

Thomas Allan (1835–1926), nurseryman of Dunedin

Isabella Kerby¹

Thomas Allan has been the subject of little research. His catalogues are rare, and any mention of the man seems to have been made only in passing. Where due consideration and research has been made, sources reflect a horticulturist of great passion, enthusiasm, and influence.

Born in 1835, in the town of Bridge of Allan, Scotland, Thomas Allan (Fig. 1A) was the eldest son of nine children born to Elizabeth and Alexander, who ran a nursery there. In 1859, Thomas and his sister Agnes travelled to Tasmania. On board the ship, Thomas met Wilhelmina Clinkscales (Fig. 1B), and they were married the following year. In 1861, their son William was born, the first of ten children. Family records report that they then travelled to New Zealand via Melbourne and arrived in Dunedin in 1861 on board the *Lightning*.



Fig. 1A–B Thomas (A) and Wilhelmina (B) Allan, pictured within brooches inlaid with gold obtained by Thomas at the Dunstan gold rush. Images reproduced courtesy of Miri Gillan and family.

That year, the Otago goldrush kicked off, spurring Thomas to head with optimism to Gabriel's Gully seeking prosperous work. He likely worked the goldfields for a few years before the initial rush calmed down, earning enough to think about setting himself up in business. By 1863, Thomas had returned to Dunedin and was involved with the Dunedin Horticultural Society (Fig. 2) as a committee member. It is noted in brief that Thomas also helped set out part of the Dunedin Botanic Garden, but any official record of his involvement seems to have been lost.²

His first advertisement as a nurseryman, seedsman, and fruiterer, appeared in the *Otago Daily Times* in 1866 with the business operating out of his seed shop (named as both Allan's Seed Shop and Otago Seed Warehouse) in

the Farley's Buildings at 'The Cutting', Princes Street, and a 2.5-acre plot named Exhibition Nursery, on Cumberland Street (Fig. 3–4).³ The University of Otago School of Surveying and Hayward and Cumberland Residential Colleges now sit on the block of land where the Exhibition Nursery once was (Fig. 5).

[ADVERTISEMENT.]

Cumberland street, Dunedin, 26th Dec., 1865.
(To the Editor of the DAILY TIMES.)

THE Otago Strawberry, Allan's Gem of Otago, wrongfully named Allan's Incomparable. Sir—By advertisement in your widely circulated *Times*, I notice an advertisement of a strawberry termed Allan's Incomparable, and to be sent out by Mr Jas. M'Indoe. Now, Jas. M'Indoe, nor any other doo, has any right to name the strawberry in question. I being the grower, having raised that strawberry, and a few others now in fruit, to be sent out by and bye, and first shown fruit to the Committee of the Horticultural Society two years ago, with a view of getting it named. I afterwards showed fruit in the window of Mr Thomas Collins, then fruiterer in the Cutting, and termed it Allan's Seedling, as the Horticultural Society Committee neglected to name it; and I next hear of it as Allan's Incomparable. I wish the public to know that I raised the strawberry in question, but I did not name it Incomparable, as I will send out another that more deserves the name.—I am, &c.,

THOMAS ALLAN.

Fig. 2 *Otago Daily Times*, Issue 1248, 27 December 1865, Page 8.

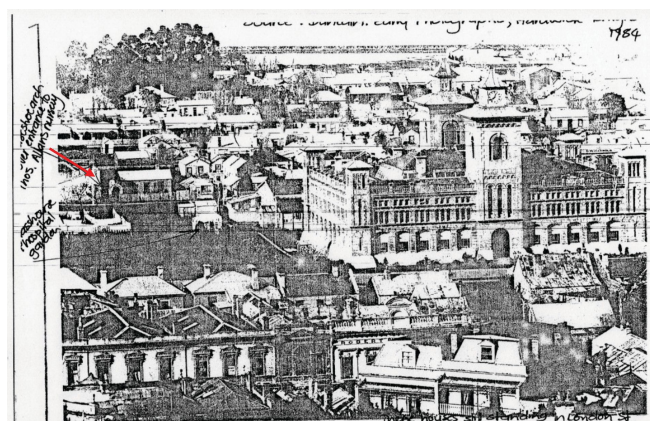


Fig. 3 An undated copy of a photograph suggesting the location of Thomas Allan's Exhibition Nursery on Cumberland Street, featuring a horseshoe archway. Image supplied by Claire Bibby.

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² An early Dunedin settler, stonemason Alexander Mackenzie was reported to have taken employment under Thomas Allan in laying out the Botanical Gardens, according to an obituary in the *Otago Daily Times* in 1905.

³ An advertisement detailing the extensive stock across his businesses is said to have appeared in Mackay's Otago, Southland and Goldfields Almanac for June 1863, but because it mentions the nursery at Forbury, it must be dated later than 1863 as Thomas did not acquire the property and did not begin listing Forbury in his advertisements until 1869.

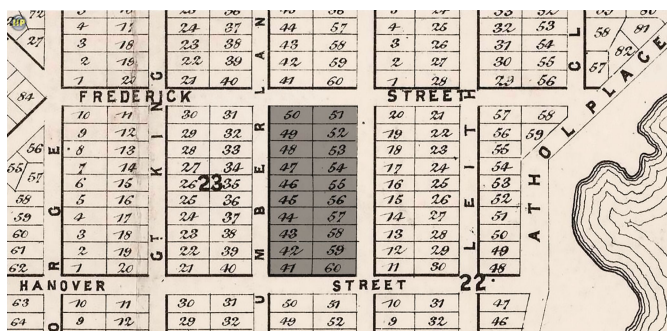


Fig. 4 The city block, with Frederick Street to the north and Cumberland Street on the left, seen as it was laid out in 1872. Records say that in 1876 Thomas Allan occupied plots 47, 49, and part of 54 for a nursery and plots 50 and 57 for "Building Land", while in 1880 he is said to also occupy sections 46 and 48 for the land, with a house upon plot 47. In 1885, it is just plot 47. Whether these were additions or reductions over the years it is hard to be certain. *Plan of the town of Dunedin [electronic resource]: with additions to 1872 / drawn by F. W. Flanagan. Sourced from LINZ. Crown Copyright reserved.*



Fig. 5 This brickwork on Cumberland Street today (via Google Maps) may be a remnant of the Exhibition Nursery entrance. In an aerial map of 1947, these brick pillars appear to be the pedestrian entrance to the Dunedin Bowling greens. *Image supplied by Claire Bibby.*

Advertising "nursery stock of every description" available the following year, it is clear to see that it was a fast-growing business venture. Thomas imported agricultural, garden, and flower seeds directly from his brother, Robert Allan, who himself procured them "from the best growers and most respectable houses in Britain" (Fig. 6).

Early advertisements (Fig. 6–9) prominently featured fruit trees like apples, pears, peaches, plums, and cherries, grass seeds, common forest and ornamental trees, and flowers. In 1868, he advertised for sale in what is likely an exaggeration, "one million Thorn Quicks [*Crataegus monogyna*], the finest ever offered in Otago." Interestingly, the ships that brought his stock in are frequently mentioned by name, helping to trace their journeys if not their origins. And, like other nurserymen, he was able to pack and send orders beyond his region.

Strawberries were an early specialty of the Exhibition Nursery with Thomas raising several selections (see Fig. 2) including 'Gem of Otago', 'Wilhelmina', 'Dunedin', and 'Favourite'. By 1870, he was growing nearly twenty selections. A visitor to Exhibition Nursery in 1870 also noted the large variety of greenhouse plants and ornamental shrubs and plants. These included newly fashionable camellias, "received from London [...] which were in splendid condition, although they were 132 days packed", azaleas, phlox, rhododendrons, the double flowering plum ("being quite new to Otago"), gentiana, hepaticas, Cape heaths, conifers and cypresses, plus many fruit and forest trees. His propagator was named as Mr Henry West.

NEW SEEDS.

T H O M A S ' A L L A N

'Has just received his new stock of
AGRICULTURAL, GARDEN, AND
FLOWER SEEDS,

Which have arrived in excellent condition, and having all been selected by his agent, Mr Robert Allan, Seedsman, from the best growers and most respectable houses in Britain, he is now prepared to offer an article for quality unsurpassed, and prices yet unequalled in Otago.

Also, a large and well-selected stock of Apple, Pear, Plum, and Cherry Trees, Gooseberry and Currant Bushes, and nursery stock of every description, at the

EXHIBITION NURSERY,

Frederick and Cumberland Streets ;

And at the

OTAGO SEED WAREHOUSE,

Cutting, Princes Street, Dunedin.

Catalogues sent free on application.

Up-country orders punctually attended to and carefully packed.

Fig. 6 *Otago Witness*, Issue 818, 2 August 1867, Page 22.

NEW SEEDS AND SELECT NURSERY STOCK.

T H O M A S A L L A N,

NURSERY AND SEEDSMAN,

Princes-street, Cumberland-street, and
Frederick-street, Dunedin,

Begs to call the attention of settlers and farmers to the arrival of the largest and most varied stock of Agricultural and Garden Seeds ever offered in Otago, comprising white, red, yellow, alsyke, cow-grass, and other clovers ; timothy, cocks-foot, fescues, Italian, rye, meadow, fox-tail, pous, and other grasses ; and garden seeds in variety and quality not to be had elsewhere in Otago.

T. A. would also direct special attention to his stock of Fruit and Forest Trees, Ornamental, Flowering, and other Shrubs and Trees, comprising 8000 apples and pears, in 70 different varieties, all splendid ; clean, healthy, and well-grown trees, 1, 2, 3, and 4 years, from 12s. per doz. ; plums and cherries, 3 and 4 years, 18s. to 30s. per doz. ; peaches, apricots, nectarines, almonds, quinces, filberts, hazels, &c. ; 300,000 thorn quicks, 1, 2, and 3 years ; 20,000 forest trees, in great variety.

All up-country orders carefully packed, and executed with despatch.

Garden Tools, Pruning Gloves, &c.

Fig. 7 *Tuapeka Times*, Volume III, Issue 175, 15 June 1871, Page 3.

CATALOGUE OF SEEDS, &c.—We are indebted to Mr Thomas Allan, nurseryman, for a copy of his Catalogue for 1875, printed in very neat style by Messrs McKay, Fenwick & Co. It contains besides lists of fruit, forest, and deciduous trees, bulbs, roses, fuchsias, geraniums, dahlias, verbenas, ericas, camellias, azalias, and other greenhouse and bedding-out plants, seeds, agricultural implements, &c., a Calendar for the year, and a variety of notes on gardening, all of which will be found of the greatest use to any one having a garden or a plot of ground ever so small. We have taken the liberty of making a few extracts.

Fig. 8 Otago Witness, Issue 1240, 4 September 1875, Page 18.

T H O M A S A L L A N ,
Wholesale and Retail
N U R S E R Y and S E E D S M A N ,
PRINCES STREET (Cutting),
DUNEDIN,
Has on sale—

The largest and finest grown stock of fruit and forest trees, ornamental and flowering shrubs, pines, and Californian conifers, &c., &c., that has yet been offered in Otago, comprising in Fruit Trees — Apples, Pears, Plums, Cherries, Apricots, Peaches, Filberts, Hazels, Walnuts, Sweet Chestnuts, &c., 1 to 5 years old, from 80s per 100.

Deciduous and evergreen Forest Trees :— Beech, Ash, Sycamore, Elms, Horse Chestnuts, Poplars, Scotch, Spruce, and Larch Firs, 1 to 8 feet, from 25s per 100.

Californian Pines (*pinus insignis*), *Halepensis*, *Maritima*, *Ponderosa*, *Cupressus Macrocarpa*, *Governiana*, *Funebris*, &c., &c., from 80s per 100; *Caliteris* Gums, or Oyster Bay Pine, in pots, from 12s per doz.

Blue Gums in pots, from £10 per 1000.

Acacias, of sorts, in pots, 6s to 12s per doz.

Hedging plants :—Thorns, Sweet Briar, *Acacia Armata*, Box, Bay Laurel, and the beautiful evergreen and compact growing *Eurebia Encenoides*, introduced from Tasmania recently by T. Allan, and now so largely used as an ornamental and shelter hedge and shrub. For a rapid and compact growth there is nothing to equal it. It is also sweet-scented and will stand cutting at all seasons, and into any style and form desired. Parties desirous of having good and quick shelter, and a nice hedge, are invited to inspect the Nursery, Cumberland street, where the Bowling Club's grounds is enclosed with it.

Price lists detailed on application.

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Fig. 9 Otago Witness, Issue 1241, 11 September 1875, Page 23.

Thomas continued to be an active member of the Dunedin Horticultural Society, serving as its secretary from 1868–1870 as well as exhibiting and organising shows. Through the 1860s and 1870s he won prizes for his antirrhinums, dahlias, roses, annuals, stocks, cut

flowers, cabbages, and kidney potatoes, among others. In January 1868, he donated £1 as prize money “for the best collection of potatoes” and a special prize for “the best basket of strawberries.”

From 1869 the Allan's leased a large, unfinished property at Forbury, south Dunedin, once owned by New Zealand's (reputedly) wealthiest resident, William Henry Valpy. The house included a 16-acre garden where some heavy bearing fruit trees were already established, possibly planted by Valpy's estate manager John Anderson, a founding member of the Dunedin Horticultural Society. What kinds of fruit trees these were and what Thomas Allan did with them is unknown.

The property proved an ideal spot for Thomas to expand his nursery grounds on top of his city site. A visitor to Forbury in 1871 commented that Allan was “preparing ground for the planting of an orchard of a thousand trees.” These were to be mainly plums, apples, pears, and cherry trees. The gardens also consisted of several winding walks, dense bush, good shelter, an aviary, and twenty-two beehives. Thomas was in fact the first to exhibit bees and honeycomb at the Horticultural Society show in March 1871 at a time of new, emerging kinds of exhibits. To show new experiments and imports also became popular and in the following year he exhibited twenty-seven selections of fuchsia.

Sometime in the early 1870s, Thomas introduced a dense, evergreen and sweetly scented shrub, “*Eurebia encenoides*” (probably *Eurybia* and now referable to species of *Olearia*), from Tasmania (Fig. 9), which he used as a shelter hedge around the Forbury grounds. The Dunedin Bowling Club, sitting within the Exhibition Nursery grounds, was also enclosed with this hedge plant. In July 1877, he advertised 10,000 of these plants for sale and could claim that he was the sole grower and supplier of this desirable shelter plant.

It was a promising and booming time for business for Thomas. In an advert from 1871 he declared he'd received the “largest and most varied stock of Agricultural and Garden Seeds ever offered in Otago.” Also available were 8000 apples and pears in 70 different varieties.

In the 1871–1872 Spring Catalogue (Fig. 10), Thomas mentions that he is “receiving constant shipments of New Plants from Britain, California and Australia.” He also says,

“In Bulbs, two years ago I imported over 30,000 comprising Hyacinths, Tulips, Narcissus, Gladiolus, Crocus, Snowdrops, Anemones, *Rununculus* [sic], &c, which are now acclimatised; some of them particularly the Crocus, Snowdrops and Anemones, caused quite a sensation when in bloom, and the Tulips, which will bloom next month, bid fair to outstrip anything seen here before. I also, last season, imported many of the finest varieties Camellias, Azaleas, Rhododendrons, Roses, Fuchsias, Dahlias, &c, yet brought to the Colonies.”

The catalogue advertised the arrival of twelve new roses at the nursery to be ready in April 1872, with eight being imported directly from Britain and “now offered for the first time in the Colonies.” These were *Rosa* ‘Adolphe Brongniart’; ‘Ardien Montebello’ [‘Adrien

Montebello']; 'Bertha Barron' ['Berthe Baron'], a seedling of the well-known 'Julius Margotten'; 'Derpuy Jamin' ['Dupuy Jarmin']; 'Madam Clerf'; 'Madam Decour'; 'Mademoiselle Maria Rady'; 'Mrs John Berners'; 'Felix Genero'; and the tea scented roses: 'Boutin D'or' ['Bouton D'or']; 'Montiplacer' ['Monplaisir'], a seedling of the well-known 'Gloire de Dijon'; and 'Madam Margotten' ['Madam Margottin', aka 'Cécile Berthod'].

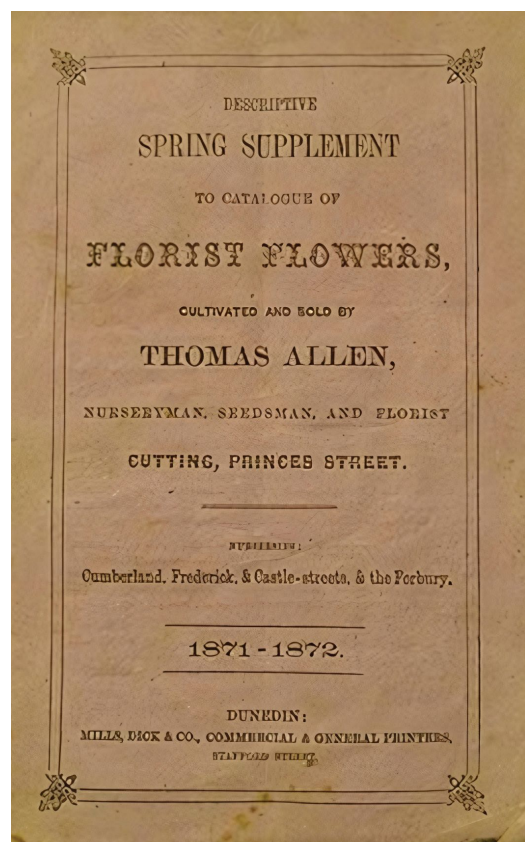


Fig. 10 The cover of Allan's 1871–1872 catalogue, with a misspelling of his surname.

Heritage Gardener Claire Bibby found that three of these roses were soon in cultivation in Christchurch. Records show that Rosa 'Berthe Baron' was exhibited to great acclaim by Mr Hugh P. Murray-Aynsley at Christchurch horticultural shows from 1872–1875, and in the collection of A. Duncan and Son at the Riccarton Horticultural Society show in 1875; 'Felix Genero' was recommended in *The Lyttelton Times* in 1887; and 'Madam Margottin' was mentioned throughout the 1870s to the 1890s, including at the Abbott Nursery in 1882.⁴ Presently, Claire has managed to only find traces of two of these roses, 'Berthe Baron' and 'Dupuy Jarmin', but only through mention in New Zealand rose indexes. She says that none of the twelve appear to be in commercial cultivation in New Zealand today, nor do they appear in the New Zealand Heritage Rose Register.

The Forbury property underwent continued renovations and restorations throughout the early 1870s until finally when in 1875 the 16-room house was opened as Allandale

House and Pleasure Grounds, giving the name to Allandale Road, St Clair (Fig. 11). In 1878, excess land at Forbury was subdivided and sections advertised for sale as the township of Allandale. Visitors to Allandale late that year, as reported in the *Otago Witness*, noted that "[t]he gardens were a portion of the choice Forbury estate, and occupy a corner of the estate lately sold by Mr James Smith to Messrs Cormack, Allen [sic], and Maud, for the very large sum of £25,000, and which is now being surveyed and cut up into sections, and we have no doubt will be one of the finest of our Dunedin suburbs."⁵



Fig. 11 ACGT 18718 58 3A/27 Plan of the Town and Estate of Allandale – R25795659. From Archives New Zealand Te Rua Mahara o te Kāwanatanga.

Around the property they now observed an artificial pond, native bush, green terraces, about 150 selections of fine roses, and a range of fuchsias, heaths, pelargoniums, deciduous forest trees, and conifers including *Pinus insignis* (now *P. radiata*), *P. muricata*, *Taxodium knightii*, *Cupressus* (*Hesperocyparis*) *macrocarpa*, and *Cupressus* (*Chamaecyparis*) *lawsoniana*. Specific attention was also paid to the "fine collection of hybrid [sic] rhododendrons, comprising about 50 varieties and hundreds of plants, and being all in flower, they were very showy and imposing, the colours ranging from pure white to yellow, pink, scarlet, and very dark purple, while some varieties were beautifully fringed."

A community garden fête was held there in 1873, and in 1874 they hosted a grove meeting of about 200 Spiritualists "who engaged in various games on the beautiful green terraces."⁶ But the expansive gardens were certainly used for gatherings for a variety of local groups.

⁴ It was mentioned in *The Lyttelton Times* as being exhibited at a show in 1870, the year before Thomas Allan advertised it, so we can deduce that this rose was not one of the eight newly imported from Britain.

⁵ Allen being another misspelling of his surname.

⁶ This begs the question that Thomas and Wilhelmina were themselves spiritualists, or even leaders of spiritualism in Otago in the 1870s, as some claim. Some correspondence on Thomas's behalf in the newspapers in 1873 does indicate they were involved in the spiritualist's association to some degree.

Sadly, in 1879 Allandale house was gutted by fire.⁷ It was poorly insured and after a lengthy and dramatic court case involving embezzlement, fraud, and defamation against Thomas by a manipulative Town Clerk, Thomas was eventually, and regarded by some as unfairly, declared bankrupt. The Allandale land was then sold to Mr Robert Macquaid, a fruiterer on George Street, who renamed the site St Clair Gardens. A visitor to Macquaid's orchard in 1898 reported seeing apples, pears, currants, gooseberries, plums, apricots, peaches, and strawberries; perhaps some of these plants remained from those planted by Thomas Allan. He did advertise a sale of all plant stock from Forbury in May 1879, before the destructive fire. Macquaid's orchard was eventually surveyed and subdivided into sections in 1905 and the original orchards and gardens of the Forbury estate became residential housing. Today, the section appears to be bordered by Valpy and Motu Streets, and Forbury and Allandale Roads, bisected by Mavis Street (Fig. 12).

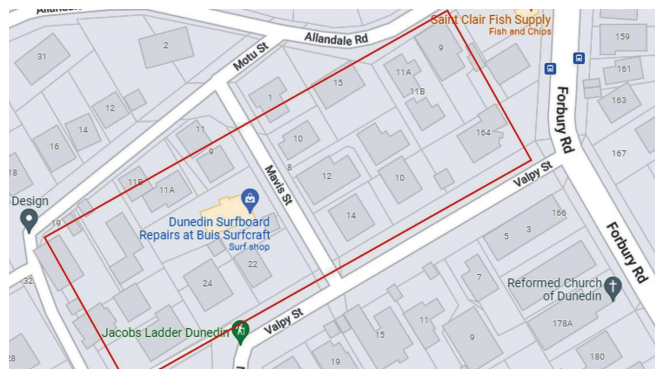


Fig. 12 An approximate of the location of Allandale House and Gardens at Forbury as seen today. Image via Google Maps.

After leaving Allandale, Thomas continued to sell stock from Exhibition Nursery until 1883, and then advertised gooseberries, currants, raspberries, roses, and trees for sale under the name Meadow Head Nursery, Forbury Road, in 1890–1891. He also continued to write in the newspapers on various horticultural topics.

At the end of the century, the Allans moved north. After some time in Tauranga, the family settled in Avondale, Auckland, where Thomas established himself as a nurseryman on two acres of land aside their house on Kitchener Street (today Holly Street). There he developed a 400-tree orchard, including apples, pears, and plums, and sold fruit, vegetables (tomatoes, onions, etc.), flowers, seeds, and even pōhutukawa trees for honey. Wilhelmina died in 1922, followed by Thomas in 1926 at the age of 91 (Fig. 13). They are buried in the Waikaraka Cemetery in Ōhēunga. They left seven children and 24 grandchildren.

Acknowledgements

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Claire Bibby for the wealth of research and resources she generously shared.

MR. THOMAS ALLAN.
Another of Auckland's old citizens, Mr. Thomas Allan, died on Sunday at the age of 91, after residing in New Zealand for 70 years. Mr. Allan was born at Bridge of Allan, Stirlingshire, Scotland, where a number of his relations are still living. At an early age he emigrated to Launceston, Tasmania, and after residing there a short time came to New Zealand, settling in Dunedin. He was one of Dunedin's oldest inhabitants, and can remember the city when it was just a few rows of straggling tents. After participating in several of the gold rushes that electrified New Zealand at the time, he settled down in a nurseryman's and seedman's business at Allandale, Dunedin, which subsequently grew to a large establishment. Twenty years ago he came to Auckland and lived at Avondale, where he continued enthusiastic work in his garden until quite recently. His wife died three years ago. Mr. Allan is survived by three sons and four daughters. They are Mr. A. Allan, who has lived for many years in South Africa, but is at present in Auckland, Mr. T. Allan, of Wellington, Mr. E. Allan, of Ponsonby, Mrs. W. D. Mason, of Middlemarch, Otago, Mrs. J. H. Warren, of Milford, Mrs. W. G. Tilley, of Wanganui, and Mrs. Charles Downie, of Parnell. There are 24 grandchildren.

Fig. 13 New Zealand Herald, Volume LXIII, Issue 19283, 23 March 1926, Page 10.

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⁷ An article in the *Evening Star* in 1945 reported that Valpy's old Forbury house was used as a residence until demolition in 1940, but since the house was reported as burning down, this may be referring to another house owned by Valpy, or perhaps part of the original house was rebuilt. Whichever the case, it does cause some confusion as to the fate of the property.