

Mt Victoria Historical Society News

No. 20, February 2002



For information contact:

Joanna Newman on 385 2254 (hm)

Alan Olliver on 385 1022 (hm)

A Royal Tour (of sorts)

Saturday March 2nd

Meeting at 1.00 pm at the Queen St/Austin Street intersection

Stroll down Queen Street and hear about life and times, people and places there over the years. Our guide will be Alan Olliver (of Moir Street and Brougham Street tour fame).

This will be followed by refreshments at Mouldings and Finishings in Home Street, generously hosted by the proprietors.

Future Events

The next events planned for the Society are:

May 19, Sunday, 2.30pm

Another in the popular *Renovations* series, when we invite speakers to talk about new aspects of renovating old houses.

September 22, Sunday, 2.30pm

AGM and a speaker yet to be confirmed

HISTORICAL NOTE

Mr. John Beck, of Kent Terrace, Mt Victoria

Under the section headed "The Wood Trade" in the 1901 Cyclopaedia of Wellington, there is an entry for John Beck. He was a prominent businessman in Wellington at the time and in this newsletter we tell you a bit about his life and activities.

September 19, 1870 I received a letter written in the following terms "We beg to inform you that we are ready to commence laying pipes and shall be glad to have your instructions in reference to the same. We propose starting in Willis St. opposite the printing office of the Evening Post. on the West side of the Street. our object in commencing at this point is to enable the works being carried on from the Centre to both ends of the town at the same time 18/ J. W. Beck
On receipt of this letter I gave the matter

John Beck

“... Mr Beck is a native of Liverpool, where he was apprenticed to Mr Bounphrey to learn the joinery trade. In 1852, having finished his term, he continued for a year or two working at his trade in Liverpool. Meantime the idea of emigrating to the colonies began to work upon his mind. In 1853 visions became realities, and Mr Beck found himself, along with many other emigrants, on board the good ship “Marco Polo”, bound for Melbourne, Victoria, where he landed in January, 1854. Before the end of the latter year the subject of this sketch was basking under the sunny southern skies, and striving to do what he could towards making the proverbial fortune. For eight years he remained in the colony of Victoria, where he found employment in the building trade in the neighbourhood of the capital. In 1860 the goldfields rush to Otago caused a good many to try their luck in New Zealand. Among these was Mr Beck, who, however, soon found that it was more profitable to work at his own trade, of which he was master, than to depend on the uncertainties of a digger’s life. He therefore went to Dunedin and engaged in the building trade till the year 1865, when he elected to settle in Wellington. Almost immediately on his arrival he was fortunate in securing from the Provincial Government the right for seven years to supply water to the shipping at Queen’s Wharf. In order to carry out the terms of his lease he had to construct waterworks at his own expense. This involved a large outlay of capital (fully £1000), in addition to his own time and labour. The results, however, proved highly satisfactory to Mr Beck, who derived a handsome annual profit as the reward of his enterprise and forethought. In the year 1870 the present business was founded. At first his operations were on a comparatively small scale, and few hands were needed, but as time went on the demand gradually increased, necessitating additional assistance and extra appliances for producing the goods required. For some years Mr Beck conducted his growing trade in Dixon Street, where he supplied, in the aggregate, an enormous quantity of timber for building purposes in the city and suburbs. Of late years the works at the latter place have been much too small, and it was therefore imperative that more commodious premises should be provided. In order to make provision for the needs of his trade, he purchased a town acre in Kent Terrace, where he has erected the present large mill, with offices attached.¹ The building, which is three stories in height, is built of wood and iron upon a substantial foundation of brick. The size of the mill may be estimated from the fact that the total floor space is equal to 15,000 square feet. A steam engine of fifteen horse power is used to drive the machinery; five tons of coal monthly are used in connection with the works. The plant includes planing and sawing machines of the latest and most approved description. About eighteen hands find regular employment in connection with the mill and yards. Mr Beck makes a specialty of preparing and supplying materials for coachbuilders and wheelwrights, and also laths for venetian blinds. He is a direct importer of timber from England, America, Australia, and Tasmania, and keeps large stocks of timber from each of these countries, in addition to a considerable stock of New Zealand timber of all kinds. In addition to supplying timber and materials for building purposes, Mr Beck is a builder himself. He has for many years continued to build dwellings, which he has for the most part designed and superintended himself. He now owns no less than twenty-three houses, which he succeeds in keeping well let to good tenants. Mr Beck is of a somewhat retiring disposition, being indisposed to seek the prominent positions in local politics. He is content to make haste slowly, and must be classed among the successful colonists of Wellington.”
[Cyclopaedia of New Zealand, Vol 1 Wellington, 1901]

One episode in his illustrious career which is not mentioned in the Cyclopaedia article, is his failed proposal to build the first public water supply in Wellington.

The public had been demanding that Wellington Town Board (the City Council’s predecessor) do something about the town’s water supply as early as 1868. The year before that, the City Surveyor had submitted a proposal to the Board for a water supply suggesting the Kaiwharawhara Stream as a possible source, but it was considered too costly to proceed. Between 1868 and 1870, private firms showed interest in supplying the town with water and in 1869 the Board considered Mr Beck’s proposal, which turned out to be the last. When the City Council was established in 1870 a Water Supply Sub-committee was formed to look at Mr Beck’s proposal. The Sub-committee received a major report from the City Surveyor setting out the whole history of the water supply to that point. In it, he details how the first he heard of Mr Beck’s scheme was when he sought permission from him in September 1870 to lay water supply pipes in the town. To that point in time, however, still no “plans, specifications or even a letter containing detailed information was ever laid before the Board.” The City Surveyor rightly became concerned. Ultimately, Beck’s scheme was found unsatisfactory, but the Council agreed to buy from him the pipes he had already purchased for the project.² After rejecting the last private proposal the Council had to do something itself and the Karori Reservoir was built soon after.

An extract from the City Surveyor’s report to Council, quoting Beck’s letter seeking permission to lay pipes, is reproduced on the front of the newsletter.

¹ The town acre Beck bought was probably No. 305 as four of the houses he built were on the corner of Kent Terrace and Edge Hill. Town Acre 305 was still vacant in Thomas Ward’s survey map of 1891. A permit was issued to build the mill in 1892 and to add to it in 1893, but the plans no longer exist. Between 1893 and 1895 permits were issued to Beck for construction of nine cottages on Kent Terrace.

² Wellington City Archives, 00164:0:1, WCC Subcommittee Minute Books, Vol 1 Minute Book Sub-committees 1870-1877