

2.0 HISTORY

2.1 Outline History

Stoneycroft is a two storied colonial house, described as 'Victorian carpenter Gothic'¹ in style, and situated on 2.4 hectares of parkland at 901 Omaha Rd, Hastings. Stoneycroft's significance lies in the fact that it is a relatively unaltered example of an early runholder's 'town house' and representative of the life style of early Hawke's Bay landed families.

In the absence of title deeds which were destroyed in the 1931 Hawke's Bay earthquake, it is estimated that Stoneycroft dates from c 1875.

W J Birch, the first owner of the house, returned to England in 1874 to marry his cousin, Miss Lydia Lardon, daughter of the Vicar of Arkel in Shropshire.² Birch and his brother farmed Frewton Station on the Taihape Road, a remote property accessible only by pack horse in 1875, and Stoneycroft was the town residence of the newly married couple

A notice in the Hawkes Bay Herald on 6th November 1878 has Mrs W J Birch of Stoneycroft, Hastings, advertising for a cook. This provides some verification of the age of the property.

The land on which Stoneycroft stands was part of the Heretaunga block purchased from local Maori in 1870 by Thomas Tanner and the 'Apostles'. By 1871 this block was being subdivided for settlement, and in 1873 the first Hastings town sections were sold. The following year the railroad reached Hastings from Napier spit, enabling building materials to be brought more easily into the rapidly growing township. Also in 1874 a District School opened. W J Birch built on the outskirts of Hastings, his land adjoining J D Ormond's Karamu block and J N William's Irimley.³

No details are available of Stoneycroft's design or building. It is a two storied timber house, with dormer windows and verandahs on the north and west elevations. The original shingle roof was replaced with corrugated iron after the 1931 earthquake but the house sustained no major damage. Over its 130 year life Stoneycroft has not been significantly altered in any way, possibly because there have been only four owners, and much credit must go to the last owners, Dr and Mrs D A Ballantyne.

The property was originally 49 hectares⁴ but land has been sold off over the years. N Beamish bought 50 acres,⁵ but by the time the Ballantynes purchased the place in 1954 it was down to 8.4 hectares. Since then subdivision, including a portion for the expressway, has reduced the area to 2.4 hectares in 2001.

The grounds surrounding the house contain a number of significant tree, nine of which (including a redwood, a pin oak, horse chestnut, Douglas fir and Californian Big tree) were registered as notable and historic trees in March 1987.⁶

In the registration form it is stated that the date of planting was 1865, and that the trees were planted by Guthrie Smith of Tutira. However this date would appear to be too early given that prior to the flood of 1867, when the riverbed of the Ngaruroro changed course, this area of the plains was very swampy and marshy.⁷ From the way the trees are positioned around the house they were more likely to have been planted at the time of building.⁸ Guthrie Smith did not arrive in Hawkes Bay until 1882⁹ so that supposition of his involvement is incorrect.

2.2 Owners

Stoneycroft has been fortunate in that over a 130 year span it has had only five owners.¹⁰

1875 – c1893	William John Birch
c1893 – 1919	Nathaniel Evanson Beamish
1919 – 1942	Beamish family [Fanny Lowry Barcroft]
1942 – 1954	R P M and T D Edmonds
1954 – 2001	Dr & Mrs DA Ballantyne

William John Birch

The 18 year old Oxfordshireman William John Birch arrived at Wellington in 1860 on the ship 'Wild Duck' He moved to Hawkes Bay where he was employed by Mr St Hill on his Tukituki property, first as a cadet, then as manager.

In 1862 his brother Azim S Birch joined him, and together they served in the Maori war and subsequently were awarded a land grant at Waimarama.¹¹

In 1867 the brothers acquired a 20 year lease on a block of land in the Inland Patca, as the Upper Taihape Road area was then known. The financial backing of Donald McLean helped the newcomers secure the 114,000 acre Erewhon block for £200 per annum, in the face of stiff competition from J D Ormond, Donnelly, the Russells, the Studholme family of Canterbury and other land entrepreneurs.¹²

The Birch Brothers were active in Hawke's Bay County affairs and both served as councillors for the Erewhon riding, A S Birch from 1883 to 1887 and W J Birch from 1887 to 1896.¹³ Their overriding objective was to extend the road from Hastings to Taihape but it was not until 1885 that the first coach reached the Rangitikei River. Other interests included the Farmers Union, Anglican Church, A&P show, and horse racing.

The scale of the Birch's farming is shown in a letter from W J Birch dated May 28 1889. The 112,00 acres were carrying 53,000 merino sheep and they were clipping 388,401 lbs of greasy wool, most of which was scoured at the Rangitikei River before being taken by packhorse and dray to Napier for shipping to England.¹⁴

There is some debate over the exact date of W J Birch's sale of Stoneycroft. Nathaniel Beamish in 'The Ways of the Whana Whana' is credited with buying the house from Birch and shifting into it on September 18 1890.¹⁵ However Joyce Ballantyne was told by a housemaid to the Blythes, who visited the Ballantynes in the 1950s¹⁶, that the house was sold to W J Blythe, the Napier retailer.

The book 'Fighting Flames' mentions an advertisement in the Daily Telegraph of 1893 advising that W J Birch had sold Stoneycroft, an 'important' farm of 73 acres, to Stuart Macdonald for £1450.¹⁷

William Birch's nephew William Caccia-Birch had managed Erewhon since 1888. In 1893 he went to India to visit his brother, and on returning bought his own farm at Pahiatua. So 1893 looks a more likely date for the sale.¹⁸ Did William Birch shift to Erewhon?

By 1897 the Birch Bros partnership had been dissolved. William tossed for and lost the homestead block. Then in 1897 came the Good Friday flood which destroyed the carefully developed Taihape Road and rendered it once more fit only for pack horse trains¹⁹ Perhaps



Stoneycroft c. 1890

it was this combination of losses that precipitated W J's next move – he sold Erewhon in 1899, and bought a farm at Marton.

Beamish Family

The next occupants of Stoneycroft were Nathaniel Evanson Beamish, his wife Elisabeth, their unmarried daughter Fanny, and youngest son Jack.²⁰ Nathaniel lived there till his death in 1919, and the house remained in the ownership of the family until 1942.

Nathaniel E Beamish was an English settler who came to the Hawkes Bay in search of a farming career. 'Tales of the Whana Whana' is a detailed account of the history of the family and their station at the headwaters of the Ngaruroro River, near the Taihape Road.

Nat Beamish spent 20 years as farm manager for his brother in law, Tom Lowry of Okawa. During this time he had taken up a lease on the Whana Whana block (1875) which he freeholded in 1886. Whana Whana was a substantial property of 18,893 acres at this date, running 18,000 sheep and 150 cattle.²¹ Like Erewhon it was a remote, inaccessible property, and Nat Beamish's son ran the property while his father lived closer to town at Okawa.

In 1888, aged 61, Nat Beamish had a horse accident which precipitated his move to Hastings 'buying from William Birch the 50 acre property of Stonecroft' in 1890,²² though this date and acreage may well be inaccurate. Details are sketchy from this period. His daughter Fanny married Dr Penrose Barcroft in 1908,²³ and left for England after her father's death. In 1934, after the Hawkes Bay earthquake, an interim certificate of title to Stoneycroft and its 20 acres has Fanny Lowry Barcroft, widow, of Hastings as owner. Fanny died in 1957.

At some stage Mrs Jean Harrison, mother of Speaker of the House Sir Richard Harrison, leased Stonecroft.²⁴

R P M and T D Edwards

In 1942 the Certificate of title was transferred to R P M Edmonds (Ships Officer of Wellington) and T D Edmonds (Farmer of Hastings). Mrs Edmonds then lived at Stonecroft.²⁵

Dr & Mrs D A Ballantyne

In 1954 on May 27th, Stonecroft was bought by Dr & Mrs D A Ballantyne who were to own the property for nearly 50 years. Their stewardship was responsible for Stonecroft being so well preserved.

Dr Diamond Allan Ballantyne served in Crete with the New Zealand Division. He was captured after staying behind to look after wounded and became a prisoner of war.²⁶ The Ballantynes returned to New Zealand after the war, in 1947; initially the land attached to Stonecroft was the main attraction for them, but they also began to restore the house, and they looked after it carefully for the following 40 years.

Dr Ballantyne joined the Hawke's Bay Hospital in 1953, and in 1956 he was appointed 'Physician to the Queen'.²⁷ He was President of the first Marriage Guidance Council in Hastings,²⁸ and Ballantyne House at Hawkes Bay Hospital is named after him. He died in 1984, aged 72.²⁹

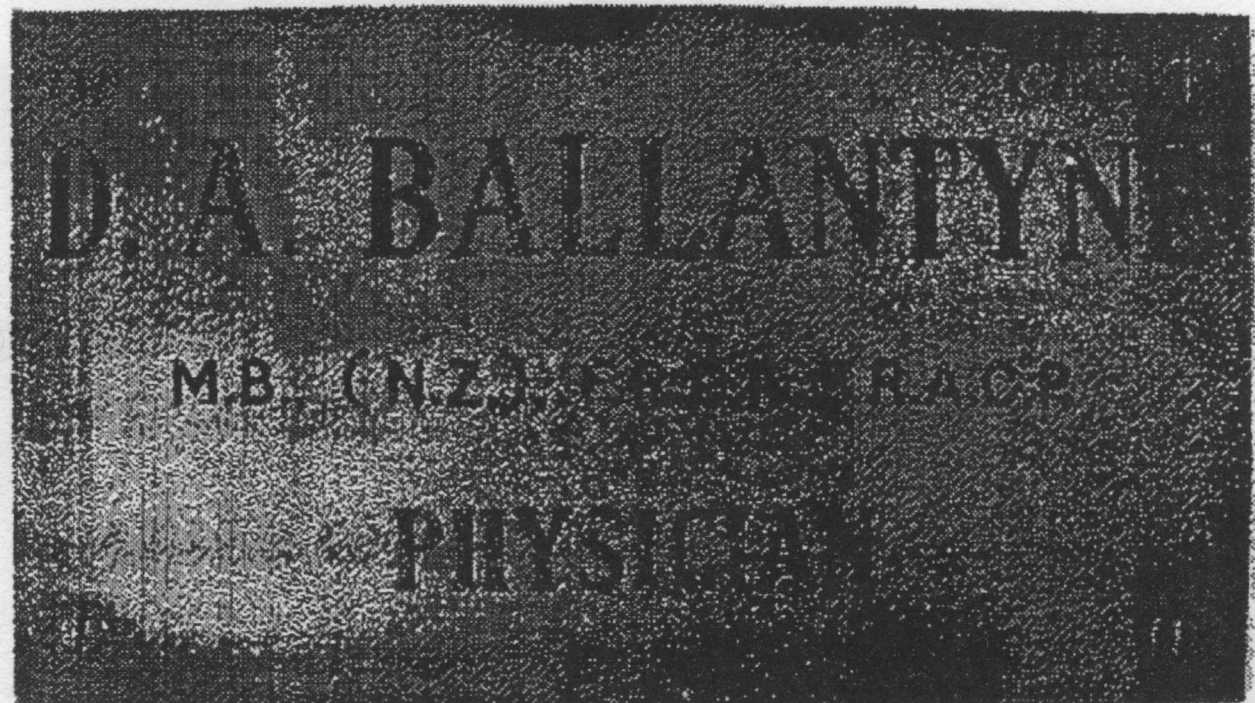
His wife Sybil Joyce was very active in the community. In 1953 she stood successfully for the Hastings City Council, the first woman to be elected. Her interests included Corso, Girl Guides and women's interests.³⁰

She was a member of the Hawke's Bay Hospital Board from 1968 to 1980³¹. Joyce died in 2003, aged 93, her address at death being given as Stonecroft.³²

In her later years Joyce Ballantyne became concerned over the future of her house. It had been given Category II registration under the Historic Places Act in 1993 but she was unsure that this would be sufficient to preserve it. In an interview she gave in 1996 after a heritage covenant had been signed with the New Zealand Historic Places Trust, she said 'It (Stonecroft) must be looked after, so the covenant seemed to be the best thing to do'³³.

The covenant, between the New Zealand Historic Places Trust and Mrs Ballantyne, dated 25th August 1995, binds future owners 'not to damage or alter the property or allow detrimental activity'³⁴ and the Historic Places Trust must approve any alteration or restoration. The covenant is described in more detail in a later section.

Since Joyce Ballantyne's death, the house has been empty; the grounds are being kept tidy, and the house has had a security system installed.



Brass plaque in front porch