

The Henry Wright Collection of photographic negatives

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In July 1976 the Alexander Turnbull Library's photograph section received a most interesting and valuable addition to its holdings in the form of a large collection of glass plate negatives rescued from a Newtown basement. The negatives were brought to the library's attention as the result of a telephone call from Mrs Bethne Mudge, of 117 Mein Street, Newtown. Mrs Mudge and her husband were preparing the house for sale and were faced with the problem of disposing of two mouldering orange crates packed with dusty photographic plates which had been standing on the earth floor of the basement for a considerable time. Their public spirited response to the problem is a happy contrast to the actions of those who have been responsible for the destruction of many such collections in the past.

The collection consisted of 380 whole-plate and half-plate negatives. All of them were dry plates; the factory coated and sensitized plates which began to supersede the hand sensitized wet plates in the early 1880s, only to be superseded in turn by George Eastman's roll film at the turn of the century. Most bore the marks of many years of storage in damp and dirty conditions but careful cleaning revealed 380 printable negatives. These have now been printed and most have been identified.

The house had originally been built by Henry Wright a well-known Wellington businessman who had lived there from 1896 until his death in 1936. Wright, an accountant and commercial agent, was one of Wellington's more colourful citizens. Until the time of his death he was to be seen around town wearing the top hat, frock coat and check trousers, with brightly-coloured tie and opal pin, which had caused him to be described in his obituary as 'the most benevolent-looking professional debt collector in the world'.¹ His large and comprehensively annotated library, subsequently bequeathed to the Alexander Turnbull Library, revealed him as holding not less colourful views on a wide variety of topics, not the least of which was the place of women in society. His views on women's suffrage led him to produce a poster entitled 'Notice to epicene women' which was duplicated and published by the library in 1975.