

saving mclean's mansion

Work has begun to renovate and restore McLean's Mansion, one of Christchurch's most significant heritage buildings, so it may serve the city anew as a vibrant community arts and heritage centre. Funds to help save this earthquake-damaged heritage survivor are now urgently needed. We joined a site visit to find out more about the project.

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Even with broken windows, smudges of graffiti and a generator whining out front, McLean's Mansion is an awe-inspiring sight. From Manchester Street, its sheer scale is somewhat obscured by the property's listed copper beech trees. It's a totally different perspective from the front lawn, where our small group has gathered for a safety run-down. Up close, the impact of the building's Jacobean-style architecture is startling, almost dizzying, with those distinctive corner towers rising impressively before us. As project manager Richard Herdman reminds us though, this is still an earthquake-prone building, so to explore its interior we need to be fully briefed on health and safety and dressed in the required safety gear whilst being escorted through the building.

He introduces us to site manager Andrew Clark from Simon Construction, who has been appointed to carry out initial stabilisation and protection works. Also in our group for today's site visit is Chris Kissling, who chairs both the McLean's Mansion Charitable Trust (MMCT) and the Christchurch Civic Trust; Ross Gray, convenor of the Christchurch Civic Trust's subcommittee set up to assist the MMCT with fundraising for the restoration; and Jacqueline Smith, who boarded here in the late 1950s when the house was run as a dental school.

The February 2011 earthquake inflicted major interior damage on the Category 1 heritage status building, one of the world's largest surviving timber-built Victorian homes. Its original floorplan boasts a staggering 53 rooms, including 19

bedrooms (many of which were for servants), and a floor area of more than 2100 sqm.

Abandoned after the earthquakes, McLean's Mansion deteriorated further as a result of damage caused by vagrants, thieves and vandals. Lead was taken from the roof, letting in the weather.

Once inside, we begin to grasp the scale of the job ahead. There's a spectacular spray of graffiti on the landing at the top of the main central staircase and the plastered ceilings look like shattered toffee, with great chunks missing. There are piles of bricks where chimneys used to be and numerous broken windows.

Yet, as Richard explains, this is a huge improvement compared to six months ago. A lot has been done to prepare the interior ahead of strengthening work and restoration. Mercifully, the shell is still fundamentally intact (thanks in part to forward-thinking architecture which includes hidden steel portal forms).

'When we first came in, the floors were covered in rubble and rubbish and we had to clear all of that, as well as remove all the broken plaster from the walls and water-damaged carpet,' Richard says. 'We also had to secure the building against vandalism and make it weathertight.'

They must have done a good job because it's dry inside, tidy, and doesn't smell musty. Tumbled plaster features and lengths of deconstructed heritage timber have been carefully gathered up, recorded and catalogued.

McLean's Mansion is an exceptional building, in its scale and design, encompassing a rich heritage.





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The old building, principally kauri in construction, has an imposing presence: the impressive central staircase still rises, as it has always done for more than a century, to an arcaded gallery topped with an enormous glass skylight. Long shadowy hallways stretch out on either side. It's a little eerie as it stands before us today, empty, ragged and fallen from the splendour of former glory days.

We follow the home's original symmetrical rectangular layout through the generously proportioned front half to a rather more modest and less ornate rear, once servants' quarters. The scale is mind-boggling: so much to see, upstairs and down. The earthquakes have uncovered old hearths and match-lined walls. One of the toilets still has an elaborately ornate porcelain bowl.

It is exciting to learn from Chris and Ross that many of the mansion's architectural pieces and original furnishings and fixtures have been kept safe by the previous owners and the McLean Institute and will be returned to the mansion as part of the restoration.

The man who commissioned this mansion, Allan McLean (1822-1907), began his young adult life in difficult circumstances. In 1840, crop failure drove his widowed mother to abandon home on the Isle of Coll and emigrate with her family of five to Australia. They did well on the goldfields and by 1852 had sailed to New Zealand. Allan and his brother John subsequently forged a highly successful farming partnership in Canterbury. McLean's Island is named after them; the brothers once owned a run there. In 1855 they acquired an extensive run in Mid Canterbury, naming it 'Lagmhor' after their birthplace on the Isle of Coll. Late in Allan's life, his beloved farm property in South Canterbury – 'The Valley' at Waikakahi – was broken up by the government of the day. He retired to Christchurch initially living in a Colombo Street cottage he'd built for his mother. What he had in mind though was a rather more lavish home. He took his plans to Mr England, a well-known Christchurch architect. Construction of 'Holly Lea', as it was originally known, started in 1899. Allan, with housekeeper Emily Phillips, moved in the following year.



TOP / Pictured is Chris Kissling, chairman of the McLean's Mansion Charitable Trust, which plans to restore and refurbish this very special building as a leading New Zealand art gallery and heritage attraction. **ABOVE** / Broken plaster features have been gathered and catalogued as part of the preparation for restoration.

OPPOSITE / The arcaded gallery, topped with a massive glass skylight.





Dental school days at 'Holly Lea'

As we carefully thread our way along dusty old hallways, Jacqueline Smith recalls memories of her two years here in the late 1950s training to be a school dental nurse. Holly Lea was sold to the government as a school for dental nurses in 1954 and it continued to serve that role through to 1982, before being sold to the Christchurch Academy.

We peek inside a large downstairs room, where chimney bricks lie piled on the floor. 'It was a surgery in my day,' observes Jacqueline. 'In the first year, we were chair assistants here.'

Upstairs, she smiles as we step into large empty rooms where sun streams through broken glazing. 'These were beautiful dormitories. Five students were in the rooms with the bay windows, lovely light-filled rooms.' We pause by the doorway of another smaller room that Jacqueline recognises as her first here. She was 17 years old when she came to board at the dental school and vividly remembers how much she missed her Southland home during her first weeks here. Gradually, though, she adjusted to the new way of life.

'The seniors were on one side of the building, juniors on the other. The matron kept a close eye on us – it was her responsibility to see the girls graduate. Everything was very strict; our uniforms were inspected and you were not allowed to have a spot on them. We wore a pale blue nurse's uniform with royal blue cardigan, white stockings, shoes and caps. There was a roll call in the morning on the staircase in alphabetical order!'

Lectures were held in a St John ambulance room in Peterborough Street, with practical training taking place in the school's two downstairs clinics and an annexe. Senior students also spent time 'in the field' at various school dental clinics. Highlights included an annual ball, ahead of which everyone was lined up in their ball gowns on the grand stair to be photographed. Graduation was a formal affair with veils worn.

In its earthquake-damaged state, Holly Lea today is a far cry from those gracious dental school days, when the building still had its fine brocade wallpapers and elegant furnishings. Nevertheless, Jacqueline is full of optimism about what the future holds. 'It all feels surprisingly intact and I'm so impressed by the progress that has been made so far. It's the beginning of a new life for this beautiful building.'



TOP LEFT / Visiting McLean's Mansion brought back many vivid memories for Jacqueline Smith (pictured), who trained here as a school dental nurse in the 1950s. **MIDDLE** / Black and white snaps of Jacqueline Smith's dental school training days at Holly Lea. **BOTTOM LEFT** / McLean's Mansion in its heyday: a vision of what it was ... and how it could look again in future years, following restoration. Photo supplied.

'It is now on track to become one of the top 10 heritage attractions for visitors to Christchurch.'

Such a large mansion for a man in his twilight years seems excessive, until one learns that he left it all 'as a home for women of refinement or education in reduced or straitened circumstances' to be managed by a trust, the McLean Institute. Holly Lea served its purpose until the trust sold it to the government in the 1950s as a school for dental nurses. (The McLean Institute continued to honour Allan's wishes, first out of a home in Fendalton and then through its investment in the Holly Lea retirement village.)

In 2016, McLean's Mansion was teetering on the edge of demolition. It was on sale in as-is condition when a rescue plan was hatched by Christchurch businessman and engineer Trevor Lord, in conjunction with leading private art collector Sir James Wallace and acclaimed Christchurch artist Philip Trusttum. Inspired by The Pah Homestead in Auckland, their vision was to save McLean's Mansion and transform it into an outstanding arts facility featuring artworks from the Wallace Collection and other prominent New Zealand artists.

That vision is now taking shape. In August 2018, the MMCT formally took over ownership of the residence and is

leading the \$12 million McLean's Mansion Gallery project. An ambitious six-stage plan has been drawn up to restore and repurpose the building by March 2022 as a world-leading art gallery, museum/heritage centre and functions space. By 2020, it is anticipated the mansion's front ground floor rooms will be complete and ready to host fundraising events.

While the Christchurch City Council has donated \$1.934 million towards the restoration, the bulk of funds have yet to be raised. 'This is a very special building and it survived the earthquakes sufficiently well that the Environment Court rejected demolition,' says Chris. 'It is now on track to become one of the top 10 heritage attractions for visitors to Christchurch. It is the largest wooden residential building in New Zealand and possibly Australasia. We are relying on donors, sponsors and supporters to help us save and restore this internationally significant building.' ●

A Friends of McLean's Mansion group has also been set up and is keen to hear from volunteers who can help with fundraising, gardening and other activities. For more information or details on how to donate, go to mcleansmansion.nz.

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