

BIRKENHEAD HERITAGE

— SOCIETY INC —

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UPCOMING EVENTS

- **Due to the Covid 19 –*
Coronavirus Pandemic which
has now reached New
Zealand, our Farrington
House Museum in Mahara
Avenue will be closed
temporarily to Public Visitors.**
- **No Meeting was planned in
April due to Easter.**
- ***Our Monthly Meetings will
be on hold until this period of
reduced public meetings and
close contact has passed
– as it will.**

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- **At our March Meeting Barbara Wesley
shared her interest and research on
sculptures, art works and War Memorials on
the North Shore.**

An excellent presentation with information on the artists, the materials and the stories behind many well known, and sometimes hard to find art works. We learnt there are sculptures located at each of the North Shore Bus Stations.

CONTENTS

- **P 2-4 An updated history of Birkenhead
Library – with contributions from our
members.**



**The Official Party with Mayor Wood at the 2010
opening of the new Birkenhead Library**

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A History of Birkenhead Library

At the turn of the twentieth century, the only library in Birkenhead was run by the Zion Hill Methodist Church. In 1901, the Birkenhead Borough Council resolved that its legal and finance committee should consider building a public one. A Government subsidy was sought in 1904, but nothing eventuated.

The Birkenhead Borough Council met for the first time in new Council Chambers facing Hauraki, (now Hinemoa Street) on January 18th 1906. Later the building was moved back to face Rawene Street across the Civic Reserve, where the Memorial to Birkenhead men who had fallen in the Great War was unveiled on April 24, 1927.

However, it was not until 1949 that the Free Birkenhead Public Library was established in the basement of the Council Chambers, opening on 14 November, with support from the National Library. In the beginning volunteers were crucial to the running of the library. They included the town clerk and a councillor, Percy Hurn, and others who had given freely of their expertise, plus local resident Mr Robert Duthie from the Auckland Public library. Savings in wages allowing the purchase of more books. In 1949 the number of volunteers was recorded at twenty-eight.

People were pulled in to assist to read to children during school holidays. Among this "band of honorary assistants" were Mrs Gardener, Mr Sloan, and Mr Odd, volunteers. By 1950 the Borough Council was looking to formally employ someone for £100 a year. Mrs Joan Foggin and Mrs Noira Wilson were the first paid, part-time librarians. Eleanor Fisher (Nell), already working in the library became the first full-time staff member in 1952. She remained the in-charge librarian until her retirement nineteen years later.

Daphne Riley was another library assistant, and volunteers Olive Jewell, Elizabeth Collins and Colleen Christie. Maureen Andrews remembered her time as a 14 year old volunteer checking out books on Friday evenings. She recalled very strict discipline within the library, Nell Fisher kept a strict eye on everyone. A member recalled poetry reading by local author Hone Tuwhare.

Following the opening of the Harbour Bridge in 1959 there was a large increase in house construction and local residents. Nora Bourke, the chairman of the Library Committee, felt the existing building was limited and, with Mayor Cyril Crocombe, began making plans for a much larger building.

The Birkenhead Borough Council building was demolished in 1967 to make way for a new and larger facility. Mr. Robert Duthie again had some input into the planning of the library, built on the Civic Reserve. On 20 April 1968, the new building was officially opened by the Governor-General, Sir Arthur Porritt, our first New Zealand born, An Olympian runner, and Physician to the Queen, he served as Govenor-General 1967-1972.

The second floor was built on top of the library in the early 1970s, and in 1979 the reserve was renamed Nell Fisher Reserve after the librarian Eleanor "Nell" Fisher. Lesley Clements (nee Paine) remembers Nell Fisher gave her a tea towel on her engagement the same year. Initially the second floor housed the Council Area Office, but the area was expected to eventually be used as library space. Deborah Mabee remembers the Council offices upstairs on the mezzanine floor – portioned into two ends – with Head Librarian Rita Grahame's office and the local History Office.

Birkenhead Library ctd.

Volunteers still had a role, carding and shelving books, and card catalogues – filing all the little cards. There was a stone seat outside with a plaque ‘J. P. McPhail’ (former mayor).

The Chelsea Archives

“The sugar company office at Chelsea was being moved. They were going to throw out the archives – around the 1970’s. Jack Wallace who worked there saved them. The sugar company archivist started, but didn’t finish sorting them. These boxes were moved to the (1968) library. Rata Grahame the Librarian was interested in the archives. She asked Margaret Paine and Margaret Hutchinson to be volunteers in the archives. She passed on enquiries to the ladies who made an appointment to meet enquirers. The two Margarets did this voluntary work for at least 15 years. When the building was demolished the archives were moved to the North Shore Archive Room in Takapuna. When the 2009 Library opened the archives were given their own room in the new building.” Margaret Paine.

Later a Librarian was given this task but once that librarian moved elsewhere there appears to be no specific Librarian appointed to the task.

The Mobile Library

Birkenhead Library, being located in central Highbury was about seven miles (11 km) distant from the more remote areas of Beach Haven and Birkdale. As a consequence, from the mid-1960s there was a persistent call to establish a more convenient branch location.

Birkenhead bought the mobile van off Takapuna in 1982. A 1949 Bedford chassis with a purpose-built body that had already been in service for 35 years, much of it as the first mobile library in Auckland. In fact, as part of the Takapuna City Council in 1977 it had been contracted to visit the outer Birkenhead area once a week.

This was reminiscent of the Country Library van, a national service which used to visit Birkenhead Library itself several times a year during an earlier era. The Bedford was eventually retired in 1992 and went to the North Shore Vintage Car Club. Over eleven years of operation the mobile issued over 163 thousand items. (Auckland Libraries, 2019)

Birkenhead Heritage Society Inc. member and former Librarian Brenda Knight recalls the Service, Cynthia McKensie was the first Mobile Librarian, and Venise Williams, Bronwyn Jones, Lisa Webb, and Sharon Cleghorn followed. Lloyd Mumme was the driver of the Mobile Bus, and kept it going over many years of its service. .

Planning through the 1990’s

In 1992 issues topped 300,000 items. In the 1990s some sort of addition to the library or a rebuild was being actively considered. Engineers in 1999 revealed the second level floor was too weak to support the weight of books without expensive strengthening, there was a leaking roof, and the building showing signs of deterioration. Repairs and ongoing maintenance costs meant the option of a completely new building was brought under consideration.

Marcia Roberts remembers attending a large gathering for a book launch in 1999, local resident Tina Bareham published *Search for a Mother*, her long journey seeking her family connections in England and Turkey. Friends of the Library provided a lovely supper but guests were crowded between rows of books..

On 1 May 2000, a time capsule was buried out in front of the library, by the Birkenhead war memorial. It contained various items such as maps, driver's licences, shopping receipts, and old library cards from the 1960s and 1970s.

Birkenhead Library ctd.

The time capsule was blessed by a kaumatua from Awataha Marae, it was planned to be dug up in one hundred years. On the plaque are quoted the opening two lines from T. S. Elliot's poem Burnt Norton.

By 2003 usage of the library had increased still further, to such an extent that it was noticeably affecting service delivery. Over 500 people a day were entering the library. For 37 years, until 2005, this was the location of the Birkenhead Public Library, it lacked space for community groups, primary schools and students, book clubs and author events.

Brendan Rawson, from the Architecture Office in Ponsonby was retained in 2004 to design a building that would create the much needed public space; and in addition, reflect the heritage of the area. Put out to public scrutiny there was some negative feedback. The original plan to include a café was changed, and the high roofline was lowered. The shadow-patterns of branches etched on the windows, (reminiscent of the trees in the reserve, one a kauri, planted in 1987 to commemorate environmentalist Bill Fisher) – are design features which were retained.

The Leisure Centre – temporary Library

In 2005, in preparation for building works on the same site, the library was shifted. The books and staff moved to a converted basketball court in the Birkenhead Leisure Centre, in Memorial Park, Mahara Avenue. Alternative sites had been considered, most were found to be either inappropriate or too expensive. There were also challenges to building on the Reserve, and resulting Resource Consent negotiations to be completed. With limited space available for services the Plunket Rooms building and adjoining Public Toilets on the site were soon to be demolished. The Citizen's Advice Bureau (CAB), and council Area Office within the building all had to find alternative premises.

In fact only 50% to 60% of the library's own stock could be accommodated.

A figure of \$175,000 was budgeted for the fit-out of the basketball court, and included such things as improved lighting, car park access, and funding for a passenger lift to allow for disabled patrons. Since the location was some distance from the town centre, a free shuttle bus was provided from Highbury once a week.

There were problems, and patronage dropped by 35%. Photocopying machines were now available, prepaid cards allowed copying of documents. In March 2007 the library was granted consent to use the Leisure Centre location for a further three years or until the new library was built, whichever came later. The library remained there for four years.

The final library design incorporated several notable features, including the maximisation of natural light, the use of recyclable material, including reuse of grey water, and a natural ventilation and cooling system to limit energy costs, plus computers. The new library opened on 17 December 2009 with a formal opening ceremony in February 2010.

Mayor Wood about to uncover the plaque



Resources: Extracts from the new Birkenhead Library 10th Birthday information, plus from various written resources in the Birkenhead Heritage Society Inc. library and files, plus consultation and questionnaires completed by members at the February 2020 meeting.

Editor and photos: Marcia Roberts