

The Nelson Provincial Museum Pupuri Taonga o Te Tai Ao

Nelson's regional museum, the oldest museum in New Zealand, has seen many changes of name, governance and location in its long history. Today the Nelson Provincial Museum has two venues: exhibitions and educational programmes are based at the Town Acre 445 site in Nelson's CBD; the collection and research resources are held at the museum's Isel Park Research Facility in Stoke and includes many objects donated to the museum at the time the museum was established in 1841.

From the Bay of Biscay to TA445

*The Literary and Scientific Institution of Nelson (the Institute) was founded in May 1841. In the Bay of Biscay officers of the Preliminary Expedition of the Second Colony, formed a committee on board the New Zealand Company ships *Whitby* and *Will-Watch*. Before the expedition reached Tenerife, a sum of money was subscribed from amongst the officers. This was transmitted back to England with directions for the selection of a number of books "of a useful character", which would form the basis of the library of the Institution.*

While a large number of books were collected by friends and associates of the colony and the colonists, the committee noted that "they would be glad to receive maps, charts, manuscripts, drawings, paintings, engravings, sculptures, casts, models of inventions and objects of natural history generally. These will be placed in the Museum of the Institution, and a record will be kept of the names of the donors."

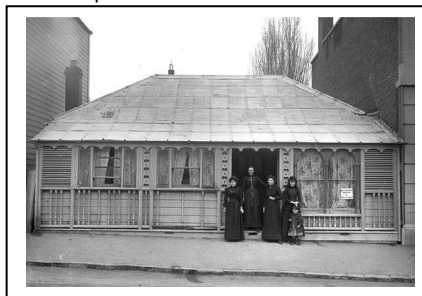


FIGURE 1. Miss Cooper, Dressmaker, and outside the former Institute building in Trafalgar Street, Nelson, c1891. Maguire Collection: 46829/4.

Late in 1842, *The Literary and Scientific Institution of Nelson* opened on part of Town Acre 445 on Trafalgar Street (Figure 1). The Institute opened first as a library (with an attached museum storehouse) and subsequently incorporated the museum. By 1844 there was already a public membership of sixty.

In 1861 the Institute, which had outgrown its Trafalgar Street premises, relocated to a grand purpose-built wooden building in Hardy Street. For the next forty-five years, until a fire in 1906, the building served as the repository for many of the region's treasures. The museum's collection was rescued from the fire that destroyed the library but many of the records were lost. In 1912 the Hon Francis Dillon Bell opened the third home of the Institute, a brick building on Hardy Street. This building still stands today, used by the Nelson Marlborough Institute of Technology for their School of Fisheries.

The two facilities of the Institute were separated in the mid-1960s; the public library came under the direct control of Nelson City Council and the museum under the administrative control of the newly-formed Nelson Provincial Museum Trust Board. The museum, with its own library and archives, relocated from Hardy Street to a purpose built building, designed by leading Nelson architect Alex Bowman, in Isel Park, Stoke, alongside the historic Isel House, once owned by the Marsden family. Isel House still stands today. The Isel Park building housed exhibition spaces showcasing both permanent and travelling exhibitions and the museum's permanent

collection of objects, the library and archives, and photographic collections.

One Museum Two Venues

During 2001 Tasman Bays Heritage Trust was setup and through the support and commitment of Nelson City and Tasman District Councils, purchased the former Hotel Nelson site on the corner of Hardy and Trafalgar Streets. This historic site is part of the original Town Acre 445. In October 2005 the museum's exhibition and education centre, TA445 (Figure 2), opened providing the region's community with the opportunity to learn more about themselves, and visitors to New Zealand are able to discover how the region has played a major role in shaping and defining New Zealand's history. The museum's collection of objects, photographs, and library and archive material, remain in Stoke at the Isel Park Research Facility (Figure 3).



FIGURE 2. TA445, cnr Trafalgar and Hardy Streets, Nelson.



FIGURE 3. Nelson Provincial Museum's Research Facility, Isel Park, Stoke.

Isel Park Research Facility

The museum cares for a large, diverse and fascinating collection of natural and social history objects. The museum's accession registers include: General Collection, Art Collection, Photographic Collection, Library and Archives Collection and Loan Collections. The collection is significant regionally and nationally and is a valuable resource of information for research and education, a record of the region's rich cultural identity. Researchers such as family, local, national and international historians, tertiary and secondary school students and professional researchers, make use of the museum's collections.

General Collection

Areas of particular strength in the General Collection are: Maori taonga and artefacts; domestic items including costumes, toys, china, furniture, glass and silver, paintings, ceramics; medals and coins; textiles from the colonial period through to contemporary items. Most objects have links with the history of the Nelson / Tasman region and reflect aspects of its past, or have been donated by residents of the region. The museum's collection policy focuses on items with a strong connection to the region or reflects aspects of the region's natural history or social life.

Art Collection

Many of the artists represented in the Art Collection lived and worked in the Nelson region. Subjects include botanical illustrations, views of Nelson City dating from the 1850s, landscapes of the Nelson-Tasman region, and portraits. The museum also holds the Marsden paintings collection of mainly mid-Victorian landscape oil paintings.

Library and Archives Collection

The Library and Archives material was historically collected by *The Literary and Scientific Institution of Nelson*, Dr F A Bett, and Nelson Historical Society's Records

Committee members, who actively collected archives and publications. The core collections are the Bett and Marsden collections.

The Bett collection forms the heart of the extensive and growing historical library and archives. Dr Francis Arnot Blackader Bett (1873-1957) was a passionate collector. Aside from running a busy medical practice, he devoted a lifetime to collecting books, photographs, maps, documents, sketches and paintings relating to the Nelson province. Dr Bett was nationally recognised as an important authority on our region.

The Marsden collection is a rare and beautiful collection of eighteenth and nineteenth century antique furniture, paintings, books, plate and glassware held by the museum. The collection was inherited by James and Frances Marsden in 1904. The Marsdens ran a large farm in Stoke, Nelson. Their homestead Isel Cottage, known now as Isel House, and Isel Park are a remnant of their farm.

The Marsden book collection contains publications on early New Zealand history, natural history and the discovery and exploration of Australia and the Pacific. The unique book collection dates from 1773 to the early 1920s and relates to the natural history, discovery and exploration of the Pacific.

The Library and Archives holds a range of material including publications and archival collections. The main focus is the Nelson / Tasman region, but some relate to early Marlborough and the West Coast. The collection's strength is in the period 1841 to 1920.

The range of published resources available includes electoral rolls, directories, family announcements and shipping intelligence from the local newspapers, church and school jubilee histories, Nelson Provincial Government publications, plans, newspaper

collections, and family histories. There are also books on a range of other subjects including New Zealand history, Maori history, birds, botany, machinery, exploration, biography, photography and clothing, to name a few.

The archival collection (Figure 4) includes: personal papers, letters and diaries of local people describing voyages to Nelson and aspects of life in the Nelson region, the earliest dating from the 1840s; records of organisations, clubs and societies including sports clubs; business records of local firms; records from the Nelson Education Board, including school admission registers and minute books; deeds for sale and purchase of land in the region, the majority dating from 1850s to 1920s; unpublished ephemera, such as tickets and invitations; research papers and theses; manuscript maps and architectural drawings; and an oral history collection, including interviews with local residents and researchers on a range of topics.



FIGURE 4. Archives storeroom, Isel Park Research Facility, Stoke.

The Photographic Collection
The Nelson Provincial Museum's Photographic Collection is a nationally significant collection, an extensive record of the region's social history, and New Zealand's development, spanning the entire period from the 1860s to the present day. The collection is a unique and detailed continuous pictorial documentation of the region. The collection is the focus for many

undertaking family research, provides authors and researchers a source for illustrating text, and is used extensively in exhibitions and education programs. The collection includes major studio and journalist collections as well as small collections of professional and amateur photographs, albums and single images. A range of media is represented in the collection from daguerreotypes and opals to glass plate negatives, lantern slides and modern transparencies (Figure 5).



FIGURE 5. Glass plate negative collection, Isel Park Research Facility, Stoke.

The museum is best known for the Tyree Studio Collection (Figure 6). The collection of approximately 105,000 images of studio portraits, civic occasions and scenic views spans the years 1882 to 1947. This collection has been in the care of the museum since 1974.

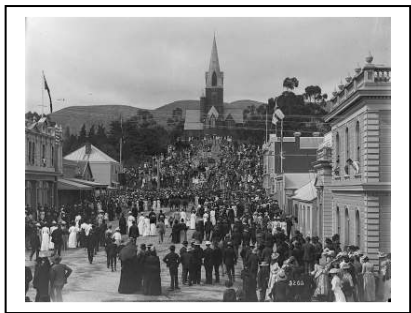


FIGURE 6. Trafalgar Street, Nelson during Queen Victoria's Jubilee celebrations, 1887. Tyree Studio Collection: 181975_3

There are many important collections held within the museum's photographic collection making up the approximate 1.5 million images in total. Some of the notable photographers and collections are: Alexander Fletcher (1837-1914), William Henry Davis (1837-1875), William Edmond Brown (c1840-1922), Theodor Thorlacius Bloch (1844-1935), Reg and Hugh Kingsford, Henry Brusewitz (1855-1922), FN Jones (1881-1962), Ellis Dudgeon (1905-1979), Geoffrey C Wood (1921-1974), Peter Cooper (1922-2006), Barry Simpson (b1926), and The Nelson Mail Collection.

Collection Care and Access

Part of the museums role is the preservation of the collections in its care for present and future generations, and providing access to the collections for researchers. The collection is also the basis of the museum's own exhibition and education programs.

Museum staff are trained in, and practice, preventive conservation. This focuses on the control of the four major threats to the long life of collection objects: the environment (temperature, humidity, light); pests; handling; transportation. The surroundings at both sites, TA445 and the Research Facility, are continually monitored to ensure objects are displayed and stored in an optimum environment. Large fluctuations in temperature and humidity are avoided to prevent expansion and contraction of organic materials and the damage that may result. Humidity control is also important to stop mould from flourishing. To prevent fading, cracking and drying of fragile organic materials such as textiles, artworks on paper and archival documents, light exposure is limited. Light is restricted for objects in storage, and those on display are exhibited under controlled light conditions and for limited periods of time. Non-toxic methods of pest control, such as freezing at very low temperatures, are used.

Correct storage and handling techniques are important aspects of the preventive conservation programme carried out by Collections Services staff on a daily basis. Visitors to the museum, and Research Facility in particular, will view and be educated in many facets of best practice. Due to the nature of many of the collection objects access to them by the public is restricted and supervised.

The range of material held by the museum necessitates specialised storage areas, and storage systems, to prolong the life of the objects. Examples are: the collection of acetate, nitrate and colour negatives is stored in a purpose built cool store where temperature and humidity are strictly monitored (Figure 7); in store rooms containing paper based objects light levels are controlled. Objects are stored in acid-free enclosures and boxes where possible, and appropriate. In the collection store rooms objects are housed on metal shelving, much of it compacting, and in metal cabinets.



FIGURE 7. Photographic negative cool store, Ise! Park Research Facility, Stoke.

The first point of access to the museum's collection is its collection management system, an electronic database. The museum installed Vernon CMS last year transferring object data from previous systems. Objects accessioned into the museum's permanent collection, or coming in on loan to the museum, go through a lengthy process: objects are first receipted,

donors acknowledged and provenance noted; objects are allocated a unique registration/accession number; then photographed, measured and condition reported; objects are then packaged and placed in storage; the location of the object in storage is then recorded; all object data is recorded electronically (Figure 8).



FIGURE 8. Processing collection objects, Ise! Park Research Facility, Stoke.

Digitization Project

Due to preservation and space constraints, the majority of the collection remains in storage with limited access by the public. To improve access to these precious items the museum has embarked on a digitisation and digital cataloguing program ensuring their continued preservation for future generations. As part of the digitisation process, objects from across all collections will be fully catalogued including images, and made available on-line, enhancing their accessibility.

Collections Online

The museum's new online public access catalogue, *Collections Online*, went live earlier this year. The online catalogue allows searches over some of the many collections held by the museum. Currently a small percentage of the collection is available online but as the digitisation project gathers momentum this catalogue will grow.

To access the catalogue visit the museum's website at:

<http://www.nelsonmuseum.co.nz>

Conclusion

The Nelson Provincial Museum has one of the most important collections representing New Zealand's early colonial history. The museum is well known for its photographic collection which has been described as one of the most important and nationally significant collections in the country. However the extensive library, archive and general collection are probably less well known yet contain some of the oldest objects from New Zealand's colonial past.

In some areas of museum practice little has changed since 1842, a record of the "names of the donors" is still kept. However the emphasis of museum collecting has moved away from solely just the object to now include the object's provenance. Staff at the museum are committed to the development and research of these objects in the collections, and providing access to them, which will inevitably unearth many of the stories of the region's settlement. Researchers using the museum's collections play an important part in this role also. This process of discovery was successfully illustrated by the museum's award winning exhibition *Unpicking the Past – revealing our dress collection* (Figure 9).



FIGURE 9. Remnants of Past Life section, Unpicking the Past, Nelson Provincial Museum 2008.

Based on extensive research undertaken for a Master's thesis, *Unpicking the Past* told the stories of settler women and the clothes they wore interconnecting the objects, archives and photographs with the people who owned or featured in them. Prior to the research the objects, archives and photographs were lifeless entities lost to history. *Unpicking the Past* brought them to life by placing them in a cultural context, giving us an insight into the lives of some of the first European migrants to our shores.

Author

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Further Information

If you would like to know more about the Nelson Provincial Museum and its collections, inquire about reproductions from the photographic collection or undertake research, please contact the museum as follows, or visit the museum's website for more information.

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References:

The Nelson Provincial Museum. 2007. [Our Museum History](http://www.nelsonmuseum.co.nz/about/history.htm). Online. Accessed: 27.10.2009.