

The People in the Picture

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It is always a surprise to find my own family in the official records of the City. The letter I found was about gorse on the family farm, which was growing too close to a road-line. My first thought was to wonder which patch the Peninsula County Council meant; then, as now, there was no shortage of gorse to choose from. My grandfather's reply, to my amusement, asked exactly that question. I copied the 1943 dated correspondence and showed it to my father. 'Yes, but that's my mothers' writing', he remarked. My Grandmother was the one at home writing the letter on her husband's behalf, looking after the house and two small children. My grandfather was running the farm without the aid of the farm-worker, who was in the army in North Africa. He may have been too busy to reply. All at once, the record showed its limits; the official version does not hermetically capture everything. In this case, the exact authorship of the letter does not materially affect its facts: there was gorse, and it needed to be removed. But it does highlight what can be a circular process of investigation. The evidence of handwriting is peripheral to determining the facts of the matter. In other cases, secondary evidence may be vital to understanding an ambiguous or baffling record. Paradoxically, the enhanced understanding provided by supporting data can end up producing more questions again, casting doubt on the official version.

Dunedin City Council Archives photograph 334/21 is a case of this last type. The photograph shows a terrace of wooden houses beside the Leith River in Dunedin. These houses were flooded out in the disastrous April 1923 floods, and the photo records the event. The Citizens' Flood Relief Committee was set up to deal with the widespread flooding in the City, and the hardship it caused. The



Figure 1: Riego Street. Lantern slide of family in Riego Street with flood damaged furniture, April 1923. Ref. 334/21.

Mayor of Dunedin, James Douglas, chaired the Committee, and the records have come into the custodianship of the Council Archives. The photograph was commissioned by the Dunedin Drainage and Sewerage Board at this time.

There are in fact two related images of the houses; one taken from further back, showing the wider Terrace, and the more personal and dramatic one presented here. The scene has long been identified as Riego Street. There are no details within the photos to confirm the assertion: in the close up image there is no context, and in the other the houses float in an opaque post-flood drizzle – nothing else is visible. Riego Street is a familiar locus of research: a large factory has existed there for some time; this has been the subject of heritage research more than once. The edge of the river was originally lined with houses, yards and small businesses – members of the public have asked about these frequently as well. But these photographs never fitted in: no available evidence shows any sign of a terrace of small houses at any time. There are numerous details visible within the photos themselves, but the contextual key to understanding them is

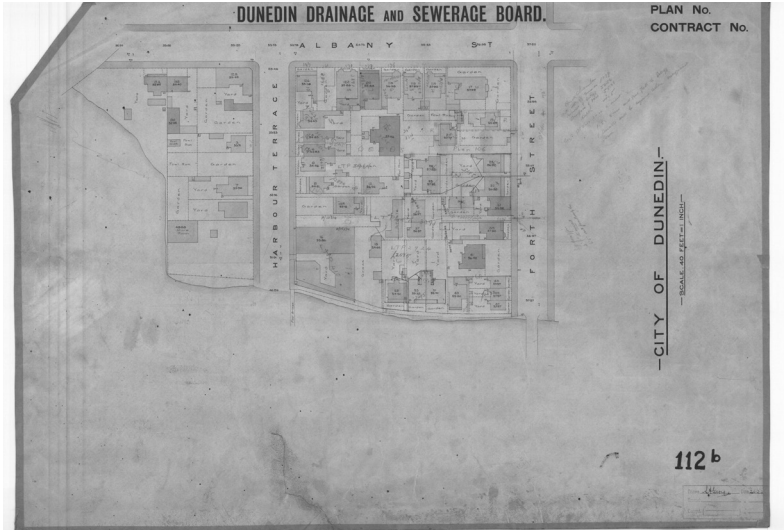


Figure 2: DCC Archives DDSB Series 38 Plan 112B. The street marked Harbour Terrace is now Riego Street.

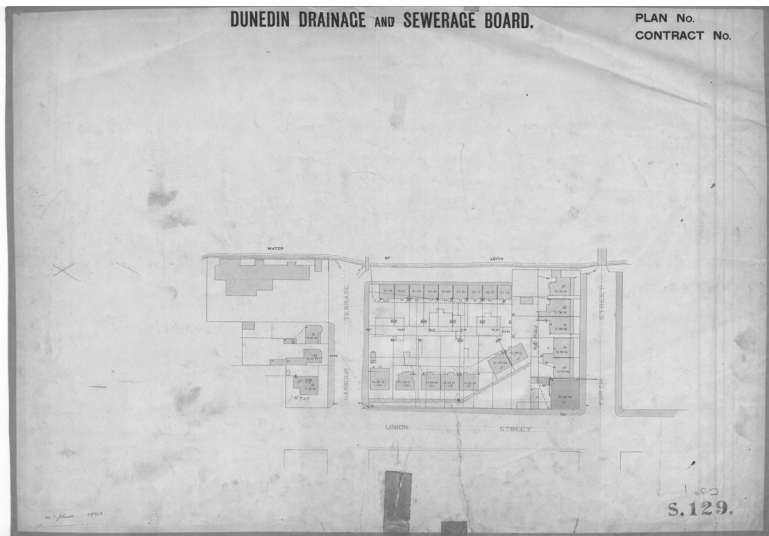


Figure 3: DCC Archives DDSB Series 38, Plan 129. Laurel Bank is at right angles to the Leith.

absent. Chance discovery during other research held out the best hope of identifying the location, and maybe even the people.

Before there were aerial photographs showing the layout of Dunedin, there were drainage plans: this might seem like an unlikely clue at first, but the House to House Reticulation Plans produced between 1903 and 1906 show every house, shed, lawn, glasshouse and other detail of any note. These are remarkably accurate: archaeologists using them have correlated the drawings with surviving structures, and the match is excellent. The one for Riego Street shows nothing like these houses, but perhaps if the right plan was found, the Terrace would be discovered.

The mystery remained until I was asked to locate a submarine. The Platypus was a gold-mining submarine, built in Dunedin. This had its own colourful story, and it ended its days in the City languishing on the banks of the Leith. (The submarine, incidentally, still exists at another location, and may yet be restored to its complete state). Could it be shown in any image in the Council Archives? There was a photograph depicting a factory in that area - I had looked at this before, and it shows the location in question. Was the factory truly in the right spot? Back to the drainage plans for confirmation - there was the large wooden building, and near it, I noted a line of terrace houses along the edge of the Leith. Could this be them? These plans are a palimpsest - they were working documents for decades and have numerous amendments. In this case, some of the additions were drawings of later houses - maybe this would be a clue? I filed this away for later; first the submarine. An object that looked, for an exciting moment, like the abandoned vessel turned out to be an old boiler, so no luck there.

Returning to the terrace, I looked at the 1947 aerial photos the Council holds to see how these related to the drainage plan. The street is helpfully marked 'Laurel Bank', with the later houses clearly visible, but the terrace was missing. It looked like the right area, but the uncertainty remained.

Again, another serendipitous discovery occurred. A set of photos depicting work on the Leith canal in 1915 showed up, and as is



Figure 4: Dunedin City Council Aerial Photograph Collection showing Laurel Bank 1947.

so often the case, the incidental details are of more interest than the ostensible subject. The pieces of the puzzle now fitted together. There was the factory, and there was the terrace of houses on the left, with their distinctive uphill kink at one end. The disorientating drizzle was gone from these images: the distinctive outline of the Otago Peninsula hills is visible, and the correct orientation of the photos was clear

The confusion of the past had a simple cause: the lack of context had led someone to assume that the houses were on the wrong bank of the Leith. The problem had been aggravated further by the simple error of inverting the photographic negative: easily done in the absence of any context.

But what about the people in the picture? Was it possible to discover who the family with their ruined possessions were? Council records have their limits in this regard: the inhabitants of low-cost housing often fail to appear in the valuation records, and this case was no exception.

The answer to the question might be in the other records relating to the flood event. The records of the Citizens Flood Relief Committee contain considerable amounts of detailed information about the applicants for relief and their circumstances.

The Case Assessor remarked that ‘all the houses in Laurel Bank have had their furniture wrecked’. All the houses accordingly have a record card, but determining which one applied to this particular house required a little more research.

Other resources bridged the gap in the records. Stone’s Otago-Southland Directories show the occupants of each house in Laurel Bank for 1922 and 1923. The house number was found by counting the number of houses visible beyond the one in question, and it became clear that it was the centre house in a group of nine. Whichever way the numbers ran, the one in the middle was going to be number 5.



Figure 5: DCC Archives City Engineers Correspondence CE 2 3 39 1915. Laurel Bank is on the left in the image.

No.	Name	Notification	Amount	Present address
7 MAY 1923		The following is a list of these cases which are filed separately.		
Grant \$10 each	Robson Miss	granted	\$10	112 Union St
Miss Hutchinson to distribute	Burns Mrs	"	\$10	344 Harrison St
Miss H. to fight	Booker Mrs	now in arrears	\$10	456 Garside Rd
	Engstrom Mrs	"	\$10	Row Lane
	Eady Mrs	"	\$10	4 Malvern St
	French Mrs	"	\$10	131 Garside St
	Henderson Mrs	"	\$10	Belgrave St N.E.V.
	Sutherland Mrs	"	\$10	161 Union St
	Manning	"	\$10	8 Laurel Bank
	Sweeney	"	\$10	

Figure 6: DCC Archives CFRC Series 5 Index to Laurel Bank Cases.

Stones' Directories are not always completely accurate, but the same occupants were listed there two years running. The odds of the information being correct improved. In 1924 the houses were gone, presumably demolished.

The house at 5 Laurel Bank was probably that occupied in 1923 by Mrs. Ethel Eady. Mrs. Eady was regarded as a deserving case for relief. Not every applicant was, and the means of deciding who received relief seem arbitrary when other cards are examined. Some of the recorded information is what the applicants volunteered, and some it is the interviewing officers' surmise. In some cases, the view of the applicant is very different from that of the case officer. The objective facts are unclear, and the subjective opinions (and even outright bigotry) of the reporting officers are at times quite prominent. Even at this level, the true story may not be the official one. The unstated context and subtexts challenge the official view, even as they elucidate them.

The assessors' card states the observed facts of the situation. Mrs. Eady had lost her possessions, some of which the photograph shows outside in the rain and mud. She had lost her means of making a

living, and she lacked any support from her husband. By using a variety of documents, official and otherwise, it is possible to identify the place, the house, the people, and their individual circumstances on a rainy day in 1923.

But the more closely the facts are examined, the more the truth seems to retreat – more evidence means more questions. Photographs, with their wealth of extra, incidental, evidence may be more amenable to this sort of interrogation than written records. Which person is the Mrs. Eady mentioned in the case notes? Who are the other people in the picture? Mrs. Eady's need for more than one bed suggests that the children are hers; certainly, some of the individuals look as if they might be related. Are some of them neighbours? There are all the other visual details that present themselves for interpretation: the shoddy brick-work suggests that the houses were low-cost dwellings. The house on the left of the photo is topped by a very early radio aerial; exactly which house is not clear. Someone was either listening to Morse signals, or perhaps the broadcasts of the first commercial station in Dunedin, which had only started a few months earlier. What does this suggest about the inhabitants of Laurel Bank, and their economic status? The focus of the image is unusual too – why did the photographer for the Board choose to capture this human aspect of the disaster, when in most of the other images, people are almost peripheral? Is this a personal choice? What official story did this support?

The story presented to us in official records is not merely the ostensible one, of course. Even the bare, uncontested details may not be entirely what they seem. The more closely we look, the more the truth seems to be pinned down – and the more elusive it becomes.