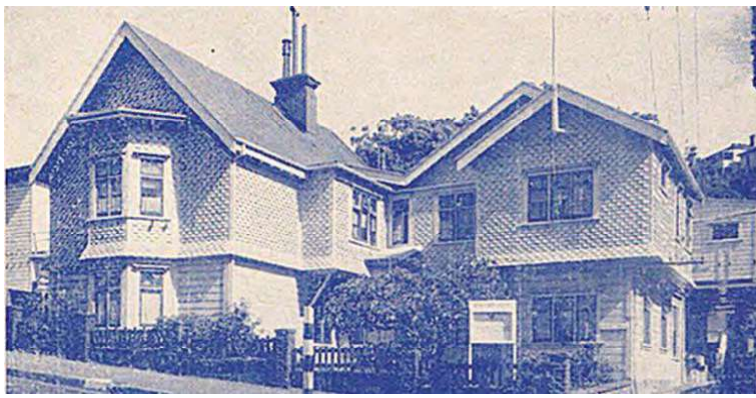




Wakefield House, 90 The Terrace. Photo: Supplied.

Local history – Wakefield House

By Felicity Wong

Kumototo Stream runs in a pipe nearby, while fake bubbling and bird song is piped into the walkway under the Terrace, leading to Woodward Street.

Next to the perpetually damp tunnel is Wakefield House.

The nine storey office block was built after the demolition in 1972 of a former grand house.

The story takes shape with Colonel William Wakefield (1801-1848) "Agent for the New Zealand Company" arriving in Port Nicholson/Poneke in 1839.

He led the establishment of the earliest New Zealand colonial settlement.

William arranged a Deed of Sale of land for Wellington that allocated one-tenth of purchased land to the signatory chiefs and their families (Tenths Trust).

160 years later, the Waitangi Tribunal found that not all the rightful owners had signed and those that had signed, may not have understood they were expected to move on.

William built a villa in 1840 where the Beehive now stands.

Meanwhile, his brother Arthur Wakefield (1799-1843) led the colonisation of Nelson.

He left the British Navy after being involved in suppression of the North African slave trade, and in British opposition to American independence.

By 1843, Arthur had arranged for 18 ships carrying 3000 settlers to arrive in Nelson.

The New Zealand Company had promised settlers one town acre, 50 suburban acres and 100 rural acres.

Exceeding expectations, there were far more settlers than arable land available.

When Māori reasonably objected to European attempts to survey disputed/unsold land in the Wairau Valley, Ngāti Toa killed Arthur and 21 others.

British authority investigated and a strict policy followed whereby land could only be sold to the Crown.

Back in Wellington, William encountered similar problems with the company's land and employment promises falling well short.

That caused widespread despair and after several strokes he died in 1848.

Chief Honiana Te Puni Kokopu was a pall-bearer at his large funeral and William's house was used by the Governor when he visited from Auckland, the then capital.

After the capital shifted to Wellington in 1865, the present "Government House" was built near Mt Victoria, (the former site of Wellington's "Lunatic Asylum").

The whole colonisation project was, however, conceived by eldest brother Edward Gibbon

Wakefield during his three year prison term (for abduction).

He didn't arrive until 1853 after the deaths of his younger brothers.

Edward's "Wakefield Scheme" for the colonisation of South Australia, Canada and New Zealand involved populating areas with a workable combination of labourers, tradespersons, artisans and capital.

The scheme was to be financed by the sale of land at a "sufficient price" to the capitalists who would then support the other immigrants but the problems in its delivery were also apparent in Canterbury.

Edward had a rocky political career in Wellington but was also an influential Member of Parliament (1853-55) committed to the establishment of Parliamentary democracy in the colony.

In 1854 Wellington held a "Founders Festival" attended by 300 settlers and 60 Māori at which Edward Gibbon Wakefield was toasted.

In late 1855 he fell ill, however, and retired to live a secluded life for seven years.

In 1861 Edward transferred the grand home at 90 The Terrace where he lived with her and her young daughter Alice, to his sister-in-law Angela (widow of his brother Daniel).

Edward died soon after and the house was eventually leased with a series of family transactions of the property culminating in a perpetually renewable lease being granted in 1949 to the New Zealand Founders Society.

That reflected the Wakefield family's desire, expressed in a couple of "entailed" wills of Edward's nephew's British heirs, for the property to remain in the Wakefield family.

In the 1970s the Founders Society demolished the house and built the 1970s building on the site.

Since the "Founders Society" invites new members from among those who can prove to have ancestors here before 1865, all Māori and a great proportion of New Zealand's population will presumably be welcome to join.

A plaque on the low wall at street level of the 1970s Wakefield House records the death at the site of "man of vision" Edward Gibbon Wakefield (1796-1862).

It refers to him as the "principal founder of planned settlement in New Zealand, MP for Hutt."

He had a checkered history and his project was imperfectly delivered and possibly misconceived from the start, but his legacy plainly surrounds us in this place called home.

More information about the house where Edward died is at https://www.nzfounders.org.nz/site_files/44445/upload_files/blog/Bulletin2April1954.pdf?dl=1

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