

Richard Bedward Owen (1873 – 1948)

In newspaper reports and official documents Richard Bedward Owen was styled 'Mr R B Owen'. Unofficially he was 'River Bank' Owen and, sometimes, 'the River Banker'. To some he was a conservationist, to others an old-fashioned philanthropist, while his enemies styled him a busybody.

Richard Bedward Owen was born at Abbey Foregate, Shrewsbury, Shropshire, on 3 December 1873, the son of Rebecca Bedward Blower and her husband, Richard Owen, a master miller. The younger Richard trained as a tailor and, at 29, in South Africa, married Alice Mary White. The couple soon emigrated to Christchurch, New Zealand, where they set up house at 117 Rossall Street, Fendalton. They had four children, Gwendoline, Marjorie, Gethin and Garth.

At first a cutter in the Farmers' Co-operative Trading Company, Richard went on to establish his own tailoring business in a shop in Hereford Street at the back of the Strand Theatre. He was later in the Triangle – the area bound by Colombo, Cashel and High streets – and in the dome of the Regent Theatre building in the north-east corner of Cathedral Square. Eventually he bought Fletcher Brothers' tailoring business at 751 Colombo Street and therein established his own highly successful enterprise, Owen's Ltd.

After World War I, Richard became immersed in public affairs. Deeply interested in music, he was President of the Woolston Brass Band. He arranged concerts and collected funds for the purchase of uniforms and instruments and to enable bandsmen to attend national contests. As honorary secretary and then director of the Royal Christchurch Musical Society, he organised performances of *Elijah*, the *Creation* and the *Messiah*. Newspapers lauded the fact that there was brought to the management of musical organisations the 'initiative and ... exertion' of a 'thorough businessman'.

As director, Richard argued that all children should have a love of and ability to play music and lamented that, in one high school, the subject was sidelined so that girls could be subject to the 'boring intricacies of botany and geometry'. In Richard's opinion, music was an excellent means of social control. Criminals became such in their free time 'when the discipline of an occupation was absent'. A child who knew music would, as an adult, profitably occupy his leisure hours.

Richard retired as director in 1922, intending to push for the expansion of school music programmes. Instead, he devoted himself to improving the appearance of the city by joining the Christchurch Beautifying Association.

In the brass band Richard had worked with well-known personality, R J Estall; in the musical society his colleague was famed cathedral organist and choirmaster, Dr John Christopher Bradshaw. In the Christchurch Beautifying Association, Richard rubbed shoulders with such grandees as Arthur Dudley Dobson, George Harper, Samuel Hurst Seager, Charles Chilton, Harry Ell and Ernest Andrews. A committee member from 1923, Richard was President from 1933 – 36.

The association conducted a campaign against air pollution caused by hospital and factory chimneys and by the city council's Manchester Street rubbish destructor. Large advertising hoardings – especially those of the Railways Department – were condemned as 'screaming ugly glaring daubs of colour'. There was a push to have electricity run underground so that the city might be rid of 'thousands of unsightly poles and overhead wire entanglements'. Bureaucrats were not alone in being wedded to error. Richard said of home owners that their 'high hedges and fences were usually very unsightly'.

Alas, the residents looked askance at the preferred model, the open garden, even when the association ran competitions



Unveiling the memorial at the 'Bricks', December 1926. Left to right: Sir Arthur Dudley Dobson; the Rev J K Archer, Mayor of Christchurch (in bowler hat); John Deans III, R B Owen. Hocken Library

Richard's men strove to turn into reality the ideal of 'making Christchurch beautiful'. They worked in the vicinity of Avon bridges within the city and, at Colombo Street, replaced decayed structures with shrubs, a miniature waterfall and steps which gave access to the river.

for the most artistic garden as seen from the street. Richard looked wistfully to the time when Christchurch would realise 'what a great cash asset there is in civic beauty'.

Richard was active in other beautifying projects. Justice Department officials allowed him to convert into a flower-begirt fountain an artesian spring near the court buildings. Richard told Charles Chilton: 'This is making quite a nice little display and interesting many people'. Just upstream were the provincial council buildings which the government returned to local control in 1928. Richard sought to keep the city council from infiltrating into the Gothic masterpiece and perhaps blotting the extensive river banks with ill-considered extensions. He encouraged tree-planting in the grounds and added the 'bright array of flowers and verdant lawn' which make up the rock work garden about the Armagh and Durham Street section of the complex. Then, in 1934, the elderly R E Green came forward with his statue of Canterbury's first Superintendent, James Edward FitzGerald. Richard was eager that the association accept a structure which the city council had declined and have it erected on the provincial council lawn. The association executive failed to appreciate that this was a tainted gift – the Greens were accusing their father of divesting himself of his assets so that there would be little left for those who had a claim against his estate. In 1939, after Green had died and Richard curtailed his public activities, the statue was erected on Christchurch Domains Board land on the periphery of the Botanic Gardens opposite Cashel Street.

Although Richard worked with other committee members – and transcended their parochialism by establishing the Canterbury Roadside Beautifying Association – his particular interest was the improvement of the Avon River and its environs. The town of his birth had the Severn on three sides; his father's business was water-powered. He enthused about the weirs and locks of the well-managed English boating rivers and admitted that 'a delusion and a snare' had brought him to Christchurch – a booklet containing a picture of a four-oared boat on the Avon. On arrival, he scanned the river but could not find the vessel.

Soon after World War I, Richard imported a canoe from Canada. At the bottom of Rossall Street, he launched the craft, and, with the help of a member of his staff, paddled it to Pleasant Point, a recently developed picnic site on the lower Avon. There the Owen family spent several Christmases under canvas.

In the area where Richard launched his boat there was a one acre wilderness bounded by a 10 foot iron fence. This adjoined and was usually thought part of the property of the Helmore family. On searching the title, however, Richard found that, in 1917, it had become public land. With the approval of the Waimairi County Council, he set to work, cleared the undergrowth, and, as he did so often, spent his own money on a project which was for the public good. Beautifying Association luminary Charles Chilton opened Millbrook Reserve to the masses on 26 January 1924. Four years later a photographer, Carl Beken, presented Richard with an album which showed how the area had been developed from 'little more than a rubbish dump' to 'one of the city's most attractive beauty spots'.

When, in 1922, the 'Creeping Depression' came to Christchurch, Richard established the River Improvement Fund. Business people and local government gave money, and men employed on public works were paid not a pittance but the award rate, a principle being established to which the city council would adhere even in the depths of the 1930s' Depression. The committee was to the fore when distress returned in 1926, eventually becoming the River Improvement and Unemployment Fund. Richard also organised the Citizens' Unemployment Committee which collected money and provided work. At depots, the committee gave relief rations to those for whom work could not be found. At workers' meetings Richard learned of the men's needs. His middle class biases showed through only on the subject of communism. At Trades Hall he thought he was 'in Russia for an hour or so' when he found Sidney Fournier distributing goods to the needy – 'dishing out bread and jam... and making

communistic sandwiches out of them'. He threatened to resign and thus pushed into the background this most colourful Marxist.

Richard's men strove to turn into reality the ideal of 'making Christchurch beautiful'. They worked in the vicinity of Avon bridges within the city, and at Colombo Street replaced decayed structures with shrubs, a miniature waterfall and steps which gave access to the river. The masses admired the improvements when they attended free riverside entertainments which featured music, illuminated water displays and cleverly arranged silent movie shows.

Because Richard advocated the resumption of Avon River traffic, it was important to him that he see established a monument at the 'Bricks', the spot above Barbadoes Street which was the highest point reached by such traffic in the 1850s. He worked vigorously on the task and was present when an architecturally-designed cairn was unveiled in 1926.

Even as Richard laboured on these endeavours, there was developing in his mind a plan 'to take in hand the river and make up for past neglect'. After much consideration, he presented his ideas to the Beautifying Association in December 1925, 75 years after the arrival of the First Four Ships. His scheme was, he said, unlike 'the festivities of the present days [which] would end in smoke'. Moreover, it would have appealed to the pioneers.

Richard envisaged weirs being introduced to beautify the stream. The waterway beside Park Terrace would be a carnival area, while the Burwood-Dallington district would be blessed with a municipal golf course, zoological gardens and, below Kerrs Reach, one of the 'finest regatta courses in the world'. A weir from the Spit to Shag Rock would maintain water in the Avon-Heathcote Estuary and in this aquatic playground would be found accommodation for rowboats, speedboats and seaplanes. In pioneer times, coastal craft had frequented the river; with debris removed and the channel deepened, launches and perhaps even yachts would come again. However, the best-known feature of the scheme was the proposed wide tree-

lined riverside boulevard stretching from the Carlton Bridge to New Brighton.

An alarming increase in the number of out-of-work men in the late 1920s led the city council to borrow money and provide employment on ventures such as the boulevard. The implementation of Richard's brainchild began without ostentation at 7.30am on 26 June 1928. Men wielding picks, grubbers and shovels engaged in 'a massed eager attack on a line of ancient macrocarpa trees' which stood opposite Dallington Terrace. Work was done on both sides of the Avon between the Swanns Road and Dallington bridges. Houses were moved back and their occupants looked onto a roadway and an extensive area of neatly-grassed river bank reserve. In a ceremony on 1 September 1929, politicians local and national planted 53 lime trees on the north bank between the Swanns Road bridge and Medway Street. Today the river reserves and the mature trees which overlook the water form mute testament to Richard and his navvies.

In the 1920s, bicycles, cars and electric trams jostled one another at the Seaview Road bridge, a narrow structure opened in 1887 to accommodate the city-to-surf horse trams. In 1923 the Governor-General issued the New Brighton Borough Council with a warrant allowing it to erect a new concrete structure. However, the clearance at high tide was, like that of the old structure, to be four feet six inches and, in 1926, the Attorney-General gave the 'River Banker' permission to use his name in a court case. Richard's lawyers, Duncan Cotterill and Co, argued that, in deciding the height of the bridge, the council must 'make provision for the right of the members of the public using or likely to use the river for navigation purposes'.

Duncan Cotterill's junior lawyer, Leonard Hensley, visited ancients such as Burwood's riverside-dwelling postmistress, Amelia Frances Rogers, and gathered information on the past glories of Avon commerce. Richard stated that the Christchurch Drainage Board's current policy of using R T Stewart's river sweeper to clear the stream of debris was



R B Owen's navvies working on the banks of the Avon, 1920s.
Hocken Library

effecting a 'wonderful transformation' and converting the river once more into 'an easily negotiated water highway'. Within a few years, motor boats would be journeying up and down the river and launch excursions to Banks Peninsula would become popular. However, a new bridge with a low clearance would 'throttle the entrance to the river...'

Avon Member of Parliament D G Sullivan assured the local authority that for Richard to triumph would be a 'miracle'. Councillors claimed that the idea of the 'river as a waterway had gone to the dogs' and that Richard held to 'the wild dream of visionaries'. Counsel for the 'River Banker', A F Wright, put the case so well that it was accepted by Mr Justice Stringer. Then, even as a personal dispute broke out between New Brighton's mayor and counsel, A W Owles and J A Flesher, the Court of Appeal adjudicated in favour of the local body. The impressive dissenting decision of Mr Justice McGregor, however, proved sufficient to persuade Richard to take the fight to the Privy Council.

The case did not reach the Law Lords. Christchurch Mayor, J K Archer, seeking to have Richard given the substance of what he asked, was told by recalcitrant beach dwellers that 'Mr. Owen had been able to get the city council at his beck and call'. Two Cabinet ministers mediated, one being Reform Party luminary, Sir Francis Dillon Bell. Even then councillor and carrier E L Smith stated, 'I am going to have this matter held up for as long as I can'.

New Brighton diehards hoped for a more sympathetic Minister of Marine after the 1928 election. A new government and minister did, indeed, come to power but, more importantly, the 1929 local body elections produced seaside councillors who wished to compromise. A bridge with a six foot six inch clearance was built, New Brighton being excused from having to contribute towards the increased height of the structure. Alas, those who gave Richard moral support were reluctant to contribute substantially towards the legal bills. Moreover, boats have not come sailing with the tide, the noticeable climb to the top of the bridge being all that

remains to remind one of the great battle. A disgruntled New Brighton councillor commented, 'More people went over the bridge in two hours than went under it in a year'. He has been proved substantially correct.

The 'River Banker' knew failure. In 1929 he stated that riverside reserves were needed 'as a lung right in the heart of our busy city', that the old fire brigade station in Chester Street (now Oxford Terrace East) should be demolished and the land returned to the public domain. Although in failing health, Charles Chilton wrote to J K Archer opposing this view. A deputation including Richard, Ell, civic benefactor T J Edmonds and E J Howard MP attended a council meeting and found that Archer wanted the Plunket Society to use the building. The Mayor stated that no conservation scheme was as significant as the work of the society; indeed, 'it was possible to overdo the question of reserves until it became a mere fad'. Archer's view prevailed.

There were other setbacks. Richard had an artist, James FitzGerald, paint pictures of the proposed Kerrs Reach regatta course. In the artist's impression, the banks were neatly grassed, boulevard drives ran along either side of the river and four boats, each containing eight occupants, were travelling upstream. The tailor attended city council meetings with his paintings fixed to blackboards but was told that his schemes were too futuristic to be considered.

In the 1940s, the idea of a regatta on the Avon was revived. The channel was diverted and a long straight course made ready for rowing contests which were to be part of the 1950 Christchurch Centennial Games. The old bend in the river – whose Maori name 'Wainoni' Professor A W Bickerton had taken for his property – became but a backwater snaking around the modern Porritt Park. Richard did not live to see the partial success of his plan for Burwood and Dallington.

Richard's relationships with other public men were often acrimonious. Certainly H T J Thacker hoped that 'once having got a taste of the boulevard atmosphere', the citizens would carry the roadway down to the sea on both sides of

the river, while, to celebrate his 50 years in Christchurch, T J Edmonds 'set another jewel along the Avon' with his generous gift of the Cambridge Terrace band rotunda which bears his name. However, the 'River Banker' and Beautifying Association had several disagreements. In 1929 the association would reimburse only a fraction of Richard's Millbrook Reserve costs. In 1936 Richard presented plans for a simple durable weir in the river but stated that he would not allow his timber to be used for the rival drainage board scheme which would 'not be a thing of beauty'. The association vacillated over which proposal it should adopt and Richard had to be restrained from leaving the meeting. He soon ceased to participate in association activities.

Richard had a particularly tortuous relationship with the Christchurch Domains Board which administered the Botanic Gardens and Hagley Park. In the first half of the 1920s, he sought in vain to have a proposed Bandsmen's Memorial Rotunda erected in the Botanic Gardens rather than on an obscure site in Hagley Park. Time has proved Richard correct; the rotunda, 'a great sight among the daffodils in spring', has been neglected by bandsmen but used by 'the great unwashed for sundry protests about issues political and social...'

In 1926 Richard became a government appointee to the domains board. In 1931, trees which he had donated were planted about Victoria Lake and down the river bank from the tea kiosk to Rolleston Avenue. This was one of the few occasions when his actions were greeted with approbation. He was often at odds with his fellows though he argued that, through publicising alleged irregularities, he had 'saved the board many thousands of pounds'.

At a special meeting in 1936 Richard claimed that, by giving choice blooms to visiting nurserymen, the Curator of the Botanic Gardens was 'trafficking in plants'. Moreover, these businessman 'would raid the glasshouse... to such an extent that the girls and women in charge would weep'. The chairman, Henry Kitson, stated that legitimate exchange with nurserymen had taken place. The tall, well-fleshed City

Councillor M E Lyons, ironically nicknamed 'Tiny', subjected Richard to a savage attack, accusing him of conducting a vendetta against former curator James Young and of driving him 'to an early grave'; Young had died at 72. Lyons claimed that Richard was 'a political accident... appointed by a government that never had the confidence of the country'. Yet when, in 1925, the same government, Reform, had won a landslide victory, Lyons had been one of its candidates. Lyons threatened to ask the Labour administration to remove Richard from office 'on the grounds that he has gone sufficiently far to dissipate any confidence that we have had in him'. Accepting that his presence on the board was not welcome, Richard resigned: 'That ends my work for the city of Christchurch - a city truly hard to serve'.

Richard remained as warden of Millbrook Reserve. He had assistants to ensure the best displays in season and one of his last innovations was to arrange the illumination of some of the more colourful shrubs at night. Yet old foes still dogged him. A reference to Waimairi County Council assistance with this work caused Councillor Henry Kitson to declare: 'It doesn't want lighting at night. It's ridiculous.'

In 1943 Richard made a will in favour of his wife and children. Gethin was left in charge of Owen's Ltd though Garth was later to take over. Richard's auditor, Russell De Renzy Mitchell, and gardener, Charles Hack, were each left £20.

'Riverbank' Owen's end was sad. He died at Sunnyside Asylum on 18 November 1948, the immediate causes of death being arteriosclerosis and congestive heart failure. Alice Mary Owen died in 1949.

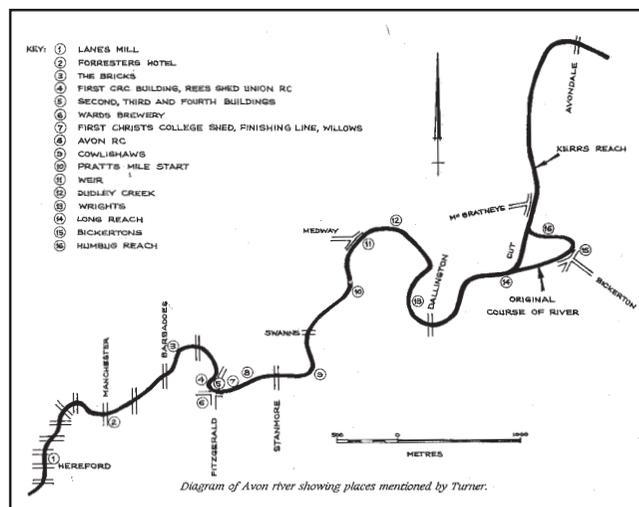
Gethin Owen thought his father 'forgotten by most' and lamented that 'not even a representative of the city council deemed it proper to pay [his] last respects'. He summed up his father's strengths and weaknesses thus:

'He was a man with tremendous organising ability, a man of great vision. He could not suffer fools and one of his great



Millbrook Reserve, 1920s
Christchurch City Libraries

faults was that he eventually fell out and had many rows with men, some in high places, who could not see his point of view, and, as a result, made many enemies.’



The Avon River

The 'Bricks' memorial is on the town side of the river just above the Barbadoes Street bridge. The Swanns Road-Dallington bridge area is the site of the Boulevard. The cut in the Avon at Dallington was Richard Owen's idea but implemented after his death.

The illustration also relates to the chapter on 'George Vennell and other Avon personalities'. The area between the Dallington bridge and McBratneys Road is the site of 'Broome Farm' which became 'De Troy's'. Pioneer Peter Kerr settled at Kerrs Reach. The area where Bickerton Street comes down to the original course of the river Dallington is the site of 'Vennell's' and the murder of the Victorian gardener.

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Richard's conflict with the New Brighton Borough Council
brought forth the following piece of verse which appeared in
the *Star* of 1 October 1927:

The councillors of Brighton,
by the Nine Gods they swore
they'd build a bridge full four feet high
but not a damned inch more.

By the Nine Gods they swore it
and coolly went their way,
and called for tenders for the job
and fixed up who would pay.

Then out spake R B Owen,
the River Banker bold:
'Your proposition's a disgrace.
The people's rights you've sold.
In perpetuity I claim the right of navigation.
Now who will put in my right hand
the costs of litigation?'

The privy purse was duly lined
and lawyers were engaged.
The issue long remained in doubt
while Wright and Flesher raged.
The Court below to RBO
awarded its decision;
but on appeal his argument
was treated with derision.

'Oh, Avon, Mother Avon',
cried Owen in distraction,
'His Majesty in Council
shall adjudicate this action.
Five hundred quids as nothing,
and we'll see this matter through
unless you folks agree to raise
this bridge a foot or two.'

And so the bridge remains unbuilt,
and contest's still unended;
and Owen's owin' more and more
for costs and fees expended;
while Captain Owles irately howls
that JAF's uncivil,
and JAF consigns the worthy captain
to the Devil.

But R B Owen's sure to win
for Wright is on his side;
and when, in days to come, the boats
come sailing with the tide,
and pass with ease beneath the span,
then will the tale be told
how valiantly he raised the bridge
in the brave days of old.