

The Historic Context and Heritage Values of Thorndon

by

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Pipitea and Thorndon

Thorndon has two histories; as Pipitea, a settlement of Te Ati Awa, and as a suburb in the city of Wellington. The following is an outline of the heritage value and the history of these areas since 1830.

Maori heritage

The history of Pipitea and Thorndon is a microcosm of Maori experience over the past 200 years.

Te Ati Awa heritage

Both suburbs are important areas for Te Ati Awa. The pa, kainga and cultivations have been built over and buried beneath reclamations. However knowledge of the people, events and resources has continued to exist. The possibilities for further interpretation material to be placed in the area are extensive.

In the 1840s Pipitea was part of a tribal network around the harbour. This was vital to the survival of the Wakefield colonists who were dependent on Te Ati Awa for provisions, labour and security. Contemporary images, personal writings and official documents provide a record of this period. Again the possibilities for further interpretation material to be placed in the area are extensive.

Wakefield's scheme provided for one tenth of land in the settlement to remain in Maori ownership. The Wellington Tenths Trust now administers these interests. Pipitea was reinstated as the name of eastern Thorndon in 2003. Te Ati Awa remains an active presence in the area.

Historical Background

Early accounts record that Pipitea/Thorndon was a seasonal food gathering site. By 1835, Te Matehou, a hapu of Te Ati Awa migrants from Taranaki, had permanent cultivations and four kainga in the area. Pipitea Pa was the leading settlement with its centre near present day Pipitea Marae. Ropiha Moturoa, Wi Kingi Wairarapa, Te Mangatuku and Te Rira Porutu were chiefs at Pipitea where close to 150 were living in 1840. Tiakiwai, Pakuao and Raurimu were outlying kainga occupied by small groups of families.

Te Ati Awa historians have established that cultivations existed in the vicinity of Thorndon Supermarket, Hawkestone Street, Kate Sheppard Place and Harriet Street. The area which is now Fitzherbert Terrace was a noted bird snaring site. Extensive cultivations existed on the slopes of Te Ahu Mairangi (Tinakori Hill).¹

There are some significant below surface archaeological remains present in the area. An excavation was carried out in 2008 in Pipitea Street on a site believed to be within the boundaries of Pipitea Pa. Features were discovered that clearly pre-dated the early housing and may have been related to contact period Maori gardening activities.

After initially supporting Pakeha settlement and the opportunities it brought for trade, Te Ati Awa became disillusioned. Serious misunderstanding over the New Zealand Company land purchases and the increasing pressure from settlers forced them out. After a struggle lasting 167 years their rights and interests in the area were acknowledged in the Treaty settlement of 2007. The Wellington Tenth Trust has its headquarters in Pipitea. Descendants of the Pipitea hapu are among its members and staff.

National significance for Maori

Thorndon has been a place of encounter between Maori and government since 1865. This association is a historic and contemporary feature not shared by any other location in New Zealand.

Some of the first Maori to become parliamentarians lived in Thorndon. The leading Te Ati Awa chief, Wi Tako Ngatata, is known to have lived in a house in Turnbull Street, while he was a member of the Legislative Council in the 1870s. For many years a Maori hostel, built at the instigation of Governor George Grey, stood at the top of Molesworth Street. Its purpose was to provide accommodation for Maori visiting Wellington on official business. In the 20th century Parliament Grounds were the site of historic protests over land.

In the mid 20th century Pipitea and Thorndon were part of the national experience of Maori as urban migrants. In the early 1940s Ngati Poneke was established on Thorndon Quay as a meeting place for young Maori working in Wellington. It continues to operate, now from Pipitea Marae, as a cultural and social centre.

¹ Neville Gilmore and Liz Mellish, Cultural report on Lambton Harbour, Wellington, 199? .

Pendennis, in the house built for 19th century merchant W. H. Levin in Grant Road, has been home to generations of young Maori women moving to Wellington for work and education.

The Maori Women's Welfare League, formed in 1951 to promote Maori interests, has national headquarters in Burnell Avenue.

Thorndon heritage

Thorndon, part of the first Pakeha settlement in Wellington, has followed the pattern of development, decline and gentrification common to inner city suburbs. It does, however, have some marked unique features.

Thorndon is one of New Zealand's oldest residential suburbs. As part of the first planned settlement in New Zealand, many of its colonists were the New Zealand Company elite.² They were progressive individuals and families with some means.

As a result Thorndon became the official centre of Wellington and since 1865 has been the site of Parliament. This has led to many notable New Zealanders living and working in the area and to events of national significance taking place within its boundaries.

Parts of Thorndon, because of steep terrain, have architecture and street scapes not found in other parts of New Zealand. The social divisions the 19th century can be seen in the workers' cottages on the slopes in the south and the large villas on the flat land to the north. This division, and the materials, design and scale of the surviving houses and buildings, give an immediate insight into how our forebears lived and worked. The buildings provide diverse examples of architectural style and the work of individual architects.

They also enhance the collections of the cultural and official institutions in the area. The history of Pipitea and Thorndon has been documented in images, publications and manuscripts held in the National Library, Alexander Turnbull Library, Archives New Zealand and the Parliamentary Library. The proximity of these institutions to the surviving housing and streetscapes provides an opportunity unique in New Zealand for researchers and the general public to get a comprehensive view of the early history of the area.

²William Wakefield, leader of the colonists, established his residence on the present site of Parliament. George Samuel Evans, unofficial judge, lived in Hill St, William Mein Smith, chief surveyor, lived in Tinakori Rd.

In many cases these collections include the work of artists, writers, musicians and photographers who have been residents of Thorndon. A significant number of their homes still exist.³

From first settlement Thorndon had schools and churches. These developed with the city and are now major institutions. In conjunction with the residential areas of the suburb, and the surviving public houses and commercial buildings, they give insight into how Thorndon and the city have functioned as a community.⁴

Respect for the past is an intrinsic value for many people. The survival of historic Thorndon embodies this and provides an environment both visitors and residents find congenial.

Parts of Thorndon are visible from the city and the motorway. With Te Ahu Mairangi/Tinakori Hill as a back drop these views have considerable aesthetic value.

The position of Thorndon close to the city, railway station and motorway make its heritage sites accessible.

Since the early 1970s the suburb has seen community initiatives which have rejuvenated historic Thorndon and set a precedent for other similar areas in New Zealand.

Thorndon historical background

The origins of Thorndon lie in two movements in early 19th century Britain. One motivated by the humanitarian belief that it was possible to reform society and the other by the desire to create wealth through colonisation of what was considered to be unoccupied land in the new world. Edward Gibbon Wakefield was a forceful and charismatic advocate of these ideas. He believed that colonisation should be systematic. Settlers should represent a cross section of respectable British society including land owners, farm labourers, professionals and tradesmen. Control of the price of land would maintain this order and fund development. From 1829 he promoted schemes for colonisation in Canada, Australia and New Zealand.⁵

³ E.g. Rita Angus, Evelyn and Frederick Page, Douglas Lilburn, Janet Paul, Jane Stowe.

⁴ Schools and churches; Queen Margaret College, Wellington Girls' College, St Mary's College, Thorndon School, Cathedral of the Sacred Heart. Wellington Cathedra of St Paul, Old St Pauls. Other buildings: Thistle Inn, former fire station, shops in Tinakori Rd.

⁵ This period of his work is outlined in The Dictionary of New Zealand Biography, vol I, 1990, p.572-573.

Under his influence the New Zealand Company was formed in 1839 and Port Nicholson was chosen as the first site for settlement. The directors and investors included notable politicians, aristocrats and merchants many holding radical and liberal views. The Wakefield family were well represented among the company's officials.⁶ The most prominent was William, principal agent. Edward Gibbon did not arrive in Thorndon until 1853.⁷

From March 1840 settlers were surveying and building in Thorndon (named for the country seat of a director of the company). The land was divided into one acre sections which remain the basis of subdivision in the suburb. Early colonists included; men with international backgrounds such as Samuel Revans, a journalist who had worked in Canada and merchants such as Nathaniel Levin, founder of Levin and Company.

Also present in the settlement were several men who had come to New Zealand early in the 19th century. Married into leading Te Ati Awa families they were an important link between Maori and settlers in land negotiations and supplying the early settlement.⁸

By 1850 the company had failed as a commercial enterprise but many immigrants had survived and prospered. Over the next 50 years these settlers and their children were prominent among those who turned Thorndon from a beach settlement into a thriving suburb.

Until the move of Parliament to Wellington in 1865 Thorndon's development was sluggish. However, a dramatic change took place in New Zealand when in 1870s Premier Julius Vogel initiated a vigorous program of sponsored immigration and public works. Thorndon became the terminus for two important railway lines. Town acres were subdivided to build housing for immigrants and railway workers.

At this point the pattern of smaller dwellings clustered at the south of the suburb and large in the north began to emerge. The growth of pastoral farming, improved transport and the invention of refrigeration led to a surge in prosperity by the turn of the century. Successful merchant and farming families built substantial homes designed by leading

⁶ Edward Jerningham, son of Edward Gibbon, was secretary to William. Brothers Arthur and Daniel held official posts.

⁷ By this time the company had failed and William was dead. Edward Gibbon lived in a house near present day Premier House. Initially he was a disruptive force in politics but spent the last seven years of his life as an invalid recluse.

⁸ They included proprietor of Barrett's Hotel, Dickie Barrett, marr. Wakaiwa Rawinia, fisherman and harbour pilot ,Worser Heberley, marr. Te Wai aka Mata Te Naihi. These women were of high status with connections to Pipitea

architects.⁹ From 1890 to the 1920s, the suburb was considered the heart of Wellington – its social, political, professional and commercial nucleus.

Many of the houses in Thorndon have been occupied by notable writers, painters, musicians, scholars, scientists, politicians, public servants and others. The writer, Celia Manson, referred to Thorndon as “a nest of singing birds”.¹⁰

By the mid 20th century the area had declined from Edwardian prosperity to inner city slum.¹¹ Improved transport and Government housing policies were among the factors which encouraged a move to outer suburbs. Thorndon became an area of cheap accommodation and many large homes became hostels and boarding houses. In 1961 it was chosen as the route for the Wellington Urban motorway. The resulting destruction of large areas of the Bolton Street Cemetery and some 400 houses led to awareness of the value of material heritage.¹² The Thorndon Society and Thorndon Trust were formed in the early 1970s to preserve and protect this heritage.

World events came to the rescue of Thorndon when the oil shocks of the 1970s made inner city suburbs sought after locations again. By 1976 the work of the Thorndon Society had led to an area of Thorndon being zoned to protect the area’s special heritage character.¹³

⁹ Among them Thomas Turnbull, Frederick de Jersey Clere and Robert Chapman Taylor.

¹⁰ Celia Manson, Widow of Thorndon Quay, 1981, p.245. Noted civil servants whose homes still exist included Thomas Ronayne, head of Railways, George Hogben Inspector General of Schools. Stevenson Percy Smith, Surveyor General and ethnologist, lived for a time in Premier House.

¹¹ Wellington’s disgrace: in the shadow of the slums: a civic responsibility, Wellington Housing and Accomodation Committee, Wellington, 1943.

¹² Black, Jane et al, Thorndon Housing Project, unpub, Wellington City council, p.33

¹³ This discourages demolition, provides for a three story height limit and restricts new exterior material to timber and corrugated iron.

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