Carter Observatory
40 Salamanca Road

Image: Charles Collins, 2015

Summary of heritage significance

- Built in 1940, the Carter Observatory is architecturally interesting in that its style offers a contrast between the red brick, square styles favoured by Georgian Revival and the large domes required for an observatory.
- The building has historical value in the role it has played as the National Observatory (1940-2010).
- The building is part of the Dominion Observatory Historic Area (as registered by New Zealand Historic Places Trust) which contains two other historic observatories; the Dominion Observatory (1907) and the Thomas King Observatory (1912).
- The building has retained a significant amount of original fabric and therefore has authenticity.
<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>District Plan:</strong></td>
<td>Map 17 reference 268</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Legal Description:</strong></td>
<td>Lot 1 DP 74620</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Heritage Area:</strong></td>
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<td><strong>HPT Listed:</strong></td>
<td>Category II, Dominion Observatory Historic Area</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Archaeological Site:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Other Names:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Key physical dates:</strong></td>
<td>1940</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Architect / Builder:</strong></td>
<td>Architect: William Gray Young</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Former uses:</strong></td>
<td>Observatory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Current uses:</strong></td>
<td>Museum</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Earthquake Prone Status:</strong></td>
<td>SR 162905 - completed</td>
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**Extent:** Cityview GIS 2012
1.0 Outline History

1.1 History

New Zealand’s first observatory was built for the Government Time Service, established in 1868. Located in Bolton Street cemetery, its purpose was to establish accurate time through fixing the position of the earth in relation to other ‘heavenly bodies.’ The Hector Observatory (1907) was established on the hill above the Botanic Gardens by Sir James Hector (1834-1907), the founder of the time service.1

During the late 19th century public interest in astronomy grew and there were large audiences for public lectures. In 1896 Charles Rooking Carter left the residue of his estate (about £2000)2 as the nucleus of a fund for an observatory to be built in Wellington. Carter was a prominent contractor who built the Provincial Council Chambers and undertook many of Wellington’s early reclamations. He represented Wairarapa in the Provincial Council and the House of Representatives. The town of Carterton is named after him.3

The bequest was administered by the Royal Society of New Zealand but it took another 30 years before the fund was large enough to start the project. Interest groups made representations to the government to begin work and the Carter Observatory Act was passed by Parliament in 1938.

The Carter bequest was to be spent on the new building, the Wellington City Council donated two telescopes it had housed in buildings near the Dominion Observatory, while staffing was to be funded and managed by the Government.4 Designs were prepared by architect William Gray Young and the building opened in 1941. It took over astronomical work from the Dominion Observatory (1907), which then became the centre of seismology.

The first director was Murray Geddes, who later died on active service in the Second World War. In 1967, a bequest from Ruth Crisp allowed the observatory to extend the library and install a new 41cm Boller and Chivens telescope in the south dome; this was later (1978) moved to the Black Birch observatory, south of Blenheim.

In 1977 the Carter Observatory Act was amended to recognise the observatory as the National Observatory.5 In 1982 a 15cm telescope was donated by the widow of broadcaster Peter Read and erected in the south dome.

In 1994 the New Zealand Historic Places Trust registered the area containing the three observatories as the Dominion Observatory Historic Area.6

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4 Knox, pp.1525-1535.
5 Summary of telescope acquisitions and movements from the Carter Observatory Information Sheet, Department of Scientific and Industrial Research.
With light pollution from Wellington City making it difficult for the observatory to continue in its role, a 2005 investigation by the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology found that it was no longer meeting the standards required for it to hold the title of ‘National Observatory.’ This title was finally removed in 2010. Later that year the observatory reopened as a public education institution.

1.2 Timeline of modifications

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Modification</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>Erect observatory</td>
<td>00056:253:B20915</td>
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<tr>
<td>1967</td>
<td>Additions to observatory</td>
<td>00058:515:C25033</td>
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<td>1991</td>
<td>Additions and alterations to observatory</td>
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<td>2009</td>
<td>Refurbishment of planetarium</td>
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1.3 Occupation history

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<th>Occupation</th>
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<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>National Observatory</td>
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<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>Carter Observatory (as run by the Wellington Museums Trust)</td>
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1.4 Architect

William Gray Young (1885-1962) was born in Oamaru. When he was a child his family moved to Wellington where he was educated. After leaving school he was articled to the Wellington architectural firm of Crichton and McKay. In 1906 he won a competition for the design of Knox College, Dunedin, and shortly after this he commenced practice on his own account. He became a prominent New Zealand architect and during a career of 60 years he designed over 500 buildings.

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His major buildings include the Wellington and Christchurch Railway Stations (1936 and 1954 respectively), Scot’s College (1919), Phoenix Assurance Building (1930) and the Australian Mutual Provident Society (AMP) Chambers (1950). At Victoria University College of Wellington he was responsible for the Stout (1930), Kirk (1938), and Easterfield (1957) buildings, and Weir House (1930). Gray Young also achieved recognition for his domestic work such as the Elliott House Wellington, (1913). His design for the Wellesley Club (1925) earned him the Gold Medal of the New Zealand Institute of Architects in 1932. He was elected a Fellow of the Institute in 1913, served on the executive committee from 1914-35 and was President from 1935-36. He was also elected a Fellow of the Royal Institute of British Architects, and achieved prominence in public affairs.  

2.0 Physical description

2.1 Architecture

William Gray Young was a prominent New Zealand architect with a fondness for the clean profiles of the Georgian Revival which can be seen, at its simplest, in the Carter Observatory. The building consists of an elegant brick podium, with projecting and receding bays and a flat roof that contrasts with the dominant spheres of two observatory chambers. Each projecting bay carries a central window, emphasising the internal focus of the building. Smaller windows, all multi-paned, are set into the side pavilions of the building. Detail on the facades is kept to a minimum, featuring exposed rain-water heads, a rendered plinth at ground level, and a simple cornice. The construction of the Observatory is brick faced reinforced concrete on reinforced concrete foundations, while the window joinery is steel.  

‘42 Salamanca Road, erect observatory,’ 16 September 1940, 00056:253:B20915, Wellington City Archives.

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2.2 Materials

- Concrete
- Masonry

2.3 Setting

The observatory is located in the Dominion Observatory Historic Area (New Zealand Historic Places Trust) on reserve land next to the Botanical Gardens. Also included in the area are the Dominion Observatory (1907) and the Thomas King Observatory (1912). The hill upon which they stand overlooks Wellington to the east and the Botanical Gardens to the west and northwest. The westward positioning of the observatory means that it looks out over the Botanical Gardens and to the hills above Tinakori and Glenmore Roads.

3.0 References

Department of Scientific and Industrial Research. Summary of telescope acquisitions and movements from the Carter Observatory Information Sheet.


Wellington City Archives

‘42 Salamanca Road, erect observatory.’ 16 September 1940. 00056:253:B2091
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?

The building has architectural value as it offers an interesting contrast between the Georgian 
Revival style (well balanced, square shapes and red brickwork) and the architecture required for 
an observatory (such as the domes of the observatory chambers).

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?

The building has townscape value as its location on the hillside means that it can be seen from 
many areas of the Botanical Gardens.

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?

The building is part of the Dominion Observatory Historic Area which contains two other 
historic observatory buildings, the Dominion Observatory (1907) and the Thomas King 
Observatory (1912).

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

The building is associated, through name, with Charles Rooking Carter, an early Wellington 
businessman who left a bequest towards the construction of an observatory. The building was 
also the site of the National Observatory up until 2010.

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?

The archaeological risk is 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?

The building is 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?
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?

Since the building was once the national observatory it has contributed to the identity of New Zealand’s astronomers and continues in this role as an educational facility.

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

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

The building is unique as it belongs to a group of three historic observatories which are located within close proximity to each other.

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?

The building has retained a significant amount of original fabric, therefore it has authenticity.

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

Because it was once the National Observatory the building is important on a national as well as local level.
## Appendix

### Research checklist (desktop)

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<th>Comments</th>
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### Background research