

Bell Barn History

A barn is said to have been built by the Bell family soon after the house was relocated to its current site in 1865. This is not thought to be the existing barn adjacent to the house. Photographs show at least two other barn structures. One was a double gabled corrugated iron building with a concrete base similar to the existing barn. The other was clad with weatherboards. The survey plan of Bell farm shows two buildings to the south west of the house and it is possible that these are the barn buildings built when the house was relocated. Another barn was on the corner now occupied by the Hockey Club Carpark. It was demolished in about 1983.

Judging from the construction of the two storeyed corrugated iron barn nearer the house it would seem the existing barn was built in the early part of the 20th century. Wall framing is variable in size, and generally only 75x50mm. Window joinery looks to have been recycled from a previous structure and much of the timber is Rimu. Framing is generally connected with spike nailing, rather than mortice and tenon joints used until the end of the 19th century. The barn does not appear on the 1926 survey plan, nor is it evident in the photograph taken circa 1910 with the house in the background, although a lower level gabled building appears to be located to the right of the house.

What is now known as Bell Barn had a hayloft at the upper level. The ground floor was originally used for storing a buggy gig and for stabling horses. Later it was used for garaging cars, in particular Miss Elsie Bell's "Moon" Car.

Mr Jack Pickering worked on the nearby Fitzpatrick Farm in the 1930s and remembered the Bells farming next to the tennis courts. They cut hay using a horse drawn hay scythe. It was forked onto a big wagon and then earned down to Bell Barn behind Bell House. The hay was pitched into the upstairs loft. There was another big cowshed on the farm, which was initially set up for hand milking. A milking machine was installed while Dufty Bell was serving in the First World War. Later a full cowshed with a mechanical milking machine was erected.

Ownership of Bell House was transferred to the New Zealand Historic Places Trust and subsequently to Howick and Districts Historical Society. The Barn has been rented as a studio or used for storage by the Historical Village and by tenants of Bell House.

The picket fence between the house and the barn was relocated from Pakuranga School in the 1970s.

In 1976 the Mt Wellington Fire Brigade wanted to burn the barn down for practice. As a result, the barn was secured, and tidied up including new iron to the roof. A lean-to over the Northern doors was removed at that time. The condition of the corrugated iron cladding and numerous nail holes suggests that it may have been repurposed from another building. Some cladding bears the trademarks of Redcliffe, an English company that produced corrugated sheet from 1850 to 1900 and Samuel Parker Ltd. who produced galvanised sheet in New Zealand from 1850 to 1900.

The Campbells leased part of the barn to store wine. Half the ground floor of the barn was allocated to the Bell House restaurant for produce and beverage storage, with the balance used by Howick & Districts Historical Society Inc. for storage of joinery and timber.

Following the demise of the Bell House restaurant as the result of a fire in the kitchen, the barn's poor condition rendered it suitable only for storage of used joinery, timber and artifacts belonging to the Village.

Many alterations seem to have been made to the barn over the years, including the installation of electricity and the partial lining of the downstairs walls. The loft floor was in a poor unsafe condition and the structure was frail with rotting wall studs and bottom plates. Windows and doors were also in very poor condition and the building was not waterproof. If major maintenance and strengthening work had not been undertaken the building would continue to deteriorate and possibly become beyond economic restoration.

In 2019 the barn was leased to the Howick Community MenzShed Inc. for use as a woodworking and engineering workshop. With funding provided by the Howick Local Board, substantial structural and maintenance work was undertaken by the shed including the removal of the unsafe loft floor and the reconstruction of the lean-to. A small portion of the loft floor was retained to show its heritage nature. All work was undertaken in accordance with the requirements of Heritage New Zealand and Auckland Council with whom the building is a listed heritage building.