[*TALK TO CHA, 9 JULY 2019*]

Addington: Cars & the Decline of a Community

1. TITLE SLIDE

When I last spoke to this Association about Addington, in 2008, I talked about the suburb in a general way. Tonight I want to focus on a single topic –the impact of the growing use of the private motor car on Addington in the second half of the 20th century. I had trouble, now I know a lot more about Addington then I did in 2008, fixing on a single topic for this talk. A sometimes overlooked aspect of writing history is why historians choose particular topics to research? That raises the perennial question of bias. Historians have constantly to guard against allowing personal beliefs or convictions to affect their research and writing. But the influence of personal beliefs and convictions is also present in what subjects engage an historian’s interest in the first place. I have to admit that I chose the topic for tonight’s talk ‘Cars and the Decline of a Community’ partly because I think it is insane that in 2019 New Zealand is still building motorways and still spending billions of dollars on highways. Looking at the experience of Addington in the second half of the 20th century helps illustrate why I believe that.

With that card laid on the table, I do assure you that this talk will not be a rant about the effects of private car ownership on society and the environment but, I hope, a relatively detached discussion of the connection between the decline of community life in Addington in the second half of the 20th century and the city-wide explosion of private car ownership that occurred in the same decades.

The initiative that led to my writing a history of Addington came from the Addington Neighbourhood Association. The Association’s aim was to have a history of Addington written to help people living in Addington today identify with, and take pride in, their local community. That gave the project, from the outset, a strong focus on community, and started me thinking about the nature of the working-class community of Addington which defined the character of the suburb from the late 19th century until beyond the middle of the 20th. I chose the title *Local Lives* to indicate this was a major focus of the book.

2. PIC OF BOOK COVER

(Notice, given what is to come, that prominent in the picture are the bicycles which appear to be the proudest possessions of the two older children.)

I became satisfied as my research progressed that there had indeed been a strong, local, working-class community in Addington for close to a century. Many residents of Addington worked in local factories, notably the railway workshops; almost all bought their groceries in local, owner-operated shops, venturing downtown only when they wanted something special from the big department stores; their social lives were centred on a network of local societies and institutions, many of them church- or lodge-based; they played sport for local clubs.

In the second half of the 20th century these patterns of local living broke down. Local employment opportunities diminished. (The closure of the railway workshops in 1991 was the final nail in that coffin.) Residents of Addington began to shop at malls and supermarkets outside the suburb. (The ground was broken for the first suburban mall in Christchurch in 1965 in nearby Riccarton.) Local societies and clubs went into decline; most eventually disappeared. Church membership fell. The Addington Burgesses Association faded away. The Addington library closed.

This all coincided with an explosion in the use of private cars and a decline in the use of public transport and bicycles. Most long-distance freight shifted from rail to road and most long-distance passenger travel from trains to planes.

Addington was ‘hit’ by these changes like no other Christchurch suburb when new roads, to enable residents of other parts of Christchurch to move around the city by car, were built across the suburb and as Addington residents themselves became car-owners.

Before I talk about Addington specifically I want to make the obvious point that how people move about in a city affects that city’s physical form and the ways of life of its residents. The point may seem obvious, but surprisingly little has been written about the interaction between transportation and how Christchurch society has functioned. The study of the city’s transport history has been limited to descriptions of the different forms of transportation used at different times, most notably in that useful series *On the Move: Christchurch Transport through the Years*. There is also an extensive literature on transport planning in Christchurch, but it is mostly in the form of technical reports that are not readily accessible to people with a general interest in the history of the city.

I think it is useful, in terms of a broader understanding of the history of Christchurch, to consider the price Addington paid as a result of private cars and trucks becoming the primary ways people and goods moved around the city.

I should say here that I am not arguing that an increase in the ownership of private cars was the *only* or even the *primary* reason why the Addington community went into decline, simply suggesting that there is a link between the increase in car ownership and the decline of the Addington community.

Now, to get down at last to the actual history of Addington. People moved about the suburb from the late 19th century until about 1960 mostly by walking or riding their bicycles. These modes of transport enabled them to get to work, to local shops, to school or to the suburb’s several halls to attend social functions.

Addington came into existence in the 1860s when the southern railway was built. But very few Addington residents, in the next hundred years, used trains to get about in their daily lives, even though Addington’s economic and social history was closely linked for that century with the railway workshops and other Addington workplaces that depended on rail.

What they did do, as I’ve already suggested, was ride their bicycles or walk.

3. PIC OF BILLY ROWE WITH HIS BICYCLE

Billy Rowe owned a forge where the Addington Coffee Co-op is now and lived on Lincoln Road further from town. For years he was a familiar figure on Lincoln Road, riding to and from work.

4. PIC OF ENTRANCE TO WORKSHOPS

Until the 1950s many of the employees at the railway workshops also rode their bikes to work. There was a double-deck cycle stand just inside the Lowe Street entrance to the workshops. Several people I spoke to who lived in Addington in the 1940s and 1950s remembered ‘rivers of cyclists’ on streets near the workshops at the start and end of each working day.

5. PIC OF CANON BEAN

Canon Bean was vicar of St Mary’s Addington from 1892 until 1933. When he retired it was observed that in all those years ‘neither the motor-bicycle nor the motor-car has been successful in alienating his affection for the push-bicycle’.

When Lang Consedine, a member of Sacred Heart Addington and employee at the railway workshops, built his own house on Edinburgh Street in the 1940s he used his bicycle to get materials to the site, tying 4 x 2s along the bar and balancing bags of cement on the handlebars.

It is harder to illustrate extent to which residents of Addington walked. But walk they did – especially children to school and housewives to the shops. One picture which illustrates the importance of walking in Addington is the footbridge over the railway line at the Addington station.

6. PIC OF PEDESTRIAN OVERBRIDGE AT STATION

The footbridge gave access to the station’s island platform; it was also an important shortcut for those walking between Lincoln Road and Moorhouse Avenue. When people stopped walking, or catching trains, the footbridge disappeared.

7. PIC OF TRAM

For their rare trips to other parts of Christchurch (mostly downtown, to shop at the department stores or go to the movies) they used public transport, which until the early 1950s meant trams. There was a passenger tram service along Lincoln Road from 1882 until 1953.

Several people who remembered Addington in the 1940s and 1950s mentioned in interviews that when people walked, cycled or rode the trams, Addington’s streets were the ‘living rooms’ of urban life. The streets were social spaces, where people paused to chat with neighbours and local children played.

I want to pause here to mention that long before car ownership became almost universal, through the years that people mostly walked or rode their bicycles, Addington had experience of what was to come. Once a year, in November, Lincoln Road became congested in a way that only became usual on other city streets later in the 20th century. During Show or Carnival Week thousands of people from elsewhere in Christchurch flocked to Addington to attend the show or the races at the trotting course.

8. PIC OF LINCOLN ROAD CROSSING

In the 1920s increasing numbers of motor cars were added to the congestion on Addington streets during show week. In 1922 one of the city’s first traffic jams brought cars on Whiteleigh Avenue, from which there was an entrance to carparking on the show grounds, to a standstill.

9. PIC OF PARKING ON WHITELEIGH AVENUE

In 1923 a reporter counted 1,084 cars parked at the show grounds and a further 798 at the race course.

10. CARS PARKED AT SHOW GROUNDS 1923

Four years later the Tramways Board noted a decline in the number of passengers on the Lincoln Road trams on race days. The chairman remarked that he had never seen more cars gathered in one place than on the grounds of the race course and on the streets around it prompting another board member to declare ‘It is the motor cars that are killing us.’.

11. PARKING AT RACECOURSE

Years before the explosion in the use of private cars so affected the suburb Addington had earlier experience of the impacts of increasing use of private motor cars.

After World War 2 these impacts became greater and greater as, through the 1950s and 1960s, more and more people living in Christchurch bought cars and gave up walking or riding their bikes. One result of this development was the construction of new highways across Addington.

In the 1950s planners in Christchurch realised that if the increasing number of private cars was to be accommodated the city’s road network would have to be upgraded. In 1959 the Christchurch Regional Planning Authority studied traffic in Christchurch. The Authority published the results of this study in 1965.

12. PIC OF COVER OF *TRAFFIC IN A NZ CITY*

The information gained in the study prompted planners in Christchurch to conclude that, in an age of near-universal ownership of private cars and of nearly total reliance on trucks to move goods, only motorways would allow traffic to flow freely and efficiently around the city. The planners drew up a Master Transportation Plan for Christchurch which was made public in 1962.

I note in passing here that the Plan assumed that (to quote from the Foreword of *Traffic in a New Zealand City*) ‘there is little doubt that the flood of motor cars will continue to increase and that, come what may, it will change our city and our way of life’. That assumption – that there was no alternative to expanding the road network to accommodate low-occupancy private motor cars – has underpinned most transportation planning in Christchurch ever since, at least until the construction of the cycling network since the earthquakes. But I’ll back off from pursuing this further lest I stray too far from being an historian into becoming an advocate of cycling and public transport.

The 1962 Master Transportation Plan provided for major motorways in Christchurch.

13. MAP SHOWING MOTORWAYS OF 1962 PLAN

The northern motorway ran from the north side of the city, through eastern St Albans then along the line of Barbadoes Street to link up with the southern motorway in Sydenham. There was also to be an expressway running from a Fendalton Road, across North Hagley Park, and along the line of Salisbury Street to Avonside. The plan also envisaged a traffic bridge across the Avon by the boatsheds to connect Antigua Street with Rolleston Avenue.

The proposed southern motorway ran right across Addington.

14. MAP OF LAND DESIGNATED FOR SOUTHERN MOTORWAY

Had it been built, this motorway would have led to the loss of a very large number of houses on Jerrold, Macaulay, Ruskin and Burke Streets and would have cut Addington in two. The impact would have been far more serious than the impact of the actual road works that went ahead – the Brougham Street expressway and the realignment of Barrington Street.

Before I talk about these projects, I want to backtrack briefly. Congestion on Riccarton Road, caused by traffic coming into Christchurch from the south, became a problem between the world wars.

Solutions proposed in the 1920s and 1930s included new roads across Addington south of the railway line or along the transmission reserve, beneath the lines bringing power from Lake Coleridge to the Addington substation. Neither of these plans went ahead.

In the 1950s congestion on Riccarton Road was finally relieved by the Blenheim Road project. Blenheim Road ran originally only from Division Street to Hansons Lane. In the 1950s the road was extended at both ends, out to the Sockburn roundabout and to Deans Avenue, and widened to four lanes. The project was completed in 1957.

15. PIC OF BLENHEIM ROAD OVERBRIDGE BEING BUILT

Blenheim Road was on the northern side of Addington; its ‘improvement’ in the 1950s had relatively little effect on the suburb, though some houses were lost. But the improvement of Blenheim Road anticipated later projects which had a much greater effect on Addington.

The work on Blenheim Road was completed before publication of the Master Transportation Plan. When the plan was made public a decade of controversy began. Most of the controversy centred around the ‘road across the park’ and the traffic bridge across the Avon by the boatsheds.

Concern about this bridge, and about the scale of the motorways, prompted the formation of a City Planning Study Group (which was the forerunner of the Christchurch Civic Trust). This group persuaded the City Council to engage the most eminent British traffic planner of the time, Colin Buchanan, to review the Master Transportation Plan.

Buchanan obliged the City Planning Study Group by criticising the proposed traffic bridge linking Antigua Street and Rolleston Avenue, but he accepted the basic assumption of the Plan – that New Zealand was ‘a country of the motor car’ and that the car would dominate the city’s transportation system for the foreseeable future. He endorsed the Master Transportation Plan in principle and declared he could see no alternative to building the ‘road across the park’. The plan to build this road was only abandoned when Pickering defeated Guthrey in the 1971 mayoral election.

I may seem to be straying here rather far from Addington. But I wanted to make the point that in the public debate through the 1960s on the 1962 Master Transportation Plan what most people ignored was that building the motorways would have significant and harmful effects on Addington, Sydenham and St Albans.

Some critics of the Plan did recognise that these suburbs would be badly affected. Even Buchanan acknowledged that building the motorways would cause hardship. The need for more space for traffic movements meant, he wrote, that properties would have to be acquired and that people would suffer. But he clearly thought this was a price worth paying to solve the city’s traffic problems.

Buchanan rejected the Antigua Street traffic bridge on the grounds that ‘environmental areas’, like Rolleston Avenue, should be protected from through traffic, but through the 1960s there was scant recognition from anyone that places like Addington, Sydenham and St Albans too were ‘living environments’ that needed protection.

The chief critic of Wellington’s urban motorway, W. B. Sutch, did address the social repercussions on building motorways in his 1965 booklet *Wellington A Sick City*. He mentioned the uprooting of long-established residents, the cutting off of residents from their shops, of children from their schools and of congregations from their churches – all of which Addington suffered when major road improvements went ahead in the suburb. But Sutch’s primary concerns were congestion and carparking in the central city.

In the 1970s in Christchurch Richard Thompson, an academic and Heathcote County councillor, became a vigorous critic of transport planning in Christchurch. Thompson was concerned that Heathcote County was not getting ‘value for money’ from the contribution it was having to make to support transport planning. But he also chastised planners and officials for not being aware that implementation of the Master Transportation Plan would destroy community life in the areas in which the motorways were to be built.

In 1973 he wrote ‘The pattern of long-established relationships among mutually acceptable and congenial neighbours in the older settled areas is one of the first casualties of motorway planning.’ ‘These are neighbourhoods’ he went on ‘where there is someone to talk to, information to be swapped [and] … small shopkeepers who know their customers.’

Thompson’s noting that neighbourhoods of this sort would be damaged by road works was an accurate anticipation of what happened in Addington when the Brougham Street expressway was built.

After publication of the Master Transportation Plan in 1962 the Regional Planning Authority undertook a ‘Second Transport Study’ which led to the urban motorways being abandoned in favour of upgrading existing roads.

16. TRAFFIC PLANNING MAP WHICH REPLACED MTP MAP

This development was a double-edged sword for Addington. It was spared the huge disruption that would have resulted from construction of the southern motorway, but two of the alternative solutions to cope with ever-increasing traffic volumes had significant effects in Addington.

The first of these was the construction of the Brougham Street expressway. The second was the construction of a through route in western Addington along Barrington Street and Whiteleigh Avenue.

17 & 18. MAPS WHICH SHOWS ADDINGTON’S ROADS 1970 & 2016

Work on the Brougham Street expressway began in 1971. The four-lane, divided highway from Waltham Road to Barrington Street was completed by 1979. At the Addington end, Brougham Street was extended from where it original ended at Strickland Street, along the lines of South Crescent Road and Jerrold Street (both of which no longer exist).

A decade after the Brougham Street expressway was built another disruptive roading project went ahead on the western side of Addington. Between 1986 and 1991 the northern end of Barrington Street was realigned and Whiteleigh Avenue was extended across the railway line. The impact of this project was similar to, though smaller than, the impact of construction of the Brougham Street expressway.

Both these projects saw Addington lose a significant number of houses. A whole block disappeared in the south-eastern corner of Addington when Brougham Street was extended.

19. PIC OF THE ‘LOST BLOCK’ OF HOUSES

Many more houses along, mainly, South Crescent Road were also cleared away for the expressway and the intersection of South Crescent Road with Selwyn Street was completely transformed.

20. PIC OF SELWYN STREET/SOUTH CRESCENT ROAD BEFORE

When Barrington Street was realigned about 60 houses were lost and Addington Park lost land.

21. PIC OF BARRINGTON STREET WORK AT THE TIME

22. AERIAL OF AREA THEY WERE WORKING IN

23. PIC OF THAT LOCATION TODAY

Apart from the loss of houses resulting from both projects, the Brougham Street expressway cut Addington school off from the suburb’s main residential areas.

24. PIC OF ROAD IN FRONT OF SCHOOL TODAY

The number of dwellings lost when these two project went ahead was low relative to Addington’s entire housing stock, but a large number of people were displaced. The effects of such displacement on individuals’ lives was something I neglected in the history of Addington. Richard Thompson in 1973 did discuss the impact, in Waltham, of the effects on individuals as well as on community life of a considerable number of people being forced from homes in which they had lived most of their lives, among familiar neighbours.

The displacement of many residents by roading projects in Addington shook the remaining residents’ confidence in the suburb and contributed to a perception that Addington was a suburb in decline. The population of the suburb became increasingly transient.

The Addington library, which had opened with strong community support in 1919, was obliged to close in 1971, when city council policies on libraries changed. The library’s committee acknowledged that the popularity of television had contributed to a loss of members but also, in the minutes of its last meeting, attributed falling membership to the more widespread ownership of cars. It also noted that the impending construction of the Brougham Street expressway threatened a further loss of subscribers. The committee’s last meeting ‘closed on a note of sadness’.

Many of the people I interviewed while researching the history of Addington commented that life in Addington changed when the Brougham Street expressway was built. The road, they observed, brought noise, pollution and danger to the suburb and made it a less appealing place to live.

25. TRAFFIC ON BROUGHAM STREET TODAY

In resident surveys undertaken in the early 21st century, long after the expressway had been constructed, traffic on highways was a major cause of concern, second, in a survey in 2003, only to burglaries. Traffic had also increased on Lincoln Road as Halswell and Oaklands became commuter suburbs. But the perennial concern was Brougham Street, especially the safety of elderly pedestrians and school children at its intersection with Selwyn Street.

The story of the improvement of road access into Christchurch from the south didn’t end with the construction of the Brougham Street expressway. The expressway originally ended at Barrington Street ‘on grade’. Beyond Barrington Street the Southern Arterial was built in the early 1980s as an elevated highway to Curletts Road. This Southern Arterial channelled more traffic onto Brougham Street, to the further detriment of Addington.

This century, this Southern Arterial has been increased to four lanes and the Southern Motorway been built beyond Curletts Road. This has further magnified the impact on Addington of the Brougham Street expressway which the suburb first felt in the 1970s.

26. MAP OF CURRENT SOUTHERN MOTORWAY

Look where the thick red line of the Southern Motorway ends. It is channelling more and more traffic across Addington. The Brougham Street Expressway is now to be upgraded, which will further increase the impact of through traffic on southern Addington.

I can’t resist here an aside here. Much of the additional traffic being funnelled across Addington comes from Rolleston. The plan to develop Rolleston as a satellite town drawn up by the Labour Government in the early 1970s included a high-speed rail connection between Rolleston and Christchurch. But in 1974 the incoming National Government scrapped the Rolleston scheme.

Had the rail connection been built, Addington would have been spared much of the disruption that has resulted over the decades from the construction of roads to cope with the cars and trucks approaching Christchurch from the south.

To return to the construction of the Brougham Street expressway and the realignment of Barrington Street in the 1970s and 1980s, I was surprised, as I researched Addington’s history, that I did not find much evidence of local opposition to the southern motorway of the 1962 Master Transportation Plan or to construction of the Brougham Street expressway. The resignation evident in the minutes of the last meeting of the library committee seems to have been widespread. I think there was more vigorous opposition in St Albans to the designation of land in that suburb for the northern motorway of the Master Transportation Plan. St Albans did not suffer the same level of disruption from actual highway projects as Addington but the designation of land for the northern motorway remained in force until 1994 which subjected residents of St Albans to a long period of uncertainty.

Residents of Addington may simply have felt powerless in the face of the traffic planning juggernaut. Richard Thompson observed in 1973 that the urban motorways of the 1962 Master Transportation Plan were located in areas in which the residents were older, less affluent and less influential politically than the residents of other parts of the city. Those worst affected by the proposed motorways were, Thompson observed, the ‘people who are least able to fight back … [who] … cannot afford to pay first-class lawyers to fight for them’.

The lack of opposition to construction of the Brougham Street expressway may have also reflected that by the 1970s the working-class community of Addington had already been weakened by other changes – the advent of television (as the library committee noted), the decline of interest in organised religion and Addington residents themselves becoming car-owners.

Which brings me to the last topic I want to discuss. Suggesting Addington was a victim of road works overlooks that Addingtonians were to some extent the authors of their own suburb’s misfortunes because they themselves became car-owners.

Ironically, given that Addington suffered so severely from roading improvements in the 1970s and 1980s, residents of the suburb were probably slower to acquire cars than the residents of other, more affluent, parts of the city. But by the late 20th century levels of car ownership in Addington were only a little lower than levels in other suburbs.

As I observed earlier in this talk, when residents of Addington, taking advantage of ‘the convenient car’, gave up walking, cycling or catching trams or buses, they became less likely to work in the suburb and have workmates living nearby, less likely to socialise in local pubs, less likely to belong to the same church or lodge as their neighbours and less likely to shop close to home.

Noticeably in the later 20th century, the shops along Lincoln Road changed from stores meeting the daily needs of local residents to the restaurants and speciality stores of today, which serve residents of other suburbs as well as residents of Addington. Fewer casual encounters with neighbours in the streets or at local shops or meeting places contributed to a dissipation of a sense of belonging to a local community.

I hope my suggestion that the decline of the old local, working-class community in Addington in the later years of the 20th century can be attributed at least in part to the roading projects and to Addington residents becoming car owners is at least worth taking seriously.

I want to end with a handful of pictures that illustrate the changes that have overtaken Addington as a result of the transition from locals walking, cycling and using public transport to everyone in the city using cars.

27. PIC OF WORKERS AT WORKSHOPS

Addington was once a suburb where local men earned reasonable livings and produced goods in workplaces close to their homes. Workers like these at the railway workshops once built locomotives and railway rolling stock. Now where the workshops stood until the 1990s, people drive from all over the city to buy imported goods at Tower Junction.

28. PIC OF 1908 BLOCK OF SHOPS

For many years local people bought household supplies and sourced services from local shopkeepers and business people who had premises in this substantial block, built in 1908, that stood on Lincoln Road. But what occupies the site today?

29. PIC OF BURGER KING

The patrons of the Burger King are not locals shopping for their daily needs but people, most from outside Addington, arriving by car to buy fast-food.

30. SOUTH CRESCENT ROAD WITH TRAM AND BIKES

Finally, there is this picture which was used on the flyer advertising this talk. The picture allows me to acknowledge again the bias to which I admitted at the start and which prompted me to choose the impact of near-universal car ownership on Addington as a topic for this talk.

The picture was taken in 1949 on South Crescent Road which was swallowed up by the Brougham Street expressway in the 1970s. I have to admit that the photo was taken on the last day of the year, during the Christmas/New Year break. The scene is calmer and more peaceful than it surely was on a working day. Even so … I can’t help thinking that Christchurch was a better place to live when most of us caught trams or rode bikes rather than dashing to and fro in our private cars as we do today. Addington today would be a very different place than it became if we hadn’t all taken to our cars in the 1960s. Dare I say a better place?