

## The Gables Colonial Hospital – The Brooklands era

Ron Lambert  
Senior Researcher Puke Ariki



One of New Zealand's most historic buildings now graces Brooklands Park. The only survivor of Sir George Grey's four colonial hospitals - the others were at Auckland, Whanganui and Wellington - The Gables Colonial Hospital is a fitting monument to our early medical heritage.

In February 1903, W. H. Skinner, on behalf of the Scenery Preservation Society, initiated a meeting "of all those interested in the preservation of the Old Colonial Hospital" which was to be disposed of "... to make room for a snug, up-to-date structure of vile taste and indifferent workmanship" (*Taranaki Herald* 20/2/1903). An article by Skinner captioned "The

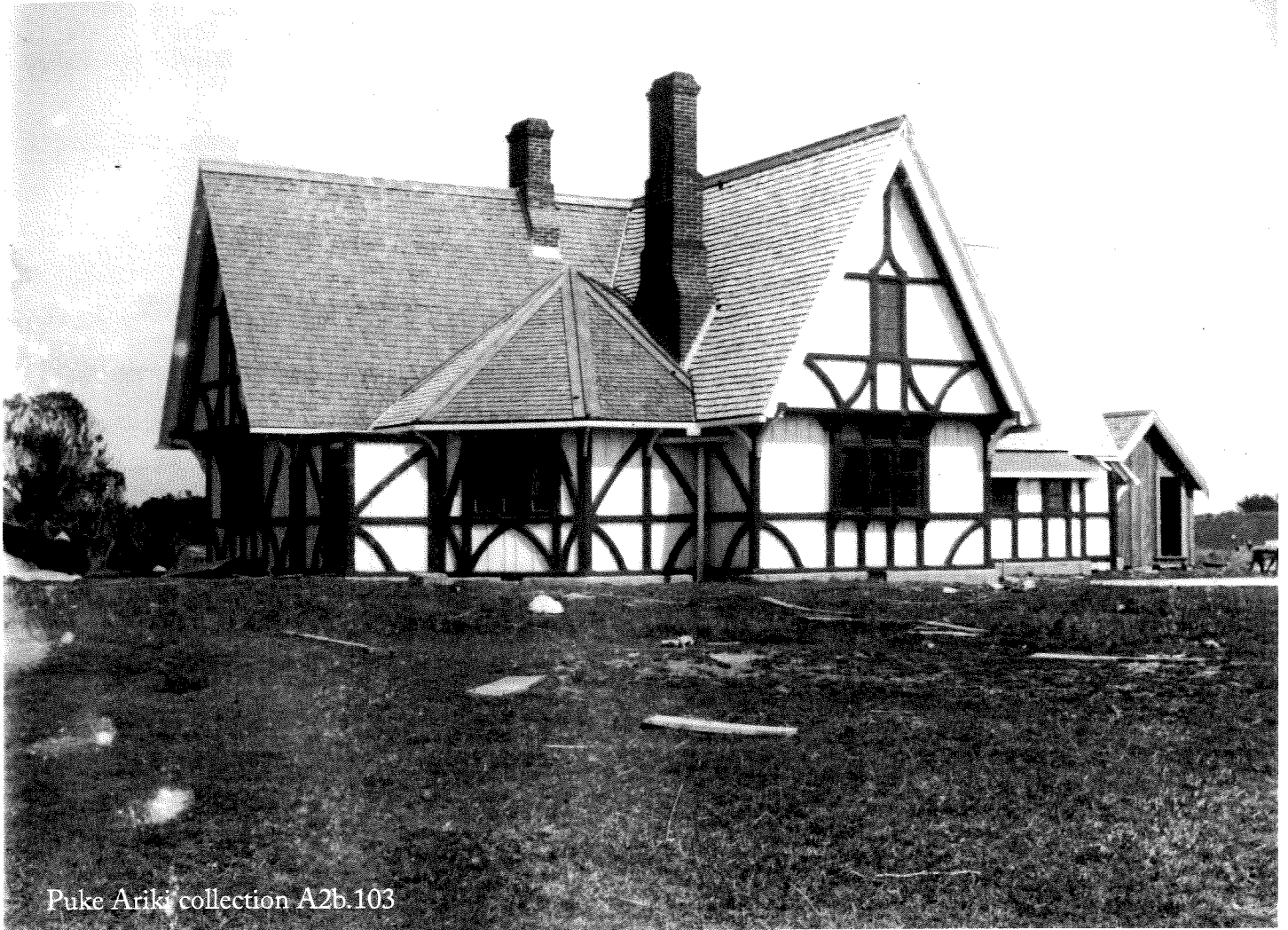
Disappearance of an Old and Picturesque Landmark" was published in the *Taranaki Herald* on 21 July 1904 - "On Saturday last the old colonial hospital was submitted to public auction "to be removed within fourteen days." A well-known "house breaker" secured, it is said, a bargain, and in a few days the familiar old building will have passed away to make room for a more spick and span, smug, up-to-date villa!" Skinner then goes on to briefly outline the establishment of the hospital which was erected in 1848 on Mangorei (then Hospital) Road, now the site of the New Plymouth Girls' High School. He concludes his somewhat sardonic article - "One could go on reminiscing about the old place, but its doom has been pronounced by a progressive Council, and councillors of all shades of opinion were agreed that it should disappear as it had become an eyesore (?) to the neighbourhood".

That could have been the last we heard of New Plymouth's Colonial Hospital, but the editor of the *Taranaki Herald*, in a footnote to Skinner's article, was able to report a development - "We are sure that many of our readers will be pleased to learn that the building is after all to be preserved, a well-known local gentleman having, we understand, purchased it for removal to his property...". That "well-known local gentleman" was, of course, Newton King, who is reported to have bought the building for £10 at the behest of his wife, Mary, who was the daughter of the highly-respected local doctor, George St. George. Nothing is known of the manner in which the building, whole or in sections, was transported to Brooklands and re-constructed, but it must have been an impressive and costly process, completed with an almost unbelievable focus on maintaining its integrity.

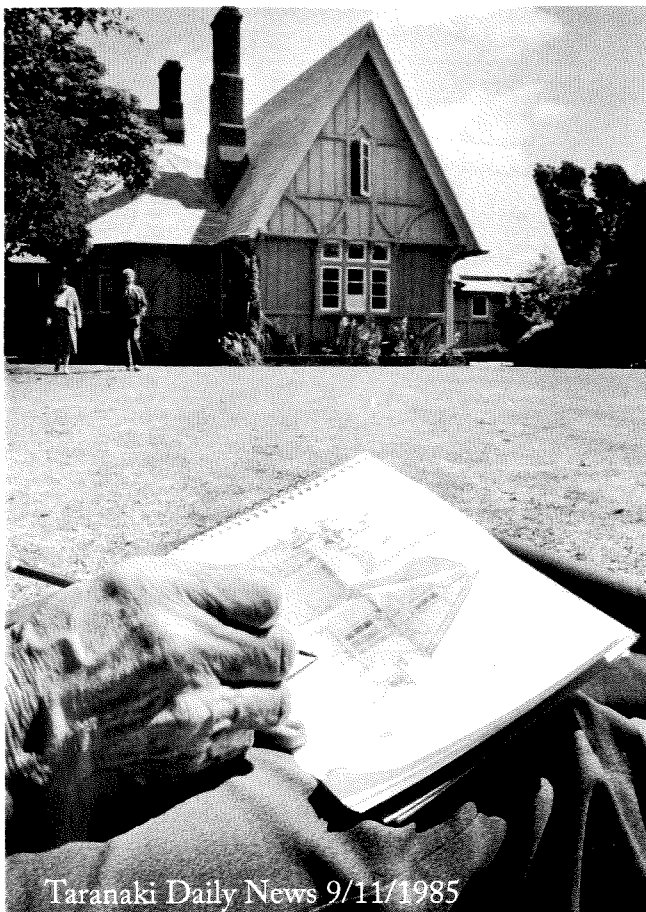
The Gables, as the building then became known, was used by several members of Newton King's family as a temporary residence. Newly-weds, Eliot and Dorothy King and son-in-law Sydney Allen and his family - including grandsons Peter and Chalmers Allen both of whom became well-known local doctors - all lived in The Gables at various times. Adrienne Tatham, Eliot's daughter, recalls that her mother was terrified of the "black beetles" (native cockroaches) that used to fall from the ceiling while she was living in the house after World War I. In 1934, the building was transferred, as part of the Brooklands estate, to the New Plymouth Borough Council. It appears to have subsequently been rented out as private accommodation.

Michael and Elizabeth Smither lived in The Gables from 1964 until 1969 after which the family moved to Otago for a few years. Many of Michael's classic early family paintings were completed during The Gables years and show identifiable parts of the building. The Gables became the residence for New Plymouth's Public Relations Officers - Patrick Connell from 1969 and, subsequently, from 1975 to 1982-1983, Bryce McPherson. Part of their lease agreements required them to open a small section of The Gables to the public on a few days each year.

It was at that stage that the New Plymouth Borough Council, in association with the Taranaki Branch of the Historic Places Trust and Dr Peter Wilson's biographer, Gail Lambert, embarked on an extensive restoration of the building. After the removal of many years of interior accretions, re-shingling of the roof, installation of fire and security systems and painting, the restored building was leased to the Taranaki Society of Arts as a gallery which



Puke Ariki collection A2b.103



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opened in November 1985. One aspect of the restoration that proved somewhat controversial was the abandoning of the “Elizabethan” colour scheme that the Kings adopted for the building. Before that, photographs show the building had been unpainted, or possibly oiled. The grey scheme adopted was designed to re-create that original unpainted appearance.

With an “A” classification from the New Zealand Historic Places Trust, and a “Category 1” listing with the New Plymouth District Council, The Gables Colonial Hospital is now acknowledged as one of Taranaki’s major heritage buildings. Its survival is due, initially, to one woman’s close association with New Plymouth’s pioneer medical fraternity and to her husband’s ability to achieve marvels.

The photographs that accompany this article are of The Gables in its newly applied “Elizabethan” finery soon after its re-erection at Brooklands (Newton King Glass Plate Collection, c 1904, A2b.103, Puke Ariki), and of Harry Fryer, President of the Taranaki Society of Arts, sketching The Gables which is reproduced, with permission, from the *Taranaki Daily News* of 9/11/1985.