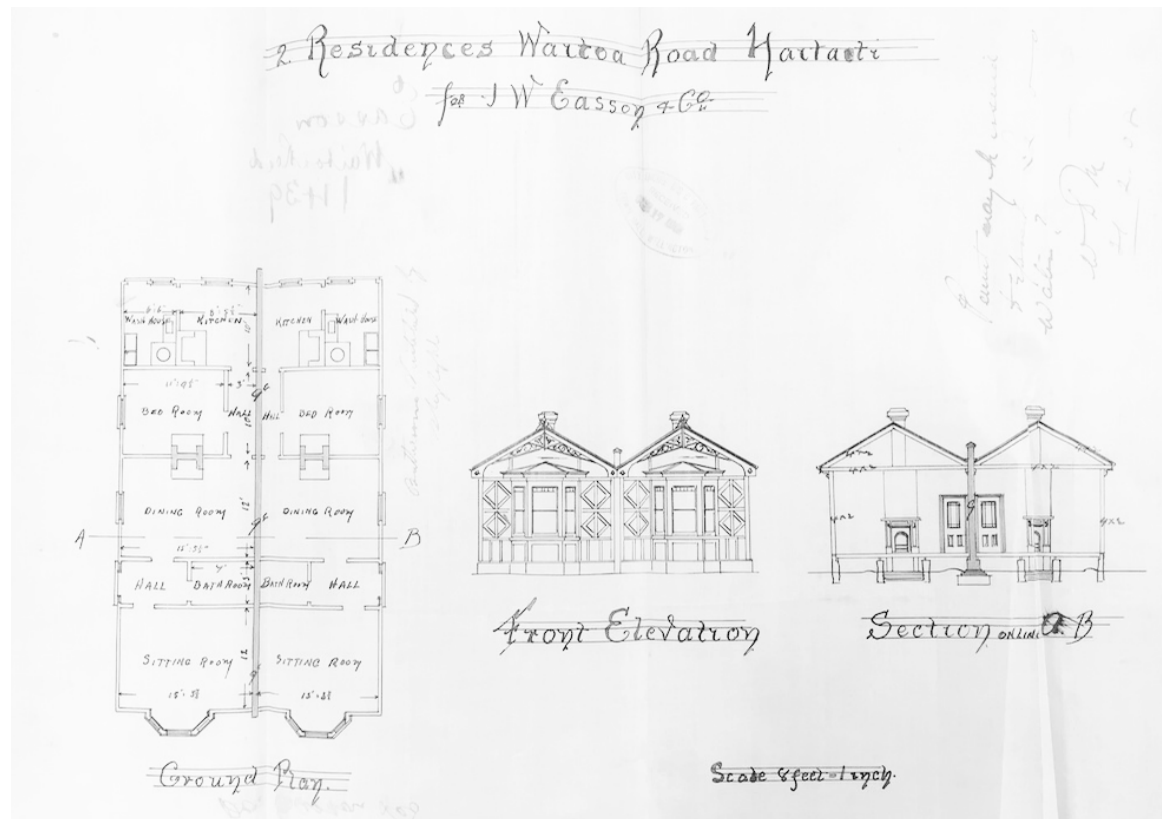


Figure 1: 2 Residences Waitoa Road Hataitai for JW Easson & Co (Wellington City Council Archives Ref: 00043-1439)

been built at a high density in the inner city due to limited availability of land. The industrial central city had become an increasingly unpleasant place to live with sanitation problems that led to outbreaks of cholera and typhus.

By 1901, Wellington was a town of 43,000

surrounded by a collection of rural villages. There were scattered houses in places like Hataitai (then part of Kilbirnie) to the east of the city, but they were largely isolated by the steep hills of the town belt and the area had a rural feeling. There were about 100 houses in Kilbirnie at this time but living there and commuting to work in the city was not

realistic for most people. Access to Hataitai village was not easy. There was a track up and over Mt Victoria via the town belt, a formed road along Oriental Parade through Evans Bay, or you could go through Newtown to Island Bay and then along the shore to Lyall Bay.

Since European settlement, land near the city had been used for market gardening and farming, but when rail connected Wellington to the Hutt Valley and the Wairarapa in the 1880s, the city was no longer dependent on nearby land for growing food. The Wellington City Council began investigating expanding the town boundary to amalgamate with outlying areas such as the Melrose Borough, that included what was to become Hataitai. The two councils amalgamated in 1903.

It was evident that to alleviate overcrowding in Wellington's central city, there needed to be an affordable means of transport to, and more houses built in, outlying areas. In 1902, the Hataitai Land Company proposed to make a road over Mt Victoria from Elizabeth Street to North Kilbirnie. This project was never realised, presumably because it was overtaken by plans to introduce electric tramways. Mirroring developments in many European

cities, the Wellington City Council began work to electrify the tram system in 1902 and focussed initially on the Thorndon to Newtown route. The first section of electrified tramway opened in June 1904.

The City Engineer recommended that a tunnel through Mt Victoria was the best option to get a tramway to Kilbirnie and this was adopted as a project by Council in January 1905. The tunnel would connect Pirie Street in Mt Victoria with Waitoa Road in Hataitai, the location of our Wellington example. Residents demanded that a footpath be included in the tunnel but this was ultimately not included in the design. The first sod was turned in October 1905. Eighteen months later the tunnel was ready for the first trial tram on 12 April 1907 and it opened officially four days later. Construction had taken 100 miners on three shifts with 10 bricklayers and 15 bricklayers labourers working each shift. Spoil was taken from the tunnel to Evans Bay to make the recreation reserve including a municipal library, swimming pool and several sporting clubs.

The 1907 inauguration of the Hataitai Tramway Tunnel at the top of Waitoa Road made it possible for residents to commute via

electric tram to their jobs in the city. One of several suburbs that expanded following the introduction of the electric tram services, Hataitai grew quickly and the suburb as it is today was largely established by the 1930s.⁵

From the early 1900s, land values around the city jumped dramatically and the city saw an unprecedented boom in construction. The boom peaked in 1907 as speculators cashed in on the tramways and the new cable car to Kelburn. Residential building construction slowed in Wellington from 1908 to 1914. Adrian Humphris' research into the minute books of the Hataitai Land Company shows how much money could be made by speculating on land in Wellington. The Company purchased 233 acres in 1901 for £16,000 or £68 per acre. By 1903, when an access road linked their estate to the city the land had increased in value over 1200% and was selling at £900 per acre.⁶

JW Easson

One of the people to cash in on the building boom was John Wallace Easson. Born in Perth, Scotland in 1868, it appears that he came to

⁵ Kelly. Hataitai Shopping Centre Heritage Area.

⁶ Humphris and Mew *Ring Around the City* p 95.

New Zealand with his parents, James Wallace senior and Charlotte, in the 1870s.⁷ The first known reference to JW Easson senior in New Zealand is a call for tenders to paint five cottages at Green Island in Dunedin in 1881, indicating perhaps that he was working there as a builder.

Easson senior had at least two sons, John Wallace and Percy. John married Mary Smith in 1896 and they had three daughters.⁸ From at least 1896, the Eassons owned a store in Greymouth, selling everything from potatoes to bicycles.⁹ According to a newspaper advertisement from 1903, the Eassons also had the largest and most up to date woodworking plant on the West Coast.¹⁰

John Easson junior and his family left Greymouth in March 1905 and he purchased a timber yard in Kilbirnie the same month.¹¹ He

⁷ "Easson's Bankruptcy" p 5.

⁸ Department of Internal Affairs. Birth register no. 1897/12071; 1899/6594; 1900/17896; Department of Internal Affairs. Marriage register no. 1896/4723.

⁹ For example, see advertisements *Kumara Times* (2 July 1896) p. 4.

¹⁰ Messrs J.W. Easson & Co. "Sashes & Doors & Joinery Work [advertisement]" p 4.

¹¹ "[untitled: Mr J.W. Easson returned from Wellington]" p 2; "Personal notes" p 2.

then spent 10 years in Wellington working as a builder with his brother Percy where they built 600 houses.¹² At this time the building industry in New Zealand was becoming more suited to rapid construction. Mass components could be made by steam-powered woodworking machines which had been imported since the 1860s. Pattern books were also widely available and builders frequently adapted plans from them.

By 1908, Easson had built several houses in Kilbirnie and he was advertising them for sale and describing Kilbirnie as "Wellington's most rising suburb."¹³ At this time Kilbirnie included part of today's Hataitai as the northern boundary of Kilbirnie was Waitoa Road. One advertisement from the *Evening Post* in February 1908 reads:

THE KILBIRNIE TRAM SERVICE has made HATAITAI and KILBIRNIE within a FEW MINUTES from the City.
WHY NOT LIVE THERE?¹⁴

Another advertisement noted that land values in Hataitai and Kilbirnie are "increasing by

¹² "Successful West Coaster" p 2.

¹³ Easson J.W. "Only One Left [Land Notices]" p 14.

¹⁴ Easson's "The Kilbirnie Tram Service [advertisement]" p 11.

leaps and bounds."¹⁵

In around 1914, having reportedly built 600 houses in Wellington, Easson left New Zealand and settled in Sydney. By 1920 he was employing 500-600 men at his eight sawmills and several steam boats.¹⁶ Easson unfortunately became bankrupt in 1923. According to him, he became insolvent when a timber cartel prevented him from securing boats to get his timber to the port of Sydney and he was unable to fill contracts back in New Zealand worth £500,000 pounds.¹⁷ He died in 1941 aged 72 in Ilford, London where he had been living and importing Australian timber.¹⁸

30 Fairfield Ave, Addington, Christchurch

Addington is an inner suburb of Christchurch, located south of the central city and west of the industrial area of Sydenham. The suburb was founded in the 1860s when early New Zealand politician and first Premier Henry Sewell bought and subdivided a 50-acre rural section. The name Addington may refer to

¹⁵ Easson's "We are building a number of 4, 5, 6, and 7-roomed dwellings [advertisement]" p 12.

¹⁶ "Successful West Coaster" p 2.

¹⁷ "Easson's Bankruptcy" p 5.

¹⁸ "Obituary" p 5.

either or both Addington Palace - the home at the time of the Archbishops of Canterbury, and/or the village of Addington in Kent - the parish of the Rev. Paulsen (or Poulson), the absentee owner from whom Sewell purchased the land.

The southern railway was laid through the suburb in the late 1860s, which encouraged industrial development and the rapid growth of a working-class community. The strong rail focus in the suburb was underlined when the Addington Railway Workshops opened in 1880. These grew to be the largest railway workshops in New Zealand, and were Addington's major employer. The flour mills and grain and wool stores along nearby Moorhouse Avenue and Lincoln Road were also large employers. With its good transport links and proximity to the city, Addington also came to be the location of many of the city's institutions, including its saleyards, a racecourse, a prison, the showgrounds, an asylum (Sunnyside), a military camp and a Presbyterian cemetery (where, perhaps true to form, the plots are narrower than was standard).

Until 1903, Addington was part of Sydenham Borough, along with neighbouring suburbs



Figure 2: 30 Fairfield Avenue, Addington, Christchurch (photograph Gareth Wright)

Sydenham and Waltham. It retained a distinct identity however; at least partly because it remained physically separated from Sydenham by a couple of large rural sections (and the nonconformist cemetery). One of these sections, between Selwyn and Antigua Streets, was a property called Fairfield. When Fairfield was finally subdivided at the turn of

the century, an avenue of the same name was formed. To this day it retains the bend where it once passed around the large 1850s homestead. A tramline laid down Antigua Street in 1911 played a significant role in the development of the nearby suburb of Spreydon, but probably had little impact on

already intensively-settled Addington.¹⁹

The new Fairfield subdivision was first advertised in January 1902; a few weeks later section 72 was purchased by undertaker and property investor George Barrell. On 13 May 1908 Barrell sold it to speculative builder Frederick William Crawford (1873-1937). Crawford split the section lengthways into two long narrow sections of about 550 sqm each, and, drawing a building permit on 20 May, proceeded to build a pair of similar small villas. Three months later the new houses - 28 and 30 Fairfield Avenue - were sold to their first occupants.²⁰

Unlike the other main centres, Christchurch's flat topography meant residential development was comparatively unconstrained. The city didn't meet the Port Hills until the early twentieth century – and then hill suburbs were a life-style choice rather than a necessity. Consequently, even in the poorer inner suburbs, sections tended to be large and houses free-standing and single-storey. If there is a Christchurch villa

archetype, it is the so-called "square" house on a quarter acre. The narrow tightly-packed homes of Wellington or Dunedin were largely unknown.

As narrow dwellings therefore, 28 and 30 Fairfield Avenue are relatively unusual in the Christchurch context. Even in working class Addington, the typology is still a minority of the housing stock. Nonetheless there was clearly a market for the value that the narrow house represented, and developers like Crawford would have appreciated the opportunity to realize additional profit from sub-dividing larger sections. Interestingly however, although 28 and 30 Fairfield Avenue are smaller in scale than the archetypal bay villa, they are not obviously cheaply-built. Both were plastered throughout, with decorative hall arches, ceiling roses, tiled registers and a bathroom (although the toilet was outside). And although both houses have the same floor plan, Crawford made sure to give each an individual street elevation. 28 Fairfield Avenue has a faceted bay window and cast-iron lace on the porch while 30 Fairfield Avenue has a flat bay with timber fretwork. The battened "stick-style" half-timbering effect in the gable of each is also different. This suggests that Crawford's target

market for these houses was the owner-occupier of modest means rather than the landlord.

Frederick Crawford, builder, first appeared in the electoral rolls in Christchurch in 1896 when he was 23. The absence of any obvious record before this date suggests he may have been a recent immigrant. Presumably he worked at his trade in the employ of others until 1904, when at the age of 31 he appears to have struck out on his own to take advantage of the city's Edwardian prosperity - advertising a new house for sale for the first time.²¹ His business appears to have grown during 1906 as over the course of that year he advertised for carpenters and bricklayers on a number of occasions.²²

The surviving Christchurch City Council building permit index conveniently begins in 1907. Between December 1907 and January 1918, Crawford applied for 53 permits – an

²¹ Crawford "For immediate sale [Late Advertisements]" p 3.

²² Christchurch Electorate p 70; Crawford "Wanted, a Bricklayer [Wanted advertisement]" p 1; Crawford "Wanted, Two Good Carpenters [Wanted advertisement]" p 1; Crawford "Wanted, 3 First-class Carpenters [Wanted advertisement]" p 1.

¹⁹ Wilson *Local Lives* pp 15-17, 29, 40-41.

²⁰ Records of Title 179/229 (1898), 199/28 (1902), 246/22 (1908). Christchurch City Council Building Permit no. 1884 (20 May 1908).

average of five houses a year. Initially most of these houses were in Sydenham and Addington. Early in 1908 - before commencing 28 and 30 Fairfield Avenue - Crawford was building two similar houses in nearby Braddon Street. In 1910 he developed a further two properties in Fairfield Avenue itself. Interestingly these later Fairfield Avenue properties were early bungalows and thus illustrate the architectural transition taking place at this time. Crawford was still evidently following the same two-for-one business model however, as in common with the earlier Braddon Street and Fairfield Avenue developments, these later dwellings were also built on parallel narrow sections. After 1910 Crawford was increasingly working in the new middle-class bungalow suburbs of St Albans and Shirley, north of the city centre.²³

In 1921 Crawford sold his yard in St Asaph Street and relocated to Wadestown in Wellington. Perhaps he was adversely impacted by the economic downturn at the end of WWI and was looking to the capital to revive his fortunes? In Wellington, Crawford

²³ CCC Building Permit no. 1720 (20 January 1908), no. 2977 (21 September 1910); Crawford "Wanted, Price for Plastering [advertisement]" p 5.

initially advertised for carpenters - which suggests he was attempting to re-establish his business. The North Island grass may not have been as green as he had hoped however, and his advertisements cease promptly. It is likely he went back to working for others. Crawford continued to work as a builder until his death in 1937 at the age of 64, at his sister's home - 15 Mount Street, Te Aro (now Victoria University (VUW) Pasifika House).²⁴

Conclusion

Comparing Easson's 600 houses with Crawford's 50, it is clear that these men's enterprises were on quite different scales. Easson would likely have been more familiar with a pencil than a hammer, while Crawford would have been wielding his tools every day. But both were engaged in residential development, and as such were ultimately subject to the same economic forces. Both men chose to launch their businesses in the middle years of the first decade of the twentieth century as a burgeoning population (growing by 56% between 1896 and 1913) and a buoyant

²⁴ Crawford "Wanted Sell, Builder's Yard" [Wanted to Sell advertisements]" p 13; Crawford "Wanted, a Carpenter [Situations Vacant]" p 1; "Crawford [Deaths]" p 1; "Crawford [Funeral Notices]" p 1.

economy created a demand for housing.²⁵ And both followed the money, with Crawford shadowing Easson from the South Island to the greater opportunities afforded by the growing capital city - and then, in turn, out of the development game as residential demand slowed and then stalled in late Edwardian and inter-war New Zealand.

To conclude, a tentative observation on domestic stylistic regionalism in the Edwardian period. The houses at Waitoa Road and Fairfield Avenue were built in the same year, are of a similar form and size and had a similar internal fitout. But the street elevation of Waitoa Road - with its half-timbering, Italianate-bay window, and elaborately fretted barges - is notably more ornate than that at Fairfield Avenue. Even taking developer preference into account, some of this difference might be accounted for by stylistic regionalism. Almost all of Waitoa Road's highly decorative features are unknown in Christchurch, where Edwardian villas tend to be characterized not by an exuberant "raging fury" but by relative sobriety and restraint.

²⁵ Lloyd Prichard *Economic History of New Zealand to 1939* p 182.

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