**Les**

**Christchurch flat land red zone**

**Area 2: Brooklands**

**Red zoned in November 2011 due to liquefaction probability**

**Les’s story**

I was a carpenter by trade. I worked for the railways for a while. Did virtually everything. You weren’t stuck on any one sort of project. You worked on buildings and all the railway stuff. I stayed there for two or three years after I finished my apprenticeship. Then I went off on a fishing boat from Kaiapoi. We used to go out crayfishing, so I did a year on that.

I went from there and I worked for Keith Wakeman for a while on his farm, helping build his big woolshed just on the other side of Kaiapoi. Then I got a job at the sawmill and I stayed there for quite a few years. So I did my apprenticeship, and my bit on the boat and two or three or four jobs, and then Lorraine [my wife] wanted to buy a shop, a tearooms. So we bought the Nova Snack Bar in Colombo Street, opposite the Prince of Wales Hotel. It’s not down there now. We were there for about eight years in that bakery and tea rooms. Did her own baking and all that.

Then Lorraine had a craft shop in Marshlands Road, and I used to stay home and make wooden toys and things like that for it. We did that for a while and it was alright. Rocking chairs, blackboards, dolls’ beds – four posters and ordinary ones – all sorts of stuff. I retired when I was 62 – I was at the sawmill then – and now I’m 79, so what’s that? About 16 or 17 years.

We had five children, four boys and a girl, but the wee girl, she died when she was seven months old. That was a bit of a turmoil. We lived in the old house, five or seven of us in there. The boys, when they were younger, they were interested in rallying, so we got quite a bit of machinery in the shed like welders and a lathe. They used to get old cars, and because you could go out in the lagoon here on the mudflats they lived out there. They even built their own cars at times, and they were still at school then. Wouldn’t dare go out there now – they’d put you in gaol – but in those days they lived out there, had a great time. Magic, absolutely magic. Couldn’t replicate it today. Get out in the river and fish, white bait.

**Les’s property**

I think it’s 56 years we’ve been here, because we were married for 58 years and we came here about two years later, to the old house. Brought our family up in there. It’s one of the original houses in Brooklands. Well, they weren’t houses, they were baches. It’s been modified. It’s still the same dimensions but inside it’s been changed.

And then we built this great big house [also on the property], and the children all disappeared! The old house is still there because it’s got asbestos cladding and you have to get the men in white coats and all sorts of things and masks and everything to pack it on to pallets and cover it with plastic and they take it away and dump it. Until somebody puts the pressure on and makes me do something with it – and it’s quite expensive, too – well I’ve got better things to do with the money. It can sit there.

The big house is a write-off. It’s like a trampoline underneath that boardwalk, and that side has actually dropped, it’s broken off and dropped down about four inches, and it’s quite wide, the gap. So nothing makes sense. You’d think with that dropping and spreading the walls would be all open and all sorts of strange things, but it’s not. It’s watertight, which is why we’re still here because it doesn’t leak. If the roof was leaking then you’d be gone unless you could fix it. But see out the back here, back of the garage? All the brick work is all broken, and the foundation is all broken.

I don’t believe in all this nonsense with these foundations. They’re old houses here in Brooklands on piles, old wooden piles or concrete piles, built the old fashioned way. I don’t know of any of them that came adrift. The old house finished up better after the earthquakes than it was before the earthquakes! This hill that we’re sitting on here used to be higher than that house. Many, many years ago we gave the sand away to a fellow down the road who wanted to build his section up, so we said, righto, you take the top of this.

And they came and did what we wanted, they took the top off the hill, but I reckon that was the beginning of the house sinking at this end where they’d been working with the loader. It gradually tipped down, and when you walked in you actually walked downhill, and you knew you were going down. Since the earthquakes, you can’t tell. I don’t know whether that end came up or the other end went down. I don’t know, but it’s relatively level.

I’ve thought about moving into the little house. I could renovate it, but the thing that puts me off is that it’s full of borer – this area is prone to borer – and all the bearers are full of borer. Sort of puts you off that idea, and you spend a lot of money renovating inside and all that sort of thing. See it’s 100 years old.

**Response to the situation**

I keep trying to ignore it − it’s not there, didn’t happen. But I’ve got to this stage now where I have to do something. I’ve got to do something in the next few months one way or another otherwise the Statute of Limitations runs out and you’re at the mercy of the insurance company then.

Because I haven’t got internet, I’ve avoided the computer. The lady across the road here, she keeps us pretty well informed. She’s really into it, she’s up to here in it. Mind you, she’s pretty switched on, that one. She knows exactly what’s going on. It takes too much energy for me. I don’t really want to know. But that’s come to an end. We’ve just got to get our act together and do something.

To a point, the sense of community has remained. I suppose we know each other better than we did before. I mean, there always was a community, but over the years the place started to change and of course you didn’t know anybody. You’d go down to the hall for a meeting and you didn’t know anyone, whereas before you knew everybody. There were five or six new subdivisions, all of about 30- or 40-odd sections, all just cropping up all around you. There were a heck of a lot more people and so I suppose … Well, you just didn’t know them the same.

**Insurance**

The house has got an insurance value of $700,000, I think it is, so that’s pretty much full comprehensive insurance, isn’t it? We’ve been declared a total loss and we’ve been offered a payment. But it doesn’t cover… Like, according to our insurance policy we’re supposed to rebuild on this site, but they don’t want to pay the extra costs of foundations for this site. So they want to pay you for the house without the foundations. When I get over all this nonsense that’s going on at the moment I’m just going to go to two or three building companies and get a price to build the place on a TC3[[1]](#footnote-1) section, show it to the insurance company, and if they don’t want to wear it I’m just going to go to court. It’s the only way out now. They keep messing you about.

And they come out with all these things, and then they say, well if you don’t do this we’re not going to pay you that, and if you don’t do that we’re not going to pay you this. But they’re supposed to be giving you a cash settlement so you can rebuild your house on your site. I know we’re red zoned, but that doesn’t prevent you from rebuilding. Well, sorry, it does at the moment, because the Council, in this new City Plan, are putting all the red zone places into a holding pattern, so all you’re allowed to do is minor repairs and a few alterations. You’re not allowed to actually rebuild until the Government decides what it wants to do with the land. And so we go into a holding pattern. The last that we were told was that as long as you met the 2004 Building Regulations they couldn’t refuse to give you a consent.

The situation hasn’t really worried me because I thought well I don’t want to go anywhere and you can’t buy what we’ve got here anyhow. We’ve got a 3,000-square-metre section and we’ve got a big workshop where I do anything, all sorts of things – mostly nothing. You go into some of these new subdivisions and you get about 300 square metres and you daren’t go banging around making noises.

**Ratings valuation**

Actually that’s one of the best parts, because firstly I’ve never been one to worry about the value of the property, if you know what I mean. In fact I used to fight the values and try and keep them down because of the rating. I think it’s quite good, and in fact I reckon we’re paying rates now of about what you should be paying. This house has got a rating value of $6,000 for the house, $50,000 or something for the 3,000-square-metre section that we’re sitting on, and those two sections down the front are $17,000 each.

We’re definitely going to sell the two front sections off to the government. I’m pretty sure we will, in this new offer thing [100 percent of the 2007 Rateable Value]. Which is $158,000. Well, mine were $123,000 as I always used to keep fighting valuations, but the going rate was $158,000. I don’t want to sell them, but there’s too much risk, isn’t there? Like my responsibilities to the family trust, and if the trust loses money I can be in trouble. I don’t think I would be, but it’s a possibility. One of the trustees told me, “Gotta be careful. Lose money or cause the trust to lose money or whatever you call it, you could be sued.” I can’t see that happening, but you have to keep it in mind. My big worry is that I’m responsible to the trust so it doesn’t finish up with no money.

**The front two sections**

Originally, after the earthquake, the whole place [Brooklands] was going to be rebuilt. All the infrastructure and the roads and all that stuff were all going to be replaced. They gave out a contract to Downers, and they wanted a place to put their headquarters or office or whatever you call it. So they started looking for somewhere to put their building and they came here, and you can’t say no, can you? You’d have the whole community after you. So we leased our front two sections.

When we were talking about leasing it he said, “How much do you want for it?” and I said, “I don’t want anything, we just want the place put back together.” I said, “When you’re finished you could probably remediate those two sections for us,” because that’s not a big job for them. “Oh no,” he said, “We can’t do that. We’ve got to lease the land and pay you.” So anyhow, I forget what it was, but that was decided.

And then when they came to put their building in they had to remediate the land, so they had to dig down a metre or so and compact, like you have to do, and get up to the right building height. Anyhow, that’s what they did. Along this side they had a sewerage scheme. We had a road carpet parking area. Unbelievable. And they had portacoms around about 3 metres wide, and inside that it was 12 square metres with a big office, and it had all steel girders and plywood floors, and then they put a big roof over the whole thing.

And while this was going on this colour scheme business [technical categories] came on track and then we got red zoned. They were just putting computers and stuff in when we got red zoned. Then it was all over! Had to pull it all down again. What a waste!

Thirty metres of concrete the builder told me. They pulled all the concrete out. It was a big mistake because they didn’t put dirt over it. Well, they put dirt over it but it was full of rocks and stones. Do you think I could get it fixed? Not on your life! I got a wee garden down there about three metres square and I took 3.5 barrel-loads of stones and rocks and things out of it before I could plant anything. Do you think I could get them to come back and clean that up?! Not on your life! The contractor came back with a machine that he ran around behind his tractor, and it had flaps on it, and they were supposed to knock the rocks and things back into the ground but all it did was smash them up. They even sent a gang out one day, he said, “I’ve got a gang between jobs, I’ll send them out for the day and they can pick up all these stones.” I thought, “Oh alright, sounds silly to me,” but all they did was wander around the place kicking them around, never picked anything up!

In the finish I got sick of it. I just couldn’t get anywhere with it. I suppose I could have gone and got the lawyer and things like that because they were breaching their agreement. I just put strings down and cut it all up into squares with string and then I worked in each one with the barrow for weeks. I didn’t get them all out but I got quite a bit so that I can now mow it. It was a huge job – took me weeks. I stayed in that area with a crowbar in the barrow and I got most of the stuff off the top anyhow. I just left it for the grass to grow naturally. It’s all twitch I suppose. It might be alright at the moment because of the time of the year, but you’ll see it’ll go brown, just like that.

To start with I didn’t even want anything for it. They could have gone in there, put their building in there and it wouldn’t have worried me, but I wanted the land remediated, that was all I was interested in. It’s remediated alright now. I can’t do anything with it. If I could use the land I probably would keep it, but you can’t do anything with it. It’s compacted. You couldn’t dig anywhere.

We got $8,000, I think it was. The contract we had with them was that they were to put the place back as it was, but they didn’t want to dig all that, go down that metre and pull all that stuff out, so we got $10,000 as compensation for that. They put soil over it and I agreed to that. As long as I could mow it I would be happy with them putting dirt over the top of it – which was a big mistake. So we actually got $18,000 altogether for the lease of it.

**Difficulties engaging with agencies**

I’ve been in The Hub [in Eastgate Mall] where a lady took me to see this person and that person, but you never, ever progressed, if you know what I mean. Nothing ever actually happened. You just sort of finished up in the same spot as where you started.

[Explaining the insurance situation] gets a bit tricky and I haven’t really got to grips with this. … I still don’t really fully understand it except that you can’t get two payments. The insurance company gave us this offer, I think it was $800,000 or something, and that was allowing $200,000 for the foundation, but they wouldn’t give you the foundation money unless you actually rebuilt by a certain time. Well that’s not really right. They’re supposed to be offering you a cash price to rebuild your house. We said we’d accept that, but I wouldn’t accept those clauses where they took that money back or wouldn’t pay the foundation cost and all that sort of thing. So that became a stalemate, and then they put the pressure on about you had to make a decision within such and such a date or they were going to start all over again, or something.

We had a survey done by a building outfit, engineering outfit, but it never got priced, so I went back to them and asked him would he do a design foundation and everything and we’ll get it costed. And so he had a look at the geotech report and he said no, the best thing for you is to go back to the insurance company and say they haven’t followed their own geotech report. So, anyhow, the insurance company did their new scope of works thing and priced it, and it came out slightly more, but not much.

The insurance company said they’d do a costed foundation, but then their engineering outfit said they didn’t know what the zoning of the land was so they couldn’t really give you a proper engineered foundation. But I mean, we’re TC3. Surely they would have known that. Wouldn’t they?

I don’t really think it is up to the homeowner to chase information, but if you don’t, they just run all over the top of you. God, some people must have got some … What about these poor old ladies on their own? What sort of hassles have they been put under? It makes you sick to think about what’s going on.

**Next steps**

Now that Lorraine’s gone it’s put a whole new light on the thing. Lorraine didn’t want to shift and I didn’t want to go, but look at this house! I could live in this room here. Just need to put a wall up there somewhere. It’s just far too big. I don’t really know where I would go. I did think at one stage I’d like to have a lifestyle block, but then you’ve got to think, well I’m 80 years old, you’ve only got about six years left being able to do things and then you’re just about in a rest home – well that’s how I look at it anyhow – so that’s not a very good idea.

Plus, this whole place, we put it into a family trust and I’m thinking if something happens to me and the kids get left with this and nobody wants it … Everybody has sort of got their own places, so it’s only great-grandchildren on the way, but I don’t think they’d want to be saddled with it either. So I don’t know. It’s a damn shame really. The upkeep of this place on one pension is going to be horrific. The whole place is centrally heated.

**Services in the red zone**

Some people say, “How come you’re living in the red zone?” and those sorts of things, but I don’t know whether to call it stigma or not. I don’t know. I just say, “You don’t have to go, the thing was voluntary, you could all still have been here if you wanted.” But people with mortgages would have had a different kettle of fish, wouldn’t they? The banks could make it hard. I don’t know whether they did or not. Fortunately we didn’t have a mortgage.

Somebody at the Council must have said about the cost of keeping the red zones going. The media come rushing out every time somebody makes a decision. Like when they said something about they were going to cut the services off, the media was out here like a flash, they were out here the next day. I’m not worried about the services being cut: I don’t think they’ll do it, and I have the ability to cope if they do.

Since the earthquakes the power hasn’t been reliable. When I say hasn’t been reliable, I know they do spend a lot of time going around cutting trees and things out of the lines, but that’s what the biggest problem is, a branch comes down and wipes out the power lines and it’s half a day before you’ve got power again. The other thing was, with Lorraine being sick, you needed to keep the heating going. That was a big thing. I got a gas heater, but they’re not very nice those gas heaters. They do the job. I’m thinking of getting a generator.

The number of people here… Why do they need to be out here every day? All day! Sucking the sewer out? There’s about 20 properties with two or three people on them I suppose.

**Unanswered question: why was Brooklands red zoned?**

I cannot for the life of me understand why we are red zoned, I really can’t. I mean, we are no different than Spencerville [where it is TC3]. Next settlement just down by Spencer Park. I think Spencer Park probably is what saved them. Look at all the damage down there: flooding, they’re still getting it. I just cannot understand it. It doesn’t make any sense. ... When you look at the other red zones - the likes of Bexley and all around there - I mean, houses just about disappeared in some places, didn’t they? Nothing like that happened here. ... The red zones are not all the same thing.

I can understand houses on the river, anywhere close to water like that. Same as us here, I suppose. We’re badly damaged, but I think a lot of that is due to the fact that we’re just sitting on an unsupported sand hill. There’s no retaining walls or anything. It’s just a hill full of sand.

I can’t understand it, because when you look at the other red zones, the likes of Bexley and all around there, houses just about disappeared in some places, and there was nothing like that happened here! God I saw one house, the front door couldn’t be opened. The red zones are not all the same thing. The red zoning that doesn’t make sense to me is the difference between the red zones. I’ve seen some of the damage in other red zones and there’s nothing like that here. That’s what makes me a bit sceptical of the whole thing. And my old house, as I say, it’s better now than it was before the earthquake.

1. **Technical Category 3 (TC3, blue)** indicated moderate to significant land damage from liquefaction is possible in future large earthquakes. Site-specific geotechnical investigation and specific engineering foundation design is required. See http://cera.govt.nz/residential-green-zone-technical-categories/overview. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)