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Stargazers close to realising a dream

[By Bruce Laybourn]
Nelson astronomers are this week focusing on a dream that all but died 62 years ago.

That dream is for a permanent home for astronomy in the district; a home for observations of the heavens, for meetings to discuss what they see and for library space to store books about what they see.

This week that dream began its translation into reality.

A building permit has been granted by the Nelson City Council for the erection of the planned new observatory at Piper's Park, at the end of Princes Drive in Nelson.

Work on the 40 sq. metre building is expected to begin within the next two weeks and should be completed in two months.

It will replace the old wooden "hut" that served amateur astronomers for 70 years — from 1905 until 1975.

The new \$8340 match-boxed observatory will adorn the Nelson landscape 63 years after Nelson philanthropist Thomas Cawthron offered 60,000 pounds for a full-scale solar physics observatory.

Cawthron's 1914 plan would have transformed Nelson into a world astronomical centre.

"Had Cawthron's plan gone ahead it would certainly have been the biggest observatory in New Zealand," says the secretary of the Nelson branch of the Royal Society of New Zealand, Mr Rex Scarlett.

"But the history of astronomy in Nelson has been a series of near misses."

Week away

The near miss astronomically came on October 8, 1915, when Cawthron died. At the time of his death negotiations were only a week away from securing the 22-year-old benefactor's signature on the Observatory Trust Deed.

Land, at the end of Princes Drive, Nelson, that had been acquired for Cawthron's massive observatory plan was transferred to the Cawthron estate by the Supreme Court and named Observatory Park.

So, with Cawthron, died his observatory dream.

And with the establishment of the Cawthron Institute, under the terms of his will, it became apparent that Cawthron's

wealth was destined for the land and not for the sky.

Dream remains

But Cawthron's observatory dream remains with the 58-member Nelson branch of the Astronomy Section of the Royal Society of New Zealand who have been without an observatory since 1975.

Borer, rotting timbers, old age and, finally, Cyclone Alison, prepared the grave for the astronomers' old observatory which spent its final days at Observatory Park.

Nelson astronomers have been campaigning for a new observatory ever since the demolition of their old home.

The first step toward the new building was a \$2000 grant from the McKee Trust in 1970. The McKee Trust is a fund set up locally by the McKee family to benefit the staffs of firms it owned and charitable organisations.

Next came \$3000 from the Kingston-Tomlinson bequest by courtesy of the Royal Society of New Zealand in 1975. This fund was left by the late Julie Annie Tomlinson of Nelson to further New Zealand astronomy.

To this \$5000 was added a \$600 sport and recreation grant later in 1975.

The extra money needed to pay for the \$8340 first stage was raised by the astronomers themselves. Stalls and appeals were held. Astronomy authority Peter Read visited Nelson to lend a hand.

The tiny initial observatory building will comprise only a small office and storeroom besides the observation dome.

Further stages

However two further expansion stages are already planned.

When funds permit the Nelson observatory will sprout a lecture room, kitchen, an outside viewing area, paving and gardens.

The third stage of building will add a second observation room, additional offices and a larger library than can be installed in the tiny office of the first stage.

Like its wooden ancestor the new observatory will not be the exclusive domain of astronomy members. Anyone wishing to exercise their curiosity will be welcome to do so.

Telescope

The old observatory began its 70-year career in Alton St, Nelson, in 1905. It was built with public subscription to house the Atkinson telescope — a valuable instrument that was almost lost to Nelson astronomers.

The telescope is recognised by today's astronomers as one of the foundations of their new observatory. Without it they would be faced with a costly bill for a new instrument.

The telescope, an equatorially-mounted 5-inch clockwork-driven refractor built by Cooke and Sons, York, England, was brought to Nelson



By Mr Arthur Samuel Atkinson in the early 1890s.

Mr Atkinson emigrated to New Zealand in 1853 and settled first near New Plymouth.

He became editor and part-owner in the Taranaki Herald and later a member of the Taranaki Provincial Council and a Member of Parliament from 1866 to 1868.

His brother, Sir Harry Atkinson, was New Zealand's Prime Minister of the time.

Arthur did not remain long as an MP and resigned his seat to study law. He came to Nelson in 1867 and set up the practice of Fell and Atkinson.

Tower

His home, Fairfield, still stands at the top end of Trafalgar St. When it was built Fairfield had a tower from which Atkinson made observations using a 4-inch Browning telescope.

He bought the big telescope in the early 1880s after watching the transit of Venus on December 7, 1882, with the smaller Browning.

Using the new telescope he observed and photographed the total eclipse of the sun on September 9, 1885.

In 1902 Atkinson died and the large telescope went into storage and was forgotten about for more than two years.

In November, 1904, his sister, Mabel, by chance mentioned to Mr Fred Gibbs that a Harmonic Society practice that Atkinson's wife had written to her son in Wellington to see if any group in the capital wished to take care of, and use, the telescope.

Mr Gibbs immediately left the practice and called on Mr Atkinson offering to take charge of the instrument and install it in a suitable building.

Mrs Atkinson agreed to allow Mr Gibbs to telegraph her son in Wellington and cancel the offer.

On loan

The telescope was then declared to be on loan to the Nelson Institute of which M. Gibbs was president.

From this point in 1905 the Alton St observatory was erected to house the telescope. It became a popular public attraction and Mr Gibbs was kept busy until the early hours of the morning on a cloudless night showing people the stars.

However in 1923 trees and buildings were blocking the view from the observatory so badly that Mr Gibbs had the building moved to the Bishopdale Hills at his own expense.

Telescope and astronomers—1880's style. This was Mr Arthur Samuel Atkinson's observatory for the transit of Venus on December 7, 1882. Pictured is his old 4-inch Browning telescope he used for the event. Mr Atkinson imported the big telescope for the 1885 total eclipse of the sun.

This was not an easy task as the old approach was through Emano St and everything had to be hauled by sledge up the steep spur.

In May, 1934, Mabel Atkinson, then the national owner of the telescope, donated it to the Cawthron Institute Trust Board which appointed Mr Gibbs as honorary curator.

He continued in this position until advancing age made him wish to resign. But the Board asked him to continue and appointed Mr Leonard Morley as honorary associate curator.

Up until his death in 1973 Mr Morley was recognised as one of the mainstays of astronomy in New Zealand. A founder of the New Zealand Astronomical Society he and Mr Gibbs, his former Boys' Central School headmaster, figured prominently in trying to achieve Cawthron's dream of a

solar physics observatory for Nelson.

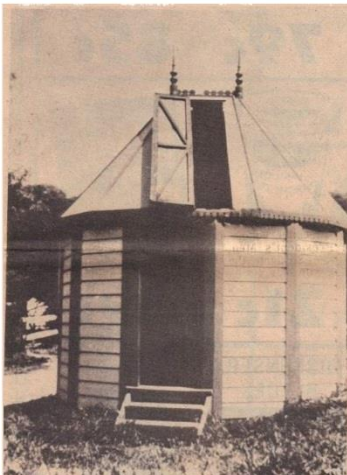
Another star

Another star of Nelson astronomy was Mr Albert Jones who was curator of the old observatory until its demise in 1975. Besides discovering a comet which was named after him in 1945 Mr Jones was regarded as the world's best-known variable star observer.

Road access to Observatory Park in the 1920s boosted interest in the telescope and before the observatory's demolition in 1975 public interest was at its peak.

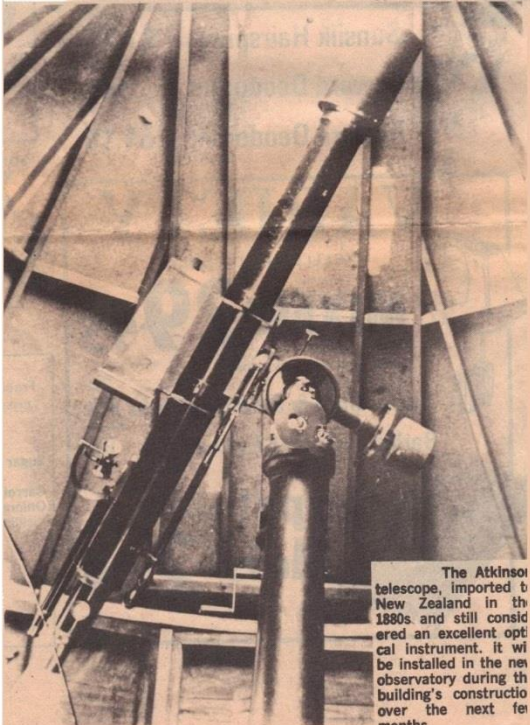
With the new observatory in action there is expected to be a renewed interest in astronomy in Nelson.

As Thomas Cawthron is quoted as saying in February, 1913: "Nelson, with its sunshine record, might prove a good locality for an observation."

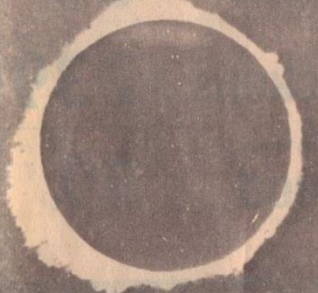


The old wooden observatory that was demolished in 1975. Here it is pictured at its original site in Alton St before the move to Observatory Park in 1923.

Built in 1905 from public subscription to house the Atkinson telescope the old building had a 70-year career before Cyclone Alison delivered the death blow.



The Atkinson telescope, imported to New Zealand in the 1880s and still considered an excellent optical instrument, it will be installed in the new observatory during the building's construction over the next few months.



The total eclipse of the sun photographed through the Atkinson telescope in Nelson on September 9, 1885.