



# OLVESTON

PORTRAIT OF A HOME

JANE USSHER AND JOHN WALSH









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# OLVESTON

Olveston is an historic Dunedin house unique in Aotearoa New Zealand in the circumstances of both its provenance and its preservation. It was designed in the first years of the twentieth century, when New Zealand was still a colony, by England's then leading architect of country houses, Ernest George, for the Theomins, a family prominent in the commercial and cultural life of the city. For a generation, the house was a home for David Theomin, his wife, Marie, and their children, Edward and Dorothy. Throughout most of the succeeding century, though, Olveston has functioned, effectively at first, and then formally, as a museum — a museum whose subject is itself.

For more than 30 years, Olveston was conserved by Dorothy Theomin, its last inhabitant. Dorothy, who never married, was the final Theomin. After the death of her father in 1933 — her mother had died in 1926 and Edward, married but childless, had died in 1928 — Dorothy remained at Olveston until she died in 1966. Over that time, the house changed little. The advent of the Second World War hastened the discharge of Olveston's small platoon of live-in servants, although after the war Dorothy wasn't left alone in the house. At her invitation, a family — the McKays — moved in as companions.

As the years passed, some of Olveston's fixtures and fittings were replaced, and paintings and books were added, but essentially it remained much as it was in its Edwardian heyday. Dorothy became the custodian of that moment in her family's history, the keeper of the house and its collections and the

memories associated with them. Possession was a mutual bond: Olveston wouldn't let Dorothy go. She wasn't raised to have a career, but Olveston gave her a vocation.

Towards the end of her life, Dorothy confronted the inseparable issues of her family's legacy and the fate of Olveston. The Theomins had always been philanthropic. As she had discussed with her father, Dorothy decided to bequeath the house, its contents and its grounds to the city of Dunedin. She wanted Olveston to be preserved as a public art gallery or museum. Her gift was accepted, but only after a public campaign persuaded the fiscally cautious city council to overturn its initial rejection.

Without this reconsideration, Olveston, despite its core of committed supporters, might have been lost or, like many lesser Dunedin mansions that have been partitioned into rental flats, succumbed inexorably to the effects of exuberant student occupation (and long-term landlord neglect). In either case, only historic photographs and Ernest George's plans and drawings — few, but typically artful — would have suggested the house's architectural distinction, and the most tangible sign of the Theomins' existence would have been the small cluster of family headstones in Dunedin's Southern Cemetery. Instead, Olveston's future was safeguarded. The house has now been a museum, officially, for as long as it was a home. Held in trust for the city and accessible to the public, Olveston has become enshrined in the history of Dunedin, as Dorothy Theomin intended.

At this remove from Olveston's early days, it's understandable the house should be most closely



linked to its longest-surviving inhabitant. The connection was made explicit in the title of the only biography of a Theomin, Margery Blackman's 2007 book *Dorothy Theomin of Olveston*.

Inevitably, some pathos attaches itself to this nexus. Dorothy had an engaged and privileged life, but it's impossible not to have some sympathy for her later-years situation as the sole survivor of her small family. Not that Dorothy ever confessed to feeling sorry for herself. While she was generous to friends and supportive of numerous causes, she was matter of fact and unsentimental in many of her interactions. One commitment, though, ran very deep. Dorothy's filial piety was unwavering. She maintained Olveston in tribute to her parents, and in accord with her father's wishes.

As a museum, Olveston is evidence of the Theomins' material success and urbane sensibility, and also of the complexity that could characterise a colonial family's identity. The layering of affiliations was especially pronounced in a figure such as David Theomin, doubly diasporic through his European Jewish heritage and more immediate British origins, but also deeply committed to the city that had been so good for him.

It's usual to regard far-flung colonial settlements as cut off — British Empire laureate Rudyard Kipling gave a rhythm to remoteness when flattering 1890s Auckland as 'last, loneliest, loveliest, exquisite, apart' — but Olveston demonstrates how connected they could be. It was a node in a network, as much a part of the wider world as the mercantile businesses that paid for its construction and operation.



One of the arguments used to persuade Dunedin City Council to accept Dorothy Theomin's donation of Olveston was the property's evocation of a lost way of life. Dorothy herself may not have seen it quite that way: her focus, when it came to

posterity, was particular to her family, not generic, in favour of a class. But less nostalgically, or perhaps less deferentially, the preservation of the Theomins' home was also promoted in the interests of social-historical completeness. Olveston is certainly an extraordinary chapter in the Dunedin story. In their grand home up on Royal Terrace, the Theomins lived in a style far removed from popular experience. Reminiscing about David and Marie Theomins' participation in the busy cycle of early twentieth-century Dunedin upper-class hosting, the nine-course dinners with 18 guests and the 'at homes' with 200, Dorothy's life-long friend Brenda Bell (1891–1979) recalled the reaction of a 'new little maid' working at an Olveston dinner party. Bell remembered seeing the girl 'standing open-mouthed, just gazing in a trance'.

The young maid's demeanour registered the dimensions of the social divide in contemporary Dunedin, but her wonder was also testimony to the extent of the city's progress. In 1850, many of Dunedin's small band of first-wave settlers were huddled in huts near the foreshore. Half a century later, the city — population 52,000, as recorded in the 1901 New Zealand census — was unequally benefiting from a late-Victorian period of prosperity that, in retrospect, was a golden age. Dunedin's confidence, which, in volatile colonial manner, could slump as quickly as it could surge, had in fact probably peaked by the turn of the twentieth century.

By then, several iterations of the New Zealand census had recorded the city's steady slide down the anxiously scrutinised population rankings. In 1891, Dunedin was in second place behind Auckland and in 1901 it was also behind Christchurch; by 1911, it had fallen to fourth, after Wellington. Despite this incremental erosion of its demographic status, or perhaps because of it, Dunedin, in the years leading up to the First World War, retained its civic ambition. The very ornate railway station, which opened in 1906,











Brasch — was to build Manono, a substantial brick house designed by Mason & Wales.

With the Theomins resident in Royal Terrace, Edward started his education at the local primary school. He then spent several years at Otago Boys' High School. He was noted in reports of the school's sporting activities and may be the source of the cricket books in the Olveston library, although David's hosting of the English cricket team in 1930 hints at his respect for the game, or, at least, the status of its most prestigious team. (David's specification of a billiard room for Olveston, with a tournament-size table, suggests he shared the disposition to the sporty, if not necessarily athletic, interests typical of Edwardian gentleman.) By the end of 1901, Edward was working in his father's warehouse, training for a career in the family business, and Dorothy was coming to the end of her time at Braemar House, a small private girls' school in Dunedin.

At this juncture, David and Marie decided they would visit Britain. They had journeyed there before, in 1891, shortly after the death of David's mother in London, taking the children and a nurse with them. Their next excursion was to last much longer and include North America, Europe and Japan. In an era of slow and not unperilous travel, departure called for some ceremony. Even so, the scale of the Theomins' send-off was impressive. Valedictory events for David included a dinner at the Otago Club and a gathering at the synagogue. At the latter, he was hailed as 'the personification of those Jewish virtues for which Christians all over the world give us praise'. Marie, in absentia, was praised as 'a conscientious Jewess, always ready to alleviate distress wherever she might find it'. David was presented with a testimonial inscribed on vellum and bound in leather and wished well on his trip 'Home'. (The locution, as ever, was a clue to the deracinated condition of the colonial state of mind.)

David also threw his own goodbye party in

a downtown hall, inviting the employees of his three companies, D. Benjamin & Company, Michaelis, Hallenstein & Farquhar and the Dresden Piano Company. This, at least, was not a male-only occasion; the *Evening Star* noted the host 'chose the wiser and more enjoyable method of a party, thereby enabling wives and sweethearts to participate'. There was dining and dancing, interspersed with musical interludes and the reading of telegraphed best-wishes from distant company branches, and, at 1.30 a.m., the finale, a patriotic song requested by David himself.

The Dunedin staff presented their employer with a 'Bon Voyage' album, a souvenir now displayed at Olveston, featuring artwork from Robert Hawcridge (1866–1920), a talented local illustrator who later became principal of the Dunedin School of Art. An even more impressive gift came from Theomin managers in Wellington, a huia feather in a waka huia (treasure box) — also displayed at Olveston, in the Great Hall — commissioned from carver Jacob Heberley (Te Ātiawa, 1849–1906).

The Theomins' overseas sojourn — they were to be away for almost three years — was perceived as a cross between a holiday, a sabbatical, a business opportunity and an expedition. In a small city where everyone knew each other's business, courtesy in significant part of the exhaustive social columns in Dunedin's three daily newspapers, no one seemed to begrudge the family their enjoyment of such a leisurely trip that would be first class all the way. The feeling seemed to be that the Theomins had earned it. A little envy, of course, would be understandable. At the synagogue farewell, the rabbi wistfully congratulated David on 'the prospects of such a journey, with all its educative advantages and the associations it would excite in his mind'.

The Theomins did love travel, as is suggested by the collection of tourist guidebooks at Olveston. But there were other rationales for the trip. David



George & Yeates, detail of Olveston's loggia, 1903. *Dunedin City Council archives*

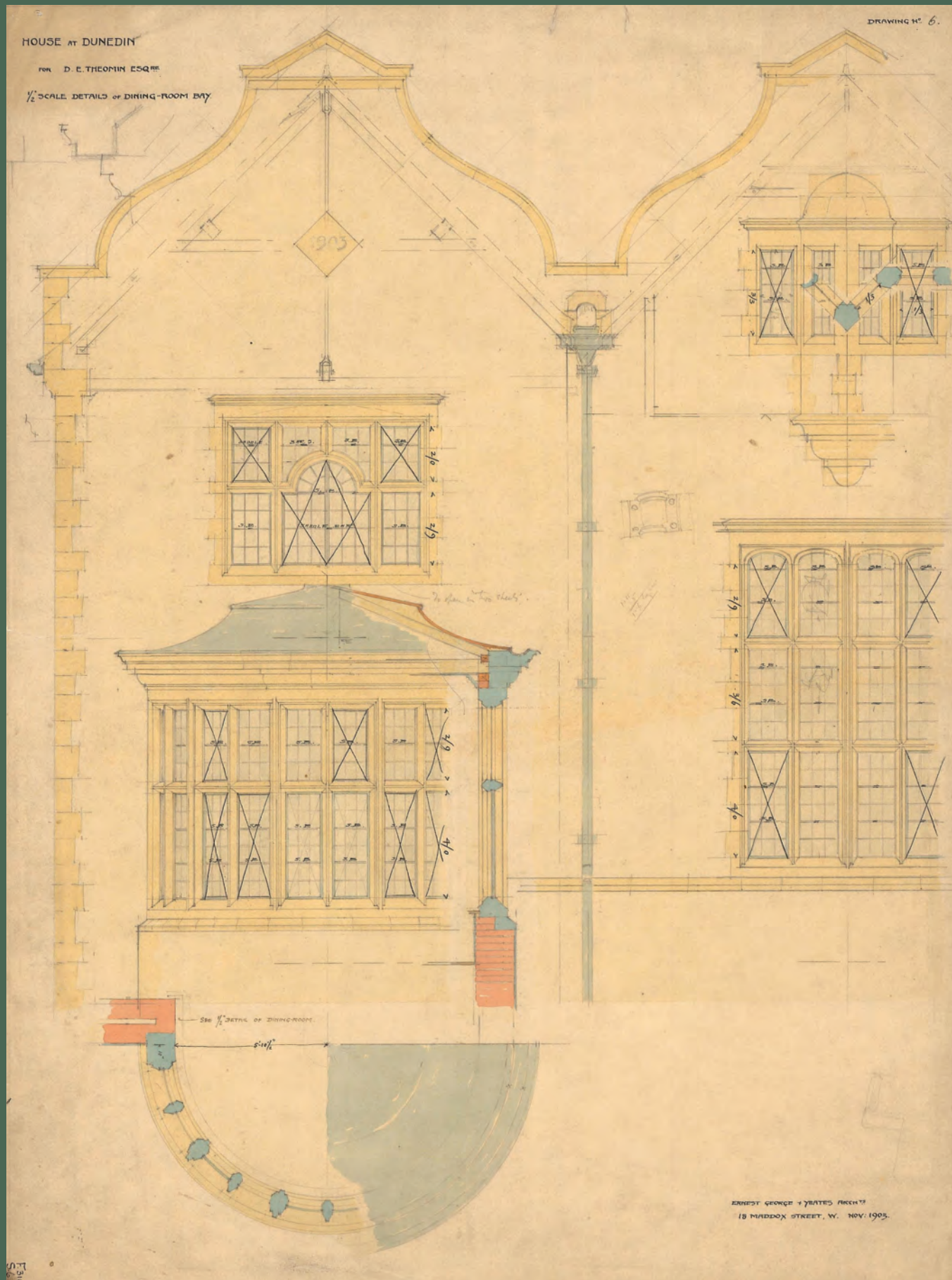


DRAWING N<sup>o</sup> 6.

HOUSE AT DUNEDIN

for D. E. THEOMIN ESQ RE

$\frac{1}{2}$ " SCALE DETAILS of DINING-ROOM BAY.

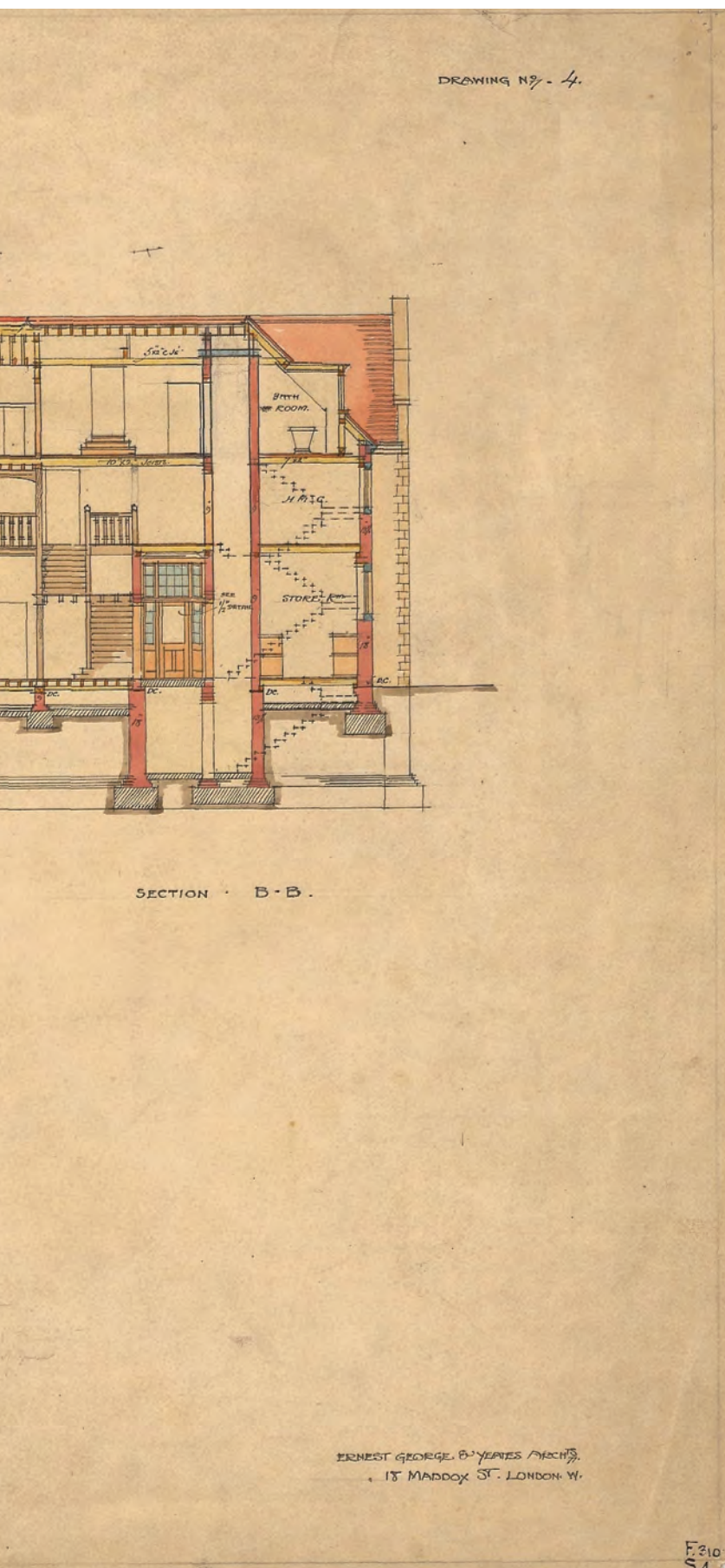


ERNEST GEORGE + YATES ARCHTS  
18 MADDOX STREET, W. NOV: 1903.









these Edwardian years. Take the reportage from 1906, for example, a year in which the progress of Olveston's construction could be observed by the Theomins from Avenal. And not just by them: 'no small interest has been taken by the surrounding neighbourhood and passers-by', reported the *Otago Witness*. (Young Dora de Beer, a Hallenstein descendant and friend of Dorothy, wrote in her diary that the Theomins' house 'is going to be a tremendous place', notwithstanding its 'ugly exterior'.)

In January, David attended the annual meeting of the Dunedin Public Art Gallery trustees, donating a painting while he was there, and a meeting of the Otago League, and Dorothy competed in the Otago Ladies Golf Club's monthly competition. In February, Marie and Dorothy holidayed in Queenstown and David was in Melbourne, meaning he missed the visit to Dunedin of an emissary of the Zionist International Organisation advocating for 'a legally secured [Jewish] home in Palestine'. The next month, Marie and Dorothy collected for the annual Ambulance Saturday appeal. In April, David attended the annual meeting of the Operatic Society, and Marie was a guest at two 'at homes', attending one in a 'brown tailor-made costume, brown furs and hat'.

In May, David attended, as a trustee or executive member, meetings of the Benevolent Association, Kindergarten Association, Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, Dunedin Liedertafel and Navy League, and donated £50 towards a new art gallery; Marie was elected as a vice-president of the Victoria League. In June, Marie chaired a meeting of the Victoria Convalescent Fund, was elected to the executive of the Otago League, staffed a stall, with Dorothy, at a fundraising bazaar for Dunedin Hospital, and went to the horse races at Wingatui, in the countryside west of the city. In July, David proposed a toast at 'a pretty Jewish wedding' and presented a retiring synagogue officeholder with 'a double gold sovereign purse and gold pencil case'.



The period between the completion of Olveston's construction and the First World War was probably the house's liveliest and, for the Theomin family, perhaps their happiest. David's businesses prospered and Marie devoted herself to the work of the Society for the Promotion of Health of Women and Children (soon known as the Plunket Society), the infants' welfare organisation founded by Dunedin doctor Truby King and of which she was honorary treasurer. The Theomins kept up a steady pace on the social treadmill of committee meetings, balls, dinner parties and 'at homes'.

The cost of such socialising must have been considerable. At an Olveston 'at home' in 1908, for example, the *Otago Witness* reported the house was decorated with ferns, palms and flowers; a musical programme ran through the afternoon; 'ices' and 'sweets' were 'partaken of freely'; and Marie Theomin and Dorothy appeared in new outfits, respectively a 'robe of ivory flowered crepe de chine' and a 'very dainty white silk garment' trimmed with white lace. The Theomins travelled to Melbourne, hosted exotic guests such as the Cherniavsky Trio, a famous ensemble of Ukrainian Jewish brothers, and in 1908 a father-and-son pair of champion Australian billiard players (the Olympic-size table getting professional-standard use), and continued to buy art and objects to add to Olveston's collections.

The family made trips to Aoraki Mount Cook, where Dorothy developed a love of mountaineering and alpine life, whether lived in bivouacs and huts, or in the convivial atmosphere of the Hermitage Hotel at Mount Cook and the Glacier Hotel at Franz Josef. She became a serious climber. Almost every year from the early 1910s to the early 1930s, she would spend a month or two in the Southern Alps, undertaking high-level treks and making around 50 significant ascents, usually guided by Alex or Peter Graham, legendary figures in New Zealand mountaineering. She was good friends with the Graham families for the rest of her life.

Mountainous South Westland was Dorothy's happy place. Literally: one memento of her climbing holidays is the 'Log of Joyful Days'. The little bound book of photographs and typescript pages is a charming record of a trip she made in 1914 with her friend Eleanor Joachim and Eleanor's cousin Dorothy Wimperis. In high spirits, the young women — Dorothy Theomin was then 25 — adopted nicknames for their excursion, respectively Kipper, Jester and Twinkler. Alex Graham appeared in the log as 'the Philosopher'. In the mountains, Dorothy was untroubled by asthma, and mountaineering, says Margery Blackman, offered her freedom and a sense of achievement. It was something that was 'purely hers', quite separate from 'the rather prim, organised life she had to live back with her parents'. The mountain hut, rudimentary and democratic, was the antithesis of Olveston.



After the war broke out, the Theomins' loyalty to empire kicked in. The family supported the fund-raising work of the Otago Patriotic and General Welfare Association and Victoria League, gave money towards Belgian relief, contributed to the Red Cross, and billeted nurses from an Australian hospital ship. David moved quickly to head off the threat to his business presented by the Germanophobia stoked by populist newspapers and 'patriotic' societies. It was not a good time to be in any way associated with Germany or its culture. In January 1915, the Dresden Piano Company took out nationwide newspaper advertisements announcing its name change to the Bristol Piano Company. 'The Shareholders and Directors are without exception, British born and bred,' the notices read, and there had never been 'one shilling of anything but British Capital invested in the business'.

The message seemed to get through, although

ABOVE: Dorothy Theomin with a climbing companion at the Haast Ridge Bivouac, Aoraki Mount Cook, 1913. *Olveston archive*

BELOW: David Theomin (seated centre), Dorothy Theomin (right) and mountain guide Peter Graham (in doorway) with companions at the Hooker Hut at Copland Pass in 1911. *Hocken Collections Uare Taoka o Hākena*













THE  
GREAT  
HALL







A spectacular room by any reckoning, the Great Hall, with its upper gallery, was modelled on similar rooms Ernest George created in his grand British country houses, albeit on a smaller scale. The massive south-facing windows convey a baronial air but the room is uniquely intimate and welcoming.

Striking features of the room are the bold acanthus-patterned hessian wall covering and plush-piled Turkish floor rug. The Great Hall is filled with the ceramics, brassware sculpture and other treasures collected by the Theomins in Europe and Asia, and major artworks acquired over time. These include works by leading British painters and one by Charles Goldie.

The Great Hall was the location of many parties and receptions, including Dorothy Theomin's nineteenth-birthday festivities in 1907, held not long after the family moved in. The gramophone near the massive staircase signals that by the 1930s the musical entertainment in this very musical family was provided by gramophone records.

























# THE DRAWING ROOM







Primarily Marie Theomin's entertaining domain, this elegant room is notable for its large collection of watercolours — many by significant British artists and two by family friend Frances Hodgkins — its cabinets of precious porcelain and silverware, its rugs and its Steinway, given to Dorothy for her eighteenth birthday and which is still in regular use. A vitrine holds small treasures from the Theomins' travels, including jewellery from the Middle East and a set of 18 scallop shells, each smaller than the next.

The room was well set up for afternoon teas and after-dinner gatherings, with a side table and a footrest alongside every chair. Servants could see whose teacup required replenishment by looking in the convex mirror.

During the day a soft light flooded the windows and at night the collection of chandeliers and lamps gave a warm glow.









































# THE DINING ROOM







































A photograph of a billiard room interior. The room features a large, arched window with a grid pattern and a central stained glass medallion. Below the window is a wooden billiard table. To the left of the table is a decorative wooden chair with a large, ornate wheel. To the right of the table is a wooden wall with a red, textured wallpaper. A long, thin object, possibly a pool cue, leans against the wall. The text "THE BILLIARD ROOM" is overlaid in white, serif capital letters.

# THE BILLIARD ROOM







This grand first-floor room with its rich red walls was a focus of after-dinner socialising at Olveston and has an East-meets-West aesthetic that must have fascinated guests. Its centrepiece is the Olympic-size billiard table, made by Burroughes & Watts Ltd of London, but mahjong could also be played in the nook created by the bay window and in the adjacent card room, whose furnishings must have taken the Theomins back to the time they spent in Morocco and Egypt. In staid 1907 Dunedin, this exotic approach to decor must have created quite a stir.

The family's interest in Japan is evident here in the two large carved cabinets filled with delicate cloisonné, ivory and jade objects and the attention-grabbing carved furniture.

The sense of a male club overlays all this: the framed cartoons and paintings of dogs and the retractable ceiling to let cigar smoke drift up and away mark this out as a masculine place. Dorothy, though, spent a great deal of time in the card room, using it as a more intimate sitting space.















