



ONslow HISTORICAL SOCIETY INC.

Established 1968

Newsletter Spring 2025



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www.facebook.com/groups/OnslowHistorical

86 Khandallah Road Wellington 6035

Dear Members

On Saturday 27 September members joined Historic Places Wellington's visit to the (former) Brigidine Convent in Johnsonville. They heard about the community work of Challenge 2000 and toured the beautifully restored Convent building. The visit was hosted by CE Hon Poto Williams and youth worker Bobbie Gibbins. Members enjoyed a delicious morning tea. I then led a walking tour of nearby heritage sites in Johnsonville. Local councillors Ray Chung and Tony Randle joined the tour, together with council candidate Andrea Compton. The group visited the Leonard Retter Boer War Memorial, St John's Anglican church, Johnsonville's oldest commercial building (the 1883 coach and farriers building behind the Post Office), and the historic Methodist Cemetery (in Norman Lane). The group enjoyed seeing the restored (once neglected) cemetery and its lovely view of the township in spring sunshine. I look forward to seeing you at the Christmas event.

Felicity Wong
President

From the committee

The committee has drawn up a plan for reorganising the interior of KATE, now that a decision has been made to upgrade the TV equipment for presentations. This will entail removal of some of the 'North Road' – otherwise known as the Old Porirua Road – material on the walls which has been there for a long time. While some North Road information will remain there will be a greater range of visual material on the walls, encompassing other elements of the history of the northwestern suburbs. There will also be some reorganisation of the range of displays in the room.

We hope to have these alterations completed for members to view by the time of the Christmas event at KATE on Sunday 30th November from 2pm.

Real Estate? **YIP** Call Team **Yip** 04 477 4450, William Yip.

---Sponsor of OHS---

Local history – Johnsonville tour

By Felicity Wong

Members of Historic Places Wellington and the Onslow Historical Society visited the historic former Brigidine Convent in Johnsonville recently.

The large two storey building was purpose built for Brigidine Sisters in 1937 and sits prominently overlooking the Mall.

Now home to Challenge 2000, the Chief Executive Hon Poto Williams and youth worker Bobby Gibbins hosted the visit.

The former convent building has a beautiful restored and welcoming vibe of glowing native timber.

Poto Williams returned to community service after nine years as a Parliamentarian, and talked about the important work taking place.

Challenge 2000 provides social services including helping young people with life skills; their justice system interactions; and provides other support, including through a food bank for families and whānau.

Community contributions are appreciated and a gift of berry jams was evident.

Touring the building gave an insight to the dedicated lives of the early teaching sisters.

The building retains a homely feel while now used by staff assisting young people and families to find their path and grow.

Sister Cyprian, who is now aged 100 years, lives next door and can recall seeing the convent being built.

She provided artifacts and information about the former convent for display.

A remarkably beautiful view of Johnsonville is from the closed-in upstairs verandah, past the tall Norfolk Pine planted with the building.

Joining the inspiring tour of Challenge 2000's building were local Councillors Tony Randle

and Ray Chung, and Council candidate Andrea Compton.

The group then walked around the corner to visit the Trooper Leonard Greenwood Retter memorial in Frankmore Avenue Park.

Len Retter, a young Johnsonville blacksmith, was killed in 1902 in the Boer War (1899-1902).

His family were early residents and his friends paid for the memorial cast iron lamp post which had originally stood on Johnsonville's Main Road.

After being moved to Moorefield Road it was badly damaged by a reversing truck.

Now it sits in a safe spot in the Memorial Park.

Cr Randle commented that Johnsonville is an honest, caring community of hard working people who built their own community center, churches and town spirit.

At the roundabout affixed to the footpath wall is a plaque marking the nearby site of Frank Johnson's early house.

He was the first full-time resident after whom the suburb is named.

Nearby up its driveway is St John's Church, the fifth Anglican church on the site.

The first three churches burnt down and the fourth church rotted.

Testament to the determination of local residents, the current building was designed by noted architect Frederick de Jersey Clere and built of concrete in 1922.

It has an arts and crafts style interior.

The church is on land originally purchased in 1836 from the New Zealand Company by the Reverend Montague Hawtrey, an English friend of Edward Gibbon Wakefield, the company's originator.

Rev Hawtrey persuaded Wakefield to set aside a portion (tenth) of settled land for Māori



Cr Ray Chung at the historic Methodist Cemetery with the 1918 grave of 27-year-old Nora Morgan who died helping others during the influenza epidemic. Photo: Supplied.

so they could share in the value increase and have provision for their own commercial activity.

Although the origin of the Wellington Tenth Trust was progressive, restrictive land leases and tenure problems did not achieve the early purpose.

The historic cemetery of St John's held the earliest Johnsonville graves but was unfortunately converted to a "lawn cemetery" in 1964 with grave remnants removed.

Next stop was down the lane next to the Post Office to visit Johnsonville's oldest remaining commercial building.

The old coach and farriers building likely dated from 1883 when a marked increase in the rating value took place.

The building can clearly be seen in photos from 1880 when Johnsonville was part of the Hutt County Council.

Records were, however, lost in a fire.

Local car enthusiast and dealer, Warwick

Bunning, showed the group its high ceiling and tōtara rafters, reminders of the building's early days as a staging post for horse drawn transport en route to Wellington.

The building is owned by Stride Investments (owner of the Johnsonville Mall and surrounding commercial areas) and has previously been planned for demolition.

The last visit was to the historic Methodist cemetery across the road and up a lane leading to the Working Men's Club (who kindly mow the cemetery's lawns).

Volunteer guardian gardener Anne Brodie outlined the restoration work involving the removal of straggly trees and accumulated rubbish.

The cemetery is now looking fine with a beautiful view over Johnsonville towards the former Brigidine Convent building.

The young folk from Challenge 2000 had helped with clearing up the cemetery site. A big thanks to Challenge 2000.



Johnsonville in the 1970's

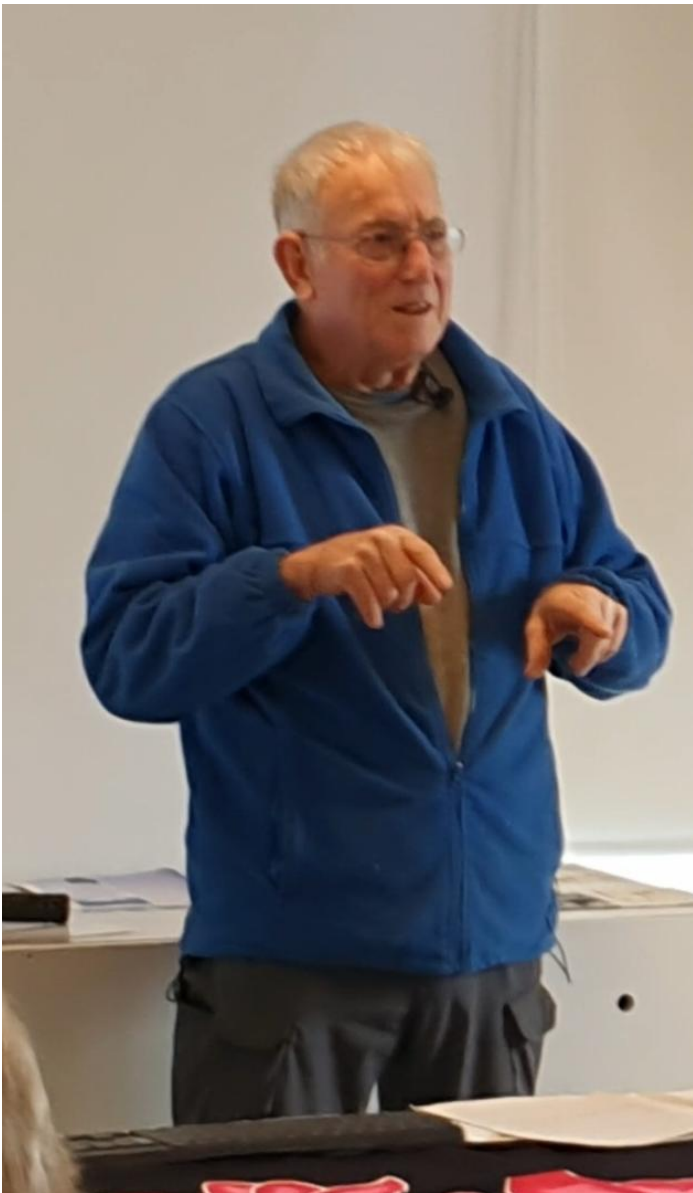


Felicity Wong walks up to St John's church talking about Johnsonville history



At KATE last month

Local resident Kelvin Nairn gave a fascinating talk on 14 September about building and sailing an ocean-going canoe in the 1970s. Kelvin joined Jim Siers' project to demonstrate that a large canoe could be built of traditional materials and sailed from Kiribati to Fiji. The project took place when academic theories about Pacific migrations were being debated. It demonstrated the tremendous skills of traditional Pacific craftsmen and their extraordinary navigation techniques used in safely crossing vast ocean expanses. Navigation was by stars and knowledge of currents and wildlife behaviour. Kelvin Nairn said the canoe was literally held together by coconut fibre string laboriously made by local women. A Pacific sailing themed afternoon tea was produced by Viv Chapple.



Upcoming Events

Monday 27 October

Labour Day walk: This year's OHS Wellington Heritage Festival walk will be around historic Ngaio. Walkers will meet at KATE at 10am for morning tea, with the walk starting at 10.30am and finishing with an optional lunch at Café Villa.

Sunday 30 November

Christmas Party at KATE from 2pm



The next committee meeting will be held on Saturday 8th November 2025, 2pm.

From Johnsonville with love

By Robert Johnson

A snapshot of early Johnsonville life has been made available to members of the Onslow Historical Society after a collection of early 1900 postcards was shared by one of its members.

Society member Tony Grant has been collecting Johnsonville postcards for 33 years and recently made them available to the Onslow Historical Society.

Due to the rarity of these cards, Mr Grant holds only around 30 but fellow postcard collectors in the Society say it is an impressive collection.

Mr Grant says his interest comes from a long family history in the Johnsonville area.

"I am a third generation John-

sonvillite and was born here in 1952. My father was born here in 1915 and his mother in the 1880s so we have a strong link."

Judy Siers of the Onslow Historical Society approached Mr Grant to do a journal on his collection and offer digital reproductions of them in the Society publication, *The Onslow Historian*.

Society president Murray Pillar says they are very excited to have access to the collection and provide an opportunity to delve deeper into Johnsonville's history.

"Each postcard not only has a great image but they tell a story," he says.

"The postcard was the text



PHOTO CREDIT:
Onslow Historical Society

message service of its day up until World War One and provided the main channel of communication between people."

Mr Pillar says people who want to get a copy of the postcards can purchase *The Onslow Historian* for \$11.40 delivered or \$10 if they pick it up from their office on 86

Khandallah Road.

"The collection showcases some real hidden treasures. We are delighted to provide a vehicle to make this history available to everyone."

Ngaio Town Hall Centenary Event

3 August 2025

It was a triumph, even if I do say so myself. Around 140 attendees – 93 signed the Visitors Book, a further 14 were identified as not signing but were there or passed through, and there were 30 odd band members. Ian Turk (NCDRA President) reckoned he counted 140 people without the band members so I'm settling for that. I counted 24 apologies, beginning with MP Andy Foster and the Mayor Tory Whanau.

The hall was dressed beautifully for its party – a banner, bunting (made by children at Ngaio School) flags, pink and green balloons, silver cups, flowers and two birthday cakes, one gifted by WCC, presented on green pink and black tablecloths provided by NCDRA. Thanks to cake-baker Alison Rushbridge. The cake was cut by former OHS President Margaret Domett, whose photo featured on the front page of the following issue of the *Independent Herald*. Note to members: all the decorative hall photos on the cake were edible! Thanks to Cake Creations of Upper Hutt. MP Greg O'Connor cut the second beautifully messaged cake, made by Nada Bakery, and congratulated the Hall on its birthday.

Buzz's Buzzing Brass Band added pizzazz to the occasion, being skilful, colourful in yellow and black, and professional, not to mention loud! The speeches were admirably short – Ian, Felicity, Peter Dunne (Patron), and mine. Peter and a randomly chosen small child – four-year-old Jack – took a moment to place a paper poppy on the War Memorial.

The fundraiser to create an Historic Places Trust Blue Plaque (being cast in Timaru) was successful – thank you to all the donors. Shortly it will be affixed to the hall.

The food was plentiful with delicious sandwiches and savouries – thanks to Rebecca and all the kind attendees who brought a plate. Girl Guide Rangers provided hospitality/floral support as did Madeleine Taylor, Beverley Holder, Margaret Pitt, Rosie Doole, Belynda Jack and Claire Bibby.

Thank you to those who turned out on Saturday to set up and tidy up afterwards – the NCDRA Committee of Ian Turk, Howard Moore, Graham Weir, Murray Pascoe and Bill Dashfield, together with OHS Committee members Felicity and husband Paul, John G, (who organised and manned the OHS table), George, Liz and Christine. Special mention goes to Clive Sowry, OHS member for his impressive historical hall display – which will appear later at KATE – and to member Clare Gleeson (Onslow Garden Club) for her display of historical gardening in the hall. Even Ed Hillary had visited the Ngaio Town Hall! OSH member Kevin Haines provided historical details from the Table Tennis Club, the longest running users of the hall since 1936!

Special mention also goes to the indefatigable George, who filmed and climbed ladders all over the place, and to Hugh Bibby who manned KATE in our absence. We also received support from Eirini Antonogiannaki of WCC Community Spaces, Gabor Toth, WCC Archivist (who promised a hall talk at KATE to accompany the slide show on display), the team at the Wellington Arts Centre, and indirectly the firemen of Johnsonville for putting up the advertising banner – repaid in carrot cake. Also to my lovely husband Mark, cousin Wayne and friends Lloyd and Garry, who collected, dismantled and returned equipment.

There was very little food left over with excess cake being distributed to Ngaio School, Ngaio Church and the Cummings Park librarians, and excess balloons to the Library and random small children. The misplaced bunting was found at the library and returned to the school, and the Visitor Book has been updated with Apologies and written recollections.

Ultimately the Visitor Book will go into the OHS archive along with tens of dozens of organisational emails for some future historian to marvel at what we did!

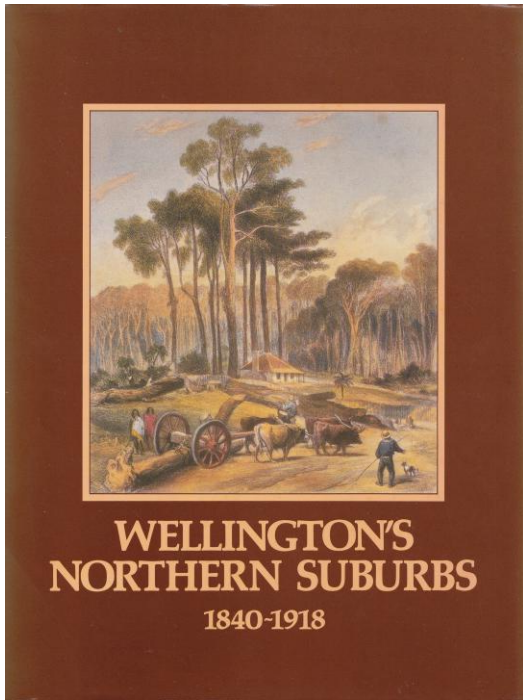
Viv Chapple

Chair Joint NCDRA and OHS Centenary Committee



Do not forget gifts for Christmas from Kate

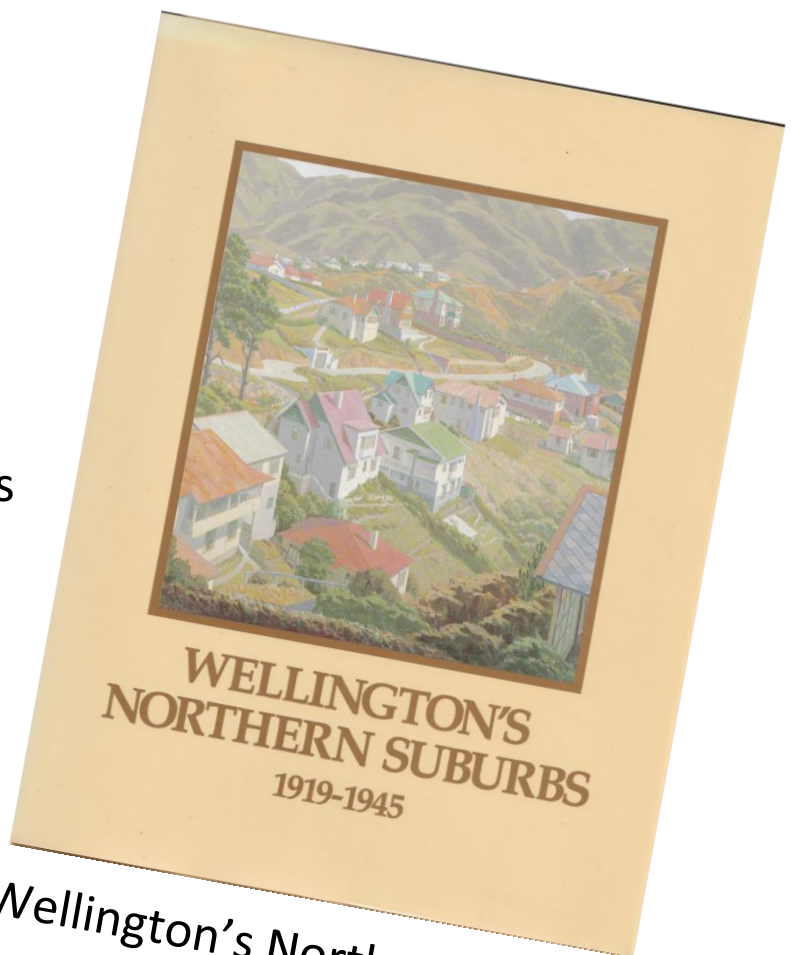
Limited edition set of four Postcard set



Now back in stock

Wellington's Northern Suburbs
1840 -1918

Soft cover only



Wellington's Northern Suburbs
1919-1945

Hard cover only



What was this building group called?

Which road was it on and where is the building on the left now?

You will have probably driven past it, and may well have been inside it and enjoyed its offerings.☺ It was in Johnsonville, just.

Real Estate?
YIP



Supporter of the O.H.S

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Answer to quiz

The Burma Motor Lodge.

Opened in 1977.

Burma Road Johnsonville.

When it closed down the site was redeveloped as the Malvina Major Retirement Village and the building on the left was moved to the back of Raroa Normal Intermediate School and is now a classroom.