

## PAM WILSON: A STALWART BATTLER FOR CANTERBURY HERITAGE



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“With her passing, yet another earthquake has struck Canterbury’s architectural heritage!” So wrote Peter Richardson when he learned of the loss of Pamela Wilson, 80, in February, appropriately at the Ngaio Marsh Retirement Village. Pam Wilson was a doughty fighter to preserve the very best of Christchurch-Otautahi and Westland’s built heritage. Wilson was appointed the first Southern Regional Officer for the NZ Historic Places Trust (Canterbury) in 1989 and served in that role with great distinction until declining health sadly forced her retirement in 2007. In that year Wilson received two distinguished accolades for her resolute professionalism: a Christchurch City Council Civic Award and, from the Governor-General, the New Zealand Order of Merit (MNZM) for noted service to heritage conservation in Canterbury-Westland. As Robyn Burgess has remarked: “Pam was an absolute legend and her deep knowledge, kind and gentle humour, curiosity and dedication is

widely recognised, both within Heritage New Zealand/Pouhere Taonga and in the wider community.”

Wilson’s exemplary dedication to the NZHPT (as it was) began in the early 1980s on the Women’s/Promotions Committee of the Christchurch branch with Eve Harding, Jenny Hamilton and others. In her Regional Officer role, Wilson grew the profile of the HPT and contributed hugely as a female Hercules battling adroitly for heritage restoration and conservation, serving in a string of small inner city offices and along the way mentoring young like-minded conservators in the subtle art of researching and registering often unappreciated built structures. Wilson worked closely in her role with Dr Anna Crighton, and Jenny May and the City Council Heritage team and, in Burgess’ words, was “a very astute negotiator and would front to developers and tell them how important historic places were.” Wilson was instrumental in listing and saving many iconic buildings and places, including the Nurses’ Memorial Chapel, the Ngaio Marsh House, and the Edmonds factory gardens. She attended many hearings where she was a forceful advocate and worked closely, as a dedicated and meticulous heritage stalwart, with CCC staff to create the monumental two-volume directory of all key heritage structures for the City Plan. Sadly, she lived to see many of these structures destroyed or demolished in the post-2010 quake sequence; yet, being a positive person, Wilson rejoiced in what was able to be saved. As Burgess noted, Wilson “was on ‘a cup of tea and biscuit’ status with all of the Category 1 owners of Canterbury’s large homesteads.” She was a staunch ally and mover in our cultural heritage sector as a skilled architectural historian, ably supported by husband John. They were a kind of power couple, both being absolutely dedicated to promoting the best from our past and flying ‘wing to wing’.

Born in 1937, an only child, to Edward (a teacher) and Georgie Pankhurst in Invercargill, Pam was educated at South Otago High School and later Southland Girls’ (where she was accredited UE). Miss Pankhurst started her career as a supply pupil-teacher, aged only 17, at Waimahaka School for a year, being two days’ too young to enrol at the Dunedin Teachers’ College. When she finally did so, Pamela Pankhurst met a young trainee, John Wilson, there and eventually they married in 1961, with Pam following him to his work in primary schools at St Clair and as the sole charge school at Hyde. While training as a teacher, Pam studied some arts papers at Otago University and was delighted to encounter, in English 001, *Died in the Wool*, Ngaio Marsh’s 1944 detective novel set at The Grampians station in Central Otago. A deep fascination with Marsh ensued, and this was augmented when, much later, Wilson started researching the architecture of Marsh’s uncle, the Arts and Crafts architect Samuel Hurst Seager—a quest which she followed for over twenty years and which was intended for a doctorate. Wilson listed “Marton Cottage”, Dame Ngaio’s family home (designed by Seager), as a Category 1 structure on the HPT Register and then, from 1992, ably assisted Colin McLachlan, Helen Holmes, Jim Espie and others in establishing the Ngaio Marsh House and Heritage Trust and then planning for a Centenary Symposium on the great Dame in 1995. Wilson ardently promoted the retention of the Ngaio Marsh House as a house museum and worked zealously to support others (the writer included) in developing what was hoped would become a jewel in the local HPT crown. Wilson also rejoiced in serving on the Riccarton House and Bush Trust for many years and worked closely with Charles Deans and Rob Dally in the careful redecoration of Riccarton House and overseeing its grounds conservation planning. Wilson also worked on researching the Kate Sheppard House in Ilam after her retirement and stayed an active and deeply valued member of the Ngaio Marsh Trust Board until 2015 as her health faltered. She took steps to maintain a plateau of professional heritage practice on that site.

But well before all of these achievements, back in 1971, seeking new challenges and career focus, the Wilson family had moved to Christchurch, and the son of an insurance client of John’s led to Pam’s very diffident enrolment, in 1975, at the University of Canterbury (now a united entity in its

llam setting) to study for a BA degree, finally majoring in history and art history. Dr T.L. Rodney Wilson encouraged the now middle-aged mother to seize this International Women's Year challenge, and "Pam took to academia like a cat to catnip" (as her youngest daughter put it), receiving stunning grades. Before long, Wilson was a tutor in History and Art History, and the late Jonathan Mane-Wheoki quickly arranged for the creation of an M.A. degree to keep her within the Art History department fold. Wilson was, therefore, a trailblazer in gaining the first MA in Art History at UC so that her thesis was the first completed in Art History at Canterbury, and it "served as a model for many subsequent students", according to one of her mentors, Professor Ian Lochhead. For that MA she researched the work of a little-known colonial architect of the Victorian era—Samuel Charles Farr. Lochhead recalls that "At the time she began her research, Farr was known as the architect of the Normal School but not much else. By the time her thesis was submitted Pam had recreated the whole trajectory of his career and identified countless Farr-designed buildings throughout Christchurch and Canterbury. Pam was also a very generous researcher, making the fruits of her discoveries available to anyone who needed them." She was a tireless encourager and exemplary role model, even in the face of set-backs, and her genius was that she humanized heritage.

Daughter Marisa has justly observed that while her mother was small in stature and gentle in nature, "this didn't define her. She had a core of inner strength and determination that allowed her to achieve more than she ever thought was possible." She "dug, deep, she pushed her agenda, she influenced people." Pam Wilson was large of spirit and a force for positive social good in Christchurch, serving her adopted city with immense dedication. Her contributions to recording, and where possible, saving our built environment were many and significant. This city and region owe much to the skilful and tireless exertions of Pamela Wilson.

*Pam Wilson was born on 2 March 1937 and is survived by husband John, son Mark and daughters Debra and Marisa. She died in Christchurch on 11 February 2018.*

**BRUCE HARDING**