

WORDS: ANNA DUNLOP / IMAGERY: MIKE HEYDON

A snapshot in time



An important photographic collection, thought to date from 1900 to the early 1930s and revealing a cross-section of central Wellington society, was unearthed by a tenant in the Berry & Co Photographers Building decades later

Those walking through busy central Wellington would be forgiven for passing the sandwich shop that occupies the ground floor of 147 Cuba Street without giving the building a second glance. But those who look up are treated to the striking Edwardian Classical façade of the Berry & Co Photographers Building, a Category 2 historic place that played an important role in the social fabric of Wellington in the early 20th century.

The building was designed by notable architect William Crichton and constructed in 1900 by WL Thompson. It was commissioned by William Berry to be a purpose-built photography studio, and the four sets of south-facing windows and glazed skylights allowed plenty of natural light for the renowned portrait photographer to practise his craft.



Berry stopped operating on Cuba Street in the late 1920s, but the upper floors remained a photography studio until 1968, when pioneering art dealer Peter McLeavey opened an art gallery in the space. The gallery, which works with New Zealand contemporary painters and photographers, is now run by his daughter Olivia McLeavey, who says her father fell in love with the building at first sight.

“He was completely knocked over by how beautiful it was,” she says, adding that he was particularly impressed with the sweeping timber staircase, decorative ceiling and two stunning stained-glass windows.

“He loved the feel of being in an important heritage space, reminiscent of the buildings he’d seen in London, and decided it was the perfect place for the gallery.”

Blyss Wagstaff, Senior Heritage Advisor for Heritage New Zealand

Pouhere Taonga, says the Berry Building is a distinctive part of the Edwardian streetscape of Cuba Street Historic Area, but it's not just its architecture that sets it apart.

"It has attracted some interesting occupants, and it's what has happened in the building that I think is especially important, both historically and culturally."

Blyss is referring to the discovery of around 3000 glass-plate negatives, thought to date from 1900 to the early 1930s, which were unearthed in a cupboard by a tenant of the building in the 1990s. Among what became known as the Berry & Co Collection, which is housed at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, are almost 80 portraits of World War I servicemen in uniform posing with family and friends, and 93 portraits of Chinese New Zealanders.

Despite some minor degradation, the photographs are clear, showing the subjects posing formally in the fashions of the time. Studio props – a wooden chair, a five-step staircase with a wrought iron balustrade, a canvas backdrop of trees – appear repeatedly throughout the portraits.

According to Michael Fitzgerald, Honorary Research Associate at Te Papa, the Berry studio was where ordinary people went to have their photos taken for special purposes.

"The collection is a revealing cross-section of central Wellington society and is incredibly valuable as a social document," he says.

This is particularly true of the portraits of Chinese New Zealanders, which were taken at a time when the community was subject to prejudice, discrimination and racist policies. The images show mostly men (although there are a few women and children), which, Michael explains, was due to immigration rules.

"From 1896 to just before World War II, Chinese immigrants had to pay a poll tax of £100 [around 10 years' wages]. It was unaffordable for them to bring their wives and children, so the community was predominantly male."

It's for this reason that Michael suspects many of the portraits are, in fact, passport photos. "The men often returned to China, either to get married or to visit their families."

Why Berry was the preferred photographer of central Wellington's Chinese population is unclear, but according to the site's listing report, from 1910 to the 1990s the ground floor was occupied by various Chinese fruiterers, which may have played a part. It was also close to Haining and Frederick Streets, then



To hear more from art gallery manager Olivia McLeavey, view our video story here:
youtube.com/HeritageNewZealandPouhereTaonga

the heart of Wellington's Chinese district and still the location of the Tung Jung Association of New Zealand, one of the first Chinese community organisations founded in New Zealand (in 1926).

It was the Tung Jung Association that Michael contacted when he started the Te Papa Family Ties project, which aims to identify the Chinese New Zealanders in the portraits and reconnect them with their descendants.

Records show that in 1928 there were around 600 Chinese people living in Wellington, and a number of them would have been part of old, established Chinese families, he explains.

"I reached out and the community and family networks kicked into action."

To date, 39 of those pictured have been identified by their families, with many of them having emigrated from a close network of villages in China's Guangdong region.

"It was very localised, what's called chain migration," says Michael. "One brave young man goes in search of new opportunities, and others soon follow."


However, unlike in Dunedin, where the Chinese went to work in the goldfields, in Wellington many became market gardeners and laundry owners.

For Michael, a couple of stories stand out. One is that of James Young, also known as Young Woon Gung, who was identified by his four surviving children. Young emigrated to New Zealand aged 16, then returned to China at 21 to marry Ng Wong Sue. They settled in Wellington where they had six children and ran various businesses.

"He features in several of the photographs, and always looks very smart – quite the 'man about town'," says Michael.

Young was very involved in community affairs and sports: he was a founding member of the Wellington Chinese Sports and Cultural Centre and the president of various football and basketball clubs. He died in Wellington in 1979, aged 76.

The other man Michael finds particularly interesting is Wing Lee, a laundryman. Despite facing racism and discrimination – "he was bashed up in his laundry by a young lout, defended himself, and then he's the one who ended up in court" – he did well, running various businesses around Wellington. Newspapers report him attending a high society fancy-dress fundraiser ball in 1911.

"Lee went dressed up as a Chinese laundry," says Michael. "Apparently he was a great success." 

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