

CHAPTER ONE

LOCATION OF THE
REGISTRAR-
GENERAL'S
OFFICE



8 COLONIAL GOVERNMENT TOOK SOME TIME TO BE PROPERLY ESTABLISHED IN NEW ZEALAND AFTER THE TREATY OF WAITANGI WAS SIGNED IN 1840, BUT BY THE LATE 1840S THERE WERE SIGNS OF A SYSTEMATIC ADMINISTRATION. IT WAS IN 1848 THAT AN ORDINANCE CAME INTO EFFECT THAT MADE IT COMPULSORY TO NOTIFY THE COLONIAL SECRETARY'S OFFICE OF BIRTHS AND DEATHS THAT OCCURRED IN THE COLONY.

The office registering births, deaths and marriages continued to be located in the Department of Internal Affairs (which the Colonial Secretary's Office became after self-government was granted in 1857) until 1931. The Registrar-General's Office was then moved to the Courts division of the Department of Justice and, except for district offices in the four main centres, all BDM work was done by what were then called magistrates courts (now district courts). Later the Dunedin district office was closed, and two were opened in Hamilton and Ōtāhuhu in south Auckland.

The Electoral Office and BDM were located together in the same unit. When the Chief Electoral Officer, Len Irwin, retired, Jack A'Court, the Registrar-General, was appointed to that position as well. Until that time the Chief Electoral Officer and Registrar-General had been each other's deputies. The former was appointed under the Electoral Act, the latter under the Births and Deaths Registration and the Marriage Acts. One person holding both roles continued until 1992 when they were split again, as were the two units.

During these years registrations in the larger towns and cities were recorded by Justice Department staff. There were registrars in all the magistrates courts. Evan Gould was based in Taihape, which served a wide rural area. He does not recall the registration work as taking up much of his time, and says that "it was just part of the overall job of working in the Court."¹ In other places, Post and Telegraph Department staff were responsible or those, such as headmasters, who were employed by the Education Department. The number of registries was cut back on several occasions – with the privatisation of New Zealand Post and again after the computerisation of the registration process. Registries were mostly still located in courts but there were some individual ones, such as an accountant in Motueka and a radio station in Paraparaumu.²

¹ Evan Gould, interviewed by Megan Hutching, 22 April 2005, side 2

² Brian Hesketh, interviewed by Megan Hutching, 6 October 2006, side 2

JACK WRIGHT

Jack started out in the public service in 1940 as a court cadet and transferred to Department of Justice Head Office in 1952 as an administrator. During this period he was also private secretary to the Minister of Justice. Before his appointment as Deputy Registrar-General in 1966 he was Deputy Registrar at the Magistrates Court in Wellington. He was appointed Registrar-General Births, Deaths and Marriages and Chief Electoral Officer in 1967. Jack retired in 1980.

10 In 1977 BDM moved from their office in Stout Street, Wellington, to Levin House in Lower Hutt. The reason, as retired Registrar-General (and Chief Electoral Officer) Jack Wright recalls, was that there were moves at the time to decentralise government departments. He remembers being told that he could choose between Masterton, Wanganui and Levin. He chose Wanganui but in the end the office was moved to Lower Hutt, where it shared premises with the Patents Office. Wright does not remember any disadvantages to being there and suggests that being further away from head office “had its advantages”.³ The move meant some change in staff as some people were not prepared to move, but Wright feels that it was a smooth transition.

It was a small unit – about 35 or 40 people – although numbers increased during the lead-up to general elections, when sizeable numbers of temporary staff would be employed. The two teams, Electoral and BDM, tended to keep separate and Eileen Kennedy recalls that they did not even mix in the tearoom.⁴

RETURN TO INTERNAL AFFAIRS

The move from the Justice Department back to BDM's old home in the Department of Internal Affairs happened on 1 October 1995. The Registrar-General's team was co-located with the Documents of National Identity (DONI) section. Within a couple of years, births, deaths and marriages and the two units that made up DONI – Passports and Citizenship – were brought together in a new business group, Identity Services. Current Registrar-General, Brian Clarke, explains that New Zealand's is one of the few registries in the world that has this relationship. There are advantages and disadvantages Clarke feels, as births, deaths and marriages information is not identity information but is rather the record of an event. However, he acknowledges that it does improve service for clients as it means, for example, that the Passports Office can access BDM information electronically so that people do not have to produce a birth and marriage certificate when applying for their first passport.⁵

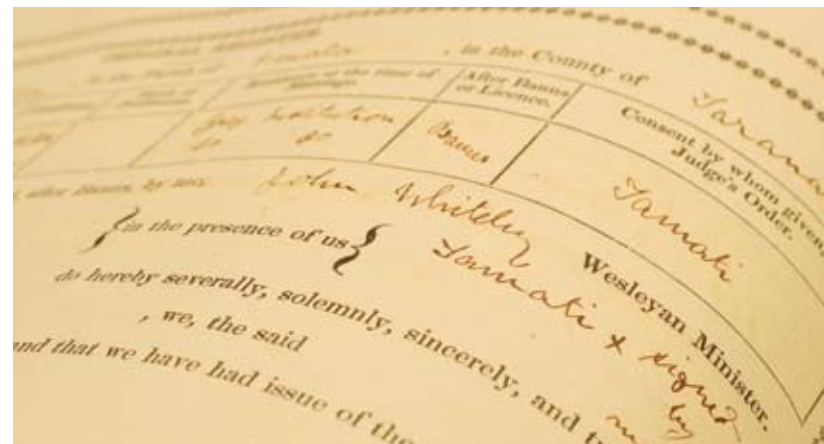
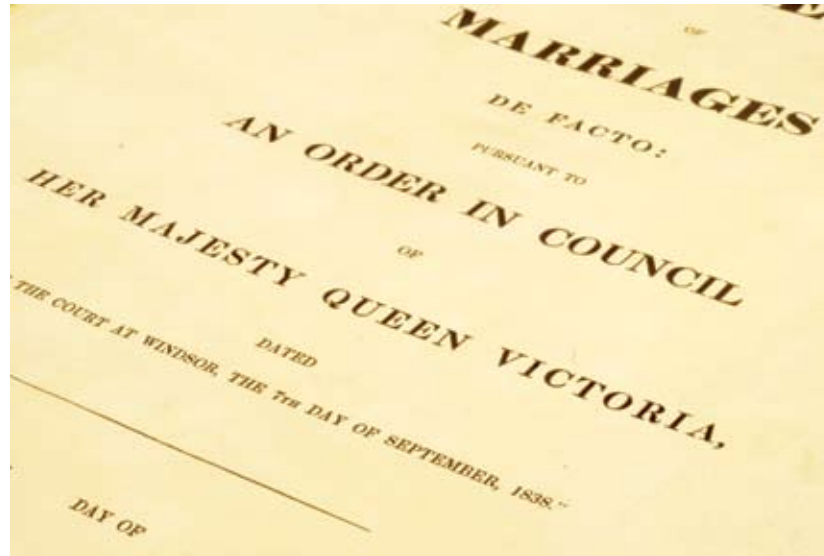
The move to Internal Affairs facilitated a number of changes, including the introduction of a computerised births and deaths registration system on 1 January 1998. BDM then scaled down its network in the courts to just dealing with marriages. Everything else was dealt with centrally, first in Lower Hutt and then in Wellington.

³ Jack Wright, interviewed by Megan Hutching, 23 May 2005, side 5

⁴ Eileen Kennedy, interviewed by Megan Hutching, 31 May 2005, side 1

⁵ Brian Clarke, interviewed by Megan Hutching, 27 May 2005, side 4

Marriage register dated 1841 to 1861.



12 There were some changes in staff at this time, as the main BDM production unit based in Lower Hutt was co-located with the rest of Identity Services in Wellington over 2002–2003. Some preferred not to work in Wellington. Eileen Kennedy recalls the farewell breakfast that preceded the move to Wellington as being “quite emotional” because many of the staff at Lower Hutt had worked together for a long time. She feels that some good institutional knowledge about the records was lost with the staff.

“There is,” she says, “an art to typing up an old record, and being able to read the writing in the large old registers in which the entries were handwritten until the early 1960s.”⁶

Brian Clarke acknowledges that from that time the office has seen constant change in terms of staff and activity.

Evan Gould had mixed feelings about the move back to Internal Affairs and the computerisation, although he says that in hindsight “it was the right move to centralise, no doubt about that. It will mean that the record being kept is much better because there’ll be one overview of how it’s been created, rather than all of the hundreds of registries, both in the courts and in the post offices that used to do it over the years.”⁷ He does regret the loss of contact with the public, however. The shift was also felt in the district offices. Danielle Amon recalls that the public found it more difficult to get access to the new office in Queen Street (Auckland), but she too feels that the shift had advantages. “We became a one-stop shop for people, which was quite good for the public.”⁸

⁶ Kennedy, side 4

⁷ Gould, side 2

⁸ Danielle Amon, interviewed by Megan Hutching, 31 March 2005, side 3