

Postal Box

Post Office Square, Customhouse Quay



Image: Googlemaps 2013

Summary of heritage significance

- The Penfold design combined simple design and functionality. The Post Office Square Postal Box is hexagonal in shape, and the roof is adorned with acanthus leaves while the cap is decorated with small spheres. It has architectural value for its design and construction in cast iron.
- The Post Office Square Postal Box is a rare surviving example of a New Zealand manufactured cast iron pillar box that used the popular design of British architect John Wornham Penfold. It is associated with the postal service and is now one of the only remaining elements of this history left in Post Office Square.
- These Postal Boxes have a high nostalgia value and attract a great amount of interest. When the Postal Service was replacing them with more modern alternatives many were purchased by museums and private collectors, while some that were particularly associated with the historic nature of an area were left in place.

District Plan:	Map 17, reference 8
Legal Description:	-
Heritage Area:	Post Office Square Heritage Area
HPT Listed:	-
Archaeological Site:	-
Other Names:	-
Key physical dates:	Installed: c. 1879-1910
Architect / Builder:	Architect: John Penfold
Former uses:	Communication – post box
Current uses:	Communication – post box
Earthquake Prone Status:	Unknown at time of writing

Extent: Cityview GIS 2013



1.0 Outline History

1.1 History

The Postal Box, located in Post Office Square named for the former General Post Office, is one of the few remaining reminders of the history of the area. The first Post Office, a timber structure, was established in the area in 1863 and was replaced with a grand masonry structure two decades later. By the 1970s, it had been decided that the building no longer served the changing needs of the Post Office, and in 1974 the building was demolished.

The cast iron pillar postal box dates from between 1879 and 1910, and is one of the 'Penfold' designs. These are the most famous of the early designs and are named for the architect who designed them, John Penfold. In 1865 Penfold had been invited to design a new standard pillar box. These Postal Boxes came in three sizes, nine types, and are extremely widespread throughout Britain and the former colonies. The design was cast in New Zealand and remained the standard through until the 1950s.¹

This postal box appears to be of the same type as those installed in Napier (Cat II, reference 4829) and Dunedin, which were among the last designs implemented in Britain and date from around 1872.² The New Zealand Penfold boxes are the only ones worldwide that bear the insignia of King Edward VII, the rest throughout the former British controlled territories have the cypher of Queen Victoria.³ The Penfold design combined simple design and functionality. The Post Office Square Postal Box is hexagonal in shape, and the roof is adorned with acanthus leaves while the cap is decorated with small spheres. Red became the standard colour for the postal boxes in 1874.⁴

By the mid twentieth century, the New Zealand Post Office Association had begun replacing the cast iron pillar boxes as they were considered unsanitary, leaky, and difficult to clear. Many were sold to museums or collectors, but some such as the Post Office Square Postal Box, and examples in Napier and Dunedin, were retained 'in those districts where they were of historical interest'.⁵

The Post Office Square Postal Box is an attractive piece of street furniture that contributes significant character to Post Office Square. Its bright red colouring and bold styling give it considerable visual appeal and it has become a local landmark in the Post Office Square heritage area.

1.2 Timeline of modifications

Not assessed

1.3 Ownership history

Not assessed

¹ Rebecca O'Brien, 'Pillar Letter Box – Hardy Street Nelson', (Historic Places Trust, unpublished registration report), 28 February 2003, accessed 16 December 2013,

<http://www.historic.org.nz/TheRegister/RegisterSearch/RegisterResults.aspx?RID=5116>

² Karen Astwood, 'Post Box (Former) – Emerson Street and Dalton Street, Napier', (Historic Places Trust, unpublished registration report), August 2013, accessed 16 December 2013,

<http://www.historic.org.nz/TheRegister/RegisterSearch/RegisterResults.aspx?RID=4829>

³ Ibid.

⁴ 'John Wornham Penfold and his pillar box', The British Postal Museum and Archive, 24/07/2009, accessed 16 December 2013, <http://postalheritage.wordpress.com/2009/07/24/john-wornham-penfold-and-his-pillar-box/>

⁵ Karen Astwood, 'Post Box (Former) – Emerson Street and Dalton Street, Napier'

1.4 Occupation history

Not assessed

1.5 Architect

Penfold, John Wornham (1828-1909) - Designer⁶

Penfold was an English surveyor and architect famous for his British Post Office Department pillar box designs. There were three types of Penfold boxes produced in the 1860s and 1870s. Penfold boxes were subsequently adopted for pillar boxes manufactured in various British colonies, such as New Zealand. Although he was best known for his pillar box design Penfold was also a leading figure in his respective professional fields, becoming the President of the Architectural Association as well as being a founding member and longstanding honorary secretary of the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors.

2.0 Physical description

2.1 Architecture

The cast iron pillar postal box dates from between 1879 and 1910, and is one of the 'Penfold' designs. These are the most famous of the early designs and are named for the architect who designed them, John Penfold. In 1865 Penfold had been invited to design a new standard pillar box. These Postal Boxes came in three sizes, nine types, and are extremely widespread throughout Britain and the former colonies. The design was cast in New Zealand and remained the standard through until the 1950s.⁷ This postal box appears to be of the same type as those installed in Napier (Cat II, reference 4829) and Dunedin, which were among the last designs implemented in Britain and date from around 1872.⁸ The New Zealand Penfold boxes are the only ones worldwide that bear the insignia of King Edward VII, the rest throughout the former British controlled territories have the cypher of Queen Victoria.⁹ The Penfold design combined simple design and functionality. The Post Office Square Postal Box is hexagonal in shape, and the roof is adorned with acanthus leaves while the cap is decorated with small spheres. Red became the standard colour for the postal boxes in 1874.¹⁰

⁶ Historic Places Trust, 'John Wornham Penfold', *Professional Biographies*, (Historic Places Trust, 2013), accessed 16 December 2013, [http://www.historic.org.nz/corporate/registersearch/ProfessionalBio/Professional.aspx?CPName=Penfold,+John+Wornham+\(1828-1909\)](http://www.historic.org.nz/corporate/registersearch/ProfessionalBio/Professional.aspx?CPName=Penfold,+John+Wornham+(1828-1909))

⁷ Rebecca O'Brien, 'Pillar Letter Box – Hardy Street Nelson', (Historic Places Trust, unpublished registration report), 28 February 2003, accessed 16 December 2013, <http://www.historic.org.nz/TheRegister/RegisterSearch/RegisterResults.aspx?RID=5116>

⁸ Karen Astwood, 'Post Box (Former) – Emerson Street and Dalton Street, Napier', (Historic Places Trust, unpublished registration report), August 2013, accessed 16 December 2013, <http://www.historic.org.nz/TheRegister/RegisterSearch/RegisterResults.aspx?RID=4829>

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ 'John Wornham Penfold and his pillar box', The British Postal Museum and Archive, 24/07/2009, accessed 16 December 2013, <http://postalheritage.wordpress.com/2009/07/24/john-wornham-penfold-and-his-pillar-box/>

The Penfold designs followed a fairly standard template featuring a roof, cap, indicator tablet, aperture, notice plate, Crown, Royal cypher, and post office legends, and a base (usually painted black) where the name of the manufacturer can often be found either at the front or the rear.¹¹

2.2 Materials

- Cast Iron

2.3 Setting

The setting of the Postal Box is the Post Office Square Heritage Area. Many of the buildings in the immediate vicinity are modern, but there are important heritage buildings within a short distance. To the west is Featherston Street, where there are a number of heritage buildings of note, and to the east is the waterfront and the heritage listed Bond Store and the former Harbour Board Wharf Offices. The Postal Box is also accompanied by a historic telephone box, also painted red.

¹¹ Paul Wicks, 'Anatomy of a letter box', 2002, accessed 16 December 2013, <http://www.wicks.org/pulp/stats.html>

Sources

Astwood, Karen. 'Post Box (Former) – Emerson Street and Dalton Street, Napier'. Historic Places Trust, unpublished registration report. August 2013. Accessed 16 December 2013,

<http://www.historic.org.nz/TheRegister/RegisterSearch/RegisterResults.aspx?RID=4829>

Historic Places Trust. 'John Wornham Penfold'. *Professional Biographies*. Historic Places Trust, 2013. accessed 16 December 2013,

[http://www.historic.org.nz/corporate/registersearch/ProfessionalBio/Professional.aspx?CPName=Penfold,+John+Wornham+\(1828-1909\)](http://www.historic.org.nz/corporate/registersearch/ProfessionalBio/Professional.aspx?CPName=Penfold,+John+Wornham+(1828-1909))

O'Brien, Rebecca. 'Pillar Letter Box – Hardy Street Nelson'. Historic Places Trust, unpublished registration report. 28 February 2003. Accessed 16 December 2013,

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The British Postal Museum and Archive. 'John Wornham Penfold and his pillar box'. 24/07/2009. Accessed 16 December 2013,

<http://postalheritage.wordpress.com/2009/07/24/john-wornham-penfold-and-his-pillar-box/>

Wicks, Paul. 'Anatomy of a letter box'. 2002. Accessed 16 December 2013,

<http://www.wicks.org/pulp/stats.html>

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 Penfold design combined simple design and functionality. The Post Office Square Postal Box is hexagonal in shape, and the roof is adorned with acanthus leaves while the cap is decorated with small spheres. It has architectural value for its design and construction in cast iron.

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?*

Its bright red colouring and bold styling give it considerable visual appeal and it has become a local landmark in the Post Office Square heritage area. The Post Office Square Postal Box is an attractive piece of street furniture that contributes significant character to Post Office Square.

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?*

The Post Office Square Postal Box is a rare surviving example of a New Zealand manufactured cast iron pillar box that used the popular design of British architect John Wornham Penfold. It is associated with the postal service and is now one of the only remaining elements of this history left in Post Office Square.

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 values are unknown, but the Post Box is included in the NZAA Central City Archaeological Area R27/270.

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

As one of the only remaining elements of the Postal Service remaining in Post Office Square this postal box has educational value for informing visitors of the history of this area.

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

There is technical value in the design and construction of this Postal Box. The construction in cast iron is of particular interest.

Social Value:

Public esteem: *Is the item held in high public esteem?*

These Postal Boxes have a high nostalgia value and attract a great amount of interest. When the Postal Service was replacing them with more modern alternatives many were purchased by museums and private collectors, while some that were particularly associated with the historic nature of an area were left in place.

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?

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?*

As one of few remaining examples of a cast iron Postal Box found in New Zealand this pillar box has some rarity value.

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

This Postal Box is an excellent representative of its type, this cast iron pillar postal box dates from between 1879 and 1910, and is one of the 'Penfold' designs. These are the most famous of the early designs and are named for the architect who designed them, John Penfold.

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?*

It appears that no major modifications have been carried out on this Postal Box other than the addition of a new padlock.

Local/Regional/National/International

Is the item important for any of the above characteristics at a local, regional, national, or international level?

This Postal Box is primarily of local importance due to the value that it contributes to the Post Office Square Heritage Area, in particular aesthetic, historic, scientific, and social. As one of few remaining examples of its type in New Zealand, and its rarity values, it has some national importance.

3.0 Appendix

Research checklist (desktop)

Source	Y/N	Comments
1995 Heritage Inventory		
2001 Non-Residential heritage Inventory		
WCC Records – building file		
WCC Records – grant files (earthquake strengthening, enhancement of heritage values)		
Research notes from 2001 Non-Residential heritage Inventory		
Plan change?		
Heritage Area Report		
Heritage Area Spreadsheet		
Heritage items folder (electronic)		
HPT website		
HPT files		
Conservation Plan		
Searched Heritage Library (CAB 2)		

Background research

Insert any relevant background information into this section. This may include:

- *Additional plans, such as those for alterations*
- *Chunks of text from other sources such as Cyclopedia of NZ, Papers Past*
- *Additional images*