St Mary the Virgin Church
168-170 Karori Road

Image: Charles Collins, 2015

Summary of heritage significance

- St Mary's Anglican Church has historic and social value as it has been a place of worship since early immigrants settled in Karori in the 1840s. Several buildings on this site have served Karori’s Anglican community since 1866, while the present building has served the suburb for over 100 years.
- St Mary the Virgin is an important example of the work of Wellington’s leading ecclesiastic architect, Frederick de Jersey Clere. The building has particular aesthetic value for the architectural quality of the Italianate design, the grace of the interior space, and the high level of craftsmanship displayed in its construction. The use of an Italianate design style is unusual for this architect.
- Several additions to St Mary’s have been carefully designed to ensure the integrity of the original design, and the main body of the church as a result remains in authentic condition.
- It is a significant landmark in the suburb, located prominently on Karori Road and visible from much of the surrounding area.
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<th>District Plan:</th>
<th>Map 11, reference 170</th>
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<td>Former uses:</td>
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<td>Current uses:</td>
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<td>Earthquake Prone Status:</td>
<td>Potentially EQP (SR 265584), (Bldg B 274224)</td>
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Extent: Cityview GIS 2013
1.0 Outline History

1.1 History

Few churches in Wellington enjoy the prominent location of St Mary’s which sits on the crest of a hill in the centre of the suburb of Karori. Its position and architecture evoke village churches in Europe and elsewhere.

One of Karori’s earliest landowners, Justice Chapman, may well have had such an image in mind when he donated a four acre block to the Anglican Church in 1847. At the time Karori was being settled by immigrants seeking flat land in the vicinity of Lambton Harbour. Although Karori was some distance away it had a population of 273 at that time. These pioneers needed a place to worship. At first they met in a small building near Chapman’s house but this interdenominational chapel did not last long. From 1852 services were held in a private house, ‘Chesney Wold’, until in 1866 a new chapel, made of timber taken from the surrounding forest, was built on ‘Church Hill’. The small structure served the settler community for many years. Among the congregation was the young Katherine Beauchamp (later Mansfield) whose family lived for a time at ‘Chesney Wold’. They attended the original St Mary’s where her father joined the vestry, just as Stanley Burrell planned to do in her story Prelude.

By the turn of the century it was clear that a larger building was required to provide for the growing suburb. In 1890 a proposal for a new church (seating 600) and a church hall was considered. However, the new St Mary’s was not built for another twelve years (the foundation stone was laid on Easter Tuesday 1911) and, when it was completed, it was much smaller than originally proposed because that was all the parish could afford.

Nevertheless the new church, which was designed by one of the city’s leading architects, Frederick de Jersey Cleré, was impressive. He had made provision for 200 worshippers but twice that number attended the inaugural service on All Saints Day, 1911. The concrete and timber building cost £2074 which was not paid off until 1916. As soon as it was paid for, Cleré was asked to prepare plans for an extension.

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2 Fearnley C. 1977, Early Wellington Churches, Millwood Press, Wellington p.128
3 Ibid. p.127
4 Ward L.E. 1928, Early Wellington, Whitcombe and Tombs, Wellington p.239
5 Boddy G. 1996, Katherine Mansfield – A ‘Do You Remember’ Life, VUW Press, Wellington p.16, 103
6 Frederick de Jersey Cleré, “170 Karori Road, erect church”, May 5, 1911, 00047:14:610, Wellington City Archives
Again a lack of funds delayed work, so that it was another ten years before the alterations were carried out.  

Meanwhile Karori continued to grow. Clere’s extension of 1926-27 had increased the seating to 280 but, in time, that also became inadequate. In 1965 the architects, Porter and Martin, designed a further extension which almost doubled St Mary’s capacity to 480. A generous porch was also added. The Bishop of Wellington consecrated the enlarged church on 20 November 1966. 

The Karori Anglican Churches committee commissioned an earthquake risk assessment in 2012, which found issues with the 1911 church and church tower, the attached early childhood centre, and the church hall. Church services were moved to the rear, 1960s, section of the church and the church hall vacated. In 2013 the church announced plans to reduce the height of the church tower to roof level, and to carry out minor repairs to the early childhood centre.

1.2 Timeline of modifications

1847  Justice Chapman donated a four acre block to the Anglican Church. Parish met in a small building near Chapman’s house
1852  Services held at ‘Chesney Wold’ (private house)
1866  Chapel built on church hill from local timber
1911  Building constructed (00047:14:610)
1926-7 Church additions (00056:20:B1897)
1965  Church additions (00058:437:C18722)
2006  Church additions and alterations (00078:1875:139198)

Church hall

1923  Church hall constructed (00055:11:A1146)
1927  Additions to church hall (00056:42:B4055)
1980  Alterations and strengthen hall (00058:1269:C53814)

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7 Fearnley p.132
8 Ibid. p.133
9 Boris Jancic, ‘St Mary’s faces earthquake issues’ Dominion Post 24 October 2013
View of St Mary’s Anglican Church c1940s (J W Chapman-Taylor. Ref: 1/2-162466-F. ATL)

St Mary's Church, showing the graveyard to the left (Duncan Winder, c1960s. Ref: DW-0179-F. ATL)
S. Mary's Church Karori

Date: February 2013

Detail from Clere’s original plans (WCC Archives, 00047:14:610)
1.3 Architect

Fredrick de Jersey Clere

Clere (1856-1952) was born in Lancashire, the son of an Anglican clergyman, and was articled to Edmund Scott, an ecclesiastical architect of Brighton. He then became chief assistant to R J Withers, a London architect. Clere came to New Zealand in 1877, practising first in Feilding and then in Wanganui. He later came to Wellington and practised there for 58 years. He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Institute of British Architects in 1886 and held office for 50 years as one of four honorary secretaries in the Empire. In 1883 he was appointed Diocesan Architect of the Anglican Church; he designed more than 100 churches while he held this position.

Clere was a pioneer in reinforced concrete construction; the outstanding example of his work with this material is the Church of St Mary of the Angels (1922), Wellington. As well as being pre-eminent in church design, Clere was responsible for many domestic and commercial buildings including Wellington's Harbour Board Offices and Bond Store (1891) and Overton in Marton. Clere was also involved in the design of large woolsheds in Hawkes Bay and Wairarapa.

He was active in the formation of the New Zealand Institute of Architects and served on their council for many years. He was a member of the Wellington City Council until 1895, and from 1900 a member of the Wellington Diocesan Synod and the General Synod. He was also a member of the New Zealand Academy of Fine Arts.10

2.0 Physical description

2.1 Architecture

The architecture of St. Mary’s Church is a distinctive Italianate style, characterised by the tall square tower, the long, low-pitched gable roof, deep overhanging eaves and gables, and small round-headed window openings in groups of twos and threes. The eaves and gables are lined with tongue and groove boarding, with purlins exposed, and their great depth emphasised by timber props up from the wall buttresses.

The building is an important work of the architect, Frederick de Jersey Clere, stylistically different from any other major church he built. Gothic was the style Clere generally chose for churches, best exemplified by his design for St Mary of the Angels in Boulcott Street. Additions to the building by Clere in 1926, and Porter and Martin in 1965, both extending the building at the west end, have been carefully designed to integrate with the original design. There is a cemetery with old graves and trees on its northern side.

2.2 Materials

The main structural material is concrete, finished on the outside in a heavily textured stucco plaster, painted white; the roof is now sheathed in concrete tiles. Inside, the church has a wide, expansive feel, and a warm richness imparted by the jarrah timber roof framing and sarking.11

2.3 Setting

The high open campanile (bell tower) of St Mary’s makes it the most prominent building in Karori. It stands on top of a distinct rise beside Karori Road and is visible to traffic travelling in both directions as well as from many other parts of the suburb.12

3.0 Sources

Boddy G. 1996, Katherine Mansfield – A ’Do You Remember’ Life, VUW Press, Wellington p.16, 103

Clere, Frederick de Jersey. “170 Karori Road, erect church”, May 5, 1911, 00047:14:610, Wellington City Archives


Jancic, Boris. ‘St Mary’s faces earthquake issues’ Dominion Post 24 October 2013


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12 Ibid.
4.0 Criteria for assessing cultural heritage significance

Cultural heritage values

Aesthetic Value:
Architectural: Does the item have architectural or artistic value for characteristics that may include its design, style, era, form, scale, materials, colour, texture, patina of age, quality of space, craftsmanship, smells, and sounds?

St Mary the Virgin is an important example of the work of Wellington’s leading ecclesiastic architect, Frederick de Jersey Clere. The building has particular aesthetic value for the architectural quality of the Italianate design, the grace of the interior space, and the high level of craftsmanship displayed in its construction. The use of an Italianate design style is unusual for this architect.

Townscape: Does the item have townscape value for the part it plays in defining a space or street; providing visual interest; its role as a landmark; or the contribution it makes to the character and sense of place of Wellington?

It is a significant landmark in the suburb, located prominently on Karori Road and visible from much of the surrounding area.

Group: Is the item part of a group of buildings, structures, or sites that taken together have coherence because of their age, history, style, scale, materials, or use?

Historic Value:
Association: Is the item associated with an important person, group, or organisation?

St Mary’s Anglican Church has historic value as it has been a place of worship since early immigrants settled in Karori in the 1840s. Several buildings on this site have served Karori’s Anglican community since 1866, while the present building has served the suburb for over 100 years.

Association: Is the item associated with an important historic event, theme, pattern, phase, or activity?

Scientific Value:
Archaeological: Does the item have archaeological value for its ability to provide scientific information about past human activity?

Risk unknown

Educational: Does the item have educational value for what it can demonstrate about aspects of the past?

Technological: Does the item have technological value for its innovative or important construction methods or use of materials?

Social Value:
Public esteem: Is the item held in high public esteem?
Symbolic, commemorative, traditional, spiritual: Does the item have symbolic, commemorative, traditional, spiritual or other cultural value for the community who has used and continues to use it?

The building continues to have spiritual significance to the religious community as it has served as a place of worship for over 100 years. Several earlier buildings on this site have served Karori’s Anglican community since early immigrants settled here in the 1840s.

Identity/Sense of place/Continuity:
Is the item a focus of community, regional, or national identity?
Does the item contribute to sense of place or continuity?

The church has had few intrusive, modern, alterations over the past 100+ years and contributes to the sense of place and continuity of suburban Karori.

Sentiment/Connection: Is the item a focus of community sentiment and connection?

The church has been a place of worship for over 100 years and has been a focus for community and social events for Karori. It continues to be associated with the key events in the lives of members of its congregation including their christenings, marriages, and funeral services.

Level of cultural heritage significance
Rare: Is the item rare, unique, unusual, seminal, influential, or outstanding?

Representative: Is the item a good example of the class it represents?

Authentic: Does the item have authenticity or integrity because it retains significant fabric from the time of its construction or from later periods when important additions or modifications were carried out?

Several additions to St Mary’s have been carefully designed to ensure the integrity of the original design, and the main body of the church as a result remains in authentic condition.

Local/Regional/National/International
Is the item important for any of the above characteristics at a local, regional, national, or international level?

The church has local significance
5.0 Appendix

Research checklist (desktop)

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Background research

A water colour of the first St Mary's built on this site in 1866 of timber from the surrounding forest. (Evelyn Dasent, 1902. Ref: C-064-020, ATL)