

The Ellis Family: Community Builders

Among those who stood out as community builders in the Lower Hutt state housing settlements in the 1940s were the Ellis family. Robert Ellis was on the verge of becoming an electrical engineer when in 1940 he was called up to fight in the Second World War. A staunch pacifist, he refused to enlist. This wasn't well received in his home town of Rangiora, and Robert and his family were vilified for being unpatriotic. One wet day he was driving home from school in a truck when a brick was thrown through the windscreen, injuring his son Brian. This was the catalyst for the family to move to Lower Hutt, where Robert got a job as a linesman that exempted him from military service.

Initially the Ellis's rented half a house in Woburn, Lower Hutt; the landlady had the other half. She too disliked Robert's pacifism, and relations were edgy. This led them to apply for a state house, and in 1945 they were allocated one in Taita, then a brand new subdivision. Adrienne and Wendy - Robert and Vivienne's daughters - recall that their street had not been properly formed when they moved in, and the nearest shop was a 'good 20-30-minute walk away'. Most of the sections were on river shingle, and it took their father much time and back-breaking work to dig up the rocks and replace them with council-supplied soil so he could form a vegetable garden. 'The day the soil truck came; Adrienne remembers, 'a grim race took place as men with shovels and wheelbarrows, and their children with buckets and basins, carried home as much as they could as fast as they could before it was all gone;

Adrienne characterises the settlement at this time as 'many "lost souls" living in the particular geographical area that was Taita'. Scores of state houses were being occupied by war-weary returned servicemen who were reacquainting themselves with wives and other loved ones. Some struggled to adapt to civilian life. Many wives were pregnant and/or had small children. Plonked down on the fringe of the city in an area with irregular public transport, not all could count on traditional family support. It was in this context that Robert and Vivienne - both Methodists with a strong commitment to voluntary service - made it their 'mission' to help draw people together as a community. Robert began a community newsletter, a cyclostyled sheet that Wendy and her siblings delivered around the neighbourhood: 'It was a way of telling people what was going on.'

Meanwhile, Vivienne began inviting many of the young mothers to morning teas at her home and establishing interest groups, including the Women's Co-operative Guild. The couple was also instrumental in establishing New Zealand's first Union Church, combining the Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregational denominations. They didn't stop there: both became key lobbyists for the Taita community centre scheme. Adrienne remembers that William Robertson often visited their home. His suicide devastated her parents, who couldn't understand why 'someone who was their inspiration and so full of ideas could give up'. But Wendy remembers Robertson as a rather strange figure. He had 'one track, one focus [the Lower Hutt community planning proposals], so it was a very unbalanced sort of life really'.

With their parents so heavily involved in community-building activities, Adrienne did much of the cooking, housework and looking after her younger siblings: 'There was always something that needed to be done'. While both women admit life would have been easier if they hadn't moved to Taita, they insist that their parents' mission was 'ours too'. They admire their parents' devotion to community building, and feel their efforts made an 'enormous difference' in many lives.



The Ellis children, Wendy, Brian, Adrienne, Murray and Howard, in the back garden of their Taita house.