

BIRKENHEAD HERITAGE

— SOCIETY INC —

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UPCOMING EVENTS

Saturday 13th February 2-4pm **Re-opening and celebration at** **Farrington House, 44 Mahara Ave.**

Join with us to visit the repainted Museum, see clearances achieved inside, and appreciate the screening of some of our historic local photos.

We have arranged to have a gazebo, and chairs set up on the lawn for a celebratory afternoon tea for members, guests and visitors.

Phone Committee members below if transport to and from St. Andrews Hall would be helpful.

Saturday March 13th 2-4pm. **St Andrews Church Hall, 172 Hinemoa St.** **Guest Speaker: Giuseppe Galina** **Italian Campaign of the 2nd N.Z. Division**

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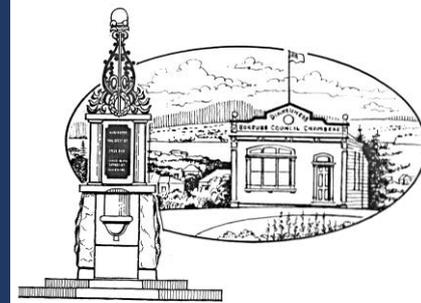
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January February 2021

We hope our members had an enjoyable Christmas, able to join families or others in celebrating the festive season—unlike many in lockdown to prevent new variants of COVID 19. Already in 2021 we have seen challenges to Democracy at the Capitol of the USA, and the spectacle of America's Cup challengers racing on Auckland Harbour.

We really are seeing historical events unfolding in our times.

In remembrance: At the end of 2020 we learnt former Committee member Tom Cotter passed away on December 7th aged 85, after years of community service. Also Shirley Lowe long time member, and early Bert Sutcliffe resident had passed away peacefully with her family present.

On the back of an old bank receipt
“We might make Mistakes
But we would make other things too.”
Michael Joseph Savage

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Story of injured worker Thomas Baker.

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Car Blown Up - Mystery at Birkenhead Council works 1934

A 1930's photo of the Birkenhead Council works depot displayed at Farrington House Museum brought to mind a criminal event that occurred at the depot during the Depression in 1934, only narrowly avoiding a tragic outcome.

Sensational headlines in the Auckland Star and New Zealand Herald proclaimed -

**CAR BLOWN UP
BIRKENHEAD MYSTERY**

**EXPLOSION IN CAR
MOTOR CAR WRECKED**

**RELIEF WORKER INJURED
METAL HURLED THROUGH AIR
INQUIRIES MADE BY DETECTIVES**

On April 12 1934, the Auckland Star provided an account from the Foreman, Mr. Bridge.

NO EXPLOSIVES KEPT IN THE YARD

“With about five others, I was standing outside the car which Mr. Hayson was attending to. I saw him bend forward to crank her, and then I heard the noise, a noise that could not have been caused by any explosion of benzene.¹ It is a wonder to me that we were not all killed.”

“Any of us might have been struck in the same way as Mr. Barker was.”

“The air was full of flying fragments, some of which were twisted like pieces of string. There was a curious white smoke coming from the engine, just like that which rises after an explosion of gelignite.”

“I remember hearing the car fire on two cylinders, and then the explosion occurred when the remaining two should have been igniting. It looked as though the two forward spark plugs had been removed, and something put underneath them. What that something was we do not know, but it certainly had explosive properties.”

“We do not keep any gelignite or explosives in the council's yards, but there is some kept under lock and key in the quarry.²”

Note 1: Benzine. Petrol was colloquially referred to as Benzine in New Zealand until the 1960's.

Note 2: The Birkenhead Quarry was located near Lake Pupuke, later known as Smale's Quarry.

The 1930's photo of the Birkenhead Council works depot, located on flat land beside Mokoia Rd, between Porritt Avenue and Chelsea View Drive



The New Zealand Herald covered the story on 13 April 1934.

“Gelignite or some similar explosive, believed to have been maliciously placed in the engine, is thought to have caused a violent explosion that occurred when a motor-car owned by the Birkenhead borough foreman, Mr. C.H. Bridge, was cranked at the borough yard at 8.30 yesterday morning.”

*“The engine was blown up by the explosion, and a middle-aged relief worker, **Mr. Thomas Barker**, who was standing near, was struck on the head by a flying bolt. He suffered concussion and lacerations of the face. Several other men who were in the vicinity had remarkable escapes from being struck by jagged pieces of metal.”*

“The injured man, who lives in Pohutukawa Avenue³, Beach Haven, was attended by Dr. R. G. Dudding. He was later conveyed to the Auckland Hospital in a St John ambulance.⁴“

“The explosion occurred at the door of the garage in which the car had been housed for the night. The owner of the machine, Mr. Bridge, gave the key of the garage to Mr. A. G. Evans, a relief worker, and he and Mr. C. V. Hayson, a timekeeper, were to get the car out and started. There was no response to the first swing, but the second time Mr. Hayson swung the crank-handle there was an explosion that was heard about half-a-mile away.”

The NZ Herald reported that no explosives were kept in the yard.

Note 3: Now Gazelle Avenue

Note 4: This was 25 years before the Harbour Bridge was opened, so transportation by ambulance necessitated a ferry trip across the Harbour.

The N.Z. Herald also reported

The car had been locked in the Council garage since five PM the previous day, and that Mr. Bridge held the only key to the garage. There was a space of two feet above the garage door. It was believed that the intruder gained access through this space, as the lock had not been tampered with.

“It is thought that entry was gained in this manner, and that the intruder removed the sparking plug from the front cylinder, placed some explosives on top of the piston, and then screwed the plug in again.”

The Police launched an extensive investigation, while people privately voiced their suspicions and theories, the culprit was never caught.

Thomas ‘Tom’ Barker

Mr. Barker’s trade was a Plasterer. However during the depression years, he was employed at the Birkenhead Council Depot as a relief worker. Initially his injuries were reported as not serious, but Mr. Barker spent several weeks in hospital after the blast, and as an outpatient required ongoing operations including skin grafts.

In later years, he lived with his wife Elsie, and daughter Maree in Tramway Road, Beach Haven. Subsequently Tom and Elsie lived on a small farm located just off Teal Crescent, in what is now Mayall Avenue, and grew flowers for market.

His grandson Richard Tout, and member of Birkenhead Heritage Society Inc. recalls that Tom was a cheerful and colourful Beach Haven character who willingly gave his time to help locals with vehicle and mechanical engineering problems.



References

- AUCKLAND STAR, VOLUME LXV, ISSUE 86, 12 APRIL 1934. (n.d.). *Car Blown Up*. Papers Past.
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Article by Erica Hannam, Committee Member

Editor: Marcia Roberts