

William Akersten

An Extraordinary Man

by Harry J. R. Dutton



Figure 1. Wharf at Nelson [ca 1910] The Custom House Hotel is on the left and the business of W Akersten is just visible alongside. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. Reference No. 1/1-010975-G. *Permission of the Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand, must be obtained before any re-use of this image.*

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The information presented here was assembled from a wide range of sources, many of which are identified either in the text or in the section entitled "References" at the end. Unfortunately, much of the available material is inconsistent. A systematic attempt is being made to verify as much as possible from "primary sources" or, at least, from contemporary accounts. This project is ongoing and it is expected that revised editions will become available as more information is acquired.

Stevedore, Rigger, Ships Captain, Civil Engineer, Businessman, Politician but above all - Pioneer, William Akersten was truly an extraordinary man.

Preface – The Depths of Time

In 1764 the family of Henry Attfield was found to be living in Weybridge (Surrey) without having obtained official “residence” (“settlement”). The parish authorities were concerned that a poor family may become a financial burden on the parish in the future. So they went to court and obtained a “removal order” to transport the whole family back to Windlesham (all of 10 miles) where they had their last official residence. In an act of supreme Christian charity, the family’s few farm animals (two chickens and a pig) were confiscated and sold to pay for the removal.

Some 40 years later the family is found living Barnet area of North London. Fortunes had changed and Richard Attfield, son of Henry, was quite prosperous. In a strange coincidence three of Richard’s grandchildren became associated with New Zealand.

- *Ann Elizabeth Attfield (granddaughter of Richard) married Edward Augarde a cousin of Henry John Louis Augarde (one of the early pioneers of Nelson).*
- *Julia Attfield (daughter of Richard) married William Nettleship. Their son (also William) migrated to New Zealand and spent time in Nelson, Auckland and Wellington before settling in Wanganui.*
- *Elizabeth Martha Cawood (granddaughter of Richard) married Francis Errick Akersten and moved to Nelson with the Akersten family in 1865.*

As the title suggests the focus of this current article is William Akersten (brother of Francis).

In the Beginning...

The story starts somewhere in the crowded, twisted, stinking streets around the docks in the east of London. A new baby cries - perhaps in anticipation of what lies ahead. “It’s a boy!” It is doubtful that anyone except his mother and a midwife even noticed William’s first utterances above the constant din of the street outside. On the 11th of March 1825 the dock area of London was an overcrowded slum. Laurence and Margaret Akersten however had a thriving business and while in no way “rich” were quite well off compared to most of their neighbours. The birth of their sixth child was probably almost routine. Laurence and Margaret must have done something right. All of their seven children survived early childhood when the overall death rate for babies born at that time and place was around 30%.

William’s father, Laurence had been a “Boatswain” (Bosun) in the Royal Navy. Wounded at the battle of Corruna on the 16th of January 1809¹, he was repatriated to England and discharged. A Bosun in the navy at the time had two important roles. First he was the technical specialist responsible for the ships sails and rigging (the counterpart of the ships Engineer today). On a large sailing vessel this was an exacting and highly technical job. It required a reasonable level of literacy and some skill with numbers. A Warrant-Officer, he was the most senior enlisted man on a navy vessel. As such he was responsible for crew discipline. This role continues in the military of today under various titles such as the “WOD” (Warrant Officer, Disciplinary), “Regimental Sergeant-Major” or “Chief of the Boat”². At the time the Bosun could stand watch (taking turns with the ships commissioned officers) but not captain the ship. Part of his disciplinary duty was to organise the floggings³ (administered by the Bosun’s Mate).

After his discharge from the Navy, Laurence set up a business supplying services to ships in port. This included repairs and changes to the rigging, provisioning (providing stores for a voyage) and stevedoring (storing the cargo). In stark contrast to “wharf labouring”,

¹ This was a Dunkirk-like rescue of the British Army from under the guns of Napoleon’s Army.

² In civilian life in a modern factory, the Bosun would correspond to a “foreman”, officers would correspond to managers.

³ It’s a modern myth that flogging was routinely carried out on British Navy ships. Floggings were relatively rare. The Captain needed his men fit and healthy to sail the ship.

stevedoring is a highly skilled job. Loading a cargo in such a way as to balance the ship correctly, ensuring that the cargo will not be damaged in transit or worse, break loose during bad weather, while maximising the amount of goods loaded requires great skill and knowledge. Over the centuries hundreds of ships and thousands of lives have been lost due to incorrect loading of the cargo! When a ship had an unusual cargo to load a specialist “stevedore” would often be hired to supervise the loading while the crew stowed it on board. Another service offered was “surveying” the ship. This meant examining the ship in detail, identifying faults etc. and assessing the ships “seaworthiness” (often for insurance or legal purposes).

Early Life

William was brought up on the London docks and he observed their workings at close hand on a daily basis. In his later years, he claimed to remember events on the docks from when he was three years old! This is a bit hard to believe. At about the age of eight William’s life changed radically. He started work as an apprentice “rigger” to his father. He had to work the same hours as any of the other people who worked for his father and he was paid for it “as promptly as they were”. Soon afterwards his mother died and his father quickly remarried. Apparently he had an intense curiosity about the world about him and spent most of the money he earned on books. After only two and a half years (just before turning 11), William was sent to a “rather good” local school where he stayed until he was 13. This was the only formal schooling that he ever received. However, his father provided a relatively strict upbringing (even for those times) and he must have been given a good grounding in basic literacy by his Mother and elder sisters.

“A Boys Voyage Around the World, Before the Mast, in 1838”

Late in his life, William wrote about his first big sea voyage in a short essay which as far as can be determined has never been published. The manuscript entitled “A Boys Voyage Around the World, Before the Mast, in 1838” is available in the archives of the Nelson Museum. This trip was clearly a pivotal event in Williams’ life.

Apparently, from all the reading he had been doing, William had developed a keen desire “to see the world”. His father was in the process of fitting out a ship called the “Mayflower” (a 326 ton Barque registered in Scarborough) for its second voyage to Van Diemen’s Land (Hobart, Tasmania). Captain Thomas Headley of the Mayflower was an old friend of Williams’ father. William pestered his father to be allowed to go on the voyage and his father gave in after Captain Headley “promised to look after the boy”. The Mayflower departed London in April of 1838 and arrived in Hobart Town five months later on 21st September.

William was, by his own account, a “very small boy”. Early in the voyage two much larger and older “ABs” (Able Bodied Seamen) started to bully him. As a refuge William took to spending most of the time when he was not on duty in the “foretop” (the basket at the top of the fore mast). He had brought a lot of books and spent most of his off-duty time reading. The voyage took 5 months in each direction with a three month stop at its destination in “Hobart Town”. It took a whole month to unload the cargo.

Someone in the 21st Century might well imagine that on such a voyage a sailing ship would stop at a few ports along the way both for provisions and for a break from the monotony. A trip to Hobart Town from London might have involved a stop in Spain, thence Cape Town or East London (in South Africa), across the Indian Ocean to Fremantle in Western Australia and thence to Hobart. Not so. It was faster to head straight south (out of sight of land) until the tip of Africa was cleared and then turn east straight to Hobart. A good test of navigation skills! There is almost always a very strong westerly wind blowing in those latitudes. Because of the winds you returned around the tip of South America and then across the Atlantic – again without stopping!

Almost by accident, William played a leading role in the very first “Hobart Regatta” on the 1st of December, 1838.⁴ The Governor of Tasmania (Sir John Franklin) decided to hold a

⁴ Today, the annual Hobart Regatta is a major national event.

regatta and celebration to mark the anniversary of the first settlement in Tasmania. It would also coincide with the launching of the largest ship ever built in Australia (The "Sir John Arthur"). The previous Governor had run similar events but these were for a chosen few, the general public was not welcome. Sir John Franklin decided that this event was to be for all of the people of Hobart and food and beer was provided "free" to everyone⁵ who decided to come. The central event of the regatta was a race between the "whaleboats" from the various ships then in port. About a dozen boats took part over a course of about seven miles. The race took something like 45 minutes and the difference between the winning boat and the one that came last was only about three minutes⁶. The boat from the Mayflower won with William enthusiastically pulling the "Bow Oar". The finish line was the beach and crews had to run their boats up onto it. As their boat hit the beach William sprang out of it "almost into the arms of Lady Franklin". Lady Franklin and Sir John had some nice words to say to William and presented the crew from the Mayflower with the winner's prize. Later, Lady Franklin sent William some books and some fruit for the return voyage.



Figure 2 Start of the Ship's Boat Race, Hobart Regatta 1880s. Obviously, there are no available photographs of the event in 1838!

Lady Franklin left a very strong lasting impression on William. In his narrative he relates the story of Sir John Franklin's doomed search for the "North-West Passage" and Lady Franklin's persistent but fruitless attempts to find and rescue her husband. In William's own words "Lady Franklin is a magnificent example of womanly heroism and devotion". He was also rather impressed by the Franklins daughter – "a handsome little fairy with laughing, mischievous eyes".

In due course, on the 3rd of January 1839, the Mayflower weighed anchor. William stood on the Capstan and played "Anchors Aweigh" on his fife while the crew gave three cheers for the hospitable people of Hobart. On the voyage home, only a few days out from Hobart, they came across a ship the crew of which had run out of food and was on the brink of starvation. They gave food to the crew and "stood by" them for a few days until they were well enough to

⁵ If you advertise any event in Australia which includes "free beer" you are likely to get most of the population turning up. According to contemporary press reports, most of the population did.

⁶ Race details from the Hobart Town Courier December 7th, 1838.

continue safely. William's account of the voyage finishes with a graphic description of Icebergs met in the Southern Ocean on the way home.

Apprenticeship at Sea

Almost immediately on his return home William started an apprenticeship to the sea. It is unclear as to his motivation in doing this. Was he planning a career as a ships captain or to follow his father into the rigging business? To be successful in the rigging business you had to be able to discuss the technical details of a ship with its captain on something of an equal footing. In 21st century "newspeak" you had to have "cred" [ibility].

William spent the next six years in various roles in several different ships mainly in the "Coasting" trade in British home waters. However, his personal records state that he was a member of the crew of the "William Stoveld" in 1843. In 1843 this ship voyaged from London to "New Plymouth" (NZ) stopping in Nelson on 2nd October. It seems probable that William was on board. William qualified as a Master Mariner (Captain) about the time he turned 20 (March 1845)⁷. While at sea it seems certain that he spent most of his off-duty time reading books in the "foretop" (as he had done on his first voyage to Tasmania). There was no formal qualification as a Master Mariner in 1845. You did your apprenticeship and were qualified by experience. A formal qualification and examination was not introduced until 1850.

The Rigging and Stevedoring Business

Immediately after qualifying as a Master Mariner, William joined his elder brothers in the rigging and stevedoring business and stopped going to sea. (His father had died a few years earlier in 1843.) He had other things on his mind as well. In April 1846 just a month after his 21st birthday, William married Lucy Boug MacFarlane in the parish church of St. Dunstan in Stepney. In due course their first child (Mary Lucy) was born in March of 1849. A second child (William Henry) was born in 1850 but did not survive.

This was a turbulent time in London and William (with quite literally 180,000 others) was sworn in as a "Special Constable" to help quell the "Chartist Riots" of 1848.

There seems to have been plenty of work. Shipping records of the time reveal movements of upwards of 100 ships per *day* (in each direction) into and out of the London docks. Williams business records reveal that he worked on between 35 and 45 ships per year in various roles as rigger, stevedore and/or as supplier of provisions. There must have been money too. William purchased his first ship (the Jane, 238 tons registered in London) in 1851. In 1852 he sold the Jane and purchased the Cacique⁸ (a 280 ton Barque). It is interesting to note that while William was registered as owner and master of these vessels all of the available shipping records suggest that he never actually captained any of them himself. Rather, he employed other captains to sail them.

Migration to Melbourne, Australia (Port Phillip)

The Post Office Directory of Melbourne for 1853 (printed in December of 1852) shows the following entry:

"Akersten, Patton and Co., Shipbrokers, Lightermen and Commission Agents. 8 Mincing Lane"

William went to Melbourne in October of 1852 to set up a business similar to the one the family had in London (in association with a Mr H. W. Patton). About July 1853 he returned to London, sold the Cacique, and bought a better ship⁹ the "Robert and Betsey" (140 Tons,

⁷ He finished his apprenticeship at the age of 20 but would have had to wait until his 21st birthday to be legally entitled to be a "Captain".

⁸ The Cacique does not appear in Lloyds Register of Shipping. However, its movements were reported in the London Times. It seems likely that this ship was registered with the East India Company.

⁹ Actually he owned a "half share" in the Robert and Betsey

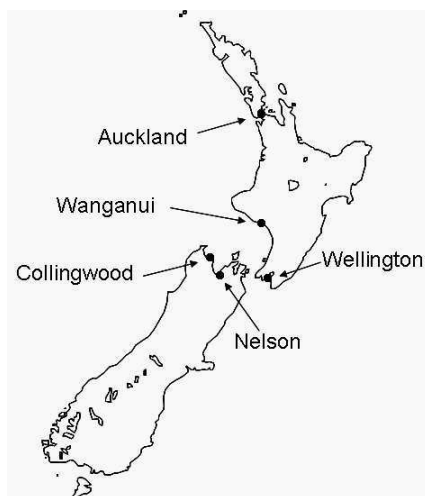
Wooden, Brigantine, ON=30971). It is unclear as to why¹⁰ but he changed the rigging from “Brigantine” to “Schooner”. The ship was provisioned for a voyage to Australia.

William’s motivations in going to Australia are still a little unclear. A number of biographers have suggested that his later move to Nelson seems to have been encouraged or even promoted by someone at James Henty & Company. It seems probable that the move to Australia was also encouraged by a member of the Henty family.

The Robert and Betsey departed London on 28th December 1853 and arrived in Melbourne on 14th June 1854. On this voyage there were only four passengers: William, his wife Lucy, their infant daughter Mary Lucy and his wife’s sister Mary Ann MacFarlane. The crew of nine included Francis Errick Akersten (William’s younger brother) and William Nettleship (actually aged 16 but “18” on the crew list). William Nettleship was a first cousin of Francis Akersten’s wife Elizabeth.

All of the crew except the Mate and the Captain were paid a nominal shilling per month for the voyage. It was a condition of their crew agreement that they would be discharged after the ship had unloaded its cargo in Melbourne. In other words all of the crew members “worked their passage to Australia”. Although William was listed in Lloyds Register as the captain of the “Robert and Betsey”, on this voyage the ship was captained by Robert Leslie. It is speculated that the cargo carried was stock for the Ships Chandlery business that William was setting up in Melbourne.

There is something of a minor mystery here. William’s younger brother, Francis, returned to London in August 1854 on the “Frances Henty”. On this voyage he was accompanied by an “H Akersten” (probably his eldest brother). The question is “why would someone work their passage to Australia and then go back almost immediately as a cabin class passenger?”



On arrival, William became involved in the business almost immediately. Under various captains but with William still listed as the registered “Master”, the Robert and Betsey traded in Australian waters for a while and did a few more trips to London and return. In 1857 William was still the registered owner.

This was a turbulent time to pick to arrive in Melbourne. Gold Rushes were well under way close by in Ballarat and Bendigo. It is said that something like half the population of Melbourne just abandoned their jobs and headed out to the goldfields. Streets were empty. There was a rapid increase in shipping traffic as shiploads of fortune hunters arrived (in excess of 50,000 of them). It should have been a good time for any maritime business. It was certainly a turbulent time. Just a few months after the family arrived, in December

1854, close by in Ballarat, there occurred the only serious incident of civil insurrection in Australian History (the Eureka Stockade). Ostensibly, the Eureka Stockade incident was caused by unfair imposition of taxes on miners (via license fees). While this was certainly true there was a much deeper context. Many of the miners were of Irish descent and resented any form of authority but particularly British authority. William, who had sided with “authority” during the Chartist Riots in London couldn’t have failed to see the parallel.

Nelson, New Zealand

In March of 1855 William was commissioned as a “loss adjuster” for James Henty and Co. A ship (the “Aden”) owned by that company had arrived in Nelson with her wool cargo heated. This is a standard problem with wool cargo – if it is damp and not properly ventilated, it can become heated and damaged by spontaneous combustion. The question was how much

¹⁰ Perhaps this was because a Schooner requires fewer sailors to man it than does a Brig.

damage had been caused and who was responsible. How much would the insurer have to pay? William went to Nelson to act as technical (and legal) representative on behalf of Henty's and the Tasmanian Insurance Company.

William had an oblique relative already living in Nelson. Henry John Louis Augarde was a pioneer settler in Nelson and a first cousin of Williams' sister-in-law. We don't know for sure if William ever knew about the relationship but given the way in which families operated in the 19th century it would be very surprising if he didn't. Some biographers have suggested that William was "encouraged" to settle in Nelson by someone at James Henty and Company. Of course it is speculation but he may have just experienced one of Melbourne's very hot summers. It doesn't happen every year but in Summer Melbourne can experience temperatures of 40°C with very high humidity for weeks at a time! It seems more likely that he saw the potential of Nelson and liked the place. For whatever reason, William decided to settle in Nelson. He returned to Melbourne, terminated his business relationships there and chartered¹¹ another ship – the "Maid of Alicante" (98 ton Schooner). On the 21st of June 1855, with his family in cabin class, twenty-one other passengers in the steerage and a full cargo, William set off for Nelson in command of the Maid of Alicante¹². Even today, in the 21st Century, the crossing of the Tasman Sea is fraught with hazard. In recent years large, state-of-the-art racing yachts crewed by expert, seasoned sailors have been lost in this area. Of course, sometimes the crossing is routine. But often there are gale force winds from almost any quarter. Almost always there is a heavy sea.

We might well pause to ponder just what it was like for William, master of this tiny ship, as it cleared Port Phillip harbour and he gave orders for the turn to port and to raise full sail in a following (westerly) wind. Ahead, a dangerous journey to a wild almost unknown country with decidedly unfriendly natives¹³. Behind, the growing town of Melbourne, wild still but with some security and some comfort. And always, a world away but ever present in the deepest recesses of his very being, England.

¹¹ Every available biography of William says that he *owned* the Maid of Alicante. However, this ship does not appear in the "list of ships owned at some time" in Williams private papers. In addition, the shipping register shows that the ship was actually owned by James Henty and Company of Melbourne for all of the years in question.

¹² It seems that this was the only time that William ever captained a ship on a significant ocean voyage!

¹³ Indeed! Big, strong, warlike, highly intelligent, very unfriendly, natives!

Nelson – The Early Years

The voyage from Port Phillip took five weeks. Immediately on arrival (on the 25th July) William set about building a business with great energy and enthusiasm. He rented small premises at the port and leased the “Queens Wharf” (also known as the “Customhouse Wharf”) from the Provincial Government. William must have had good powers of persuasion or at least negotiation. According to the lease, if heavy goods fell through the wharf, William was liable. If the wharf fell down, he was not!

He set about improving the port facilities in Nelson with equal energy. In 1856, less than a year after his arrival, he designed and built a new wharf in the Wairau estuary. This wharf was able to handle quite large (for the time) sailing vessels (up to perhaps 300 tons) and was used principally for the loading and unloading of cattle.

At the time there were a few very small wharves at the Nelson Port none of which had the depth of water necessary to handle even a relatively small sailing vessel. All ships of more than 10 tons or so were loaded and unloaded in the stream with the cargoes transhipped via rowing boats. This is not a very efficient way of handling any goods but particularly bulk goods like coal and timber.



Figure 3. Beach scene at Moetapu during a regatta 1914. Part of Akersten, James Raglan fl 1883-1914 : Photographs of Marlborough (PAColl-5746). Reference No. 1/2-110320-F. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. *Permission of the Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand, must be obtained before any re-use of this image. (The photographer was William's nephew.)*

A large American vessel (the “Rock City”) with a 20 foot draught arrived in Nelson and had to be unloaded. William had acquired an old ship (the “Admiral Napier”) and he used this as a barge to perform the unloading. Subsequently, he used the same technique on several occasions to unload large vessels in the stream. In 1857, Nelson merchant Captain Nicholson approached William to build a new wharf for him. Together they had the idea of using the “Admiral Napier” as the end section of the new wharf. In this way the Admiral Napier could become a warehouse. Immediately after they started work a gale force wind broke the Admiral Napier free from its moorings and washed it up onto a beach. This proved

that the location was somewhat less than ideal. They selected a new location and William built the “Napier Wharf” as conceived with the Admiral Napier forming the end section. It initially provided for craft with a displacement of eight feet. This wharf was later extended (by William) and renamed the “Albion Wharf”.

In association with Captain Nicholson, William became very active in promoting the embryonic sport of sailboat racing. On March 25 1857, William became a founding member of the Nelson Yacht Club. Captain Nicholson donated a trophy – the “Nelson Yacht Club Grand Challenge Cup”. The first contest for this trophy was run in 1858. In subsequent years whenever he had a vessel to enter, William regularly participated. In the early 1870’s his vessel the “Collingwood” was usually entered in the race for “Coasters”.

On September 14th 1858, William was elected to the “Board of Works” for the province. He held this position until he was appointed Superintendent of Works in 1876. In today’s world it seems a little strange for someone who is contracting services to a body to also be a member of that body. Today, this would be held to be a “conflict of interest”. However, in the 19th century this was quite normal and everyone involved would have understood the relationship.

In 1859/60 in partnership with a Mr Turner¹⁴, William designed and built the “Government Wharf” at Green Point. Much later, in 1876, he would build the “New Government Wharf”. Each of these wharves allowed for deeper and deeper draughts and therefore larger and larger ships to be brought alongside.

An 1859 Nelson Directory lists him as Marine Surveyor, Custom-house Agent and “Nelson Provincial Government Surveyor of Vessels”. In the period from his arrival to the end of the 1860s the word “building” in reference to a wharf or bridge meant just that. William purchased pile-driving equipment and other construction equipment. He both designed and supervised construction in the role of “contractor”. Later in his career his role changed to that of designer and consultant.

There is a long list of wharves, bridges and roads which William designed and built. Some of these were as a contractor and others in his later role as “Superintendent of Works” for the province. This list includes the wharves already mentioned as well as the first bridge over the Pelorus River (near Rai junction) and the Picton Wharf. In addition William produced a number of well documented proposals for projects which didn’t go ahead. In 1861 he produced an official report on the feasibility of a dry dock in Nelson. This report showed possible alternatives in some engineering detail and provided estimates of the likely costs of each alternative.

Apparently William had had some training in Civil Engineering or at least in drafting. His plans for his wharves and bridges still exist and are said to be very clear and meticulous in their drawing. However, there is no record of him undertaking any formal schooling except for less than 3 years between the ages of 10 and 13. It seems that he learned most of what he needed from books. In later years he said that he learned navigation from other crew members in off-duty times on long voyages. To the 21st century mind it seems inconceivable that anyone would be able (or permitted) to do this. Not so in the 19th century. There are many documented instances of people succeeding in roles for which they had no formal qualification.

Early in 1862 William joined with a number of local businessmen in forming “The Phoenix” - a small coal-mining and exploration company. They chartered a ship, the “City of Nelson” and explored around the coastal inlets looking for workable seams. A number of likely prospects were evaluated and rejected but they did find a good workable seam about two and a half miles up the Mokihinui River. They took out a mining license, built a road and commenced mining but it seems that they never produced any appreciable amount of coal.

¹⁴ Probably this was William Turner, the husband of William’s sister-in-law Mary Ann Turner (nee MacFarlane).

Later in 1862 William leased 2,500 acres of land at “West Wanganui”¹⁵ classed as “not suitable for agricultural purposes”. In conjunction with this lease he obtained a license for “depasturing stock” (ie. grazing cattle) on it. In 1867 he obtained a lease on 528 acres in Pigeon Valley. Later in 1873 he was to obtain a new lease on 236 acres of his previous holding in Pigeon Valley. It is unclear as to what purpose William put this land. It may have been simply to qualify him to vote and to stand for public office. The “West Wanganui” lease was in the middle of a coal field and the lease may have been intended to assist in gaining exclusive access to the coal.

In 1864, the New Zealand Government decided to move the capital of New Zealand from Auckland to somewhere more geographically central. Most of the towns around the Cook Strait and a few further south competed for the position. Perhaps in anticipation of future involvement in public life, William was a co-author of a major submission paper promoting Nelson as the future capital (with a very large appendix rubbishing Wellington).

William’s primary business however, was in providing services to sailing ships in the same way as his father had in London. Provisioning, Rigging, Stevedoring, Surveying and in the sale of ships gear (chandlery). In addition he operated (owned) a succession of small coastal vessels which were used to carry passengers and freight between local ports such as Nelson to Wellington and Collingwood. The two most significant of these were the “Eliza” (20 tons, Cutter) and the Collingwood (15 tons, Ketch).

Nelson Naval Artillery Company

Volunteer military forces were very important to New Zealand at this point in history. There were on-going wars with the Maoris and England was engaged in a number of overseas adventures. (It is very important to remember that people at the time regarded themselves as “English people living in the colonies” NOT as “New Zealanders” or “Australians”.) An official part of the military, the volunteers were equipped and partially funded by the government. A large proportion of the able-bodied men in every NZ town was involved in one or other volunteer force. Even though Nelson (being on the South Island) escaped most of the trouble with the Maoris, the volunteers were viewed by everyone as very serious and very important.

They had some fun too. Many of the volunteer units had bands which were called upon to play at civic functions and recreational events. As a means of raising money, the volunteers regularly ran sporting carnivals. These were a bit like a “fun-fair” but the central activity were athletic competitions (such as races) offering significant prizes. (Professional sport was unheard of at the time.) The prize for the winner of the 100 yard foot race was the equivalent of several weeks wages for an average person. This was combined with races for children etc. When events such as these were run by the “volunteers”, military competitions (such as rifle shooting) were also part of the days activities. At these events the band was usually a central attraction.

In February of 1860, on the outbreak of the Taranaki War, William was appointed Captain of the newly formed Nelson Volunteer Naval Artillery Company.

Nelson Auxiliary Volunteer Fire Brigade

For many years William was an enthusiastic member of the Nelson Auxiliary Volunteer Fire Brigade. This was a separate organisation from the main Fire Brigade composed mainly of people who worked in the area of the Port. It was partially funded and equipped by the main Fire Brigade. William filled the position of Brigade Secretary for at least 8 years from 1869.

¹⁵ West Wanganui is on the West Coast of the South Island about 100 miles from Nelson and is NOT related to the town of Wanganui on the North Island.

An Encounter with “Bully” Hayes

“Scallywag”, “Ruffian”, “Semi-Pirate”, “The Terror of the South Seas”, Captain William Henry (“Bully”) Hayes¹⁶ had an evil reputation. He traded in slaves (“Blackbirding”), smuggled guns to the Maoris during the Maori wars, brawled in bars and routinely left town without paying his bills. Later in his career he was to graduate to attacking and pillaging remote trading posts and small settlements around the South Pacific. His story has in recent times been romanticised but in 1864 he was a man to be reckoned with. But then, so was William Akersten.

It seems that Bully had borrowed a lot of money to buy a ship (the Black Diamond) in Sydney and then defaulted on the payments. He loaded a cargo of coal in Newcastle (100 miles north of Sydney) and left for Nelson. Unfortunately he met a gale on the way, lost several sails and shipped over a metre of water in the hold. He stopped in Auckland with a damaged cargo, no money and with his ship in urgent need of repairs. In due course, with the ship repaired and loaded with provisions, Bully sailed away one Monday morning and “paid his creditors with the foretopsail”¹⁷. He was planning to go to Nelson but decided instead to moor in a sheltered harbour at the Croixelles only about 30 miles away. Bully and his wife wanted to visit a sick friend (Mrs Rankin) who lived “on Mr Askew’s Run” on the opposite side of Croixelles Harbour to where the Black Diamond was moored. So on Friday August 19 1864 Bully borrowed a small sailing boat (the “Waterwitch” owned by Mr Askew) and together with his “wife” (Rona¹⁸, aged 20), their 13 month old baby (Adalaida Eudora Hayes), his wife’s maid servant (Mary Crowley aged 15) and his wife’s brother (George Buckingham) he set off to cross Croixelles harbour. Part way across the boat was overturned by a sudden squall and everyone on board except Bully was drowned.

Bully’s flight from Auckland had received very wide publicity including an article in the Sydney Morning Herald. This article poked fun at the ignorant businessmen of Auckland who had trusted Bully. But it also noted that his intended destination was Nelson! The mortgagors of the Black Diamond saw their opportunity. Instructions were dispatched to Nelson to arrest Bully as soon as he could be found. Of course, Bully hadn’t gone to Nelson but when news of the accident revealed the location of the “Black Diamond” events moved very quickly. Six “special constables” headed by William Akersten were sworn by the resident magistrate (Mr Poynter) in Nelson and given the task of arresting Bully and bringing the Black Diamond back to Nelson. William probably got this task in his role as Captain of the Nelson Volunteer Naval Artillery Company.

Available accounts of what happened next differ widely. On the night of September 21st 1864, William’s “posse” was towed in a whaleboat (by the Paddle Steamer Lyttleton) from Nelson into Croixelles harbour. They then spent some six hours rowing around the harbour looking for the Black Diamond. Finally, at around 3 AM they located it in an inlet. They were able to get on board quietly, there being no watch. Some accounts say that Bully was awoken in his cabin with a police revolver at his temple. A more credible account suggests that Bully came on deck and faced William who read him the demand to pay or surrender the ship. There was a short scuffle involving an axe and William and his posse won the day.

You could play this one for Comedy. In one biography, Bully is described as a “giant of a young man, all brawn and muscle, who would have weighed some 240lbs [17st]”. He is reputed to have been around 6 foot 2 inches tall. William on the other hand was a very small man - less than 5 foot 6 inches tall and half of Bully’s weight. The face-off on the deck must have been interesting to say the least. An Irish-American larrikin against the son of a Bosun from the Royal Navy! William had been born and raised in the dockland area of eastern

¹⁶ His nickname “Bulli” (which fits as a mispronunciation of “Billy”) is Samoan for “elusive” or “evasive”. It was reputedly given to him by Dr Rabone, the famous missionary.

¹⁷ The foretopsail is the last sail you see when a ship disappears over the horizon.

¹⁸ In some accounts she is named “Rosie” or “Rosetta”. There is no record of a marriage between Bully and Rona ever having taken place. It would have been bigamous anyway as Bully was already married.

London where small boys learned to fight to survive! In addition he had undoubtedly picked up some of his fathers authoritarian manner. Even at this stage accounts still vary. Some say Bully was brought back to Nelson in a Whaleboat. More credible accounts say that William sailed the Black Diamond back to Nelson. Some say the subsequent legal proceedings and forfeiture of the vessel took place in Nelson, some say Auckland. We might pause to wonder which was the greater indignity for Bully. Having his ship confiscated or being arrested by William. What is certain is that there was a public scandal because Bully was allowed to leave Nelson before all the pending legal proceedings had taken place. A few months later, on February 1st 1865, Bully became the registered owner of another ship (the "Shamrock", funded by a "rich Auckland widow") and was back in business.

One hundred and fifty years on you can't help feeling sorry for Bully. He had just lost his wife and daughter in a boating accident which if not his direct "fault" at least could have been avoided had he taken a bit more care. An experienced sailing-ship captain should not have a problem handling a small ketch no matter what the weather! On the night William arrived, Bully wasn't in command of his full faculties. William however, is said to have taken great pride in his feat and to have told and retold the story many times for the rest of his life.

An interesting aside is that "Bully Hayes" was a cousin of "Rutherford Hayes" who was destined later to be elected 19th President of the United States! (1877-1881)

The Boulder Bank – A Vision

The "Boulder Bank" is the reason that Nelson exists. About 1.5 km from the shore and running parallel to it for some 12 km, the Boulder Bank acts as a natural breakwater forming a harbour between itself and the shore. At high tide it is about 55 meters wide and rises about 6 meters above sea level. A bit like a sand bank, it is composed of loose rocks of various sizes deposited there by wave action over millennia. The tourist brochures call it "the longest natural breakwater in the world". Of course they have it very wrong. Less than 100 km away there is a 35 km long sandbank (at "Cape Farewell") that protects Collingwood from the north-west. Then there are the "Outer Banks" in the Eastern USA (a few hundred km of sandbanks just off the US eastern seaboard) and the Great Barrier Reef of around 2000 km long situated off the north-east coast of Australia.

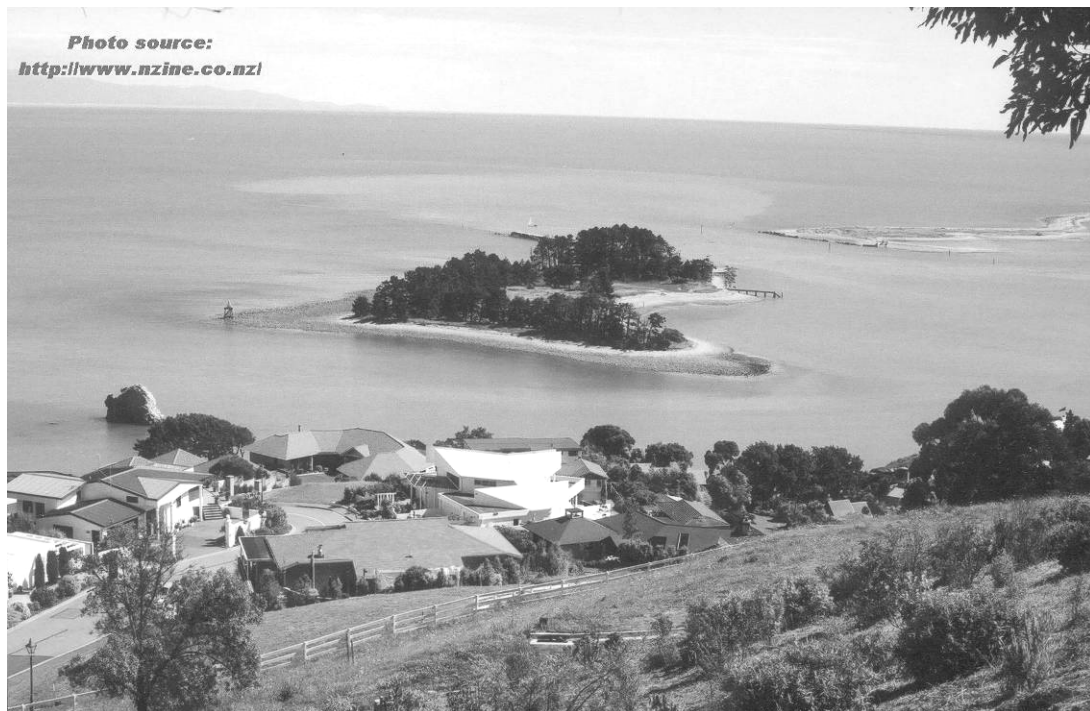


Figure 4. The "Cut" in the Boulder Bank as it is today. The old entrance to the harbour is the channel between the island and the shore.

When William arrived in Nelson the only way into the harbour was by going around the end of the Boulder Bank. This was difficult and hazardous especially for sailing vessels at low tide. William produced a plan to cut a channel through the Bank to allow large ships easy access into the protected harbour area. Positioning such a channel is a difficult engineering task. You have to be sure that you don't destroy the protection that the Bank provides. You also need to be sure that wave action won't close up the channel as fast as it is built or that the new channel might be widened by wave action and provide a trigger for nature to erode the bank away. This latter event was unlikely. When the first European Settlers arrived (on 1st of February 1842) the Boulder Bank was a chain of islands at high tide which only became a connected "Bank" at low tide. By the mid 1850's when William arrived it had built up to being contiguous even at high tide. In the 1860's William is said to have become almost evangelical in his advocacy of the idea. Almost prophetic in a way. A ship owned by William, the "Collingwood" was wrecked on the Boulder Bank in 1874 after arriving too late to enter the harbour due to the tide. Governments take time to do anything but the channel was cut and opened for traffic in 1906 a year after William's death. It seems a bit sad. Both Nelson newspapers gave extensive coverage to the opening of the "Cut" including verbatim reports of the many speeches. At no time was William's name mentioned.

As it happened, the cut was opened not a moment too soon. Large steam ships had already begun to appear in NZ and these could not enter Nelson Harbour by the traditional entrance – it was too shallow. Without the "cut" Nelson would have declined. The depression of the 1930's hit the NZ provincial towns very hard indeed and without its key role in trade Nelson may well have died. Even today, the Cut requires regular dredging to keep it open.

Arrival of Relatives

Sometime around 1865, Williams' brother Francis Errick Akersten arrived with his wife (Elizabeth Martha), their seven children and Mary MacFarlane (Williams' mother-in-law). Francis immediately went to work with William in the maritime business.

William Nettleship (the same who had accompanied the Akerstens on the voyage to Australia) had since married and arrived with his wife (Caroline) on the 1st of January 1867. As

mentioned before, the Nettleships and the Akerstens were relatives. William Nettleship was a jeweller and goldsmith but it is unclear just what he did when he arrived in New Zealand. It is known that he went to Collingwood (about 80 km from Nelson) almost immediately and was involved with William Akersten's Collingwood business. William Nettleship left the Nelson province around the time of William Akersten's bankruptcy and never returned.

The Provincial Council

In the early 1850's, New Zealand had a National Government. However, because communication around the country was very difficult, six provinces each with a provincial government were created. The original idea was that the provincial governments would be little more than municipal councils. Quite soon, through some judicious politicking, the National Government ceded control of the sale of "crown" land to the Provincial Councils. This gave them a good source of extra revenue and they quickly acquired many of the powers that would normally be those of a national government. It all became chaotic quite soon. Continuous political demands led to the break up of existing provinces and the creation of new ones. When the railroad came different provinces had different gauges of track etc. Reporting to the Provincial Councils there were well more than 100 road and harbour boards. The National Government was to disband the Provincial Councils in November of 1876¹⁹. In the meantime, Nelson (Town/City) was the capital of Nelson Province.

William had been elected an inaugural member of Nelson Board of Works on September 14th 1858, a post he was to hold for at least 15 years. He was elected to the Provincial Council in November of 1865.

¹⁹ Probably the best decision ever taken by any Government in the history of the English Speaking Peoples! Would that the idea had crossed the Tasman!

Bankruptcy and Recovery

SALES BY AUCTION.

IN THE ESTATE OF W. AKERSTEN,
BANKRUPT.

MR JOHN R. MABIN will Sell by Public Auction, at the Nelson Auction Rooms, by order of the Provisional Trustee in Bankruptcy, on account of the above Estate,

On **THURSDAY**, the 18th instant,
At 12 o'clock—

THE NEW STORE,

situate at the Port, lately in the occupancy of the said W. Akersten, measuring about 40 feet by 24 feet.

Also,

All that piece or parcel of LAND, being Lot 15 and part of Lots 16 and 17, of Mount Pleasant Estate, having a frontage of 99 feet to Maberly-street, leading to Russell-street; together with the commodious

DWELLING HOUSE

thereon. The house is almost new; substantially built, and fitted with every convenience situated in one of the healthiest parts of Nelson, and has a commanding view of Blind Bay and the Harbor. It is at present leased to — Biddle, Esq., and yielding a good rental. This is really a good investment.

Also, that well-known

BOAT, COLLINGWOOD,

about 25 tons burden; carries about 13,000 feet of timber under deck, on a very light draught of water; sails remarkably well, and is one of the most useful crafts sailing out of Nelson. She is well found in every respect, almost new, and at present engaged in a very lucrative trade.

Further particulars can be obtained from R. Pollock, Esq., Provisional Trustee in Bankruptcy; or from the Auctioneer. 346

Nelson Province grew very rapidly in the 1850's and in the first half of the 1860's. Much of this rapid growth was due to Nelson being a gateway (and Regional Capital) for the goldfields near Collingwood and on the "West Coast". With few, inadequate, roads Nelson Port became the major transhipment point for the district. But gold rushes end and by the late 1860's the activity and trade had reduced significantly. Nelson's township population of about 5,500 actually declined by about 250 in the period 1865 to 1871. In addition, the world was entering an economic recession that lasted through the 1870's.

We don't know exactly how or why William got into the position of going bankrupt. We do know that he overcame the setback quite quickly.

In provincial New Zealand at the time newspapers routinely reported every detail of a bankrupt's court hearing ("examination"). Not so with William. There is a one phrase note in the Nelson Evening Mail of December 17th 1868 noting that he had been declared bankrupt and a single sentence on 13th March 1869 reporting its discharge. However, there were extensive double-column advertisements for the auction-sales of his property run over a period of more than a month! William had extensive assets and most were sold to satisfy his creditors.

At the time you had to be a landowner either to vote or to be a member of the Provincial Council. Williams' land was to be sold as part of the bankruptcy proceeding and therefore he had to

resign his position on the Provincial Council. Of course, he would not have had the capital to continue in business either.

It appears that he continued most of his business activities after the bankruptcy in much the same way as before. Despite his ship (the "Collingwood") being put up for sale as part of his bankruptcy in 1869, it was still trading with his son-in-law (James Pilkington) as Captain in 1871. The ship was subsequently wrecked on the 24th October 1874. At that time William was still the registered owner.

In 1873 William with a consortium of three others unsuccessfully tendered for construction of the new railway. On the 16th of April 1874 he purchased land in Victory Square and took out a mortgage to the Union Bank of Australia. Clearly the bankruptcy was well and truly behind him as he was considered a good credit risk by the bank at that time. Through the 1870's William was listed in the Post Office Directories as a "Marine Surveyor".

On January 10th 1876 William was appointed "Superintendent of Public Works" for the Provincial Government. This appointment was to *increase* in scope after the abolition of that Government and the takeover of many functions by the National Government in November 1876²⁰. Some biographers suggest that he resigned this position in 1878 "to give full time

²⁰ The Provincial Councils were of course political bodies elected by the people. However, they had administrators and bureaucrats employed by them to conduct the actual business of Government. These bureaucracies were NOT abolished – they were "taken over" by the National Government.

attention to his marine business". However there is strong evidence to suggest that he continued to hold this position (or perhaps had an "advisory" position) at least until 1885.

In his new job William was responsible for all of the roads and bridges in the Province of Nelson and later extending to the "West Coast"²¹. He was also responsible for harbour works. It seems that the position allowed him to undertake some amount of private work on his own account

In his role as Superintendent of Works he personally designed and supervised the building of several large bridges, many miles of road and a number of other works. However, whenever he had the choice he gave most attention to the improvement of the Port.

Family Tragedy and Renewal

1878 was not a good year for the Akersten family. Lucy's sister Mary Ann Turner (nee MacFarlane) had died in December of 1874. William's brother, Francis had died in November of 1876. William and Lucy's daughter Mary Lucy Pilkington had her first child in April 1878 but the child died only five weeks later.



These events had a traumatic effect on William's wife, Lucy and she took to drinking heavily. In the early morning of July 23rd Lucy passed away in her sleep. An inquest was told that she had not eaten solid food for some months and had been drinking heavily. An injunction had been obtained against local hotels preventing them from supplying her with alcohol but this had had little effect. The finding was that she died of alcoholic poisoning after a history of alcohol abuse. So passed in sadness, the little Scottish girl from Edinburgh, a world away from home, who had married William with so much hope and joy only 30 years before.

To continue a truly "Annus Horibilus" on September 14th a nephew of Williams (Frank Laurence Akersten, son of his brother Francis) was drowned in a boating accident near the Moutere river. Strange that Frank had been brought up in Nelson but had recently moved his residence back to Yarmouth in England. He was visiting Nelson as a member of the crew of the "Helen Denny".

Figure 5. William Akersten

The year did end on a much more positive note. Two months later in November, William married Jane Lake.

The ceremony was performed at Jane's residence by the famous Wesleyan minister the Reverend Rainsford Bavin.²² The Rev Bavin was famous as a leading supporter of the "Temperance" movement – it can hardly have been a spirited wedding! At 35, Jane was 20 years younger than Lucy had been and it is tempting to think that he remarried with indecent haste. But the facts suggest something different. Jane was the widow of Captain Edward Lake who had been drowned in the wreck of the "Success" at Ninety Mile Beach off the Mid Canterbury (eastern NZ) coast three years before (June 1875). Edward's ship was in port when a gale force wind arose. In a futile attempt to save his ship he took it to sea intending to ride out the gale. His death in the broken-up flotsam of the ship hardly rated a line in the local newspapers. After all the Success was perhaps the least of six ships that foundered in that storm. The loss of her husband left Jane destitute. She had no

²¹ "West Coast" as it is used here is the official name of a region in New Zealand. Contrary to British tradition it actually refers to a section of the west coast (of the south island).

²² The Reverend Bavin was destined to have a highly distinguished career in his church culminating with an appointment to a very senior position within the Church in Sydney. His son, Sir Thomas Rainsford Bavin also had a distinguished career in both the law and politics culminating in his election as Premier of New South Wales.

assets, no means of making a living, four young children and was eight months pregnant with a fifth. There was a public appeal for donations to help but it raised only a trivial amount. William would have known Edward Lake. William and Jane had their only child (Caroline Charlotte) in July of 1879 but she died only 7 months later. In the longer term the marriage seems to have worked out well for both of them. Jane was destined to live for another 52 years.

The 1880's

By the late 1870's Williams marine business had grown again and his fortunes had significantly improved. In 1878, perhaps at least partly because of his family crisis, he resigned his position as Superintendent of Works to devote full time to his maritime business.

The 1880's business was however, significantly different from the earlier venture. After 1880 William never rigged or provisioned another ship. He confined himself to the sale of "Ships Chandlery" and associated equipment. Probably this was partly due to his advancing age. However, William was principally a rigger of sailing vessels. Sail was being very rapidly replaced by steam and the business of rigging large ships declined very rapidly. Also, since the early 1870's there were two significant competitors in the Ships Chandlery business. Mr Frantzen's business was larger than Akersten's.

It turns out that in addition to his other qualities William was something of an inventor. In August 1885 William mounted a large exhibit at the New Zealand Industrial Exhibition in Wellington. The dominant part of this exhibit consisted of "Marine Contrivances" (mainly aimed at improving the safety of ships at sea). There was a new type of Marine Compass (developed by William), an improved compass-card, course-indicator, life-buoys, cork-collars and swimming-belts. In addition there was a new ocean beacon and a mud anchor for buoys. He was awarded first prize in this category and was given a certificate of "The First Order of Merit". In addition he exhibited in the "Civil Engineering and Public Works" category. In this section he showed a model of a bridge embodying a new method of construction of his own design. In addition there were models of improved marine and river breakwaters – also his own designs. Showing a completely different talent he also entered in the "Condiments... and other Food Products" category. Here he showed a range of Pickles and Sauces. His fish sauce was given a very favourable mention in the official record of the Exhibition. Of course, his wife Jane may well have been behind this part of the exhibit – but the "Official Record" credits William.



Figure 6 Nelson City Council 1896. William is the fifth person from the left, standing in the back row. (Photograph courtesy of the Nelson City Council.)

William couldn't keep away from public affairs for very long. The Provincial Council had been abolished in 1876. However, there are many local things that are best accomplished by a local body. A new local council had been constituted to look after these. In 1886 William was elected to this body. In this role he was also a member of the Licensing Committee.

Perhaps one might expect that Councillor Akersten would take an interest in Council business but only involve himself in occasional issues. Not William. William became deeply involved in every

aspect of council business especially in matters concerning Roads, Sewers, Water Supply and the Port. It is said that William applied himself with very great energy and enthusiasm to

all of the affairs of Nelson through the whole 17 years he spent on the Council. He retained this position until resigning due to ill health (a stroke) on November 7th 1903.

Sunset

In August of 1903 William suffered a serious stroke. Although he recovered he withdrew from all public life and settled on a sedentary retirement. In 1905 another stroke delivered a heavy blow. He had seemingly recovered from this second stroke when he died (of weakness) on the morning of his 80th birthday (11th March).

For all of his fifty years living there, William took pride in the growing town of Nelson, saw himself as part of it and worked to further its development. In so doing he applied seemingly endless energy and enthusiasm. The British of the time would call it an “indefatigable spirit”.

William was survived by his wife Jane and his daughter Mary Lucy Pilkington. Both Jane and Mary Lucy passed away in 1930. At that time there were four living (Pilkington) grandsons of William. In addition, several descendants of William’s brother, Francis are alive today in New Zealand, Australia and the USA. William is remembered in the name of the street that leads to the port (“Akersten Street”), the gates of the port itself (“Akersten Gates”) and in the naming of “Akersten Bay”.

Obviously, William did not build the town of Nelson by himself. Nor even the Port for that matter. In Nelson as elsewhere, dozens, perhaps hundreds, of remarkable people made their contributions, large and small. But in an important sense, William’s real memorial is the thriving town of Nelson itself.

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