

The English at Point England

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Background

Auckland is a city of over a million people that covers more ground per head of population than anywhere else in the world. The city lies on an isthmus with harbours to the Tasman Sea and the Pacific Ocean, and the whole city is punctuated by over 40 extinct volcanoes. Point England, the location of the imported houses that are the subject of this article, is part of the eastern suburb of Tamaki. The area was once the scene of an exercise in garden suburb and neighbourhood planning ideals and has a legacy of state houses, these being house designed by the government's own Housing Division for rent. When these house were first designed prior to Wold War II they were better than anything available in the private sector.

The 500 timber single storey frame houses that form the subject of this article (Fig. 1), however, did not originate in New Zealand but were imported in kitset form from the UK in 1953. The houses had simple rectangular plan, and were timber framed, clad with horizontal painted weatherboarding, with a shallow pitched gable ended roof covered with painted corrugated steel roofing, and with double hung timber windows. In the living room these windows reached down to floor level, and part of each living room was projected forward from the main body of the house. The angle between the main house and this projection formed the main point of entry, up three or four steps from ground level. Each living room also had a masonry chimney with an open fire. Most houses had

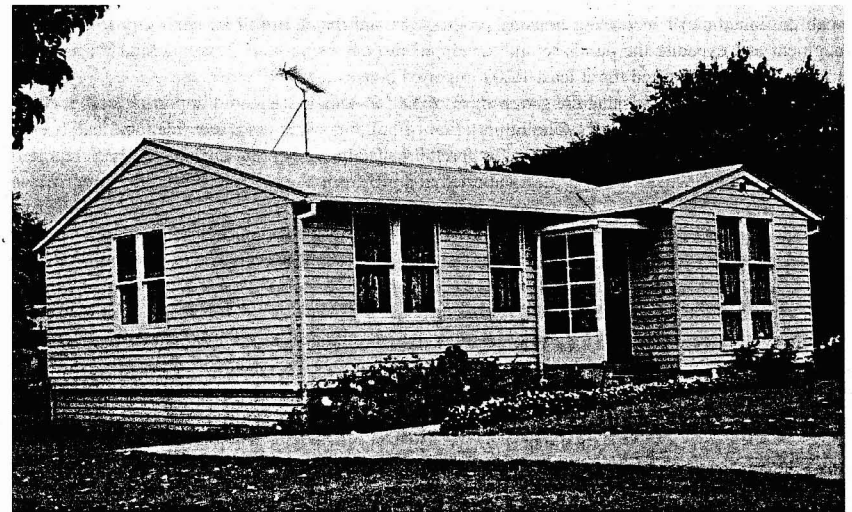


Figure 1. A Point England house still occupied today but retaining its original appearance.

circulation through the living room to an internal corridor. This gave access to two or three bedrooms depending on house type, a dining kitchen, separate laundry with its own rear porch and steps to the backyard, bathroom with washbasin and bath, and separate toilet. Such a plan type and construction was far more typical of New Zealand than the UK at that time.

At a time when the UK was itself short of houses at the end of the war because of destruction, lack of building and the deterioration of the housing stock,¹ and with the Conservative party being elected in 1951 on the promise to return the country to the pre-war target of 300,000 house completions per annum, exporting houses seems a curious phenomenon, and exporting timber frame houses from a country that had problems with timber supply in the postwar period, to one that grew timber for export, is even more curious. The unravelling of this story has not been easy. No New Zealand architectural historian knew anything about the imported houses when asked. Much information has had to be gleaned from parliamentary debates and newspaper articles, and then followed up in archives and with those who are currently involved with the houses in some way.

The post war housing position in New Zealand

New Zealand, although similar in overall land area to the UK, has a much smaller population. In 1950, there were rumoured to be 43,370 applicants waiting for a State house, many of whom were housed in transit camps, but this actually represented approximately 2.5 per cent of the country's population.² In contrast the pre-war position in the UK was that 6 per cent of the population were living in overcrowded or unacceptable conditions.³ In a further parallel to events in the UK, the failure of the first New Zealand Labour government to find ways of alleviating this postwar housing shortage contributed to the election of a National (right wing) government in 1950. This government, having campaigned on a housing policy of increasing expenditure and low interest rates to reduce State housing and encourage private ownership, was embarrassed when the housing demand failed to be satisfied, and had to look for other methods of producing the required housing. The idea of importing houses emerges in a confidential letter of October 1951 from the Acting Commissioner of Works to the District Commissioners that urged, "...all possible steps [be taken] with the intention of increasing housing production" and that "It will be necessary to facilitate, augment and expedite the purchase and development of housing land..." and to find "...serviced land that will be required for at least 1,200 imported houses..."⁴.

It may not be surprising that the government of New Zealand considered importing what it could not produce for itself internally. The importation of buildings was not a new idea and had been a common practice in colonial times. The first prefabricated house in New Zealand has been reported as early as 1806.⁵ This house had been imported as a gift from Governor King of New South Wales for Te Pahi, the Maori chief. The house was erected in the Bay of Islands and later burned down in a dispute with some whalers. The full story and documentation of these early imported houses in New Zealand has still to be investigated.

Prefabrication of house was also not unknown in New Zealand. It had been used by the New Zealand Housing Division to construct houses prior to 1949 with 200 recorded as being completed. These two-bedroom, trussed roof houses were designed as models to promote further development by local building firms,⁶ but the technique did not gain popularity in New Zealand until the early 1960s. However, in 1951 the principal public reasons for the National government to import prefabricated houses were, according to the then Minister of Works, Mr Goosman, "...that they should be additional to the production of the local building industry" and that "New Zealand insignis pine had not the all round suitability of Baltic and other continental pine timber..."⁷ The objective was to alleviate partly the shortage of housing materials and skilled labour that had existed in New Zealand since the depression, and Goosman stated that he would oppose importation unless tradesmen "came with them".⁸

The Houses at Point England

Negotiations were undertaken with several overseas firms for the supply of prefabricated houses and the tradesmen required to build them, Goosman reporting in February 1952 that the "Government had received tenders of up to £6000..." per house.⁹ The initial proposal was that the houses would be prefabricated in the UK. This would mean that as much of the labour of construction as possible would be transferred to the UK, with tradesman in New Zealand assembling the prefabricated components, and undertaking the infrastructure, the connections to it and foundation works. Such prefabricated houses would have been in direct imitation of the 1944 UK Temporary Housing Programme, where the prefabricated wall and floor panels, structural frames, joinery components etc. for the prefabricated bungalows were often made in many different factories and then transported to the site for assembly.¹⁰ However, there was later a change from full prefabrication to pre-cut houses, where the timber for the structure, wall cladding and joinery would be cut and marked in the UK before shipping but not pre-assembled.

Eventually, the contracts for 1000 houses were awarded to two British firms, Thermo-Insulation Units Ltd. of London for 500 houses for Titahi Bay, Porirua, Wellington, to be manufactured by an Austrian subsidiary, and a further 500 for Tamaki, Auckland to be supplied by Simms, Sons and Cooke Ltd. of Nottingham. The Wellington contract was valued at £1,371,000,¹¹ which is a much lower £2742 per house, with the total value for both contracts being £3 million.¹² Both of these firms had been involved in the manufacture of pre-cut houses for the Australian market.

Australia already had an established policy of importing houses. The problems in Australia were similar to those of New Zealand post war, as Boyd explains:

"Australia's problem at this time was a housing shortage pursued by a manpower shortage in a vicious circle. One of the first and biggest import schemes was promoted by the Victorian government in 1948 to bring workmen with their own houses for the state railways. The project was called "Operation Snail", thereby resurrecting the century-old joke. It differed from all previous import schemes in that the English manufacturers followed designs from Australia. These were done, with fine attention to detail, by Yuncken, Freeman Bros., Griffiths and Simpson, and Baxter Cox, architects of Melbourne."¹³

"Operation Snail" was the idea of Colonel Kent-Hughes, the Minister of Transport in Victoria, who wished to attract emigrants from Britain to work on the railways but who realised that there were no houses for them to occupy, or any chance that the needed houses could be built using local means.¹⁴ Simms, Sons and Cooke, who were to supply the Point England houses in Auckland, were appointed the principal contractors for "Operation Snail" before the houses were even designed because European firms were thought to have the manufacturing processes and supplies available, even though they were unfamiliar with Australian housing types.¹⁵ As with the imported New Zealand houses, for Australia the first idea had been to import prefabricated houses, but this was changed to pre-cut houses.

"Complete prefabrication, in the sense of panel construction, was not adopted because of the restrictions it imposes on design variation and the far greater cost of handling large prefabricated sub-assemblies, both in shipping and road transport to distant areas."¹⁶

In August 1952 the Director of Housing, R. B. Hammond undertook an inspection of a prototype of the Austrian-manufactured pre-cut house that was destined for Wellington. These were to be shipped in one consignment in September 1952.¹⁷ This was followed by a similar inspection of the English prototype houses that were to be shipped in separate consignments at a rate of 50 per

month,¹⁸ with the first units arriving in Auckland in March 1953.¹⁹ By July 1955 the *Herald* was able to report that, "Only seven of the 500 pre-cut homes ... remain to be completed".²⁰

The reason for the UK government being prepared to export houses at a time when that country was still short of accommodation for its own population and the Temporary Housing Programme was still in action²¹ was given by a representative of one of the tenderers. Mr Riley, of H. Newson, Sons and Co. Ltd. stated during a visit to Wellington that, "The economy of Britain was such, that she was prepared to release housing materials to the Commonwealth countries to obtain funds for the purchase of foodstuffs".²² Although New Zealand had a healthy balance of payments in this decade mainly through the export of primary produce, this early move towards a "global economy" was not viewed with unanimous enthusiasm, and the importation of the pre-cut houses was considered in a *Herald* editorial as a "large scale experiment".²³ Also, the irony of a country seemingly unversed in "4 x 2" construction²⁴ exporting timber framed houses to the other side of the world where timber frame was the traditional method of construction was not lost on all. The Otago Master Builders opposed the importation of the houses and suggested allowing the immigration of bush men to develop New Zealand's timber industry.²⁵ An editorial in the same paper on March 4 1953 considered that, "The industry should view the imported houses as a qualified reproach, and a challenge to show its ability to build more houses more speedily and at a lower cost."

The contention that the UK was unversed in "4 x 2" construction is also a misconception. Although walls in the UK were traditionally of brick, roof and floors were commonly framed in timber. The 1944 Temporary Housing Programme also had four different timber framed systems within it.²⁶ The "Operation Snail" houses imported from the UK had also been timber framed. The timber was pre-cut, marked and packaged in England and delivered as house lots. The timber was Swedish whitewood, kiln dried and prime-painted to try and minimise distortion during transport across a wide variety of climate zones.²⁷ As New Zealand was drawing directly upon this earlier, successful Australian experience, the criticisms appear very insular, but then New Zealanders have never had a high regard for Australians and vice versa.

Simms, Sons and Cooke

The Nottingham firm that exported the 500 houses to New Zealand was one of the oldest contracting firms in the UK. In 1793 William Cooke first appears in the Nottingham Directory as a plumber and glazier.²⁸ A Mrs. Cooke was listed as head of the firm in 1814, and the Cooke firm continued until 1912, when Cooke and Simms are listed as plumbers and co. The year 1912 also saw the firm of Simms, W.J. and Sons listed as painters and decorators.²⁹ Between the first and second world wars, the firm constructed over 30,000 houses in England and Wales, as well as larger public building contracts. In World War II the firm appears to have become familiar with prefabricated building techniques:

"During the last war the Company undertook the erection of military camps and aerodrome buildings and runways throughout Great Britain, coastal and inland defence works of various kinds, and refrigerated meat stores and other buildings. It also manufactured hutments, mobile workshops and hospitals packing cases and many other timber products".³⁰

The connection between Simms, Sons and Cooke and timber construction postwar is confirmed by their involvement with the Derwent System of timber construction developed by Vic Hallam of Derbyshire.³¹ They were the contractors for the 1956 Derwent System Bancroft Lane Junior School at Mansfield, Nottinghamshire.³² This experience led to the engagement of the firm for the much more significant Bancroft Lane Infants' School, which was the first to use the steel frame system developed by Nottinghamshire County Architects Department, as a low cost method of coping with

sites liable to mining subsidence. This system was to become the basis of CLASP. An article on the system suggested Simms, Sons and Cooke had a part in its development as they are stated to have built a two storey portion of the steel structure in their yard at Nottingham on which a series of tests were carried out.³³ The Bancroft Lane Infants' School started on site in January 1957 and was operating by September 1957.³⁴

By 1972 Simms, Sons and Cooke was not just one of the oldest contracting firms in the country, but employed more than 2000 people and was running building contracts all over the UK.³⁵ The firm was taken over by Trollope and Colls in 1978. Simms, Sons and Cooke continued in the export building business until this time. Their most reported export was a prefabricated hostel for the Falklands Islands that was "made by W.J. Simms, Sons and Cooke, and was complete to the last knife and fork when it left their Nottingham works. in Haydn-road [sic]".³⁶ According to the firm's architect, Russell Keen, a standardised barracks system normally destined for the Middle East and made by the firm had been adjusted to take account of the low temperatures and high winds.³⁷ The firm is also credited with being pioneers of industrialised building systems, "the most famous of which is the Simms C-DA System in timber".³⁸ From this interest in producing factory based timber building systems and a record of building houses, it is less surprising that Simms, Sons and Cooke became involved in exporting pre-cut houses to Australia and New Zealand.

Progress of the scheme at Point England

From the start the project was one of controversy. Complications were first experienced in providing sufficient sites for the Auckland houses. The houses were to be built at Point England, north of Tamaki. Only seven months before the shipping of the houses correspondence from the Ministry of Works records "... that part of Block V of about 50 acres is urgently needed for imported pre-cut houses. It would be impossible to satisfy the sudden need for 500 sites without this block".³⁹ When the preparation of the sites began in October 1952 a dispute arose with the leaseholder of the Point England property on which the houses were to be constructed. Chwlie Fong, a market gardener, complained that the State Housing Department had not given him any notice to evacuate the land and by removing his crops he and his family would be left without an income or a place to live. The dispute was only settled by the direct intervention of Director of Housing. Local residents were also upset by the siting of the imported houses, as the City Council had earlier agreed to construct a Community Centre for the whole Tamaki garden suburb development on the Point England site, and had also designated the area for a shopping complex. The residents had accused the Council of "...disguising their real intentions for the site..." and "When the government made an unannounced start on the construction of five hundred prefabricated houses on the property ... the residents' worst fears were realised".⁴⁰

To begin with, an office and a store were established at Camp Bunn (an old army camp in the nearby settlement of Panmure) by the British contractors Simms, Sons and Cooke Ltd, along with a Christchurch firm, Tasman Homes (N.Z.) Ltd. This latter firm appears to have been involved with the government from the start of the negotiations for the imported houses⁴¹ but their actual contractual part in the programme has not yet been traced. Camp Bunn had been erected during the war to house American servicemen and had been later converted for use as a transit camp for 87 families awaiting State housing placement.⁴² Rudimentary facilities at the camp included communal washhouses and a living room that contained the kitchen facilities, but to offset this there was a 300 seat picture theatre and a tennis court for recreation. Although it seems likely that some of the tradesmen who emigrated to take part in the building programme were temporarily housed there, part of the contract included an agreement that the newly arrived tradesmen could use a number of the imported houses in an unfinished state for accommodation.⁴³ Another advantage provided to the carpenters on the programme was that they could build their own houses with materials supplied by

Tasman homes with their labour acting as the partial deposit.⁴⁴ Sixteen carpenters took advantage of the scheme that credited £350 for their labour and only required a further £150 as a full deposit with the balance being undertaken as a mortgage by the State Advance Corporation. Another 40 immigrant tradesmen appear to have been allocated completed houses from the scheme.⁴⁵

Despite these encouragements the project failed to draw the necessary overseas tradesmen and "the slow arrival of immigrant tradesmen..." was one reason given by S. Johnson, manager for the British contractors, for his "... disappointment with the progress..."⁴⁶ At the peak there were approximately 210 Australian, English and Scottish workmen engaged on the construction, many of whom had worked on similar projects in Australia.⁴⁷ One Bristol building firm, F.H. Alderwick Ltd, moved with seven staff and "...41 cases of equipment that included a concrete mixer, saws and tubular scaffolding" to work on the assembly of the pre-cut houses. The workmen and their wives had been provided passage by the government under the assisted immigration scheme designed to attract skilled labour to the country.⁴⁸ Some tradesmen, such as plumbers, arrived before their skills were needed and were placed on loan to local contractors until they were required.

Although it was the stated intention of the government that all the timber for the houses was to be imported, a turn down in New Zealand's timber exports to Australia necessitated the renegotiation of the contract.⁴⁹ An agreement between the parties allowed only 250 houses to be constructed in "Scandinavian Red Deal" and the remaining 250 were in locally grown "NZ insignis Pine" from Putauru.⁵⁰ A number of items such as chimneys, hot water cylinders, coppers, tubs, paint and sanitary fittings were purchased locally for which the value was expected to be £60,000. In addition the hardwood sub-floor timbers were pre-cut and imported from Australia.⁵¹

The delayed arrival of some of the materials required the government to extend the duty free period during which the houses were to be imported and the government also came under attack from the opposition for changing the importation method from prefabricated to pre-cut.⁵² The most likely reason for this change of house structure was a saving in shipping space. For the Austrian houses it was quoted that the vessel could carry 500 pre-cuts to New Zealand but only 280 to 300 prefabs.⁵³

The Designs

The exact origins of the designs are difficult to establish. Ferguson states that the Point England houses were pre-cut "...to designs provided by a British firm".⁵⁴ Hammond, the Director of Housing, was deeply involved in the authorization process of the Point England house and he was known to promote generally his own 1953 open plan design, but the cellular nature of the Point England pre-cuts would indicate that he did not have any real influence on these final designs. The Australian architectural firms, Yuneken, Freeman Brothers, Griffiths and Simpson and Baxter, Cox and Associates of Melbourne were specified as consulting architects on the working drawings of the houses, as was the Wellington architectural firm of John, Meldrum and Whitwell.⁵⁵ This forms a direct link between the Victorian pre-cut "Operation Snail" houses and the Point England programme via the same manufacturers Simms, Sons and Cooke, and the involvement of the same Australian architectural firms. Roy Simpson, one of the partners of Yuncken et al appears to have been later credited with the design of the Australian pre-cuts that "...were manufactured in Britain ... some (of which) were sold to New South Wales and New Zealand".⁵⁶ It could also be assumed that because of this connection a considerable amount of experience was transferred from one project to the other. This was partially confirmed by the tradesman "...all (having) worked on the building of similar houses in Australia" and the use of "...bundles of pre-cut Australian Hardwood for use as sub-floor".⁵⁷ During the postwar period, as at other times in history, there was substantial debate on how to make houses affordable and the Victorian project emphasized that "A penny saved on one repetitive item can easily be £1000 in quantity production".⁵⁸ Considering the expense of

rejigging for trusses and frame cutting, shipping calculations, and reworking plumbing and electrical prefabricated systems, it is highly likely that Australian designs were only slightly modified for the New Zealand environment.

One certain modification was the electrical system. The Victorian project used an Australian designed and manufactured harness electrical system,⁵⁹ whereas the Point England houses used a UK supplied "Octopus" system from Hartley Electromotives Ltd., Shrewsbury.⁶⁰ With 44 different house types in the Australian project⁶¹ and only five, with variations, in the Point England project there was considerable opportunity to borrow plans from the former programme. The one house plan located from Victoria, "designed for a northerly aspect", shows a considerable similarity to the 3A plan of the Point England project (Fig.2) even allowing for the fact that cellular plans containing the same accommodation and of approximately the same size, do tend to be similar in approach.

There were five basic plans for the New Zealand pre-cut houses, two 2 bedroom plans and three 3 bedroom plans, all of which could be sited either right or left handed. The 2 bedroom houses were "...about 800 square feet" and the 3 bedroom "... about 1100 square feet".⁶² Alternative entry porches and chimney positions were available for four houses, including both the 2 bedroom models, and all models offered some variation in window positioning. Only one of the 2 bedroom houses provided a front entry separate from the living room, all others entered directly into the living room. The lack of a separate entry was a source of annoyance to some tenants with many constructing a visual barrier inside the front door.⁶³ In contrast the earlier UK prefabs had a separate entrance and hallway even when the plan was sectionalised into four factory built parts, as in the case of the aluminium bungalow⁶⁴. This lack of a separate entry would suggest that the plan did indeed come from Australia and did not originate in the UK.

One distinct similarity between the Victorian and the Point England designs was the use of a rectangular chimney. This shape was unusual in New Zealand with a square chimney block being

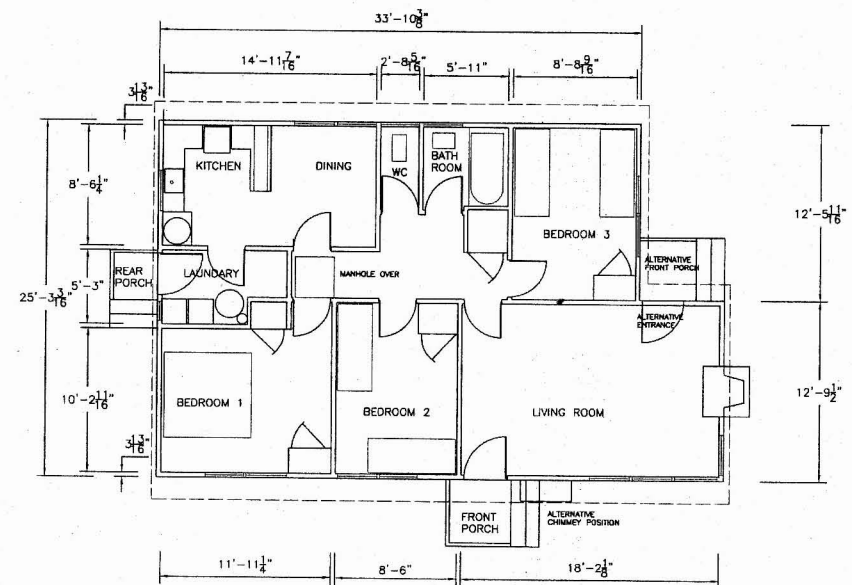


Figure 2. A Plan 3A Type House. Courtesy Housing New Zealand

common in State houses. The prefabricated plumbing systems exhibited similarities with a difference being that the New Zealand houses had header tanks. An obvious difference was the floor to ceiling windows that were in all the Point England houses. This feature did not appear in the earlier Australian houses by the same designers and contractors, nor were floor to ceiling windows common in the UK. A clue comes from the 1953 Hammond and Wilson houses, (Wilson was the then Government Architect) which were produced as model designs, "for both State rental purposes and for people desiring to build their own homes".⁶⁵ Both houses show a window in the living dining room with a dropped cill, next to the main entry and facing the road. The same feature also appeared in the imported houses for Porirua, Wellington, designed by the Housing Division under Wilson, where "Living-room windows extended to 12 in. from floor level".⁶⁶ Kellaway suggests that the "...talented team of modernists working for the Housing Department" may have influenced some aspects of the designs.⁶⁷ However, many of the architect designed homes that were reported in the journal *New Zealand Home and Building* at this period show the same dropped fenestration to the living area, and it may simply be an architectural fashion statement of the time that was transferred to the imported houses.

It was possible that the Point England houses were the first kiln dried timber framed houses in New Zealand. A construction outline for the Australian houses states that "Timber parts are mostly of Swedish whitewood, dressed throughout..." and "All timbers are kiln dried to appropriate moisture content...".⁶⁸ In Hansard the Point England houses are described as being "...accurately thickened...".⁶⁹ With the timbers being obtained from the same manufacturer it is highly likely that the timbers were similarly treated and, although low temperature kiln drying of timber began in New Zealand in 1951, these timbers were all exported to Australia because of the State Advance Corporation's insistence on chemically treating pine. Kellaway mentions that some of the Wellington houses "... suffered from pest infestation and were burnt" because of "... poor treatment at some mills".⁷⁰ This would suggest that chemical treatment was required in New Zealand for that group of houses. An indication that an exception was made for the Point England houses came from Housing New Zealand with the comment that rot had occurred because of the use of "untreated timber".⁷¹ What was not known was whether this occurred in the imported timbers from Scandinavian or those made from New Zealand pine. Another progressive feature of the Victorian specifications that did not transfer to the Point England houses was the inclusion of mineral wool for ceiling insulation, though the climate of Victoria is not very different from the climate of Auckland.

Apart from the distinctive features mentioned earlier the imported houses were conventional in most other obvious features with weatherboard exterior cladding, gable ended galvanized steel roofs and solid concrete corner foundations with batten infill. Interior linings were plasterboard fixed to an 8 foot stud and coppers were installed in all houses, although cylinders with immersion heaters supplied the hot water for most purposes.

Personal perspectives

As many of the imported houses at Point England still exist, either as part of Housing New Zealand's current stock or in private ownership, it was possible to talk to some people who had lived in the houses for a considerable length of time. Contacts were made through local community groups.

An urban myth appears to have grown up around the Point England pre-cut houses concerning their origin. Local people, including those who have lived or still live in the imported houses, do not refer to their British heritage, but rather consider them Scandinavian. Contemporaries of the houses will argue passionately that they came from Sweden. Noelene Carter can recall speaking to the builder before moving into her house in Pirangi Street in 1953 and being told that the houses

were "pre cut in Sweden".⁷² Pamnure Senior Citizens do not respond readily to inquiries about the UK pre-cut houses, but many have lived in, or had friends who had lived in, the "Scandinavian houses", when it is clear that it is the UK imported houses at Point England that are being referred to. The source of this myth may partly be found in the expectation that the Auckland City Council would import Swedish prefabricated houses for slum clearance at Freemans Bay (an area of housing immediately to the west of the city centre).⁷³ Since many of the people who moved into the Point England houses came from this area the impression that the houses they were moving to had been built in Sweden could have travelled with them. Another reason for the development of the myth could be that some of the timber used in the imported houses was Scandinavian Red Deal and the existence of some Dutch imported houses in the locality may also have confused the issue.

Two aspects of the houses recur; that they were cold to live in and that many were orientated incorrectly. Flo and Ford Childers who lived in Tripoli Road speak of the "... bedroom being warm and the kitchen being cold".⁷⁴ Noelene Carter says her family had to sit over the fire to keep warm because the house was "... draughty, cold and uninsulated" and her lounge "...faced the backyard".⁷⁵ There are stories of houses sited incorrectly and even placed on the wrong site. This was not surprising with a large green field development and considerable pressure on the subcontracted builders to complete each house as quickly as possible.

An assessment of the project

The first puzzle is why the government ever entered into the project. Housing shortage always makes good election propaganda but there never appears to have been any real housing crisis in New Zealand. Despite the rumours of a waiting list for State houses of over 40,000 people, the 1950 report from the Minister of Housing offers a different perspective.

"At the end of September, 1950, the State Advances Corporation had 40,408 unsatisfied applications for State rental houses, but many of these applicants were adequately housed. The urgent cases represented much less than half this number."⁷⁶

The fact that timber from this date was really no longer in short supply in New Zealand would have given a very adequate reason for the cancellation of the programme, and the contract was, indeed, renegotiated so that New Zealand timber would be used for part of the project.

The real reason for persevering with the programme was probably linked to the fact that the government insisted that imported tradesmen were to be part of the deal. Even if timber was no longer in short supply, tradesmen to make use of that timber were. As the imported houses had to bring workmen with them, men who would remain in New Zealand, this was one way of increasing the building workforce. Importing houses in timber would mean bringing in carpenters and joiners, the tradesmen who were needed in New Zealand with its timber framed house tradition. As the Ministerial report commented, "If tradesmen come to New Zealand with the imported houses it will be a net addition to both labour and material supplies".⁷⁷

If the imported house venture were to be evaluated on a purely economic basis the project would be deemed to have been unsuccessful. The houses were more expensive than anticipated and they were criticized for not being up to a New Zealand standard.⁷⁸ The three bedroom imported pre-cut houses were offered for sale at £3085 to £3250 each and the two bedroom houses at £2835 to £2925 each. This compared to the average price for an orthodox, existing State house in the same area at £2600 although there were claims that this latter price was below cost because of a government policy to "...encourage State tenants to own their own homes".⁷⁹ Considering the extra work a new owner of an imported house might undertake to establish the property, such as fitting a draught screen to the front door, the existing State house would have been far better value. The Labour

opposition claimed that the true cost of the imported houses was £3600 including the land, and that they were "...a disgrace to this country".⁸⁰

The fact that the scheme contributed 40 per cent of Auckland's State house production during the period they were being constructed illustrates the significance of the programme. In 1953-4 approximately 600 state houses were built.⁸¹ The imported house programme started in April 1953 and was completed in June 1955, which amounts to a production of slightly fewer than 250 houses per year. Approximately 240 families were housed in each year the programme was running with many of these coming from the slum clearance of Freemans Bay or from transit camps. The houses have also been occupied for far longer than their predicted 30 year life span with many tenants taking the opportunity to purchase the houses from the State (Fig.3). For the government of the time, however, the delays in the project and the cost of the houses meant that the scheme became an embarrassment, and was not repeated.

Possibly the real failure of the project was not the cost of the houses or the quality but the fact that the local builders failed to take on the technology that was incorporated into these imported houses. The majority of the local industry did not comprehend fully for another decade the efficiencies and materials savings that could be gained by pre-cutting and better organization. The fact that the majority of timber framed new houses in New Zealand are now pre-cut in the factory for on site assembly is another ironic twist in the convoluted story of the 500 pre-cut houses from England that have provided homes in Auckland for almost half a century.



Figure 3. A new roof, a wood burner and aluminium windows. An upgraded pre-cut house.

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