

Hawke's Bay Art Gallery and Museum

Leaflet No. 7

A Pictorial History

Athenæum, Library-

Art Gallery, Museum, 1865-1958

The initial step towards obtaining a Mechanics' Institute in Napier was taken in 1859, one year after Hawke's Bay Province was established. Building was delayed through lack of a suitable site. In 1865 the Provincial Council granted a part of the northern end of the five-mile shingle bank which was then the only land route out of Napier. For ninety-three years a cultural centre has been maintained on this site.



Napier and Ahuriri Plains, 1864.

Showing Museum site at lower left; Provincial Council Chambers, built 1860, the large building on right; Masonic Hotel, built 1861, on Hastings Street-Tennyson Street intersection; St. John's Church, Church Lane, opened 1862. There was no Dickens Street.

The first Athenæum, the first building on the site, was erected in 1865. By 1874 it had been enlarged. The Court House was built that year on part of the site. With the abolition of the Provincial system of Government in 1876, by Act of Parliament the site was vested as the "Athenæum Reserve" in the Napier Athenæum and Mechanics' Institute, Inc., part of it was appropriated for the purposes of the Supreme Court and, in return, a piece of adjoining land of equal size was granted, the land in Herschell Street on which in 1958 the Holt Gallery is to be built.



Napier was expanding. The Athenæum required repairs and extensions. In 1835 it was reported that the Reading Room "was in a pretty pickle with scaffolding everywhere." The Committee had arranged a £1200 mortgage at $7\frac{1}{2}$ per cent. and after months of confusion a handsome two-storied building stood on the site. It had an improved Reading Room and Library and a better room upstairs for the use of the Hawke's Bay Philosophical Institute (now the Royal Society) with space for its special library and museum exhibits.





There was a new Lecture Hall upstairs. Among the scholarly speakers who were heard in this room was a botanist of note who made New Zealand's rich and unusual flora known to scientists overseas. This was William Colenso. At the first meeting of the Philosophical Institute in its new room Colenso, then President, reported his findings in the Seventy Mile Bush on his recent botanising tour. Among them were fifty-nine new species of ferns and mosses, from some of which he had prepared microscope slides for that occasion.

In 1907 the 7½ per cent. loan was a burden impossible for the Athenæum Committee to carry. The Borough Corporation took over the building, library and the mortgage, which had been little reduced. Repairs were necessary also and the Council had increasing problems.

A feeling developed about 1924 that a properly housed and attended Museum was required in the Province for a valuable collection would be given to Napier if conditions were right for its safe-keeping. Parts of the wooden building had stood for sixty years, yet, ironically enough, in 1931 the Athenæum was one of the few surviving buildings in Napier town area. It gave a last but important service by providing space for clerical work in connection with rehabilitation of residents. When the old building was no longer required by the Commissioners who then controlled Napier it was decided that it had outlived its usefulness so it was to be demolished to make the site available for the erection in permanent material of an Arts and Crafts Museum which was part of a suggested plan for the use of the water-front for public purposes. Mr J. S. Barton made it clear that for restoration of such amenities as the Theatre and Library there was then no money available.

So the old Athenæum was sold for demolition and realised £110 5s. Some of us can recall hearing an early authoritative address on Wireless there and the attempt to link with Gisborne.

Some of us have vivid recollections of entering the familiar door to register our "Return to Napier" in February, 1931.

In 1933 the nine-year-old Hawke's Bay Art Society stepped on to the site with dreams for the future which in that decade of struggle for survival appeared unattainable but which now are warm realities. With no possessions left, with only £124 in the Bank, a small Society proposed to establish and maintain a Museum and Art Gallery, to provide a fireproof building which would permit the acceptance of Lady McLean's collection of museum pieces and thus preserve it for Napier, where it could assist materially a new Ethnological Museum.

The Municipal Authority could, and did, under the Act of 1933, grant the lease at a nominal rental of a portion of the Athenæum reserve and has continued to grant help to the extent of its powers.

Money was collected by a small enthusiastic group, the Art Gallery was opened in 1936, the central block in 1938 and the Museum wing with its Children's Museum and the Education Department Art Centre downstairs in 1955, a truly wonderful achievement for a voluntary organisation, for the building is free of debt.

Help came from here and there, but tense moments have been known. The Carnegie Corporation, following a policy of helping those who help themselves, made a valuable contribution of money and material; unexpected bequests came from several members and in recent years a few generous "Give while you live" Trusts have been created; the Local Body annual grants, the unstinted voluntary help from Chairman, Director and members, the continued mutual co-operation with the Royal Society and Public Library, begun with the Athenæum in 1874, all these and the support of the Society's greatest benefactor, the City Council, have made it possible to establish and maintain a Museum with ever-widening interests and ever-increasing responsibilities as an important amenity in the City of Napier.



Coast-loving Pohutukawas stand on each side of the main entrance through which 30,152 visitors have passed in this the ninety-third year of occupation of the once barren site on Napier's eastern shingle spit.

A.M.A., 1958.