



The Aranui/Hampshire Paradox: Planning and the politics of street naming in Christchurch, New Zealand

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1. INTRODUCTION

As far as suburbs with bad reputations go, Aranui in Christchurch often seems to dominate local public perceptions. High crime, high unemployment, low incomes, run-down state houses and uncared-for neighbourhoods have been the key words and phrases used over many decades.¹ This reputation achieved national standing over the same period and in 2001 Aranui gained the dubious distinction of becoming the pilot project for the Labour Government's state housing Community Renewal Programme initiated in 2001.² It is common to read "Don't buy or rent here" comments on websites and blogs advising prospective immigrants on where to live.³ One of the dispiriting moments in Aranui's history came in September 2009 with the discovery of two bodies under the floorboards of a Hampshire Street property and the subsequent charge of double-homicide and conviction of local resident Jason Somerville for the murder of his wife Rebecca Chamberlain and neighbour Tisha Lowry.⁴

Over the past twelve months barely a week has gone by without mention of a house fire in this neighbourhood.⁵ This is despite the fact that while properties may have been damaged or abandoned since the earthquakes of 2010-2012 no part of the land in Aranui has been "red-zoned", i.e. deemed unfit for occupation by domestic dwellings. Red zoning is sometimes used to explain why structures have been set alight in adjoining neighbourhoods where both houses and the land have already been condemned; it merely speeds up the process of

desertion. Although there are some 1500 houses in Aranui - of which the government owns more than 450 as rental housing - most are deemed in need of repair only and in principle can be fully let. This local "burned-over district," as Mike Davis has re-purposed the evangelist's term when describing urban problems in Los Angeles,⁶ seems, on the surface at least, to have a self-destructive element to it.

There has also been a perception, reasonably accurate until the earthquakes, that Aranui was increasingly becoming home to high concentrations of Maori and Pasifika people in Christchurch.⁷ Although it was not evident when judged by the generally muted appearance of houses and gardens in the neighbourhood, throughout the 1990s and 2000s, attendances at local churches and some public events made it clear that there was a distinctly non-European feel beginning to take hold. This changed dramatically after the earthquakes when many Maori and Pasifika moved to other areas of Christchurch or parts of New Zealand.

Yet if one looks at a street map of Aranui, the streets suggests an area that could hardly be more quintessentially English, even by Christchurch (New Zealand) standards. Hampshire, Basingstoke, Purbeck, Solent and Lyndhurst, for example, connote the green English countryside or picturesque port locations. The sandy soils and treeless brown landscapes of Aranui could hardly be further apart in appearance and feel to the leafy heart of Albion, so how did this happen? Was colonialism so entrenched that it stayed mindlessly perpetuated

in New Zealand planning bureaucracies until the mid-1970s when Aranui received its final batch of Anglophile street names? Was it more a case of random or idiosyncratic selection, left to a faceless individual? This discussion firstly explores how the streets in Aranui got their names. I then ask whether it matters how they got their names and I argue that the political and policy dimensions of street-naming are not merely historical questions; planners need to be prepared to revisit and reconfigure the identity of local neighbourhoods in partnership with local communities as circumstances and values change, particularly in “under-developed” locales.

2. NAMING THE SUBURB

As a local historian has been at pains to point out there are, in fact, two areas or neighbourhoods that make up what is labelled by most as Aranui.⁸ “Wainoni” has disappeared from usage except as the name for a main road and a public park yet at one time it was an official designation.⁹ Wainoni is often translated as “bend in the water” and is usually traced back to the name given to the house and large property established in 1884 by the undeniably eccentric Alexander William Bickerton. Bickerton’s estate bordered the southern bank of the Avon/Otakaro River and became the well-known “Wainoni Park” attraction over the next two decades. Whether he merely adapted an existing or earlier description is not clear but its lack of romantic or fanciful connotations suggests that it may simply have been a longstanding local description for the area.

“Aranui” translates as “great or major pathway” and again this may refer simply to a pragmatic description by local Ngai Tahu of the most convenient transit route between, say, Kaiapohia and Rapaki. Scattered historical notes suggest that there was archaeological evidence of a crossing point near the Bower Avenue Bridge which would support the idea of a transit route cutting across the area. More light needs to be shed on the origins of these names, but the important point is that apart from the addition of Ben Rarere Avenue in 2006 – named in honour of an important local community member and Maori Warden who had worked in the area since

the 1970s - the reference to tangata whenua stops there in most sources. With the exception of “Wainoni Park” and the impressive carved po on the Hampshire Street frontage, everywhere you turn in the labyrinth of streets suggests that you are in the heartland of southern England and its southern coast, rather than the South Pacific.

3. NAMING THE STREETS

How the streets of Aranui and Wainoni received their very localised English names appears to have gone unrecorded despite extensive archival research to trace the process by which names were allocated. The general approach and methodology to making state housing development was followed here as elsewhere. Central government, via the then Housing Construction Division, the Ministry of Works, and the Lands and Survey Department, all operating between their Wellington Head Office and Christchurch District Branches, created the maze of streets and most of the houses within the neighbourhood. The word “most” in the sentence above is important as it is often assumed, wrongly, that Wainoni and Aranui were pure state rental housing projects from the outset, in keeping with the tradition of state housing provision established by the Labour administrations of the 1930s and 1940s. In fact the scheme, as envisaged here along with others that were delivered under a new National administration in the early 1950s, was conceived as a more or less even mix of state rental and private dwellings. The latter were to be delivered via a much vaunted “group housing” scheme. The state broke in and serviced the land, then sold the sections to builders or groups of builders to build houses with the guarantee of purchase of unsold properties. The state houses were for the most part to be standard single family home detached state houses for initial rental and potential on-selling later. Again, unlike pre-War specifications which were of a high standard and which many private builders had long thought undercut their own competitiveness, the 1950s state housing designs were pared back and flimsier, by some accounts (including tenants), than those of the Labour era. A number of multi-units for more or less permanent renting were also included.

Major development work began late in 1952. The initial land purchase involved much legal and engineering work. Amongst many straightforwardly negotiated land purchases there were a few compulsory acquisitions (and several cases of protracted litigation for higher compensation over twenty years including one where the legal action outlived the complainant). There was the cutting and filling of sections and the provision of what we now call “infrastructure” i.e., water mains, stormwater and sewerage drainage followed of course by the making of roads, thoroughfares and a number of parks and reserves. At this time the development was referred to as the “Wainoni Block.” There were a few pre-existing roadways with names such as Marlow, Rowan, Rowses and the slightly more intriguing Eureka Street. These were absorbed into the new development.

Although the Wainoni Block was the principal focus for development and was added to in a substantial way by the purchase in the late 1950s of the “Speedway Block”, named after the former motorcycle and midget car speedway that had operated in the area in the late 1940s, the first streets to be completed and opened up for both group and state house building contracts were in fact in a small enclave to the south of the main development. The origins of Betty Place, Doreen Street and Merrington Crescent make for mildly endearing reading even if it smacks of male condescension.

These names, according to one source, acknowledge the spouses of draughting staff at the Lands and Survey Department local office in Christchurch. Doreen Street, for example, acknowledged Doreen Frances Brown, wife of Alfred Vernon Brown and Betty Place paid tribute to Betty Spear, wife of Roy Bramwell Spear.¹⁰ The other street developed at the time, Merrington Crescent, has not been explained to date.

4. THE NEED FOR NAMES: A LIGHTNING RAID ON HAMPSHIRE, DORSET AND THE ISLE WIGHT

In the main development, the Wainoni Block, at least twenty brand new streets appeared on the first maps that emerged during early 1950s and in the first sketches they would merely have been labelled numerically by engineers and draughtsmen. One of the earliest plans from 1955 shows a proposed layout and some provisional names (see Figure 1). It is certain that these names and the ones mentioned above were fixed by mid-1955 as a small article on new streets in the city that appeared on page 5 of *The Press* of June 28th listed all of the names shown here.



Figure 1: Tentative Layout, Cook and others, Wainoni Christchurch 1955 (Archives New Zealand, Christchurch File: R22245204 HDC31191 Scheme Plan Wainoni Block).

As reproduced here the street names are difficult to read, but a piece of official correspondence from the time provides a list (See figure 2). The letter is principally concerned with street widths and the order of names does not tally with road numbers on the plan above but it provides the first real capture of the “flavour” of the nascent suburb.

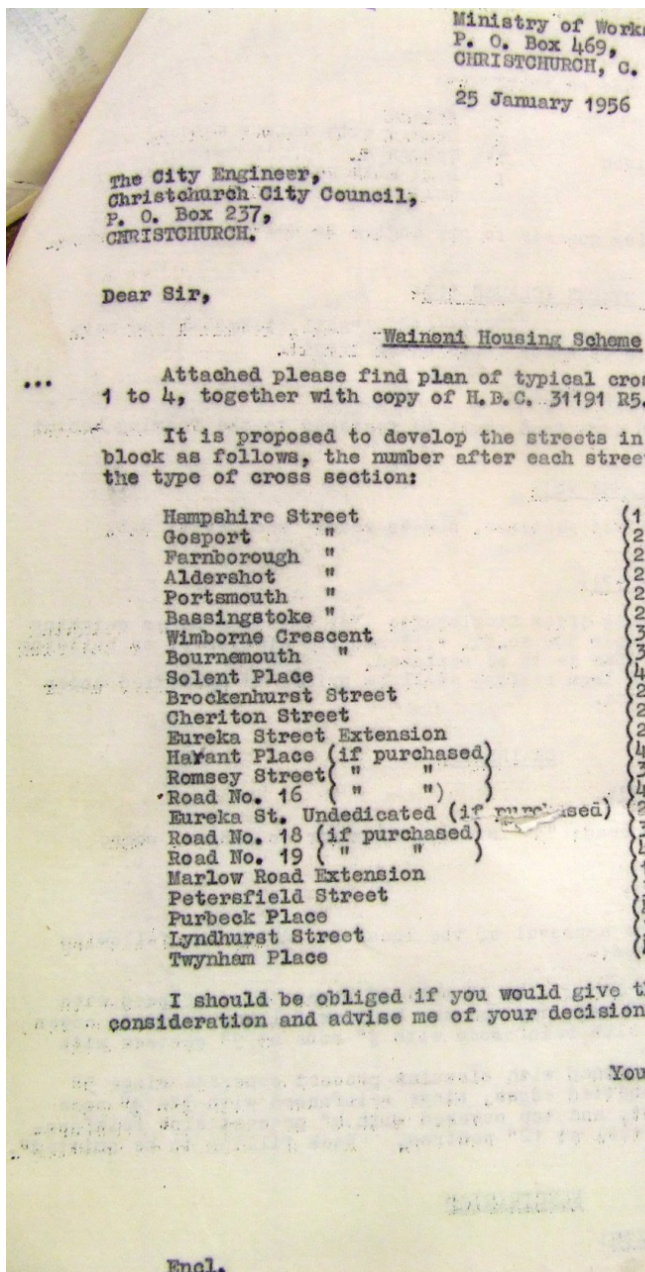


Figure 2: District Supervisor H. S. Sherbrooke to City Engineer, 25 January 1956. File: Archives New Zealand, Christchurch R20012408 Group Building Wainoni Block.

By reconciling this list above with the fragmentary map information available it is possible to construct a street number/street name list to which I have added some descriptive

information where (H) stands for the County of Hampshire, (D) stands for Dorset and (IW) stands for the Isle of Wight:

1. Hampshire Street (H) – Hampshire is a large and populous county on the south east coast of England with an area of some 3900 km² and a population of more than 1,760,000. The County Flower is the Tudor Rose.
2. Basingstoke Street (H) - Basingstoke was a small market town until the 1950s and lies west of Farnborough and Aldershot.
3. Portsmouth Street (H) - Portsmouth is a large city on the south coast and a major base for the Royal Navy.
4. Bournemouth Crescent (H) - Bournemouth is a large coastal resort town and was within the boundaries of Hampshire until it became part of Dorset in 1974 and it is the nearest city to Christchurch.
5. Brockenhurst Street (H) - Brockenhurst is a picturesque village in the New Forest northeast of Christchurch and south of Lyndhurst.
6. Solent Place (IW) - “The Solent” refers to the strait that runs between the Isle of Wight and Dorset.
7. Cheriton Street (H) - Cheriton is a small village in the South Downs between Winchester and Petersfield.
8. Havant Place (H) - Havant is a market town north east of Portsmouth and south of Petersfield.
9. Wimborne Crescent (D) - Wimborne is a market town north west of Bournemouth.
10. Aldershot Street (H) - Aldershot is a large town south of Farnborough and is known as the “home of the British Army”.
10. Farnborough Street (H) - Farnborough is a town to the north of Aldershot and east of Basingstoke best known for its annual Airshow.
11. Gosport Street (H) - Gosport is a port town on Solent Peninsula opposite Portsmouth and the Isle of Wight.
12. Lyndhurst Street (H) - Lyndhurst is a village in the New Forest north of Brockenhurst and south of Romsey.

12. Petersfield Street (H) - Petersfield is a market town in picturesque location.

13. Twynham Street (D) - Twynham is a school in Christchurch, Dorset (but was in Hampshire until county boundary changes in 1974).

14. Purbeck Place (D) - Purbeck peninsula is a noted geological form, often referred to as an island, which terminates at Swanage.

15. Romsey Street (H) - another market town dropped later makes up triangle between Winchester, Southampton and north of Lyndhurst.

As it happened, Romsey Street, Petersfield Street and Havant Place did not make the final configuration while Farnborough was reassigned during the final phase of expansion of the development. Nevertheless, the total number of streets as envisaged here was 17. The Hampshire and south coast theme continued with the subsequent additions of streets and housing to Aranui during the 1960s. The official records do not specify the dates and order of new names that were assigned but a pattern can be derived from first mentions in street directories which the Christchurch Public Libraries have used to gather information on street name origins¹¹.

1964

1. Yarmouth Street (IW) - Yarmouth is a port and coastal resort town on the west end of the Isle of Wight across the Solent from Lymington.

2. Sandown Crescent (IW) - Sandown is seaside resort on the eastern end of the Isle of Wight.

3. Carisbrooke Street (IW) - Carisbrooke is a village dating from medieval times west of Newport on the way to Yarmouth.

4. Soberton Street (H) - Soberton is in the Meon Valley a few miles south of Corhampton.

1966

5. Mattingley Street (H) - Mattingley is a very small village between Farnborough and Basingstoke but to the north.

6. Warblington Street (H) - Warblington is a suburb of Havant.

7. Meon Street (H) - Meon is named either after the River Meon or West/East Meon in South Downs where the Meon rises.

1968

8. Ventnor Place (IW) - Ventnor is a seaside resort south of Sandown.

9. Winchfield Street (H) - Winchfield is a small village between Farnborough and Basingstoke.

10. Corhampton Street (H) - Corhampton is a very small village on the west bank of the River Meon in South Downs.

11. Portchester Street (H) - Portchester was once a small village and is now part of a conurbation just above Gosport in Portsmouth Harbour.

12. Netley Place (H) - Netley Marsh is a small village in the New Forest.

[13. Farnborough Street – held over from 1955].

During the period 1972-75 the very final phase of Aranui's development took place and the names St. Heliers Place, Channel Place, Carteret Place, Casquet Lane, Pateley Lane, Cornet Lane and Guernsey Street might appear to extend the English connection in a deliberate manner. However, this was predominantly a private subdivision at the southern edge and the developer, Ronald Cyril de la Mare (1925-1975), who was the managing director of the Bower Egg Farm Ltd, named the streets to acknowledge his home area of Guernsey¹². The final layout for Aranui is shown marked in green in Figure 3.

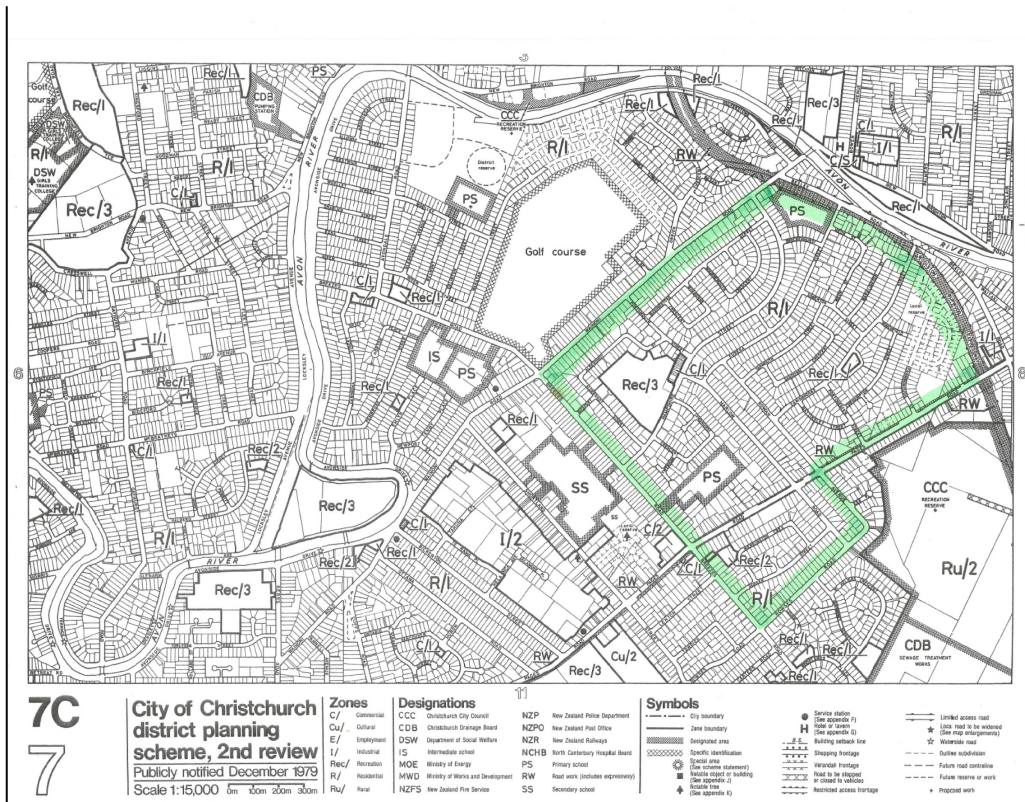


Figure 3: City of Christchurch district planning scheme 1979 planning map 7C (Aranui is shown in the area contained within the borders marked in green)

To the 17 names listed earlier another 12 must be thus be added in this apparent miscellany of English place names. In the absence of any official explanation, direct guidance or clues, the 29 choices evoke a classic and extended Monty Python sketch. In “the Cycling Tour,” the unutterably dull Mr Pither, played by Michael Palin, embarks on a cycling tour of Devon which he fastidiously records in a diary.¹³ His daily entries invariably start with “Fell off near...” places such as Bovey Tacey, Tiverton, Ottery St Mary, and Tavistock to mention but a few.

Similarly, the list of names for Aranui and Wainoni reads like the travelogue of a motoring or cycling (and probably rather damp camping) excursion through lower Wessex just after the Second World War with a few grimy towns thrown in for good measure. While this may seem rather fanciful when judged by present standards of naming – typically a committee-based process using multiple forms of consultation with multiple stakeholders including tangata whenua – in the 1950s at least the addition of a large suburb to Christchurch would most probably have been delegated to one or two individuals at most, with the main proviso

being keep it English and avoid repeats of names already in use in the city. What is clear, based on correspondence between the Wellington Head Office of the Ministry of Works and the District Branch in Christchurch in the later rounds of name selection, is that the job was that of a central government employee, not the local authority. Who, if anyone, stands out as the most likely candidate for that task?

5. “SPIKE” THE DRAUGHTSMAN AS PRIME SUSPECT

While the great thinkers of planning are much written about in city histories, “planning professionals”, if one excludes star architects from this grouping, rarely command attention. Like their fellow professionals of the twentieth century, i.e., engineers, surveyors and draughtsmen and draughtswomen, the price of salaried security for most planners is usually anonymity. Ranking within an organisation does not provide any greater guidance as so many planning functions are delegated. Thus, while in this particular case one might be tempted to look to a senior appointee at the local level, such as Ministry of Works District Supervisor H. S. Sherbrooke who penned the letter shown in

Figure 2 above, his career biography is non-existent.¹⁴

If there is a prime suspect or candidate for these naming choices then it would appear to be one of the people involved in the designation of the very first new Aranui street names: Roy Bramwell Spear, whose wife Betty, as mentioned earlier, was the inspiration for Betty Place.¹⁵ According to Auckland War Memorial Museum records, Roy “Spike” Bramwell Spear, was born in Christchurch and served in the Royal New Zealand Air Force from 1940 to 1954. He reached the rank of Squadron Leader and received a number of awards including the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC).¹⁶ A note in the Lands and Survey Annual Report to Government for 1939 shows that Spear was transferred as a Draughting Cadet from New Plymouth to Christchurch.¹⁷ It is clear that following discharge from the Air Force Spear recommenced work as a Lands and Survey Draughtsman in Christchurch and he would have been in the thick of the Aranui project upon his return to his home city.

While Spear may have idly selected the names that sought to define Aranui as if he were retracing a post-war touring holiday through the pleasant English countryside, there are some clear military references in Farnborough, Aldershot and Portsmouth. A more specific pattern emerges when these and other names are correlated with former Royal Air Force bases and airfields of the World War Two era. During the war, Spear flew with 218 Squadron, which was based in Norfolk, East Anglia. His postings after then are not clear but based on the assumption that Spear was instructed by one of his seniors to name around 20 streets in a major new subdivision with an obvious connection to Hampshire and the Christchurch in England he appears to have used this opportunity to tick off a number of key RAF bases and airfields that figured in critical bombing campaigns and invasions launched from the south coast of England.¹⁸ The streets of Aranui, then, appear to owe their existence to the mental map of a local World War Two flying ace thinking back to events less than a decade past.

6. CONCLUSION

What, you might ask, has all this to do with present day Aranui and Wainoni? There are a number of points to consider. Firstly, there is the contradiction that among the few suburbs in Christchurch that bear Maori names and which, until recently at least, held one of the highest urban concentrations of tangata whenua (and Pasifika peoples), these are overwhelmingly “ultra-Anglo” in nomenclature. And these are not old suburbs. They are a post-war product and coincide with the first serious efforts to recognise a bi-cultural, if not multi-cultural, society – the population boom in Aranui occurred during the 1960s, the time of civil rights campaigns here and abroad.

Secondly, Aranui has been stigmatised to the extent that incremental housing renewal programmes, such as those carried out under a Labour administration between 2001 and 2008, will not be sufficient to reset the compass, so to speak. As with other master-planned state housing projects of the post-war period it needs to be acknowledged that having made such commitments once, ongoing commitments will always be required, perhaps not at the master plan level, but at the very least in terms of periodic reviews without prejudice, where such things as the configuration and naming of streets might sensibly be revisited.

Thirdly, the earthquakes of 2010-2012 have left Aranui in another paradoxical position. The streets and housing stock, although damaged, have fared better than some of the immediately adjoining neighbourhoods and suburbs. Within two to three years Aranui will be a residential island in a sea of red-zoned, light industrial and utilities e.g., sewage treatment, land. Adding to this novel situation Aranui is at the centre of one of the largest post-earthquake Christchurch school re-organisation decisions whereby the existing primary schools within the suburb will cease to exist to become part of a campus combining five schools on the edge of the suburb. A significant part of Aranui will have to be re-planned as a result. The risk is that without reinvestment Aranui will be a kind of desert island if things are left to progress incrementally or by attrition.

Fourthly, the natural environmental conditions in Aranui are not reflected in the built environment. Prior to the making of the state housing subdivision Aranui was an undulating sand hill and hollow landscape with very dry and very wet underlying soils and a wider topographical profile than most would imagine. Exposed to the prevailing easterly it supported hardy coastal vegetation. The apparent proximity of the Avon/Otakaro River, once an integral part of the local ecosystem, is a practical illusion since that natural feature has been fenced off from Aranui by virtue of the Bexley motorway. If ecological restoration projects are good enough for other parts of Christchurch, and these are common throughout many other suburbs, whether public or private, they ought to be emerging in Aranui.

With these points in mind it is time, in my view, to reconsider, reclaim, rename and revitalise Aranui and Wainoni. Those with the greatest commitments and investments there, including residents, neighbourhood groups, Ngai Tahu, Pasifika organisations, church groups, Housing New Zealand (and their planners) and Christchurch City Council (and their planners) need to collaboratively redesign the area. Talk of “anchor” projects is rife at present in Christchurch with most of the rhetoric directed at the Central City. In the case of Aranui a different metaphor seems more suitable: “kaharoa,” a Maori term which translates loosely as “large net.” The way forward may be multiple but interwoven projects which draw people back to the east. Aranui is at the core of that net, a net with loose ends that need tying up. We are not in Hampshire anymore.

¹<http://www.stuff.co.nz/the-press/news/7992714/Setbacks-slow-Aranuis-road-to-recovery>. Accessed 2 August 2013.

² Six Community Renewal projects made up the programme between 2001 and 2008: Aranui, Clendon, Eastern Porirua, Fordlands, Northcote and Talbot Park. The projects were discontinued after the National Party won the 2008 election. During the life of the Aranui Community Renewal Project 62 units in multi-unit configuration were replaced with 48 single-storey units.

³<http://www.geekzone.co.nz/forums.asp?forumid=48&topicid=114597>. Accessed 2 August 2013.

⁴<http://www.stuff.co.nz/national/crime/2836777/Slow-recovery-of-buried-bodies>. Accessed 2 August 2013.

⁵ <http://tvnz.co.nz/national-news/christchurch-arson-attacks-mean-and-vicious-4755474>. Accessed 2 August 2013.

⁶ Davis, M. 1999. *The Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster*. London: Picador, pp.112-122.

⁷ Maori comprised 21.3 % and Pacific peoples comprised 18.1 % of the local population according to the 2006 Census. The ratios for the Canterbury region were 7.2% and 2.1% respectively.

<http://www.stats.govt.nz/Census/2006CensusHomePage/QuickStats/AboutAPlace/SnapShot.aspx?ParentID=1000013&type=au&p=y&printall=true&tab=Households&id=3593100>.

⁸ Baker, T. 2007. *Aranui and Wainoni History, Christchurch, New Zealand*. Christchurch: Tim Baker.

⁹ The original government purchase of parcels of land in the area in the early 1950s yielded what was labelled the “Wainoni Block” even though it encompasses what most people now call Aranui. In official government archives, most of which are held at the offices of Archives New Zealand in Christchurch and Wellington, the name Wainoni is used on most files until well into the 1970s.

¹⁰<http://christchurchcitylibraries.com/Heritage/PlaceNames/ChristchurchStreetNames-B.pdf>. Accessed 2 August 2013. Research Librarian Margaret Harper conducted an interview in 2005 with a member of the Spear family.

¹¹<http://christchurchcitylibraries.com/heritage/placenames/>

¹² Baker, T. 2007, p. 86.

¹³ Monty Python’s Flying Circus “The Cycling Tour” Episode 8 Season 3, aired on BBC One 2 December 1972.

¹⁴ H. S. Sherbrooke is mentioned in the Appendices to the Journal of the House of Representatives 1950 Session I, D-01 p. 14 Ministry of Works Statement as a District Supervisor moving from the Napier office of the Christchurch office that year.

¹⁵ This research has found no record of the life or works of Alfred Vernon Brown the other staff member at the Ministry of Works.

¹⁶<http://muse.aucklandmuseum.com/databases/Ce-notaph/129357.detail>

¹⁷ Appendix to the Journal of the House of Representatives 1939 Session I, C-01a, Department of Lands and Survey Annual Report, p.13.

¹⁸http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_former_Royal_Air_Force_stations. Accessed 2 August 2013.