



NEWSLETTER

No. 111, March 2025

Mt Victoria Historical Society Inc.
www:mtvictoria.history.org | Facebook: MVHS.Inc

Art Deco Mount Victoria

Guided Walk
Sunday April 13 at 2.30pm

Mt Vic has some superb examples of Art Deco architecture.
Join Joanna Newman for a tour of the sights and stories of this unique stylistic era.

Numbers will be limited for safety reasons, so to reserve places please phone 027 7577 984.

Embassy panels

The Committee has reached the decision to stop organising and paying for cleaning the glass on the heritage panels on the side of the Embassy Theatre because the Council has agreed to do this since installation of the latest one. This marks 11 years of our taking on responsibility for ensuring that the stories were always readable and appealing to passers-by. Huge thanks to David Lee for organising it for all those years and, even, initially (with another member who's since moved out of town) getting out with bucket and rag to do the job himself.

Membership

Membership renewal rates have been a bit disappointing this year, so another gentle reminder. We really value your membership because, even if you don't participate in events, it shows that you value Mt Vic's unique heritage and support our work. Please do consider renewing! And, if you're not sure whether or not you have already done so, feel free to contact Margaret at leslie.earle@gmail.com.

Judicial review on character housing

LIVE WELLington's judicial review hearing took place on 24 February in the High Court, with a good turnout of supporters in attendance. The legal challenge was against the decisions made by the Wellington City Council and the Minister Chris Bishop, in refusing to accept the recommendations of the independent hearings panel.

The judgement may take up to 3 months to be delivered.

A Historic Curiosity

Some time ago, before we understood the extent of Wellington's water woes, by chance I found this letter to the Editor of the Wellington Independent on 9 August 1870. It's only just occurred to me how pertinent it is 155 years later. We're constantly being told that our water woes stem from the fact that many of our pipes date back to the Victorian era, but maybe the attitude towards them also hasn't changed much.

A NATURAL CURIOSITY.

TO THE EDITOR OF THE INDEPENDENT . . . I do the best I can by climbing the Terrace, and occasionally Mount Victoria. This morning I chose the latter, but as I went round the beach I felt the wind so keen, and the rain so disagreeable, that I was almost anxious to find an excuse to turn homewards. Wending my way up the hill, I came to a sort of road, and the weather continuing very bitter, I thought I would try it. Seeing a little girl I asked its name, and where it led to. She said it was called Brougham street, but could give me no further information about it.

Having seen in the papers a short time back an account of the state of the Karori road, I at first thought I had fallen upon a branch of it, it was such a mud puddle. However, I managed to get along pretty well, and only got into two or three holes which let the mud in over my Wellingtons. It did get rather worse when I began descending the first declivity, and it was here I came across a real natural curiosity. It was a hole, about twenty feet deep, something like a well, only on looking into it you could not avoid noticing that its evolutions had an extraordinary resemblance, on a large scale of course, to the orifice of the ear, while a rumbling rushing noise, as of water, proceeded from the depths of the cavern. I could not help speculating upon the wondrous legends of *diablerie* and witches cauldrons that would be connected with it were it in the old country. I asked a man who was passing about it. He said it was called Drans-feldt's* Lug or the Devil's Ear by the early settlers in that locality, who were principally of Teutonic origin, and that I was the first stranger who had taken any notice of it. I could not help remarking that such a cavern ought surely to be covered up, as however interesting to philosophical antiquaries whose attention it had hitherto eluded, it was rather dangerous to passengers unacquainted with it, and to little children, for if any of them in running about should happen to fall into it, it would be quite impossible to bring them out alive; and I suggested that if it was desirable to preserve such an interesting natural phenomenon a railing ought by all means to be put round with a door, fastening so high that no youngster under twelve might get into such a dangerous locality. My friend said it was very true, and that the town authorities had been repeatedly applied to to have something done, but had hitherto neglected it, alleging they had no funds, which, said he, I cannot understand, as all the people in the neighborhood regularly pay their rates, while not a single penny has been laid out on us for the last four years. . . I am, &c. NEMO.

*J Dransfield was Chairman of the Wellington Town Board and the first Mayor of the newly formed City Council which superseded it in 1870.



This photograph taken in the 1870s, probably near the corner of Brougham and Majoribanks Street, gives an idea of the state of development in Mount Victoria at the time. [Alexander Turnbull Library 1/2-125984-F]

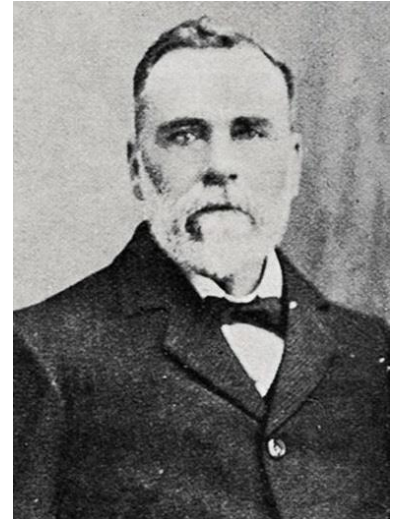
HISTORIC NOTE

William McLean 1845-1914

Recently a newspaper article was posted on the MVHS's Facebook page, which referred to William McLean's 1898 car accident at the Basin Reserve. However, William McLean had an intriguing background which deserves to be told in more detail.

William was the son of a Scottish shoemaker who emigrated to New Zealand for the goldrushes in Otago and West Coast, before settling down as a headmaster and later as an auctioneer in Reefton. In 1884, he came to Wellington and lived in Home Street, Mt Victoria, for about 25 years. Initially he was listed in Stones Directory as a commission agent. By 1906 he was manager of the Empire Loan & Discount Co.

William tried his luck with politics but was not successful in three elections. However, in 1892-3 he became the Liberal Party MP for Wellington for one year in a by election.



Right: William McLean Member of the New Zealand Parliament for City of Wellington wikipedia

William's main claim to fame was that he introduced the motor car to Wellington. In 1898 he imported two Benz vehicles, one of which crashed at the Basin Reserve when it failed to take the bend at Kent Terrace intersection. William was at the tiller or steering arm. Who knows whether he was speeding, but the outcome was that his passenger, Wellington Mayor Thomas Hislop, got a bloody nose and the two nearly came to blows during New Zealand's first motor vehicle accident. Shortly after the incident, McLean introduced a private bill to Parliament, which when passed became the McLean Motor Act, setting out the rules for operating vehicles, including a maximum speed of 19 km/h on the open road, and 13km/h in the city.



Right: Wellington's first motor car, the Benz "Petrolette" "New Zealand's First Two Motor Cars Imported into Wellington in February 1898" By Dr John Osborne FTC, DTT, PhD, MSAEA, MSAEI, MIAME, FSG

More controversy surrounded William when the Wellington Association of Spiritualists opened their new hall, the New Century Hall in December 1900. This was located in Kent Terrace between what is now Home and Elizabeth Streets. The Association's president was William McLean. William was a proponent of seances. One séance, advertised as "The Second Promiscuous Séance" (NZ Times 24/8/1909), involved a less than convincing Australian spiritualist medium Charles Bailey and spirits "Professor Denton", "Dr Whitcombe" and "Abdul". In an earlier newspaper report (Inangahua Times 15/5/1889), a person who attended one of William's seances said "the spirit grunted in a manner quite unintelligible to anyone except Mr McLean". Adverse publicity led to noisy people gathering outside the hall disrupting the seances. In one incident in 1903, stones thrown by those gathered outside, broke windows at the hall during a séance.



Right: Elizabeth Street, 1925 (New Century Hall extreme right). WCA 00138-5052

McLean also promoted Dr Ceasar Lombroso, who had a theory that a person's brain capacity is linked to criminal behaviour. Lombroso also had beliefs in spirits which could communicate with mankind and describe future life.

Another lasting legacy of William McLean was the construction of the Opera House in Manners Street. William was the Secretary of the Wellington Opera Company which built the current Opera House in 1914, shortly before his death.