

A Slice Of Aro Valley By Sarah Lang

IT WAS AS A BRIGHT-EYED 17-year-old school-girl that I first found Wellington's Aro Valley on a jaunt from hometown Wanganui to stay with sister Marta in her first flat. Friend Sylvia and I drove excitedly past the high-rises overhanging the motorway's end, through the web of one-way city streets and onto Aro Street, the valley's corridor nestled between Kelburn and Brooklyn Hills.

Right onto one of the streets twisting its way up to Kelburn, sharply-sloping Adams Terrace, and like something out of a storybook appeared a stack of seemingly doll-size houses with all their stained-glass windows, rickety verandahs and merry murals. Licorice allsorts, my mother calls them.

Marta's dim, cave-like flat squeezed between four extremely close neighbours. Even in the middle of the brightest day her bedroom let in no natural light — the windowed side of the room shivering up against next door's entrance.

I forgot Aro Valley until midway through 1998, now living in Wellington and attending Victoria University on the side of the Kelburn Hill. Wandering one day around campus' far realms, I spotted some precarious-looking steps and wound my way down to a slender street with familiar rows of wee wooden houses. As I gazed up to Brooklyn they looked like a frozen cascade — seemingly about to topple like a stack of dominoes but clinging to the hill with ferocious will.

Back came the feeling I had on my first visit to Aro Valley — that I'd popped up in a setting from one of my childhood fairy tale books. This is where I want to live, I thought, and asked around about the valley. One of the earliest-settled Wellington suburbs, from the mid-1800s it housed a predominantly working-class community and some of the country's first brothels, morphing post-1950s into a haunt of artists, musicians and many a pod of flatting students.

A few months after my tiki-tour I moved into a big old green-and-white villa towering about halfway up Devon Street, that narrow bridge between university and the valley. From home I'd follow generations of students up the wheeze-making path to class or traipse down to Aro Street past my neighbours strumming guitars and sipping tea on their steps.

Often I wondered why dangerously narrow Devon Street wasn't one-way. When a car met

another winding around a nearly 180-degree turn, one had to back its way up the hill or reverse down the road to make way for the other (though occasionally an intrepid driver managed to manoeuvre his squealing tyres into a steeply-slumping, rare-in-Aro driveway).

SOON I DISCOVERED my favourite spot at the crossroads between the valley and the far reaches of town: Aro Park. At first glance just a hilly patch of grass, a few picnic tables, a pristine public toilet and a meandering path, but it was the hub of the valley and a perfect place for friends to gather and people watch.

present for friend Sylvia we erected her new tent in the middle of the park and in buoyant, wine-fuelled mood began rolling down the hill like primary-school kids — cheered on by passersby.

That easy friendliness draws me back. Whenever I boomerang back to Wellington on holiday from home-of-four-years Auckland I plan a catch-up in the park with the old crew. I still run into more people that I know in Aro Valley than I do on Auckland's Karangahape or Ponsonby Roads.

On an early summer visit I found the valley had lost some of the quirky character I love.



PENNY TOWNS

Time and again on golden summer evenings we'd head there, en route pooling gold coins to buy a bottle of sparkling wine from Patel's ("The Superette With Everything") and detouring past Te Aro Fish Supplies to pick up a bundle of famed-in-Wellington giant chunky chips.

Then to sprawl on the grassy knoll chomping and sipping as the Renaissance swordfighters' club, African drumming circle and other local clusters practised in the foreground, and ever-present pigeons pecked at the fringes of our food. Something always transpired, most amusingly the bespectacled boy so intrigued by the tai chi devotee posturing on the grass that he walked smack into a power pole.

Fed and "watered" we'd play frisbee or hacky sack, joined by passersby ambling along shortcut paths from The Terrace and Abel Smith Street. A few years ago as a 20th birthday

Well-off Wellingtonians have moved in, with property prices sky-rocketing and the number of houses for rent plummeting, driving close-to-the-breadline students and artists further out of town. The gentrification of Aro, one ex-dweller calls it.

Wandering down Aro Street I spy a clutch of upmarket shops and over at new eatery Deliaro, Lambton-Quay-type businessmen sip lattes in the sun.

Pleasingly op-shop outfits still outnumber the suits. (Friends and I surmise that many of the places perched on the twisting streets are still a little too damp and dark for the gentry.)

But the park remains the same. And no matter how firmly my compass points north I'm here again, sprawled on the hill one early autumn Sunday. The pigeons peck at a few stray chips — like me in no hurry to leave. ■