

## Heritage Buildings Report

**Site ID**

**Building/Site Name**

Rennell's Villa

**Address**

46 Vivian Street, New Plymouth



### Statement of Significance

This villa was one of two near identical houses constructed on this section for Clarence Rennell in early 1901; of which this is the only survivor. Clarence Rennell was a prominent local businessman who had this house constructed as a rental property during a period of significant speculative building activity driven by a severe local housing shortage during the late 1890s and early 1900s. The house was designed by noted New Plymouth architect Frank Messenger, who contributed significantly to the built environment of New Plymouth during his long and distinguished career. An excellent example of an early twentieth century double-bay villa incorporating some interesting architectural elements such as factory bay windows and lean-to parapet walls, this building is notable for its high degree of external integrity, with the principal elevations remaining much as they were when first constructed. Located in a prominent inner-city position at the intersection of Robe Street and the busy Vivian Street/SH45, this building makes a strong positive contribution to the local streetscape. It is also one of a number of interesting older buildings which contribute to the historic character of the area surrounding St Mary's Cathedral.



# Heritage Buildings Report

## Legal Information and Heritage Status

**Legal Description** PT Section 709 Town of New Plymouth

**District Plan Item/ Map No.**

**Heritage New Zealand List** Not listed

## Construction Information

**Date of Construction** 1901

**Principal Materials** Wooden framing, weatherboard, corrugated steel

**Construction Professionals** Frank Messenger (architect)

## History

The eastern portion of Town Section 709 was purchased by New Plymouth businessman Clarence Rennell during June 1899.<sup>1</sup> Born in London during 1832, Clarence Rennell emigrated to Victoria, Australia, during the gold rush of the 1850s, before later settling in New Zealand.<sup>2</sup> One of New Plymouth's foremost nineteenth century businessmen, he was one of the founders of the New Plymouth Investment and Loan Society and the New Plymouth Gas Company; holding the position of secretary to each of them for 31 and 29 years, respectively.<sup>3</sup> Clarence was also secretary to the New Plymouth Harbour Board for 25 years, and secretary to the Trustees of St Mary's Church for 30 years.<sup>4</sup>

Following his purchase of part Town Section 709, it seems the vacant property was initially used for grazing purposes. However, vandalism of the site appears to have been an issue, as during March 1900 Rennell offered a £1 reward for information leading to the person(s) destroying the fence on his section at the corner of Vivian and Robe Streets.<sup>5</sup> It was during late-1900 that Rennell commissioned noted New Plymouth architect Frank Messenger to design two villas for the property, with Messenger calling for tenders for construction of two 'cottages' in Vivian Street during December 1900.<sup>6</sup>

Architect Francis (Frank) John Messenger was born on 4 July 1865, the second son of William and Arabella, he would later become one of New Plymouth's most influential architects. Frank was educated in New Plymouth, and trained with local architect Henry J. T Edmonds, before moving to Melbourne, where he worked for Oakden and Kemp for ten years.<sup>7</sup> In 1891, Messenger married his second cousin Lucy Messenger, before returning to New Plymouth in 1893; he commenced practice in New Plymouth the following year.<sup>8</sup> Frank Messenger and Horace Victor Griffiths entered into partnership in 1917, with William Taylor joining in 1920.<sup>9</sup> This partnership ceased in 1930, with Messenger and Taylor forming a new partnership; Leonard Wolfe later joined in a partnership that

<sup>1</sup> Taranaki Land Deed Indexes (23516), c.1858 - c.1928, Archives New Zealand

<sup>2</sup> *Taranaki Daily News*, 29 December 1906, page 2

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> *Taranaki Herald*, 14 March 1900, page 3

<sup>6</sup> *Taranaki Herald*, 1 December 1900, page 3

<sup>7</sup> Pritchard, Ian. (1994). *Frank Messenger, Architect: The work of a New Plymouth architect*. New Plymouth: Ian Pritchard.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

## Heritage Buildings Report

would last up until Messenger's death on 11 October 1945.<sup>10</sup> Throughout his long career Messenger designed residential and commercial buildings in a variety of styles and made a significant contribution to New Plymouth's built environment.

Rennell's two Vivian Street houses are associated with a speculative boom driven by a severe housing shortage in New Plymouth during the late 1890s and early 1900s. At this time, wealthier citizens had groups of cottages constructed for the purpose of being either rented out, or less frequently, on-sold. The pair of cottages constructed for Rennell are somewhat unusual in being architecturally designed and rather more elaborate than other speculative builds of the time, which were generally constructed following simpler pattern book plans.

The new buildings don't appear to have been finished until after the start of the 1901-02 rating period on the 1<sup>st</sup> of April 1901, with the property still without buildings and valued at just £8 for the 1901-02 rating year.<sup>11</sup> However, by the 1902-03 rating year, two houses are noted as being present on the property and the rateable value increased to £60.<sup>12</sup> The houses were almost certainly complete by June 1901, when Rennell advertised to let "two newly-erected six-roomed cottages, corner of Robe and Vivian streets".<sup>13</sup>

Clarence Rennell passed away on the 28<sup>th</sup> of December 1906 aged 75 years, with his two sons, Clarence Sydney Rennell and Cuthbert Ernest Rennell, appointed trustees of his deceased estate.<sup>14</sup> The house continued to be rented out until October 1920, when the property was conveyed to accountant Blanche Adela Rennell, a sister of Clarence and Cuthbert.<sup>15</sup> Blanche passed away during 1929 and ownership of the property was soon transmitted to Emily Mary Rennell, Blanche's sister and executer of her deceased estate.<sup>16</sup> Soon after, Emily sold the property to Margaret White Martin, wife of James Lent Martin.<sup>17</sup>

Upon Margaret's death in 1946, ownership was transferred to James Martin; although he only resided at the house for another year until his death during 1948.<sup>18</sup> During May 1948, the property was transmitted to Arthur Rowe, the executer of James' deceased estate, before being purchased by Charles William Cadman.<sup>19</sup> In 1952 the property was settled under the Joint Family Homes Act, the registered owners being Charles Cadman and his wife Violet.<sup>20</sup> During 1954, ownership of the property was transferred to Maude Elizabeth Thomas, with the property settled as a joint family home during 1955; the registered owners being Maude and her husband Arthur Humphrey Thomas.<sup>21</sup>

Maude Thomas passed away during 1960 and Arthur subsequently became the sole owner.<sup>22</sup> However, when Arthur married again in 1967, ownership of the property was once again settled under the Joint Family Homes Act, with Thomas and his wife Mary Evelyn Thomas joint owners.<sup>23</sup> Following Thomas' death, Mary became the sole owner in 1980, residing at the house until the property was

---

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> New Plymouth Borough Council Rating Book 1901-02, NPDC Archives

<sup>12</sup> New Plymouth Borough Council Rating Book 1902-03, NPDC Archives

<sup>13</sup> *Taranaki Herald*, 27 June 1901, page 3

<sup>14</sup> Clarence Rennell, 1907, probate file including will, New Plymouth Probate Files, 1867-1981, Archives New Zealand (21954)

<sup>15</sup> Taranaki Land Deed Indexes (23516), c.1858 - c.1928, Archives New Zealand

<sup>16</sup> CT TN125/89, Land Information New Zealand (LINZ)

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

## Heritage Buildings Report

purchased by the present (2019) owner Neville James Harvey in 1996.<sup>24</sup>



View of north-eastern elevation showing lean-to parapet wall

**Reference Sources** See footnotes.

### Description

Located a short distance from New Plymouth's CBD, this building is highly visible from the busy one-way Vivian Street. Occupying a prominent corner site, this villa is the lone survivor of a continuous row of early 1900s villas progressively removed since the 1980s and now largely replaced with private carparking. The villa at 46 Vivian Street forms part of a wider group of interesting older buildings in the vicinity of St Mary's Cathedral which add visual interest and contribute to the historic character of the area.

The main form of this building is a single-storey double-bay pyramidal villa with rear lean-to; when compared with other similar surviving New Plymouth villas, this building is notable for its high degree of external integrity. Timber framed and clad in scallop profile rusticated weatherboard, the building largely retains its original window joinery, being predominantly double-hung timber sashes. The roof is sheathed in corrugated steel and a double-flue brick chimney finished with roughcast plaster rises near the rear.

The symmetrically composed main front elevation faces roughly south-east and incorporates two identical projecting flush bays; each fitted with a faceted factory bay window. Each bay window is fitted with a standard double-hung sash at the front and a slightly slenderer sash window on each of the side returns; the shallow bay eaves are supported by slightly detailed timber brackets. The upper gable end features decorative timbering with sunburst insets; the only major modification being the shortening of the original finials.

---

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.



## Heritage Buildings Report

The central timber front door appears original and features a large upper glazed portion and two lower timber panelled sections. Additional light to the hallway space is provided through a transom light above the door; the sidelights typically found on such villas are conspicuously absent from this entranceway and is perhaps reflective of space constraints at the time of construction.

A pair of double-hung sashes and a single four-light double-hung sash are positioned on the north-eastern elevation, whilst a further two double-hung sashes (the rear window incorporating four-light sashes), are fitted to the south-western elevation. Interestingly, and perhaps reflecting that this is both an architect designed villa and positioned on a prominent corner site, the ends of the rear lean-to are fitted with flat-topped parapet walls designed to disguise the slope of the skillion roof; this is rather a rare architectural feature for a New Plymouth villa.

### Assessment:

<b>Historical</b>	This villa is associated with prominent local businessman Clarence Rennell, and its construction is a product of a significant speculative building boom driven by a severe housing shortage in New Plymouth during the late 1890s and early 1900s. The house was also designed by noted New Plymouth architect Frank Messenger who contributed much to the built environment of New Plymouth during his long and distinguished career.	✓
<b>Importance to Community</b>	-	
<b>Architecture &amp; Construction</b>	This building is an excellent example of an early twentieth century double bay villa incorporating interesting architectural elements such as factory bay windows and lean-to parapet walls.	✓
<b>Setting and Context</b>	Located in a prominent inner-city position at the intersection of Robe Street and the busy Vivian Street/SH45, this building makes a strong positive contribution to the local streetscape. It is one of a number of interesting older buildings which contribute to the historic character of the area surrounding St Mary's Cathedral.	✓
<b>Archaeology</b>	-	
<b>Representativeness, rarity and integrity</b>	This building is a representative of the types of architect designed double-gable villas that were once common in New Plymouth's inner-city residential areas, but which have become increasingly uncommon in recent decades. The building is notable for its high degree of external integrity, the principal elevations remaining much as they were when first constructed.	✓
<b>Meets threshold for listing</b> (three or more ticks, or two ticks in one criterion)		✓