

## Michael Fowler's tales from the quake

Local historian, Michael Fowler spoke at the commemoration service. Here is his speech:

Often when I talk about the 1931 Hawke's Bay earthquake, I refer to stories about the actual disaster in regards to lives lost, dramatic stories of rescue - but the rebuilding of our CBD is a story on its own. And I am sometimes asked what Christchurch can learn from the 1931 Hawke's Bay earthquake rebuilding, and what, if any, similarities exist between the two events. Well to start with, the population of Hastings was around 12,000 and Christchurch's was approximately 380,000. Hastings tallest building was the Grand Hotel at five storeys – then the tallest structure in Hawke's Bay. Christchurch of course had numerous 20 storey plus buildings.

Christchurch introduced us to the word and the events of liquefaction, but Hastings had no liquefaction. Almost all of Hastings' residential buildings were wooden which simply wobbled around and snapped back into place again, minus their chimneys. Many Christchurch houses were in their words "munted".

The Hastings quake relief effort organisation consisted of a meeting around 1pm on the day of the earthquake in front of BJs Bakery, where it was decided, amongst other things to swear in special constables to prevent looting – because in relation to the population there were few policemen – and my understanding is the police in those days pretty much knew who the troublemakers were, and just waited outside the public bars for them to surface. These special constables, who were from all walks of life, were sworn in and given pistols – to shoot looters - and it must be remembered in those days it was still legal for bank staff to shoot robbers with the bank pistol with no hard questions, I understand asked by the law. Incidentally Havelock North was rather poor in those days and with not enough pistols to go around they improvised by having nails protruding from wooden sticks as their weapon of choice. It may interest the children of St Mathews School here today that many young children of Hastings managed to slip through the special constables and find their way to the wrecked buildings of lolly shops, and when no one was looking – accidentally find some lollies. One lolly store owner saw the bright side of this, and when he found the children of Hastings had left one particular lolly due to their apparent dislike of it, he made a note not to reorder it when he reopened - so some used the disaster for market research. A local shoe store owner, who set up a temporary shop in his home garage was asked frequently for a right handed or left handed shoes in a particular style "for a friend who had one leg". After noticing an apparent increase in one legged people in Hastings, not due to the earthquake - he realised looters had found one shoe and returned to his temporary store trying to find the matching one.

Looting didn't take on the proportions of Hawke's Bay in Christchurch, but those caught were dealt severe sentences, as they were here – but no one was shot or hit by a Havelock persons stick.

Christchurch's temporary buildings, as many of you will know are shipping containers. Hastings put up wood and corrugated iron buildings – an architectural style newspaper editor W C Whitlock referred to as early Klondike or American wild-west. Some may note that the Christchurch temporary building, shipping container, architectural-style

is soon to be adopted in Hastings - but Christchurch, as far as I know, did not adopt Klondike-style architecture of Hastings after 1931.

Christchurch citizens were given a chance through Air NZ, public and council support of coming to Hawkes Bay for a break after their 2011 earthquake. Indeed some were sent from Hastings to Christchurch in 1931 after the evacuations. The difference in 1931 was that some Hastings people were viewed as over stayers in Christchurch and letters were sent to council to request that these people be removed. Some who rented merely walked away from their perfectly fine property here and enjoyed free hospitality in other towns. Some rather entrepreneurial people in Wellington decided they would also become earthquake refugees as well, and the Hastings Borough Council would sometimes get letters asking if so-and-so was actually living in Hastings during the earthquake.

Many agencies were involved in the aftermath of the Christchurch earthquake – and mayor Bob Parker worked extremely long hours, as many of us know. Arguments over property – red zones – concepts of design – and today – four years later - some discussion and discontent still rages in Christchurch. Hastings Mayor George Roach took it upon himself to organise most of the rebuild. He personally approved every building plan after calling together the practicing architects of the town, who decided that a consistent building-style of what we now call Art Deco/Spanish Mission will be applied. Hastings has actually more Art Deco buildings than Napier as its CBD was bigger. Napier has grander examples of Art Deco as it was the capital city of Hawke's Bay, and had more wealthy insurance and government organisations there – and don't worry Bill Dalton – Hastings isn't the capital of Hawke's Bay now – Havelock North clearly is! Interestingly enough at the time of the earthquake Havelock North was living up to its created purpose of being an orcharding and small farm district. Most of Havelock CBDs buildings were wrecked – and as it was not a wealthy area then – many buildings were patched up and left like that for decades until one by one they were mostly replaced in the 1970s to 1990s– that's why today we have quite the varied mixture of building styles in Havelock – no consistent style was used as the area couldn't afford to borrow to rebuild immediately.

When Hastings mayor George Roach became fed up with his councillors George Roach simply overruled them and said "this is how it will be". A case in point is the municipal theatre tower roofs – and after much debate as to whether the overhanging roofs should be replaced, George Roach simply announced they would be replaced when he felt the discussion going nowhere amongst his councillors.

Unlike Christchurch in 2011 red tape was almost non-existent in 1931. The council simply acted in a way to get the job done quickly and by the end of 1932 the CBD was mostly rebuilt. As business then was often based on personal relationships – deals were done in the prime minister's office to get extra earthquake relief – one outlying Hawke's Bay mayor annoyed the prime minister so much he refused to assist with his town's clean-up costs.

George Roach passed away in 1934 – now ex-mayor - Bob is still with us as I saw him on TV the other night. George Roach's early death was attributed to the stress of the earthquake aftermath – he was not a young man, but his death was regarded as premature. Adding to his stress was his business, Roachs, which was the largest department store in Hawke's Bay, where 17 people died during the earthquake– this building would have been 100 years old

this year, but fell down after only 16 years in use. Rumours circulated as to why the building imploded upon itself. His business was declared insolvent – he did re-establish quickly however. More troubles occurred when the business was not losing money, but the local policeman and the nightwatchman were stealing goods for over a year. Farmers is where Roachs once existed.

After the earthquake the government moved quickly to tighten the building regulations, but relaxed them a couple of years later – this produced an angry response from Hastings Borough Council who argued building regulations should not be relaxed, but more stringent. We now see the building code presently tightened due to Christchurch.

In 1880, the local newspaper reported that building in brick was more expensive than wood, but insurance premiums would be cheaper for brick. A risk existed in an earthquake for brick buildings, but more lives, they thought would be saved by the fireproof qualities of brick than by deaths by earthquake, and we now know how wrong they got this. They knew then the buildings were unsafe. Many buildings that collapsed in Christchurch were the same type that fell in Hawke's Bay, but ironically most deaths were in a relatively modern building.

Both Christchurch and Hawke's Bay share a history of earthquake devastation – 80 years apart. But today our main focus is on the lives of the 93 people who died here on 3 February 1931 – and the efforts of those who rebuilt Hastings. Many people remark to me during Art Deco weekend what a pretty city Hastings is – but those who live here are in some ways immune to our surroundings, but I encourage you when in our CBD to pause and look upwards at our buildings, their legacy to us from our darkest day in 1931.

Thank you. ©Michael Fowler 2015