

VICTORIA Square

where the Town Hall rubs shoulders with history

From Maori village to Market Square to Victoria Square to Cultural Precinct

By Heather Hapeta Cambell

Victoria Square lies just over the river behind the Christchurch Town Hall and Convention Centre, looking nothing like the swamp settlers had to cross to get to the markets held there in 1850. Those early settlers must have been sorely disillusioned when they first saw the soggy land of their dreams—however they weren't the first to inhabit this land. Between 1000 and 1500, Maori (who had arrived here in large canoes from the Cook Islands) lived in a settlement called Puari, east of the Otakaro River, and home for around 800 people who gathered eels, whitebait, native trout, ducks, and flounder.



To mark this village, and acknowledge the cultural value of the site to the Ngai Tahu iwi, a special six-metre tall poupou carved in totara was commissioned as part of the 1990 commemorations of the 1840 signing of The Treaty of Waitangi, and was erected in 1994.

The river was renamed the Avon, after a river in Scotland—this was changed to Avon. The **first bridge** to span the river was a cart bridge in 1852. Ten years later the **first public lamp** was lit at the same market street bridge but kerosene was considered too expensive and the town lighting project was halted for two years.

A **post and chain fence**—some portions are still in use—was built in the 1860s to save 'innocent children and tipsy men alike' after 30 people had drowned in what now seems an extremely placid river. A new **iron bridge** replaced the old one in 1864.

A **police station** and lock-up was built in Market Square, which was used as a women's prison by the 1870s. There was a **blacksmith's forge and stockyards** where farmers tethered their horses while they sold produce. This was the village centre of the rural community of Christchurch.



In the late 1800s—when the old square was considered an eyesore—the area was renamed **Victoria Square to commemorate the Queen's diamond jubilee**. It was put in order with lawns, flowerbeds, and willow trees that are believed to be from cuttings off a tree at Napoleon's grave at St Helena.

In the early 1900s the Duke and Duchess of Cornwall and York laid the foundation stone for the commissioned statue of Queen Victoria. It was also a jubilee memorial to the pioneers of Canterbury, and to those who had died in the Boer War. Victoria died before the statue was unveiled.



Victoria Square has changed many times over the years—the Queen's statue has been moved around like a chess piece, the road closed, band rotundas built and removed, and in 1931 a fountain was built. **The biggest change came when the Christchurch Town Hall was built in the late 1960s and opened in September 1972.** It too sits on a historical site. The Limes Hospital—where one of the first Alcoholics Anonymous meetings in Christchurch was held—is remembered by The Limes Room. It also has the two largest hand-blown chandeliers in the Southern Hemisphere, each made in two pieces, banded with copper and holding 104 bulbs.

In the Town Hall hangs a large tapestry that celebrates New Zealand women gaining the vote in 1893—the first country in the world to achieve this. A plaque also commemorates Douglas Lilburn, New Zealand's premier composer who lived and worked on the site in the 1940s.



The whole area is a cornucopia of history—invisible to those who hurry past.

The traffic-census on the bridge, on one day in 1862, showed how vital Market Square was: 10 bullock drays with 58 bullocks, 51 horse drays with 60 horses, 36 carts with fifty-one horses, 199 saddle horses, 20 cattle, 204 sheep, one donkey and cart, 1000 foot traffic.

An 1861 photo shows wooden homes and business and a post office. One long building with a white gable and verandas around three sides was the Market Hall, and the coffee-palace attached to it was most likely the first coffee shop in Christchurch.

