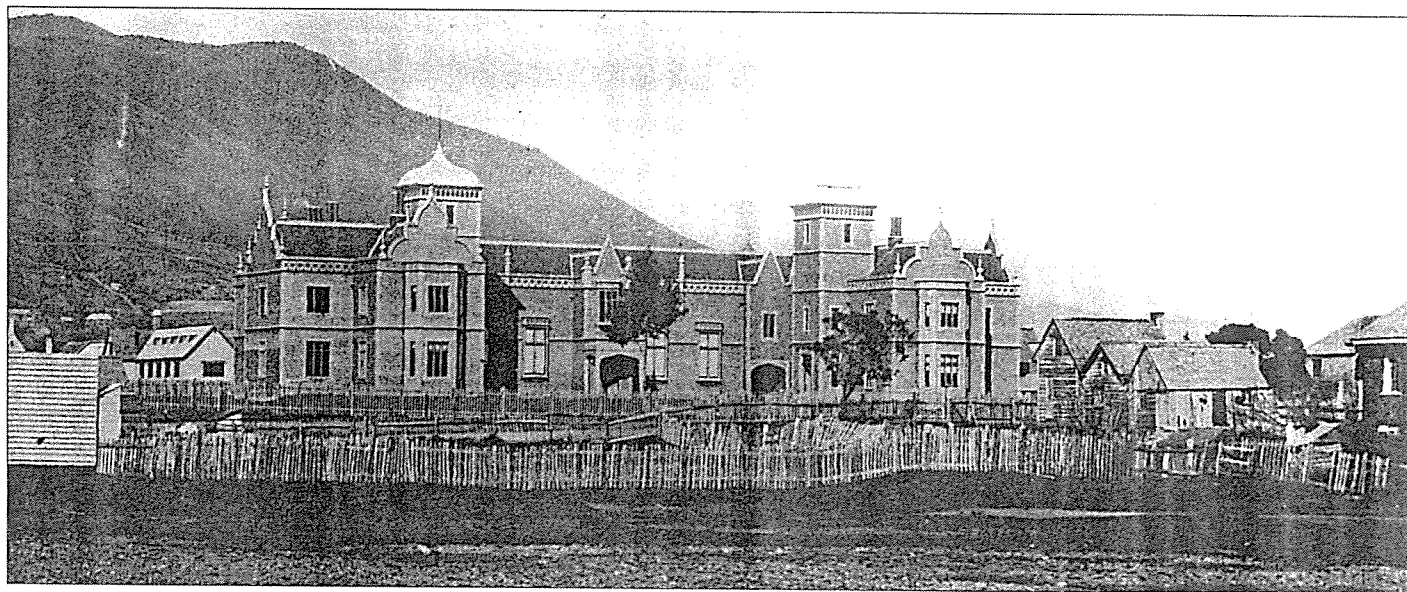


# Albion Square: History in the City's Heart

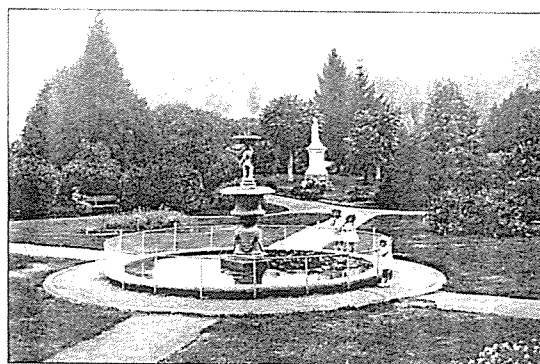
Catriona Rawlence



*Close to the centre of Nelson, Albion Square was once the political heart of the city. Now efforts are being made to ensure its surviving open spaces and historic features are preserved.*

**T**he name Albion Square means nothing to many Nelsonians as it no longer appears on maps or street signs. But Albion Square has played a very important part in the history of Nelson. The early settlers envisaged it as a spacious, green and peaceful place. To the local Maori it was an important source of food.

For nearly one hundred years it was the political centre of the province. But 1991 sees Albion Square encroached on by cars, modern buildings and commercial development. It is one of the few green areas left in central Nelson. Bounded by



Hardy, Bridge and Tasman Streets, it now includes the Queens Gardens, although they are now administered separately. Originally it extended right through to Collingwood Street as well. On the Square stood not only Nelson's Provincial Council Chambers, but also two of our early schools and one of Nelson's earliest acclimatisation ventures.

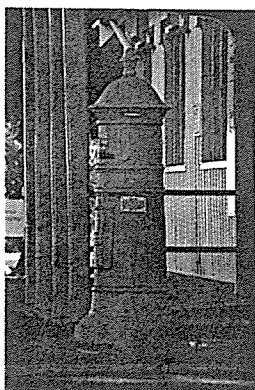
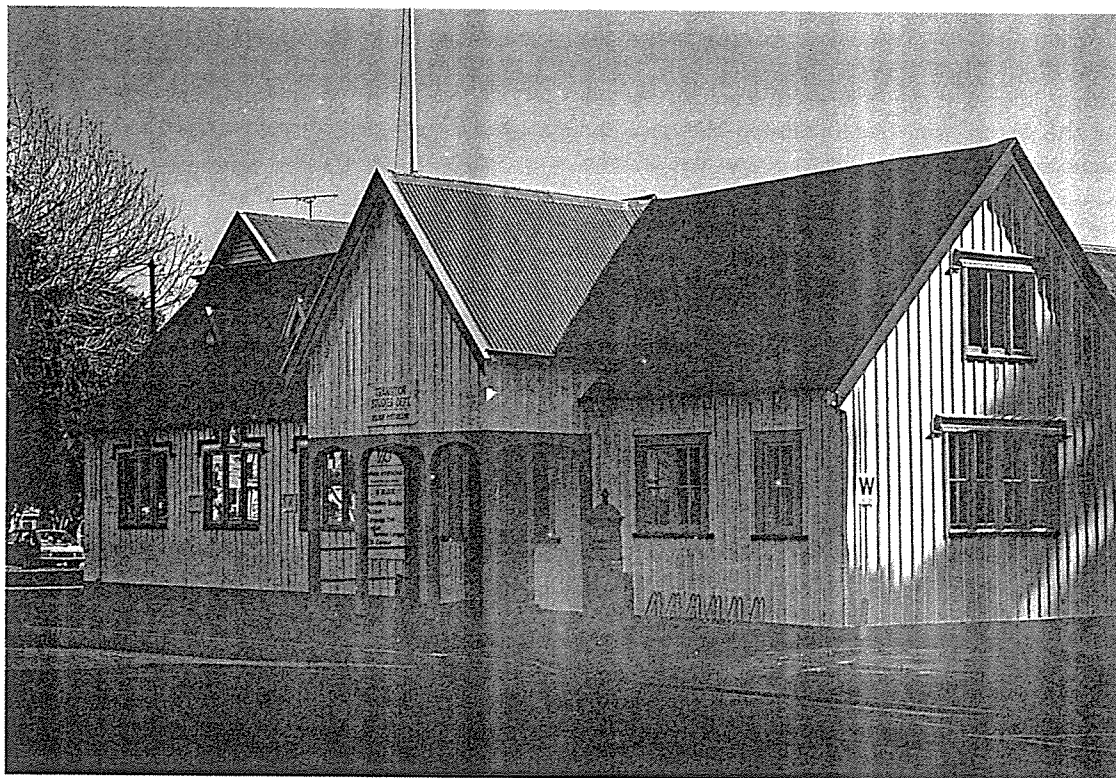
*Head of page: The Nelson Provincial Council Buildings, c. 1870 (Photo: Nelson Provincial Museum) Above right: Queens Gardens, c. 1905. (Photo: Alexander Turnbull Library)*

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Right: The old Girls' School, Hardy Street, built in the 1860s and now part of the Nelson Polytech.

Right below: The Fish Hatchery, erected in 1867 and used until 1946.

Below: The iron post box on Hardy Street which also dates from the 1860s. (All photos: Ross Wearing)



to 400. The settlers talked, and talked, and talked. Beginning at noon, they were still talking at 8 p.m., when they had a tea break. Resuming at 9 p.m., the meeting went on until 1 a.m.

The outcome of this long meeting was that Nelson favoured a federal system of government where each province had its own administration but was allied to a national administration as well. Voting required a property qualification and was, of course, for males only.

Two years later, the provincial system was introduced and Nelson became one of six provinces. In 1853, the first Provincial Council was elected. It held its first meeting in the local courthouse. In his opening address, the Superintendent, Edward Stafford, commented that "the absence of any sufficient council chamber and offices necessarily connected with it will require that you make provision for these objects".

By 1858, a local newspaper, *The Examiner*, was asking why the Provincial Government was lagging behind the Masonic Lodge and the churches in providing itself with suitable accommodation. Later in 1858, a competition with a £25 prize was announced for the best design for a Provincial Council building. Maxwell Bury happened to be in Nelson at the time working on extensions for Christ Church — the original church on Church Hill. Bury submitted an elaborate design to be built of wood. It was Jacobean in style, based upon the architecture of English



country homes, and sported elaborate towers and gables. Bury's design won the competition and planning went ahead.

Significantly, the site chosen for Bury's building was the very site where, nearly nine years before, the fledgling community had met in December 1850 to assert its political rights. The land had been given to the Superintendent of Nelson Province by Crown Grant in 1856.

The foundation stone of the Provincial Council Buildings was laid on 26 August 1859 by Ferdinand von Hochstetter, who was touring the province at the time on a geological survey. Set in the stone was a bottle containing items from the province in 1859. Retrieved 110 years later, it contained a newspaper, a piece of Pakawau coal, a nugget of Aorere gold, copper ore from the

When the first European settlers arrived in 1842, the area was covered in bush and scrub, with a large swamp — a prolific source of food for the Maori who had inhabited the area for some 500 years. The Europeans called the swamp the eel pond. Social interaction between the two cultures was not exactly encouraged early on. By 1843, the area had been cleared of its bush and scrub, ostensibly to stop the local Maori from hiding there. The settlers were very concerned about their security at that time, as a result of the Wairau Incident in that year.

By the end of 1842, the meat market for the new settlement was located by the pond, as were the first Sunday and day schools, in a small wooden building at the Bridge Street end. One could be forgiven for suspecting the motives of the settlers in having the area cleared and Maori use of it curtailed — did they foresee the area was to become very significant in the history of the emerging township.

By 1844, a small brick building with a slate roof was added. This became known as Campbell's School because Matthew Campbell was the gentleman instrumental in forming the Nelson School Society, the organisation responsible for administering the school. Campbell also opened a shop and flour mill in Hardy Street by the pond. Fresh water was initially a problem, so Campbell ran a channel from the Brook Stream some 400 metres away (it came down Alton Street). Water from this mill race then discharged into the eel pond.

It wasn't until 1850 that the land gained its first connections with the political history of Nelson. Settlers in Nelson were then generally well educated and intelligent and objected to the new colony being governed from England. There was a natural desire to have a system that would better reflect the changing needs of the colony. A group calling itself "The Constitutional Society" decided to call a public meeting to discuss how the colony could be governed.

At that stage, the settlement of Nelson was only eight years old and had no building large enough to hold the number of people the Society expected to attend. As luck would have it, next to Campbell's School there was a large marquee that had been erected for the annual assembly of children attending the various schools in the district. Around 600 children had fitted into the marquee, so it was judged large enough.

The meeting took place on 27 December. Around 300 people are believed to have attended, although there was much coming and going, so some estimates have put the number at closer



*The Old Engine House, completed in 1866. It was built in a style to match the nearby Provincial Council Buildings. (Photo: Gary Holz)*



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mines on D'Urville Island, a piece of flax prepared at Mr McGlashan's flax mill in Waimea Road, two pieces of cloth from Blick and Co., coins and an 1859 Directory.

In his speech at the laying of the stone, the Superintendent announced that the area would be known from that time as Albion Square. Albion (taken from the Latin word for white — presumably referring to the cliffs at Dover) was the name given by the Romans to Britain. It was a name in common use at the time. Albion Wharf was built in 1857 opposite the present Tasman Tavern and there was also an Albion Hotel.

The Provincial Council Buildings were completed in just twenty months at a cost of £9000. Considering Nelson's population was only 5000 at the time, it was a huge cost for the small community. The Council first met in the new building in April 1861. There was no official opening.

The Provincial Buildings were, for many years, a centre for a wide range of activities, from balls, concerts and bazaars to meetings, classes, examinations *and* poultry shows. It really was the centre of the community, set in what were to become magnificent grounds. The grounds were given status of their own when, in 1887, a city councillor, Francis Trask, expressed a wish that some of the reserve be converted into a lovely garden for the pleasure and delight of the citizens of Nelson. Because it was the year of Queen Victoria's jubilee, the area was to be known as Queens Gardens. The swamp was drained and the lake formed, opening the way for the gardens we know today.

Unfortunately, the twentieth century has not been so kind to Albion Square. With the end of the provincial government system in 1876, the Provincial Buildings became government offices. One hundred years after the foundation stone had been laid, the building, then known as Government Buildings, was still in use as offices. But it was literally falling down round its occupants. Doors would not close and joists were so rotten they crumbled at a touch. It was not unusual for clerks in the Lands and Survey Department to arrive in the morning to find their desks awash with rainwater which had come through the tiled roof. A door on the Magistrate's Court had a telling cautionary sign — 'Do Not Slam'. No doubt an unscheduled demolition could result.

In 1966, the Ministry of Works and Development proposed demolishing the old building to build a new courthouse. There was considerable opposition to this and efforts were made to save

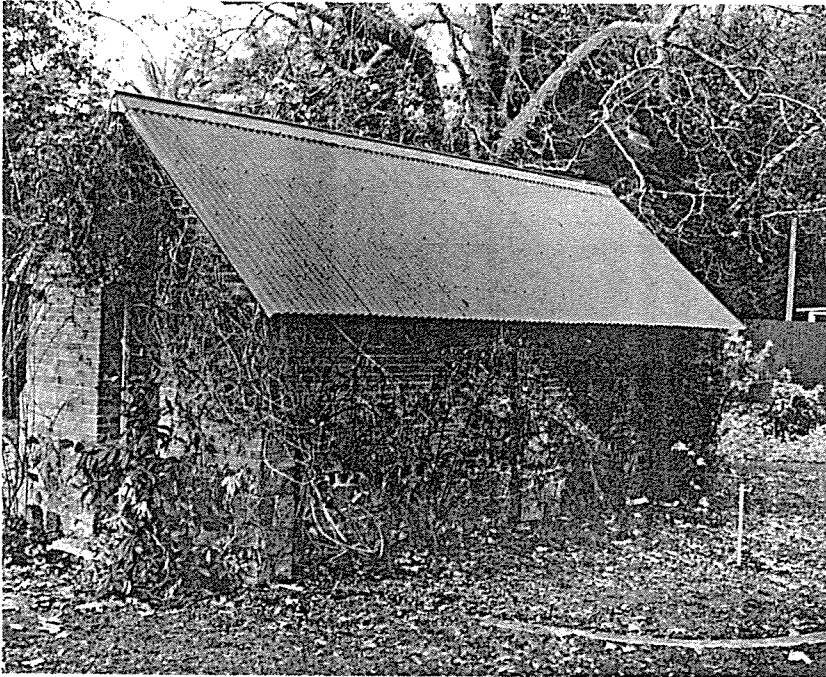
the building. Because of its severely dilapidated state, the cost to strengthen and renovate it would have been substantial.

Even so, though tenders had been called in 1968, the Ministry of Works and Development delayed demolition to see if Nelson could come up with a feasible retention plan. In 1969, the Government offered the building to the Nelson City Council together with a grant of \$60,000 for renovations. The Council was to be responsible for future upkeep. Previous councils had been in favour of preservation, but the new Council considered the grant far short of the actual cost of restoration, meaning the burden would fall on city ratepayers. The offer was turned down.

In September 1969 the bulldozers moved in and the building was razed. Albion Square's most familiar landmark was gone. But the Square did have other buildings. Though none were so impressive as the Provincial Buildings, some were important and some still exist today.

Probably dating from around 1861 is an old brick building that was used as a magazine (storage for explosive materials). Up till then such goods were stored on the Boulder Bank. Still standing also is the Old Engine House (housing a fire engine). Completed in 1866, it cost more than the £100 allocated. Designed by Henry Handyside, to match the nearby Provincial Buildings, it was used as a fire station for only a short time. Perhaps its best claim to fame is its association with the Maungatapu murders, 1866. The bodies of the victims were stored there until they could be buried.

The old Hardy Street Girls' School still stands, with a new coat of paint. Built in the 1860s as a contemporary of the Provincial Buildings, it was used as a girls-only school when a larger school was built. Overcrowding seems to have been a constant problem. In 1869 there were some ninety children in the infant school. By 1875 there were 147 in the preparatory department and only two teachers. Obviously more teachers and additional classrooms were urgently required. A year later, the preparatory department numbers had risen to 193, with three teachers. A new school was built next to Matthew Campbell's boys' school in Bridge Street to relieve the overcrowding. After 1896, the girls' school was used by the Nelson Central Board of Education. About 1927 the Public Works Department moved in and remained tenants until relatively recently when Nelson Polytechnic took over, returning the building to educational use. The original building has been added to and renovated many times.



*Above: The old brick building, probably dating from 1861, which was first used as a magazine.*

*Below: Parts of the standard test chain of Provincial Government days survive in Albion Square. (Both photos: Gary Holz)*



Outside the old Girls' School in Hardy Street stands an iron post box — the sole working survivor of such period pieces left in Nelson. The idea of post boxes was advocated in 1863, mainly for country areas, but when the policy was put into practice, boxes were also erected in towns. Two were allocated to Nelson: one for Hardy Street near the Provincial Buildings and the other outside the then Post Office on the corner of Rutherford and Bridge Streets. The latter is now just inside the Nelson Provincial Museum's entrance to Isel Park and is not in use, but the Hardy Street box is still cleared twice a day by New Zealand Post.

Standing under the trees between the old Girls' School and the old Technical School (now also part of the Nelson Polytechnic) stands a small hexagonal building that was erected in 1867 as a fish hatchery. Built by the Nelson Acclimatisation Society (formed in 1863), the building was used for hatching trout up until 1946. It was the birth place of literally millions of trout (658,000 in 1935 alone!) that were later released into Nelson's rivers. The water came from Campbell's mill race. Initially the water supply was a problem, but even so the Society's secretary, F. Huddleston, managed to hatch some 800 brown trout in the first year. By 1877, the Acclimatisation Society considered that there had been enough fish released in the Maitai River at least to begin issuing permits for that river. A new hatchery and holding ponds were subsequently built near the eel pond and later still, around 1929, concrete ponds were built.

Remnants of a 'standard test chain' also remain on Albion Square. Surveyors' measures were subject to some very rough wear and tear in the field, so they had to check their chains (of one hundred links) against what is known as a 'standard test chain' to ensure accuracy. Nelson's five chain test base was laid in 1877 and ran across Albion Square. The easiest place to see what remains of the test chain is along the eastern side of the old Girls' School where one mark is a shaped stone with an inset metal plate. It is now nearly level with the roadway. Other remnants of the test chain are on the Bridge Street side of the Square.

There were, of course, other buildings on Albion Square which have not withstood the test of time, or of man. Matthew Campbell's school, later the School of Mines and later still part of the Suter Gallery, was finally demolished in 1979 to make way for gallery extensions. All that remains of Campbell's mill is a small waterfall in the shrubbery on the western side of Queens Gardens. The remaining mill buildings, behind the old Technical School, were demolished relatively recently.

The foundation stone of the Provincial Buildings is now in the foyer of the new Courthouse. The Courthouse, the Police Station and the Monroe State Building occupy the site of the original building.

Albion Square has been administered by the Department of Conservation in recent years. However, with the advent of state-owned enterprises the whole area has been under threat. It could have been subdivided and administered on a piecemeal basis by each department or enterprise. Moves were made during 1990 and 1991 to have the whole area designated an historic reserve so that it could be preserved as open space. In 1990, Nelson Polytechnic considered extending its buildings onto the Square, encroaching on land occupied by the fish hatchery and threatening a number of historic trees, including the 120-year-old cork oak. Fortunately, that threat was also rebuffed.

The Nelson District Committee of the Historic Places Trust has this year been in the process of erecting interpretation panels on both the Hardy and Bridge Street entrances to Albion Square to make the public more aware of this historical gem in the middle of what is now a bustling city. □

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