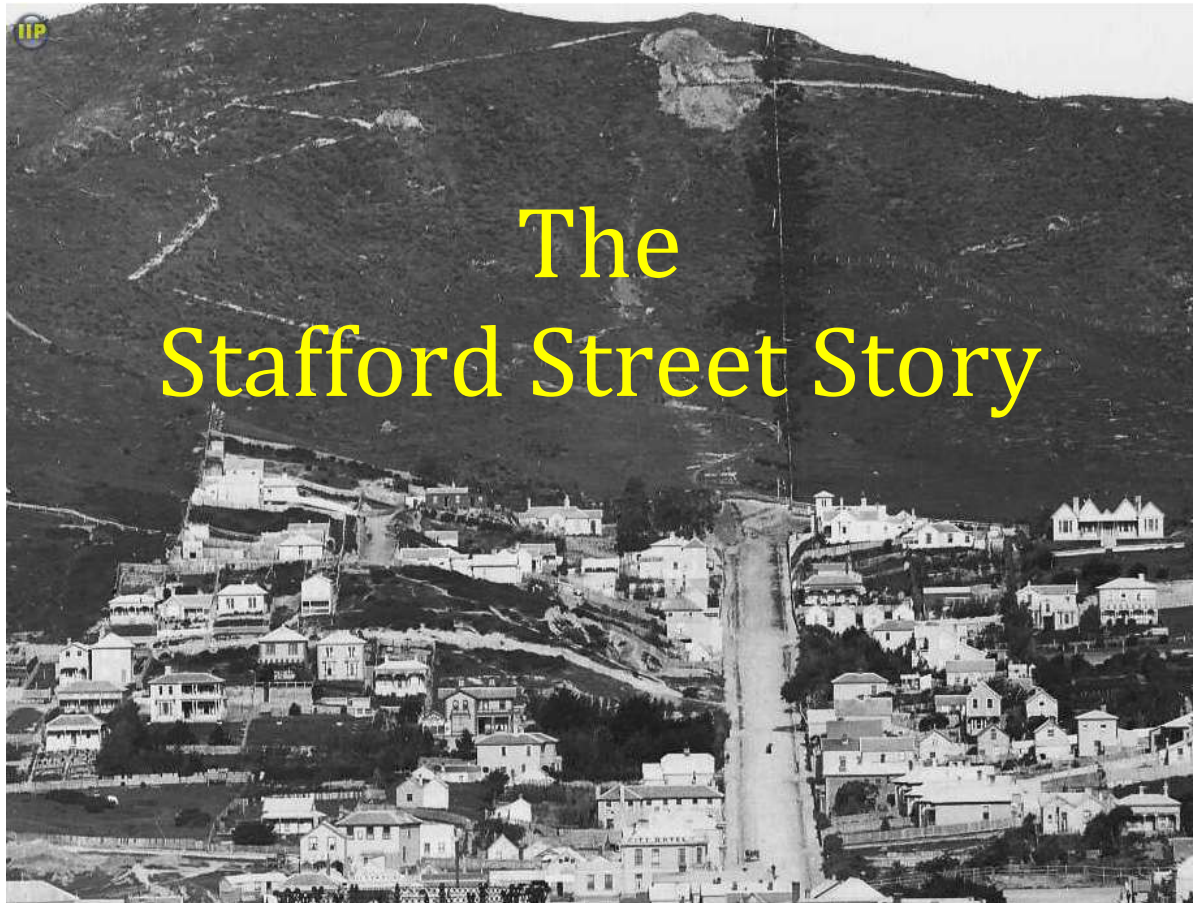




Joanna Newman

SPECIAL THANKS

To Richard Norman, enthusiastic organiser of street gatherings and the inspiration behind this history who, with his wife Janice, celebrates 40 years of living on Stafford Street this year.

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Introduction

A late summer's evening, warm and windy. A cul de sac, like an extension to the gardens of the nearby homes. A park bench for passers-by on the footpath outside the picket fence of one. A barbecue waiting expectantly on the asphalt to be fired up.

Soon, residents of all ages, and accompanying dogs of varied breeds and with energy and curiosity to match the children's, are rolling up with contributions from traditional snarlers to trendy beetroot salad.

This is the annual street party in Stafford Street Mount Victoria; just the most recent expression of neighbourliness in one of the least accessible streets of this unique suburb.

Some of the houses forming the boundaries of the party venue are oriented to expansive views of harbour or city, but that doesn't negate the closeness of their relationship to their neighbours and the special relationship that develops when residents in a street can connect with one another without dodging vehicles on their way to somewhere else.

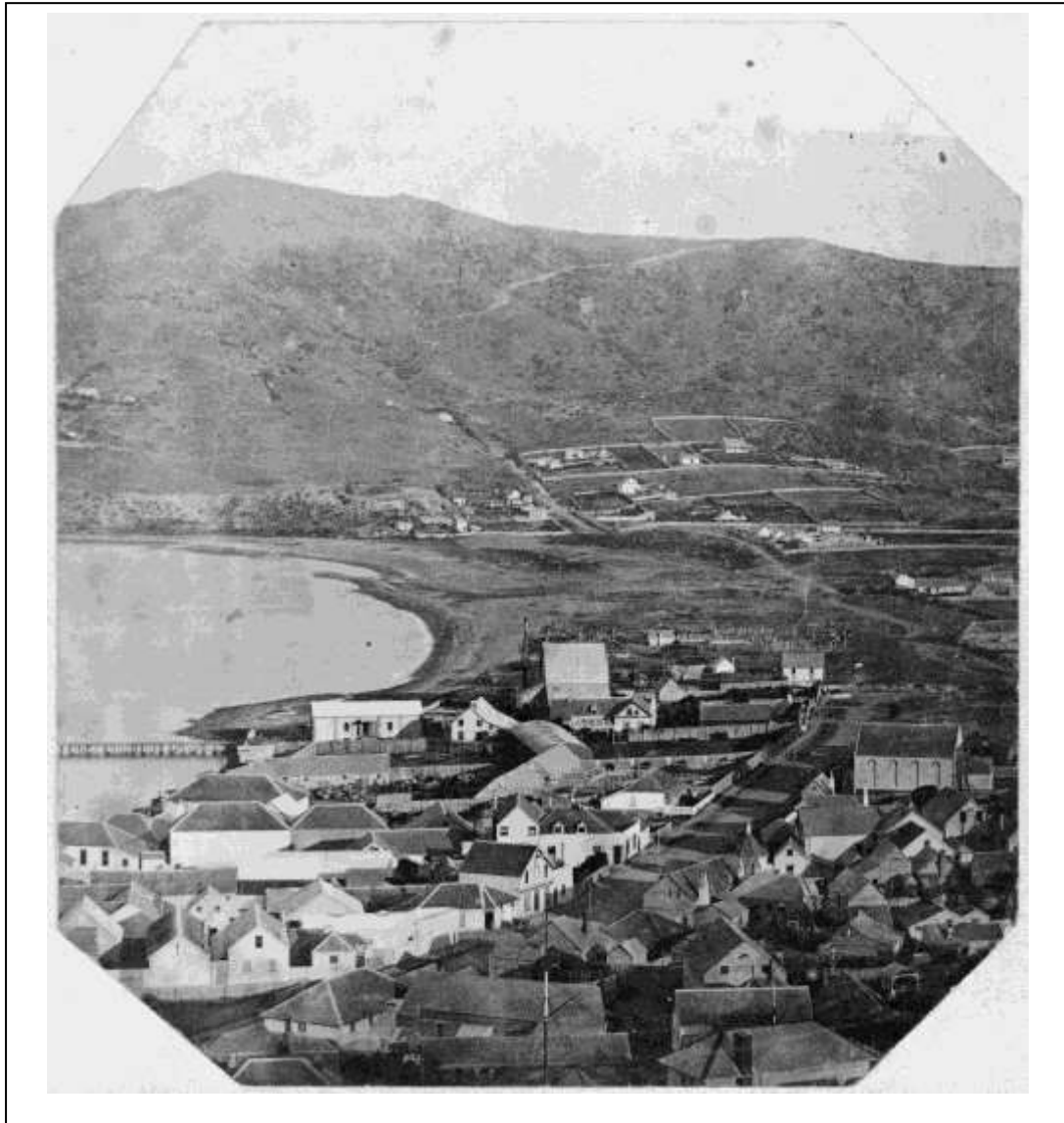
In a locale like Stafford Street, since time Wellington-immemorial, residents and their friends have been able to connect on the street as they did at the street barbecue of 2018.



Street barbecue 2013.
Richard Norman on flute
and Dayle Jellyman on
piano.

Early days

For many years after Wellington's settlement, dwellings on Mt Victoria were sparse. The lower slopes were carved up into town acres and sold but many were held by absentee landowners. Meanwhile, development took place on the flat land round Te Aro or at the government end of town in Thorndon.



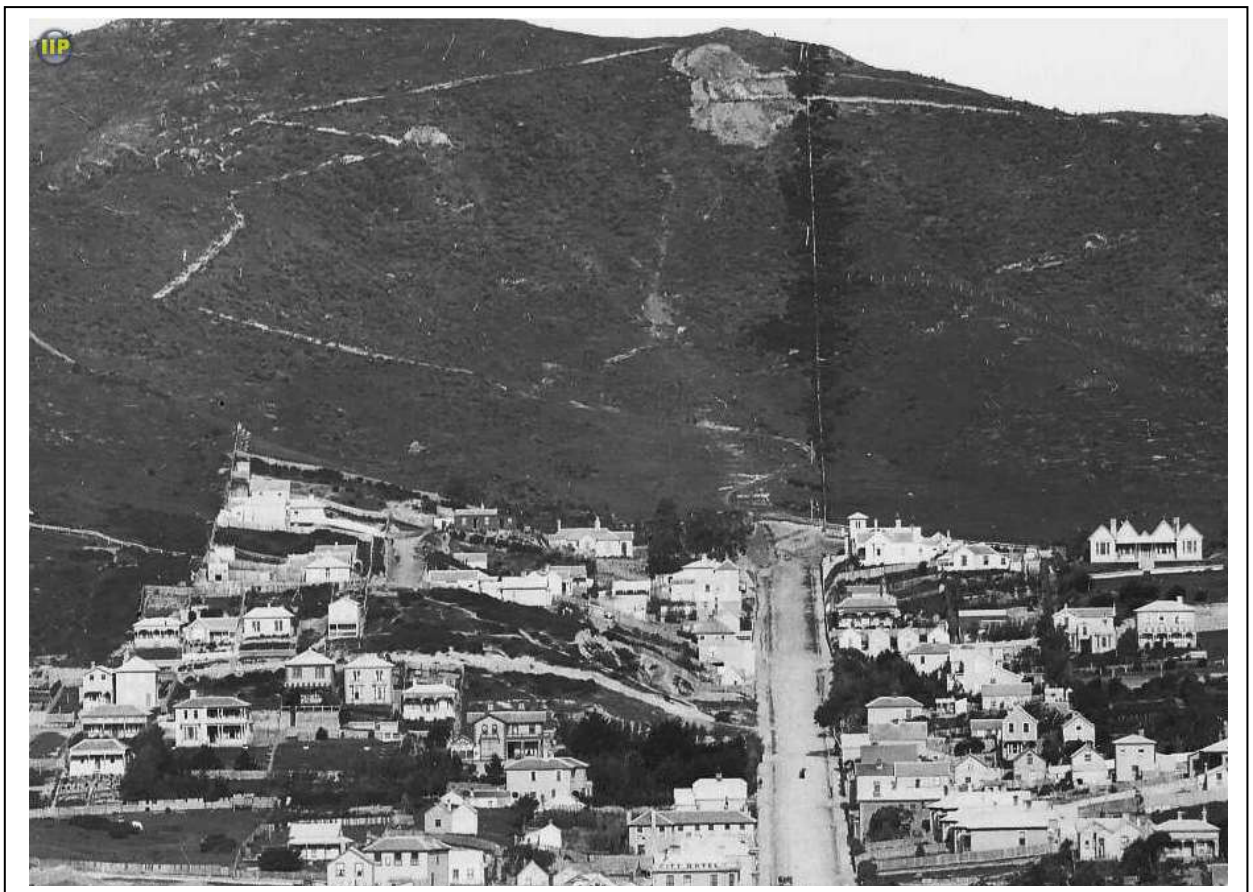
Overlooking Te Aro, 1857. Alexander Turnbull Library 1/2-002961-F

In 1870 Mt Victoria still had only seven streets: Brougham, Austin and Hawker running north to south; Ellice, Pirie and Majoribanks running across them at right angles and Roxburgh in a dog leg connecting Majoribanks and Hawker. It was peppered with houses, as pressure on the flat land of the town centre started pushing people to the slopes of the hill, but there were still only around 60 houses on the land.

By 1870, however, Wellington had been the capital city for five years. Its population was starting to grow rapidly: from 8,000 people in 1870 it mushroomed to 20,563 by 1880/81. Development and subdivision of Mt Victoria really began at the end of the 1870's, starting at the northern end with the formation of Port, Stafford, Lloyd and Elizabeth Streets. In a plan of the City of Wellington published in 1878, there is still no Port or Stafford Street and anyone who lived on the town acres that stretched up the hill to Stafford Street was considered to be on Majoribanks Street.

One or two people lived on what is now Stafford Street in the 1870s, however. A surprising number had maritime connections. Not only that, they or their families are some of the longest-term residents. Perhaps the land was a little cheaper, up such a steep climb; perhaps they valued the view over the harbour to the wharves from the eastern end of the street.

There was Henry Hill, a master mariner, resident from at least 1878 until 1892. One who was particularly well-known in Wellington was the harbour pilot, Lancelot Holmes. He owned land from 1877/78 and built what is now No. 23 in 1886. After he died, his wife continued to live there for another 41 years. (Read more about Holmes and his wife on the following pages.)



Part of : 1883 Looking toward Courtenay Place and Mt Victoria . . . (ER Williams Collection)
Alexander Turnbull Library 1/2-140304-G

For the citizens of Wellington, conditions were primitive in the 1870s. Once a week a contractor would call with a horse and cart, crying "bring out your nightsoil!" Gradually the sewage collection service was supplemented with open and badly-covered drains. Apart from the unpleasantness for humans, these were a major hazard for horses and broken legs were common. By 1879, residents in Kent and Cambridge Terraces were petitioning Council to have the open drain in Kent Terrace covered. It was one of the most problematic in Wellington because of its location at the foot of Mt Victoria, where rainwater drained into what would once have been swamp.

The town's water supply also caused the citizens consternation. In 1878 Dr James Hector carried out a study into the quality of the water and reported that *"A sample of water taken at the service pipe at the museum on the 9th instant and allowed to stand in a tall glass vessel for five days, deposited a brown sediment and acquired a fetid odour."*

Port and Stafford Streets appear for the first time in Council records in 1880.

Stafford Street was officially named by the Council in 1881. What it lacks in size it makes up for in the prestige of its namesake. It was named after Sir Edward Stafford (1819-1901), Premier from 1856 to 1861, 1865 to 1869 and also for a short time in 1872. He was 37 when he became New Zealand's first and youngest-ever (then!) Prime Minister. As Edmund Bohan¹ put it: "In the chaotic and factioned world of New Zealand politics before the advent of organised political parties, Edward Stafford reigned supreme. His vision of an independent, democratic and racially tolerant nation set him apart from almost all his contemporaries." He led settler agitation for self-government and some consider he was probably one of our most effective premiers.



Photo: Nelson Museum 326883

Lancelot Holmes

(1840-1891)

Lancelot Holmes and his descendants claim he was the first European child born in the new Port Nicholson settlement at Petone, coming into the world on March 25th 1840.

Even if this is disputed, and it comes down to whether a baby was born on ship or on shore, he can certainly claim the honour of being one of the first Pakeha children born in the settlement.

Pilot Holmes
Te Papa 1992-0035-1658



Lancelot took to a seafaring life early and at the age of about twenty became coxswain to the pilot boat for Wellington harbour. A couple of years later, he was promoted to harbour pilot. Later on he was appointed chief pilot at the Heads, where he remained in full charge until February, 1888.

The pilot in Wellington had a unique responsibility and challenges. As shipping increased during the 1840s, the New Zealand Company became aware of the need for skilled pilots to help guide vessels into Wellington harbour. It was the responsibility of the pilot, with the permission of the Captain, to board ships arriving at the mouth of the harbour and guide them safely through the Heads and into Port Nicholson

When Holmes left the service in 1888, pilots were still required to get out to arriving vessels in a 9-metre whaleboat, under sail and oar power. In 1883, for instance, Holmes rowed 20 kilometres out to a steamer that had lost power and finally brought the ship safely into the harbour after dark.



Pilot Holmes and
crew at Worser
Bay, c.1883

Alexander
Turnbull Library
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Holmes would have spent much of his time based at the pilot station in Worser Bay. (Built in 1866, the pilot's cottage is still there).



Worser Bay pilot station, c.1883. The people on the verandah are probably Rachel and Lancelot Holmes.
Alexander Turnbull Library PAColl-6348-39

Lancelot was forced to take leave of absence in February 1888. The contracting of the sinews in his hand as a result of 28 years of gripping the steer oar in the pilot boat threatened to make him a complete cripple. The holiday failed to set him right so, in August 1888, Pilot Holmes had to finally retire from the service.

Holmes was universally esteemed as a pilot and seaman, and considered “an exceedingly capable man at handling a vessel”. Not only was he the chief pilot, but in 1874 he also sailed to victory the first real yacht (that is, one designed only for racing and cruising) built in Wellington. He was considered a “thoroughly hearty and good-natured man”.

Holmes can't have spent much time living in his Stafford Street home, dying of the dropsy (which was probably congestive heart failure) about 2 ½ years after his retirement. He was 51 years old and one can only imagine that the hard physical life must have taken a great toll on his health. On the day of his funeral, the flags on the vessels in harbour and on several business premises in town were flown at half-mast. The funeral cortege left his residence in Stafford Street and was accompanied by “no fewer than 14 carriages”, clearly a mark of the esteem in which he was held.

Holmes had married his wife, Rachel Caroline, when he was 24. She must often have been alone in the house in Stafford Street. She lived on there, however, until she died 31 years after him. By then, she was known by local children as ‘Granny Holmes’, and features as a significant presence in their tales of growing up in the street.

Turn of the twentieth century

In the 1890's we are provided with a unique view of Stafford and Port Streets (and, indeed, the whole of Wellington City). Thomas Ward's 1891 plan of the city was commissioned by the Council and shows every house and shed on its plot of land, with details of verandahs and even building materials. We can see the Holmes' six-room house (now number 23), for instance; and the six-room house next door (now number 21) which they owned and let to the Ayletts. (A copy of the Stafford/Port Street area is at the back of this booklet, with modern house numbers superimposed.⁴)

Occupations of the residents show that many were modest tradesmen. Between 1891 and 1914, there is a lumper (a labourer employed in loading and unloading cargoes, taking 'work in the lump and giving it out in the piece'), a stoker (feeding the fuel into boilers), a tailor's cutter, a journeyman saddler (a qualified saddle-maker often hired by the day), a boot machinist, an artilleryman and a canvasser in residence.

More maritime men move in, too. Shipwright, Stewart Walker, lived in Stafford Street from 1883-1914; master mariner, George Balding from 1890-1918; David Mitchell, marine engineer, from 1886-1904. William Edlund, a seaman, lived on the street for 29 years (1901-1930); and yet another seaman, a shipping master and a boatman resided there more briefly.

We have few pictures of the people who lived in Stafford Street in the early 20th century but there is a photograph of the Ohlssons.



Ann and Hans Ohlsson with baby Lavinia and Oliver (b.1898), 1902, probably in Elizabeth Street.
(Collection of granddaughter, Olive Hancox.)

Hans Ohlsson's connection with Mt Victoria started before he came to live on it. Around 1890 he arrived as ship's carpenter, after leaving his home in Lanskrona near Malmo in Sweden. In Wellington he jumped ship and slept on Mt Victoria until the ship left port. He later married Ann Hitchcock and they lived in Elizabeth Street for a few years, where two children were born.

Lavinia died of pneumonia in their Elizabeth Street home in 1905. Hans did well, however, and in 1906 he built and owned five small houses with a partner, John Roy: three where 22 Stafford Street is now and two on a third section directly below on Majoribanks Street. He and his family lived at No. 22 until he died in Porirua Mental Hospital in 1915. Ann and the children then moved away from the street.

With the advent of World War I, many of the men in Stafford Street signed up or were conscripted. Some didn't get the call till the later years of the war: Walter Press, a cutter living at No. 12, and James Taylor from No. 21 in 1916; Frank Taylor, a munition worker, RL Whitten a clerk, and F. Nicholas, a butcher from No. 18, in 1917.

As late as 1918, Christopher Diack, a tailor with two children from No. 14; R.T. MacGregor, a carpenter with one child from No. 7; A.D. Ensor from No. 18 and policeman, I. Walsh, were called up.

Alex (Charles Alexander) Roulston from No.3, however, signed up with the Australian Forces in 1915, embarking in Sydney. He was 27 years old and a Lance Corporal by 1917 when he was badly wounded. That year he sent his mother a souvenir of the war: a replica of the medal struck by Germany to commemorate the sinking of the Lusitania. Alex was discharged as medically unfit in 1918 and came home, but died young in 1936.

The Roulston family had lived in Stafford Street since 1896 and continued living there until at least 1960. Ms Lucy Elizabeth lived there after her brother Alex died. Alex senior, the lumper, died in 1917 in Porirua Mental Hospital before his youngest son Alex came home. The oldest of the five children, James (Robert James) seems to have also lived with his mother in Stafford Street, existing precariously on odd jobs. Between 1916 and 1918 he advertised several times his availability as a gardener, experienced rabbitier, or handy man for sheep station or farm, milking or "any suitable work". A letter he wrote to the editor of the Dominion newspaper in 1915, however, hints at a more exciting past. He reveals that "In 1895 I penetrated the Urewera with a survey party and we camped on a redoubt where Te Kooti fought the 65th Regiment . . . The Natives were very hostile to us when we went to camp. . . . The huia was plentiful there in my time. We often saw them near the camp."

The 1930s

Stafford Street in the 1930s can be vividly imagined thanks to the memories and writing of Peggy Dunstan, who lived there for around six years from 1930. As Peggy Baylis she moved into No. 22* with her family after her detective father's transfer from Christchurch. When one of the boys in the street said accusingly that he never saw Peggy's father much she retorted "Well that's because most mornings he goes out on the *Janie Seddon* to meet overseas boats and see there's no criminals trying to get into the country . . . And he has to work most nights because there are so many here already."²



The Baylis's house had a private entrance off Majoribanks Street. "We liked our street – no, we loved it dearly. It was pretty steep. Our house, one of three exactly the same along from Canning's, was down a steep bank. The milkman used to leave his horse and dray on top while he rushed around with the milk, until one night the horse went to sleep and fell down the bank, dragging dray, crates, milk bottles and all with it." But in winter, sometimes the rain poured down Port Street "like a water chute, the gutters streaming water in solid torrents that met up in a fury of spray at the corner of Majoribanks Street."³

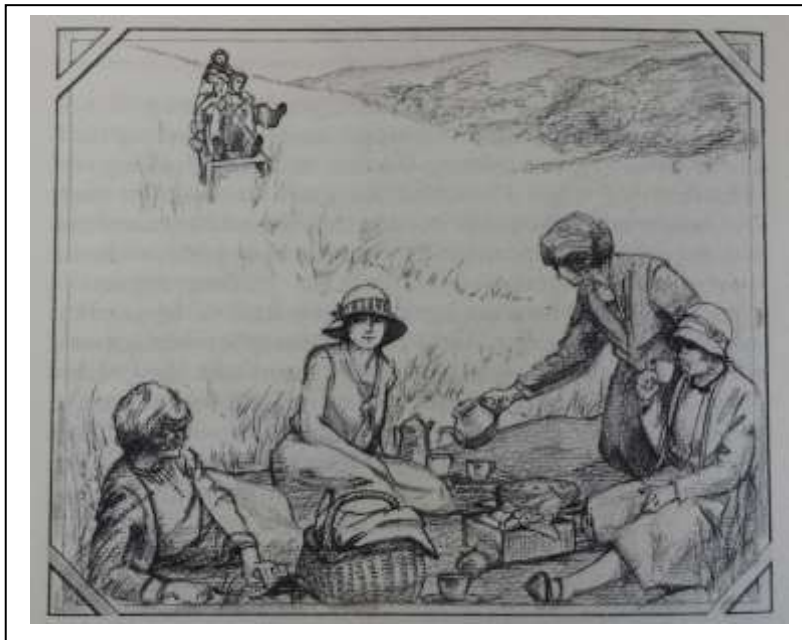
The street was full of children: The Baylis's, Ayletts, Bernesconis, Quins and DeCents, to name but a few. The whole of Mount Victoria was their territory and they had forts all over the hill.

Peggy was a member of the Kelly Gang led by Pat Aylett (alias Mr Kelly), but there was also the Bernesconi Gang from the street to back them up when they took on the 'Home Boys'. The children found it pitiful to see the boys in the remand home at the top of Majorianks Street doing their chores, but it didn't stop them jeering at them and playing pranks. They'd watch them from a big lookout tree beside the pond on the Town Belt at the top of Majoribanks Street.



* One of the houses built by Ohlsson.

Guy Fawkes Day was another opportunity for the kids of the street to get together to make mischief. That day, it was in the form of making gunpowder. The result was “an enormous and thunderous success. It brought on an attack of Jim Aylett’s angina and blew the cellar door out and over Granny Holms’s fence, killing three bantam roosters. Mr Kelly, John Burns and Pat Barry lost their eyebrows and front hair. It blew two boards out of the veranda above the cellar . . .” Mrs Holmes was the Aylett’s landlady.

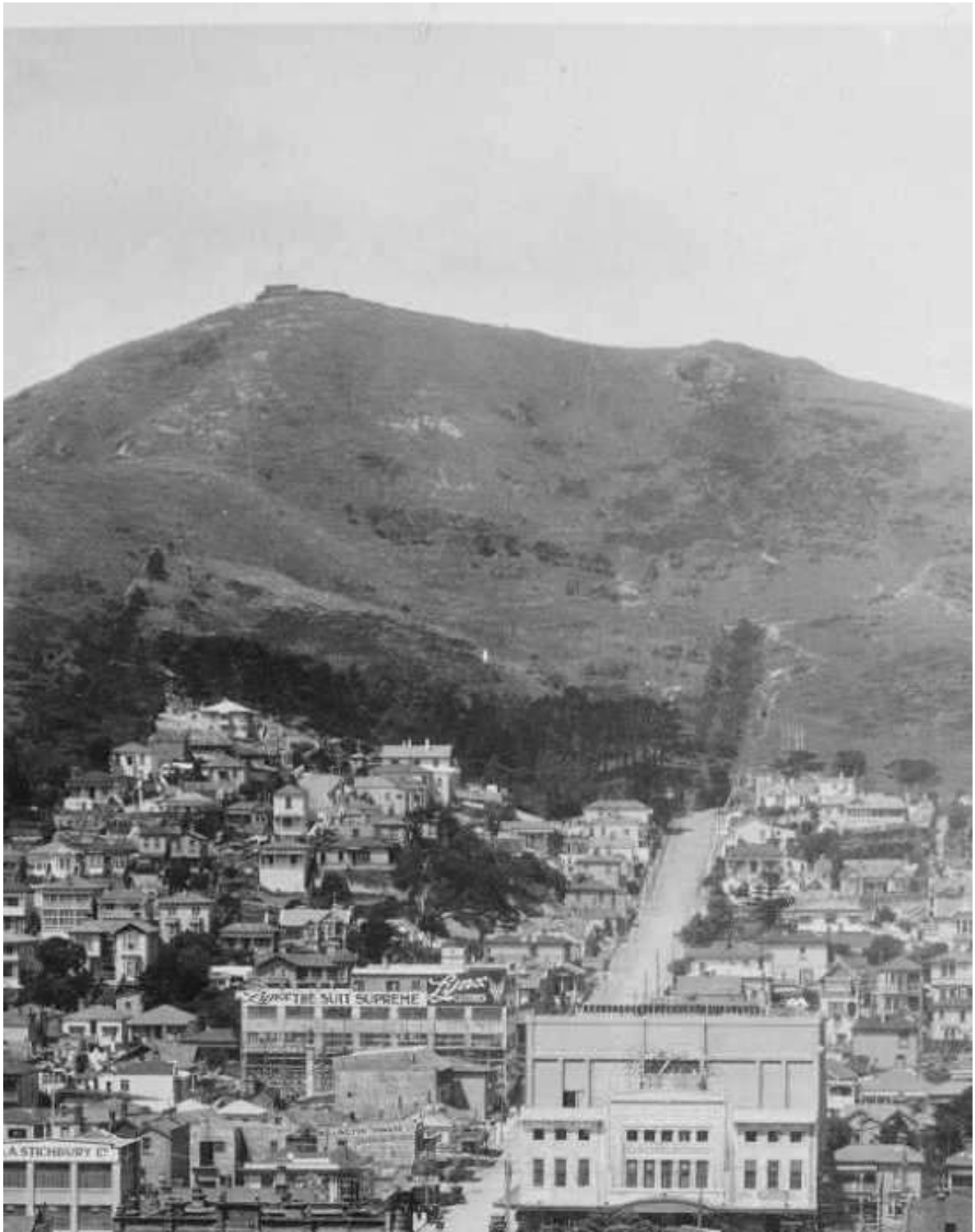


Peggy lived across the road from the Ayletts and their back gate opened onto the Town Belt. The children had a sledging season, when they greased the runners on their sledges with mutton fat provided by Mrs Aylett and tested the speed of the track. “Oh, the feel of it! The taste of it! We took great bites of the wind, great draughts of sun, and tore huge holes in the air as we flew with a ‘WHOOSH’ down that glassy-smooth grass slope.”

“There were one or two things we had to do but we didn’t mind. We went down to the end of Stafford Street to the other Mrs McNee’s for fresh eggs (tenpence a dozen) and received, with profuse thanks, the twist of paper filled with lollies which she always had kept aside for us kids. Stafford Street was like that.”

Granny Holmes died in 1932 at the ripe old age of 85. Towards the end of her life, Peggy remembered how “on some nights we could see Granny at her window across the road with a candle, moving it this way and that, looking, looking for someone - ‘Captain Holms,’ I’d said. He’d been dead for years but it had been a very romantic marriage and I suppose she missed him.” Granny’s death ended the Holmes’ 54-year association with the street.

Peggy’s father had a car, which was something to be remarked on in the street. Cars had entered the residents lives before this, however; in 1926, motor driver William Jardine, had moved into No. 14.



Part of: Courtenay Place Wellington, c.1927, Alexander Turnbull Library 1/2-051232-F

The 1950s

Lynda Stedman (née Wood) was a child in Stafford Street in the 1950s and 1960s. She remembers many of the same families Peggy Dunstan writes about in the 1930s.

Once again, the tenacity with which residents of Stafford Street hold on to their roots there is demonstrated by Lynda's family.

Lynda's grandparents, Randolph and Elizabeth McGregor, bought 15 Stafford Street from its builder, Joseph Charlton, in 1924. Before that, they had lived at what they called 'The Doll's House' - No. 2a - from 1915. Randolph was a carpenter. Lynda's mother, Audrey, was born in 1921 and lived most of her life at No. 15, only leaving in 1995. Her 74 years living in the same house on the street is the record so far.

They were very happy years, growing up in the street, Lynda remembers. One of the most thrilling pastimes for the boys was riding their bikes from the very top of Stafford Street, down Port Street and over into Austin Street "with a couple of look-out-Charlie's (the girls) positioned along the way to watch out for any cars coming up Majoribanks Street. After Carl Harrison almost ended up on the bonnet of a car coming along Austin Street, our parents put a stop to the practice."

Vendors would regularly visit the street in those days: the Thompson and Lewis man in his truck to sell drinks by the crate (all of one sort or a mix of lemonade, cream of soda, raspberry or cola); or the fruit-and-vege man, who parked his truck outside No. 11, and whose produce Lynda would carry home after her mother had made her careful selection. The Salvation Army even came up the street at Christmas time and gathered on the corner outside 3 Port Street to sing carols and collect for the needy.



Left: Audrey, with her father Randolph MacGregor, and her sister, Pearl (prob 1940s).
Above: Lynda and her brother, Richard, with their mother at No.15. (No.17 behind)

Collection of Lynda Stedman

The 1980s

The 1980s saw dramatic changes in the building-scape of Stafford Street.

In 1982 three two-storeyed houses were slowly and carefully trucked up the Port Street hill, all in two halves, to new homes in Stafford Street. In the ultimate in recycling, two houses on Abel Smith Street belonging to the Education Board, and one on Taranaki Street, were bought by developers, Burrell Wilkinson, and relocated to vacant sites at numbers 4 and 6. The appeal for Richard Burrell was that the houses were in mint condition with features such as original leadlights, and unpainted skirting boards and doors. Finding the land was the challenge in Wellington but the sections in Stafford St were available after another developer pulled out.

Streets were blocked along the route and the houses were parked on an empty site on the corner of Austin and Majoribanks Street overnight, before the final climb.

Miss Ashforth of Belvedere Flats on the corner of Austin St and Majoribanks in 2000 remembered it like this: “one quiet Sunday morning a big house-moving vehicle travelled up Austin Street and up Port Street bearing a huge house which was to be placed at the far end south side of Stafford Street. Two more large double-storey houses were erected up on the remaining sections and must have destroyed the views of the neighbours over the road. Part of the embankment had to be cut away to allow one of these big vehicles with their loads to go around the corner at the top of Port Street.”



The top half of No. 4 being moved into position, 9 January 1982.
Photo by Peter Avery, Dominion Post Collection, Alexander Turnbull Library
EP/1982/0083/29

Richard Burrell admits to a soft spot for heritage. Burrell Wilkinson also refurbished 3 Port Street and created new fences in front of all four properties – modelled on the fences at Richard’s aunty’s farm. Even though it acquired the three old houses for free, the company didn’t cut corners and spent too much money on the houses, making a loss on the move.

No. 4a and 6 Stafford Street are fine examples of two-storey Victorian villas and implanted a sense of grandeur in the street that did not match its relatively humble organic growth. They were both designed for the same client, in 1897 and 1896, by Guido Schwartz, an important Wellington architect who designed many houses in Mt Victoria and landmark buildings of the time. He designed, for instance, the Oriental Hotel (later known as the Palace and the Carlton) and the Empire Hotel. The latter was a large luxury hotel and its owner paid for Schwartz to make a study tour of Australia to gather the latest ideas in luxury and appointments to bring back to Wellington.

Although the existing villas have only a 35-year relationship with the sites, the land had been built on before. The 1892 Thomas Ward survey map shows the outlines four and five-room houses.



Detail from 1897 plan of No. 6 (61 Abel Smith St), WCC Archives 00053:2468

One of the residents of No. 6 Stafford Street would go on to become our Governor General, Dame Patsy Reddy.

Burrell Wilkinson might have lost money on the relocation of Victorian houses to Stafford Street, but they recouped any losses with their next development, the flats at No 22 Stafford Street.

With the subdivision, it was realised that Stafford Street had never been legally created as a road. Both it and Port Street were still private right-of-ways. Just over one hundred years after the residents paid the Council £160 to form Stafford Street (in 1881), it and Port Street were finally made public streets.

The Twenty-first Century

And so we come to 2018.

In this year, we find one resident who has lived in Stafford Street for nigh on fifty years, putting the terms of some of the earlier residents into the shade.

Muriel Ross has lived with her daughter, Dorothy, in her one-room-wide cottage at No. 13, since 1969. She even spent six months staying here with her aunt and uncle in 1942. Muriel was 12, then, so attended Clyde Quay School during her visit. When her aunt died and left her something in her will, Muriel was able to come back with her daughter, Dorothy, and buy the house.



Muriel Ross, 2018

There have been many changes over the years Muriel has lived here. One that saddens her is the state of the Town Belt behind her property. We climb up her long narrow garden, through the damp, early-winter plant beds where Muriel tells me she grows tomatoes in summer. Passing through a little gate at the top, we emerge onto a shady track at the foot of a slope covered in what Muriel describes as “knee-high wandering willy and shoulder-high something else”, forgotten arum lilies and straggly trees. Once, Muriel remembers, this was a beautifully tended garden, with flowering shrubs and lawn, where she and others had played as children.

Lynda Stedman, who lived at No. 15, remembers the garden, which was created by Muriel’s uncle. “Mr Mitchell had the most beautiful garden which he created outside his property and others on the Town Belt. He spent many hours pottering and growing lovely flowers and vegetables. However, much to the disappointment of everyone, once he passed away, the city

council came along and tore everything down and left it decimated and dangerous to walk through. My mother, a keen gardener herself, tried to save some of the plants and keep some growing but it was an uphill battle, which she abandoned in the end.”

One of the most notable changes, though, is cars. In 1969, Muriel remembers only two car owners on the street. Now, it’s lined with petrol-driven motor vehicles.

And, in the latest sign of changing times and the changing face of Stafford Street, 2018 will see one of the first electric-vehicle charging stations in a Wellington suburban area installed in this small street in the heart of the city.



References

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- ³ Dunstan, Peggy, *A Fistful of Summer*, Whitcoulls 1983
Illustrations on pages 9 & 10 by Jean Oates, from *A Fistful of Summer* by Peggy Dunstan, Whitcoulls 1981
- ⁴ Wellington City Council, Thomas Ward map,
<https://gis.wcc.govt.nz/LocalMaps/Viewer/?map=d576440c16dd48628d96839f8f0c90be&account=1127626>

Thanks also to Lynda Stedman, Muriel Ross and Olive Hancox for sharing their family histories with me.