



The humble beginnings of our beloved Wellington icon

In the 1890s Wellington was the fastest growing city in New Zealand and with the city becoming increasingly crowded speculators saw the opportunity to develop new suburbs beyond the town belt.

In 1895 a group of Wellington businessmen had formed a company and purchased Upland Farm in the hills directly above the city centre for the purpose of residential development. At the same time the successful Wellington businessman Martin Kennedy had secured an extension on his lease of 5 acres of land just below Upland Road which included the current grounds of Weir House and the Cable Car station at Salamanca. Company records show Kennedy as having had the original idea for the cable car, certainly

its construction did much to further his business and political interests and no one at the time or subsequently has disputed this. Kennedy had previous experience of cable cars on the South Island's West Coast and was Chairman of the Greymouth and Kumara Tramway Company.

In 1897 prior to the public announcement of the cable car project, Kennedy had agreed to the council building a road through his property (Salamanca Road), however he got the council to alter their original plans so the road followed the path of an old creek bed which was considerably lower on the hillside than the proposal, this route both dissected his land nicely for subdivision and also was low enough not to cause any problems to the yet to be announced cable

car layout.

Kennedy saw the cable car as a way of increasing the desirability and in turn the rents on the properties he was developing at Salamanca. However he needed to persuade the Upland Estates Company shareholders that it was a good idea for them to invest. This would have been no easy task given that the land development alone was a hugely speculative venture, let alone adding another highly speculative, expensive and technically challenging project to the mix. Its very likely that the decider for the Upland Estate Company was a promise from Kennedy that he could arrange for the University to be located in the new suburb. To make the cable car work Kennedy also had to persuade fellow directors on the board of

the New Zealand Times Company to purchase land on Lambton Quay for their new headquarters so that a small portion could be subdivided off for the Cable Car Terminal. Even at this stage land on Lambton Quay was amongst some of the most expensive in New Zealand and would have been too expensive for the Tramway Company to consider.

By the late 1890s it was obvious the amount of speculative development was seeing land coming to the market that would meet Wellington's needs for at least the next 30 years, so any new development needed a point of difference to be successful. Whatever inducements were offered by Kennedy the Upland Estate Company directors agreed to become involved in the cable car development and formed the Kelburn and Karori Tramway Company.

The cable car system was designed by the Dunedin born engineer James Fulton who was also a trained surveyor and had been instrumental in deciding on the location for the cable car and had set out the layout for the Kelburn Suburb.

Fulton's design for the cable car allowed for a track that

was straight in both distance and elevation and passed over or under all existing roadways allowing for uninterrupted passage. The cable car was a major achievement for New Zealand engineering. It was 785 metres in length rising over 119 metres at an average of 1 in 5.1 and passed through 3 tunnels and over 3 viaducts.

After much negotiation with the Council and the passing of The Wellington High Level Tramways Bill in late 1898 the company set about the construction of the cable car. On 1 February 1900 the company announced the construction contract had been given to Maurice O'Connor a close associate of Martin Kennedy, for the sum of 12,172 pounds. When all 3 tunnels were under construction O'Connor employed up to 50 men working in shifts. There is a common misconception that prison labour was used in the construction of the cable car, however this is unlikely given the skilled nature of the work and the fact explosives were used to blast the tunnels. The only link to prison labour were in the construction of the roads including Salamanca Road which led to the garden battery and in the manufacture of the

bricks which line the cable car tunnels from the Terrace Gaol brick kilns. At the same time as the cable car construction O'Connor had a contract with the Wellington Harbour Board on land reclamation at Waterloo Quay. Spoil from the lower tunnel excavations was used in this reclamation work with spoil from the top tunnel filling the gully on the Kelburn Park site.

Despite, at times almost round the clock shifts building the cable car the project was a year behind schedule when finally completed in February 1902. the delays were put down to both poor weather during the winter of 1901 and the contractor O'Connor, however, no penalties were ever levied against O'Connor and its possible that the Directors allowed the cable car to overrun so that Charles Pharazyn a fellow director of both the cable car and the Kelburn Development could have more time to sell his sections in Northland prior to the opening up of the Kelburn Development.

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