**John**

**Christchurch flat land red zone**

**Area 2: Brooklands**

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

**John’s story**

I worked in the motor garage where the town art gallery is now, in Worchester Street. I worked there for eight years. I wanted to build this house, but I wasn’t getting enough money so I went to the freezing works and got a job there. I was there about 26 years. I left and got a job at the Canterbury Frozen Meat Company because it was much closer. That was alright, but in the winter we had three or four months off, so I fixed cars and lawnmowers and all sorts of things. Went whitebaiting. Between the two works there’s about 34 years.

I had one knee replaced and the other knee wore out because it carries extra load when you have a disability. I was about 60-odd and it got too much for me, working, but I signed up to get this knee done too, and when I got that done I was just about 65 when I would have retired anyway. It hasn’t been easy. In between times I worked in the forestry, I worked in Colombo Street as a chainsaw and lawnmower mechanic, and then I worked on the Styx River dredging and weed cutting. We towed three blades along behind a diesel-powered boat cutting the weed, because when the weed builds up it affects the flow and we had to keep it down.

Anyway, I worked and built this house in my spare time. We [Margaret, my wife, and I] lived at several places. We lived with my parents for a while, and then the guy across the road had a property and he let us stay there rent-free for a few months, and then we got a rental in Dartford Street.

I have about 12 or 14 model planes. We used to run the Kaiapoi model aeroplane show at Rangiora Airfield on Labour Weekend, and that was really good. Did it for 10 years and we made quite a bit of money. People would pay to come out and watch model aircraft flying and crashing and all sorts of things, tow the banner around.

I’m a very keen fisherman and I had an old caravan at Rakaia River about 30-odd years. Most weekends I’d shoot up there and took the kids until they grew up. Then Margaret and I would go up and spend the weekend there, catch half a dozen salmon. Had quite a secluded spot beside a water race, and there were trees and things around it. I used to mow the lawn.

Margaret was the patron of the Brooklands Community Centre. She started the table tennis club and that’s where we met. And it was good, too. She fell madly in love with me and I couldn’t understand why. She was a wonderful wife, a great cook, she loved fishing and deer stalking. We used to go deer stalking − she had done that with her brother before I’d ever met her. She was a real outdoor woman, and we used to go over to the West Coast gold panning, sleeping in the caravan. It was good. Many, many times. Go fishing, come back with a chilly bin full of fish.

I haven’t done a lot of fishing since I had a bit of a stroke about 10 years ago. I’m pretty good now, but this arm was numb and my speech was slow and blurred, and this leg wouldn’t go where I put it. When you have a stroke there’s part of your brain cells that die, they’re starved of blood and other cells have to take over the job they were doing, and if you leave it too long it’s pretty hard. A lot of people give up and just don’t try, but if you try hard you’ll get there.

**John’s property**

My family homestead is across the road, number 20. I lived there until I was about 21.It took me about three years to build this house. It’s a sort of a concrete sheeting, a quarter-inch thick, but it was quick to put up. The wooden frame is built first. It’s withstood earthquakes − it would have done about 4,000 earthquakes. And we had a terrific wind that was blowing sheets of iron off roofs across the fence and it never made any difference. Before the earthquake I got double glazing because having sugar diabetes you are very susceptible to temperature changes. The cold is hard. Your lower limbs, and especially feet.

The house is perfectly liveable. It doesn’t leak. The damage is just cosmetic. I think I’ve been paid out for that. I’ve got a list of things that’s meant to be done, but contractors aren’t interested because it’s still in the “red light” district. I’m a Christian and I prayed pretty hard when those big earthquakes struck, and I think it worked because this house isn’t badly damaged at all. They haven’t been out to fix anything yet. When I rang up to get contractors out they came out and they measured everything up, but you never hear any more from them. You ring up and they say, “Oh, it’ll be in the post, we’ll send out a price in the post,” and you never hear any more. I think they’ve been instructed not to touch any houses in the red zone.

I have a section next door. I’ve got a letter pre-earthquake from the Council that they consider that part of my family home − the section. CERA [Canterbury Earthquake Recovery Authority] described it as a vacant damaged section, but there is no damage in it. There’s no stuff came up out of the ground. The letters they’ve sent me don’t make any sense at all. They kept sending their letter every fortnight. I ignored it because it didn’t make sense. They wouldn’t know where Brooklands was, I don’t think, most of them, sitting in an office somewhere, probably in Wellington. That’s the way they work and try and scare the hell out of everybody.

**Reasons for staying**

I built it myself. We raised four children here and it’s more than just a house. It’s your home and identity. My children agree with me staying here. Stewart would like to come and live back here, and he’s seen it’s much like it was when we first came out here with hardly anybody living out here. It’s a wilderness.

I didn’t have a mortgage. People who had mortgages were instructed by their banks to get out. I got in touch with two lawyers and they both said, “Oh you’ve got to go,” but later on we found it wasn’t compulsory. They couldn’t force you out unless they make a change in the law in Parliament. As long as you pay your rates and you’ve got ownership, you’re reasonably safe. But with Brownlee’s attitude nothing would surprise me. It’s a government directive. I think lawyers were instructed to encourage people to shift from Brooklands because they just said you’ve got to go. We found out later it wasn’t compulsory. I haven’t shifted. I’m pretty stubborn, and perhaps a little ignorant.

I’m at the end part of my life so it’s not all that important. I mean, everything is freehold. I don’t owe anything to anybody and I’m quite happy here. A bit lonely.

**Neighbours leaving**

There’s some things I miss, and that’s neighbours, because I got on pretty well with all my neighbours. Most of them, their heart broke when they had to leave − crying. The children love it out here because the lagoon is just over the hill, and swimming and the water skiing and all sorts of things that modern kids do. It was a good place to bring up children. It was safe. Well, there were one or two drownings out in the lagoon at different times, but that can happen anywhere I suppose. It’s broken a lot of people’s hearts having to leave Brooklands. I cried when I first saw my neighbours’ house. The children had written messages on the walls before it got demolished. Couldn’t believe it. Ten- or eleven-year-old girl, broken hearted.

Dear old Henry. I took the letter into him to say that we’ve got to shift out of Brooklands and I asked him a bit later, “How do you feel about it?” And he said, “I’m gutted.” It was only a month or so after that he sat in his chair and died. He did have a plan to build himself a new house on the property, but of course that was nullified by the EQC [Earthquake Commission]. He loved Brooklands.

**Living in the Brooklands red zone: services**

I don’t like the fences they’ve installed. I used to be able to go out there and walk straight across to my sister’s place on an angle, you know? And the footpaths are pretty ungainly, and they’ve got wreckage and stuff strewn on them still. The last few months or so there’s been so much work and machinery. It’s a rush job. I think they actually got hauled over the coals by CERA for taking too long.

Apart from the fences it’s going to be just like living in the middle of Hagley Park with the grass that’s starting to come through now. They’ve left quite a few fruit trees, walnut trees and things, otherwise most of the trees have been taken out that aren’t native. One family had this beautiful big lavender bush − it was huge − and they came all the way back from Geraldine, where they’d shifted to, to try and dig that out. It was such a big unruly thing they gave up. But it’s a beautiful bush and of course the scent was beautiful. A month or so after they’d left the Council went down with a bulldozer and ripped out a lot of those plants from the roots, and they ripped the bush out and left it lying on top. Anything that wasn’t native is to go. It was the woman that’s in charge of the clean-up. She was there instructing the chap what to do with his machine.

So the next day I went down with my van and put the lavender bush in the back and brought it home. I don’t know whether it’s going to survive. It hasn’t completely died, but I don’t think it’ll flower this year. It was some woman’s pride and joy, you know? You can’t blame people salvaging trees and plants and things, although if they’d been caught they’d have been prosecuted. Once you get out of that property it becomes Crown land.

They’re getting around to cleaning up the rubbish lying around, most of that was cut off to allow them to put the fences up and it was just heaped up on the side of the road to be collected later and apparently it’s not a very important load. The last couple of days they have been picking them up. Truckload after truckload of soil and they’ve built up sections about eight to ten inches, I suppose. The heaps of soil that was all spread out and sown in grass, it’s certainly tidying the place up a lot.

I’m slightly nervous about security, but so far we haven’t had anybody trying to break in or anything, and I can lock the gate at night, so they’d have to get over the fence. The houses that had been abandoned were looted. People driving up from town and having a merry old time. Now the houses have gone, there’s still a bit of traffic at night that’s a bit unexplained. 11 pm Friday and Saturday night and the boy racers come out down here and they go where the boat ramp is and have made a lot of damage there. Just round and round in circuits in the mud and doing what young people do.

The postie comes around and checks on people. We haven’t lost any services, although they threatened that we would. It’s a bit like living on the edge of a cliff and waiting for them to push us over. It’s quite debilitating mentally. The only service we had in 1940 was electric power, nothing else, and we survived and we loved it out here because we were all keen fishermen.

It’s a bit vague what the outcome of the zoning is going to be. They don’t seem to know themselves, or they say they don’t know. But now they’ve put this 360-degree walk track which finishes at the Brooklands Lagoon. That’s a fairly important subject that’s never been brought up before. We didn’t know anything about it until a couple of weeks ago, when it was in the paper. No maps to say where it was. Just a few statements.

The paper said to go to the Council office and you’ll see a map of it, but why isn’t it public? Residents have got a right to know what’s going on. You pay rates for these sorts of things. It’s already happened. Like the meetings they have. Most of the Council meetings have already been decided before the meeting is held.

We had a meeting about the Brooklands Hall. It wasn’t badly damaged. It wasn’t good enough to play bowls − they played indoor bowls around there − but it was quite useable and quite safe. The lady who was the president, she said they told her there was liquefaction under the hall, and that was a lie. There wasn’t any liquefaction under the Brooklands Hall. But they got the hall smashed down as quickly as they could. It was gone.

The community centre was established quite early in the history of Brooklands. First of all, to make a hall they took the boat shed around by the jetty and carted it around to the hall section, and they installed it there. After a few years that got burnt down and a builder who had a bach out here he made us the new hall. They sort of ran the playcentre and all sorts of things. They had dances every second Saturday night. The loss of the community centre was a big thing. That was a staging post for emergency − headquarters for civil defence.

**Insurance**

I’m insured [but my insurer] said they only cover the paths, the concrete. They put money in my bank account − sent me a sum of money. I never signed or agreed to anything, but that’s how they work, and they shun the responsibility and put it onto the house owner, you see. They put money in my account, and I’m sitting on it at present. It’s earning interest and in another 10 years there might be enough there to start repairing stuff. Of course it wasn’t enough to cover the repairs, and nobody I’ve read about in the paper agrees to it, either. I don’t know whether it’ll cover much or not, but I’ve approached two contractors to come and do it and never hear anymore from them, because it’s red zoned and they’ve probably been told not to bother with red zoned properties.

I’m still insured, but some companies have been in touch with people who are what we call the stayers, and they said that their insurance had been cancelled. It wouldn’t surprise me if that happened to me, too.

All told, it would probably be about $85,000 that CERA offered me for the house and garage. Eighty-five thousand dollars is not a lot. I mean, a good caravan costs that much now and probably a decent car would cost you more. Just for the house, and $150,000 for the section. That was to buy the house, and once you signed that paper it’s finished, that’s it. You’ve got so long to get out of it. On my rates demand they’ve revalued this section at $17,000. Before the earthquake they were fetching $200,000, because it’s a wonderful holiday spot.

**Stress**

It’s stressful not knowing whether you’re going to be here next week. It’s pretty frustrating. We’re apparently not getting a lot of sympathy from the North Island. There’s been anti letters in the paper when they decided the stayers are not justified in staying. And the Council put in a report in the paper that it’s costing so many million dollars for us to remain in the area, which was a lot of bunkum: they’re counting the wages of all the Council workers, and a lot of them are being put off work because there’s not much work for them now. And of course, propaganda is a weapon for people with money, and people in the North Island read that and say, “Oh we shouldn’t be paying tax payers’ money to keep those lazy so and so’s there!”

I say, “Come and live here and try it, see how you get on.” To destroy a complete village − 418 houses, I think, and they’ve done similar in Kaiapoi. There was damage in parts of Brooklands, mainly around the river, same around the Avon, but there were a lot of houses that were quite sound and were repairable. Big, flash, modern houses.

The earthquake period was sheer hell. We had never had earthquakes like that in Christchurch before. We’ve had smaller shakes, and you think, “Oh that was pretty good,” but when you can’t stand up against it and the walls are bending like rubber it’s pretty severe. I was in bed for the first one [in September 2010], and that was 7.1 and I couldn’t have stood up. I sat next to my bed hanging on.

CERA has been worse than the earthquakes. I don’t think we’ve been treated very fairly, not New Zealand, no. Our system has changed, our democracy has fallen flat, our elected ECan [Environment Canterbury] Council is dismissed, and they are handpicked, and look what they’ve done. They’ve stolen half the Rakaia and Waimak with the water. That’s just a fisherman’s point of view. Rivers are public water, owned by everybody, not just farmers.

We lost our democracy. We’ve got no say in it. They just send letters all the time. They don’t come out and talk to you. I’m against the convention centres and swimming pools and games and things when there’s still people in dire straits. It’s just not New Zealand. New Zealand isn’t normally like this, but there you are. This government have got the bit in their teeth and they’re doing as they please, when they please.

I have definitely suffered. Mentally, not physically, but mentally, oh yes. There’s been one or two suicides in Brooklands. Been hushed up. I was told one lady committed suicide and then the next two or three days it wasn’t suicide at all, but I think it was. Somebody has put a cross with flowers where she lived. It’s a continued worry, sure, but it’s the same all around Christchurch with people that are affected. A lot of people haven’t had repairs done to the houses. Won’t forget it.

We should forgive our enemies, according to the Bible. Sometimes it takes a bit of doing.

The Bible tells us that the world will be destroyed, and that’s what they’ve done. We’ve had the odd developer cruising round. Who knows what that’s about, but it’s certainly an apple to be picked. Just what developers are looking for and rubbing their hands together with the eye of making a fortune out of rebuilding in Brooklands. I believe they have a hidden agenda. I do believe that. When you see things like this going on it doesn’t bode well for the future. They’ll try and take our houses without paying for them eventually. You’ve got to read between the lines, and well, who knows … But they’ll want us out of it, there’s no doubt about that. We’re an eyesore on their little plan, whatever the plan is. They won’t let on, but building developers will be looking at this place and rubbing their hands together.

**Media**

What happened to John Campbell wasn’t fair, wasn’t right. He was coming down here and interviewing people, and it was anti-government, and the people who pay his wages cut him off eventually because he was being a bit too forthright. And he was really good. He didn’t pull his punches.

**What could be done differently?**

Unfortunately the scale and magnitude of the earthquakes were so great the government was confounded in the early stages. They didn’t know what to do. Miles and miles of sewerage pipes and drainage pipes were smashed and broken. It was a hell of a job.

I think a lot of the employees of CERA were not qualified for the job, but they were desperate, so can you really blame them? But the government, I feel, has let us down. I know the community centre round here − they didn’t really do much, and they should have tried to hold us together, but they were so worried with their own situation it was probably too much for them. But to demolish the hall that was a mainstay of the village! The whole committee were in favour of demolishing the hall. There were only three or four of us stayers that were against it.

**Unanswered questions**

The Government were taken to Court. That was thrown out of Court and they were found guilty, and so they’re making new offers to people that were approached before to pay them the full $150,000. So far I haven’t heard anything. I’m not worrying because I don’ really want to sell it, but I’ve heard a rumour that the Government have bought sections and they’ve devalued them to $1 so that they don’t have to pay much rates on it, you see, to the Council.