NEWSLETTER
No. 112, June 2025

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

The Kutners: from Russian-Poland to Mount Victoria

Sunday July 20 at 2.00 pm
Friends (Quaker's) Hall, Moncrieff Street

The Kutner family lived in Rosemary Bromley's house at 1 Batham Drive from 1917-1980.
Come along and hear her tell the story of Rachel and Daniel Kutner's escape from persecution by the forces of Tsar Alexander III, their sojourn in London, and how eventually they and their six children made Wellington their home.
It is a remarkable tale of resilience, adaptability, and sporting and theatrical achievement.
Non-members welcome

Re-registration as incorporated society
We have successfully been re-registered as an incorporated society and are now the proud owners of a new certificate of incorporation.

Heritage Festival Sept-Oct
This year, we are going to be working with the Trustees of St Gerard's Monastery and Church to offer tours. There'll be three public tours but a special one for Mt Vic Historical Society members on Sunday 19 October at 3pm. So you won't need to book for a public one unless, of course, you can't make the exclusive one. We'll send out booking details nearer the time.

Obituary: Julie Anne Middleton (1957-2025)
Julie lived in Mount Victoria for 45 years, where she was an active community member before passing away in May after a year-long health battle. She was a significant figure in the formation of the Mount Victoria Historical Society.

Julie and her partner Alan formed the Historical Society at an inaugural meeting held at the old Crossways Community House in October 1995. Julie was on the steering committee as Secretary and wrote a number of the early newsletters, researched the background to the Queen Victoria statue and established the first heritage walking tours of Mt Victoria. She gained copyright approval and Lottery Board funding for our first publication, *The Streets of Mt Victoria*, based on Fanny Irvine Smith's Book, *The Streets of My City*. Julie and her family attended most of the MVHS activities and particularly enjoyed dressing up in period costumes on a number of occasions.

Julie was also actively involved in a number of local organisations such as the Mount Victoria Residents' Association, the local Plunket music group, the Mount Victoria Garden Club, "Save the Basin" and Moir Street heritage campaigns. She supported the Community Dinners at Innermost Gardens and was the self-appointed Librarian, regularly tidying and stocking the book box there. Before Covid, Julie attended the Monday craft workshops held at The Hub, and has participated in olive picking around the streets of Mt Vic. At one stage she was a co-editor and a distributor of the *Mt Victoria Newsletter*. More recently Julie has been distributing *The Local* community newspaper. She was an active parent in support of her daughters, Kate and Susanna, at St Mark's Church School and Wellington East Girls' College.

Her generous contribution to the wider Mount Victoria community will be sorely missed. *Photo: Julie and Alan*

HISTORIC NOTE

The Austin Street Boy's Home

Recently, MVHS received two requests from families wanting to know more about the Austin Street Boys' Home.

The boys' probationary home was established in 1918 at 9 Austin Street. It was set up to accommodate delinquent and criminal children, and young people who could not be boarded out, but it also housed those who were deprived, neglected or abused.

Detail: Mt Victoria, Wellington, including Majoribanks Street, 1920. [ATL: PAColl-5584-53]
The Boy's Probationary Home highlighted

The large house was originally built for Edward Reeves, a wealthy trader, who was in business with John Plimmer at one time. He died in 1912 and his son William sold the property to the Government during World War One. Although it was referred to as 9 Austin Street, it was located up a long flight of concrete steps, and situated where Lawson Place is today. The house was on half an acre of land adjoining the Town Belt.

Detail: Wellington from Mt Victoria 1884, Burton Brothers. [ATL BB 240-1/1-G]
A rear view of the Reeves house, highlighted. It was substantially altered by the time the Government bought the house.

In a 'Fist Full of Summer', Peggy Dunstan, once a local resident, wrote of her time roaming the Town Belt in the 1920s:

> "Oh fortunate children. We were part of the 'Kelly Gang,' and we had the whole of Mount Victoria as our own particular territory. Of course we had to fight to keep it that way; there were other gangs too. The Home Boys formed one of these, and the phrase struck terror into all but the bravest heart. They were boys from the remand home in Austin Street, and a tough bunch to tangle with."

"… The hikes took us along the back of the remand home on the return trip as we were too tired to stick to the demanding track along the top. It was pitiful to see the Home Boys' Gang, tamed and cowering, doing chores in the huge yard. We would loll on the fence for a bit and sling them a few choice phrases we'd saved for such just an occasion. Their faces would be far more pitiful then, and we didn't linger long…There were usually reprisals after this sort of thing and we had to keep a sharp look out…Just off to the side of the lookout tree (at the top of Majoribanks Street) was the pond. All the water from the hill flowed down into it."

On one particular occasion, the pond was full, with only clay stopbanks holding back the water. The Home Boys were coming up Majoribanks Street from Clyde Quay School. On turning into Austin Street, the Kelly gang broke down the stopbanks of the pond.

"… a veritable wall of water leapt the drain and… roared in a muddy tidal wave down Majoribanks Street. It caught the Home kids alright. They were pretty close and some of them were almost knocked off their feet."

Looking through the Paper's Past website, there were a number of newspaper reports of escapes from the Boys' Home. Two examples are presented below:

A JUVENILE'S OFFENCE.

Corporal punishment was ordered to be administered to a juvenile offender, a lad of fourteen years, whose escapades were described to Mr F. K. Hunt, S.M., at a sitting of the court on Saturday. The boy appeared on a charge of escaping from the Wellington Boys' Probation Home.

According to the senior sergeant, the boy managed to escape from custody one Saturday evening, and after wandering about the city, sleeping out for several nights, he was taken in by a resident of Thorndon quay. He obtained employment, and while at work gained access to a box in the rear of the premises and stole £40 in money.

"Give him twelve strokes of the birch, and return him to the home," were Mr Hunt's instructions to the Juvenile Probation Officer.

Above: NZ Times 13 November 1922

Two lads, aged 12 and 14 years, ran away from the Austin Street Boys' Home on Sunday and travelled as far as Levin on stolen bicycles. After ransacking several motor-cars and stealing, among other things, a rifle, they were arrested by the police about 11 o'clock on Monday night. The boys were taken to the Weraroa Training Farm for the night and returned to Wellington yesterday.

Above: Evening Post 2 March 1938

A former neighbour of the Boys' Home and MVHS member, Joyce McNee, described in an oral history her links with the Home. Joyce's husband was a cabinet maker. "We were quite well involved with those boys. My husband (Noel) used to allow one or two boys into the workshop, as a bit of therapy or something, to play with wood. But that was a privilege. And it was more of a privilege to come into the house here to have a cuppa." Joyce's daughters were allowed to play with the boys, if the boys were well behaved.

By 1959 a new facility had been built in Epuni, Lower Hutt. In 'Little Criminals - The Story of a New Zealand Boys' Home', David Cohen describes the shift out of Austin Street. "The wards had been

looked after in an ageing house in Austin Street…On the morning of Thursday January 29, 1959 the boys in Austin Street began packing and loading furniture on the watch of their new guardian (Maurie Howe - manager) for the move out of the capital. The journey was completed by five o'clock that afternoon. Fifteen kids were now resident in the new institution."

The "ageing" house description was a euphemism for a poorly maintained house, which was not fit for purpose. As early as the 1950s concerns were raised about the state of the piles and sloping floors. In 1954 a damning Education Department inspection report of the boys' workshop, at the rear of the house, said that "much of the weatherboarding needs replacing; the glass in the windows was out for a long time; most of the window sashes and window frames needed repairing, and in some cases replacing. It was raining at the time and the lads working in the shed had sacks over the windows to keep out the rain."

After the boys moved to Epuni, neighbours of the former home on several occasions reported intruders in the building. They feared fire might result. On a Friday night in August 1959, the former Boys Home was set alight, seriously damaging the interior of the building. The building was due to be demolished and this no doubt hastened the demolition process. Demolition took place in 1960 and the Department of Social Welfare sold the land in 1984 for the Burrell-Wilkinson apartment development, in Lawson Place.

The morning after the fire at the former Austin Street Boy's Home [Evening Post 15/8/59]

By Alan Olliver

Visit to historic home

A group of members was privileged to have the opportunity to visit an historic home in Austin Street, built originally in 1875. Our generous hosts told us about the history of the house, prepared material for us to browse through, and allowed us to move around the house as we wished enjoying original and restored features.

I don't think we need to run a poll of members to ask what one of their favourite activities might be – this event was booked out within 24 hours.

Some out-of-town members not able to join the visit were keen to learn about the house, so in a future newsletter we'll share that.