

A HISTORY OF CACCIA BIRCH HOUSE

Caccia Birch House provides a living link with the pioneering past of Palmerston North.

Designed by Danish Architect, Ludolf Georg West, it still stands on its original site. The original home cost a little under £900 to build.

It was one of the first large houses to be erected in the city and was built for Jacob Nannestad and his family. Nannestad was a Norwegian immigrant and a partner in the sawmilling firm of Richter, Nannestad and Jensen, which at the time was engaged in clearing bush in the wider Hokowhitu area.



Built in **1895**, the house was originally a simple two storied family home that contained a finely Rimu timber panelled foyer, study, hallway and dining room. It had a drawing room, kitchen and toilet on the ground floor and four bedrooms and bathrooms on the second floor. During the following years the family improved the surrounding land, creating an attractive park with large lawns and gardens overlooking the lagoon, in which guests were frequently entertained.

By the early **1900's** the fortunes of the sawmillers declined with a lack of suitable timber and the impending depression.

In **1903** the house and 22 acres of land and the lagoon, was sold to English business man & retired farmer John Henderson Pollock Strang. The house was named 'Woodhey' after Mrs Strang's family home in England. At a cost of £800 the house was extended and transformed into the elegant building we are familiar with today. Two conservatories were added either side of the entrance along with the covered balcony at the front door. A day nursery and night nursery were added to the second storey. Separate servants quarters were added to the rear of the house with a small timber staircase for staff to access the second floor from their quarters. This remains a feature today.

In **1905** stables were added to the barn. This was to house the Strang's polo ponies, carriage and incorporated a residence for the groom. It later housed his motor car, one of the first in the region. Woodhey, by this time provided a gracious setting for many local social activities.

During **1907**, Woodhey was offered for lease to the government as a temporary residence for the Governor General, Lord Plunket and his family. A fire at Parliament House caused business matters to be transferred to Government House while repairs were undertaken. More additions were made to the house to prepare for Lord and Lady Plunket's stay. At a total cost of £1500 a billiard room was added at the rear lagoon-side of the house and a guest bedroom was added directly above the kitchen. Temporary bedrooms and offices were also erected, although these were removed after the lease expired. In the grounds there was a lawn tennis court.

In **1908** the Vice-Regal party took up residence and remained at Woodhey until **1910**. The Strang family meanwhile, had taken a holiday to England, in those days by ship. They returned from overseas and resumed residence at Woodhey until **1921**, when they sold the property and moved to New Plymouth.

In **1921** William Charles Caccia Birch and his wife Maude (nee Keiller) moved to Woodhey. William was a retired farmer having sold Erewhon Station near Taihape and spending time at his late father's property near Marton, before moving into Palmerston North. Maud had family and friends close by. During their time the gardens were developed further and Maude designed a stone edged garden overlooking the lagoon. Its shape exists today, although re-built with new paving.

Mr Caccia Birch died in **1936** and the lagoon was sold in 1938 to the city to be a civic amenity. Maud's sons were farming in the Marton district and after trying to sell the property for a couple of years, the family chose to donate the rapidly declining property to the Government to help in the War effort.

In **1939** the 'Caccia Birch House' became military staff accommodation for home-guard officers who were training at Massey Agricultural College until the war ended in 1945. A temporary wing was added as a mess hall, directly adjacent to the old kitchen. Shortly after the war had finished Palmerston North Hospital Board set up a Convalescent Home for returning war veteran nurses. The house held beds for up to 20 patients. The temporary wing, now contained four bedrooms, dining and sitting rooms. In the mid **1950's**, the house was no longer required by the hospital.

By **1960** it was used to provide offices and classrooms for the Palmerston North University College. This was established by Victoria University of Wellington to provide courses not available at Massey Agricultural College.

During 1963, an Act of Parliament saw Massey and PN University College amalgamated to become Massey University of the Manawatu. This title was abbreviated in 1966 to Massey University. Gradually operations were shifted to the Massey Campus. Teachers Training College subsequently occupied Caccia Birch House until they completed their own campus on the opposite side of the Lagoon.

By late 1976, the house stood empty although Massey University was still the official tenant.

The Crown owned the property and as no use was being made of it, suggestions of demolition, subdivision and sale were put forward and debated vigorously at PNCC.

In 1977 Caccia Birch Preservation Society was formed by Professor John Dunmore and concerned about the future of this historically valuable property.

By 1983 Sir Brian Elwood's council petitioned the Government to 'sell' the property to Palmerston North City Council. A fee of 10 cents and a Deed of Gift to ensure the community have use of the property in perpetuity.

The change in ownership did not settle the question of future use and finding money to restore the property was the next task. It took several more years before the roof and piles were repaired.

A resident custodian ensured further vandalism was curtailed.

In 1989, a voluntary Trust Board was formed to manage the property commencing with the interior restoration project. In order to completely restore the property some of the grounds were subdivided for residential sections, earning about \$700,000. A local Supporters Houseie club raised over \$100,000 and a Lotteries board grant of \$50,000 and the PNCC funded a further \$150,000. (These figures are approximate)

During 1992, the ground floor was completely refurbished, the grounds were landscaped with paving surrounding the house and rose garden. A large parking area was laid.

In 1993 a manager was employed, as it was decided that the rooms would be let out for meetings and functions with the general aim of generating income for the property. The second floor was redeveloped into one large room, suitable for functions and wedding receptions. The gardens had been overgrown for so long, developing them was time consuming and the local Horticultural Society provided voluntary help to get this underway. The many notable old trees in the grounds had also been neglected so there was a lot to tidy up.

1994 saw the restoration of the old CoachHouse. There were only funds sufficient to complete the foundations, painted exterior cladding and public toilets.

By this time the house was well used as a conference venue and helping generate income to continue some development of the property. Providing a lovely venue for the community to hire and use for both business and private functions, the house has hosted visitors and clients from all over NZ and overseas, many professing the beautiful building and grounds to be a Jewel in Manawatu's crown.

2000: Work has continued in the CoachHouse interior, with the Coachman's Lounge refurbished and available to use. The significant project of developing a historical archive about the history of the property, families and Hokowhitu area in the old stables for visitors has been a great success and work continues on developing this.

2006: The Trust Board spent two years raising funds to install a simple platform elevator to allow wheelchair users and mobility impaired people with access to the top floor.

2007: The Rose Garden received a make over with more paving added for greater utility. The Herb Society abandoned their corner garden and the Trust's gardener took over the upkeep. Some areas were replanted with roses and the carpark walkway widened for better access.

2012: A new wrought iron fence and gateway was installed to the Caccia Birch Lane—Wisteria Walkway access and the area more clearly defined for visitors. New information signs were added at both the entrance ways

2013: The CoachHouse work continues with a pressurised sprinkler system fitted and 2 more areas repaired by replacing the timber wall lining and insulating at the same time.



The Trust Board is a non-profit organisation that uses all fees charged to assist in the maintenance and preservation of this Category 1 listed Historic Homestead for the continued enjoyment of the community. We strive to continue upgrading and improving the facility as well as preserving its unique environment for future generations.