

The Robert Martin Ltd
Decorating and Stained Glass business, Wellington, New Zealand.

Robert Martin (c.1837-1910)¹ arrived in New Zealand in 1859 and began business as a painter, paper hanger, and decorator. In 1863 he established the firm Robert Martin Ltd² in Manners street Wellington where, over a forty year period, he gained the reputation as Wellington and districts eminent decorating house dealing in all manner of wallpapers and decorating supplies. In the 1890's he expanded the business to include the design and production of lead-light and stained glass windows. By the late 1890 he had established a dedicated department for the purpose where he employed experts in all aspects of the craft who had English and Australian experience³. His chief designer and stained glass artist was Charles Edward Carter (1862-1908)⁴ who headed the department which won a first prize for stained glass windows at the 1898-1899 Auckland Exhibition⁵.

[New Zealand Herald, Vol XXXVI, Issue 10956, 10th January 1899, page 6.](#)

"AUCKLAND EXHIBITION..."

"...NEW ZEALAND STAINED GLASS."

"Mr. R. Martin, of manners-street, Wellington, shows an interesting exhibit, in the shape of three stained glasses, which reflect great credit upon the exhibitor. The whole of the exhibit was manufactured from the raw material, being designed, painted, fired, and leaded on the premises. In the manufacture of church and domestic leaded lights, Mr. Martin certainly occupies a very high position if the quality of the work exhibited at the Exhibition is any criterion."

[Evening Post New Zealand, Volume LVII, Issue 30, 6th February 1899, page 6.](#)

"AUCKLAND EXHIBITION

WELLINGTON AWARDS.

[BY TELEGRAPH - PRESS ASSOCIATION.]

AUCKLAND, 4th FEBRUARY.

In connection with the Exhibition, a first award has been given to Mr. Robert Martin, of Wellington, for stained glass windows..."

[Auckland Star, Volume XXX, Issue 39, 16th February 1899, page 6.](#)

"JUDGING AT THE EXHIBITION. LIST OF AWARDS"

"...Robert Martin, Wellington, 1st award for stained glass window..."

[Evening Post, New Zealand, Vol LIX, Issue 125, 28 May 1900, page 2.](#)

WELLINGTON INDUSTRIES

"REPORT of the Visiting Committee of the Wellington Industrial Association on its visit to the works of Mr. R. Martin, painter, Paperhanger, Lead Light Manufacturer, etc.:-

Wellington, 7th March, 1900.

To the President and Members of the Executive Committee, Wellington Industrial Association.

Gentlemen – Your committee begs to report that it has to this day visited the works of Mr. Robert Martin, Lead Light Manufacturer, painter, paperhanger, etc. The entrance to the factory and store is by way of a passage from Manners-street, which is most tastefully adorned with pot plants, creepers, and flowering shrubs. At the end of this passage we came upon the bulk stores containing very large supplies of paints, oils, and varnish. We next were shown the paper rooms with their thousands of rolls of all kinds of wall papers, and the moulding-room with its hundreds of thousand feet of picture mouldings, from the plainest to the most elaborate. Thence to the workrooms proper, where we were shown the rooms devoted to the mounting and framing of pictures and the manufacture of sketching blocks and canvasses (on frames) for oil painting. The frames for these canvasses are made from American pine, cut into strips of the required dimensions. Our local timbers, unfortunately, are none of them suitable for this work. Some very ingenious machinery for making these – and, in fact, all kinds of frames – is used in this work. From here we went to the second and by far the more interesting part of the establishment – namely, that devoted to the lead-light. Everything to do with this is now centred in a newly erected two-storey brick building at the back of the premises just described. The dimensions of each of the two floors are 53ft x 30ft. The ground floor is used for the storage of the great sheets of glass of various colours and designs required in this work. It will not be out of place to remark here that the glass and the sheet lead are the only two parts of the finished article not made on the premises. On this floor, too, is the furnace and kiln for burning the colours into the glass, in the manner that will be explained later on. Upstairs are the designers' rooms and the rooms for the workers in lead, glass, cutting, staining, and fitting. After a brief look at the glass and the kiln, we went upstairs and found the designer at work on a design for embossed windows for the new Bank of New Zealand building. The design is first of all drawn upon paper and is then transferred to a sheet of glass by means of a black. The pattern then stands out clear from the otherwise blackened surface. It is then treated with a powerful solution of hydrofluoric acid, which eats into the glass and permanently fixes the pattern. If in addition to embossing pure and simple it is desired to stain the glass, a further process is necessary. For this the required colouring is done by means of a metallic paint. In this connection a curious story is told of the way the beautiful yellow colour so well known in stained glass work was first obtained. It appears that very many years ago members of the old Guild of Glass workers wore a uniform adorned with silver buttons. One day a worker lost a button off his coat; later on, on drawing his work from the kiln, he found the button on one of the sheets of glass, and all around it was imprinted a colour – blue when placed on an opaque surface, but a lovely yellow when held to the light. Thus accidentally was discovered a process which exists to this day, only instead of silver buttons half-crowns are now pressed into the service of the stainer. To proceed with our description, however, the next step after the application of the mineral paint is the burning. The prepared glass is placed in the kiln and subjected to a heat almost sufficiently intense to melt the glass. This indelibly fixes the colours for all time. This operation requires the very greatest care.

The next thing calling for attention is the lead, for you must have lead as well as stained glass before you get your window. This process is very interesting. Sheet and bulk lead (no tea lead is used) is melted into castings about 18 inches wide, and [?] inch thick: each casting is then cut into four pieces, and each piece forced through

a compressing machine, which turns it out into what is technically known as a “cam” – a “cam” being a strip of lead 4 feet long and shaped very like a diminutive train rail. Into the narrow groove on each side of the “cam” the pieces of coloured and stained glass are fitted.

The next operation is the cutting of the glass to all the various shapes for the work in hand. The paper design is here called into play again. This time it is numbered in every part, the number signifying the colour of the glass to be used. The cutter with his diamond then cuts out all the various-shaped pieces required for the work. This is a most delicate operation, as the least fault in the cutting gives too much play in the frame and causes leakage. Then comes the sorter, who pieces everything together, like a Chinese puzzle-solver; and now we have the glass in the exact shapes and colour wanted; we have the “cams” ready to bind them together, and the whole is passed now to the fitter, who piece by piece builds the window up, surrounding each piece of glass with a piece of the “cam,” soldering it up as he goes along. Then when he has got all the joints soldered on the one side the work is turned bodily over and again each joint is soldered on the other side. Then the copper ties for supporting the window on the iron rods are fitted on, and the window is sent to the cementer, who brushes into every crevice and cranny the powerful cement that solidifies the whole work and makes it impervious to wind and water.

Special men have been procured by Mr. Martin for each branch of the work here described – men having both English and Australian experience – and it is satisfactory to find that his enterprise has been rewarded, for in addition to doing the lead-light for such important local buildings as the Parliamentary Building, Royal Oak, Empire, and Searl’s Hotels, the Bank of New Zealand, and many others, orders have been executed as far north as Auckland and as far south as Temuka.

Before leaving, we were shown books of designs for all kinds of conditions of windows, panels, doors, fanlights, screens, etc., that have been made on the premises, and also some beautiful specimens of glass of which, owing to the wonderful progress in the glass industry during the last two years, over 20 new kinds have in that time been produced. There were exquisite tints of antique glass used exclusively for figure work such as in stained windows for churches, opalescent glass, ambetti glass, and many others. All are in use in the production of the work turned out by Mr. Martin. This concluded a most interesting visit to one of our local manufacturers.

We are, Gentlemen,

D. JONES.

P. HUTSON.

C. D. MORPETH, Secretary.

[Evening Post, New Zealand, Volume LIX, Issue 21, 25th January 1900, page 6.](#)

“Many visitors have been attracted to the new Royal Oak Hotel, and not a few Wellingtonians also have admired its fine dining-room and general attractive appearance during this week. Most of the embossed glass-work in the hotel was prepared and fitted by Mr. Robert Martin. Besides the various firms whose work was acknowledged in the descriptive article published yesterday it should be mentioned that Messrs. Luke and Sons constructed the 5 h.p. boiler used for steam purposes throughout the house.”

[Manawatu Herald, NZ, Saturday 18th August 1900, page 3.](#)

“All Saint’s Church.

On Thursday night a service was held at 7.30 to celebrate the re-opening of All Saints’ Church, on the completion of the contract for its enlargement...”

“...THE GIFTS, Mrs Robinson, the widow of the late F. Robinson, presented the East Window of stained glass, which has been exceedingly well executed by Mr Martin of Wellington. The centre light has a figure of Our Saviour carrying a lamb, with the I.H.S. combined over, and the Cup, below; the two side lights having suitable text on handsome scrolls. That the window is in memory of the late Francis Robinson is

mentioned at the foot of the centre light. All who have seen the window are very much pleased with it...”

The church has been identified as All Saint’s at Foxton which is 100km north of Wellington. A Copy of the church’s centenary book from 1976 confirms this on pages 15 and 34. See: [A Century of Faith 1876-1976 History of All Saints Foxton.](#)

[Manuwatu Standard, NZ, Vol XXXVIII, Issue 6811, 29th September 1900, page 2.](#)

“IN MEMORIAM.- Mr R. Martin, of Wellington, has just completed a handsome patriotic design in stained glass for a Hawke’s bay resident. The design consists of scenes of Mafeking, a group of New Zealand troopers together with a portrait of “B.P.” The window is at present on exhibition in Mr Martin’s shop, manners street, and is well worthy of inspection.”

[Evening Post, New Zealand, Volume LXXVI, issue 81, 2nd October 1908, page 7.](#)

(Charles Edward Carter 1862-1908)

“A private cable message received in Wellington from England yesterday that Mr. Charles E. Carter, a member of the firm of Robert Martin, Ltd., Wellington, was seriously ill. And another message this morning announced that his illness had ended fatally. Mr. Carter was a native of Norfolk, England, and was about 45 years of age. He went Home, with his wife, by the last trip of the Athenic, for the benefit of his health. On the voyage he caught a cold, and he was laid up for some time after he reached England with a severe attack of influenza, the heart afterwards becoming affected. The deceased, who was a very popular man, had been in New Zealand for about 25 years. He was at one time lieutenant in the D Battery of Artillery, and he was also one of the churchwardens of St. Peter’s. Shortly before he left for Home, he was re-elected a member of the Wellington Industrial Association. The family consists of two sons and four daughters.”

[Evening Post, NZ, Vol LXXVII, Issue 113, 14th May 1909, page 4.](#)

“R. MARTIN, LTD.

For those whose aestheticism runs to such adornments as lead lights and stained and embossed glass, the window exhibit of R. Martin, Ltd., in manners-street, will have a lot of attraction. Sign writing, of all kinds, and all fashions, in all manner of artistic design, is there. The firm makes a speciality of lead lights, stained and embossed glass, and what is called “Our Genuine Incised Sign,” of which last named there are two particularly fine examples, each 10ft 6in long, the letters standing out in handsome and bold relief. Not only are these incised signs good to look at, but they wear well. One sign in course of building runs a full 25ft. The embossed work, of which excellent examples may be seen in the various branches of the bank of New Zealand, is all done on the premises; the chaste and delicate designing, the manipulation of the hydrofluoric acid and the rasping. The firm takes a lot of pride in the lead-light and stained glass, all of which – applied art of the best – is carried out in the workshops. The lead and the glass are imported, and Martin does the rest, and does it exceedingly well. One handsome church window, designed and carried out in the Manners-street shop, was made to a Nelson order, where it now decorates a church window. But perhaps the incised sign is a warm favourite. Leaded signs, stencil drawings – designed and cut on the premises – help to ornament the shop windows. With the incised sign the firm has done a lot of business about the city. Six shops in Cuba-street, one in Ghuznee-street, four in Willis-street, one in Grey-street, and several others in Lambton-quay and Newtown display signs made in Martin’s, and they are guaranteed to last as long as the shops, or the owners themselves. The thrifty housewife, whose floors are lined with linoleum, will find such aids to elbow-grease as Linoshino and Cremonium, both of which are described as the last things in such polishes. There is also a floor stain, which is guaranteed to stain and keep stained. Picture-frames are also a prominent feature. All these things, and others unmentioned, to be found in R. Martin’s windows, in manners-street, have two recommendations to patrons: Firstly that they are well and truly made; and, secondly, that they are manufactured in New Zealand.”

[Manawatu Standard, Volume XLI, Issue 9402, 28th December 1910, page 5.](#)

“After an illness of several months Mr Robert Martin, head of the firm of Robert Martin, Ltd., painters and paper-hangers, of Manners street, Wellington, died somewhat unexpectedly last evening. The deceased, who was 72 years of age, was an old resident of Wellington, and leaves a family of seven daughters and two sons.”

[Otago daily Times, Issue 15031, 3rd January 1911, page 3.](#)

“A Wellington message reports the death of Mr Robert Martin, at the age of 73 years. He was one of Wellington’s best known citizens, having arrived in the city in the ship Queen of Avon in 1859. After four years as a painter and paperhanger he founded the present business in Manners street in 1863, and was closely identified with the structural growth of the city ever since. He was a native of Norfolk, and was educated at North Walsham Grammar School, known as Lord Nelson’s school, and finished his education at St. John’s College, Hurstpier Point, Sussex. He was the great-grandson of Sir Richard Steele, Bart., Dublin. He is survived by Mrs Martin and five daughters (including Mesdames E. C. E. Carter and Stephens) and two sons, and 11 grandchildren.”

Other web links of interest:

[Martin family, 17 Manners street, Wellington, c.1889.](#)

[Robert & Mary Ann Martin, Kent Terrace, Wellington, c.1900.](#)

[House of Robert Martin & family, 19 Kent Terrace, Wellington, c.1903.](#)

[A photo of Robert Martin \(1838-1910\) c.1900, Wellington, NZ.](#)

[Employees of Robert Martin Ltd c. 1905](#)

[Shop interior, including wallpapers, Robert martin Ltd, Wellington c.1905.](#)

[Window display, including wallpapers, Robert Martin Ltd, Wellington c.1905.](#)

[Charles Edward Carter, c.1905.](#)

[Window designed and made by Charles Edward Carter of Robert Martin Ltd c.1890's.](#)

[Window designed and made by Charles Carter of Robert Martin Ltd c.1890's.](#)

Footnotes:

¹ NZ BDM:1911/2697. Robert Martin, age 73. Died 27 Dec 1910

² [Otago daily Times, Issue 15031, 3rd January 1911, page 3.](#)

³ [Evening Post, New Zealand, Vol LIX, Issue 125, 28 May 1900, page 2.](#)

⁴ [Evening Post, New Zealand, Volume LXXVI, issue 81, 2nd October 1908, page 7.](#)

⁵ [Evening Post New Zealand, Volume LVII, Issue 30, 6th February 1899, page 6.](#)