

Hawkes Bay Branch 30 November Napier Port and Lunch

A beautiful Hawkes Bay morning saw our members entering our coach in readiness for our trip to The Port of Napier. With our informed commentator, Tony, we entered the Port and at once the information began. Only LOGS and CONTAINERS?.... so much more to see and understand.

The history is one from early beginnings to the Port we see today, dealing with worldwide containers and shipping wood to China. Napier can now accommodate the world's largest vessels.

Due to a technician setback earlier and no 'Business as Usual' we were able to see how large an area and the many buildings needed for this modern port. With a staff of 300 plus it is a credit to Napier.



Tucked away on the other side of the chunky breakwater is something we did not see, PENGUINS, our very own penguins.

<https://www.napierport.co.nz/our-business/our-future/6-wharf/building-sustainably/korora-sanctuary/> for videos in penguin boxes.



Back to Club Napier for lunch and the next part of the day, when Bob Bishop was acknowledged as the newest full member of our branch and his wife Karyl had an amended certificate to reflect additional family and ships.

Our speaker unfortunately was unwell, so member Richard McKenzie, with a days' notice, read the speakers notes on 88 to 94 Dickens St, a 1430 square metre, 2 story building. Entertainment has been provided on this site since at least 13th May 1887 when the proprietors, Cohen and Conroy offered the Theatre, stage hands and ticket takers free of charge to any amateur company for the suffers of the late shipping disaster the SS Belmont.

In 1896 it was rebuilt as the Gaiety Theatre, for silent movies plus an orchestra. It was also used for live performances. This first building was a huge iron structure. It was also the home of Hawkins and Rome's motor garage and was destroyed by fire on 6th June 1911. The cause of the fire was an explosion in the garage. The insurance on the theatre was 1500 pounds, however the owners estimated their loss at 2000 pounds as the films destroyed were valued at 800 pounds.



It was rebuilt in 1912 as the Gaiety Theatre, a popular venue for both movies and live performances. Being one of the first reconditioned buildings after the earthquake then renamed the Gaiety de Luxe Theatre it was completed and reopened on 27 June 1931. In 1932 the owners Thompson - Payne then complied with the new regulation and had strengthening work completed.

Finally operated by Kerridge-Odeon chain Gaiety de Luxe Cinema closed in 1960.

At that time 33 year old Bernie Meredith, was Chairman of the Napier Development Association. The Top Hat was born and Bernie was the face of the new venue. "It was my way, or the highway" he said. Transformation started immediately, a waxed dance floor, a coffee bar and air conditioning. Admission was 5 shillings including coffee, and no pass out were issued. There was no liquor sold. A strict dress code, all men must wear jackets but very hot nights he allowed ties to be removed. Every fashion and trend of the 60's could be seen at the Top Hat, from cigarette vending machines, Coca-Cola, Brylcream, winkle pickers, miniskirts and eventually high collars, side boards and psychedelia. About 26 Balls a year were booked in advance for 3 years solid at one stage. These would include alcohol and a light meal in the ticket price. As the 1960's drew to a close, hotels had extended their drinking hours plus adding entertainment. The numbers were dropping, the writing on the wall, Bernie left the Top Hat.

Bernie Meredith passed away on 20 March 2020 aged 92 years.

Various other night clubs succeeded in the Top Hat building under various name changes.

In 2014 the building had a Class 1 protection order against it. In October 2023 its valuation was \$1.26m but was sold on 7 March this year for \$650,000.



Carol P