



MOUNT ALBERT HISTORICAL SOCIETY INC.

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1922 Mt Albert Typhoid Epidemic

Mt Albert is changing. Single dwellings make way for greater housing density; Watercare is upgrading wastewater infrastructure with the Central Interceptor project. We aim for healthy, livable homes and thriving communities. All this against a backdrop of rapid social change, financial uncertainty, and pandemic. One hundred years ago, the situation was very similar.

Mt Albert was the fastest growing borough in Auckland: 253 building permits were issued for new dwellings in the year to March 1922. The residents required water, and they created waste.

Mt Albert Borough Council struggled to do their best in the face of this unprecedented growth. Formed in 1911 to replace the Mt Albert Road Board, it had inherited a weak infrastructure and had been further hampered by the war and lean times. Budget proposals to expand infrastructure to meet future demand were often rejected by voters, as they would mean rates increases.

Local councils banded together on large infrastructure initiatives. The main city wastewater interceptor from Point Chevalier to Orakei had opened in 1914, administered by the Auckland and Suburban Drainage Board, and Mt Albert sewers were connected into this. On 1 April 1922 the Auckland Electric Power Board took over local councils' assets and began delivering electricity across the isthmus. Auckland city drew its water from the Nihotupu Dam project in the Waitakere Ranges. Mt Albert Borough Council had the

option to draw water from this main if necessary.

In 1911 Mt Albert Borough Council had opened a Pumphouse which supplied the Borough with water from the Albert West aquifer through springs located near the Asylum at Oakley Creek. Water was pumped up to two reservoirs on the slopes of Mt Albert. At the start of 1922, 11,300 of the 12,500 residents of Mt Albert Borough lived in homes connected to this Mt Albert water supply. Most other local bodies accessed water from similar aquifers at this time.

Initially, the Pumphouse produced pure clean water. However, the scoria fields that fed the aquifer were rapidly transforming. In 1923, Auckland's Acting Medical Officer of Health, Robert H. Makgill summarised the situation: "on the possible catchment there are now about one thousand houses, most of which have been built in the last five or six years."

Wastewater infrastructure was rudimentary. Mt Albert Council approved discharge of domestic wastewater straight into scoria ground. Sewers were installed from 1901 onwards, but they did not serve the whole Borough. For those not connected to the sewers, night-soil collection was optional (at 6d a week), and many properties had septic tanks which drained through scoria pits. Of course, this pollution made its way back into the aquifer.

Contaminated water leads to illness, and typhoid, caused by the B.coli bacteria, was a constant threat in early New Zealand. There had been

outbreaks in several spring-fed districts in the decade before 1922, including One Tree Hill and Western Springs. In 1915, just four years after Mt Albert began using its new Pumphouse, the Auckland District Health Officer warned local bodies that it was dangerous to rely upon local springs. Water quality was tested, but not frequently enough to head off problems.

The Council realised that they needed an expert on the staff to take responsibility for public health. Recruitment began for the first Borough Sanitary Inspector in August 1921, but the appointee did not start work until February 1922.

During 1921, tests showed varying levels of B.coli in Mt Albert's water, reaching dangerous levels in November. On 5 December the Council started chlorinating its water. This worked, but in response to public feedback about taste, the level of chlorine was reduced. The B.coli levels rose again, and the chlorine dose was increased at the end of March.

The summer had been very hot and humid. The level in the aquifer dropped, and residents were implored to conserve water. To help, by January 1922 around 900 homes in Mt Albert Borough had been switched to the Auckland city water mains, but the Council intended to return everybody to the local water supply by mid-March. Despite the lower water table, during the summer 15,000 gallons of water per hour were being pumped out of the springs and up to the reservoirs on the mountain.

Auckland is prone to both drought and deluge, and at the end of February, heavy rain started. This created significant flood damage through the Borough's low-lying areas. It also flushed more sewage and other pollutants into the already tainted aquifer.

Mt Albert was about to hit the headlines. Typhoid was an annual seasonal disease, and in March 1922 a few cases of typhoid were reported across Auckland, which was not unexpected. However, in April and May, a significant typhoid epidemic swept through the area served by Mt Albert Pumphouse. There were 216 reported cases, and 31 deaths.

The first case was notified on 8 April: as typhoid has an incubation period of 12-14 days, the early infections stemmed from the period of low chlorination. However, the Auckland health authorities were unaware that there were many cases of typhoid at the Asylum in the first week of April, and this gave the bacteria time to spread.

Once it was realised an epidemic was underway, swift action was taken. On 13 April, the local water supply was turned off, the pipes were flushed and chlorinated, and supply was switched to the Auckland city water main. Unfortunately, not all Mt Albert residents had access to this clean supply and some continued to use water from the now heavily chlorinated local reservoirs.

Typhoid is highly contagious, and can be passed from person to person through food, and by contact with waste products. On 17 April, residents were warned to boil water and milk thoroughly, not to eat raw food washed in water, and to prevent contamination by flies. On the same day schools and rubbish tips closed, but picture theatres and churches remained open, as typhoid was not shared through the air.

Most infections appeared between 17 April and 15 May, with a long tail into June. Cases occurred throughout all areas that were supplied with Mt Albert water. Mapping showed one notable exception: there were few infections in an area populated mostly by returned soldiers, who had been inoculated while serving. By the end of April, 442 residents had lined up for inoculation against typhoid.

People who caught typhoid were isolated to prevent spread of the disease. Home visits by nurses were available. Many of those too ill to be treated at home, or living in homes without sewer connections, were admitted to Auckland Hospital. Evelyn Tattersfield established a temporary fever hospital at her home Puriri Puke at 34 Allendale Rd. This large, elevated house, which was isolated from neighbours, had also been used in 1918 as a hospital during the influenza epidemic.

The Mayor of Mt Albert, Alfred F. Bennett, managed the crisis as well as possible. He admitted that the source of the outbreak was the water supplied by the Borough's Pumping Station but attempted to deflect blame away from the Council's poor waste infrastructure, and posited that the source of infection was the Asylum. As the Asylum was connected to the main interceptor sewer, unlike many of the new houses on the scoria plain, this was not a strong argument. The epidemic cost Bennett popular support and in 1923 he chose not to stand for a second term in office.

The aquifer was clearly the source of the infection, and since May 1922 all Mt Albert's water has been drawn from Auckland city's water mains. The Council issued 900 infringement notices by the end of June 1922 for houses that were not compliant with a by-law requiring connection to sewer mains.

Improvements were made to night soil collection procedures and funding was obtained for large-scale wastewater and drainage works. The new Borough Sanitary Inspector played a significant role in protecting future public health.

Unfortunately, this was not the last epidemic in Mt Albert. Typhoid has been reported from time to time: as recently as 2017 there was an outbreak centred on the Mt Albert Samoan Assembly of God Church. The polio epidemic of 1947-8 was a tragedy for individuals and had considerable social impact. Influenza continues to be an annual scourge, and SARS, measles and other diseases run through our communities regularly. Covid19, of course, has impacted our community greatly, and the "Marist cluster" of cases in May-June 2020 thrust Mt Albert into the national media gaze again.

Going forward, we need good housing and quality infrastructure that is adequate for the changing needs of our communities. Our lives are inextricably bound up in the decisions made by our fellow citizens, by politicians and by local and national agencies.

*Written by Lynley Stone
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Would you like more detail about this topic?
I recommend two very readable sources:

Makgill, R. (1923). *Notes on an outbreak of typhoid fever in the Mount Albert District, Auckland*. In *Department of Health. Annual Report of the Director-General of Health*. AJHofR, Session I-II, H-31, pages 20-22. <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/parliamentary/AJHR1923-I-II.2.2.5.34>

Truttman, Lisa J. (2007). *Wairaka's waters: The Auckland Asylum springs*. (available from Auckland Libraries)

As well as the sources listed above, extensive use has been made of newspaper articles from Papers Past. If you would like to see a fully referenced version of this article please contact the author.

Note that the old Pumphouse is now Building 33 on the Unitec Campus. It will be retained as a heritage building in the planned residential development of this area.

Help Create MAHS's Record of Mt Albert's History

Street Photo Project

We are delighted to report that since January we have photographed the street view of houses in 20% of the streets of Mt Albert. We are very grateful to the members who have joined the project in response to our call in the last *Newsletter*.



20 Goring Rd, January 2022.
Taken by Sue Aitchison-Windeler.

Would you be interested in taking some photos for us? Please get in touch and we can assign you an area – every photograph helps.

Future Newsletter Topics

We are planning future articles, about:

- the realignment and extension of St Lukes Rd.
- the block of shops that were demolished to make way for St Lukes Rd extension.

Do you have any personal or professional memories and information about the road change, or about the shops? We would love to talk with you over the next 3 months.

Have Your Say on Proposed Changes to Auckland's Unitary Plan

Auckland Council is proposing to allow greater intensification of building, particularly along the “walkable catchment” areas close to transport corridors. The proposal includes re-zoning considerable portions of Mt Albert as a Terrace Housing and Apartment Building Zone, allowing up to 6 storey apartments to be built on properties. These areas are:

- Most properties between New North Rd and the Northwestern Motorway, almost up to Fowlds Park in Morningside.
- A large block of properties between New North Rd and the mountain, and along both sides of Mt Albert Rd between New North Rd and Toroa Tce. This includes streets running west off Mt Albert Rd (Ferner Ave, Allendale Rd etc.)
- Smaller areas between mostly along New North Rd, between Mt Albert Rd and St Lukes Rd. Francis Ryan Close is a pocket flagged for development.

Submissions close on 9 May. Details can be found at <https://akhaveyoursay.aucklandcouncil.govt.nz/housing>.

February-April 1922: Mt Albert 100 years ago

As well as the typhoid epidemic...

- Mt Albert Presbyterian Church was moved by steamroller from the corner of New North Rd up Mt Albert Rd to its present home.
- Mt Albert Grammar School opened. Morningside station was considered the most convenient station for students.
- Motorcyclists were using the road near Edendale School “as a racetrack.”
- The pay phone in Kingsland was heavily used although prone to being vandalized.
- Graffiti along the railway line near Kingsland was a problem.
- Most new homes that were being built were for former soldiers who received government financial assistance.
- Kowhai School became the first “junior high school” in the Dominion.
- A garden fete and evening concert were held at Dr A.O.Knight's home in Seaview Ave to raise funds for the Mt Albert Baptist Church Primary Department Piano Fund.

Will you share your research?

Have you researched the history of a property, or done family history related to Mt Albert, or written about the history of a local business, club etc.? Would you like to write an article for the *Newsletter* or for the MAHS website, or help us write one? Please get in touch.

Collecting Mt Albert History

We are keen to obtain digital or print copies of old photographs and documents about Mt Albert people, houses, streets and events. We can help with digitisation if necessary, so that the original stays with the owner.

The photo below is an example of a treasure that has been shared with MAHS from a personal collection. It depicts the large villa on the corner of Carrington Rd and Prospero Tce, which was demolished in the 1970s.



214 Carrington Rd taken from 1 Prospero Tce c1945 by John Bridge.
(Cropped). From collection of Colin Bridge.

NEWS

ANZAC Day 25 April 2022 at Mt Albert War Memorial Hall

The 2022 ANZAC Day ceremony was briefer and the gathering smaller than previous years, a deliberate strategy to keep people safe during the Covid19 pandemic. Masks were required and social distancing encouraged. There was no choir, and fewer groups were formally represented. It was clear that many in the community who would normally attend chose not to risk being part of a large group. However, the Hall was almost full, with a good sized crowd standing outside. Showers threatened, but held off until later in the day.

Christina Robertson, Albert-Eden Local Board member, ably facilitated the ceremony. Captain Erica Kearse, Mt Albert Corps Officer of the Salvation Army, led the prayers. The bugler, Philip Anderson, played the Last Post and Reveille. Mary Horsley read the Ode: *For the Fallen* by Laurence Binyon. This was followed by Mt Albert MP and Prime Minister Rt Hon Jacinda Ardern, who spoke movingly of how precious it is to come together and share, about how we cannot take peace for granted, and how Mt Albert has memorialized those who have served. Wesley Donald, MAGS Head Prefect, read John McCrae's poem *In Flanders Fields*, and Eva Wadsworth Deputy Head Prefect, read *A Poem for ANZAC Day*.

MAHS laid a wreath at the Mt Albert cenotaph as part of the service. This year our wreath was composed of hand knitted poppies made by MAHS committee members Judith Goldie and Mary Inomata.

After the ceremony, many people stayed to talk, and to reflect on the crosses on the lawn, representing Mt Albert service people who have fallen, and on the wreaths at the cenotaph.



MAHS EVENTS FOR MAY-AUGUST 2022

We have a full programme of events planned for the rest of the year. We take your safety seriously and will do all we can to minimise the risk of COVID19 transmission at our meetings. Please wear masks.

MEMBERS GET-TOGETHER MEETING. Saturday 21 May, 2pm. Ferndale House. No designated speaker: we want to get to know each other a little more. We invite you to bring a brief story to share about how you are connected to Mt Albert. This might be about your childhood, work, or something else entirely. We will observe social distancing and require masks while inside. Refreshments will be served outside on the verandah where conversations can continue in fresh air. This relaxed meeting is for Members only.

THE STORIES WE TELL. Sue Birman. Sunday 12 June, 2pm. Online via Zoom. In this online talk Auckland Council's Principal Oral History Advisor Sue Birman takes us on a tour of the oral histories and sound recordings in Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections. Sue will take Q & As after her talk. A reminder will be sent, and the Zoom link will be shared before the meeting. We plan to offer more online talks in future.

MT ALBERT GRAMMAR SCHOOL HISTORY. Debbie Dunsford. Saturday 16 July, 2pm. Debbie Dunsford is the author of the new Centenary book on Mt Albert Grammar School (to be launched September 2022). She will talk to us about researching and writing the book. This meeting is for Members only.

MT ALBERT HISTORICAL SOCIETY ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING. Saturday 27 August 2pm. Ferndale House. Please join us for our AGM. Our speaker will be Bill Hodge, retired Professor of Law at the University of Auckland. Everybody welcome.