

Alex Wiseman: reluctant architect?

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ABSTRACT: The Auckland Ferry Building, completed in 1912, is still a significant landmark in downtown Auckland today. However, its architect, Alex Wiseman, remains less well-known and more enigmatic. Born in Auckland in 1865 into a prominent Methodist family, Wiseman was apprenticed at 16 years of age to noted architect Edward Bartley for a term of four years. Wiseman then practised as a draughtsman for a period, before moving to Victoria, Australia, to follow his first love, music, making his living as a music teacher and organist. After marrying and starting a family, the lot of an impecunious musician may have held less appeal, and in 1903 Wiseman returned to Auckland. He established his own architectural practice and, over the next 12 years until his death at the age of just 50, he received, often with the aid of familial and church connections, several high-profile commissions, including the ferry building, the YMCA building and Auckland Training College (both in Wellesley Street), and "Greenacres," the home of James Gunson, later mayor of Auckland.

Early life and family background

Born in Fort Street, Auckland, on 21 March 1865, Alexander Wiseman was the son of James Wiseman and his wife, Margaret Barlow.¹ James Wiseman was the head and founder, with his brother Alexander, of the wholesale saddlery firm of J & A Wiseman, and was a prominent member of the Wesleyan church. Through his mother, James Wiseman was a nephew of William Chisholm Wilson, who established *The New Zealand Herald* newspaper in 1863.²

James Wiseman died in 1898,³ and his eldest son, John, became head of the family business. John Wiseman was a long-time member of the Auckland Yacht Club and served as its

¹ Wiseman "Alexander Wiseman," pp 31–32; "Births" p 9.

² "Obituary" p 3.

³ "Obituary" p 3.

commodore.⁴ In 1901 he married Mabel Annie Edith Kenrick, whose father had been warden of the goldfields and resident magistrate in Thames.⁵ Other siblings of Alex Wiseman also married well. In 1899, his brother Malcolm married Lilian Jessie Katherine Partridge, the daughter of Henry Edward Partridge,⁶ a prominent businessman, tobacconist and art collector who amassed the eponymous collection of Lindauer paintings now held by the Auckland Art Gallery.⁷ Jane Wilson Wiseman married Neville Newcomb, a land agent, in 1893.⁸ Jessie Helen Wiseman married seed merchant James Henry Gunson, from another family prominent in the Methodist

⁴ "Mr. John Wiseman" p 247.

⁵ "Personal items" p 6; "Marriages" (1901) p 1.

⁶ "Marriages" (1899) p 1.

⁷ "Obituary: Mr H. E. Partridge" p 12

⁸ "Marriages" (1893) p 1; "Obituary: Mr. Neville Newcomb" p 1.

church in Auckland, in 1905. James Gunson went on to serve as mayor of Auckland from 1915 to 1925, and was knighted in 1924.⁹ In 1904, Mary Olive Wiseman married her second cousin, Frederick Walter Wilson, a grandson of William Chisholm Wilson and a director of Wilson & Horton.

From an early age, Alex Wiseman was musically inclined, and when he was 14 years old he was appointed as an organist at the Parnell Wesleyan church.¹⁰

Apprenticeship to Edward Bartley: 1881-85

As the fourth son in a family of 13 children, Wiseman would have had little prospect of taking over the family business from his father. James Wiseman therefore, no doubt

⁹ Stacpoole "Gunson, James Henry" np.

¹⁰ Wiseman "Alexander Wiseman" pp 31–32.

taking account of his son's interest in the arts but wishing him to follow a solid and respectable profession, entered into a contract on 19 June 1881 with the prominent architect, Edward Bartley, for the young Alex to be apprenticed to Bartley for four years. Bartley was paid the sum of £50, while James Wiseman was obliged to provide his son with "good and sufficient meat, drink, lodging and washing, suitable clothing, medicine and medical attendance." Alex Wiseman was to be paid by Bartley only in the third and fourth years of the indenture: 17s 6d per week in the third year, and £1 per week in the fourth.¹¹

Over the four years that Alex Wiseman was articulated to Edward Bartley, the latter completed a number of significant commissions in Auckland, including St John's Methodist church at 231 Ponsonby Road (1882), the synagogue at 19A Princes Street (1884), the Auckland Savings Bank building at 256–260 Queen Street (1884), St Jude's church in Avondale (1884), and Coombes' Arcade at 25–27 High Street (1885). The aforementioned buildings remain standing today and are all listed either category 1 or 2 by Heritage New

¹¹ Wiseman "Alexander Wiseman" pp 31–32.

Zealand.¹² We can only speculate as to the extent of Wiseman's involvement in these projects.

Bartley certified on 20 July 1885, when the term of Wiseman's indenture ended, that Wiseman was a "painstaking and careful draughtsman - courteous and willing at all times."¹³

Musical years: 1885-1903

Following the completion of his apprenticeship, Alex Wiseman may have worked as a draughtsman, as he is listed as such in the 1890 electoral roll for the Auckland City constituency, living at his father's residence. He was a capable artist, as shown by a collection of sketches by him from 1891 now held by the Auckland Art Gallery. It was, however, as an organist that Wiseman gained more attention at that time. He received training in the pipe organ from Neville Barnett in the mid 1880s,¹⁴ and following the

¹² Heritage New Zealand "St John's church (Methodist)" np; Jones "Synagogue (former)" np.; Jones "Auckland Savings Bank (former)" np.; McKenzie "St Jude's church and hall" np.; McKenzies "Coombes' Arcade (former)" np.

¹³ Wiseman "Alexander Wiseman" pp 31–32.

¹⁴ Wiseman "Alexander Wiseman" pp 31–32.

latter's appointment in 1887 as organist of St Mary's Cathedral, Sydney,¹⁵ Wiseman succeeded him as organist at St Matthew's church in Hobson Street.¹⁶ From 1888 at the latest, Wiseman was taking pupils himself, providing lessons on the organ, piano and harmonium, as well as in the art of accompanying.¹⁷

Sometime between 1891 and 1893, Wiseman moved to Victoria, Australia, and made his living there as a musician and music teacher. He was resident in Mooroopna, across the Goulburn River from Shepparton, 181km north of Melbourne, when, on 17 June 1893, he married Harriet Amanda Coombes at the Presbyterian church in Clarendon Street, Melbourne. Harriet, born in Auckland in 1868, was the daughter of Samuel Coombes, the Queen Street draper for whom Coombes' Arcade had been designed by Edward Bartley in 1885. Samuel Coombes was declared bankrupt in 1886, and the family later moved to Melbourne.¹⁸ It is conceivable that Wiseman would have met the 17-year-old Harriet

¹⁵ "General news" p. 5; "Mr Neville Barnett, F.C.O." p 2.

¹⁶ "Musical and dramatic" p 4.

¹⁷ "Advertisements: educational" p 8; "Business notices: educational" p 2.

¹⁸ McKenzie "Coombes' Arcade (former)" np.

Coombes during the design and construction of the arcade for her father, and that his decision to shift to Victoria could have been influenced by Harriet's departure for Melbourne.

Over the next several years, Alex and Harriet had four children: Hilda Alexandra (born 1894 in Mooroopna),¹⁹ Vella Elizabeth Amanda (born 1896 in Shepparton), Neville James Alexander (born 1898 in Shepparton), and Enid Olive Alexa (born 1900 in Surrey Hills, Melbourne).

In November 1896, it was reported by the *New Zealand Herald* that Alex Wiseman was living in Shepparton and making "rapid progress" in the musical profession: he had recently written an introduction to the cantata "Esther" that was performed by a 100-voice choir and orchestra that he conducted, and buoyed by the success of his composing debut, he had gone on to write a march for piano, entitled the "Akarana March" in honour of his home town. The *Herald* reviewer described the piece as a "most pleasing and brilliant production ... tuneful and well harmonised."²⁰

¹⁹ Prince "Wiseman, Hilda Alexandra" np.

²⁰ "Musical and dramatic" p 4.

However, Wiseman's activities appear to have been only occasionally covered in the Victorian newspapers: such as in October 1894 when he played the organ at a wedding in Mooroopna;²¹ in 1899 when he gave an organ recital and was the accompanist for various solo singers at a Good Friday concert at the Shire Hall in Alexandra, 138 km northeast of Melbourne;²² and in December 1901 when he was the accompanist and organ soloist at a concert at the Wyclif Congregational church in Surrey Hills.²³ In 1900, he advertised his services as a piano and organ tuner and repairer based in Surrey Hills.²⁴ It seems that his musical career may not have made such rapid progress as he would have wished, and he had diversified into piano tuning to help support his growing family. Whatever the situation, in 1903 the family returned to Auckland where Alex Wiseman established himself in practice as an architect.

Architectural years: 1903-15

Back in Auckland, Alex and Harriet Wiseman had a further three children: Huia Alexandra (born 1904); Rona Altan (born 1905); and

²¹ "A fashionable wedding at Toolamba" p 5.

²² "Esther" p 3.

²³ "Wyclif Congregational church concert" p 2.

²⁴ "Advertisement" p 2.

Douglas Alexander (born 1908). In 1907, by which time his architectural practice appears to have been thriving, Wiseman designed and built a 10-room house in Ranfurly Road, Epsom, to accommodate his growing family. At the same time, he continued his musical interests, and was an organist at various churches including St John's Methodist church, Ponsonby, and the Pitt Street Methodist church until a few months before his death in 1915.²⁵

Over the course of his 12 years of practice in Auckland, Wiseman designed well over 100 buildings. The following list is gleaned from tender advertisements and other reports in *The New Zealand Herald* and *Auckland Star* newspapers, and the journal *Progress*.

1903

Villa at Epsom. £877.

Eight-room house, Buckland. £595.

Two-storey residence, Remuera.

1904

Two-storey house, Firths Road (now part of Mountain Road), Epsom.

Wesleyan church, Buckland. Dimensions 30 ft x 20 ft.

Two houses, Onehunga.

²⁵ Wiseman "Alexander Wiseman" pp 31-32; "The late Mr. Wiseman" p 5.

Villa, Wallace Street, Ponsonby.
Warehouse, Upper Queen Street.
House, Gordon Road, Mount Eden.
10-Room house, Onehunga.
Villa, Mount Eden.

1905

Alterations to shop and dwelling, Union Street.
New parsonage for Methodist church, Kingsland.
Additions to schoolroom, new infants' schoolroom, new outbuildings for St John's Methodist church, Ponsonby.
Brick store, Chancery Street.
Cottage, Parnell.
Four-storey brick building, central city.
Butter factory in brick, Frankton Junction. £890 10s.
Two-storey residence in brick and wood, Remuera.
Warehouse in brick, Victoria Street.
Warehouse, central city.
Three-storey brick building finished in cement for Kapai Corn & Broom Company, corner of Victoria & Coburg (now Kitchener) Streets.
Factory, stables, and caretaker's quarters, Epsom.

1906

Villa, Gillies Avenue, Epsom.
Residence, Northcote.
Queen's Hall in brick with gallery and chair accommodation for 250 people, adjoining residence of A. Thorne, Paget Street, Ponsonby.
Store in brick, Freemans Bay.
Two-storey residence, Remuera.
St John's church in wood with iron roof, corner of Main and Gilmour Streets, Waihi. £996.
Two shops for R. Salmon and Son (butchers).
Foundry, Freemans Bay.
Alterations to premises, Queen Street.

Waggon shed and enlargement of stabling, Epsom.
Two houses, Ponsonby.
Two houses, Kipling Avenue, Epsom.
Stable roofing, central city.
Warehouse in brick, Albert Street.

1907

House, Marama Avenue, Epsom.
Additions and alterations to house, Grafton Road.
Auckland Training College, Wellesley Street East. £8500.
10-Room house, Ranfurly Road, Epsom.
Renovations to house and additions to stabling, Church Street, Ponsonby.
House, Ring Terrace, St Marys Bay.
Seven-room house in wood, Whangārei.
Shops and offices in brick for trustees of Baptist Tabernacle, Karangahape Road, Newton.
Shop in brick for Mr Solon, Mount Eden. £378.
Three-storey building in brick and stone for Messrs R. Malcolm Ltd, Wellesley Street West.
Warehouse, corner of Albert and Wellesley Streets.
Ventilation of church, Ponsonby.
Warehouse in brick for Messrs Collins Bros and Co. Ltd, corner of Wyndham and Federal Streets. £15000.
School hall in wood for St Stephen's church, Ponsonby.
Residence in brick, Symonds Street.

1908

Four two-storey shops in brick, Queen Street. £2997.
Cottage hospital, Rāwene.
Stables in brick, Upper Symonds Street.
Shop in brick, Mount Roskill.
Methodist Mission hall in brick and wood to accommodate 800 people with gallery and choir, schoolroom to accommodate 200 children, East Street, Newton. £3200

Alterations and additions to factory in wood, Upper Queen Street.
Residence in wood for H.M. Chisholm, Remuera.
Residence in wood, Mount Roskill.
Additions and alterations to Baptist Tabernacle Sunday School, Queen Street.
Rebuilding of shopfront, Newmarket.
Infectious diseases hospital, Whangārei.
House in wood, Mount Eden.
Additions and alterations to Leys Institute, Ponsonby.

1909

Seaside cottage, Lake Takapuna.
General improvements to house and erection of stables in wood, Lake Takapuna.
Weekend cottage, Tāmaki West.
Warehouse for Messrs Warnock Bros, Durham Street.
Re-covering of roof of house with corrugated iron, Hillsborough.
House in wood, Queen Street, Northcote.
House, Gladstone Road, Parnell.
Alterations and additions to house, Grange Road, Mount Eden.
House in wood, Clonbern Estate, Remuera.
Residence, Devonport.
Alterations and additions to Baptist church, Grange Road, Mount Eden.

1910

Auckland Ferry building. £55077.
Additions to outbuildings, Khyber Pass.
Alterations and additions to house, Victoria Road, Devonport.
Remodelling of and additions to house, Valley Road, Mount Eden.
Kindergarten school in wood, Epsom.
House in wood, Mount Eden.

Building in wood and iron, concrete flooring, and sundry improvements, "Door of Hope," Cook Street.
 Residence in wood for E.H. Mitchell, Meadowbank. £1065.
 Extensions and sundry improvements to bakehouse, Symonds Street.
 Bungalow in wood, Lake Takapuna.
 House, Northcote.
 Methodist church in brick to seat 300 people, Greenwoods Corner, Epsom. £1727.
 Alterations and additions to house, Epsom.
 Bungalow, Takapuna.
 Additions to brick building, Albert Street.
 House in wood, Mount Eden.
 Verandah, Queen Street.

1911

YMCA building, corner of Wellesley Street East and Coburg (now Kitchener) Street. £17222.
 Shops with dwellings in brick, Grey Lynn.
 Alterations to Auckland Harbour Board offices, Quay Street.
 House in wood, Mount Eden.
 Police and customs building, Queen Street wharf. Estimated £5000–6000.
 Relating of roof of Auckland Harbour Board offices, Quay Street.
 Renovation of five Auckland Harbour Board houses, Harbour and Waitematā Streets, Ponsonby.
 Factory in iron and brick including concrete retaining wall, Grey Lynn.
 Addition of five rooms to Admiralty House ("Glenalvon") for Auckland Harbour Board.

1912

Alterations and improvements to Mr T. Clark's boot emporium, Ponsonby.
 YMCA, Wanganui. £7000.
 Bungalow in wood, Lake Takapuna.
 Additions and alterations to house, Devonport.
 Bungalow, Northcote.
 Church in wood, Russell.
 Improvements to premises occupied by National Piano Company, corner of Albert Street and Wellesley Street West.

1913

New Sunday school and gymnasium for Newton Congregational church, Edinburgh Street, Newton.
 Improvements to building, central city.
 Residence in wood, Cambridge.
 Improvements to house, Epsom.
 Addition of elevator to four-storey building, central city.
 Strongroom and other alterations to Auckland Harbour Board offices, Quay Street.

1914

Bungalow in concrete and wood, Mount Eden.
 Extensive additional to bakery for Messrs Walter Buchanan Ltd, Eden Terrace.
 Hall in brick, Takapuna. £2500.

It is evident from the list of Wiseman's buildings that he undertook a significant amount of work for the Methodist Church, no doubt aided by his family's strong associations with that faith, as well as his own involvement as organist. His earliest church, in 1904, was the Wesleyan church at

Buckland, 4 km south of Pukekohe. The simple wooden church in Gothic style at the corner of Buckland Road and George Crescent is still standing, although significantly modified as a private residence. The following year he designed a new parsonage for the Methodist church in Kingsland. Other commissions for the Methodists included: the 1905 additions to the schoolroom, new infants' schoolroom and other outbuildings for St John's church, Ponsonby; the large Mission Hall in Newton in 1908; improvements at the "Door of Hope," part of the Methodist Helping Hand Mission, in 1910; and the imposing Gothic brick church at Greenwoods Corner, also in 1910.

In 1905, a small timber hall was erected alongside the Baptist church in Jervois Road, Ponsonby. A report by Heritage New Zealand notes that the architect is uncertain, but that Wiseman played the organ at the building's opening.²⁶ What is certain is that there were strong similarities between the Baptist hall and the Wesleyan church at Buckland, both having the same Gothic influences with steeply gabled roofs and a projecting front porch with side entry. In the following years,

²⁶ McKenzie "Ponsonby Baptist church" np.

Wiseman received at least three commissions from the Baptist church, for new shops and offices in Karangāhape Road in 1907, additions and alterations to the Tabernacle Sunday School in Queen Street in 1908, and alterations and additions to the Baptist church in Grange Road, Mount Eden in 1909.

For other denominations, Wiseman designed St John's Anglican church in Waihi in 1906; a new school hall for St Stephen's Presbyterian, Ponsonby, in 1907; a small church at Russell in 1912; and a new Sunday school and gymnasium for the Newton Congregational church in 1913.

Wiseman's Methodist connections may well have also contributed to his appointment as architect for the YMCA building in Wellesley Street East in 1909. The president of the Auckland YMCA at the time was Andrew Clarke Caughey,²⁷ a Methodist minister and partner in the retail firm of Smith and Caughey: the Smiths and the Caugheys were two of the leading Methodist families in Auckland.²⁸ The building, on the corner of Kitchener Street, opposite the Auckland Art

²⁷ "Y.M.C.A. progress" p 6.

²⁸ Coney "Smith, Marianne" np.

Gallery and public library, remains today and houses, among other businesses, the Gow Langsford Gallery. Having designed the Auckland facility, Wiseman may have been encouraged to enter the competition for a new YMCA building in Whanganui, which he duly won. Opened in 1914,²⁹ that building has since been demolished.

In May 1907, Wiseman was appointed as architect for the new Auckland ferry building in Quay Street,³⁰ and tenders were called for the construction of the building the following March.³¹ A year later, Wiseman's brother-in-law, James Gunson, was elected to the Auckland Harbour Board,³² and in 1911 Gunson became the board's chairman.³³ The building was completed in July 1912 at a cost of about £68,000.³⁴ In June 1911, Wiseman had advised the harbour board of a possible saving of £3000 if the tower was omitted,³⁵ but this proposal was not accepted. During Gunson's chairmanship of the Auckland

²⁹ "Wanganui Y.M.C.A." p 5.

³⁰ "Auckland Harbour Board" p 4.

³¹ "Tenders" p 2.

³² "Harbour Board: the Auckland elections" p 5.

³³ Stacpoole "Gunson, James Henry" np.

³⁴ "The Harbour Board" (1912) p 7.

³⁵ "Harbour Board" (1911) p 5.

Harbour Board, Wiseman served as the board's architect, carrying out several projects. In this case, however, it was probably Wiseman's success with the ferry building that gained him the position, rather than any nepotism on Gunson's behalf. In 1982, the building was granted category 1 listing by the New Zealand Historic Places Trust (now Heritage New Zealand).³⁶

Also in 1907, Wiseman completed the design of the new Auckland Training College for the education board. The formal opening of the building, designed in the Queen Anne style, took place in November 1908.³⁷ The building has been subsequently demolished.

In 1908, Wiseman designed four shops in what would become a terrace of 16 shops by 1912. The site in Queen Street has been owned by the Methodist church since the 1840s, and the shops at 460–466 Queen Street were built for Neville Newcomb, Wiseman's brother-in-law. The terrace was given category 1 listing by the Historic Places Trust in 1987.³⁸

³⁶ Jones "Ferry building" np.

³⁷ "New training college" p 6.

³⁸ Heritage New Zealand "Terrace of shops" np.

The many private dwellings that Wiseman designed include: the residence of George Winstone in Symonds Street (since demolished in favour of the motorway); "Marinoto" for Dr William Henry Parkes on the corner of Airedale and Symonds Streets (also no longer standing); a house for Fred Wilson on the corner of Mountain and Clive Roads in Epsom (subsequently used as a boarding hostel by Auckland Grammar School); and "Greenacres," in St Andrews Road, Epsom, for James Gunson (and later used by the Tongan royal family and known as "Atalanga").³⁹ George Winstone was active in the Methodist church, serving as trustee of the Methodist Charitable and Educational Trust.⁴⁰ Parkes was a keen amateur organist, so naturally chose Wiseman to execute the design, which included a music room for a pipe organ.⁴¹ Fred Wilson was Wiseman's brother-in-law and second cousin, and James Gunson was also Wiseman's brother-in-law.

During his architectural practice, Wiseman had at least three students, who enjoyed success in student competitions run by the

³⁹ Wiseman "Alexander Wiseman" pp 31-32.

⁴⁰ Methodist Charitable and Educational Trusts Act 1911 s 4.

⁴¹ Wiseman "Alexander Wiseman" pp 31-32.

journal *Progress*. Alfred John Brown was articled to Wiseman between 1908 and 1912, and went on to become a notable town planner in Australia.⁴² Later students were Horace Lovell Massey, who became a leading Auckland architect, winning four NZIA gold medals, and Edward George Le Petit, who also practised in Auckland.

Towards the end of his life, Wiseman is reported to have been in "indifferent health," and it is noticeable that his volume of work decreased, particularly from 1913 onwards. He died at his home in Ranfurly Road on 21 September 1915, and was buried at Purewa Cemetery.⁴³

Despite only practising as an architect for the last 12 years of his life, Wiseman showed considerable skill and deserves to be remembered as a leading figure in Auckland architecture from the early years of the twentieth century. Had he chosen to continue in architecture as a young man, rather than pursuing his first love - music - he would no doubt have produced a much larger body of work and have been able to hone his skills

even more. Nevertheless, with both his abilities and his social connections, he obtained significant commissions and made important contributions to architecture, primarily in Auckland, over what was a very short professional career.

⁴² Proudfoot "Brown, Alfred John" np.

⁴³ "The late Mr. Wiseman" p 5.

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