



The police residence at 3 Iti Street, as it was in 1984.



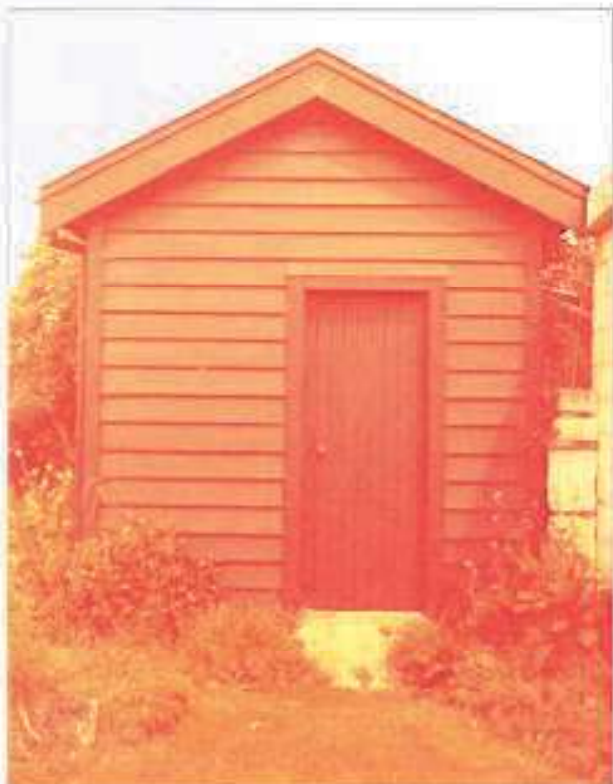
The old cell block.



The old police office which was part of the house, with the entrance blocked off but the steps up to the door remaining.



Constable John McCardle, who served at Ōtaki from 1978-1986.



Another view of the old cell block built in 1912, photos taken 1984.

*Photos this page courtesy of New Zealand Police Museum and Feilding & Districts Community Archive*



The entrance to the old cell block before a coat of paint.



In 1911 the house above was built as Otaki's police station with the residence attached. The office is on the right with the entrance to the office just around the corner of the house on the right. Photo courtesy of New Zealand Police Museum

# THE POLICE HOUSE

## 3 Iti Street

by  
Marisa King

**W**HENEVER you hear the recollections of people who grew up in the 1970s, some common themes arise. For example:

*"All the kids in the neighbourhood just played together."*

*"We were in and out of each other's houses all day."*

*"Mum would call out, 'It's tea time!' and we would all go home."*

As kids of the 70s, it was no different for my brother, my sister and me. We lived in a small Otaki street (aptly named Iti Street) and had many friends who lived next door, across the road and around the corner. We were never short of playmates.

But there was something a little bit different about Robert, Mark and Karla Brookes, who lived next door

at 3 Iti Street<sup>1</sup>. Their dad was a policeman and their house was owned by the police.

It was next to the courthouse, which was on the corner of Iti and Matene streets, and even had a jail in the backyard. The courthouse was moved several years ago to its present site on the main highway and is now the Old Courthouse Gallery.

We kids didn't talk about Mr Brookes' job much. But one morning I got up to hear Mum and Dad discussing a fire. Two local men had firebombed the Brookes' house the previous night while Mr Brookes was out on duty.

<sup>1</sup> Some former tenants say it was 5 Iti Street when they lived there. The Kings lived next door at No 7. However the house is identified in the KDCDC rates database as No 3 – No 5 doesn't exist in the database.





Three constables who have been in charge at Otaki. From left, Bruce Hutton 1986-1988, Trevor Turnbull 1961-1972, and John McCardle 1978-1986.

*Photo courtesy of Feilding & Districts Community Archive*

I'll always remember staring out of the kitchen window at the blackened wall of their house.

Funnily enough, Dad was in the Otaki Volunteer Fire Brigade at the time, but as he drove out of our garage on the other side of the house, he didn't realise the fire he was about to attend was next door. Thankfully no one was injured, but the incident was a sobering reminder that not everyone in town liked the police.

But on to more cheerful matters. When Robert and Mark Brookes visited Otaki recently, the three of us went to see their old home. The cold and grey July afternoon was in stark contrast to the warm welcome we received from the house's current owner, Jennifer (Jenny) Turnbull of Jailhouse Pottery. The house felt just the same as it had when we were children. As Mark later recalled: "It was very surreal to be back there and remember images from that time, which is now more than 40 years ago."

Our visit inspired me to want to dig a little more into the house's history. I wrote to New Zealand Police requesting any information they had on the property, but after waiting a month I was informed they had been unable to find anything in their files. I received a similar reply from Kāpiti Coast District Council and the New Zealand Police Museum in Porirua.

This article is therefore an amalgam of information I have been able to obtain from other sources, including the house's past and current residents; a comprehensive history of the Palmerston North Police District, *Beyond the Call of Duty* (1988) by Ray Carter; and the glorious Papers Past website.

I found conflicting information on when the three-bedroom house (which initially doubled as Otaki's police station) was built. A caption on a photo of the house in Volume 9 of the *Otaki Historical Journal* suggests it was built in 1891. However, in his book Ray Carter reports it was 1911 (Carter died in 2019). That date is supported by information available on Papers Past. Wellington's afternoon newspaper, *The*

*Evening Post*, reported on December 24, 1909, that the Government's Supplementary Estimates brought down that afternoon included £700 for "Otaki Police Station". And 11 months later, on November 5, 1910, the same newspaper announced: "Tenders are invited for the erection of the Otaki Police Station". I was unable to find any information on the opening of the station or the house.

As Carter writes, there was a wooden cell block behind the house that was reportedly built in 1912. It was still at the property when Constable Bruce Hutton moved there in 1986, but is now at Pahiatua awaiting restoration. At some stage, a concrete cell block was also added to the property.

The police office was a room on the right-front of the house with a separate entrance from the outside. The office was closed about 1934 and the outside wall blocked off. The police office then moved into the courthouse on the corner.

By the time Jenny Turnbull and her husband bought the house in 2006, the old police office had been incorporated into what is now a spacious lounge at the front of the house. But it was still a separate room when the Brookes' moved into the house in 1970 and when the family after them, the McCardles, lived there from 1978.

Writing from Mackay, Queensland, where he now lives, Arthur Brookes says he applied for the office to be incorporated into the lounge, but it didn't happen.

Arthur transferred to Otaki from Palmerston North with his wife, Dawne, in mid-1970. At the time, Sergeant Jack Pollock, who served in Otaki from 1960 to 1971, was living in the Iiti Street house with his family. The Brookes moved into it when the Otaki police contingent was reduced from three to two constables. Previously, 44 Matene Street, which stood on the other side of the courthouse, was also a police house, but it became a State house when the police numbers were reduced.

"The house was in good condition when we



moved in, although very old," says Arthur. "The only major renovation done during our time was the total restumping [repiling] with concrete stumps that were cemented into the ground."

He says the cells in the backyard were seldom used, due to a regulation that while there was a prisoner inside, the police station had to be manned because of the possibility of an earthquake.

"Prisoners were normally taken to Levin, which was manned 24/7."

When there were overnight guests in the cells, it was the job of the policeman's wife to provide them with meals. Robert Brookes, who is now teaching English in Tallinn, Estonia, remembers his mother doing this (Dawne Brookes died in 2021). Donna Hooper (formerly McArdle), who was married to Constable John McArdle and now lives in Carterton, did the same thing.

"The first time I supplied a meal the prisoner received a lovely roast on a tray with a knife and fork," Donna says. "Well, that wasn't the right thing to do – I never thought of the consequences of a prisoner having stainless steel utensils. They were immediately confiscated from the tray and plastic ones found."

When they were not occupied, many other creative uses were found for the cells. Robert Brookes remembers playing in them; Donna Hooper used the wire beds to store pumpkins from the garden ("There was perfect air circulation to keep them in top condition"); and Bruce Hutton used the concrete cell block to store his collection of vintage car parts.

All of the former residents I interviewed spoke highly of the good growing conditions in the Iti Street garden.

"You only had to touch the soil and stuff grew," Bruce says.

Arthur Brookes remembers growing a giant sunflower – a replica of the Sunny Ōtaki emblem – at the front of the house.

From a child's perspective, the large section also provided many opportunities to have fun. As well as playing in the cells, Robert Brookes remembers having his own section of garden to tend and harvest. His brother, Mark, fondly remembers the birthday parties his mum organised that were held in the driveway and front yard of the house (as I do).

And Nicole McArdle, now living in Masterton, recalls playing with her brother, Sean, under a large Norfolk pine tree that used to be in the backyard.

"The yard was huge. Dad had a monster garden and there was even room behind the cells for my stepsister's horse to graze," Nicole says.

She also remembers the concrete cells: "They had big thick steel bars. They must have been freezing if



Birthday party in the backyard, with Dawne Brookes managing festivities.

you ended up spending the night in them."

The McArdles moved into 3 Iti Street in 1978 when the Brookeses moved to Australia. John (who died early in 2021) replaced Arthur as the local constable.

Donna, who was born in Ōtaki, says it was a totally new experience for the family going to a small police station.

"When John was out on duty at night it could be a bit daunting answering the door to strangers and trying to sort out their problems."

The family enjoyed living in the house, with the children frequently running up and down the long hallway. The old police office next to the lounge was used as a playroom, but only in good weather due to its external access.

In addition to providing meals for the occasional prisoner, Donna was also on catering duty on days when the court next door was in session. A judge, police prosecutor and other police staff would travel from Levin to Ōtaki.

"They always came to our house for morning tea, and sometimes lunch, so Monday was always my big baking day," she says. "One of the sergeants used to bring me duck eggs to use in my baking."

In 1979 we waved goodbye to the McArdles when our family moved to our current home at 244 Mill Road. And when the McArdles transferred to Levin in 1986, they were followed into 3 Iti Street by Constable Bruce Hutton. When he first arrived in Ōtaki, a new kitchen was being built in the house, so initially he lived at the motor camp while the work was completed.

"It was a solid house in really good condition; you couldn't fault it," he says. "The three bedrooms all got the morning sun."

He often had guests staying due to his involvement with the Friendship Force and the International Police Association ("It was very United Nations"), although as he lived a bachelor life, some work was needed to fit out the spare bedrooms for his first guests, a couple from Iowa.





Together again, July 2022. From left, Janice King, daughter Marisa King, Mark Brookes, Robert Brookes, Ben King and Maurice King.



Off to school, 1970s. Robert, left, and Mark Brookes.



Nicole McArdle's birthday, late 1970s. Marisa King far right, Nicole in pink cardigan and brother Sean behind, Kelly Hollis front in red and white top. Others unknown.



Sean and Nicole McArdle with their dog, Arden, by the Norfolk pine tree. Concrete cell block in the background.

"I got some furniture from the local second-hand shop and it was delivered the night before they arrived. I bought sheets and blankets from The Warehouse and washed them so they wouldn't know they were brand new."

He used the old police office as a "mini-museum" for his collectable number plates.

Bruce left Ōtaki in 1989 with his new wife, Seona, to become a police community liaison officer in Porirua. But he has fond memories of his time in the town.

"It was a community with a good heart and had a lot of good people of all nationalities. There was only a small element that was a problem."

He has now retired to Woodville.

After I published a request for information about the house on social media, Rob Bigwood informed me that he and his dad, Noel Bigwood, lived at 3 Ibi Street from about 1987 to 1990. Sergeant Rick Mathie is also believed to have occupied the house from about 1991 to an unspecified date. Mention was made by one correspondent of an Ōtaki College First XV party and school ball function being held at the house. If only walls could talk.

Some years later, in 2006, the property was bought by a developer. Its history from then on might have looked quite different if fate hadn't intervened. Ill health forced the developer to abandon the project, and it's then the property was snapped up by Jennifer Turnbull and her husband, who had moved to Ōtaki from Otago in 2003 with their young family (daughter Amy is now 23 and son Thomas 21).

Jenny, who was attracted by the size of the section and her affection for old houses, says they soon discovered they had a substantial amount of work on their hands – especially outside.

"There was a fence that locked off part of the section at the back," she says. "The grass was as high as the fence and people had dumped a lot of rubbish there, like washing lines and bikes. We cleaned out all the rubbish and put a couple of orphan lambs in there that we had been given. The lambs lived in the jail and ate all the grass down."

The old wooden jail was no longer on the property although the concrete cell block was. But it was badly neglected.

"It really stank. It was horrible," Jenny says. "The windows were smashed and there was graffiti on the





Jennifer Turnbull and husband Fred Langford's No 3 Iti Street as it is today.



The section of the lounge that used to be part of the old police office.

walls. We arranged for Fulton Hogan to pull it down."

The interior of the house had been reasonably well cared for, although it was painted in "quite weird" colours such as bright yellow, olive and purple. There was even a purple fireplace.

The renovations that Jenny and her second husband, Fred Langford, are doing to the house are very much focused on reflecting and preserving its original character. For example, the gib board that was on the walls has been removed to reveal the original tongue and groove woodwork, while its modern skirting boards and light fittings have been replaced by those more in keeping with the house's heritage. It all explains why being inside the house felt exactly the same to me as it had 40 years ago.

"You could see the house had had many lives. There were layers of wallpaper and paint on the walls," Jenny says.

The rimu window frames and doors are being stripped back to their original wood, including removal of the hard shellac underpaint. It's painstaking work, with the shellac often hidden under many layers of paint.

"The shellac is very dark so we are stripping this back to the sanded wood base and then oiling or varnishing to protect the natural wood," Jenny says. "There is no borer in the wood; it's amazing. If you try to bang a nail into the wall you can get it just so far and then it bends, the wood is that hard."



Mark Brookes with a Sunny Ōtaki mask. He is the director of the American International School of Lesotho based in Maseru, Lesotho. "Everyone keeps asking me what/where Ōtaki is!"

The house has also revealed other treasures, with Jenny recently discovering a 1960 New Zealand threepence coin stuck in the fireplace.

Not surprisingly, the renovation work is proving to be a slow and drawn-out process.

"Getting tradespeople who are prepared to do the work is really hard. Nothing in this house is square! But it's very rewarding."

Outside the house, a small original outbuilding with three rooms is used as a laundry, woodshed and toilet.

"The middle room was used for coal and next to that was what used to be the wash house," Jenny says. "There was a high step where the copper would have been and a patch on the roof where the chimney was."

Behind the house, the now attractive and spacious garden is full of mature trees that Jenny planted soon after moving into the house. A large pottery studio and gallery next to the garden was built in 2009, and is also used for pottery classes. The building, which was designed to complement the style of the house, is high-ceilinged, spacious and sunny. Just like the house, it has a very homely feel.

"The house has got a nice smell with all the wood and it's always warm," Jenny says. "It gets all day sun and although it's a big house, it keeps the heat in."

Jenny and Fred have made a point of tracking down old police houses in other towns. Jenny says many of the ones they have found have a similar design to their home.

"There are houses exactly like this one all over the place. There's an absolute replica of it on Shannon's main street next to the police station. Whenever we go anywhere we always try to track down the old police station and courthouse."