

# POSTAL SERVICE

Part 2, Chapter 8

**M**ail bringing news from "Home" was eagerly awaited by the early settlers and the first post office was established in Thorndon in the middle of the 1840. Postal and telegraph facilities developed over the years and, by the 1870s, were based at the Chief Post Office in Customhouse Quay, near Queen's Wharf. Although mail deliveries were made to people living in the town the service did not include the growing area around the Basin Reserve. As the result of a petition to the postmaster-general in June 1874 deliveries were extended to the residents of Te Aro and Adelaide Road but people living south of John Street continued to collect their mail from the Chief Post Office.

Further requests for better facilities resulted in the opening of the Adelaide Road Post Office on 1 April 1876. Situated in Revans, now Riddiford, Street, the office was given the name commonly applied to the district before the term Newtown was adopted. Herbert Gaby, who owned the soapworks, was the first postmaster and the office was in his new store in what is now Riddiford Street, close to the John Street intersection. Outward mail closed daily at 8 a.m. and inward mail for those residents not receiving a delivery service would have been held at the office until collected.

Gaby resigned the following year and was replaced by George Henry Baylis, Snr on 1 October 1877. The new office, listed in the Wellington Almanack as a country post office, was located in the Newtown Timber Yard and Builders Ironmongery Store in Adelaide Road, between Drummond and John Streets. After operating for over a year it closed on 31 December 1878. The services offered by these two branches would have been limited to the sale of stamps and money orders, receipt and despatch of mail and possibly, the operating of Post Office Savings Bank accounts.

The area was without postal facilities for close on seven years after the closure of the Adelaide Road office

although it is likely that mail deliveries were extended to Newtown during that period. The Newtown Post Office opened on 1 October 1885 in Alexander Wilson's store on the corner of Constable and Riddiford Streets, where the children's play area is now situated. It was well placed to serve the growing population south of Constable Street and, in addition to the normal services, the office accepted telegrams for transmission to the Chief Post Office. A new service was introduced in 1887 with the establishment of parcel post. The office's name caused some confusion because of similarity to the Auckland suburb of Newton and Alexander Wilson became a firm advocate for a name change. On 1 July 1891 the office was renamed Wellington South Post Office. About the same time Alexander Wilson retired and his son Alexander Jnr ("Sandy") took over as postmaster, a position he retained until the turn of the century.

The Adelaide Road Post Office reopened on 17 November 1894 as a telegraph/telephone office but within a week it was established as a full post office. The postmaster, George W Wilton was a chemist and importer of Chemical and scientific apparatus, whose business was located at 53 Adelaide Road, between Oxford and Broomhedge Streets.

The need for a permanent building for the Wellington South post office became obvious during the 1890s as the building boom progressed. In July 1897 a deputation of three people, headed by Charles Wilson, the new member for the district, waited upon the Postmaster-General to press their case. After hearing that 4,000-5,000 people lived in Newtown and the surrounding districts who would be served by such an office, and that up to 22 houses were being built each week, the Hon. G. Walker, agreed to recommend to Cabinet that a sum of money be voted for the project. Officialdom worked slowly and it was not until January 1899 that an advertisement appeared in the Evening Post

Reference to be  
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requesting offers of land suitable for a post and telegraph office in Newtown. A central location was required, preferably in an area bounded by Hospital Road in the north and Stoke and Constable Streets in the south. By then, there were few vacant sections left and the Post and Telegraph Department had great difficulty in finding a site. A section in Riddiford Street was eventually chosen, on the southern side of the present St Thomas's church centre, where L. Evans and Co. Ltd. and World Video Centre are located. As the City Council planned to widen Riddiford Street the building was set back 16 feet from the street line and, in compensation, the department was given a portion of Gordon Place at the back of the property.

The new office, built at a cost of £1,886, was a two-storey brick building faced with Oamaru stone in what was described as the new Renaissance style of architecture. The public office was on the southern side and had six desks for public use and a double counter with glass partitions. The general office area was on the northern side and the centrally placed front vestibule included a soundproof telephone box. Accommodation for the postmaster was provided on the first floor with a kitchen and dining room at the rear of the ground floor offices. The new postmaster was J. W. Salmon and he was assisted by a telegraph operator, three messengers and a clerk.

Wellington South Post Office was decorated with flags and business premises displayed bunting on 15 August 1900 when the new building was opened by the Premier, the Rt. Hon. R. J. Seddon. The two public schools had closed early so there were many children in the large crowd which witnessed the formalities. The Premier accompanied by Miss Seddon and the Minister of Public Works, the Hon. W. Hall-Jones, was received by the Mayor, J. G. W. Aitken, and other dignitaries.

During the ceremony various speakers voiced their concern about local problems, for the Premier's

benefit – the necessity to extend the railway from Te Aro Station through Newtown to Island Bay to serve the growing population and the need for more police accommodation. While not making any promises about the railway the Premier indicated that the government would be prepared to meet the district's need when the time came. On the question of police accommodation he was less forthcoming merely stating that he thought "silence was golden" on that subject.

Amidst the general approval of the fine new office there was some disappointment that it was not intended to erect a clock on the outside of the building. When the Postmaster-General, Sir Joseph Ward, was approached he promised that the government would contribute half the total cost of £150 if the remaining £75 was raised by the residents and business people. Billy Barber, the local MP, undertook to organise the collection but unfortunately the members of his electorate did not fully support his appeal and he paid most of the cost from his own pocket.

The clock, which projected above the main entrance on an iron bracket, was not a popular feature with the staff because it was difficult to wind. To do so it was necessary to lean out of a first-floor window to insert the key, fixed to the end of a long "V" pole into the hole in the clock, a difficult task in wet or windy weather.

Once the new office was open telegrams were sent by wire direct to Wellington South then delivered by local messengers. Ernest Nees, who lived in Berhampore and later, in Manley Terrace worked as a telegraph boy at Wellington South Post Office about 1907-8. He mentioned in his memoirs that the messengers wore brown uniforms with a red stripe and that they either walked or rode a bicycle when delivering telegrams. If people were out a note was left, the telegram was marked "not at home" and taken back to the post office. As the boys did not like making night calls to some of the dark streets off Adelaide Road near Athletic Park it was

not unknown for night telegrams for these addresses to be so marked and taken to the office without a call being made.

While the new office was being established at Wellington South the Adelaide Road Post Office continued to operate at the same address. A change of postmaster occurred about 1901 when William Gower took, over the pharmaceutical business and he remained in charge for nearly 10 years. In 1911 a former shop at 123 Adelaide Road, in the corner of Drummond Street, was purchased from the city council and a permanent office was opened on 29 June with J. F. Carr as postmaster.

The work of the Wellington South Post Office increased steadily during this period. About 1915 the postmaster and his family vacated the living quarters which were then converted to more office space for the 14 staff members employed. Wellington South Automatic Telephone Exchange was installed in part of the space a few years later. The exchanges at Newtown and Courtenay Place, the first two in Wellington, were switched on at midnight on 18 October 1919. To help instruct the public on how to use the new phones advertisements were screened at picture theatres throughout Wellington, an effective means of mass communication in pre-radio days. The exchange remained in the post office until 25 September 1957 when it moved to a new building in Hall Avenue, behind the present building occupied by New Zealand Post and Postbank.

Post Office work continued to grow and in 1946 a temporary building was erected at Wellington South in the yard on the south side of the building to provide extra accommodation for the savings bank section.

The third post office in the area was opened at Wellington Hospital on 16 February 1949 at the request of the Wellington Hospital Board. It was the first office established in the country to serve the needs of staff,

board, and patients and had its own postmark. Miss M. Purvis the postmistress, and her assistant, provided full postal facilities but savings bank services were limited to deposits only.

As accommodation became *more* cramped it was decided in the early 1960s to build a new office on the southern corner of Hall and Riddiford Streets. After many delays building started in December 1965 and the foundation stone was laid on the 19 May 1966 by the Hon. W. J. Scott, Postmaster-General. The ceremony, except for the "tapping of the stone", was held in Newtown School Assembly Hall because of wet weather. Sir Francis Kitts, the Mayor, said it was appropriate that the government should play a part in the reconstruction at Newtown by erecting a prestige building which would set the pattern for future redevelopment.

Built at the cost of \$169,000 the new office was opened on the 29 August 1967 by the Hon W. J. Scott who described it as a fine addition to Newtown's business area. Part of the ceremony was again held in the Newtown School Assembly Hall but the weather cleared in time for the large crowd to move across Riddiford Street to watch the Postmaster-General unveil a plaque, and send the first telegram. Two large brown paper bootees addressed to Karitane Hospital, Melrose were among the first items to be posted. Organised by the Newtown branch of the Plunket Society the bootees, which were three feet high and brightly decorated with pictures and bows, contained baby clothes and toiletries donated or paid for by local business people. A range of perishable items, such as meat and vegetables had been delivered previously to the hospital.

The small post office in Adelaide Road had, by the 1970s, become overcrowded and needed replacement. It was demolished in December 1977 together with an old two-storeyed double unit next door. A new single storey office was built on the enlarged site by Robin Schwass Ltd at a cost of nearly \$165,000 and opened on May 1979.



Changes occurred on 1 April 1987 when, under the State Owned Enterprises Act passed the previous year, the former New Zealand Post Office was divided into three separate organisations – New Zealand Post Ltd, Postbank Ltd and Telecom Corporation of New Zealand Ltd. The public area at the former Wellington South Post Office was divided temporarily into two sections to separate New Zealand Post and Postbank until major



alterations were made to the building in 1989. A permanent wall was erected between the two offices and the northern section used by Postbank was designed to provide an enlarged public area with a new entrance near the corner of Hall Street. The refurbished premises opened on 20 November 1989. New Zealand Post Ltd continued in its cramped corner until the following April when the post shop was relocated in a temporary building in Hall Street. The whole front area was redesigned and the positions of the post shop and private boxes were reversed to make additional space for the relocated private boxes from nearby offices which had closed. On 28 May 1990 the redecorated post shop opened for business.

During this period of redevelopment at Wellington South events had also occurred at the other two offices. Adelaide Road Post Office was the scene of an armed robbery on 21 November 1988 when a lone robber got away with \$2,000. The following year it was a victim of the policy which closed small, uneconomic offices and the doors were finally shut on 12 May 1989 after nearly 95 years continuous service. The building is now occupied by a Public Trust branch. Wellington Hospital Post Office and Postbank closed on 11 February 1989 with wine and cheese being supplied to all customers on the last day. These closures, combined with the shutting of Island Bay, Brooklyn and Berhampore offices about the same time, left the Wellington South branches of New Zealand Post Ltd and Postbank Ltd as the only centres serving the southern suburbs.

This is a very different picture to that of earlier years when, in addition to the permanent offices, a number of temporary agencies were opened for specific purposes and for varying lengths of time. The first was Newtown Park Military Post Office which operated between 15 and 30 October 1901 to serve the South African Contingent camped at the park prior to embarkation. Further offices at Newtown Park were

Reference to be added

established at the Wellington Boys Institute Bazaar on 20 September 1913 and the Wellington Citizens' Carnivals in March 1913 and April 1914.

Another wartime office known as Newtown Military Camp, functioned between 12 July and 13 November 1940 and is thought to have been at the then Winter Show Buildings which were used by the army at that time. The Wellington Show Buildings, formerly Winter Show and now the Wellington Snow and Sports Centre, John Street, was the centre for 13 industrial and trade fairs held at 2-3 yearly intervals, between 1952 and 1976, at which temporary post offices were established for periods of up to three weeks. It was a successful way to publicise the work of the Post and Telegraph Department (renamed New Zealand Post Office in 1960) and to demonstrate the equipment and latest developments as well as provide postal facilities for the exhibitors. When tape recorders were newly on the market a popular feature was the recording devices which were then played back to the speaker. Watching people's reaction to hearing their own voices was as entertaining as having the experience.

The central location of postal facilities is very important and it seems that, over the years, the Wellington South Post Office has largely been on the fringe of the Newtown business district. When the first permanent building opened in Riddiford Street in 1900 it was well placed in what was then a busy area. The nearby hotels, police station and tram terminus all generated pedestrian traffic and the surrounding shops flourished. Gradually changes occurred as the hotels closed, the police station moved north and the tram terminus was relocated. With fewer people drawn to the area the shops began to decline. The establishment of Fownes, George and George's and other major shops near Newtown School caused further deterioration, leaving the post office isolated at the southern end. When a new office was eventually built in the 1960s on what had been

expected to be a central site, it was ironical that the business area to the north had begun to die. The public library had moved from opposite the hospital to Constable Street and the two-storeyed business premises which lined the street were taken over for hospital development. For a time the business area remained static until, in the early 1980s, the section of Riddiford Street south of Constable Street began to revive. A new Anglican church was built and the opening of the Newtown Mall and McDonald's Restaurant attracted more shoppers to the area leaving the post office again on the fringe of the business section.

Now however with the closure of offices in the surrounding suburbs, New Zealand Post and Postbank are well the wider southern region of the city.



Reference to be added