RENOVATING A LANDMARK

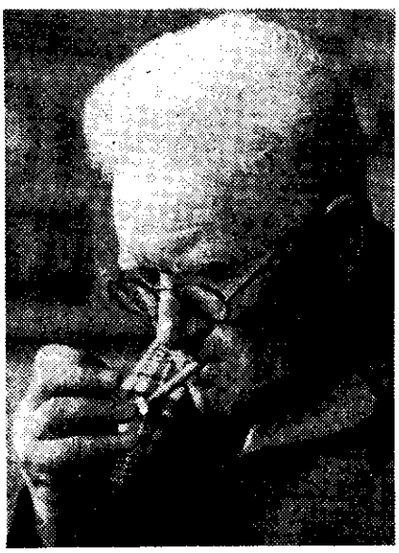
SO far it has been a lovely autumn in Wellington, and lots of people have been inclined to loiter in the sun to watch the painters at work outside Government Building. It's 14 years since it was painted last, and in that time "traffic film," to use the trade term, has done its dirty work, and we have tended to hurry past it in its shabbiness without giving a thought to the essential rightness of its proportions or the beauty of its hand-carved ornamentations. Certainly it has been a landmark, but it is with a certain sheepishness that we have boasted of having "the largest wooden building in the world."

GOVERNMENT BUILDING, Wellington—Fresh paint has revealed the essential rightness of its proportions.

But that attitude has changed. "Made a wonderful difference, hasn't it?" says one onlooker to another. "Wouldn't have thought the old building could have looked so good." There have been admiring comments on the colour scheme, the deep buff of the weatherboards contrasting with the white of the window frames, the pale green under the eaves and on the ceilings of the porches. "Let themselves go a bit, haven't they?" says another admiring spectator. But productive of the highest praise from the citizen-in-the-street is the Royal coat of arms, which now appears in all the resplendence of its heraldic colouring after 20 years or so of anonymous buff. The gold and silver, emerald and scarlet glow above the pediment, and the stern business of Government appears a little less stern on their account.

It was in Sir Julius Vogel's time that the idea of a building to house all the Government offices was first thought of. With the transfer of the central government to Wellington it was necessary to house the rapidly expanding Government departments, and the Colonial architect, Mr. W. H. Clayton, was instructed to draw up plans. The original plans, their meticulous detail typical of the draughtsmanship of the period, are still housed in the Government Architect's office, duly signed by William Clayton and the contractors. The framework was to be Tasmanian hardwood (bluegum and stringybark are mentioned in the files, but we cannot be sure that these were the species actually used), the piles totara, the weatherboards, flooring and interior woodwork of heart kauri. In 1874 the business of reclaiming land from the harbour was begun (at that time Lambton Quay ran along the foreshore) and by 1876 the four-storey building, secure on its deep piles, was completed at a cost of £40,000.

SIR JULIUS VOGEL



J. W. HEENAN

After seventy-five years space is at a premium

Early employees, looking out the side or back windows, must have been very conscious of the encircling seas.

Wings Extended

All the existing departments were housed in the building (Public Works still continues in its original offices, though it has long overflowed them) and in addition the First Floor Front was devoted to commodious accommodation for cabinet ministers and their suites. The central Cabinet Room is still used for meetings of the Executive Council, since there is a rule, dating possibly from the reprehensible conduct of Cromwell in dissolving the Rump or the earlier vagaries of Charles I, that the Governor-General cannot set foot in Parliament Buildings during the session. During the session therefore the Cabinet Room reverts occasionally to its original purpose.

The building remained structurally unchanged till 1897, when it was decided to extend the south wing, and so much care was taken to duplicate exactly details such as the carvings on the window frames that it is almost impossible to tell the more recent from the original. There is a slight difference in spacing between the windows and now the sinking of the piles has revealed a difference in level. The north wing was extended similarly 10 years later, and the cost of the two additions was something under £7,000.

Mr. J. W. Heenan, till recently Under-Secretary of Internal Affairs, has spent more than 40 years of his working life in Government Buildings, and his recollections of his early days in the building throw interesting lights on the public service of that time. He first began as a cadet in 1906, when Richard John Seddon occupied the Cabinet Room. New Zealand had just become a Dominion, and new names appeared in the corridors, since the Colonial Secretary had now become the Minister of Internal Affairs, and the Secretary to the Treasury was now Minister of Finance. But perhaps the strongest contrast was between the streamlined office routine of to-day and the methods in use in the early years of the century. Females in the office were still a rarity, and typewriters almost as rare, but the Minister's secretaries were always qualified shorthand-typists, picking their way surely over the double keyboards of the early Yost and Barlock machines. Letters were copied by hand into letter-books. There were no accounting machines, though these came into use after the First World War.

The messengers Mr. Heenan first remembered were elderly veterans of the Maori Wars, mostly ex-members of the Armed Constabulary. There were still no lifts in the building (these were installed in 1919, for the sake of the disabled servicemen who paid frequent visits to the State Advances to Settlers Department on the second floor), but a small hydraulic lift was used to take files or ledgers from floor to floor. The year 1909 saw the installation of an automatic telephone exchange in the building in place of the old manual one.

At this time Government Buildings stood unchallenged in the middle of its own block of land, bounded by Whitmore Street and Bunny Street at the