

GARDENER: BASIL ROBERTSON

Born: 11 Sep 1864, Odiham, Hampshire, England.

Married: 8 May 1893, St Marks Church, Wellington, New Zealand

To: Charlotte Jane Sutherland (1874 – 1925)

Died: 17 Dec 1920, Levin, New Zealand

Buried: Tiro Tiro Rd cemetery, Levin, New Zealand,

Basil Gardener's parents were:

Matthew (1822 – 1879) & Barbara Ann (nee Shepherd) (1827 – 1908).

He had six siblings including one twin.

George Matthew (1858 – 1925)

Sarah Jane (1859 – 1911). She married Robert Crawford.

William Charles Rooking (1861 – 1929)

James Walter (known as Walter) (1864 – 1908)

Albert Edward (1866 – 1933)

Percy Frederick (1869 – 1943)

Basil & Charlotte had two children:

George Basil Robertson Gardener (1894 – 1961)

Florence Margaret Gardener (1896 – 1969). She married William Frederick Charles Bennett (1898 – 1953)

In 1879 Basil's parents decided to emigrate to NZ, leaving on the 17th May aboard the "Halcione". His father Matthew died 3 weeks later, variously documented as happening in Somerset and at sea (the latter being most likely). Regardless, the family arrived in Wellington on the 19th August without their patriarch, and shortly before Basil's 15th birthday.

They brought with them large stocks of groceries, drapery, china, glassware, crockery and ironmongery with the intention of opening a general store.

This was opened by Barbara in Carterton (called Criterion) with eldest son George.

The 1884, the lease on the shop expired so Barbara held a closing down sale and returned to England. However, she came back to New Zealand living with George in Wellington and then later with Basil in Levin until she died in 1908.

Basil would have helped in the store in Carterton. In 1882, at the age of 18, he had a serious accident when thrown from his horse onto another horse and under the wheels of a passing cart. He was confined to bed for 5 weeks.

After the Carterton store was sold Basil moved to Wellington where he is listed as a grocer in the electoral rolls.

In 1891, at the age of 27, he moved to Levin.

The north-west corner property at the Oxford St and Queen St intersection was originally purchased by Henry Bevan in March 1889.

From the rates books (of the time):

1893: Ownership of the site is in the hands of Basil Gardener, and John R McDonald.

1897 to 1900: Ownership is Basil, and J W Bowen (Jeweller).

1901: Ownership is Basil, John R McDonald, and M Manderson.

1902 to 1904: Ownership is Basil, John R McDonald, and E Tucker.

1905 to 1906: Ownership is Basil, John R McDonald, and G J Perry.

During Basil's time there the business was called the Manawatu Co-operative Store and sold food, hardware, boots & clothing. This was later extended to include ladies' hats, kitchenware & produce. From 1907 he no longer had an interest in the property.

Also, from 1898 to 1903 Basil owned a building at Lot 29 Oxford St (where BNZ is today). This was leased to Fred Pink (bootmaker).

By 1903, Levin had a Chamber of Commerce. It met and dissolved a number of times, as local businessmen saw the need to come together to boost the town and its business. Its spokesman was Basil Gardener. In 1905, the Chamber organised a petition to ask the government to grant borough status to a combined Levin and Weraroa.

As you can read in the biographies of other settlers (e.g. Peter Bartholomew and Fred Roe) there was a counter-petition to stop this move by people who had small holdings on the outskirts of the village. After consideration by the Colonial Secretary, Sir Joseph Ward, and some redrawing of the boundaries to appease the opponents, Levin was proclaimed a borough from 1 April 1906. The population was just over 1300.

A mayor now needed to be appointed, along with nine councillors. Three candidates stood for the mayoralty and Basil was the undisputed winner, with 256 votes, ahead of John Davies (129) and Charlie Williams (120).

Basil was never challenged in an election, remaining Mayor until December 1915, when with his health increasingly frail, he stood down in favour of Charles Blenkhorn. He then took over the role of Town Clerk from Philip Goldsmith.

He was a quiet and patient man, very clear about processes, who held together a talented and forceful group of councillors without compromising his own views for the sake of peace. His role was to lead them in satisfying the town's many growing communal needs.

Major development projects ensued - street improvements, sealed paving along the main highway, a gasworks, a high-pressure water supply, the Carnegie library, the first

swimming baths, government reserves converted to recreation areas, regulations for horse-drawn vehicles and traction engines, sanitation improvements, and Emma Ostler's lease of the unsightly gravel pit along Oxford Street West bought out to make proper the heart of the town's business area.

As the town grew Basil encouraged the establishment of many organisations, usually with him in an elected position.

Back in 1900 he had been one of the founding members of the Horowhenua County Club (situated at the back of the Levin Hotel). This later became the Workingmen's Club and is now the Cosmopolitan Club. He was the 2nd President of the County Club.

In 1906, the year he became mayor, he was a foundation member of the AP & I Association taking on the role of Secretary, which he held until 1914. He served on the Ohau Domain Board, and was secretary of the Lake Domain Board.

He was in the Levin Dairy Company from 1900 to 1903. In 1902 he helped found the Druids Lodge, going on to become the District Grand President.

He started the Boy Scouts in 1910, served on the Foxton Harbour Board from 1911 to 1916. He fought hard to wrest control of the harbour from the Government.

His interests encompassed health too. A member of the Wellington Hospital Board, Basil fought for many years for Horowhenua to be transferred from Wellington's to Palmerston North's hospital catchment area. One of his proudest moments was when this occurred in 1916.

He enjoyed sports and played cricket in Levin. He was a keen supporter of athletics and rugby, elected Patron of Wanderers club in 1913.

The list goes on. He acted as a steward for the Levin Racing Club. He was the chairman of the Horowhenua Trotting Club when it was formed in 1914.

He helped establish the Levin Fire Board which first met in Jun 1919. For years before this, relations between the council, as administrators, and the Levin Volunteer Fire Brigade had been deteriorating over accusations of penny-pinching when it came to requests to finance new fire-fighting equipment and infrastructure. Under the new Board, the town would come within a national network, its fire services properly funded. Within two years there would be a new fire engine, fire station and six street alarms wired into it.

Unsurprisingly, given his relentless service, Basil's health began to hamper him. In 1911 he had a bad attack of influenza. In 1914 he was admitted to hospital where he underwent an operation on his spine, probably a legacy of the accident he had in Carterton in 1882.

During the influenza epidemic of 1918, Basil joined councillors and others to work as volunteers looking after the sick. Several fell seriously ill and Basil was amongst those laid low from exhaustion.

In December 1920 he finally succumbed to a long illness. He was only 56.

Throughout, he was very well supported by his wife Charlotte. She in turn was entrepreneurial as she established a business at Lot 17 Oxford St (now 107 Oxford St). She ran this business from 1911 to 1916.

Basil and Charlotte owned a good many properties around Levin for various periods of time.

Now 51 & 51 A Bristol St	1908-1920
Now 60 & 60 A Salisbury St	1901-1921
Now 18 & 20 Devon St	1916-1917
Now 44 Bristol St (Bowling Club)	1910-1921
Now 42 Bristol St (Bowling Club)	1907-1921
Now 40 Bristol St (Bowling Club)	1907-1921
Now 38 Bristol St (Bowling Club)	1907-1921
Now 83 Winchester St	1901-1903
Now 81, 81A, 81B Winchester St	1901-1903
Now 2, 4, 6 Hereford St	1909-1911
Now 26 & 28 Bristol St & 12 Exeter St	1908-1921

Railway Block 3, Lots Pt 47 & Pt 48	1918
Railway Block 4, Lots 10-13	1909-1911
Railway Block 4, Lots 14-30	1909-1917
Railway Block 6, Lot 81 Cambridge St	1907-1908
	1911-1915
Railway Block 4, Lot 45	1921-1922

Now 153 Winchester (as Gardener, Ryder & Leonard)	1904-1917
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Also, his mother Barbara owned:

Now 16 Bristol St	1895-1906
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Credits to Anthony Dreaver's publications:

'Levin: the Making of a Town' and

'Horowhenua County and Its People, A Centennial History'