

THE HASTINGS WOMEN'S REST -

a brief history, and an appraisal for revival.

Reference:

- ▶ History (according to Mary Boyd pp 218 - 220).

The Women's Rest was opened to the public in September 1921. The land on which it stands was part of a block that had been sold to the Hastings Borough Council for its extension of Russell Street (then called Station Street).

A condition of the sale was that Council erect the facility on the block. The vendor, a Mrs Garnett, began a fund raising campaign by donating £750 to assist with the project, and further substantial donations were soon to follow.

From its beginning, the Women's Rest provided Plunket Rooms as well as accommodation for a matron, a lounge, nursery and of course toilets. The Plunket Rooms were provided free in return for a contribution from Plunket to the matron's salary. In its early years, the popularity of the Women's Rest was such that its services practically paid for themselves. In addition to the services available to mothers, it was a favourite lunchtime venue amongst women working in the town.

Over the years the Women's Rest continued to provide an important and much valued service to the women of Hastings and surrounding district.

The predominant user has always been Plunket, but a range of other women's groups have utilised the facilities from time-to-time and of course the lounge, nursery and toilets have been patronised by thousands of casual users over the years.

In the 1980's, maintenance problems began to surface and Council's attention was drawn to the need to consider longer-term issues regarding the Women's Rest. The last resident matron of the Women's Rest, Sheena Shergold, continued to serve tea, coffee and biscuits in the lounge, but changing times saw a decline in the demand for this.

The expansion of the cafe and lunch-bar trade in the city, virtually non-existent until the late 1970's, the opening of alternative toilet facilities and the increased mobility of visitors all contributed to a drop in patronage. Council derived no income from any of the building's services.

With the exception of the Plunket Rooms, there became a perception that the building was under-utilised and with Council seeking efficiencies and requiring accountability, the future of the building came under increasing scrutiny.

At about the same time as questions were being raised about the Women's Rest's future, debate was taking place regarding the city's library needs. The existing library building was acknowledged as too small to serve a city of Hastings' size and architects were engaged by the City Council to consider options for a new library. The resulting concept would have required the demolition of the Women's Rest to make way for a new library on the Eastbourne Street/Russell Street corner, although provision was made in the new building for replacement Plunket Rooms, toilets and other community rooms.

Early in its term, the first Council of the Hastings District considered the library plans that it had inherited from the City Council, and resolved not to proceed with a new building. The subsequent sale of shares in the Hawke's Bay Milk Corporation made possible the funding of an extension to the existing library, which is now under construction.

More recently, there has been debate on the location and future direction of the Visitor Information Centre, and one option was to relocate it to the Women's Rest building. The proposal had merit in terms of location, and was seen as an option that would provide fuller utilisation of the lounge area, thus justifying an increased Council commitment to the building as a whole.

The K-Mart development had some influence on the decision to remodel the Visitor Information Centre on its present site, as did public concern regarding the Women's Rest's identity should it be forced to serve such a dual purpose.

Early in 1991, at the time the Visitor Information Centre debate was beginning to take place, Sheena Shergold was offered redundancy. Council considered it could no longer justify the position, albeit a part-time one, and if proper attention was to be given to the future role of the Women's Rest, the accommodation area had also to be reviewed. By having the flat vacated, Council now had the opportunity to consider a wide range of suggestions and options for better utilisation of the building.

The truth is, there has been neglect of the building's condition. There is no doubt that the interior of the Women's Rest needs refurbishment. While the public areas and Plunket Rooms have remained in reasonable condition, the accommodation had deteriorated to a point where it was becoming inhabitable. Much of the building's plumbing is also in need of replacement.

Having noted these points, it can be said that the building is in sound structural condition and its recent exterior repaint, compliments of Levenes, shows that despite its age, it has significant potential as a prominent base for community use in the future.

It is now up to Council in consultation with the community, to identify ways of better utilising the space now available, ways that must be complimentary to existing users and the building's historical role, but also catering for the needs of modern society.

Throughout the period of the Visitor Information Centre location study, Plunket and other Women's groups and organisations were invited to participate in our deliberations, and several meetings and on-site inspections were held.

The Heretaunga Women's Group had approached Council earlier with suggestions and plans for a revitalisation of the use of the building, and a lease of occupation of some space was agreed to.

It was, in fact, Council restructuring which led the Division newly responsible for the Women's Rest, to have a closer look at its needs, use and operation.

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