

If These Walls Could Talk . . .

A grand Remuera house saw life as a family home, a Maori women's hostel and a movie set, as Jan Bierman discovered

The grand home which once stood at 515 Remuera Rd was built for Mrs Jessie Campbell, nee Falconer, around 1915. Its original address was 195 Remuera Rd and the property was bounded by Remuera Rd, Ladies Mile and Tahora Ave. It was part of the subdivision known as the Mainston Estate. Jessie and her husband, John, who were already living in Remuera, acquired lots four, five and eight when the estate was offered for subdivision in 1912. This gave the Campbells around 3615m², almost an acre of park-like grounds. But John died not long after the purchase and records show it was Jessie alone who went on to obtain a building permit and hire Clarke & Son to build an imposing kauri house.

Large "mansors or mansions" in the Remuera area were selling for around £1400-£1700, according to contemporary ads by property auctioneers. There was little risk of Jessie over-capitalising on her grand design, which featured a magnificent entrance foyer, a billiard room and living rooms downstairs. There were six fireplaces, stained glass bay windows, the ceilings were ornate plasterwork, and between the attic and the cellars were nine bedrooms, enough to accommodate the large families of the day, and their domestic staff. The home's position on the Remuera ridge gave it expansive views too, of the growing city and the Waitematā Harbour.

Jessie Campbell didn't remain the home's owner for long. In 1919, it sold to master mariner Captain William Ross. Born around 1847 in Scotland, Ross had made his fortune successfully trading around the Pacific. A stalwart of the Royal New Zealand Yacht Squadron, he is remembered in maritime history as the father of the Auckland Anniversary Day Regatta. Ross and wife Annie settled into 195 Remuera Rd, making it their home for the next 16 years. Council records from the early 1920s record the house as being a two-storey wooden construction, with a single-storey cottage also within the grounds.

Perhaps empty-nesters in a very large house, the Ross's sold the home in 1933. By then, Captain Ross had retired. They moved to another home not far away, at 29 Great South Rd, where they lived until William's death six years later (Annie would survive him by another decade).

The property had become known as Plumley, but the origin of the name, and who bestowed it, remains lost in the mists of time. Plumley is the name of an English village and civil parish, but no connection between the Campbells or the Ross families and the English Plumley has been established.

The next owner was retired farmer Issac Gelston Gray and his wife, Elinor (nee Mellsop). The Grays didn't settle for long, signing over a five-year lease in 1937 to a Nurse Sutherland. Alterations were made, and Plumley was reborn as Ewhurst, a convalescent and rest home. In 1954, ownership changed again – this time, the owner would retain the property for three decades. The new titleholder was the Methodist Church

of New Zealand, who acquired the house for £11,250, with a significant government investment.

Ewhurst became Seamer House, a hostel for young Maori women coming to the city for work or career training. The name was in honour of the Reverend Arthur Seamer, the church's superintendent of its Maori missions. The house and gardens had become run down. Renovations were quickly started – there was concern about vandals making things worse – and a committee of ladies was formed to help with sewing and mending as the residents began to arrive. A gardener was employed to bring the grounds under control, living onsite in a flat.

Seamer House residents included students from the Kindergarten Training College in Arney Rd (now St Anne's, a private home) and other training institutions. The hostel was run on Christian principles and teachings, and residents attended either the Remuera Methodist Church or their own church every Sunday morning. They also went to the Māori Mission Service in Airedale St once a month.

Matron Eileen Moore wrote a memoir of Seamer House, now held in the Methodist Church of New Zealand archives. She noted that "the girls came from different parts of the country, some settling better than others. One girl had never lived in a Pākehā house before, she was scared stiff to go outside the gate alone because of the traffic, and was afraid to go to sleep because in such a big house she was afraid of ghosts". The residents were from all walks of life, including orphanages, and girls too who just "wanted to spread their wings", Matron Moore noted.

In her memoir, she described Seamer House as having "a large dining and sitting room, with divided doors, kitchen with an island bench, stainless steel benches, wash-house, washing machine etc, outside bedroom and sewing room, two (more) bedrooms, and Matron's bed-sitting room, toilets, and a very large entrance hall. Upstairs there were three very large bedrooms divided by wardrobes in the centre of the room, three double bedrooms, a bathroom and toilet, and large verandas with beautiful views over the city and suburbs. A basement with two large rooms – one as a games room and the other a drying room, stores etc". Matron Moore liked to keep her house shipshape. She made note of the problem keeping the hall floor gleaming. It was "covered with a rubber lino with a sponge rubber underlay. I have never spent so much time on my knees and blessing those who put it down ... every sharp piece of gravel cut through the rubber and every mark showed".

Matron Moore also noted that initially there was opposition from the neighbours who did not appreciate a hostel as a neighbour, nor the noise the girls made, but once they got to know the matrons and girls, their attitudes changed.

Over the following decades updates were made – the verandas were enclosed, fire escapes added, the attic converted to more rooms. In 1987 Seamer House was no



Above, Seamer House circa 1955, on the corner of Remuera Rd and Ladies Mile (Methodist Church of NZ Archives Photographs Collection M69).

Right, staff and residents captured on the hostel's opening day, August 27, 1955.

Matron Moore is seated centre, front. (Methodist Church of NZ Archives Photographs Collection M10).



longer needed by the church, and was sold again. Its fortune as a large family home or hostel didn't keep up with the land value. After several changes of ownership, in 1997 it was sold for removal, making way for up to seven units to be built on the acreage. Eventually, a new single dwelling was erected and Seamer/Ewhurst/Plumley House was shipped out of town.

Today, it stands proud, the centrepiece of a 5.5ha property at 162 Sunnyside Rd, Coatesville. In 2008, it was used as a set for *Aliens in the Attic*, a US movie shot on location in Auckland. With current CV of \$3.95 million, the house has reclaimed its stature as a grand home, standing well into another century.

Jan Bierman originally researched and wrote this article on behalf of Remuera Heritage as part of its 'Remuera Homes' series, see remueraheritage.org.nz. It is reproduced and edited with permission for The Hobson.

Sources consulted include Auckland Libraries Archives, Auckland Council Archives, Methodist Church of New Zealand Archives, Papers Past (paperspast.natlib.govt.nz), maritimemuseum.co.nz, teara.govt.nz