



WHANGANUI DISTRICT HERITAGE INVENTORY

Register Item No: 310 **Type:** Building **Site:** Pre-1900 Archaeological Interest

Name: CENTRAL FIRE STATION

Location: 139 Guyton Street, Whanganui

Legal Description: Lot 1, DP 55691 (formerly Section 220, Town of Wanganui)

Current Details: Owner: [Contact Whanganui District Council for details]

Occupier: Owner plus Wanganui Ballet and Dance Academy

Original Owner: Wanganui Fire Board

Date: 1921

Architect/Designer: CR Ford of Ford & Talboys

Builder: Walpole & Patterson

Status: District Plan Class: Class B, 2013

Thematic Context: Civic

Significance: Architectural, Historic, Context

Integrity: Substantially intact exterior with many internal heritage features

Photo Reference:

WDC File Ref: Heritage/Inventory/C9

Date: 2009 and 2006

See pp 5-6 for additional photographs



The elevations of Guyton and Wilson Street facades with new fire station doors. Note memorial stone under corner window on Guyton Street and also the fire service houses to the left and the flats to the right of the station building.

History:

Of the site:

The names of all the owners/occupiers of the previous buildings on the site are not yet known; however old buildings on the site were demolished in 1919 to make way for the new fire station.

Of the Fire Brigade in Wanganui:

The first volunteer fire fighters in Wanganui were British soldiers stationed at the Rutland and York Stockades from the mid 1840s. A volunteer Fire Brigade was formed in 1866, by which time Wanganui had a Town Board. Obtaining funds for the brigade's equipment was always difficult, but the bad fires in 1868 which destroyed the Rutland Hotel and newly-erected Presbyterian church served to demonstrate the need for a well-equipped fire service; subsequently the first fire engines were purchased from Dunedin and England and housed in a shed on St Hill Street.

The first purpose-built fire station was erected in St Hill Street in 1882; this housed the fire-fighting equipment as well as providing accommodation for the men on duty. This two-storey wooden building stood next to the Borough Council Chambers built the same year; the Opera House was built next door to these buildings in 1899. A watchtower was built on Rutland Hill in 1883 but this was replaced in 1891 with a new watch tower on Cook's Gardens above the fire station; this tower was used until 1922 and is still standing today. In 1903, the Wanganui brigade took delivery of their first steam fire engine, a self-propelled machine which was the first of its kind in Australasia. The brigade's first petrol-drive engine was in service here in 1910.

The catalyst for the decision to set up a permanent fire brigade in Wanganui came in 1918 with the Foster's Hotel fire on Taupo Quay. Residents were critical of the volunteer brigade's response to this destructive fire which took place on Race Day and a Fire Board was subsequently established in 1919, staffed by permanent officers. There were arguments about the ownership of the volunteer brigade's assets which were finally resolved when the Borough Council sold the old fire station land and building to the new Fire Board for £3,000; another £1,350 was paid for the old brigade's equipment.

Of the building:

One of the new Fire Board's first tasks was to build a new fire station as the St Hill Street premises were too small for a permanent brigade with modern equipment. The Board raised a loan of £20,000 which enabled them to purchase a section on the corner of Wilson and Guyton Streets and erect a two-storey brick building. (The Borough Council must have later bought back the old St Hill Street premises from the Fire Board as this wooden building served as Council offices until the new City Council Chambers on Guyton Street were completed in 1968.)

The architect commissioned to design the new fire station was Charles Reginald Ford of the practice of Ford & Talboys in Wanganui. Ford had set up his architectural practice when he moved to Wanganui in December 1913 and in November 1919 he took Robert Talboys into partnership and the firm was renamed Ford & Talboys. One of Ford's apprentices from 1915 was Joseph Francis Ward, son of the local bookseller and astronomer, Joseph Ward. The fire station plans dated 1920 are all annotated clearly to note that the building was designed by "CRF" (Ford) and the drawings done by "JFW" (Ward). Ford remained in Wanganui until 1923 when he moved to Auckland and went into partnership with William Gummer; their partnership of Gummer & Ford was one of New Zealand's most successful inter-war architectural practices. Joseph Ward left Wanganui in 1921 and moved to San Francisco where he became a successful architect in the Bay Area, working there until his death in 1972.

The Fire Board's tender notice to remove the old buildings from the new site is dated October 1919, indicating that the section had been purchased prior to this date and plans started for the new fire station. The architect's plans are dated Feb and March 1920 and the building permit was issued on 20 April 1920 to the Fire Board to erect its new station. The cost was estimated at £13,542 and the chosen contractor was a local firm, Walpole & Patterson, with whom Ford had worked on a number of other buildings including Victoria Court which was under construction at the same time. In July 1920 the *Wanganui Chronicle* reported that the foundations were in place but more than a year would pass before the new fire station would be completed and ready for occupancy.

The official opening of the new fire station took place on 14 September 1921. The chairman of the Fire Board, Councillor WM Luxford, presided over the ceremonies, which ended with a "dainty afternoon tea" being served to those in attendance. The *Wanganui Chronicle* in its report on 14 September described the exterior design of the new fire station as being "based upon the architecture of the Italian Renaissance, very

simple elements being used to gain a quiet and dignified appearance appropriate to the building's use and its character as one of the town's principal public buildings."

The main front of the building faced Wilson Street to avoid potential conflict between emerging fire engines and the trams on Guyton Street. The centre of the station was the plant room with its three large doors opening onto Wilson Street; the public entrance was also on Wilson Street (a doorway later blocked off and made into a window). Single-men's quarters were mainly on the ground floor with the Guyton Street entrance providing access to the first floor with its social hall, further single men's quarters as well as self-contained quarters for the superintendent and his deputy.

Since its opening, the main dates affecting the Central Fire Station and its history are as follows:

1922 – A new Duplex fire alarm system put in place; the old Cook's Gardens watch tower was no longer needed but remained on site.

1928 – two old cottages on Guyton St were purchased to serve as married quarters, being rebuilt at a later date. The need for additional married men's quarters had been identified in 1926.

Late 1920s – the open porches were glazed in (photographic evidence noted in Conservation Report); this reflects consideration that sleeping porches were no longer necessary for health reasons (the 1918 flu epidemic and increase in TB had both encouraged healthy living and sleeping porches on residences).

1926 – Castlecliff Fire Station opened; this operated until 1972; building still extant.

Late 1930s – public access door on Wilson Street stopped up and replaced with window.

1939 – new hose tower built.

1940 – nine flats built on Wilson St section that had been purchased in 1930 with an existing house that had been divided into two flats. New flats were designed by RG Talboys.

1942 – hose tower painted in camouflage colours as enemy air raids were contemplated.

1960/61 – new hose drying and drill tower erected.

1969 – need for a new fire station site identified and investigations started.

1976 – NZ Fire Service set up so the fire brigade was no longer run by the city council. At the same time, Wanganui became the command area for district fire brigades and the need for a new fire station became more urgent.

1979 – construction started on new fire station on Maria Place extension (after years of discussion re new site).

1981 – Fire Service moved to new station and old building made redundant but ownership transferred to City Council (which became the District Council under 1989 local government reforms)

1986 – Wanganui Recreation and Sports Training Centre housed in old fire station. Signs put up.

1990 – Heritage Study by Chris Cochran and Di Stewart recommended classification of building.

1997 – Wanganui District Council commissioned Conservation Plan for the fire station from Di Stewart & Assocs and Bruce McKenzie from Dickson Lonergan Architects.

1999 – building sold to Ross Mitchell-Anyon. Sports Centre no longer there by this time. Some restoration work begun.

2006 – building sold again to new private owner who began renovations with exterior painting undertaken during 2007.

2009 – Wanganui Ballet and Dance Academy opens in old Social Hall.

Description:

The fire station is a two-storey brick building with plaster finish. The roof is mainly clad with Marseilles tiles; the rear portion with its corrugated iron was one of the changes to the original design, presumably to save money, and has always been clad in this way. The design of the building reflects a Georgian revival style which was much-favoured by Ford at the time. It has wide bracketed eaves and symmetrically placed sash windows with 8 lights to each sash. Pilasters delineate the slightly protruding corner bays on the street elevations; the ground floor windows on these bays have upper pediments. Cornice bands run around the building, front and back, at the head and sill of the first floor windows. The simple disc motif below the corner window pediments and between the upper cornice and the soffit with its wooden brackets is a decorative device used by Ford on two other commercial buildings he designed in Wanganui – Empress Buildings in Ridgway Street and the interior courtyard of Victoria Court in the Avenue. The plant room doors facing Wilson Street are an important feature of the building; the doors have been replaced during

current renovations but the openings retain their arches above the lower columns. The Guyton Street entrance has an arch above its recessed doorway. The building retains its plastered brick chimneys.

The once-open upper porches are all clearly visible as they have different windows which were put in place in the late 1920s when the porches were closed in. The memorial stone on the Guyton Street corner records the opening of the fire station in 1921. The arched windows on the stairwell are visible at the rear of the building. Two original features on the building have disappeared – the flagpole on the Wilson Street elevation and the plaster emblem above the Guyton Street entrance. Hose towers, a shed and garages have long gone from the back area which now serves as a car park.

Internally, many original features remain especially in the social hall (with its original fireplace surround), stairway and upper landing. A major leak above the stairwell had caused damage to the ceiling but has been fixed. The Conservation Report identifies all the changes that have been made to the building over time as well as recommendations for restoration work.

Condition:

The building is currently under renovation for adaptive new uses. The exterior was painted in 2007; new doors have been put in place of the original fire engine doors on Wilson Street.

Resources Consulted:

Wanganui District Council Building files: 139 Guyton Street file contains original blueprints, dated 23 Feb 1920: Architect CRF; plans drawn by JFW; 1986 alterations for recreation and sports centre; *Old Fire Station Conservation Plan* prepared in 1997 for Wanganui District Council by Di Stewart & Assocs with Bruce MacKenzie of Dickson Lonergan Architects (extracts on Heritage Inventory file - includes history of the fire service in Wanganui as well as history of the building); 2008/09 renovations to create apartment and dance studio.

Wanganui Borough Council Register of Building Permits, Archives Ref AAF 174:1 – permit issued 20 April 1920 to Fire Board to erect Station, Wilson & Guyton Sts, Contractor: Walpole & Patterson, estimated cost £13,542.

Wanganui Borough Council 1908 Insurance Assessment Plan – does not show this part of town.

1990 Wanganui Heritage Study, item C9 – has little information but notes building should be classified under Historic Places Act and listed in District Plan.

Yeoman 4 Aug 1882 – Mr Wright to complete plans & specs for Fire Brigade’s new building.

Wanganui Herald 1 Sept 1882 – JR Wright’s tender notice for Fire Brigade Station, St Hill Street.

Wanganui Herald 14 Sept 1882 – description of plans for new Fire Brigade building next to Council Chambers. JR Wright, architect; FM Spurdle, builder. Cost £730.

Yeoman 10 Nov 1882 – notes framework of new fire station now complete.

Yeoman 15 Dec 1882 – fire station nearing completion.

Wanganui Herald 25 Oct 1919 – tender notice for removal of building, corner Wilson & Guyton Streets, for Wanganui Fire Board/Town Clerk.

Wanganui Chronicle 23 July 1920 – new fire station, Wilson/Guyton Street corner – foundations in.

Wanganui Chronicle 14 Sept 1921 – “New Fire Station” – report on building prior to opening ceremony. Notes architects were Ford & Talboys.

Wanganui Chronicle 15 Sept 1921 – “New Fire Station” – report on opening ceremony. Notes cost of building was £14,300 plus purchase of land with buildings on it, £2,400.

Wanganui Herald 11 Feb 1926 (and later dates) – reports of opening of Castlecliff Fire Brigade Station; no architect or builder named.

Wanganui Chronicle 8 Feb 2007 – photograph and caption of work on building.

Wanganui Chronicle 24 Jan 2009 – “Old Fire Station full of new business activity” – notes dance studio and apartment in building.

Athol Kirk and Bryan Barkla, *Wanganui’s Finest: 125 years of Firefighting in Wanganui*, 1991.

Gavin McLean, *New Zealand Tragedies: Fires and Firefighting*, Grantham House, 1992.

Ross Mitchell-Anyon, personal communication re building history, 28 June 2009.

Comments on Significance:

Architectural

The fire station was the last of four office/commercial buildings in Wanganui designed by Charles Reginald Ford, whose later partnership with William Gummer formed one of New Zealand’s most successful inter-war architectural practices. The association with Joseph Francis Ward, who worked with Ford on the design of this building, is also significant as Ward became a successful architect in San Francisco following his training under Ford in Wanganui. The Georgian-revival influence in the design of the building reflects the return to classical values after the First World War. The integrity of the building’s exterior is also significant as most of the original features remain intact.

Historic

This was the first station built for the professional fire brigade in Wanganui. The building is an important reminder of the development of the fire service in Wanganui and reflects the civic pride at the time in ensuring that an important public building such as the new fire station was to be an asset to the town. The building is also a reminder of the role of local authorities in running fire brigades before the establishment of a national fire service in 1976.

Context

This is an important building on a corner site on the outer edge of the CBD. It contributes to the townscape in this block of Guyton Street, which has two other landmark buildings - the District Council Chambers and St Paul’s Presbyterian Church.

Recommendations:

Date: June 2009 **Research by:** Wendy Pettigrew



Guyton Street façade with Dance Studio sign.



Wilson Street façade with new doors.



Rear view with entrance to Dance Studio.



Rear view up to apartment and deck.



Tesla Studios photograph 1921 of Fire Station with engines (possibly taken at the opening). Note the boy standing in a doorway on Wilson Street; this entrance was closed off in the 1930s and became a window. Note the plaster emblem above the Guyton Street entrance; this was removed at some time after 1981. Also note the porches, one above the Guyton Street entrance and the other at the end of the Wilson Street upper façade; there was originally one more on the other side of the building. Alexander Turnbull Library 1/1 008126-G.



This photograph taken in 2006 shows the original fire engine doors still in place. The obtrusive sign boards had been erected for the sports centre.