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# **History and Building Archaeology of ‘The Wigwam’ 125 Western Hutt Road, Lower Hutt, Wellington**

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## **Introduction**

This paper documents a now demolished and uniquely historic cottage, colloquially known as ‘The Wigwam’ which was formerly located on the western Hutt hills, on an elevated section above Melling Station, Lower Hutt. The cottage, which was within an historic property owned by the New Zealand Transport Agency (NZTA), had not been occupied for a number of decades and had fallen into a state of extreme disrepair. It was consequently identified as a safety hazard and scheduled for demolition. An archaeological assessment of the property was carried out prior to the demolition and some of the history of the Wigwam was determined from various historic archival records and survey plans (see Grouden, 2018). It was demolished in November-December 2018 as per the conditions of HNZPT Archaeological Authority 2019/068. The archaeological building recording carried out at that time revealed some very unusual and interesting architectural features not generally characteristic of 19<sup>th</sup> Century Wellington architecture.



*Figure 1. ‘The Wigwam’ prior to demolition, 6<sup>th</sup> September 2018.*

## **History of the Building and Site**

The Wigwam was situated within an 139 acre piece of land (Hutt Section 75) which was sold to William Dorset for £5 in April 1847 (Wellington Deeds Register volume 1, folio 532). Dorset sold the whole of Section 75 to Henry Stilling in May 1870 (Wellington Deeds Register, volume 19, folio 575). Stilling had the whole section subdivided up into smaller lots in 1876 (refer to Wellington Deeds Plan 65). This subdivision was to be called ‘Stillingfleet’ and it comprised what is now part of the suburbs of Harbour View and Tirohanga. 125 Western Hutt Road includes the majority of what was then Sections 31 & 32, Deed 65 and a second area marked ‘reserved from sale.’ Stilling's township never really eventuated, probably because the terrain within Section 75 was fairly challenging and formation of viable roads was some time in coming.

Section 32 was sold by Stilling (farmer) to Charles Edward Beatson (architect) in May 1877 and this included a lease over the adjoining section 31 (Wellington Deeds Register volume 48, folio 66). Charles Beatson was trained by his father William Beatson, a well-known Nelson architect who emigrated from England with his wife Maria to New Zealand in 1851 (Bowman 2005). Charles worked with his father until William's death in 1870 and was appointed as Assistant Colonial Architect in Wellington ca 1871 (*New Zealand Mail* 23<sup>rd</sup> September 1887: 18).

Charles Beatson married Mary Alice Guy in January 1876 (*Nelson Evening Mail* 8<sup>th</sup> January 1876: 2) and the couple were resident in the Hutt as early as December 1876, when Mary Beatson gave birth to a baby boy (*Evening Post* 6<sup>th</sup> December 1876: 6). It is likely that the birth of this first child spurred Beatson on in establishing his own family home and resulted in the purchase of the Section 31-32 property and the construction of the house that became known as ‘The Wigwam.’ The house was probably built ca 1878.

As Assistant Colonial Architect, Charles Beatson designed a number of public buildings including a lunatic asylum in Nelson (*Evening Post* 18<sup>th</sup> April, 1873: 2) and the Government Printing Office in Wellington (*Evening Post* 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1884: 3). He also designed a number of public buildings in Lower Hutt, including St James Church (*Evening Post* 26<sup>th</sup> April 1878: 2) and the Petone Town Board offices (*New Zealand Times* 11<sup>th</sup> March 1886: 3). He designed for private individuals after he was made redundant as Colonial Architect in 1887 (see for instance *Evening Post* 10<sup>th</sup> November 1887: 4).

The Beatsons returned to Nelson several years after Charles established his private practice in Wellington, settling at his wife's home of Ngatimoti near Motueka

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(Bowman 2005: 144). The wider property, including The Wigwam, was sold by Beatson to George Manley Yerex in September 1889 for £600 (Wellington Deeds Register, volume 100, folio 442). Yerex was a Canadian entrepreneur who set up an import business in Wellington in the late 1880s (mainly supplying typewriters, sewing machines and bicycles). He made the 125 Western Hutt Road purchase 11 months before his marriage to Clara Pinny which occurred in August 1890 (*Evening Post* 11<sup>th</sup> August 1890: 2). The Yerexes went on to have 7 children whilst living at this property.

Yerex advertised The Wigwam for lease or rent for 1 to 3 years in February 1892, with the intention of travelling overseas. This dwelling was described as having 11 rooms, being 15 minutes walk from Hutt Station (now Western Hutt Station) with unrivalled views of the Hutt Valley and Wellington Harbour. It was also on 6 acres of cleared land with pasture for stock, a spring and 500 fruit trees (*Evening Post* 1<sup>st</sup> February 1892: 3; 20<sup>th</sup> February 1892: 3).

The Yerexes were back in Wellington and living at The Wigwam at least by December 1897 for the birth of a daughter (*Evening Post* 30<sup>th</sup> December: 6). Yerex gifted the property to his wife Clara in February 1899 (Wellington Deeds Register, volume 124, folio 581) and the couple constructed a much larger dwelling (now known as Lochaber House) on another part of the property shortly afterwards (McCracken and Mew). This building, a large American Queen Anne style edifice, is listed as Historic Place No. 2889 and remains on site.

The Yerexes sold the whole property, including The Wigwam, to William Brown in December 1906 for an unspecified sum (Wellington Deeds Register volume 154, folio 412). Brown was the managing director of Laery & Co. general importers and produce auctioneers, who had offices in Allan Street, Wellington central and were in business under that name from 1886 (Cyclopedia Co. 1897:566). Brown in turn sold to David Alexander Ewen in 1919 and a new certificate of title was issued in 1921 (WN273/164). Ewen was a businessmen in the firm Sargood, Son and Ewen and a prominent Hutt identity and he and his wife Marian lived there for many decades. It was acquired by the Ministry of Works (now the NZ Transport Agency) in 1976. Mrs Ewen (by that time widowed) continued to lease the property until the 1980s (McCracken and Mew).

It is not clear what use was made of The Wigwam once Lochaber House had been constructed ca 1900, but it was described as a gardener's cottage on a building application lodged in 1949 (see BP9407\_LH-1 and BP9407\_LH-2, HC Archives). It is likely that it was used as a staff dwelling by the Yerex family and others during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

## **Building Phases of The Wigwam**

No documentation of the construction of The Wigwam has been so far forthcoming, but the current building footprint provides some clues as to the probable original formation. The building appears to have been developed in the following sequence:

Phase 1: ca 1878 original construction (Beatson)

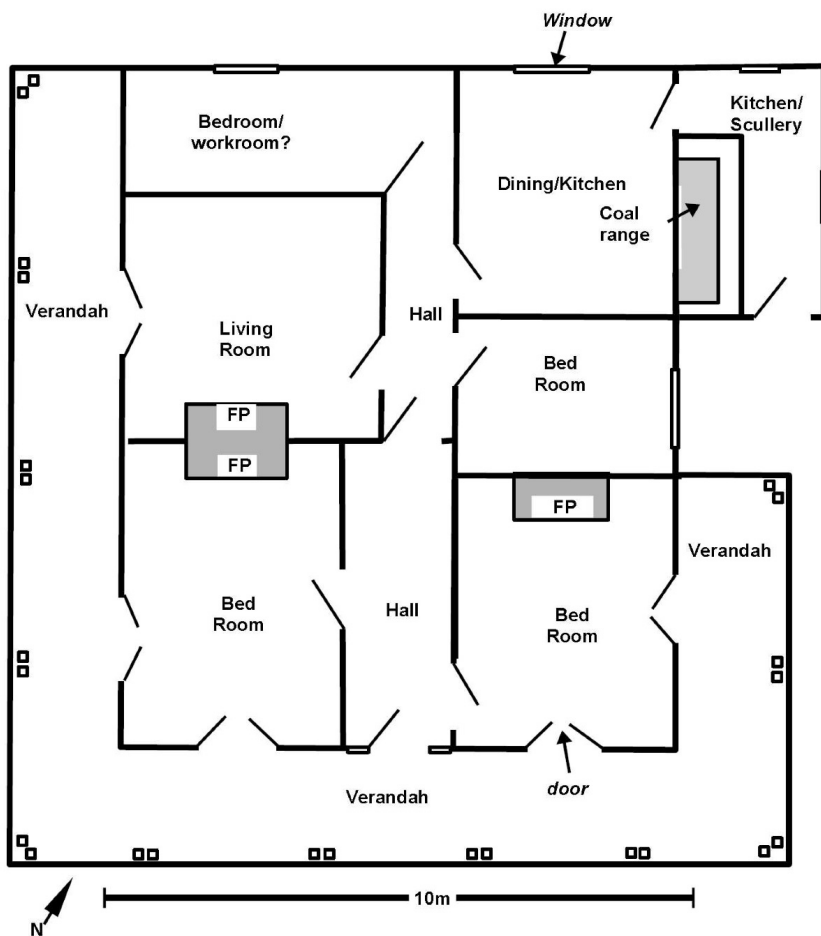
Phase 2: pre 1892 verandah alterations (Beatson/Yerex?)

Phase 3: post 1892 bathroom/pantry conversion (Yerex/Brown?)

The house is likely to have been originally constructed as a simple square surrounded by verandahs on three sides with 6 main rooms, including a living room, kitchen/dining room, three bedrooms, kitchen/scullery lean-to with coal range. An additional bedroom or workroom at the rear would have been converted into the bathroom/wash-house/pantry area. There would have been open verandahs along three sides, with French doors leading into front bedrooms and the sitting room. As well as the kitchen range with vented chimney, there were two additional vented fireplaces, one a double servicing adjoining Rooms 2 & 3, the other a single in Room 1. The probable original ca 1878 floor plan is shown in Figure 2.

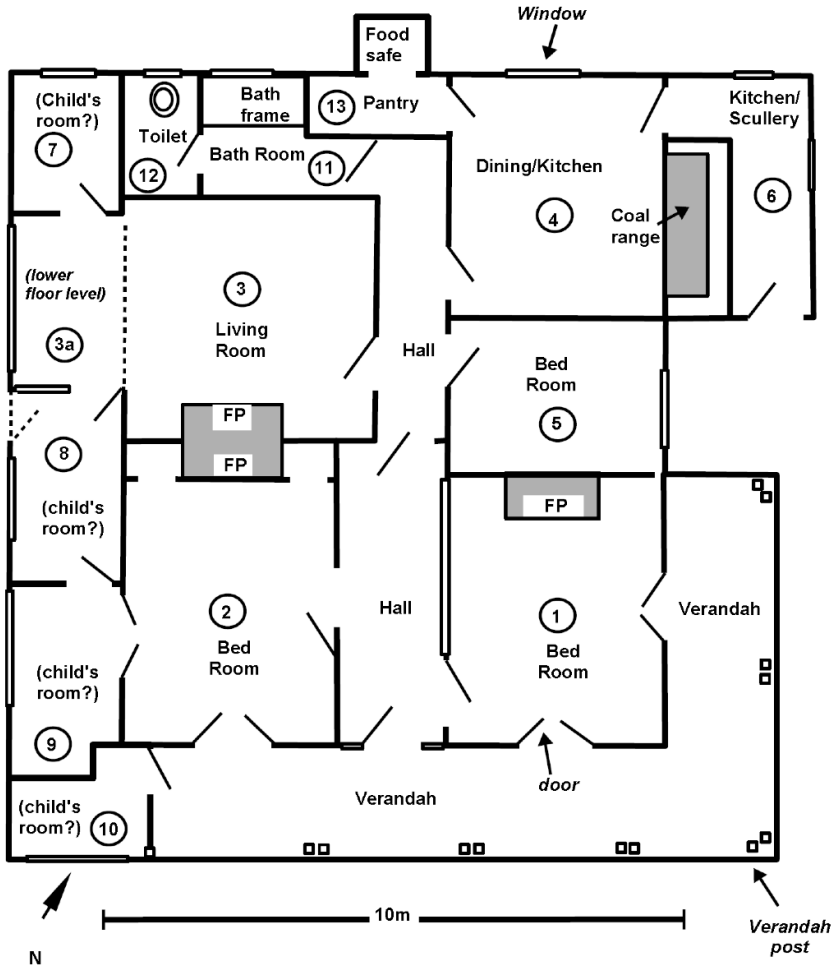
The main change to the house post construction was the closing in of the verandah along the south-western side. The covered in verandah was divided into 5 additional, small room spaces. The closing in and dividing up of the verandah must have occurred prior to Yerex advertising the house for rent in 1892 and was probably for housing children (either by Beatson or Yerex). There is also likely to have been alteration to the rear workroom/bedroom area with the installation of a full bathroom including toilet. This probably occurred post the 1890s (for Yerex or Brown). The floor plan prior to demolition can be seen in Figure 3.

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*Figure 2. The Wigwam probable original floor plan ca 1878*

*Grouden – The Wigwam*



*Figure 3. The Wigwam ca 1890 floor plan at time of demolition.*

The general appearance of the building prior to demolition can be seen in front and side elevation in Figure 4 and Figure 5 (dotted lines indicate where building elements such as chimneys and verandah posts are known to have been present but had been removed by the time of building recording).

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Figure 4. The Wigwam front (south-eastern) elevation prior to demolition.



Figure 5. The Wigwam side (north-eastern) elevation prior to demolition.

### Details of Construction

The building was a basic square shape, with double hipped rear gables on the roof and a central gully, forming a U shape. It was divided into 5 main rooms with surrounding verandah and kitchen and kitchen/scullery lean-to. It had a 10 ft stud throughout, apart from in the closed in verandah rooms which were lower both in floor and ceiling. The house differed in a number of ways from others previously seen in the Wellington area in several key and interesting ways.



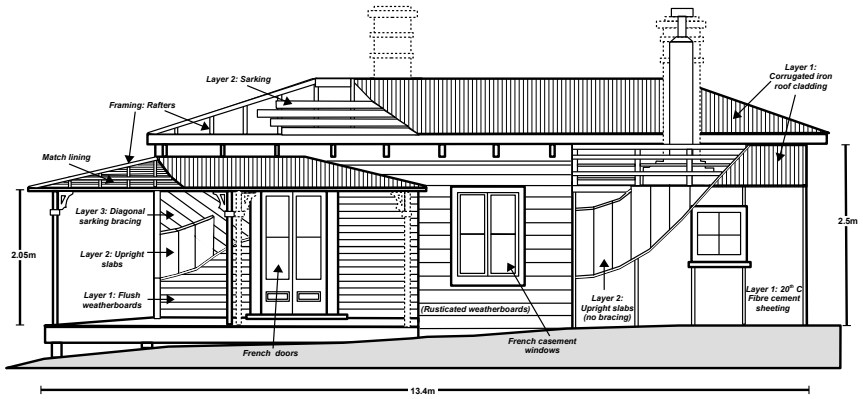
## **Vertical Braced Slab Wall Formation**

Wooden cottages, houses and villas of all sizes of this era in Wellington and the surrounding district were generally constructed using a standard framing system of vertical (studs) and horizontal (nogs/dwangs) 2 inch x 4 inch timbers nailed into a grid pattern, allowing openings for windows, doors and other joinery. This was set above a floor system made up of piles, beams, joists and floorboards (usually tongue and groove). Grid-like framing (trusses) were also used for ceilings and roofs.

This wall and ceiling framing was then generally lined using thin, horizontally positioned, rough sawn wooden sarking boards to create a relatively flat surface suitable for covering with Hessian scrim and then wallpaper. In rarer circumstances, instead of the sarking lining, walls and ceilings were sometimes lined with a lath and plaster system. This consisted of thin wooden laths, nailed close together over the regular framing and plugged with a plaster mixture to provide rigidity. External cladding was then generally some kind of weatherboard, either rusticated, lapped or rebated v-joint, nailed directly to the outside of the wooden framing.

The Wigwam had a very different wall structure based around heavy vertical wooden slabs braced diagonally with wide, wooden sarking planks. These wooden slabs stretched from floor to ceiling in one piece (apart from where interrupted by joinery) and were very substantial being 40mm (1.5in) thick and 290mm (11.5in) wide. The overlying diagonal sarking was 12mm (0.5in) and 200mm (8in) wide, with Hessian scrim and numerous layers of historic wallpaper on top (see Figure 6 and Figure 7). Samples of vertical slabs, sarking lining and external weatherboard were all identified as rimu (Wallace, pers. com. 2019). This structural system was used throughout the cottage, both for internal, partition walls and external, structural walls apart from areas that had clearly been altered post the original building construction, such as the verandah (see Figure 7 and Figure 8).

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*Figure 6. The Wigwam north-eastern elevation showing internal structure.*



*Figure 7. The Wigwam Room 3 (living room) showing structural layers.*



*Figure 8. The Wigwam, covered verandah from Room 3a facing south-east.*

The roof structure was set on top of the vertical slabs using standard 2in x 4in framing material and lined with sarking boards (not set in a diagonal pattern). As was generally the case with later 19<sup>th</sup> C houses, both ceiling undersides and walls were then lined with taped, Hessian scrim and covered with various layers of wallpaper. The external structural walls had an additional layer of wooden weatherboards on the outside.

This structural system has links with the early, slab built pioneer huts of the 1840s-1860s (see for instance Salmond 1986: 53-54 and Isaacs 2015: 129). However, these early huts were simple, generally single-roomed structures adopted as less fire-prone variations of the raupo whare. They also tended to have

at least some element of internal framing supporting the vertical slabs. They did not generally have sarking bracing or external weatherboards.

This use of vertical slabs is an intriguing building method and it appears that Charles Beatson may have been experimenting with different architectural building styles and construction methods and took the opportunity to explore that with the design of his own dwelling. According to Bowman (2005: 144), Beatson used a similar, though even more spare, system at a later family home constructed in Ngatimoti, Nelson. Here vertical slabs were dowelled together forming interior and exterior wall linings and needing no framing, cladding or bracing. It may well be that Beatson modified his style of construction for the Nelson house as building The Wigwam probably proved quite costly with the substantial amount of solid timber required.

Whatever the case, a wooden dwelling constructed with virtually no internal framing is very unusual for any period of New Zealand architecture. Beatson may have been influenced by early New Zealand slab hut construction and also North American ‘vertically laid plank houses’ of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century and later (see Isaacs 2015: 129), but The Wigwam bore little resemblance to other, simple slab buildings in the region, such as Sayer's Slab Whare, Carterton, which is listed as Category 1 Historic Place No. 7429 and was constructed some time earlier ca 1860 (O'Brien 2002).

### **French Doors and Casement Windows**

A second unusual feature of the house was the use of numerous French doors, leading from main rooms to the verandah and of hinged, French casement windows. Most houses constructed 1870s-1910 in New Zealand were fitted with double hung sliding sash windows with split panes and internal counterweights. There were no sliding windows present in the Wigwam and very few windows in general. This was because there were four (and probably originally five) sets of French doors providing access as well as illumination to rooms 1, 2 and probably 3. No other external windows were present in these rooms. Samples of these doors can be seen in Figure 1 which shows them leading into Rooms 1 and 2 on either side of the front door.

Similarly, hinged, French style casement windows were present on external walls in the bathroom, Room 5 bedroom and Room 4 kitchen/dining room. These windows mirrored the French style doors seen along the verandah.

The combination of wide verandahs, French doors and double French casement windows is again very uncharacteristic of the Wellington region and was probably

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an architectural innovation adopted by Beatson to create a light-filled dwelling with good access to the outside environment. Similar designs with wide verandahs and French doors have been seen on other often older buildings in New Zealand, located in more rural settings in the Wairarapa (for instance Alexander Turnbull Library PA2-2780) and Hawkes Bay (for instance Alexander Turnbull Library 1/1-005640-G). This style also has similarities with historic Australian architecture designed for hot, rainy climates, such as the quintessential ‘Queenslander’ houses found in the northern states. However, the vertical slab construction is not typical of any of these other examples.

### **Conclusions**

The Wigwam represents a very unusual example of an 1870s Wellington, domestic dwelling designed by and constructed for a young, locally active architect. As Assistant Colonial Architect Beatson's main projects would have been civic ones requiring more formal designs intended for public settings. It was probably a welcome opportunity to be able to explore architectural ideas and innovations when designing a house for his own new family on this elevated section in the Western Hutt hills some 140 years ago.

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