

Te Kuini Karangahape

[Karangahape Queen]

Published in *express* community newspaper December 2006. Karangahape (K') Rd is an important street in Auckland, New Zealand.

From piss-elegant past to gritty urban present, Kevin Booth explores the Karangahape track and the tales she tells.

Our beloved, slightly bedraggled “Gay K” was once Auckland’s ritziest road. What happened? Where did all the glamour go? Is some of that glitz beginning to sneak back?



Different ideas circulate about what Karangahape means. Edward Bennett, K' Rd historian whose Heritage Walk offers copious historical information, suggests it stems from Hape, the stingray-riding Māori ancestor who came ashore in Mangere. Hape welcomed the Tainui canoe to Aotearoa with a karanga or chant. So: Karanga-a-Hape. Another source translates it as “winding ridge of human activity”. It certainly was: from Parnell to Manakau, or around the harbour up to the North Shore, this was the busiest pre-European route in the North Island, making it one of Auckland’s oldest thoroughfares.

In 1840, Ngāti Whatua chief Apihai Te Kawau sold 1200 hectares, including the Karangahape ridge, to Captain Hobson on which to build Auckland. The price: 50 blankets, 50 pounds sterling, 20 pairs of trousers, 20 shirts, 10 waistcoats, 10 caps, 10 iron pots, 4 casks of tobacco, 1 box of pipes, 100 yards of gown pieces, 1 bag flour and 20 hatchets. A bargain?

Because several generations of pa-based wars had cleared it of vegetation (building a pa meant burning off surrounding bush cover), leaving just bracken and small stands of mānuka and tīkouka, this accessible isthmus between the Manakau and Waitematā harbours made a perfect site for the country’s capital (1840-65).

The name has always been a bit gnarly for Europeans. An unsubstantiated account tells how a trainee constable in the 1870s—prior to street signs—encountered a dead horse on the strip. He duly wrote his report: “Found on Kayre... Kerangy... Kaer...” He finally dragged the corpse around the corner: “Found on Pitt St.” Even pre-1900, locals were calling it K' Rd.

In the late 19th century, surveying and building began in earnest. For ninety-nine years, Partington’s Windmill (1851), corner of Symonds and K, sketched a skyline more iconic than

any Sky Tower, helping ships navigate into port and drunks find their way home. Fierce opposition to its demolition in 1950 spawned pioneering heritage protection legislation, the New Zealand Historic Places Trust and a more heritage-conscious generation of K-Roaders.



At its Ponsonby Road end, the 1886 water reservoir still stands. Almost a century later (1984), Visual Artists Against Nuclear War painted a mural on its wall—now a landmark icon.

Few preservation covenants exist on K' Rd buildings. Two thirds of the street has only four owners, but they all prefer restoration before decimation.

One example is St Kevin's Arcade where any renovations try to replicate its former grandeur. The sad truth though, is saints haven't been too common around here. This was where Scoria House was built, the first European mansion in the area, out of local volcanic stone. After serving as Governor Grey's residence for a few years, it was bought by bookmaker Thomas Keven. It became known as "Mr Keven's House". During the New Zealand Wars, it housed the officer's mess of the Royal Irish Regiment. Bennett hypothesises a link to a liquor shop that stood just outside the municipal limits of grog-free Dublin—a 24-hour den of merriment and debauchery known as St Kevin's. If there's one thing both the Irish and K-Roaders do well, it's party. Nevertheless, once the house had been demolished and a new building erected, with a right-of-way through to recently inaugurated Myer's Park, the "e" had changed to "i" and that bookie had got canonised.

For over a century there has been a pub on K. The Naval & Family (1897), like many pubs, was built on a corner: no awnings, but with a huge lantern over its doorway. The reason was that the government would only grant a licence to a pub on a corner (it was in Australia I first heard an inferior drinking hole referred to as "a pub without a corner") so that they could ensure every street corner was lit without having to pay for lighting. The lantern was to attract sober patrons; the lack of awnings, to discourage drunk ones from loitering in the rain.

By the 1890s, K' Rd was coming into its own as Auckland's most important shopping street. Rendell's, George & John Court's, Pascoe's, Hallensteins, Malvern's Home Stores, Butcher & Co., Flackson's... it was shop till ya drop for the next seventy years and K' Rd was the place. The reason? Electricity. People could go out to the movies, or dancing in brightly lit places like the Savoy Reception Rooms. Window-shopping became all the rave. Electricity meant you could have large, brightly-lit, plate glass windows displaying your goods well into the night.

1910 was a big year: Grafton Bridge, or "Myers Folly", was built to replace a rickety wooden bridge over the gully. It was the world's largest single span of reinforced concrete. Two steamrollers were driven across to prove it wouldn't come tumbling down. Symonds St tram shelter and toilets were built alongside—a new concept: ladies' loos! Up until then one would

simply look away from the steaming puddle left after a damsel had paused in the street before wafting her billowing skirts onwards. Soon after came the Beresford Street amenities, which have been turned into a venue still popular with those wanting to extend their nocturnal revels into the morning: The Supper Club.

1910 was also when the King's—Auckland's oldest surviving theatre—opened in Upper Pitt St, now Mercury Lane. In 1911, it showed the first colour film in New Zealand. Like most of our theatres it became a cinema in 1926, the Prince Edward, then returned to being the Playhouse, later renamed the Mercury.

For a taste of the Prince Edward's old world charm without genuflecting to the church that



now owns it (though I am told their renovation is faultless), have a coffee in the grand but dilapidated, neo-Greek entranceway, added in 1926. Renamed the Norman Ng Building, it was a fruit & vege shop for years, but now brews NZ's finest coffee. I'm talking about the beautiful barrel vault ceiling that houses Brazil café.

For years the Mercury was one of Auckland's only two live theatre venues. The other, also a K' Rd girl, has had her share of facelifts. She began as a Vaudeville theatre in 1911, becoming the Arcadia in 1914. When Raymond Hawthorne returned from RADA to bring 70s New Zealand the concept of ensemble performance, compared to older declamatory theatre, the Arcadia's fly tower was perfect for the new Theatre Corporate. From drama queens to drag queens, it then transformed into Staircase LGBT nightclub.

Probably the first queen to cruise the strip in a limo was Queen Elizabeth II. In 1953, a tiara-like arch of pure kitsch was erected over K' Rd. Department stores whipped window-dressers into bedecking shops in their finest Christmas tack. The royal couple—young Kuini Elizabeth and hubby—waved limply to the plebs as they glided on towards Grafton Bridge.

That was her final moment of grandeur. In 1957, the motorway complex was begun. Hard times were upon us: one million tonnes of earth were gouged from the Karangahape ridge to be replaced by the over-bridge; the government demolished 15,000 homes; more than 45,000 people—mainly working class—had to move. Over 4,100 graves were exhumed and dumped into a mass plot on the other side of Symonds St. Meanwhile the Council decided to move on the red-light district around the Britomart area, pushing out the sex industry to... where? Curious fires occurred in K' Rd shops that had lost their customer base to the motorway. The

insurance helped owners relocate to Newmarket and other more profitable areas. Rents plummeted. Empty premises were suddenly available for all kinds of... interesting ventures.

Yet one icon from that time is now as zealously defended by K-Roaders as the Ashes are by the Aussies: the Vegas Girl. Several attempts have been made to topple her or clothe her, but still she proudly ah... crawls as a symbol of this street's "lurid reputation". In fact, Karangahape Road now houses only seven businesses still connected to the sex industry.



The seventies saw a misplaced attempt to present K' Rd to the world again. Unfortunately, few of the architects involved had any concept of harmonising with what had gone before, resulting in disasters like the office block at Symonds St corner. Two buildings from that time, while contrasting with their surroundings, have found their place: Newton Post Office (1973) and Samoa House (1978), the first Fale design to be built outside of Samoa.

While plenty of sex workers still operate on or around K' Rd, more galleries, designer shops and trendy cafes are appearing.

In 1996, Victoria Henderson and Brian Butler transferred their gallery Artspace from down near Britomart Quay into the contemporary Newton Post Office building. Henderson felt "the culture of the time suited where we were and who we are. It had a real gritty edge."

The feeling at Artspace is that Karangahape is a rising constellation yet there's trepidation about what that means. More galleries, boutique shops and fine restaurants can only

attract more money into the area and everyone is keen on that. Yet people are passionate about K' Rd. Heckles rise at the idea of it becoming "gentrified".

When Dominic opened Brazil in 1995, he loved the street for its diversity. The café's urban flavour is unique: "We couldn't operate on any other street in Auckland." Both Henderson and Dominic are suspicious of ventures like the Naval & Family's recent facelift. Will it kill Karangahape's essential essence? Yet Dominic is philosophical: "[Gentrification is] a slower process than people think." Nevertheless, Te Kuini Karangahape has changed her gown so often in the last two centuries without losing her identity, she's sure to remain Auckland's reigning street.