

Alton Street Heritage Precinct



View looking northeast towards Nile Street (Mike Scott, 2019)

AS.1 Introduction

The Alton Street Heritage Precinct comprises a single parcel of land (part section 509) that was subdivided in the early 20th century. The former Gibbs' residence at the corner of Nile and Alton Streets is a composite dwelling comprising a two-storey Italianate villa and a single storey vernacular cottage at the rear. It is associated with the notable personages of Mary and Frederick Gibbs and makes an important contribution to the historic residential character of Nile Street.

The smaller-scale dwellings erected in Alton Street at the rear of the Gibbs' home in the 1910s and early 1920s are close to the roadway and make no accommodation for private vehicle ownership. They provide an example of early 20th-century intensification, whereby a large residential plot was subdivided over a number of years to create smaller parcels for more modest dwellings. The residents of Alton Street (Nos. 29-37 inclusive) submitted to Nelson City Council in support of a Heritage Precinct in 1995.

AS.2 History

The oldest house in this precinct (94 Nile Street) is the former home of Henry Hounsell (died 1869) and Mary Elizabeth Gibbs (1836-1920). Hounsell was a Nelson grocer and wine and spirit merchant and he acquired part of Town Section 509 from Matthew Campbell, whose millrace ran along Alton Street into what is now Queen's Gardens. Hounsell is said to have built the vernacular cottage fronting Alton Street in c.1865; it appears to have been extended with a two-storey Italianate wing in the 1870s. The property was then purchased by Mary Gibbs, who arrived in Nelson with her nine children in late 1877, having made the decision to emigrate from London before her husband James' death.

Mary Gibbs was an active member of the community, involved in social and charitable events, and in her obituary she was claimed to be the first female elected member of a school committee in New Zealand (*Nelson Evening Mail* 22 October 1920, p. 5). Mrs Gibbs vacated her Nile Street home in 1905 and then lived with her son Frederick, the well-known headmaster of Nelson Boys' School, until her death in 1920.



Mary Gibbs (22255/3, Nelson Provincial Museum)

Survey plans provide further information about the residential development of the precinct. In January 1884 survey plan NN_A_180 recorded that Mary Gibbs owned the entire parcel of land along Alton Street that was bounded by Nile Street in the north and Brook Stream in the south. The first subdivision of Mrs Gibbs' property occurred in early 1905, at which time survey plan NN_A_793 showed four land parcels south of the Gibbs' residence. This subdivision would appear to coincide with Mary Gibbs' removal from Nile Street to live with her son.

In December 1905 survey plan NN_A_822, which was drawn up for JS Rutherford, showed a building at what is now 33 Alton Street, then located on the parcel immediately to the south of the Gibbs' property. The footprint shown on this plan appears to be that of a bay villa with a return veranda, rather than that of the transitional bungalow that occupies the site today. It is possible that a fire reported in December 1910 might explain the age of the house in situ. The early morning blaze destroyed a home owned by J Bennett of Murchison that was occupied by Arthur Austin, a tobacconist.

Plan 822 shows that Mrs Gibbs retained ownership of the parcel that includes what are now 29 and 31 Alton Street, as well as 94 Nile Street. The southernmost portion of Mrs Gibbs' original parcel (now 35 and 37 Alton Street) was subdivided for J or Annie Bennett in April 1909. In March 1911 Mary Gibbs subdivided 31 Alton Street, indicating that she was still the owner of the northernmost part of the original property. Just two months later Annie Bennett subdivided 33 Alton Street, while the Misses Gilkison subdivided the

parcel at the corner of Nile and Alton Streets to create 29 Alton Street in March 1922. Presumably the family had sold 94 Nile Street after Mary Gibbs' death in 1920 and the Misses Gilkison then became the new owners.

The Gilkison subdivision would accord with the later bungalow styling of the house at 29 Alton Street, whereas the four other houses along Alton Street bear the hallmarks of earlier architectural styles; the square-plan villa (31 & 37 Alton Street) and the transitional bungalow (33 & 35 Alton Street). As the transitional bungalows are a matching pair, bar some alterations to No. 33, a date of c.1911-15 is suggested based on their styling and the incidence of the fire in December 1910. A date of c.1910-11 is suggested for the square-plan villas.

AS.3 Visual Characteristics

AS.3.1 Height

The precinct consists of single-storey houses, except for that portion of the former Gibb's residence that overlooks Nile Street and is two storeyed. The low scale is an important feature of the street and should to be maintained.

AS.3.2 Closeness to the Street

The houses are close to the street and to one another, presenting a continuous frontage along Alton Street. This is an important feature which helps to create a sense of place.

AS.3.3 Roof Form

With the exception of No. 29, the houses have hipped roofs. The gabled roof forms of No. 29 add variety within the coherent streetscape of the precinct as a whole. The integrity of the roof form from the street is an important feature of the precinct; skylights and solar panels should be positioned accordingly.

AS.3.4 Materials and Detailing

Horizontal timber weatherboards and corrugated iron roofing are the materials authentic to the houses in the street and their scale and texture make a defining contribution to the character of the historic streetscape. Timber detailing, in the form of shingled gable ends, eaves brackets, veranda posts and friezes, enlivens the facades of most of the houses; the simpler treatment of Nos. 31 and 37 providing some variety within the streetscape. Strong emphasis must be placed on the use of materials and detailing that is sympathetic to the original design.

AS.3.5 Windows and Doors

Depending on the age and style of the house, double-hung sash or casement and fanlight type windows are authentic to the houses in the precinct. The main entrance door is typically on the principal elevation facing the street; it may be a solid panelled door or

feature glazing. Timber-framed windows and doors are authentic and maintain the integrity of the streetscape. Inappropriate replacement of windows and doors can detract from the integrity of an individual house and compromise the overall appearance of the historic streetscape. The fenestration of new houses should be designed in sympathy with the typical size, scale and materials of the existing housing.

AS.3.6 Verandas

All houses have a veranda or entrance porch overlooking the street. These are an important feature of the houses and provide the transition space between the public street and private home. Development should maintain or consider reinstatement of these verandas.

AS.3.7 Fencing

The historic character of the streetscape depends in large measure upon the openness of the houses to the public domain. Historically-authentic, low-scale fencing creates a sense of demarcation from the roadway, while maintaining visual contact between the street and the houses' principal elevations. High fences are therefore inappropriate within the precinct. Fencing materials should be sympathetic to the individual house concerned.

AS.3.8 Garaging

Existing carports or off-street parking, where provided, is at the side or rear of the site. This allows the streetscape to retain its continuous frontage. Off street car parking requirements for this precinct may be flexible to avoid the need for garaging in the front yard.



A carport to the side of the house and a low-level picket fence help to maintain the historic character of the streetscape.

AS.4 Performance Guidelines

Applications for resource consent will be evaluated for their alignment with the following guidelines.

AS.4.1 Scheduled Heritage Buildings

The scheduled heritage buildings in Alton Street are the defining elements of the precinct. Proposals relating to scheduled buildings are appropriate where:

- a) Group A and B buildings are retained in all but exceptional circumstances, with demolition or removal a last resort
- b) additions or alterations continue the use of timber weatherboards, corrugated metal roofing, timber joinery and detailing in keeping with the original dwelling is encouraged; and
- c) proposals consider the reinstatement of original façade elements, including verandas and entrance porches, when undertaking alterations.

AS.4.2 New Dwellings

New dwellings within a heritage precinct, whether due to removal of an existing dwelling and replacement, or construction of a second dwelling, also have the potential to adversely affect the character of the precinct, unless done in a sympathetic manner. Proposals for new dwellings are appropriate where:

- a) the new building is designed in such a way as to maintain and enhance the historic character of the streetscape;
- b) the form and scale of new work is in keeping with the existing houses when viewed from the street;
- c) materials used complement and enhance the historic character of the precinct;
- e) the building is single storey with roofs in keeping with existing heights and pitch when viewed from the street;
- f) the street boundary line must be maintained.

AS.4.4 Accessory Buildings

Accessory buildings are appropriate where:

- a) they are designed to be complementary to the streetscape in form, detail and use of materials when viewed from the street;
- b) they are not constructed in the front yard (except garages where physical and legal access to the rear or side of the site is not possible).

AS.4.5 Fences

Timber picket fences, a maximum of 900 mm in height from footpath level, are appropriate for new fences on street frontages.



Former Hounsell/Gibbs house, Nile Street (Dr A McEwan, 2017)