

'Progress' v 'Preservation'

A history of Te Aro, Wellington



By Erin Menzies

Te Aro is an area that has changed and been changed many times in the course of history. Although initially the suburb reflected the people who founded it, change has taken place as Wellington develops as a city. Te Aro's central location has made it even more vulnerable to change, as the infrastructure needs of the city have grown. Over the years, Te Aro has reacted, and changed in response to regional, economic and geological features.

While change is an intrinsic part of society's development, it has the potential to cause conflict with communities conservative values. It is useful to keep in mind the paradox of 'progress v. preservation' as well as the evolutionary nature of heritage when considering the history of Te Aro, Wellington. This piece of writing does not intend to argue the virtues of various approaches, but rather to provide an overview of the history of the suburb thus far. It will not go into the details of architectural history, but will focus on the social history of Te Aro, as a part of Wellington City.

Before considering the history of Te Aro, it is important to consider the idealised notion of heritage. Heritage is a relatively new concept to New Zealand. Increasing efforts to preserve the physical remnants of our past have enriched our appreciation of our histories and helped New Zealand to bridge the gap between mere statehood and nationhood. The rise of the heritage movement has also created some substantive dilemmas. How much of our past are we prepared to sacrifice for modern developments – or to what degree is it reasonable to slow the momentum of 'progress' to preserve our heritage? These are questions of fundamental importance, yet in attempting to answer them, communities often pay little attention to what heritage actually means.

Alexander Trapeznik and Gavin McLean argue that heritage is an idea that is intertwined with nostalgia. This creates a past that is intrinsically good. Heritage is used to express ideas about the past emphasising themes like community and success. Trapeznik and McLean also note that heritage rarely depicts alienation – a concept which looms large in the history of New Zealand.¹

Heritage is not a static idea. Like the history that it helps to depict, our ideas of what constitutes heritage are constantly being reworked and reshaped. 'Heritage homes', for example have traditionally been the large stately homes of the affluent. Only recently have we begun to place more emphasis on the preservation of working class heritage, and Maori heritage.²

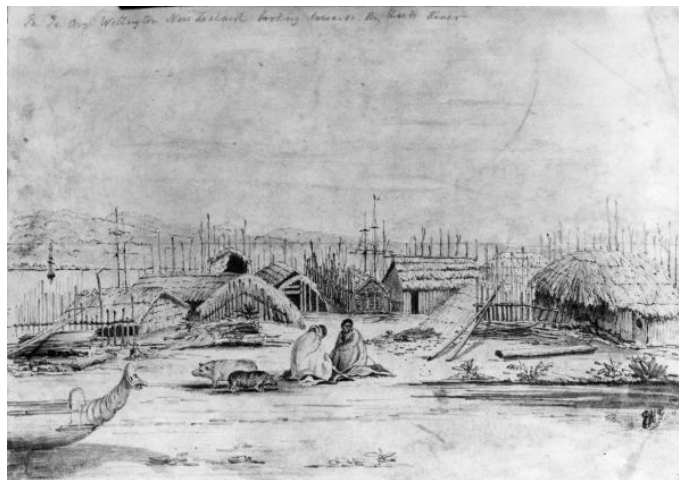
Te Aro is noted as one of the few remaining physical examples of working class life and culture in New Zealand. This makes it incredibly important that efforts are made to preserve the heritage aspects, while accommodating the greater needs of the city, and the region.

When Wakefield's vessel *The Tory* sailed into Wellington Harbour in 1839, the landscape was vastly different to what we see today. Most of Wellington was covered in deep forest, with only a few clearings around the Tinakori area and Brooklyn. Te Aro flat was a low swampy area, covered in vegetation like toi toi, raupo, and flax.³ The

New Zealand Company purchased the area from Te Puni - Kokopu, a chief of the Pito-one (Petone) and Te Wharepouri, a Ngauranga chief. The sale proceeded with the knowledge that Te Puni did not have the authority to sell Pipitea (Thorndon) or Te Aro. Furthermore the sale was denounced by Te Puwhakaawe of Hikoikoi and boycotted by the Te Aro Pa. In an attempt to justify this fraudulent sale Wakefield labelled Te Aro a slave Pa.⁴

Thorndon and Te Aro flats were the first areas of Wellington to be settled after the settlement of Britannia (Petone) failed with the flooding of the Hutt River. The unscrupulous purchase of the area caused significant problems. New Zealand Company surveyors worked armed with swords and pistols. Te Aro Maori showed their opposition by pulling out survey pegs by night.⁵

The occupation of Te Aro Pa itself caused problems. It sat in the middle of the new town, occupying prime land. Fitzroy tried to persuade Te Aro Maori to accept £300 for the site, however it wasn't until 1847 that Governor Grey reached agreement with Maori, allocating them a 526-acre country block, 2 horses and carts, and 2 steel mills as compensation for their Pa site.⁶



Thought to be the work of Edmund Norman, this is a sketch of Te Aro Pa, looking towards the Hutt River, circa 1842, ATL, A-049-001

Notwithstanding opposition from Maori, and the rather undulating landscape, company surveyors attempted to apply the grid style town plans designed in Britain. Land was sold to emigrants and absentee speculators in one-acre blocks, with the promise of additional country acres as land was cleared. Shelters were originally constructed temporarily out of raupo, with wood or brick used to create longer lasting houses. Wealthier colonists brought their own 'kitset homes' with them. Juliette Deane (nee Daniell) in her memoirs described the house she was born on in Abel Smith St.

This house was constructed partly of oak frame-work doors, window-sashes etc. having been brought to New Zealand by my Father in the sailing ship "Adelaide." Wood felled on the spot completed the building.⁷

The house was portable enough to see it later relocated to the Terrace where a Miss Noakes occupied it in 1901.⁸

The seemingly uneasy co-existence of the two cultures in early Wellington continued despite efforts to make Wellington a European town. David Hamer argued that although the early settlers depended on Maori for food and shelter, the underlying assumption was that Maori were unsuited to living in the advanced and civilised European town environment.⁹ In 1846 it was estimated that approximately 700 Maori lived within the town confines and that over 500 acres of land that Europeans had claimed ownership of were still being cultivated by Maori.¹⁰ Absentee ownership perhaps acted as a valve for tensions, however both races were decidedly ill at ease. “It is no longer safe to trust them in the shops” reported the Gazette, adding

They have got rid of the fear of going out at night and successfully rob even tolerably well watched gardens. We know of one garden from which in their nightly visits they have recently taken nearly a quarter of an acre in potatoes, besides many other vegetables.¹¹

Racial tensions heightened by the 1843 events in Wairau, led to the NZ Company guns being relocated from Somes Island. Gun positions were established in Thorndon and Clay Point (now the corner of Willis St and Lambton Quay). In March 1845 the Militia Ordinance was passed allowing for the emergency swearing in of special constables to help ‘keep the peace’ between the two races. Wellington was divided into three districts for defence purposes, Te Aro, Thorndon, and the Hutt. Each district contained a stockade, and settlers were encouraged to involve themselves in their city’s defence by volunteering as special constables.¹²

Class tensions also featured in early Wellington. The New Zealand Company aimed to create in New Zealand a miniature Britain – without the vices. This required social engineering at an incredible level. Aristocratic settlers, who were bestowed the title of ‘colonists’ paid their own fares on New Zealand Company ships and were expected to become the landowners of the new colony. Of the 8648 settlers transported to New Zealand from 1839-1843 only 990 fitted this category.¹³ The rest were working class and came as assisted emigrants. They had their fares paid by the company and travelled in steerage in order to ensure the colony had an appropriate labouring class. Preference was given to agricultural labourers, artisans and domestic servants. Only a small number of craftsmen, for example, tailors and shoemakers, were given assistance by the company to emigrate. The company required character references, and refused assistance to inmates of workhouses, those who had received poor relief as well as people of Irish nationality.¹⁴

In Wellington these engineered class differences manifested themselves geographically. Thorndon became known as the official quarter, and Te Aro the commercial quarter. Te Aro was home to a new class of merchants and entrepreneurs as well as much of the working class the New Zealand Company had courted. These settlers did not emigrate simply to recreate the social order of the land they had left. Emigrating to New Zealand

presented many social and economic opportunities, as well as challenges and hard work. B. R. Patterson asserts

While the gentry whiled away the days awaiting the allocation of their country lands, the merchants set about laying the foundations for colonial fortunes. And they did so effectively. Merchant thumbs were in many pies.¹⁵



Overlooking Te Aro flat, Wellington, circa 1850s. Photographer unidentified, ATL, 1/2-055704; F

Te Aro began life as a rural settlement, but quickly developed to become Wellington's early centre of commerce. It boasted 'the Exchange' a wooden building built in 1841 "of some pretension in point of architecture," and which also doubled as a library. Messrs. Rhodes and Co. had their office in Te Aro as did the Gazette, an early newspaper. Old Customhouse St, now Bond St. was home to Waitt's and Tyser's, Bethunes and Hunter's and Mr Fitzherberts stores.¹⁶ Aided by the artificial boom created by the New Zealand Company's expenditure of £25 000 on surveys, merchants opened a bank, built shops and bonded warehouses with wharves running into the harbour.¹⁷ Louis Ward wrote in 1929 "the clinking of the hammers and the sudden apparition of new habitations still went on day after day with unceasing activity."¹⁸



Te Aro foreshore, Wellington, circa 1850s-60s. Photographer unidentified, ATL, 1/2-028493; F

Economically dominant, Te Aro residents presented a challenge to the existing social order, which the New Zealand Company wished to retain. An important and well cited example of this is the 1841 anniversary of settlement celebrations. The organisation of these celebrations illustrates a clear split between Thorndon and Te Aro, or the ‘aristocracy’ and ‘democracy’ as suggested by Wakefield.¹⁹

The celebration was originally planned for 22 January 1841. The membership of the organisational committee was to be by invitation only. The sporting events planned would incorporate the working class, but the attendance at the ball would be restricted to aristocrats. In response to these plans two advertisements were placed in the Gazette on 16 January 1841. One notified members of the ‘select committee’ of an upcoming meeting. The second called for a public meeting to find “the best means of celebrating in a popular manner the anniversary of the arrival of the settlers in this place.”²⁰ The organisations proceeded along separate lines, although Patterson found that despite the talk, neither committee included members of the true working class. The popular committee can be seen as representing the aspirations of the new emerging merchant class.²¹

For the record, the select celebrations were largely regarded as a flop, while the popular celebrations were seen as a success.

Equally telling of Wellingtons social rift is the reaction to an expedition from Auckland, led by Captain Hobson, to recruit labourers. A public meeting was called and advertised

We the undersigned landholders and residents of Port Nicholson, viewing with surprise and disgust at the nefarious attempt which is now being made by Captain Hobson to deprive us of our artificers and labourers, men brought out at our own expense, for the benefit of the settlement of Port Nicholson..... do hereby call a meeting of our fellow colonists.²²

In convening a meeting of ‘colonists’ the advertisement is specifically uninviting the labourers, who were at the crux of the problem, and seems very odd by modern standards.

Race and class however, were not the only forces at work in Te Aro. Physically the suburb has been reshaped and redefined in many ways over the course of its history. Natural disasters such as fire and earthquakes have had a huge impact not only on the types of buildings found in the area, but also on its natural physical features. Likewise the policies of the New Zealand Company and government have influenced the development of Te Aro, as have the people who settled it.

Housing is one factor that distinguishes Te Aro. Most of Te Aro’s, and early Wellington’s housing, was in the style of simply designed wooden cottages. Architectural influence was slight; designs were borne of practicality and economy.²³ However it is important to note the impracticality of a sizable settlement comprising wooden houses, without an organised fire brigade. On Wednesday 9 November 1842 the inevitable occurred. Fire broke out on Cornish Row in Thorndon. The New Zealand Colonist and Port Nicholson Advertiser opined

Those who witnessed the progress of the flames and saw the comparative inutility of all exertions to check their course must have felt deeply the extent of the injury which they might have occasioned. It was at one time almost possible that the very existence of the colony might have been hazarded. If the stores at the head of the bay had caught, the loss thus occasioned would have well high ruined the prospects of the colony; because we have no productions to support us under the destruction, or even temporary suspension of our trade.²⁴

Although the fire did not strike Te Aro directly, it shook Wellington, and may well have paved the way for the increased use of brick as a building material.

Wellington was hit again by disaster in October 1848, however this time it came in the form of an earthquake. The phenomenon was entirely new to emigrants. Rev. Robert Cole of the Episcopal Church held services morning and evening at both Thorndon and Te Aro, in the open air to accommodate frightened settlers.²⁵ This along with the earthquake that followed in 1855 reinforced the practicality of wood as a building material. The writers of the 1897 Cyclopaedia of New Zealand wrote that

Under these circumstances it is perhaps hardly fair to blame the founders of Wellington for putting up their temporary buildings with little regard to the future.

They did however consider that the lack of ‘permanent buildings’ helped to make Wellington the ugliest city in the colony.²⁶ Despite the obvious perils involved in building in brick or stone, by the late 1870’s as architects began to make more of a

contribution to the development of the city these materials were more commonly used in construction.²⁷

The 1855 earthquake also raised the height of Te Aro, allowing for future land reclamations. This allowed for the creation of the Basin Reserve sports ground, which had been intended as an inland harbour of sorts. In 1857 the provincial council was petitioned to set aside the Basin Reserve as a recreational area. Work began in 1863 with the draining of the basin reserve by prison labour, and in 1866 the town board put up a fence and planted trees. The first cricket match was held there on 11 January 1868.²⁸



Overlooking Te Aro flat, Wellington, circa 1860, showing Manners Street through the centre. Photographer unidentified, ATL, 1/2-021186; F

As the population of Te Aro thickened, another striking feature developed. Perhaps encouraged by the New Zealand Company policy of selling town land in one-acre blocks, and aided by the lack of any relevant regulating authority, owners subdivided land, creating narrow access ways, some of which still survive today.²⁹ These caused headaches for subsequent councils, particularly with the arrival of the motorcar.

Early residents also shaped Te Aro in more immediate ways. A quick scan of the street names of the area uncover many of the names associated with early Wellington. Tonks Avenue, for example is named for the entrepreneurial Tonks family who settled in Te Aro and ran, among other things, a brickworks. Abel Smith St, once graced by the residences of prominent Wellington families, was named after John Abel-Smith, a New Zealand Company director. Footscray Avenue, constructed by Mr. Thomas Bloomfeild Jobson, was named after the Melbourne suburb where he grew up.³⁰

It is also important to consider the ways in which Te Aro has been reshaped within the greater context of Wellington. The suburbs initial rise to prominence came on the back of the shipping industry. As this began to slump, the labourers and merchants that lived there felt the impact heavily. Te Aro became known as a ‘slum area’, and was a problem to the city council right through to the 1970s. The changing shape of Wellington also played a part in the ‘decline’ of Te Aro. Alan Mulgan argues, “the history of Wellington

transport is the history of Wellington's development." New roads, tramways and buses opened up the outer suburbs for settlement, increasing Te Aro's importance as a transport route. The area became seen as ideally suited to factories and light industry – not residential housing.³¹

The depression, and two world wars slowed possible action by the council on restoring Te Aro, but in the 1960s-70s the redevelopment of Te Aro became a hot topic. Papers ran features on the so-called slums. The Evening Post published an article focusing on Holloway Road, which described "sagging stairways with most of the tread rotted away" leading to "sagging, open doors and damp musty rooms where glass from broken windows crunches underfoot..."³²

The solution advocated by the council was a comprehensive urban redevelopment area plan, abbreviated to CURA. This involved dividing Te Aro into several 5-year development zones, which all fitted into a 20-year timetable. Emphasis was placed on replacing many of the old wooden houses with high-density housing.³³

The demographics of the suburb had changed with along with its physical condition. The council view was that the growing immigrant and student population of Te Aro meant that renewal was unlikely to happen without it's leadership.³⁴

Opposition from residents revealed a surprising lack of community facilities in Te Aro. Unlike other areas, there were no playcentres, kindergartens, library, recreation facilities or churches. As dialogue increased between the action group established by residents, and the council, a community centre was established to facilitate community development. Meanwhile the composition of the suburb was again changing. A combination of low housing prices and the oil shocks of 1973 led to what Debnam terms the "gentrification of Aro Valley." Debnam suggests that these professionals, who had only recently bought into the area, spearheaded the successful opposition to the CURA.³⁵ The end result was a cooperative effort between community and council, and received contemporary applause.³⁶

Despite the contemporary rhetoric, joint planning between the council and the Te Aro community was ultimately unsuccessful. Debnam suggests that the action group, led by a large minority group of owner-occupiers, were only actually interested in retaining the status quo. He argues that the amount of effort poured into the cooperative effort was in part due to both sides having gone too far, so that that both were conscious that they would look silly if efforts were abandoned.³⁷

Today the future of Te Aro is again in question. Wellington's infrastructure needs are again imposing themselves over the inner city suburb. If any lessons are to be learnt from it's history, we must accept that while the preservation of our history and heritage are vitally important to us culturally, the preservation of heritage is pointless if it constricts communities abilities to inhabit and grow within Settlements. As the shape and functions of Te Aro change, efforts must be made to reconcile both needs.

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- ¹ Alexander Trapeznik + Gavin McLean, “Public History, Heritage and Place”, in Alexander Trapeznik (ed), *Common Ground? Heritage and Public Places in New Zealand*, Dunedin, 2000, p. 15-16
- ² Trapeznik + McLean, p. 15
- ³ Gavin McLean, *Wellington: The First Years of European Settlement 1840-1850*, Auckland, 2000, p. 20
- ⁴ McLean, pp. 16-17
- ⁵ John Miller, *Early Victorian New Zealand: A study of Racial Tensions and Social Attitudes 1839-1852*, London, 1958, And Giselle Byrnes, *Boundary Markers: Land Surveying and the Colonisation of New Zealand*, Wellington, 2001, p. 108
- ⁶ David Hamer, “Wellington on the Urban Frontier”, David Hamer and Roberta Nicholls (eds), *The Making of Wellington 1800-1914*, p. 231
- ⁷ Juliette Deans, Reminiscences, MS Papers 2379, ATL
- ⁸ Louis E. Ward, *Early Wellington*, Auckland, 1929, p. 304
- ⁹ Hamer, p. 229
- ¹⁰ Hamer, p.231
- ¹¹ Quoted from the Gazette (undated), Melva Vincent, ‘The Inky Way’, MG Vincent Collection, MS Papers 1859, ATL, p. 81
- ¹² McLean, pp. 75-77
- ¹³ J.C. Dakin, “Working Class Pioneers. The Background of the Earliest Emigrants from the British Isles to the Central Districts of New Zealand 1839-43”, MS Papers 2294, ATL, p.2
- ¹⁴ Dakin, p. 3
- ¹⁵ B. R. Patterson, *Early Colonial Society Through a Prism*, Wellington, 1994, p. 27
- ¹⁶ Ward, p. 279
- ¹⁷ Miller, p. 116
- ¹⁸ Ward, p. 81
- ¹⁹ Patterson, p. 12
- ²⁰ Patterson, p. 2
- ²¹ Patterson, p. 19-22
- ²² Melva Vincent, “The Inky Way”
- ²³ Chris Cochran, “Styles of Sham and Genuine Simplicity: Timber Buildings in Wellington to 1880”, In David Hamer and Roberta Nicholls (eds.), *The Making of Wellington 1800-1914*, pp.107-113
- ²⁴ *The New Zealand Colonist and Port Nicholson Advertiser*, 11/11/1842, p.2
- ²⁵ Louis E. Ward, *Early Wellington*, Auckland, 1929, p. 145
- ²⁶ *Cyclopedia of New Zealand. Industrial Descriptive, Historical, Biographical, Facts, Figures, Illustrations, 1897*, vol.1, Part 1, 1897, pp. 217-218
- ²⁷ Chris Cochran, p. 113
- ²⁸ Ward, p. 367
- ²⁹ Alan Mulgan, *The City of the Strait. Wellington and it's Province, a Centennial History*, p. 207
- ³⁰ F. L. Irvine-Smith, “The Streets of My City. Wellington New Zealand”, Wellington, 1948, pp. 192-193
- ³¹ Irvine-Smith, p. 197
- ³² “Slums – Accusing Finger Pointed at City”, *The Evening Post*, 16/07/1963
- ³³ Geoffrey Debnam, “The Limits of Local Initiative”, 1986, pp. 1-2
- ³⁴ Report by Acting City Planner, September 1970 (not fully sourced) in Debnam, p. 6
- ³⁵ Debnam, pp. 42-44
- ³⁶ *The Story of Aro Valley Wellington. Environmental Planning Part B*, 1983
- ³⁷ Debnam, pp. 74-76