



# MOUNT ALBERT HISTORICAL SOCIETY INC.

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## Street Fire Alarms in Mt Albert



For over fifty years, street fire alarms were a vital piece of Mt Albert's public infrastructure.

### In the event of fire

We are all familiar with fire alarms, with their clear instructions — “Break glass press knob.” The design may have changed, but the principle is the same: if you push the button, the Fire Brigade is called to your location. These days they are only seen inside, but they once featured on many street corners, clearly marked by red and white painted poles.

### Fire bells and telephone calls

An alarm must be raised quickly if the Fire Brigade are to have a chance of controlling a blaze. Mt Albert's Fire Brigade was established in Kingsland in 1906, and in 1912 fire bell towers were installed at Morningside and at Glenmore, opposite Morrin (Mostyn) St, to allow people to summon help. There was also a fire bell at Mt Albert. The key problem with fire bells was that they were not always heard at the Fire Station.

It was the late 1960s before most homes had a telephone. Without one, in an emergency people used public phone boxes, the phone of a neighbour or a business, or even of a stranger — you could tell which houses had phones by following the phone lines on the street.

If fire bells were not reliable, and phones few and far between, how should you call for help? A quick, foolproof solution was needed: the answer was street fire alarms.

### Street fire alarms in Auckland

Mt Albert residents would have seen street fire alarm boxes in the city. When you broke the alarm's small glass window and pushed the button, a coded signal was sent to

the Fire Station via a dedicated line. Fire fighters could be dispatched straight away to the location of the alarm box.

Auckland started using the Kirkby system in 1903, and over time additional systems were added. They upgraded to the New Zealand-designed Duplex Street Fire Alarm system in 1919–20.

### Street fire alarms in Mt Albert

Mt Albert Council first considered introducing street fire alarms in April 1914, but did not proceed until 1921. Two disastrous fires underlined how inadequate the fire bell system was. In September 1920, fire destroyed Robert Davis's bakery (now 30 Lloyd Ave), then in October 1921 Coulter Bros Engineering Works (now 932–934 New North Rd) was burnt down. In both cases, the Mt Albert fire bell was rung but was not heard 2 miles away at the Fire Station in Kingsland. With the Coulter Bros blaze, there was a considerable delay before somebody thought to phone the Brigade.

Mt Albert purchased Auckland's superseded Kirkby system, and by the end of February 1922, the fire bell towers had been sold, and the street fire alarms were in place. Fire Brigade staffing was increased and the Fire Station at Kingsland was extended, allowing seven men to sleep overnight in the station.

### The first street fire alarms

In February 1922 there were twelve street fire alarm boxes on three circuits. Along *New North Rd*, they were placed on the corners of:

- *Gladstone (Carrington) Rd*
- *Alexandra (Alexis) Ave*
- *Wairere Ave*
- *Salisbury (Sainsbury) Rd*
- *Western Springs Rd*
- *Commercial (Central) Rd*
- *King St*
- *Morrin (Mostyn) Rd*

Along *Edendale (Sandringham) Rd*, alarms were at the intersections of:

- *Walters Rd (Eden Park)*
- *Royal Tce*
- *Paice Ave*
- *Balmoral Rd*

The first test of the system came on Saturday 4 March 1922, when a fire in a wash-house in Aitken Terrace was rapidly extinguished, preventing serious damage, thanks to the proximity of the Morrin St fire alarm box.

### Rapid growth

Two months after the official opening, there were 22 street fire alarms in Mt Albert Borough, but the locations of these next ten are not identified in any sources.

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In October 1923, five were added, at the intersections of:

- *Western Springs Rd & Finch St*
- *Walters Rd & Kowhai St*
- *Western Springs Rd & Mountain View Rd*
- *Edendale Rd & Oxton Rd*
- *Edendale Rd & Calgary St*

In January 1924, Mt Albert Borough Council approved seven new alarm boxes, and asked that three more locations be identified.

In November 1924, the line was extended to the western end of the Borough. The Karitane Hospital agreed to pay costs for an alarm to be installed outside its building (in McLean St). There were at least two alarms put in:

- *New North Rd & Bollard Ave*
- *Murdoch Rd (McLean St)*

In April 1925, an alarm was installed for the Prince of Wales Estate at:

- *The Triangle, at the end of Roslyn (Rossgrove) Tce.*

In November 1925 one was placed somewhere in:

- *Vincent Ave (Owairaka Rd)*

## A new Fire Station

Mt Albert Fire Brigade desperately needed upgrading. The Council, under Mayor Leonard Rhodes, raised a £7000 loan to build a new station next to the old one, buy a new fire appliance, and to upgrade water mains and stormwater systems. The upgrade included purchasing a Duplex street fire alarm system, like the one Auckland had been using since 1919 (the old Kirkby system was offered for sale). The new station officially opened Saturday 12 June 1926.

## Street fire alarms in the new system

At its 1926 launch, Mt Albert's new Duplex system supported 49 street alarm boxes around the Borough, on 4 circuits. The system had the capacity to run 6 circuits, each capable of taking 15 alarms boxes.

Early in 1927, Frederick Marter, Brigade Supervisor, lobbied for a fifth fire alarm circuit to be added in the upcoming budget, raising the capacity to 75 alarms in total, which he thought would be "ample for the time being." He stated that street fire alarms were "the only sure way of communicating with the brigade."

By July 1927, alarm boxes had been installed on the corners of:

- *Mt Albert Rd & Huntingtree Ave*
- *Exeter Rd & Gordon Rd (Morningside Dr)*
- *Edendale Rd & Vancouver Ave*

Eight more were planned for the Edendale area. In October 1929 an alarm was placed somewhere in:

- *Euston Rd*

## Auckland Metropolitan Fire Board

The fire services of Auckland were amalgamated to form the Auckland Metropolitan Fire Board on 1 April 1933. At its first meeting, it resolved to modernise and expand the fire alarm systems of several areas, including Mt Albert, which got 16 new street fire alarms as part of a circuit reconstruction (this seems to have involved upgrading

previously installed fire alarms, rather than adding 16 new points). Mt Albert had 60 fire alarms at this point, with 613 across the whole city.

The Fire Board ran alarm circuits on 102 poles in Mt Albert, belonging to the Auckland Electric Power Board, at a rent of 1s per pole per year. The alarm wires had to hang at least 2 feet lower than the existing wires. When the Mt Albert Fire Brigade was out on a call, they were now able to switch their alarm system over to the Pitt St Control Room so the street alarms were continuously monitored.

## After 1950, Mt Albert and Avondale Circuits

The number of street alarms in Mt Albert Borough stayed stable at 60 between 1933 and 1950, when new alarms were installed in the western end of Mt Albert. These were on the Avondale Fire Station's circuits rather than Mt Albert's. Alarms were placed at the corners of:

- *Hendon Ave & Harlston Rd*
- *Richardson Rd & Preston Ave*
- *Hendon Ave & Rangeview Rd*
- *Springleigh Ave & Renton Rd*
- *Hendon Ave & Richardson Rd*
- *Jerram St & Harbutt Ave*
- *Richardson Rd & Owairaka Ave*
- *Jersey Ave & Newcastle Tce*

In 1953, a further alarm was installed on the corner of:

- *Warwick St & Levonias St*

When an alarm was triggered, the station received a coded message indicating which circuit and which box had been activated. Roller blinds were installed in the stations with locations beside each code number.



The circuits were reorganised from time to time. In October 1957, Mt Albert Fire Station had a 6-circuit board, with 3 active circuits supporting 66 alarm boxes:

- Circuit A 17 call points
- Circuit B 23 call points
- Circuit C 26 call points

The alarm circuit coding changed again between 1957 and 1961, as references in official documents start referring to alarms on Circuit 36 and 37 rather than A, B and C. An alarm in Taylors Rd was moved from Circuit 36 to Circuit 16 in 1961.

In 1961, street alarms were installed on the outside of every fire station, so that the public could raise an alarm if the Station's staff were out on a call.

- *Mt Albert Fire Station, New North Rd, Kingsland*

This was the last street fire alarm added in Mt Albert. Across Auckland, the final alarm was installed in 1964. At the highest point, there were 923 alarms Auckland-wide

### Locations of other alarms

At some point, alarms were installed at the corners of:

- *Taylor's Rd & St Lukes Rd*
- *School Rd & Fourth Ave*
- *Sandringham Rd & Onslow Rd*
- *Aroha Ave & Thanet Ave*

Along Taylor's Rd, street alarms were outside:

- *Carter's Timber Merchants*
- *Sharland & Co (opposite the back entrance of Mt Albert School)*

### Problems with street fire alarms

#### *Distance*

Particularly in the early years, the nearest alarm could be up to a mile away from some homes.

#### *Operator error*

Some people would break the glass but not take the essential next step of pressing the knob. Errors like this were reported in the daily newspapers, serving as lessons for readers.

#### *Not using the nearest alarm*

Not seeing, or deciding not to use, the most convenient street alarm, caused delays. In June 1924 a man ran to the Fire Station when a building in Kingsland caught on fire. There was a street alarm directly opposite the burning building.

#### *Not phoning as well*

People thought that using an alarm was sufficient, but a phone call helps the dispatcher send appropriate resources to the exact address of a fire.

#### *False alarms*

False alarms were a persistent problem, and pranksters faced heavy penalties if caught. Grant Manning, whose father was officer in charge of the Mt Albert Fire Station, remembered "the nuisance of false alarms by hooligans, drunkards and small boys ... I recall one evening in the 1960s when a carload of youths set off every street fire alarm they came across in their travels along Symonds Street, through Eden Terrace and the length of Sandringham Road. This caused many turnouts until, when it was plain what was happening, Fire Chief Lloyd Wilson ordered just one appliance investigate each box... and that police be alerted."

False alarms used Brigade resources, potentially diverted firefighters from attending genuine emergencies, and placed people in danger. During a hoax call-out on 2 June 1934, volunteer Fireman Frank Oade was seriously injured when the fire engine crashed during the hard turn from New North Rd into Sandringham Rd.

In later years, at least two and ideally three fire appliances were sent when a street fire alarm was activated in a residential area. Prank calls were a considerable burden.

### Maintenance

The street fire alarms had to be reliable. They were routinely tested, and any with faults were clearly marked with an "Out of Order" sticker. Fire crews carried keys and replacement glass discs and would reset and replace the glass of any alarm that had been activated.

### The end of an era

The 111 System was implemented across wider Auckland between September 1968 and 1975. In July 1973, the Auckland Metropolitan Fire Board discussed whether street fire alarms should be withdrawn.

From 1931 onwards, Auckland-wide, more alerts came in from telephones than from street fire alarms. In 1969, the ratio was 5:1, and by 1973, the ratio was 13:1. The same fire was often notified by both a street alarm and at least one phone call. In 1973, there were 902 street fire alarm boxes across the isthmus, but there were more than 150,000 telephones, and around 1300 private fire alarms. No new street alarms had been installed for nine years. The service began to be wound up, circuit by circuit, and by 1979, all of the Auckland's street fire alarms had been removed.

Mt Albert Fire Station in Kingsland closed operationally on Thursday 7 March 1974, with the new Balmoral Fire Station officially replacing the Mt Albert and Mt Eden Stations. The Mt Albert fire alarm circuits were all handled through the Central Fire Station in the latter years.

### Fire in Wairere Ave

On 30 January 1925, there was a fire at 6 Wairere Ave.

*"Shortly after midnight the occupants of a house on Wairere Avenue, Mount Albert, were awakened by the smell of burning, and on investigation it was found the premises were on fire. Mr R. S. D. Burrell, the tenant, ran to the end of the street, where he used an automatic fire alarm. The Mount Albert brigade turned out promptly and although two bedrooms were burning fiercely when the fireman arrived the brigade succeeded in saving the rest of the house, a six-roomed wooden structure."*

*[Auckland Star 30 Jan 1925]*

The 1955 photo below shows the round red fire alarm on its red and white painted pole at the corner of New North Rd and Wairere Ave.



### A request

The records that have survived are incomplete – we need your help. Do you remember the location of any street alarms? Do you have any street-scape photos which show a street alarm? Do you have any stories about street fire alarms to share with us? *Please get in touch.*

*Lynley Stone*

## Article Credits

I am enormously grateful to Ric Carlyon from the Auckland Fire Brigade Museum and Historical Society for information and support. Thank you, Bruce Graham and Olwen Anderson, for sharing your memories. The article draws on records from Mt Albert and Auckland Councils (Auckland Council Archives), from the Auckland Metropolitan Fire Board (ArchivesNZ), and newspaper articles (Papers Past).

A fully referenced, expanded version of this article with a map will be posted on the MAHS website.

## Image credits

p.1 Detail of a photo taken 1964 of *Dominion Rd Mt Eden*, probably taken by Ernest Ian MacLaren, Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections 580-09452.

p.2 left Detail of photo of roller blinds from *Wanganui Fire Brigade 150 Years of Service* by Bryan H. Barkla, p.99.

p.2 right *Area map* from Avondale Fire Station . Area Map, F850.2002. MOTAT

p.3 Detail of photo *Tram 222 on Suburban Street* by Graham Stewart, 1955. PHO-2020-19.218. MOTAT

## Further reading

For more about the history and technical side of fire alarms, please read Ric Carlyon's article *The Story of Fire Alarms in New Zealand*: <https://dispatches.co.nz/the-story-of-fire-alarms-in-new-zealand/>

His article on *Auckland's Fire Bells and Towers* is equally fascinating:

<https://dispatches.co.nz/aucklands-fire-towers-and-bells/>

We look forward to publishing some writing by Ric in future Newsletters.

## EVENT REPORTS

### School days: Members show and tell. 6 April, Ferndale

A large group gathered to share memories and stories of school days, near and far. 14 stories were told by Members and friends, covering the experience of both pupils and teachers, from pre-school through to tertiary level. There was a lot of laughter. Unexpectedly, Wainuiomata featured prominently. It was great fun, and we thank everybody for their participation.

[Photo, right: Kathryn Twort speaking about her time as an Exchange Student in the USA]

### ANZAC Day. 25 April, Mt Albert War Memorial Hall and Cenotaph

Mt Albert Historical Society was well represented at this year's ANZAC Day service at Mt Albert War Memorial Hall. Susan Drake laid the MAHS wreath, which was made by Mary Inomata. The world seems more volatile this year than it has done for some time, driving home the realities of the ANZAC experience.



### Peter Janssen: Surviving Historic Auckland Hotels. 4 May, Ferndale.

Peter Janssen, supported by photographer Josip Bojčić, gave a fascinating talk, titled *Surviving historic Auckland Hotels, with a focus on 19th century pubs. And do we have New Zealand's oldest hotel in our backyard?* Peter is a travel writer, the author of several books about touring and walking in New Zealand, and of *High Hopes and Big Dreams*, about small towns in their twilight years. The 4th edition of his book *New Zealand Pubs: 170 Classic Pubs to Visit* was published a few months ago. He is a Member of Mt Albert Historical Society, and we are delighted that he was able to share some of his research with us. Afternoon tea featured ginger beer and a cheeseboard.



## MAHS DATES TO REMEMBER

**Tuesday 24 June 2025. 10am–midday. Visit to Walsh Memorial Library, MOTAT.** Meet the Library team and learn about their collections and the way they work with researchers, donors and the wider Museum. They will present a variety of objects relating to the Mt Albert area and further afield followed by an informal Q&A session with light refreshments. RSVP essential — to [janetvonrandow@gmail.com](mailto:janetvonrandow@gmail.com)

**Saturday 26 July 2025. 10am–midday. Life Writing Workshop, Ferndale House.** A hands-on workshop for people wanting to write their memories and life stories down, suitable for people who are new to life writing, and also as a refresher for people who are experienced writers. Lynley Stone will take you through some key writing skills, we will do some short writing exercises, and talk about how to keep on writing after the workshop. We will work at tables. Bring a pad and pen. Morning tea provided. RSVP essential — to [janetvonrandow@gmail.com](mailto:janetvonrandow@gmail.com)