

Mt Victoria Historical Society News

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Art Deco Mt Victoria

Sunday, March 23 at 2.00 pm
Meeting at the Central Fire Station

Join Joanna Newman for a tour of the Art Deco architecture and 1930's history of Mt Victoria.

The walk will end at Strawberry Fare, a great place for afternoon tea surrounded by the Art Deco atmosphere of the last building on our tour.

If weather forces a postponement, the walk will take place a week later on March 30. Phone Joanna Newman on 385 2254 if you feel you need confirmation.

*Stepping
Out!*

steppingout.feelinggreat.co.nz

Programme

For the first event of the year, we have worked with Wellington City Council to be part of their month encouraging walking in Wellington. We hope the extra advertising will mean new people will discover the unique nature of Mt Vic! Do get a copy of the *Stepping Out* brochure for lots more great walks throughout March.

The next events to put in your diary are:

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| May 18 at Crossways | - Alan Olliver: Historic Earthquakes in Wellington, including impacts on Mt Victoria |
| July | - Historic movies at Time Cinema |
| September | - AGM (attraction to be announced later) |

Fire in Mt Victoria

Most of you will have read about the fires on Mt Victoria in early February, even if you didn't watch them - with a certain fascination tinged by concern!

Fortunately, the fires this year both occurred on still days. They reminded me, however, of the great fire of Shannon and Hawker Streets which occurred just over 100 years ago and destroyed 22 houses. We had an excellent talk about this nearly six years ago from Tony Bartley but, because many current members will have missed it, I thought this would be an appropriate time to share it with everyone via the newsletter. Thank you to Tony and to Julie Middleton for their research.

HISTORICAL NOTE

GREAT FIRE IN THE CITY

A LARGE AREA SWEEPED ON MOUNT VICTORIA

TWENTY-TWO HOUSES BURNED

So read the headlines in the Wellington newspaper just over 100 years ago. The article went on to say:

THE EVENING POST, THURSDAY, MAY 30, 1901

The largest fire which has been experienced in Wellington since the Panama-street conflagration in 1887 – and one covering a greater area than that historic blaze – broke out at an early hour this morning on the slope of Mount Victoria, in a house on the west side of Hawker Street, occupied by Mr. Charles Moore. The alarm was given by Mr J. McVicar, nightwatchman, who, seeing a small flame coming from the window of the house, touched the electric signal at the Duke of Edinburgh Hotel. About the same time, that is shortly after 2 o'clock, two of the crew of the Hinemoa also noticed the outbreak, and after setting off a street alarm telephoned to the Brigade from the Central Police Station.

The Brigade turned out with admirable promptitude, and quickly had a lead of hose playing on to the burning house, which by this time was one mass of flames. But Hawker Street is one of the much-talked-of high levels, and so slight was the pressure of water that for all practical purposes it was absolutely useless, and with alarming rapidity the fire spread to the adjoining house, occupied by Mr. H. Radcliffe.

A FIRE-FANNING GALE.

By this time it was evident that the condition of affairs was serious. One of the strong north-westerly gales for which Wellington has earned a certain reputation was blowing with hurricane force and fanned the flames so that they roared and leapt in a manner which gave full promise of a hard night's work for the brigadesmen and disaster to the residents in the vicinity. The pressure of water at starting was so small that, as one member of the brigade expressively remarked, "I could put my finger in the nozzle and stop the flow." However, the men did their utmost, and fought the flames with the almost powerless squirt until their own clothes began to scorch and burn, and it was evident that, with the available resources, further resistance was impossible.

The flames then attached the house occupied by Mr Andrews (of Messrs Bridge and Andrews, dentists), which was in a few minutes converted into a blazing furnace. These three houses, the first to be consumed, were slightly under the level of the road line, and overlooking Clyde-quay. They were thus exposed to the full fury of the gale, and the flames, which were not affected by the scanty amount of water thrown upon them, licked up the three buildings in an incredibly short space of time.

Mr. Moore and his family escaped with what they stood up in when roused, and were

none too soon, either, in getting safely clear of the premises. Mr. And Mrs. Radcliffe and their young son had a similar experience, and although they managed to save a quantity of valuable silver, they suffered just the same, as their salvage was put for safety into Mr. Freyberg's house, which was itself burned down before the morning was much advanced. Mr. and Mrs. Andrews are away from home on a holiday, and the house was in charge of two servant maids, who saved practically nothing.

THE FLAMES CROSS THE ROAD.

. Many others, too, gave their assistance in removing furniture from threatened houses, but, as usual on such occasions, their efforts resulted in a considerable amount of damage to the goods removed, and the resultant benefit was not very great. Others, again, removed goods to so great a distance that they have not yet been recovered – a species of meanness that deserves the deepest reprobation. The police were present in strong force, notwithstanding which despicable thefts of salvaged goods were only too common. It is a pity offenders of this sort cannot be brought to book and taught a lesson which will put a stop to such a contemptible species of crime.

AN IMPRESSIVE SPECTACLE.

The sight was truly magnificent. Huge columns of flame shot up into the sky, and borne along by the gale, swept in resistless volume along their course of destruction, while millions of sparks and burning fragments formed a pyrotechnic display of a wonderfully effective description. The scene was particularly impressive when viewed from a distance. Seen from the flat on the high ground at the northern end of the city the observer gained an adequate conception of the fearful speed at which the fire travelled. One could see a house standing clear of the flames. Suddenly huge red arms would clasp it, and in a few minutes nothing was to be seen of it but chimneys standing gaunt and bare against the sky. As the fire pursued its career quite a forest of chimneys were exposed to view, but so great was the heat that many of these crumbled to ruins as the flames passed by.

HELP FOR THE SUFFERERS

A tremendous sensation was, naturally, caused in the neighbourhood of the outbreak, and those who had been fortunate enough to escape, and had not been forced to remove their furniture for safety's sake, threw open their doors to those who had been less fortunate. And in every case help was needed, for so great had been the progress of

the fire that remarkably little had been saved in any case. Two young women escaped enveloped only in their night-clothes and a blanket which they had hurriedly wrapped round them when warned of their danger. Some would not believe that the fire ever could reach their houses and were very indignant when brigadesmen and constables seized hold of their children and insisted on the evacuation of the premises. In a very few minutes the houses were in flames, and were burned to the ground. One lady, who was very ill, had to be carried out of her house to a place of safety on a shutter, together with her six-days-old infant.

The occupants of the houses have been "put up" temporarily in all parts of the city by relatives and friends. Those who are without friends were given shelter by residents adjacent to the fire region. Much-needed help was rendered during the morning by kind-hearted fellow citizens and their wives. Persons who had lost their all were to be seen gazing upon the ruins of the spot they were wont to call "home", and many expressions of sympathy were extended to them in their time of trouble. Already sufferers are looking for houses, and housekeepers bemoan the fact that they will have to begin home-life "all over again".

A SCENE OF DESOLATION.

As the long dark night merged into day the scene was one of utter desolation. The flames had done their work, and had subsided, leaving only masses of still burning embers and huge flaring gas jets to mark their trail. All along the roadside were piled heaps of furniture, some watched over by owners or friends others left unattended, which round about stood many of the victims of the fire. One could tell them by their attire . . .

. . . he never saw the brigade work harder or stick more pluckily to a forlorn hope.

Superintendent Hugo, who worked at high pressure from start to finish, was kept too busy to give more than a passing word to pressmen this morning. He said that immediately on reaching the scene he saw that there would be a great fire and a clean sweep. The water service was of very little help to him because the pressure did not throw the jets more than 20 feet. He had taken part in the fighting of a bigger fire than that of this morning; but it was the first time a fire had ever got away from him as this one did. It was a fire which had spread with rare rapidity.

THE INSURANCES

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