

Heritage Buildings Report

Site ID

Building/Site Name

Robertson Residence (Former)

Address

14 Wakefield Street, New Plymouth



Statement of Significance

Constructed during 1913-14, this attractive house was designed by noted New Plymouth architect Frank Messenger for New Zealand dairy industry stalwart Robert William D'Arcy Robertson, who occupied the house for almost thirty years until 1942. The land on which the house is located has an interesting history, originally reserve land, an Act of Parliament allowed the property to be leased as building sites from 1910, with the property remaining leasehold until the mid-1990s. The house is architecturally significant as probably the first New Plymouth dwelling constructed in the English Domestic Revival style, and a rather early example of the style nationally. The exterior of the house retains a high degree of integrity, with many original architectural features surviving intact. Well-maintained and set amongst picturesque gardens, the house makes a strong positive contribution to the local streetscape.



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Legal Information and Heritage Status

Legal Description Lot 1 DP 5953

District Plan Item/ Map No.

Heritage New Zealand List Not listed

Construction Information

Date of Construction 1913-14

Principal Materials Wooden framing, weatherboard, corrugated steel

Construction Professionals Frank Messenger (architect), W. Cliff (builder)

History

Early Section History

First surveyed in the 1840s, the land on which 14 Wakefield Street stands originally encompassed parts of sections 1849 and 1850 of Frederick Alonzo Carrington's original Town of New Plymouth. However, these sections, along with a number of others along the Avenue Road (now Coronation Avenue), were never granted to settlers and deemed unalienated lands. On February 20th, 1858, under the provisions of the *Public Reserves Act 1854*, these unalienated sections were vested in the Superintendent of Taranaki Province upon trust as an endowment for public schools and general educational purposes.¹

The *Town Board of New Plymouth Endowment Ordinance 1867* enabled the New Plymouth Town Board to receive revenues collected from the lease of these lands, and remained in force until repealed and replaced with the *Town Board of New Plymouth Endowment Ordinance 1871*, which extended the use of the lands to encompass cricketing and horse racing.² With the abolition of the provinces in 1876, the racecourse reserve was vested in the New Plymouth Town Board under the *Municipal Corporations Act 1876*.³ The sections were later brought under the *New Plymouth Recreation and Racecourse Reserve Act 1887*, which provided specifically for the establishment and management of a racecourse on the reserve.⁴

As a recreation reserve, it was not possible to grant leases to private persons for building purposes, or for a period of longer than 3 years at a time.⁵ Accordingly, the various portions of the racecourse reserve were generally only leased for grazing on one-year terms. However, by the early 1900s there was growing interest in further developing the eastern portion of racecourse reserve. In 1903 there was a proposal to build stable facilities on the property, and in 1904 the Agricultural and Pastoral Association attempted to acquire the site for show grounds by way of a land exchange with their St Germain's Square property (between Gill & Molesworth Streets); However, neither proposal was supported by the New Plymouth Borough Council.⁶

¹ Town Board of New Plymouth Endowment Ordinance 1867

² Town Board of New Plymouth Endowment Ordinance 1867; Town Board of New Plymouth Endowment Ordinance 1871

³ Municipal Corporations Act 1876

⁴ New Plymouth Recreation and Racecourse Reserve Act 1887

⁵ Public Reserves Act 1854

⁶ *Taranaki Herald*, 27 January 1903, page 2; *Taranaki Herald*, 9 August 1904, page 2

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By the late-1900s, sentiment towards alternative uses for the eastern portion of the racecourse reserve, specifically for housing purposes, appears to have shifted. The groundwork was set by the *New Plymouth Recreation and Racecourse Reserve Exchange Act 1909*, which, in addition to enabling the exchange of some lands near the southern end of Gover Street, removed all rights of the Taranaki Jockey Club over the 12 acre portion of racecourse reserve on the eastern side of the Avenue Road.⁷

The following year, during January 1910, the Borough Council made public its intention to promote a Bill to enable the council to lease the eastern portion of the racecourse reserve as buildings sites.⁸ It was argued by the council that the flat land close to central New Plymouth was well suited for housing, that building leases would provide far better returns than grazing leases, and that New Plymouth was already well-endowed with public reserves, so the relatively small area of land was not required for public recreation.⁹

It was initially thought that there would be little difficulty in convincing Parliament to pass a Bill to enable the racecourse reserve land to be leased for housing purposes.¹⁰ However, whilst on a visit to New Plymouth later in January, the Hon. Mr Fowlds (Minister of Education & Public Health), “expressed the opinion that the Borough Council would have some difficulty in inducing Parliament to pass a Bill giving the necessary authority”, largely because the government “is opposed to local bodies granting building leases of reserves set apart for recreation purposes”.¹¹

The *New Plymouth Racecourse Reserve Vesting Bill* was introduced to the House during June 1910 and passed its first reading in early-July.¹² Following evidence being heard by the Local Bills Committee, the Bill was then subject to considerable debate in Parliament, the Bill eventually being sent back to the committee for review.¹³ The Bill was finally passed into legislation during November 1910 with some minor amendments, principally that half, rather than the originally proposed £200, of the yearly rent derived from the leases was to be devoted to the maintenance of Borough Reserves.¹⁴

During December 1910, authority was given by the Borough Council to employ a surveyor to subdivide the eastern portion of the racecourse reserve and to have a lithograph plan of the site produced.¹⁵ The Reserves Committee was also authorised to put the leases up for sale by auction on terms of 21 years with perpetual right of renewal; the leases were to have a reserve of £5, and although not subject to compulsory building clauses, no building of a value less than £500 was to be erected.¹⁶

⁷ New Plymouth Recreation and Racecourse Reserve Exchange Act 1909

⁸ *Taranaki Herald*, 11 January 1910, page 2

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Taranaki Herald*, 17 January 1910, page 2

¹² *Taranaki Herald*, 8 July 1910, page 4

¹³ *Taranaki Herald*, 20 August 1910, page 2

¹⁴ *Taranaki Herald*, 12 November 1910, page 2

¹⁵ *Taranaki Herald*, 13 December 1910, page 6

¹⁶ *Ibid.*



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Robert and Marion Robertson



Mr R. W. D. Robertson, *New Zealand Mail*,
14 June 1900, page 37

The lease of allotments 29 and 30 (New Plymouth Town Sections 1849 & 1850), was granted to Robert William D'Arcy Robertson for a period of 21 years from March 11th 1912.¹⁷ It seems Robertson hails from Otago and became involved in the dairy industry from a young age. During 1896 he was the official tester of milk in Auckland, before being appointed to the role of government inspector and grader of dairy in Taranaki the following year.¹⁸

In 1900, Robertson resigned his position as inspector to take a position in the dairy produce exporting firm of J. B. MacEwan, being appointed New Plymouth agent in late-1900.¹⁹ About this time, Robertson also established a model dairy farm on Frankley Road, this being equipped with all the latest dairying equipment, including a modern milk pasteurising system from Denmark.²⁰ During 1903, Robertson married Miss Marion Anderson Walker, with the couple appearing to have two children, Robert (b.1905) and Mary (b.1907).

In 1909, when Mr J. B. MacEwan travelled to England, Robertson was put in charge of the Wellington Branch, usually headed by MacEwan himself.²¹ Robertson remained with J. B. MacEwan until 1911, when he resigned and went into business on his own account, establishing the firm of R. W. D Robertson & Co, whose premises were situated in Brougham Street. Robertson was appointed the sole New Zealand agent for the international dairy produce firm of Andrew Clements & Sons Ltd during early-1911, and later the agent for firms selling products from milking machines to motor vehicles.²²

Robertson was appointed to the High School Board of Governors in 1916 and served as chairman during 1919.²³ Several months later, during April 1919, Robertson was appointed Dominion organiser of the Welfare League; a position based in Wellington.²⁴ Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Robertson's advice was regularly sought by farmers, dairy companies, international export firms and the government on various matters relating to the dairy industry, with Robertson by now known as one of New Zealand's foremost experts on dairying matters.²⁵ During the 1920s Robertson became Chairman of the Mangorei Dairy Company and was for a period during the 1920s and 1930s, President of the New Plymouth Rotary Club.²⁶

¹⁷ CT TN71/148, Land Information New Zealand (LINZ)

¹⁸ *Taranaki Herald*, 21 July 1897, page 2

¹⁹ *New Zealand Mail*, 14 June 1900, page 37

²⁰ *Taranaki Herald*, 28 May 1901, page 2

²¹ *Taranaki Herald*, 24 April 1909, page 2

²² *Taranaki Herald*, 27 April 1911, page 2; *Taranaki Daily News*, 17 April 1916, page 1

²³ *Taranaki Herald*, 4 March 1916, page 7; *Taranaki Herald*, 21 January 1919, page 2

²⁴ *Taranaki Herald*, 25 April 1919, page 4

²⁵ *New Zealand Herald*, 14 July 1933, page 13; *Stratford Evening Post*, 26 June 1934, page 4

²⁶ *Opunake Times*, 24 August 1926, page 2; *Manawatu Standard*, 7 May 1932, page 8



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Construction of the Present House



Residence in New Plymouth. Mr. Frank Messenger, Architect

View of house soon after completion. *Progress*, 1 June 1914, page 1115

During late-1912 or early-1913, Robertson commissioned accomplished New Plymouth architect Frank Messenger to design a fashionable new residence for his Wakefield Street property. Francis John Messenger was born on the 4th of July 1865, being the second son of William and Arabella. 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.²⁷ 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.²⁸

Frank Messenger and Horace Victor Griffiths entered into partnership in 1917, with William Taylor joining in 1920.²⁹ This partnership ceased in 1930, with Messenger and Taylor forming a new partnership; Leonard Wolfe later joined in a partnership that would last up until Messenger's death on 11 October 1945.³⁰ Both individually and as a partner, Frank Messenger contributed immensely to New Plymouth's built environment, with his commissions both numerous and varied, ranging from early villas, some of New Plymouth's earliest bungalows and English Domestic Revival Style homes (of which 14 Wakefield Street is likely the earliest), and both timber and reinforced concrete commercial premises.

²⁷ Pritchard, Ian. *Frank Messenger, Architect: The work of a New Plymouth architect*. New Plymouth: Ian Pritchard, 1994.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

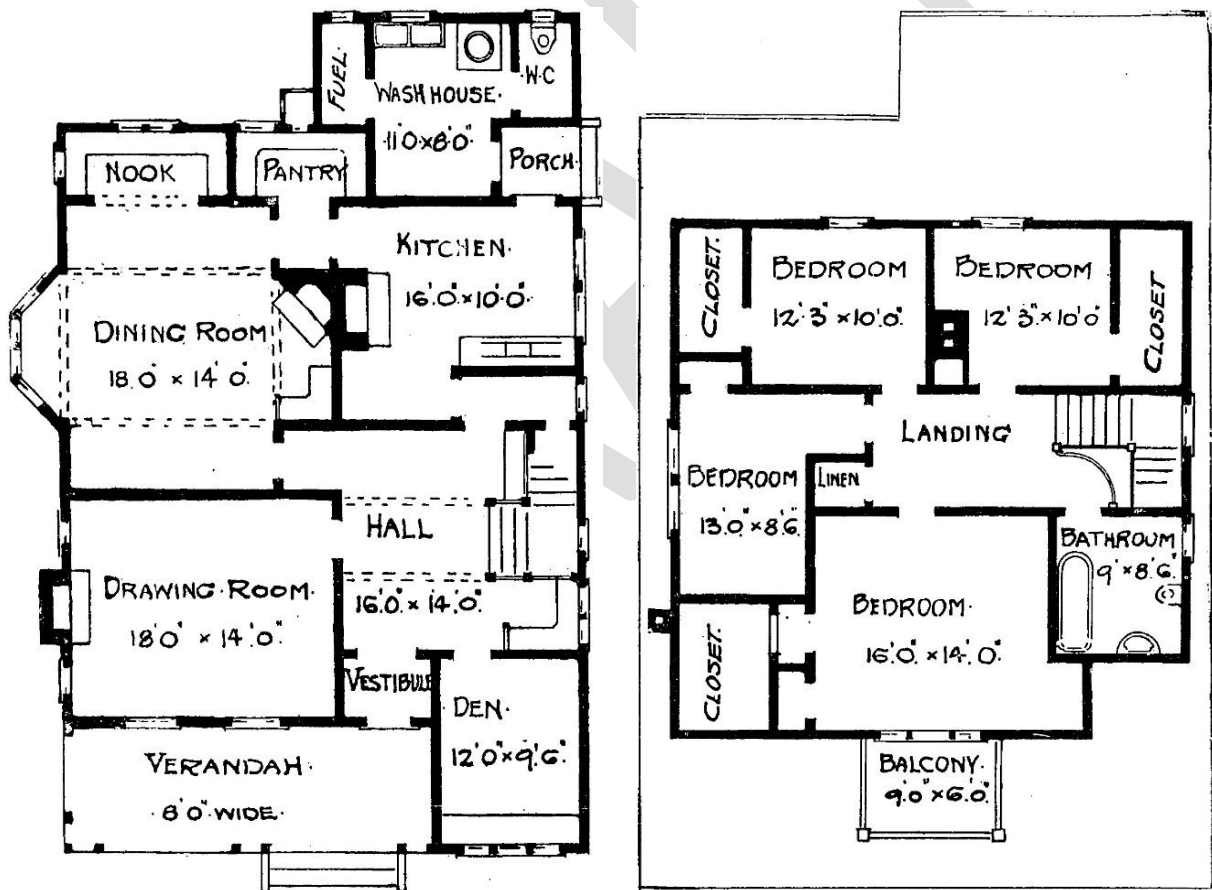
³⁰ Ibid.



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A building permit was granted to R. W. D. Robertson on July 2nd 1913 for the construction of a residence on allotments 29 & 30, Avenue Road, with the building's value being a massive £989.³¹ During June 1914 and probably soon after completion, the architectural merit of the house was recognised through its inclusion in *Progress*, New Zealand's first architectural periodical. At the time of publication, the house was described as follows:

"The rooms are well-proportioned, and the house well arranged. The vestibule opens from the verandah 8ft. wide to lounge hall and staircase. The dining-room is 18ft. by 14ft., with bay window, and an alcove, with seats and ingle nook. The servery is conveniently arranged near the kitchen. The drawing-room is 18ft. x 14ft., and den 12ft. x 9ft. 6in., with vestibule between. Space economy has been studied, and there are convenient closets and wardrobes upstairs. The largest bedroom is 16ft. x 14ft., with balcony 9ft. x 6ft. The building is of timber, with Oregon pine doors and casement windows. The house cost about £1000 and was erected by contractor W. Cliff."³²



Plans showing layout of ground floor (left) & first floor (right). *Progress*, 1 June 1914, page 1115

³¹ NPBC Building Register Book 1902-22, Puke Ariki Archives (ARC2011-204)

³² *Progress*, 1 June 1914, page 1114

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14 Wakefield Street would remain the Robertson's home for several decades, with a new lease for the property granted to Robertson for a further 21 years from April 1st 1933.³³ As per the *New Plymouth Borough Land Exchange and Empowering Act 1939*, the Avenue Road properties held by the New Plymouth Borough Council, including those leased by Robertson, were vested in the New Plymouth Harbour Board.³⁴ This Act enabled the Borough Council to exchange a number of properties along the Avenue Road for New Plymouth Harbour Board properties located within central New Plymouth (parts of the old Mt Eliot Reserve), to enable the Borough Council to promote Carnivals for the purpose of raising funds for the maintenance and improvement of public reserves and domains.³⁵

Allotments 29 and 30 were subdivided into two irregularly sized lots during 1941, with a new 13-year lease (from February 1st 1941) granted to Robertson for lot 1 of the subdivision, which incorporated the extant house.³⁶ Robertson continued to reside at the property until September 1942, when the lease of lot 1 DP5953 was transferred to John James Sullivan.³⁷ Robert Robertson relocated to a house at the corner of Devon and Hobson Streets, where he resided until his death a few years later on August 8th 1944, aged 72 years.³⁸

Recent Ownership History

Sullivan resided at the property until August 1951, when the lease of lot 1 DP5953 was transferred to dentist Ross Valentine.³⁹ The lease to Valentine was renewed for a further 21 years from February 1st 1954, with right of renewal and being subject to a fencing covenant.⁴⁰ During 1959 the lease was transferred to hotelkeeper Kevin Joseph O'Rielly, who resided at the property until May 1960 when the lease was transferred to insurance agent James Vincent Hosie.⁴¹ The lease was only held by Hosie until September 1961, when it was transferred to retired farmer John Joseph Dalton.⁴² The lease was acquired by Arthur Hillary Robinson and his wife Mae Ivy Robinson during May 1972, and renewed for a further 21 years from February 1st 1975.⁴³

In 1989 the Taranaki Regional Council assumed the role of the previous Taranaki Harbours Board. This saw the Harbour Board's assets, including the remaining racecourse leases, transferred to the council at this time.⁴⁴ In 1996, at the conclusion of the 21-year lease, the property was purchased freehold by the then leaseholders.⁴⁵ The property was sold in 2004 and again in 2005, before being purchased by the present owners in 2011.

³³ CT TN71/148, LINZ

³⁴ New Plymouth Borough Land Exchange and Empowering Act 1939

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ CT TN71/148, LINZ; DP5953 LINZ

³⁷ CT TN71/148, LINZ

³⁸ NPDC Cemetery Search, <http://www.newplymouthnz.com/Residents/Facilities-and-Services/Cemeteries-and-Crematorium/Cemetery-Search>; Accessed 11 October 2019

³⁹ CT TN71/148, LINZ

⁴⁰ CT TN194/39, LINZ

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

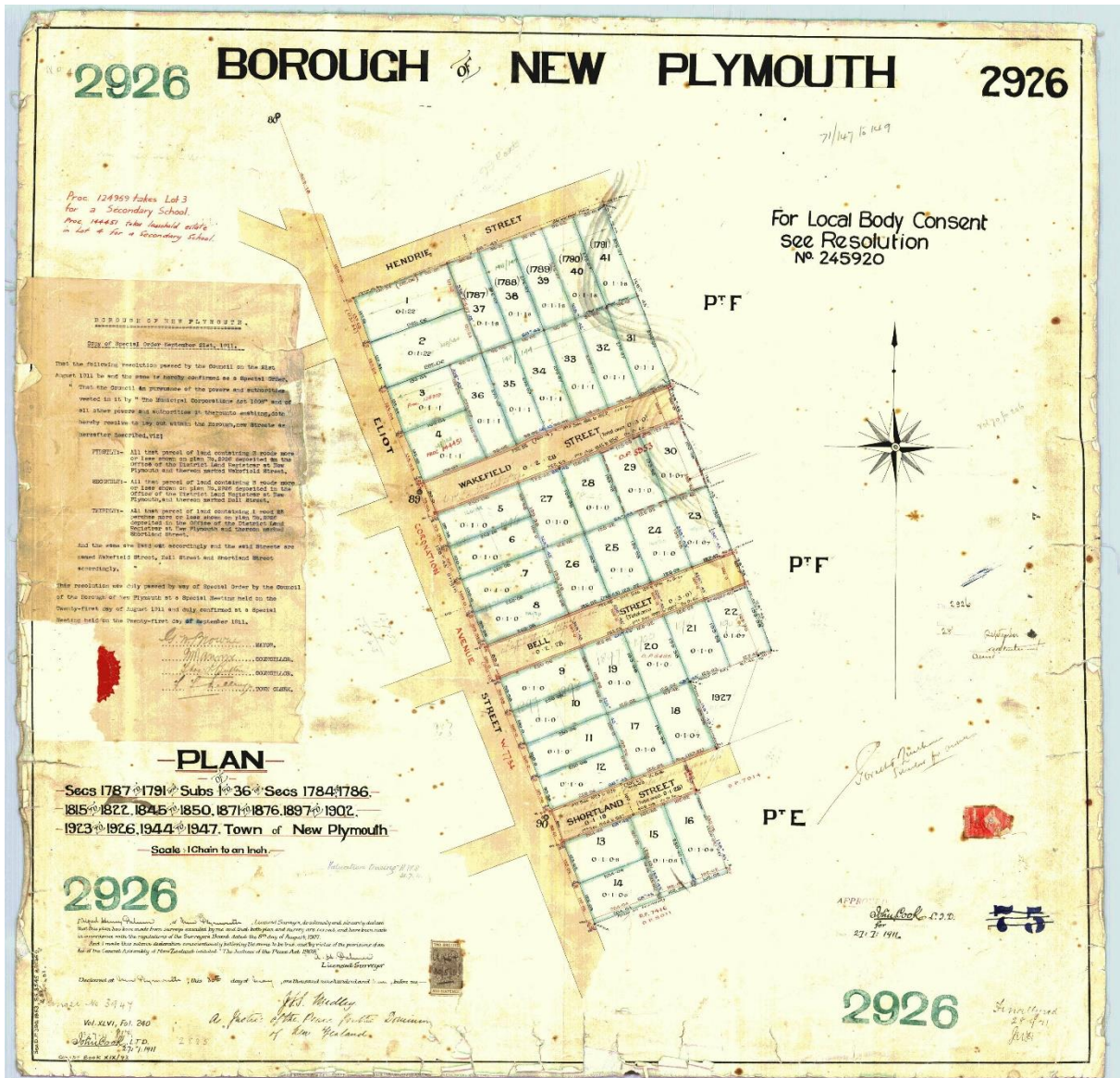
⁴³ CT TN194/39, LINZ; CT TNJI/77, LINZ

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

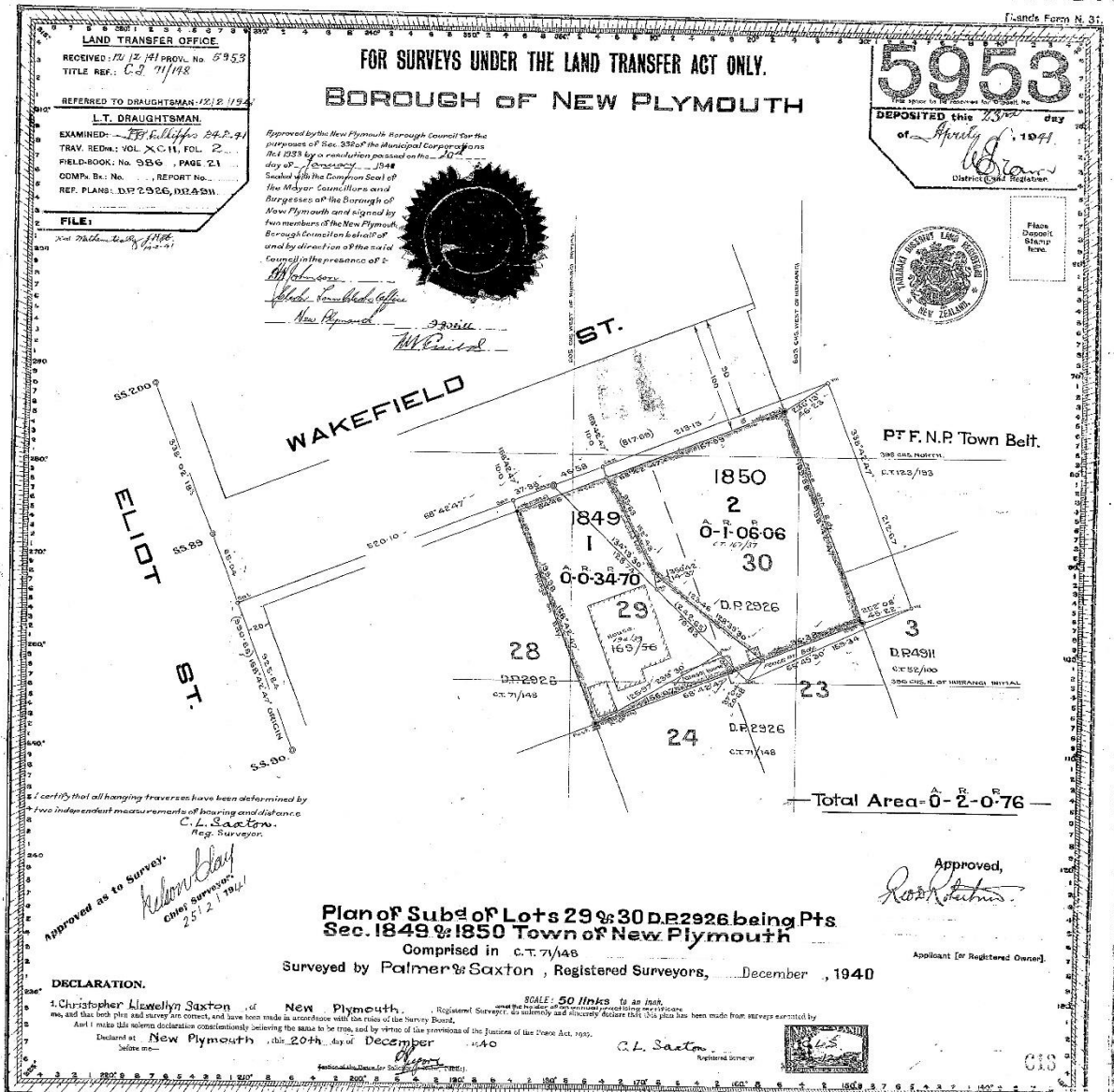


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DP5953, LINZ

Reference Sources

See footnotes.

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Description

The former Robertson Residence is located in a cul-de-sac just east of New Plymouth's main southern entrance on Eliot Street/SH3, in the suburb of Welbourn. Situated at the eastern edge of an area of high ground, the house has largely unobstructed views across the Boys High School playing fields, down the Te Henui valley, and towards the Tasman Sea. The Pohutukawa lined Wakefield Street comprises an eclectic mix of buildings, with the northern side entirely occupied by New Plymouth Boys High School; the Brutalist Ryder Hall (1969-72) being a dominant feature in the streetscape.

The main house is positioned near the rear of the section, with a concrete driveway leading to a modern double garage (in a style sympathetic to the main house) at the south-western corner. A large washhouse, probably constructed during Robertson's period of ownership, is also located along the southern boundary. The front garden comprises a rectangular lawn surrounded by garden beds and provides a picturesque setting for the dwelling.

This house is significant as probably the first house in the English Domestic Revival style to be constructed in New Plymouth, and a rather early example of the style in New Zealand. It wasn't until the boom years of the early-1920s that the English Domestic Revival style would become popular in New Plymouth, with houses in the style largely designed by prominent local architects for wealthier clients. Today, English Domestic Revival style houses form an important part of New Plymouth's architectural heritage, especially within older city-fringe streets.

A radical departure from the villa style, the English Domestic Revival style emerged (and shared similarities with), the bungalow style; both having roots in the Arts and Crafts movement of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. The present house at 14 Wakefield Street incorporates elements from both the Arts and Crafts and bungalow styles, with extensive shingling, wide eaves with exposed rafters, and window hoods, especially characteristic of the latter style.

Two-storied with timber framing and clad in horizontal weatherboards and shingles, the house is largely contained within a single, wide NE-SW gable; this being a design synonymous with the English Domestic Revival style in New Plymouth. The roof is sheathed in long-run corrugated steel and an external brick chimney (now finished with plaster), rises at the north-eastern elevation.

The main front elevation faces roughly north-west across the front garden. At ground floor level, a veranda extends across roughly two-thirds of the frontage; originally open, most of the veranda has since been enclosed (at an early date) with timber casements incorporating some patterned and leaded panes. The front door is mostly comprised of timber panels, with a central glazed panel incorporating clear and blue leaded glass. A set of three divided-pane timber casements with fanlights provide light to what was originally the den, with the wide eaves featuring exposed rafters

At first-floor level, a large gabled dormer projects from the roof and features an intriguing small balcony with timber balustrade. Access to the balcony is provided through a central glazed timber door with top-hinged casements either side and transom windows above; a shingled hood provides shelter and shade. The dormer is largely clad in timber shingles, although the upper portion features timber battens and decorative mouldings.

On the north-eastern elevation, the dining room bay window has been altered and now incorporates a pair of French casements in place of the original casement windows; although the angled roof with exposed rafters remains. Two divided-pane timber casements are fitted either side of the chimney, with another positioned further south. The first-floor gable end is almost entirely clad in timber shingles (this would become a common feature of later English Domestic Revival style houses), whilst a central pair of bottom-hung timber sashes (incorporating divided upper sashes and a shingled hood), is reminiscent of those used by Messinger in his earlier villa's.

On the rear elevation, a ground-floor lean-to is fitted with further timber casements and a rear entrance door. At first-floor level, a pair of central gabled dormers project from the roof and are each fitted with a central bottom-hung sash (incorporating divided upper sash), with a shingled hood above. The south-



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western elevation incorporates further bottom-hung sashes at ground and first-floor levels, along with another entrance door; like the north-eastern elevation, the upper gable end is again mostly clad in timber shingles.

Assessment:

Historical	This house principally has historic significance as the former residence of prominent New Plymouth citizen and New Zealand dairy stalwart Robert William D'Arcy Robertson and his family. Further historic significance is derived from the house being designed by noted New Plymouth architect Frank Messenger, who both individually and within his subsequent partnerships, contributed much to New Plymouth's built environment during the early decades of the twentieth century.	✓
Importance to Community	-	
Architecture & Construction	14 Wakefield Street has considerable architectural significance as probably the first English Domestic Revival style house constructed in New Plymouth, and a rather early example of the style in New Zealand. The house incorporates a number of interesting architectural features from both the Arts & Crafts and bungalow styles.	✓✓
Setting and Context	This house makes a strong positive contribution to the local streetscape.	✓
Archaeology	-	
Representativeness, rarity and integrity	This house is a locally rare example of a dwelling in the English Domestic Revival style designed prior to the First World War. The house, although subject to some minor alterations, retains a high degree of external integrity, with many original features surviving intact.	✓
Meets threshold for listing (three or more ticks, or two ticks in one criterion)		✓