

Brave new life in the suburbs

IN January 1953, my father, Bert Jacobs — a carpenter and joiner — my mother, Marie, and I arrived in New Zealand to start a new life. I was 11. Leaving behind Britain's post war retaining and austerity, we arrived in a country of comparative plenty and opportunity.

I think those years in Christchurch were the last pioneering days of New Zealand.

After the war there was a shortage of skilled labour in New Zealand. In the late 1940s and early 1950s the New Zealand Government provided immigration schemes to bring skilled workers and their families here. Most of the immigrants came from Britain.

The contract for most immigrants under these schemes was that the New Zealand Government would pay for the fares for the whole family to come here, find accommodation, and find a job in the trade of the skilled worker. In return the worker had to remain here in the trade for two years. After that the immigrants could do as they wished.

Many of the immigrants were carpenters — especially needed because of the Roxburgh hydro scheme and the shorting of housing at that time.

For those that came to Christchurch the accommodation was in Lyttelton at the old Tasman Naval barracks, by the oil wharf.

This was rather austere accommodation: for single immigrants it meant just dormitories; for the families, there were separate bedrooms with communal dining

PETER JACOBS was among the flood of British immigrants to New Zealand in the postwar years. Establishing a home in Hoon Hay, he says, was like the pioneering days all over again.

and lounge/recreation areas.

For a couple with one child board was \$15 a week. Wages were about \$25 per week.

Most of those at Tasman Hostel worked in Christchurch. The only public transport from Lyttelton was the train. None of the residents at Tasman had a car, and the road tunnel did not exist at that time anyway. The hostel was a good 2km walk from the railway station, so the journey to work was considerably time consuming. Many people kept bicycles at the Christchurch railway station and cycled from there to work. All of this meant there was a tremendous incentive to move to Christchurch as soon as possible.

Because there was a shortage of accommodation it was not easy to find rental property in Christchurch. At Hoon Hay, however, which was then becoming a new suburb of subdivisions under the Halswell council, it was permitted to build cheap temporary accommodation — usually a bach — for the owners while they built a house.

Until 1952 streets were formed with just a bulldozer and grader, after which shingle was spread.

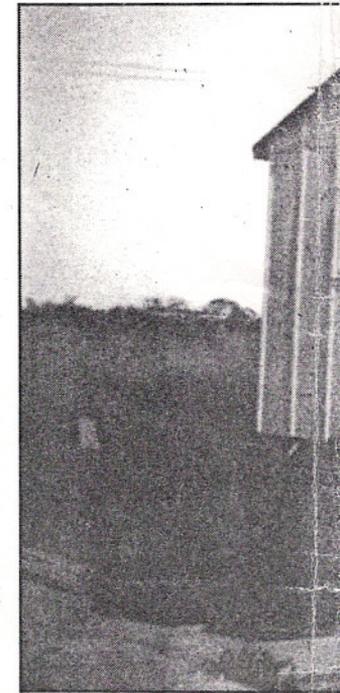
There was no water reticulation, sewerage system, telephone cables, kerbs, or footpaths. Electricity and occasional street lights were the only facilities provided.

The streets opened up in Hoon Hay in 1952-53 were Wyne Street, Downing Street, Dalkeith Street, Samuel Street, Gainsborough Street, and Maryhill Avenue, where sections were around £350. These could be purchased with 10 per cent deposit — £35.

The permit for building the bach lasted for a year while the house was being built. This permit could be extended year by year providing progress was made on the house. As extensions to permits cost an extra fee, nobody ever applied for an extension, and nobody ever seemed to check to see how the building was progressing.

For the immigrants, particularly carpenters, it was a golden opportunity. It meant that with cheap temporary housing costs, and a two income family (all the wives worked), a house could be built continuously out of income in spare time.

By the end of 1953 there were 11 baches in Gainsborough Street alone, where my father bought a



section. Most of this group were carpenters from Britain, although there were a number of Dutch and New Zealanders. Other skills among these people were plumbing, sheetmetal work, and engineering.

The baches were generally the size of a garage, and positioned so that when the house was finished it would become the garage. Built of 75mm by 50mm framing, mouthoid roof, and polite sidings externally, with Pinex or Hardboard internally, they were very cosy dwellings. However, all facilities were minimal and austere.

Water was from a well sunk 20m deep.

My father built the outside toilet less than a metre from the back of the bach. A weekly night soil collection was provided by the council. The bucket sat under appropriately shaped boards upon which to sit, and was positioned so it was easy to remove for emptying. Going out in all weathers motivated the idea of building a workshop on the back of the bach and building it around the toilet.

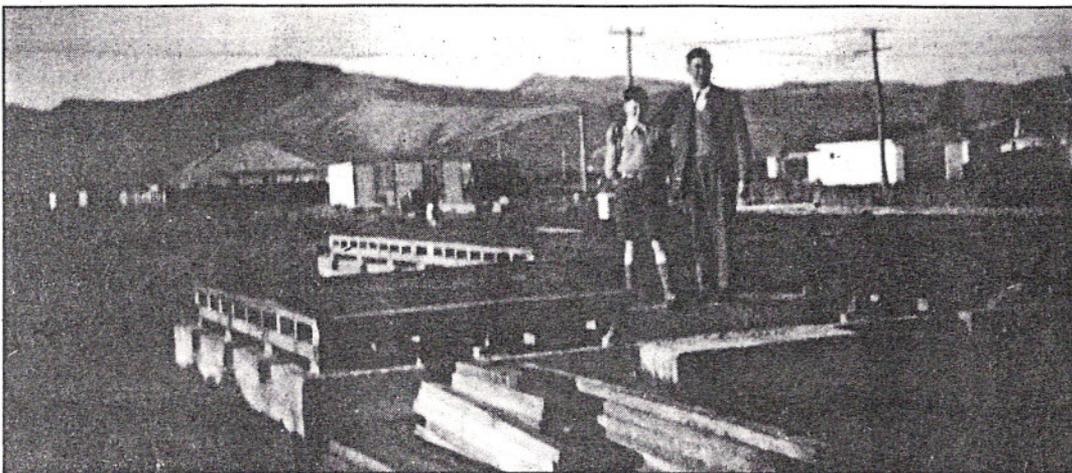
A trap door, then cut into the back of the outhouse, enabled the night soil collector to remove the empty bucket from the outside. In the middle of the night, we would be awakened by the clatter of the collection into a larger container.

On more than one occasion the collection was forgotten. As the bucket was nearly full, my father had to bury the contents the next day, but he would also complain to the council.

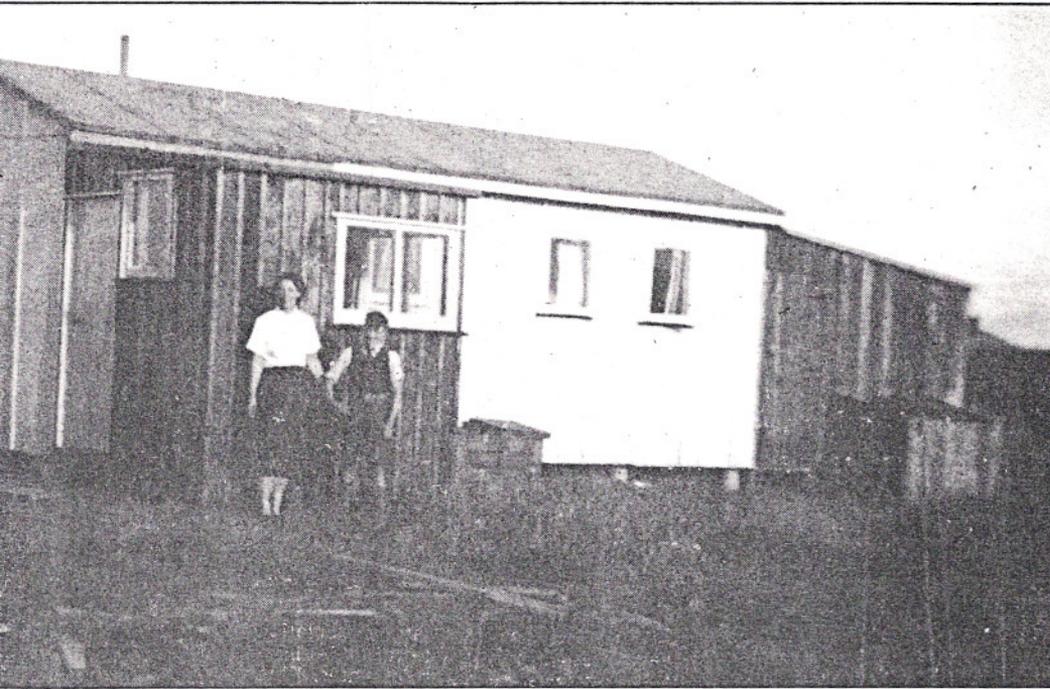
The collectors would turn up the next night and find it empty. A conversation followed after he banged on the bach wall:

"It's empty! What's yer problem?"

"Had to bury it myself, it was full!" my father yelled.



The foundations rise on the family's Hoon Hay section.



LEFT: Peter and Marie Jacobs outside the bach — already showing signs of additions.

“Oh! needn’t have come back men.”

And everyone went back to sleep as disgruntled feet dragged through long grass back to the truck.

When people moved into their houses it was less convenient. The bucket had to be placed out by the front verge, so each Sunday night (as it was for Rainsborough Street) carrying the bucket out was a two-handed job.

Sometimes the milk truck

came around about the same time. The empty bucket would then be brought back in at the same time as the milk, bucket in one hand, milk in the other.

Not only were sewerage and water facilities very basic, but so were bathroom facilities, water heating, cooking, and waste from the sink and bath. In fact the only facility functioning normally was electricity.

At first everybody just washed at the kitchen sink. A bathroom was added after a while. Our

family added on a lean-to which was 1.8m square. An old tin bath bound for the dump was positioned on one side, and an electric copper bought for £1 was placed in the corner. This was also used for doing the laundry: clothes, towels, sheets, and so on would be put in the water in the copper and stirred with a stick. They were then rinsed out in the bath.

The waste from the bath and the kitchen basin went out through old bicycle tubes joined

together and fed into a shallow ditch, eventually leading into the street gutter — if the sullage had not soaked away first. This method of waste disposal was later suspected to be the cause of serious illnesses in some children.

Cooking was on a little electric rangette which consisted of two hotplates and a small oven. This was assisted by a small coal burner, which also heated the bach. Water was heated in a pot on top of this. Heating proved to be extremely economical by using all of the timber offcuts from building the house.

A real spirit of adventure and companionship existed between the neighbours. There were no fences, just a number of small baches sitting in long grass in a large paddock. Some used caravans and even old buses or trams.

The weekly entertainment was to go to the cinema in town on a Saturday night. Going home on the last tram or bus you heard continuous chatter about progress of the houses being built. There was a lot of homesick talk among the women of going “back home” to see mum.

However by about 1956 most of the houses had been built and most of the other sections were being built on. Fences were erected, gardens laid out — and it was the end of an era.