

A brief history of commercial tattooing in Wellington city

In 1908-9 Mr Henri C Swiftt, operating in Molesworth Street (#58) and later 165 Cuba Street, [advertised tattooing](#) with *electric needles in all colours* and boasted *nineteen years experience*.

In mid-1910 his business in Cuba St was [taken over](#) by F. Penn, tattooist.

Prof. Penn*, tattoo artist, as he frequently advertised himself, had previously plied his trade in Christchurch and Auckland before returning to Wellington after which he disappears from newspaper advertising.

*In the early days there was a tendency for tattooists to be given, or give themselves, the title Professor, indicating their mastery of the art.

We'll never know how busy or successful these businesses were but it does show that the existence of tattooists and tattoo studios in central Wellington is not a new phenomena.

Long believed to be the domain of sailors, prisoners and gang members, tattooing has had, like many other aspects of fashion, distinct trends.

New Zealand newspaper reports from the end of the 19th century noted the popularity of tattooing amongst high society, both men and women. Many members of [European royalty](#) were known, or believed, to sport tattoos including a couple who would later become the great-grandparents of King Charles III. This coincided with the introduction of the electric needle in the 1890s.

Interest in tattooing surged again with World War 1 when Prof. De Lacey ran daily [advertisements](#) in Wellington newspapers offering tattooing *by electricity* at 123 Manners Street with *A new and varied selection in 23 colours of beautiful hue* while guaranteeing *likeness of friends*

Like his predecessors De Lacey's advertising disappeared soon after and things appear to have been quiet on the tattooing front until the Roaring 20s when the emancipated young flappers again embraced tattooing.

However this did cause concern in society and in 1922 [NZ Herald reported](#) that :

Local authorities in many places in England are seeking powers to make it illegal to tattoo girls under 21 Dozens of thoughtless youngsters submit to disfiguration every night, ignorant of the fact that the united hearts, the snake, the initials or whatever design their fancies choose, will handicap them for the rest of their lives.

This reporting did not, it seem deter the young ladies of Auckland because in 1929 [The Sun \(Auckland\)](#) profiled Mr Hood, a former ship's cook in the mercantile marine, who set up his tattooing premises three years earlier. While the majority of

his clients were naval men, it was not unknown to be approached by women requesting a tattoo.

One of the most daring had a pretty pink and blue kewpie engraved on her leg, above the knee. Another young lady, who loved a sailor from HMS Dunedin ... had the outlines of his photograph transferred to her thigh ...

Mr Hood also offered tattoo removal as part of his services noting that young men often approached him to have their beloved's name etched on to their skin, and returned some months later to remove it.

As the century progressed fashions changed. Across the Tasman, in what today would be called cosmetic tattooing, young women began getting their [lips permanently inked](#) in *bright vermillion* although this trend appears not to have caught on in depression-era New Zealand.

With the outbreak of World War Two tattooists again began advertising their trade. The *Evening Post* [advertised](#) tattooing removals and *painless, bloodless, artistic, permanent tattooing* being done by an *ex-Navy man* at 138 Vivian Street.

Towards the end of the year former professional boxer Tiger Mitchell [began advertising](#) he was operating out of 79 Vivian Street and over the next few years moved around different premises along the street. Again, ex-Navy man, Tiger emphasized tattoo removal in his advertisements although his claim that tattooing was good for rheumatism appears to have little basis in fact.

Tattooing was very much in vogue amongst the armed forces stationed in Wellington with [reports](#) they preferred *patriotic or fanciful designs on wrists or forearms* over the *more elaborate works of art formerly etched on chests and backs* .

***"I got Elvis on my elbow
When I flex, Elvis talks
I got hula girls on the back of my leg
And she hulas when I walk"
- Tattoo, [Van Halen](#)***

Post war tattooing fell from favour and in 1962, in response to reports that the practice was enjoying a comeback amongst sailors in Britain, Secretary of the New Zealand Seaman's Union was [quoted](#) as saying that *tattooing is not popular today among sailors*.