

# 'A bit of a dream' in New Plymouth

Lois Galer- Gail Lambert

**W**hen the idea of recycling the Egmont Steam Flour Mill was first mooted by Fletcher Development and Construction, I visited the mill with Fletcher's New Plymouth manager, Warren Charlton. My memories of that visit remain vivid. I recall walking through a part of the building that had recently been vacated by the local branch of the National Party, soon after the General Election of 1984. The large clock on the wall had stopped at midnight. Blue and white crepe paper streamers, remnants of an election night gathering, no longer rippled across the ceiling but dangled lifelessly down the walls. Vandals in a late night

visit had scattered cards across the room. I picked one up — it was a National Party sympathy card! It seemed a symbolic end of an era, not just for the tenants but for the building itself.

Three years after that visit, that section of the building (a late addition) survives only as a memory. It could not be incorporated as part of the redevelopment that ensued. However, the fabric of the main building has been carefully and sympathetically recycled by Fletcher's, a company involved in the redevelopment of several other historic buildings around New Zealand, including an old stable block near

Albert Park in Auckland and Christchurch's Normal School. The New Plymouth project was an almost copy-book example of planning, co-operation and liaison between the developer and the various other parties involved.

All too few historic commercial and industrial buildings are being conserved and recycled in New Zealand. Developers' arguments on building conservation are familiar: "the cost is too high; the site is too valuable; there is no viable reuse for the building; strengthening is too costly". It is difficult to counter such arguments on the grounds of historic heritage or integrity of towns-

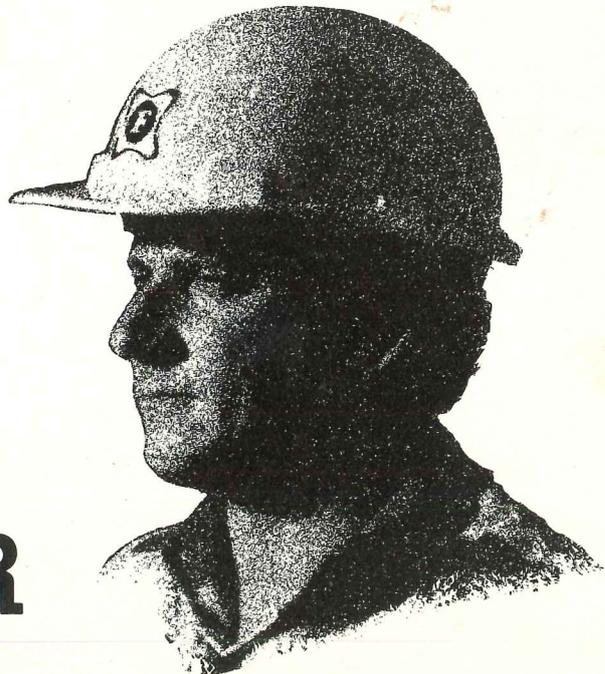
## We recognised the historical significance and future potential of the EGMONT STEAM FLOUR MILL

FROM ORIGINAL CONCEPT THROUGH  
TO DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION WE  
TRANSFORMED THIS NEGLECTED  
OLD RELIC; GIVING IT A NEW  
LEASE OF LIFE.



# FLETCHER

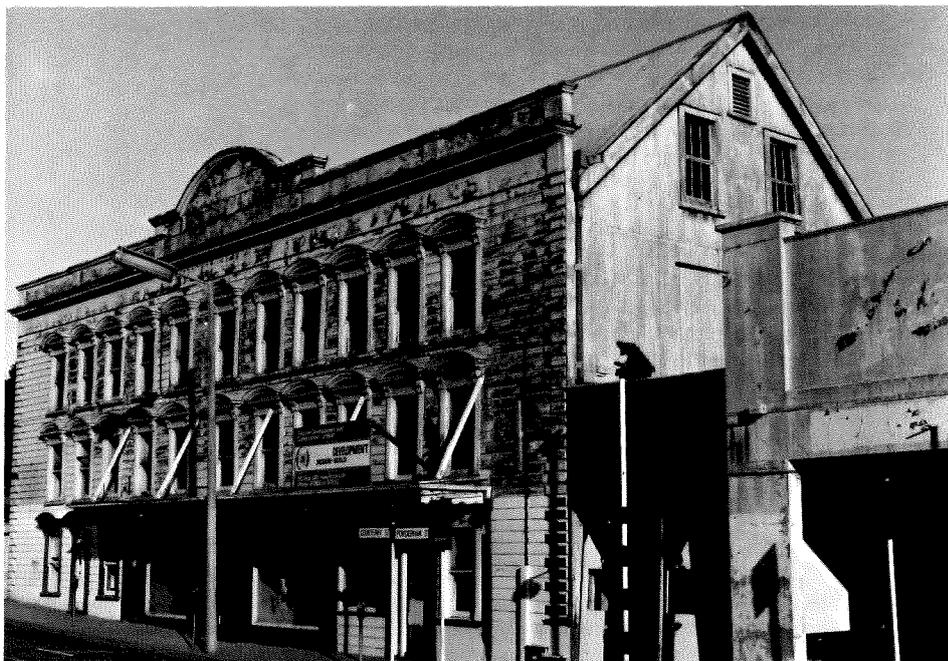
Fletcher Development & Construction Ltd.



cape. This situation is unlikely to improve until worthwhile incentives such as tax and rate savings are introduced into New Zealand to encourage retention of our heritage. However, it is to be hoped that the success of projects such as the Egmont Steam Flour Mill will encourage developers at least to give serious consideration to options other than demolition. The present unhappy trend whereby tower blocks rise up behind the facades of historic buildings, seems, to many, an unhappy compromise.

The history of the Egmont Steam Flour Mill has been well documented by archaeologist Robyn Oliver who is currently completing her M.A. thesis on the history of Taranaki flour mills. Built for the firm of Webster and Hulke between 1865 and 1867 at a cost of £7,000, Egmont was by far the most sophisticated and expensive of New Plymouth's flour mills and was opened with much fanfare, in a strong mood of optimism. The mill was different from other smaller ones in the area in being powered by a steam engine rather than a water-wheel. The owners were local businessmen, not working millers. It was a substantial wooden building with board and batten style cladding common in New Plymouth at that time. The main timbers used in the construction were rimu and kauri. The lower floor was built of stone blocks taken from the New Plymouth foreshore and of bricks.

The mill was built to designs from an English firm, Messrs Bull and Bond, by architect George Robinson. Rollers rather than grinding stones were installed to crush the wheat, which came from Taranaki, Patea and Wanganui, supplemented by supplies from Christchurch. There was, however, prejudice against local wheat as it produced a dark coloured, unappetising looking flour. Management hoped to overcome this problem by installing, about 1889, an intriguing piece of machinery called "The Gardener City Brush and Scalper". This contraption was an American invention designed to clean the wheat and produce a whiter flour.



The mill generally operated only for two-thirds of the year, producing four tonnes of flour per day. Additional income came from bone dust production in an area detached from the main building. In 1881 the owners (by then Webster and McKellar) built a second mill on the Tawhiti Stream in Hawera. By 1885 the firm was bankrupt and the Egmont Mill was sold to Zacchaeus William Wells for £2,050, although the previous owner continued to operate the mill until at least 1896. Ownership moved to a firm of produce merchants, Collet and Co., for the period 1905–28. From 1928 to 1965 the building was adapted for use as the New Plymouth shop of Farmers Co-op (now Taranaki Farmers). When the Farmers moved to new premises in 1965, the building began to deteriorate. Part of the building was used by the local branch of the National Party which owned the property. The ground floor in recent years was used by a co-operative as a market, while the remain-

der of the building fell into disrepair and became a haunt of homeless street kids.

We pick up the story of the mill again in 1983 when Max Leuthart (then New Plymouth's development manager for Fletcher Development and Construction) turned his thoughts to the potential of this central city building. The Egmont Steam Flour Mill is a conspicuous building on a prime inner-city commercial site at the Carrington Street end of Currie Street fronting onto Powderham Street. It stands amidst park reserve land which surrounds a city council carpark that is neatly hidden by the trees and the lie of the land. The building is a prominent landmark only one block up from Devon Street, the city's main shopping centre. The site links with the Huatoki Walkway which passes two further flour mill sites, further upstream, the Alpha (1844) and Victoria (c. 1845).

Initially, Fletchers' development manager in Wellington was asked to look at what



**Left:** *The Backstage nightclub in the renovated basement area of the Egmont Steam Flour Mill. (Photo: Taranaki Newspapers)*  
**Below:** *The parapet as work began on the building's restoration. Right (opposite): The restored frontage of the building was recently voted the best decorated commercial frontage in New Zealand by the New Zealand Painters and Decorators Association. (Photos: Charters Guthrie Crawford & Associates)*





Left (opposite): The Mill viewed from Powderham Street, prior to renovation commencing. (Photo: Charters Guthrie Crawford & Associates) Above: The frontage of the Mill after restoration. (Photo: Kris Pfeiffer)

could be done with the existing buildings. Preliminary sketches were prepared showing the potential of the structure. During this process decisions had to be made about "what could be saved and what would have to go". Fletchers decided that the building did not suit office or retail development, but was good for a restaurant-entertainment complex. The mill was then marketed by Fletchers to potential users and investors. Lion Breweries picked up on the idea. While they considered the proposal, Fletchers were busy negotiating with investors and calculating reconstruction costs. After much preparation and discussion, a development package was agreed to by all parties.

Maori Trustee Bruce Robertson introduced the idea to a joint Maori trust venture. He in effect became the crucial catalyst for the project proceeding. He employed a

property consultant, Roy Hanns (an Historic Places Trust Board Member), to act as his representative in negotiations between all parties and to supervise the contract. A large part of the investment came from the local Parinihinihi ki Waitotara Incorporation.

To summarise: for the venture to succeed, Fletchers had to find someone to own the property and someone to tenant it and to pursue through it all what Fletcher's present Taranaki manager, Warren Charlton, calls "a bit of a dream". He speaks of the project with obvious pride. The dream gradually began to take shape. With a tripartite agreement between all parties and the construction contract confirmed, the project was ready to move.

The proposal could not have reached this stage without the positive involvement of

the New Plymouth City Council. The council assisted the project by purchasing an adjoining property necessary for the development to proceed and by entering into a contract agreement with Fletchers regarding right of purchase for the mill project. It would not have been possible for Fletchers to "pull the package together" without such co-operation from the local authority. By facilitating the development of the entire block where the mill is situated, the council was able to ensure sympathetic redevelopment of the whole area in character with the mill building. As part of the total proposal for the mill site, Fletchers planned to redevelop the adjacent property, a disused car yard, as their New Plymouth office and warehouse. The exterior design was to echo that of the mill, while the reuse of timbers and corrugated iron from the mill in the offices was an imaginative blending of both old and new materials.

The stage was now set, but the final "go ahead" became dependent on obtaining a new food and entertainment liquor licence. Besides initially offering advice and enthusiasm, the Taranaki Regional Committee of the Historic Places Trust was able to assist the project in a tangible way at this stage. The committee prepared a submission of support for the licensing hearing. Crucial support also came, once again, from the council, which was keen to see not only the retention of an important historic landmark in the city, but also a valuable new facility for the community and visitors added to the attractions of the city. The licence was eventually granted after a lengthy delay. Fletchers were delighted, and perhaps a little surprised, at the support that came through from the community; they received many congratulatory phone calls from citizens "for keeping the bulldozers out".

There is no question that redevelopment of the mill was a risky undertaking which, according to Charlton, "could have either gone down the tubes or done well". Happily the latter is the case. Many builders have commented to Charlton that they would never have taken on such a project, but he maintains that the "risk" is a hard factor to evaluate under these circumstances. Without such boldness with old or new buildings, townscapes would lack vitality.

A major problem was to retain the integrity of the building while meeting fire and health regulations. Difficulties with fire safety were overcome by increasing the number of sprinklers. Compromises in historical integrity had to be made to meet the stringent health regulations governing food and liquor outlets. For example, the stone block walls behind the bar and in the toilet block in the basement nightclub area had to be covered with a smooth cleanable surface. It was decided that by plastering the contours of the masonry surfaces would be retained and the process, more importantly, would be reversible. The installation of modern requirements for items such as air conditioning and gas lines for dispensing alcohol was more complicated than in a new building but there was definitely more job satisfaction in solving these problems. According to the project manager, Martin Stephens,



the tradespeople soon developed a real empathy for the job and were keen to meet the challenges of relearning nineteenth century skills in such areas as carpentry and stone masonry.

Sewage servicing proved a real challenge because the basement area was lower than the street level. The problem was solved by installing a sophisticated pumping system. Another difficulty faced during redevelopment arose from the lower levels of the building being subject to flooding by the adjoining Huatoki Stream. Provisions in the Local Government Act allow for building permits to be issued for such sites subject to the owner's awareness of the flood danger being registered on the title. In the case of the flour mill, it was only the basement area that would be affected by flooding. The City Engineer's Department provided expert advice on projected maximum flood levels and a retention wall was built appropriately. Special flood doors were also incorporated in the basement plan, to a standard approved by the city engineer.

Despite these special problems that had to be identified and dealt with, the project proceeded smoothly. Construction commenced on 1 November 1985 and was completed by the end of September 1986, two months ahead of schedule; perhaps an indication of the enthusiasm with which the workers "got in behind" the project.

Of course, the crucial factor for anyone considering conserving a building is cost. Fletchers established very early in the planning stages that the estimated cost of \$2 million was about the same as the cost of ripping down the mill and rebuilding. But there is no way new development could recreate the character of the old building: "you just can't get three-inch-thick kauri timber floors. How much do you pay for character?" Charlton made the point that costs have to be carefully monitored, especially when trying to meet by-law restrictions, but this does have benefits. In New Plymouth, it made the workers think about what they were doing and not just rip down every piece of timber. The responsibility of the foreman is vital. Charlton commented: "Where some demolition is necessary, it can end up with a sort of frenzy with everyone going mad and smashing everything in sight. To keep restraint is difficult. In terms of costing, there were bonuses in sympathetic redevelopment. For example, once they were into the job, they found it looked wrong to use new timber, it was too straight and too white and had no holes in it. Wherever possible, demolition timber was used to maintain visual integrity." Charlton has high praise for project manager, Martin Stephens, whose enthusiasm and close attention to detail were vital to the success of the project and to ensuring it was completed within budget.

The co-operation between developer and local authority was reciprocal at all stages. A flood early in the construction phase badly damaged a nearby bridge which formed part of an access walkway adjacent to the mill and council car park. The council and Fletchers shared the cost of replacement. An ugly concrete storage bunker adja-

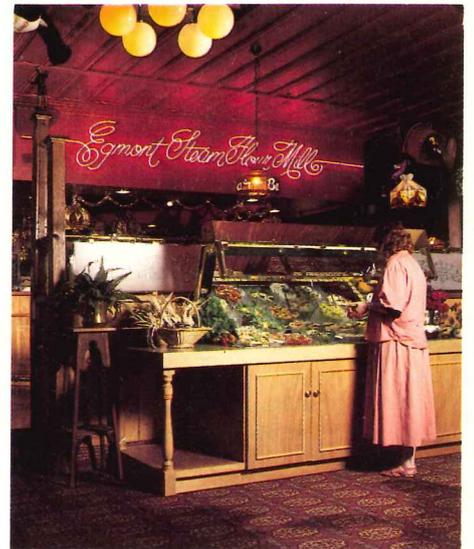


**Above:** The rear view of the recycled mill.  
**Right:** A corner of the restaurant in the building. (Photos: Kris Pfeiffer)

cent to the site was removed by the council. An area of city reserve alongside the new Fletcher office, on the bank of the Huatoki Stream, was landscaped for the city by Fletchers from designs supplied by the council's Parks and Recreation Department.

The mill has now been opened for nine months and the Lion Corporation has confirmed the retention of this historic industrial building by resurrecting the original name and by giving an Auckland interior decorator, Robin Ritchie, a free hand to create the appropriate atmosphere of nostalgia. The walls of the restaurant are adorned with a clutter of memorabilia which fascinates diners. The restaurant complex is on the ground floor, a nightclub occupies the basement and the top two floors are potentially office space, but are currently being used as a craft market. The future of the Egmont Steam Flour Mill is now secure. It has been listed as an historic building under category 2 of the city's draft district scheme.

Although recognised by many as an important and historic city landmark, the mill also has significance as an example of an early New Zealand wooden building. Much of the original wooden fabric has been retained, although on the exterior this remains intact but not visible behind the later wooden facade and modern corrugated



iron cladding. That it has proved financially viable to conserve such a substantial woodens industrial building hin a provincial centre must surely make this a valuable case study for many years to come. The work carried out also meets most of the criteria laid down by the International Council of Monuments and Sites. The key to the success was the will to make it work, of all parties. According to Charlton, "If any one of those involved had not been prepared to carry through their commitment, the project would have fallen through."

The negotiations were complex and required all groups, from the local authority and licensing authority to the prospective tenants and investors to share, "a bit of a dream".

Gail Lambert, a member of the Board of the Historic Places Trust, is New Plymouth's Deputy Public Relations Officer

We buy and sell a wide range  
of interesting books  
Catalogues of rare and out-of-  
print New Zealand books on  
request

**QUILTERS BOOKSHOP**

PLIMMER STEPS

P O Box 958, Wellington

Telephone: (04) 722-767

\$3.30  
includes  
GST

# HISTORIC PLACES

Number 18 • Published by the New Zealand Historic Places Trust • September 1987

*in New Zealand*

