Articles

THE *NEW* DEPARTMENT OF BOTANY RESEARCH BUILDING!

Mary Anne Miller

The rain held off but the champagne flowed as we welcomed the Vice-Chancellor, Professor David Skegg, on Friday 25th November 2005 to open the new research building – our first custom-built facility in 81 years. Since 1924, when the Reverend Dr John Holloway took on the role of Lecturer of Botany, there have been requests, some strongly worded, for new department facilities. There was a time in the early 1970s when the Department thought it would be moving from its "temporary" residence to occupy part of the Science III complex, but this was not to be. Recent acquisitions to the department archives include undated plans for a four storied establishment with links to the Landcare building on Cumberland St. Obviously another aborted attempt at re-housing us.

Finally in 2000 permission was granted to proceed with a dedicated research facility. Plans were drawn up and negotiations got underway with Otago Museum over exchange of land to make our building and their proposed Tropical House possible. Early in 2004 the site was cleared, which unfortunately meant the destruction of a garden first created by Holloway then later enhanced with Three Kings rarities by his successor Professor Geoff Baylis. However, the department gardens had expanded to other areas over the years so although plants were lost, space was not significantly reduced. Also demolished were Holloway's original glasshouse and a World War II prefab hut.

The footprint was in place by October 2004 with Naylor Love responsible for constructing the Neil Ashby design. Foundations for both the Botany Research Building and Tropical House went down simultaneously and fortunately for Botany it was decided to go ahead with its construction first. There were some interesting moments when huge cranes lifted steel girders over the glasshouses onto the site and a few delays, mainly bad weather over last summer, but time was made up later so that the building was ready for occupation at the beginning of August 2005.

We now have an area under cover, the Interim Lab, where samples can be sorted and cleaned from the field. And while the downstairs Holloway Lab and smaller rooms are for ecological/physiological activities, such as current investigations on the function of red pigments in the New Zealand ice-plant *Disphyma australe* and carbon uptake mechanisms in seaweeds, the upstairs Baylis and Bannister Labs are dedicated to molecular biology. Projects underway include applying DNA fingerprinting to look at fungal diversity in *Hieracium* roots, West Coast forests species, wood rotting fungi and the alpine lichen *Thamnolia* as well as a search for gender markers in rimu and genetic delineation in the family Lobeliaceae. The adjacent microscopy room has so far accommodated research on fossil plants, slime moulds, and mites and crystals in plants. The three main labs, as you may have noted above, commemorate the

contribution to science of our first three Heads of Department. They were constructed to ERMA (Environmental Risk Management Authority) standards and HSNO (Hazardous Substances and New Organisms) Act 1996 regulations. We are very pleased with our new building but hope we don't have to wait another 80 years for further upgrades.

Emeritus Prof Peter Bannister in the new Bannister Laboratory - *Mary Anne Miller*