

THE PLAYHOUSE formerly GLEN EDEN TOWN HALL

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The folk who settled early in the Waikumete / Glen Eden area must have been a resilient lot. The soil was and remains rather poor yet they managed to survive as well as to contribute to their fledgling community, sparse as it was.

Glen Eden residents were fortunate to have had a Public Hall from the beginning of the 20th century. It was built by a committed group of locals who funded it cooperatively, possibly by forming a limited liability company. This was at a time when there were no public halls in the vicinity. Indeed, in election advertisements as late as 1928 Glen Eden's was the only Public Hall listed as a polling place. In New Lynn and Henderson they were in church or lodge halls as well as what was known as "The Kiosk" in Titirangi.

The first Public Hall, was opened by the local MP, Mr John Bollard, on the same site as the Playhouse in 1900 or 1901. Mr. C. T. Spearpoint was the architect and it cost somewhere between 250 and 300 pounds. The building was 62 feet long and 27 feet wide with a supper room and ladies dressing room. There was provision for a bowling green and a lawn tennis court at the rear.

It became the centre of the community's social life, was used to train cadets and territorials during WW1 and magic lantern shows were held there at least as early as 1919 as there is a reference to slides showing the horrors of the Russian revolution. Then, in the 1920s, silent movies were shown on Wednesday and Saturday evenings with a matinee on Saturday as well. Piano accompaniment was provided by Madge Malam.

(See "In Those Days; An Oral History of Glen Eden.") There were many wedding receptions held there and the local lads were farewelled as they left for war. People travelled some distance to attend dances which were always well patronised. Glen Eden Town Board was formed in 1922 and the building became more commonly known as the town hall.

Then on 9th February 1935 disaster struck.

Headlines in the New Zealand Herald on 11th February 1935:

GLEN EDEN FIRE
PICTURE THEATRE BURNED
BOARD'S RECORDS INTACT
OUTBREAK AFTER DANCE

“ The Glen Eden Town Hall building, housing a main hall used as a picture theatre and the Glen Eden Town Board offices, was badly damaged by fire which broke out about 1 30am yesterday morning. The fire apparently started at the rear of the building behind the screen and when it was noticed, the main hall was blazing furiously. The Henderson Volunteer Fire Brigade, which answered the call, had a difficult task in arresting the flames but was able to save the Town Board offices and the public library at the front of the building from total destruction. However, the damage to the main structure is such that complete rebuilding will probably be necessary.

The hall is leased to Mr. F.K. Routley and used as a picture theatre. Pictures were shown on Saturday evening and the performance was followed by a dance, which concluded at midnight. The caretaker, Mt F. Burbidge, made an inspection at 12 30am before locking the building and at that time everything appeared to be in order.

Brigade's prompt arrival: A little over an hour later the fire was discovered and a call was sent to the Henderson Brigade. Although over 4 miles from the burning building, the brigade reached the fire in about 7 minutes but appeared to be faced with a hopeless task. The only available fire-plug was some distance from the building, but 2 leads were run from the standpipe and working with a good pressure of water, the firemen were able to save the front of the building.

The main hall with its contents was almost completely destroyed but the picture machine, which was housed in a zinc-lined room, suffered no damage except by water and is thought to be intact, while 8000 feet of film in airtight containers was also saved. However the screen and loudspeakers on the stage were destroyed. While the brigade was holding the flames in check The Town Clerk of Glen Eden, Mr. C.R. Wilkinson and willing helpers removed most of the books and papers from the Town Board office. The more important records, however, were in the safe and inspection later in the morning showed these had escaped damage. The contents of the public library, which is controlled by a local committee, also appeared to escape serious damage although there will be some loss as a result of water reaching the bookshelves.

Loss to the District: The Chairman of the Town Board, Mr. A.J. Routley, stated last evening that the loss of the hall would cause considerable inconvenience to the residents as it was the only large meeting place in the township and at present it appeared that the Board would be faced with the cost of rebuilding, probably in brick. Although the building was insured in the State Office for 1100 pounds, this would not cover the cost of rebuilding. Considerable improvements had been carried out to the building about four years ago when the Board's offices were added and other work had been done to modernize the building at a cost of about 200 pounds. The seats in the hall, which were the property of Mr. F. K. Routley, were insured with the New Zealand Office.

The members of the Henderson Fire Brigade remained at the scene of the fire until 5 30am yesterday morning and a number of local residents throughout the night provided them with tea and hot cakes, while some of the men whose clothing was drenched, were supplied with a change of clothes.”

An interesting piece from the Auckland Star 14th September 1932 refers to the Henderson Town Board having previously offered fire service coverage to Glen Eden at a cost of 50 pounds per annum. The Glen Eden Town Board said that should be reduced as they were not prepared to pay this sum. Henderson was not prepared to move and stated that 80 pounds would be a fair price. A letter was sent to Glen Eden desiring a reply within seven days.

I presume sense finally prevailed as otherwise the brigade might never have arrived!

On 16th February 1935 the Auckland Star advertised:

GLEN EDEN TOWN BOARD

Tenders called. For sale for removal.

Remains of the building.

Tenders to be for cash and accompanied by a deposit of 1 pound.

All materials to be removed within 14 days from acceptance.

Tenders close at the temporary office in West Coast Road at 5pm on Wednesday 20th February.

Despite this being in the period of the great depression, things moved quite swiftly.

On 28 February 1935 under Glen Eden Affairs, The NZ Herald reported that a delegation from the Western Suburbs RSA had appeared before the Glen Eden Town Board seeking work for returned soldiers. WSRSA would provide the wages if the Board arranged meaningful work. The works committee was instructed to prepare a scheme for the approval of the Association. It was decided to advertise for competitive designs for a public hall and offices to replace the building recently destroyed by fire. The hall was to provide accommodation for dances concerts and pictures.

The NZ Herald records on 20th March 1935 under Glen Eden Affairs:

“ At a meeting of the GETB several works of a beautifying nature were submitted to the WSRSA for its approval as work suitable for the employment of local returned soldiers. A deputation representing the business interests produced a design of a municipal block to replace the public hall, which was destroyed by fire. It was decided that it was too expensive. Another proposal to build offices and leave the construction of a hall and picture theatre to private individuals was presented but it was decided that it was in the interests of ratepayers that a public hall and office building should be erected by the Board.

NZ Herald 15th May 1935 noted:

‘Proposals for the construction of the Glen Eden public hall and offices in brick were considered at the last meeting of the Glen Eden Town Board. It was decided to apply to the Local Government Loans Board for permission to raise a loan of 3000 pounds for rebuilding.’

NZ Herald 13th November 1935 states:

“Six tenders were received at Monday night’s meeting of the Glen Eden Town Board for the erection in brick of a new office buildings for the Board. The lowest tender, that of Ravenhall Ltd, for 1200 pounds was accepted and the work will commence almost immediately.’ (Once again it was decided to apply to the Local Government Loans Board for permission to hold a ratepayers’ poll on the proposal to borrow 3000 pounds for the building of the town hall.)

NZ Herald 22 May 1935:

GLEN EDEN TOWN HALL
New Brick Building
Acceptance of design

“A design submitted by Mr. A.C. Marshall of Mt Albert for a handsome brick building to replace the Glen Eden Town Hall which was destroyed by fire in February last, has been accepted. The approximate cost of the building will be 3,500 pounds. The design of the building is a modern version of a Georgian type and the whole will be finished in a plain but serviceable manner so as to fulfill the requirements of the community for many years. The building will be rectangular in shape with protruding wings at each corner. It will be constructed throughout with brick and permanent materials and with a tiled roof. (See below.) The structure consists of a main auditorium, with a seating capacity of 500 and requisite kitchen and dressing rooms a small library and municipal offices. The auditorium will be used for dances and as a picture theatre. The floor will be sloped from the back for a third of the distance for better visibility, while the remaining level portion will be reserved for dancing. The projection box will be constructed in concrete. A feature of the outside will be the white bands of purpose made bricks forming a striking contrast with the red bricks of the wall. Drive access will be by a side entrance.”

The light coloured bricks were never white so perhaps were more standard ones to save money and the roof was not tiled, no doubt as a further economy measure. It still has a corrugated iron roof.

Right up until 1988 Local authorities in NZ were required to seek approval from ratepayers to raise a loan for any purpose. Only ratepayers could vote. So the Town Hall loan proposal was finally advertised in the Herald on 1 April 1936.

The poll was held on 22 April 1936, 5 months after the tender had been awarded. But 1100 pounds had been received from the insurance claim, which would have funded the early work.

By now the size of the loan had risen to 3500 pounds.

“The currency of the loan is 35 years at 3 ½ % and a sinking fund of 1 ½ % per annum is proposed. It will be secured by a special rate of 7/8th % of a penny in the pound on the unimproved value of all rateable property in the Glen Eden Town Board district.”

But loans were always contentious.

Auckland Star 27th April 1936 :

GLEN EDEN POLL
PROPOSAL DECLARED CARRIED
MAGISTERIAL RECOUNT SOUGHT

“A number of Glen Eden ratepayers took legal action this morning with the object of having a magisterial recount made in connection with the Glen Eden proposal to borrow 3500 pounds for a new town hall. After a preliminary recount last Wednesday, it was announced that 110 votes were received for the proposal and 110 votes against. A recount was made on Friday afternoon and it was announced that one of the votes counted against the proposal had been found to be informal and the proposal was therefore carried by 110 votes to 109.”

So it was a close run thing.

It is interesting that the Herald merely records that the proposal was carried as a result of one informal vote. Of course, the Star was an evening paper, which had beaten them to the news the day before.

It is noted elsewhere, including in papers such as the Evening Post and the Poverty Bay Herald, on 14 May 1936, that a magisterial inquiry was to be held on 25th May. There is no newspaper record of this so perhaps it was dismissed. Certainly there was no change of plans and the work continued.

Once again the Auckland Star was first with the news on 12th May 1937. the date of King George VIth 's coronation.

GLEN EDEN TOWN HALL
OFFICIAL OPENING

“The new Glen Eden Town Hall and municipal building, an imposing brick structure, was officially opened this afternoon by the chairman of the local Town Board, Mr. A.J. Routley. There was a large crowd present including representatives of neighbouring bodies as well as other interests in the district.

In welcoming the visitors, Mr Routley said that the hall, opened on Coronation Day, would be called Coronation Hall. The present building, he said, took the place of one which was burned down in 1935 and which had been built in 1900.

The cost of the building was 4543 pounds.”

Not to be outdone, the NZ Herald gave a little more detail.

NZ Herald, 13th May 1937.

NEW TOWN HALL
OPENING AT GLEN EDEN

“The official opening of the new Glen Eden Town Hall and municipal offices, a brick structure, which replaces the old building burned in 1935, took place yesterday afternoon. The ceremony was performed by the Chairman of the Glen Eden Town Board, Mr. A.J. Routley, who said the building would be known as Coronation Hall. Prayer was offered by Rev. H.J. Liddell. Other speakers were the Chairman of the Waitemata Electric Power Board, Mr. R.T. Leighton, the Mayor of New Lynn, Mr. G. Lawson and the Chairman of the Henderson Town Board, Mr. H. Norcross. The 250 people present then inspected the hall and afternoon tea was provided. A ball was held in the hall last night.”

Despite Mr Routley's comments on the day, the building was never referred to as anything other than the Town Hall. This was recently confirmed to me by his grandson, Alan Routley.

So began the life of the Glen Eden Town Hall.

The building still has signage above the side doors leading into the two wings at the front, that the library was to the left and the Town Board, later the Glen Eden Borough Council offices, to the right. It served the community well, was used for civic functions, public meetings, dances, concerts, wedding receptions, movies and theatre productions. Among the latter were shows produced by Alcy Winton, a teacher at both Glen Eden Primary and later, Glen Eden Intermediate, who founded the Children's Light Opera Company in the mid 1960s. My eldest son was the male lead in "San Marino" when he was about 11 years old.

But the major theatrical group involved was St Thomas's Light Opera from New Lynn. The Prospect Players, a smaller group, which joined with them to form Playhouse Productions, was the brainchild of Dr Colin Roberts, with Jim Berret and Robert and Gladys Prior who were associated with Prospect School.

Minor improvements were made to the building, including the ramp at the entrance, which was installed by the New Lynn Rotary Club in 1984. They had held a very successful auction and "It's in the Bag" night there where my husband played the part of Selwyn Toogood.

Changing times meant the building was seldom used for anything other than movies. Harley Arthur, who succeeded his father, leased it for some years but the maintenance was a continuing problem for the Glen Eden Borough Council.

The lease allowed the Council to use the building for a limited number of times per year and I was present as a councillor, at a meeting chaired by the then Mayor Dr. Harold Moody, in the late 1960s, to discuss the possibilities that the development of Glenmall might bring. Ironically, it was the late Mr F.K (Kinsman) Routley who was the most vociferous opponent. I also recall at least one Anzac Day ceremony (then held at 11 am) transferred there because of heavy rain.

Following the amalgamation, which formed Waitakere City Council in November 1989, there was further pressure on finances. Playhouse Theatre Productions was then the major user of the building. In fact records show that in that year, GEBC gave \$40,000 to the theatre group. This money was probably part of the money received as a one off dividend from Auckland Airport shares. (Most of that money went to pay for the building on Ceramco Park and for the Community House on Pisces Park.)

As President of Portage Licensing Trust from 1989 to 1995 when gambling machines were first permitted in taverns and the Trust members at that time had the say in where the money from them was used, I approached Playhouse then president, Jack Lawrence, originally from St Thomas's Light Opera, because we felt that some money should be given to the arts. (Titirangi Theatre received funding at that time also.) Small as it was in the beginning, Jack was very appreciative and attended the donation evenings, which the Trust was able to hold in those days. Playhouse received \$10,000 annually, in four installments for a couple of years, which enabled some essential work to be carried out. (This led to the naming of the "Portage Foyer.) But a great deal more was needed.

Waitakere City Council investigated the setting up of a Trust, which would then be able to access funding from other sources. As a councillor, I supported that process on condition that the residual owner, in the case of failure, should be the City or its successor and that Council have a representative on the Trust Board.

The inaugural Waitakere Playhouse Theatre Trust was formed in 1997 under the chairmanship of Dorothy Chisholm, with Derek Battersby as the first Council representative and the building was handed over. After five years of fundraising, the renovated Playhouse Theatre was reopened by then Mayor Bob Harvey and myself, in 2002. It had cost \$1.2m and was a great improvement in both comfort and facilities including a revolving stage section. There is a handsome plaque in the Portage Foyer marking that event.

The transparent canopy, which covers the entrance, was criticised by some but it is a sensible and practical solution, which protects patrons from the elements but still allows the fabric of the building to be visible.

Ewen Gilmour was council's representative on the Playhouse Trust when he resigned from council. He was not replaced immediately and then the new Auckland Council was becoming a reality. As a member of the Waitakere Ranges Local Board, I raised the need for a council representative, during the first term of the new council as the Board was providing some operational funding. But there was no resolution.

I have a personal attachment to the Playhouse as it was there that I was introduced to local government when I became a reporter of the Glen Eden Borough Council meetings for the Waitakere Gazette, the forerunner of the Western Leader. It was councillors who then asked me to stand for Council in a by-election because they judged my reporting to have been fair. So as the first woman to serve on GEBC, I embarked in 1963 on a career in local government, which has continued until the present day.

Unfortunately there is still no formal connection between the Waitakere Playhouse Theatre Trust and Council, which is disappointing and not compatible with the original deed. But I am an optimist and it is my fervent hope that the Trust can be encouraged to work with the Local Board to ensure that this longstanding community building will be treasured and enhanced into the future in a mutually supportive way.

Janet Clews

Formerly: Mayor of Glen Eden
Waitakere City Councillor
Waitakere Ranges Local Board Deputy chair
President of Portage Licensing Trust
Present sitting member, Portage Licensing Trust

References: "In Those Days" edited by Pauline Vela," Papers Past "and personal experience.





