

A Short History of John Rhind Funeral Directors *by John Rhind*



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The history of the firm which is in business today as John Rhind Funeral Directors, one of the leading firms of Funeral Directors in Christchurch, does not in fact begin with any member of the Rhind family. The firm was founded in Christchurch in the nineteenth century not by a Rhind but by Walter Langford. John Rhind, whose name the firm bears today, did not enter the business until the early years of this century, more than twenty years after the firm had been founded. A Langford remained associated with the business until 1920, almost forty years after the firm had been founded.

The association with the Langford name takes the history of John Rhind back to the very beginnings of the profession of undertaking in New Zealand, further back even than the time that Walter Langford set up his business in Christchurch. His father, John Arthur Langford, was born in Birmingham and arrived in Wellington in 1840. Soon after landing in this country he abandoned Wellington and moved north to Auckland. By 1842 he established in business in Auckland in various lines of trade - as carpenter, cabinetmaker and undertaker. Notable for the story of John Rhind Funeral Directors is that in September 1842, while in partnership with a Mr Gardiner, Langford conducted the funeral of Captain William Hobson, the first Governor of the Colony of New Zealand. Hobson died in Auckland on 9 September 1842 at the young age of 49. The "Auckland Times" recorded that Langford and Gardiner conducted Hobson's funeral arrangements "with admirable propriety".

The John Rhind, whose name the firm bears today, entered it in 1906, 25 years after it had been established by Walter Langford. He was born in Christchurch after the family emigrated in 1864. He married Martha King in 1885 and they in turn had a large family. John Rhind worked as a carpenter for many years, right up until 1906 when he entered in partnership with Herbert Langford. The firm was run as Langford and Rhind for 14 years, from 1906 to 1920, when Herbert Langford sold his interest to John Rhind who then ran it with assistance from his sons, Douglas and Norman, until his death in 1944. Later Douglas and Norman, who had both been working in the firm for many years, bought it. In 1958 Douglas' son John joined the firm (when Norman retired), becoming a partner with his father, who retired soon afterwards. Subsequently, John Rhind's sons, Graeme and Stephen, joined the firm, continuing the tradition of Rhind fathers and sons working together in the family firm, a tradition which spanned four generations from the time Douglas Rhind worked with his father, the first John Rhind, who was the great-grandfather of Graeme and Stephen.

The firm's address in London Street — which is narrow with a curious dog leg half way along — runs from the corner of Bealey and Fitzgerald Avenues through to Stanmore Road. The firm is notable for having operated from the same site for more than 100 years, indeed ever since the firm was first established in 1881, it has always been on London Street. Walter Langford first advertised in June 1881 that he had set himself up in business on a site on London Street, "four doors from the North and East Belts" (as Bealey and Fitzgerald Avenues were then known). At that time, he was far from the only place of business on London Street where was found a mixture of small businesses; including a grocer, photographer, printer, jam, pickle and sauce manufacturer, bakery, cordial maker and corner store.

Gradually however, probably as Stanmore Road developed as a commercial thoroughfare, London Street lost its place of business and slipped into being the residential road it is today. Indeed, Walter Langford himself gradually bought up property along the north side of London Street.

When Walter Langford established the firm in 1881 motor vehicles were only just on the horizon and horse-drawn vehicles were the norm for almost all purposes. Hearses were no exception. Behind its London Street premises, the firm had, for many years, a horse paddock and stables.

The 1930's saw the firm of John Rhind undertake a sweeping modernisation. A charming little chapel (a church in miniature), work rooms and a garage were built solidly in brick, so solidly that parts of these buildings have been retained. Following the erection of the new buildings, another section was bought on the firm's London Street frontage. A new house, numbered 15 was built on this section. The old wood house, number 19, was then pulled down and a new house similar to number 15 was built on this site. This work was all completed before the outbreak of World War II.

In 1961, soon after the present John Rhind joined the firm, the premises were thoroughly modernized and the firm's vehicles replaced. A little later the firm embarked on a vigorous policy of acquiring land for parking, staff houses and eventual expansion. Much of the land along London Street, which the firm gradually bought up, had once been owned by the founder of the firm, Walter Langford.

This allowed the firm to complete, in 1991, the first major changes on the site since the premises were modernized in 1962. With the redevelopment, the public may approach the new chapel and other facilities from Whitmore Street, but the firm still retains its London Street frontage and its association with the thoroughfare where it began.

The new buildings were a u-shaped building with a striking new chapel occupying one wing and a two-storey block with offices upstairs and working rooms and other facilities were completed in time for a formal opening on 21 September 1991. The original garage and chapel were converted soon after into a large catering lounge and kitchen. In 1997, after much soul searching the company was sold to Stewart Enterprises which controlled the firm for several years until Bledisloe NZ was formed to incorporate many New Zealand firms. During this time the present John Rhind along with several Rhind family members continued the running of the firm; in due course John's son, Graeme, was appointed C.O.O. of the New Zealand company. Under Bledisloe's ownership, while several adjacent properties (originally occupied by members of the staff) have been disposed of, refurbishment of the buildings and extensions to the carpark are continuing. Along with these improvements the vehicle fleet has been updated, a new phone exchange system installed and additional staff engaged. All this to allow the firm to maintain its customary high standard of service to the Community.