

Wellington prison gardens – Vivienne Morrell

If after reading this, anyone is keen to visit the Miramar community garden, please email me with expressions of interest. We could visit on a weekday (perhaps a Thursday) using the scenic route number 24 bus: wgtn@historicplacesaotearoa.org.nz

Recently a keen and knowledgeable volunteer gave a few of us a tour around the Mt Crawford prison community garden. It has a hilltop location on Miramar Peninsula near the former Mt Crawford Prison. (They are on Facebook as the [Miramar Prison Garden](#).)



The current garden is located a little below Mt Crawford prison, which opened in 1927 and [closed](#) in 2012.

I decided to do a bit of research on prison gardens in Wellington.

This is a detail from a c. 1910 photo showing the Terrace Gaol and its gardens.¹



The Terrace Gaol was eventually supplanted by Mt Crawford Prison when it opened in 1927 and now Te Aro school (360 The Terrace) partially occupies the former Terrace Gaol site.

But before Mt Crawford Prison there was already a prison on Miramar Peninsula: Point Halswell Prison – located on the northern end of Miramar Peninsula, further down the hill from the current Mt Crawford buildings, but not quite on the point where Massey Memorial now is. This prison dates from 1888, when it was decided to use prison labour to assist with the construction of coastal defences, and the camp used by the workers was declared a prison in March 1888.² And P S

¹ Source: Terrace Gaol and gardens, Wellington. Fry, Pat. Ref: 1/2-058369-F. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. [/records/22570645](#)

² New Zealand Herald, 7 March 1888, p. 5. See also the Archaeological Assessment done for WCC and LINZ: Motukairangi Miramar Peninsula, Subsurface Archaeological Services [Andy Dodd], 2020. [Accessed here](#).

Garvey was gazetted the gaoler.³ Prisoners at Point Halswell also assisted with the construction of the military roads and continued to do intermittent work on the defences and at the prison farm until 1919.

The pines which cover much of the northern and western slopes of the Miramar Peninsula were first planted in 1907. Convict labour was used to plant trees around Point Halswell in 1913, and by April 1915, 140,000 trees had been planted with plans for 90,000 more that year.⁴

In 1919, the Point Halswell buildings were converted to a women's prison. There was local opposition to this location – but in dismissing these objections, it was noted there was already a couple of acres of vegetable gardens and a large area of dairying.⁵ However, when the prison was almost ready in 1920, the Minister for Justice told a reporter that it was only temporary and the Government “had definitely decided not to place a permanent prison on Point Halswell. He recognised that the peninsula was one of the scenic features of Wellington and that in years to come it would be required by the city for residential or other purposes”.⁶

It was only a few years later that Mt Crawford was chosen as the new permanent Wellington prison site! In 1923, Seatoun ratepayers were reported as particularly indignant at the location.⁷ The prison opened in early 1927. Eighteen months later it was reported there were flower beds and lawns inside the prison complex.⁸

In 1936, the Wellington Beautifying Society wanted to plant many trees around Wellington and got the cooperation of the prison to grow seedlings. In 1936 the Controller-General of Prisons sought from the Public Works Department: “...the sum of £11 to enable the glass house at Wellington Prison to be extended so that seedlings etc. may be reared in connection with the Harbour Front Beautification Scheme. We have undertaken to do a considerable amount of planting on the Peninsula.”⁹

Thousands of tree seedlings continued to be grown in subsequent years. In 1938 it was said that the Beautifying Society provided the materials “including those for glasshouses and frames, etc” while the prisoners provided the labour.¹⁰

However, by 1944, the Beautifying Society reported that the glasshouse was seriously dilapidated and it would require a considerable amount to ‘renovate it’.¹¹ By 1946 it was said the glasshouse was beyond repair and would be demolished and a new and larger one had been designed by a returned soldier in hospital.¹²

Unfortunately, I couldn't find any proof that the glasshouse was rebuilt, but I assume it was in about 1947 and this photo, taken in January 1950, shows a portion of the recently built glasshouse, which is still there.¹³

³ New Zealand Times, 31 March 1888, p. 2

⁴ Archaeological Assessment – see footnote 2 for the full details.

⁵ Evening Post, 17 September 1919, p. 8

⁶ Dominion, 14 February 1920, p. 6

⁷ NZ Times, 29 September 1923, p.5

⁸ Dominion, 25 June 1928, p.6

⁹ Archives NZ file: Code no. [R20125787](#); Record No. 25/508, Box 632, part 2

¹⁰ Evening Post, 7 April 1938, p. 10

¹¹ Evening Post, 15 November 1944, p.6

¹² Bay of Plenty Times, 24 December 1946, p. 2

¹³ Photo credits: 1. Mount Crawford Prison, Miramar Peninsula, Wellington. Evening post newspaper. Ref: 114/104/06/31-F. Alexander Turnbull Library. [/records/22308858](#) 2. Mount Crawford Prison vegetable gardens, Miramar Peninsula, Wellington. Evening post newspaper. Ref: 114/105/02-G. Alexander Turnbull Library. [/records/22738307](#)



This photo taken at the same time (Jan 1950) shows the extensive vegetable gardens:



To complete the story of Point Halswell prison, the buildings were converted to a prison training centre in 1958. The buildings were removed in about 1980 - the location has been used as a film set on numerous occasions since then.¹⁴

¹⁴ Archaeological Assessment (see footnote 2). The site of the Women's Prison is recorded as archaeology site R27/383.

This sign (recently discovered in the greenhouse) shows some of the produce the gardens produced for the Mt Crawford prison kitchens in 1991 –



The Miramar garden today:

It was established as a community garden in 2012 by John Overton when the prison closed. It is a mixture of private plots and communal spaces and there are now over 130 members.

Earlier this year, [plans were announced](#) for several hundred new houses on the prison site and surrounds.

The proposal is to build up to 700 homes on top of Mt. Crawford, in addition to the 300 homes planned for Shelly Bay making a total of 1000 new homes.

A cable car is planned from the top (probably from near the greenhouse) down to Shelly Bay.

However, the Minister for the Environment recently [declined to refer the proposal to the fast-tracking](#) approval procedure, so it will have to go through the usual consent processes.

Here are two more views of the greenhouse taken on the recent visit:

