



BLOCKHOUSE BAY
HISTORICAL SOCIETY
INCORPORATED

NEWSLETTER

FEBRUARY 2026. Number 129

NEXT MEETING

The Blockhouse Bay Historical Society next meeting is on Wednesday 4th February at 1.15 pm. PLEASE NOTE it is at Armanasco House.

The Blockhouse Bay Community Centre is being renovated - again.

Guest Speaker – Barbara Henderson-Wragge

Barbara is a skilled public speaker and great raconteur. Her cinema life started in 1994 and over 12 years spanned cinemas in Dunedin, Timaru and Auckland. She was involved in the latter stages of the projector and 35 mm film (with all their foibles) before it all went digital. This is a must for those of you who have memories of the Kosy Theatre in the Bay.

LOCAL NEWS

The Blockhouse Bay Christmas Festival saw over 350 visitors to Armanasco House! We were delighted with the turn out. Many stopped to ask questions and take in the photographs and artefacts. Visitors especially appreciated that the House was open as they could not visit on a Tuesday. We didn't sell that many Christmas cookies (no one carries cash these days) but it was a great opportunity to greet and chat with the visitors. A bright sunny day saw so many enjoying the Festival. Congratulations to Jodi Judd and her team of volunteers for organising the event. Jodi is leaving her position as Town Centre Manager and the Festival was her last hurrah – well done and we thank you for your work on behalf of Blockhouse Bay.

Blockhouse Bay Primary School Register

Did you go the local Primary School? We have a register, by year, from 1904 -1961 of the children who did. Call in and have a browse through it and see how many names you remember.

Armanasco House 2026

We are open as usual on Tuesday from 9am to 1pm from 13 January, and on these Saturdays from 10am -12 noon:

17 January 11 April 11 July 3 October

Follow us on Facebook to get updates as they occur.
<https://www.facebook.com/share/1FVgFWRLjT/>



Visitors to Armanasco House Dec 2025

Krystene Vickers; krys@ekiwi.com

Mary Marshall; marymarshall55@gmail.com

Anne Bell; 627 8619

Tony Joyce; 626 6445 tony.joyce@xtra.co.nz

Life Members;

Eileen Rusden, Yvonne Dabb, Alan Cole,
Brian Goodwin and Tony Joyce.

Visit our website;

www.blockhousebayhistoricalsociety.com

WOMEN OF THE BAY

These women have all, in their own way, contributed to our community and we are proud of their association with Blockhouse Bay.

ZENA ABBOTT

April 1922 – November 1993 was a New Zealand weaver and a Blockhouse Bay resident. Her works are held at the Auckland War Memorial Museum and the Dowse Art Museum.

She was born in Auckland in 1922. Growing up in Depression-era New Zealand, Zena left school at the age of thirteen to become a dressmaker, and was subsequently drafted into essential work during World War Two. During the 1950s, she travelled around New Zealand, living in a caravan and working as a sewing machine instructor. She would leave Auckland with a van full of sewing machines and return loaded with fleeces and lichens.

She first studied weaving with fellow Blockhouse Bay resident German-born weaver Ilse von Randow at the Auckland City Art Gallery in 1952. Zena acquired her own loom and began experimenting with unspun wool and natural dyes and fibres. Her first piece of weaving, a finger twisted rug, sold within 3 hours of arriving at New Vision gallery.

In 1959, her work was shown in the Auckland City Art Gallery in An Exhibition of New Zealand Craft Work, alongside artists such as Len Castle. In her work Zena used natural and artificial dyes, and materials ranging from art silk and flax fibre to alkathene piping and burglar alarm tape. From the late 1950s she became interested in 'extending the traditional boundaries of weaving into three-dimensional constructions'. In 1958 Zena opened a professional handweaving studio in Blockhouse Bay, Auckland. This was an A-Frame building, unusual for those times. The building is still standing in Terry Street.

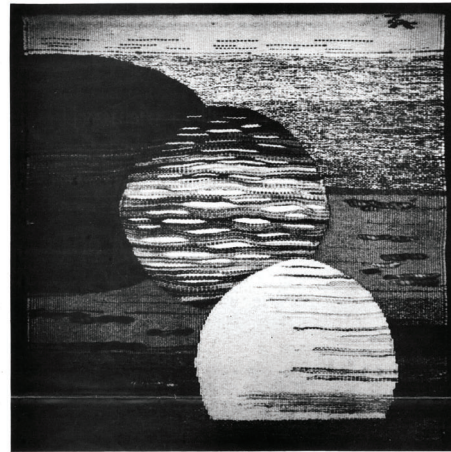
From the studio she ran a small-scale commercial operation, teaching and employing several women. Mary Marshall's mother Betty was one of those women and Mary recalls her mother was never able to walk by an interesting piece of lichen or moss. It had to be scraped off and taken to the studio - you never knew what colour or tint could come from it. At its peak she employed 7 weavers with two out workers. Zena sold her work through craft shops and galleries throughout New Zealand. She exported her work to Australia, and exhibited in Australia, England, Canada and the United States.

In 1968, Zena was one of the founding members of Brown's Mill Market, New Zealand's first craft co-operative, located in an old flour mill in Durham Lane, Auckland. In 1986 her work was featured in Elizabeth Eastmond and Merimeri Penfold's book *Women and the Arts in New Zealand - Forty Works: 1936-86: the work the authors chose to*

reproduce was *Scrolls* (1980), a large sculptural piece made up of a triptych of wall hangings and two large woven scrolls placed on the floor, which viewers were encouraged to unroll to reveal the woven text 'From thorny plants the hidden fibre', which referenced the sisal derived from cactus plants which was one of her favourite materials. In 2019 to 2020 the Dowse held an exhibition of her work called *Zena Abbott & Emma Fitts: Nomads*.

Ian Spalding wrote of her:

"By her work with the Handweavers Guild and the New Zealand chapter of the World Crafts Council, by her generous sharing of techniques and by her continuing help and encouragement Zena Abbott has been an inspiration to hundreds of weavers and has made an inestimable contribution to the development of the craft in N.Z."



WOVEN BY HAND

The fibre collection of pioneer
New Zealand weaver

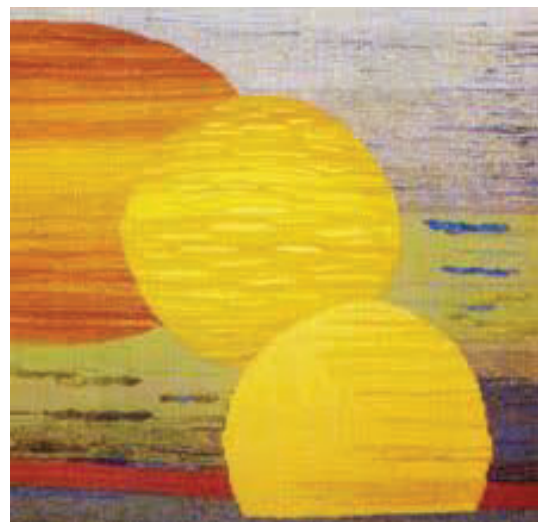
ZENA ABBOTT

5 August — 2 September



FISHER GALLERY

Reeves Road (Sahlini Town Centre) Pakuranga. Telephone 559-999.
Hours: Monday-Friday 10-4; Saturday 11-3; Sunday 1-5.



Service person of the week

A Blockhouse Bay store manager is today's winner of the Service Person of the Week award.

Shirley Browne runs the ladies fashion shop "Shirley's" on Blockhouse Bay Road. She is pictured above with flowers courtesy of Van Lunnes Nurseries in Lincoln Road.

Shirley, who adores flowers, was nominated for her excellent customer service and attention to details.



SHIRLEY BROWNE

From the footpath in Blockhouse Bay village your eye is drawn to the colourful window display of Shirley's women's fashion store. As you step inside, you are met with an explosion of colour and fashion, all beautifully curated and displayed.

Shirley's has been a Bay fixture for about 40 years. It is run by Shirley Browne. As a fashion co-ordinator for Brian Caughey Ltd she would visit fashion shops around Auckland. Shirley's was then in a different venue in the village and was a much smaller shop. The previous owner offered Shirley the chance to buy the shop and she took up that venture, more recently moving to one of the new generation shops built opposite the Library.

Shirley has seen many changes to the Bay village over the years. She was there with many other Blockhouse Bay residents, to wave a placard at the town hall when the library protest took place.

She lives in nearby Titirangi but is fully involved with the Bay community. When I was interviewing Shirley for this article she knew all the names of the customers who came in and what they liked. It is this interaction with customers that Shirley loves. During the Covid-19 lockdowns the hardest thing for her was missing that interaction with her clientele. Whether a regular customer or a first timer Shirley always makes you welcome. Her customers come from all over Auckland and beyond. She has customers from Australia who make it a point to come to her shop when they are visiting relatives in NZ. Shirley does not currently have an online presence as she prefers that personal face to face touch.



Two necessary skills for successful retailers are customer service and merchandising. Shirley has both these skills in spades. She changes her window display on a regular basis and has even overheard men say to their partner as they walked by "that would suit you". Inside her flair for fashion and design is breath taking.

Shirley sums it up in a simple sentence – "It's no hardship to come to work".

BETTY HANSON MBE

Betty was a woman who made a notable contribution to education, first in Blockhouse Bay, then in the wider community and nationally.

Soon after the first of her 7 children started at Blockhouse Bay Primary School she became involved in school activities. Her initial contact was through the Dental Clinic Committee, which looked after the practical running of the clinic. She was co-opted onto the School Committee in 1919. Her ability and drive were recognised as she worked for the school's benefit for over 26 years. In those days the women on the committee served two roles - Secretary and supper provider. During her 10 years as Secretary, she saw through some arduous jobs such as the transfer of part of the block of land which lies adjacent to the school and was used for sport activities She served as Vice President and President on the Auckland School Committees Association and was an executive member of the National School Committees Federation.

Betty was reluctant to take up that role as meetings were held during the day and she had a preschool daughter. However, the men on the Committee offered their wives' services as babysitters. (Note: not their own services!). The appearance of a woman on the Education Board was met with some resistance from the men on the Committee, but this was eventually overcome when they realised the valuable contribution she made.

Teacher training and recruitment were her particular interests. Betty was appointed to the Auckland Grammar School and Lynfield College Board of Governors. It was not surprising then that in 1970 she was awarded a MBE for her services to Education.

After moving to Piha in the 1980s Betty shifted her focus from public service to community politics and was president of the Piha Residents and Ratepayers Committee and Waitakere Community Board.

Betty passed away in June 2010 aged 93. Her last public appearance was at the Piha memorial service on Anzac Day that year.

LOIS WHITE

The New Zealand art world is filled with remarkable figures, but few are as compelling—and as unjustly overlooked in their time—as Anna Lois White (1903–1984). Known professionally as Lois (pronounced Loyce) White, she was one of the country's leading modernist painters and a dedicated educator at the Elam School of Fine Arts, where she taught for more than three decades. Today, her work is enjoying a long-overdue resurgence, earning recognition for its bold style, social consciousness and extraordinary range.

Born in Auckland as the youngest of four children, White grew up in a comfortable, middle-class household thanks to her father, architect Arthur White. Her artistic talent was recognised early - she became a valued member of the school sketch club and was repeatedly commended for her contributions.

In 1923 White enrolled at Elam, beginning an association that would influence her life and shape her legacy. Her arrival coincided with the leadership of A.J.C. Fisher, who became director in 1925. Fisher introduced her to the compositional principles of the Old Masters, particularly the figure work of Botticelli, and encouraged her to see painting as a vehicle for conveying ideas rather than merely depicting the visible world. This philosophy became foundational to her later practice.

After graduating in 1928, White joined the Elam faculty as a part-time tutor while also teaching at Takapuna Grammar School. Continuing to live at home with her mother and sister Gwen, she contributed financially to the household while simultaneously developing her own work. In 1931 she became a full working member of the Auckland Society of Arts, marking her emergence as a professional artist.

By 1934 she was a full-time lecturer at Elam, a role she held until 1963. Her teaching emphasised the constructive use of light and the thoughtful arrangement of figures—skills she believed were central to strong draughtsmanship. She maintained a respectful professional friendship with fellow Elam tutor John Weeks, though they famously diverged on colour theory. Where Weeks favoured harmonious palettes, White argued that “disharmonious, clashing colours” were necessary when expressing unsettling or socially charged themes.

White’s first overseas trip in 1960 exposed her to the breadth of European art, which she eagerly studied in galleries, museums, and churches. She remained abroad until 1962, but upon returning to Elam she found a radically changed environment. A new generation of students and staff regarded her style and teaching approach as outdated, leading to an atmosphere of ostracism. Within a short time, she was pressured into taking early retirement—an event that cut short her academic career but ultimately reopened space for her painting.

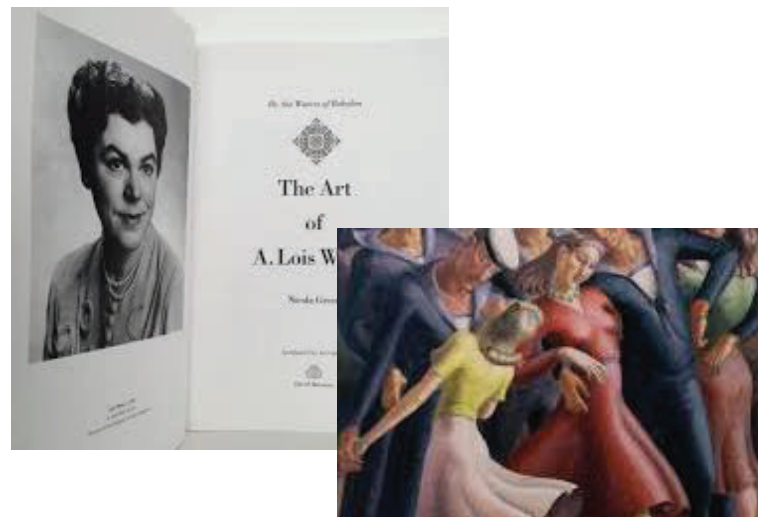
White’s paintings often confront the social and economic injustices of her era. Her work *Success* depicts a prosperous man triumphantly waving a money bag over a starving family, while *War Makers*, produced between the World Wars, exposes the hypocrisy and cruelty of warmongering elites. White openly identified as a socialist, and her art reflects a deep concern for the vulnerable and disenfranchised.

War Makers is currently on display in *Modern Women: Flight of Time* at Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, where it continues to resonate with contemporary audiences.

In 1948 White helped establish the New Group, an association of artists committed to disciplined draughtsmanship during a period when abstraction was gaining popularity. Long perceived—even by herself—as a conservative figure, she worked across a far broader spectrum than critics initially recognised. Her oeuvre spans classical composition, decorative design, social realism, expressionism, and pastoral scenes. Only in the late 20th century did scholars appreciate how the diversity of her styles placed her at odds with New Zealand’s then-dominant focus on regional landscape painting.

In 1975 Wellington art dealer Peter McLeavey visited White’s home in Blockhouse Bay. There he found early compositions stacked in her studio and garage, untouched and largely unknown. Although she considered herself “old-fashioned,” McLeavey saw the power in her work and organised her first solo exhibition in 1977. White—by then 74 years old—finally received the attention that had eluded her for decades. Another major exhibition followed posthumously in 1994, securing her reputation as a significant modernist voice.

Reflecting later on her well-known painting *The Fleet’s In*, White described its spontaneous origins. While working on a mural in the old W.E.A. building, she heard a commotion outside—what sounded like revellers who had “all drunk a lot of beer.” Annoyed by the distraction, she soon realised the noise celebrated the end of the war; peace had just been declared. On walking through the streets to Queen Street, she found the city filled with sailors and exuberant crowds. Though she ultimately depicted no American sailors, the painting evokes the chaotic energy and emotional release of that momentous occasion.



(There are many other notable Women from the Bay but we couldn’t fit them all in this Newsletter. Watch out for future editions!)

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