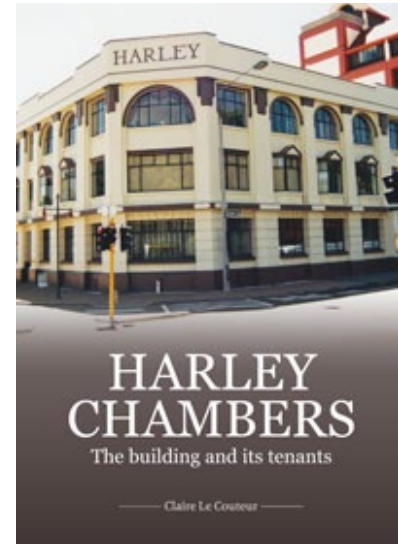


# Book Review: Harley Chambers

## The building and its tenants

Written by Claire Le Couteur. The Cotter Medical History Trust are the publishers as well as the custodians of medical history items relating to Harley Chambers. 2025.

Harley Chambers was built in central Christchurch for Arthur Suckling to the design of prominent Christchurch architect G. T. Lucas (Gordon Thomas Lucas) to exclusively accommodate medical and dental practitioners. Its siting near the Christchurch Public Hospital made it easy access for tenants and their patients. *Harley Chambers* provides an early history of the site and its owners from 1851 to 2011. It tells us about the people involved in its creation and its tenancies, and it chronicles its historical context through place and time.



When the site was purchased for rooms for medical practitioners the Art-Deco period of 1928 inspired the building's design as well as an extension needed by 1933. The curved windows and elegant entranceway gave it a distinct architectural appearance. The construction in reinforced concrete is well documented and architectural plans of the exterior and interior are reproduced in full. They include interior details of the layout for surgeries, waiting rooms and consulting rooms. The extravagance of its interior with marble floors and staircases gives a nod to its world-famous counterpart in Harley Street, London. Later In 1978 when the building was put up for auction the auctioneer commented 'Harley is built like a battleship. It is built to survive'.

The history and recollections of the many doctors, dentists and other tenants who practised in Harley Chambers are documented from the meticulous research by the author as well as from personal interviews. The most controversial tenant was in 1976: the Mystique Massage Parlour (Nude Massage with Personal Wash \$25). The ventilators were hooked up throughout the building. The sound carried through them clearly and the practitioners and patients objected to hearing the 'huffing and puffing, slapping and tickling', not least because it constituted highly suspect alternative medicine. The more conservative tenants were not amused. In later years rooms were let to more acceptable non-medical professionals with rooms leading off the highly polished corridor floors. There were solicitors and barristers, medical masseuses, podiatrists, accountants, architects, real estate agents and insurance brokers to name a few.

The author has encapsulated an absorbing amount of detail in 130 pages but this does not make it a tedious read. My interest was held throughout. The addition of index, glossary, references and appendices also added important information. The variety of images and photographs throughout provide a visual record from the site plan of 1851 and with images of tenants, and photos of early medical items from the Co8er Medical History Museum, through to views of earthquake damage.

Sadly, as a result of the Canterbury earthquakes of 2010 and 2011 this significant heritage building, an integral part of the fabric of central Christchurch, was seriously compromised and approved for demolition. Its scheduling under the Christchurch City Plan as a significant historic place was not enough to save it. Nor was its listing in the National Heritage List/Rārangi Kōrero administered by Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga, as a Category 2 historic place. This well researched and accessible history of Harley Chambers is timely. At the time of writing it stands forlornly and profusely graffitied awaiting its impending demolition; what a pity that even 'facadism' is impossible as its decay is at a point of no return. It is a perfect read for anyone whose interest lies in history, heritage or health and even ideal for the 'who's who' enthusiasts.

Reviewed by  
Dame Anna Crighton  
2025