

The Founding of the Auckland Justices of the Peace Association

In 1922 a group of Auckland Justices of the Peace were looking to better their reputation and their services to the public and they believed forming an organisation would assist them to further their cause.

For years Justices had been plagued by a denigrating campaign by the weekly newspaper "Truth" which cruelly called them "Jay Pays" or "Jay Pees", taking many hundreds of column inches over the decades to call out injustices, mistakes, harsh (or short) sentencing, and uneven tempers on the bench. Justices of the Peace were often lampooned in insensitive cartoons... and not just in the "Truth" weekly. And then in early 1922 there was a well-publicised case of a Justice of the Peace who gave a stiff jail sentence for a trivial offence. Lawyers sometimes joined in, criticising "justice" handed down in sentences by Justices of the Peace on the Bench.

Auckland Justices noted that other centres had formed their own local Associations and had begun educating their members to improve standards, unify procedures on the Bench and have a single collective voice. Wellington Association had been guided and advised by Court Clerk, Cecil Hewlett.



C. J. Hewlett
N. Z. Truth

In 1922 he was transferred to Auckland Court where he befriended and mentored Justices here and immediately sowed the seeds for a local Association. An invitation to Justices of the Peace to hear the proposal was published in the newspapers.

JUSTICES . OF THE PEACE.

ALL JUSTICES OF THE PEACE ARE
ASKED TO ATTEND A MEETING AT
THE MAGISTRATE'S COURT ON WED-
NESDAY NEXT, OCTOBER 11, AT 4
P.M., TO CONSIDER THE ADVISABILITY
OF FORMING A JUSTICES' ASSOCIA-
TION

Auckland Star October 7th 1922

The advertisement attracted some 60 Justices of the Peace to the meeting, some of whom did not know their counterparts. Convenor, William Coltman, observed that... “this is what the Association, when formed, will accomplish... put everyone in touch” and besides this, he said, “our stated objects are maintaining the dignity of the office of Justice, seeking increased knowledge by means of lectures from judges, magistrates and members of the legal profession, and doing other things for the advancement of the status of the office”. John Fray told the meeting about the other Associations already formed and that it was up to the Government to have material available detailing Justices’ duties.



Arthur Rosser JP
S. P. Andrew Studios

Arthur Rosser moved “that an Auckland Association of Justices of the Peace be formed”, his motion was seconded by Charles Norgrove and those present voted the Association into life.

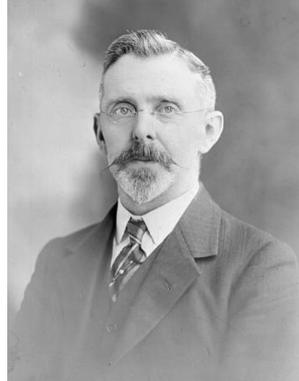


Auckland Magistrate’s Court 1920s: the Association’s birthplace
J D Richardson – Auckland Libraries Collection

It was decided on a follow-up meeting to propose a Constitution and Rules, and this was held on the evening of October 24th 1922 in the Magistrate’s Court.

This date, October 24th 1922, is regarded as the Association’s birth date

William Coltman chaired this second meeting which adopted constitutional details and then elected the foundation officers for the Association. Patrons were Auckland Judges Mr. Justice Stringer and Mr. Justice Herdman while local Stipendiary Magistrates were Vice-Patrons: E. C. Cutten, J. W. Poynton, J. E. Wilson, and W. R. McLean.



William Coltman JP

The inaugural President was William Coltman and Vice-Presidents J. H. Fray, A. D. Seabrook and A. Rosser. The first registrar was William Ward Baker while the Treasurer was Charles Wheeler. The Council consisted A. J. Stratford, H. H. Hunt, F. J. H. Ellisdon, E. G. Skeates, T. E. Whitton, A. Oldham with C. J. Kent-Johnston elected Auditor.

William Coltman



William Coltman – with familiar cigar

He was an accomplished lawn bowler and his singing prowess led to his Presidency of the Royal Auckland Choir. As President of the Automobile Association during the 1920s - emergent years of the motor car - he oversaw speed events on Muriwai Beach and introduced competitions for women drivers during motor rallies at Bucklands Beach and Mangere. He was an inveterate cigar-smoker.

Who Can Belong?

This was the question discussed at an early meeting of the Auckland Justices of the Peace. Documents from Christchurch and Wellington Justices Associations showed their members were balloted, voted to membership. "It's a way of keeping out those appointed Justices by the Minister but whom the locals in those two Associations don't think are worthy" was the reason given. Auckland's Justices thought otherwise, deciding all those holding the commission of Justice of the Peace should be eligible to join the new Association and the new Constitution reflected this. The annual membership subscription was set at 10/.

Earliest meetings were told it was intended that the new Association would form branches throughout Auckland Province to keep in touch with Justices in the hinterland, and this was later done. A library and lecture room would be established and there were also plans for a downtown office where Justices would be rostered to be in attendance for the convenience of the public. Further, each Justice would pay £1, the cost of the member's medallion, a "badge of office", to be worn so they could be readily identified.



One of the original badges of office

An Association Underway

The Auckland Association of Justices of the Peace was established and its immediate future charted by the inaugural Executive which lost no time actioning moves to progress the stated objectives. This initial work fell to the founding Registrar, William Ward Baker, who was in office for the Association's first year.

The Wellington Justices of the Peace Association, in congratulating their new counterpart on its founding, were already suggesting a Federation be formed comprising Canterbury, Wellington and Auckland associations.

In November, just a month after founding, Cecil Hewlett of the Auckland Magistrate's Court (who had mentored Justices of the Peace) was added as a Vice-Patron of the Association.



The plaque prepared to be affixed to the former Magistrate's Court building to mark the Association's centenary

Footnotes

News of the Association's founding led to renewed interest in Justice of the Peace affairs.

Looking Back. One veteran, who said he was too old to become a member(!), recalled in 1922 that “in the old days” (1800s) he was called-on for a wide variety of duties, “much more complex than now” and the swearing-in was a very serious ceremony before a Judge in the Supreme Court. He had, he said, followed advice given by the Judge when he was sworn in. “The Judge said that the chief duty of Justices of the Peace was simply to bring common sense to bear on all questions brought before them. That advice has never left me, and I have made very few mistakes in consequence”. He also disagreed that Justices should be allowed to smoke pipes, cigars and cigarettes during their meetings. “The decorum has gone!”

Total Service. The other aspect given publicity was the length of service Justices of the Peace had given. One or two at the foundation meeting in 1922 boasted how long they had been Justices, but their records were soon overtaken by others who wrote to newspapers giving dates of their earlier swearing-in. It was agreed at first that H. Dunbar Johnson had the honour, having been gazetted in June 1885. John Gemmell subsequently claimed longer service, from 1883. But Robert Hill surfaced, a Justice of the Peace since October 12, 1871, and his claim of 51 years’ service went undisputed!

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