

Nathan Memorial Fountain

Grant Road, Thorndon



Summary of heritage significance

- The Nathan Memorial Fountain has considerable aesthetic value for its design and construction. There are few other examples of decorative cast iron work on public display in Wellington, so this is a noteworthy historic and cultural relic.
- The Nathan Memorial has significant historic value and is closely connected to several prominent early Wellington families and was created in one of England's most famous cast iron manufacturing areas. The Brandon's had a significant impact upon Wellington and the fountain was in the family's possession for over 60 years. Its reuse for the memorial of Benson Nathan is a remarkable turn of events. It is a physical demonstration of S. George Nathan's grief, and his determination to contribute something beautiful to the city. There are few individually dedicated public memorials to servicemen/women in Wellington which makes this memorial particularly special.

District Plan:	Map 18, reference 19
Legal Description:	Pt Lot 1, DP 8709 (CT 12D/1439)
Heritage Area:	-
HPT Listed:	-
Archaeological Site:	-
Other Names:	-
Key physical dates:	Memorial opened: 1951
Architect / Builder:	Unknown
Former uses:	Civic – memorial
Current uses:	Civic – memorial
Earthquake Prone Status:	Unknown at time of writing

Extent: Cityview GIS 2013



1.0 Outline History

1.1 History¹

The Nathan Memorial Fountain is a monument of significant historic and artistic interest, both for its relationship with two prominent Wellington families and its creation in one of England's most famous cast iron manufacturing areas. The fountain was erected as a memorial by S. George Nathan for his son Benson, who had died during the Battle of Crete in 1941 and has been maintained by the council on the site since this time.

The history of this fountain dates back further than its installation on Grant Road as a memorial. Alfred de Bathe Brandon, an early Wellington politician and lawyer, founded a notable Wellington family. He amassed significant wealth and built a large family home in Hobson Street, Thorndon, in 1880. He adorned the large gardens with Coalbrookdale garden furniture that he had purchased on a trip to England. Among the pieces was a Classically influenced garden fountain. In 1904 the fountain was moved across the street to a house owned by his son, also named Alfred. Alfred de Bathe Brandon (the second) lived in the house until his death in 1938, after which his widow and son (also named Alfred) and later his wife, continued to live at the property. Alfred (the third) made his name as an aviator during WWI, by which time he had already been educated in England and started his career in the family legal firm. Following the war (and after being awarded a number of military decorations) he returned to his legal work in New Zealand. It was not until 1938 that he married his wife Ada, when he was 58 and she was 38, and they went on to have one son. In 1942 Alfred's mother Louisa died, and the remainder of the estate was divided between the surviving members of the family. Alfred and his wife decided to move to Heretaunga selling their Wellington property. Prior to their relocation, they sold the fountain to S. George Nathan. The house was later demolished and now forms part of the grounds of Wellington Girls' College.

Sidney George Nathan was a member of one of Wellington's most prominent Jewish families. Nathan (senior) was a partner in Jacob Joseph and Co., general merchants and importers before establishing his own business, Walter Nathan and Co. He was also a partner in W.M. Bannatyne, a general importing business. The Nathans lived at 100 Hobson Street, next door to the Beauchamp family. There was a close friendship and business relationship between Walter Nathan and Katherine Mansfield's father Harold. Nathan died in 1922 and the firm was sold to T & W Young the following year.

S. George Nathan, as he styled himself, established a real estate agency in 1908 when he was 23. It grew quickly on the back of Wellington's rapid suburban expansion and growing economy, and within a few years he had branches in wider Wellington. He was also responsible for the construction of the Alephi Theatre in Willis Street in 1912, as well as selling imported goods, and moving into share broking after the Depression. Nathan married twice, having two sons – Michael and Benson – and one daughter – Juliet – with his first wife Kathleen who passed away in 1938, and no children with his second wife Joan. Nathan died in 1953, the business left to his son Michael.

¹ History adapted from: Michael Kelly and Paul Cummack, 'Nathan Memorial Fountain: Grant Road, Thorndon', unpublished draft conservation plan, (prepared for Wellington City Council, July 2013), 4-11.

His son Benson was born in 1916 and educated at Wellington College. He was employed as a farm cadet when he enlisted to fight in WWII late in 1939. Benson joined the 19th Battalion and Armoured Regiment of Wellington, part of the 1st Echelon of the Second New Zealand Expeditionary Force (2NZEF), which left New Zealand on 5 January 1940 and landed in Egypt in February 1941. Egypt was the training base for the first three echelons of the 2NZEF once they were assembled together. They trained in the western desert and fought skirmishes against the Italian army, but these were just preludes to significant action to come in Greece. New Zealand troops were deployed in early April following a request from the British to help defend the country against an Italian and German invasion. In Greece, the battalion was heavily engaged in the fight to stop the invasion but by the 9th of April the Allied forces were forced to evacuate Crete. An invasion of the island by German forces was anticipated, but the lightly armed defenders were not well enough equipped to repulse them. The initial fighting involved repelling paratroopers who had gained a foothold around the village of Galatas, near the western end of the island. During a counter attack by the Wellington and Taranaki companies in the hills and valleys behind Galatas on 20th May, No.9 platoon, including Lance Corporal Nathan, was separated from the battalion and left behind enemy lines after the battalion retreated. The following day the platoon laid low while trying to determine how to get back to the battalion. While waiting the platoon observed fighting between the Greek and German forces, however, when it tried to intervene on behalf of the former, the men came under sustained fire from the Greeks who thought they were Germans. The platoon retreated, and Nathan was sent with a section of men to cover the departure. At this point the official history of the battalion observed that 'no sooner had they set up than they were found by the 'friendly' force, which it is now supposed were Greek, and raked with machine gun fire. Nathan was killed and several of his section wounded. Benson is commemorated at the Athens Memorial in the Phaleron War Cemetery. The memorial is dedicated to those Commonwealth soldiers who fell throughout Greece from 1941 to 1945.

His father clearly felt the loss of his son deeply, and with no grave in this country, went to considerable lengths to mark his son's passing. He purchased the fountain in 1947 and in turn offered it to the city to act as a memorial to his son and to beautify the area. It took ten years for the memorial to be opened and it seems that Nathan Snr waited until after the war to suggest the memorial. In 1949 the City Engineer drew up plans for a much more elaborate and formal arrangement than was actually built, with stone steps and a circular garden around the fountain. The cost of the work in 1947 was estimated to be £700 although the final cost was not recorded.

The location of the memorial is significant; it is located in the reserve known as Queen's park, in honour of Queen Victoria's reign. It was also temporarily known as Lady Macalister Park (the wife of Sir Robert Macalister who was mayor of Wellington from 1950-1956). Macalister supported Nathan's offer of the memorial and being in the corner of Wadestown Road and Grant Road, it was straight down the hill from Nathan's residence. The opening of the memorial took place on 20th December 1951 in front of a small gathering of people. The *Evening Post* reported the opening, although it does not indicate who unveiled the memorial.

In November 1974, Benson's brother Michael observed that the fountain was in a poor state and asked the Wellington City Council to give it some attention. The Director of Parks and Reserves, Ian McCutcheon, responded by organising a 'complete overhaul', in which the pipes and drainage were renewed, the fountain was sandblasted, and the surrounding pavement was replaced. Work finished at the end of February 1975, and there are no further records of repair occurring, although it has been regularly maintained and has had a conservation plan prepared in 2013.

1.2 Timeline of modifications (original plans cannot be accessed)

1880	Fountain placed in Alfred de Bathe Brandon's garden
1886	Fountain is moved to No.17 Hobson Street
1904	Brandon estate sold, No.17 and the fountain retained by the family
1942	Fountain sold to S. George Nathan
1951	Nathan memorial opens at corner of Wadestown and Grant Roads
1974/5	Memorial restored

1.3 Ownership history

1880	Alfred de Bathe Brandon (senior)
1886	Alfred de Bathe Brandon (the second)
1904	de Bathe Brandon
1942	S. George Nathan
1951	Wellington City Council

1.4 Occupation history

Not Assessed

1.5 Architect

Unknown

2.0 Physical description

2.1 Architecture

This fountain is a distinctively Victorian decoration influenced by the Classical tradition.

The Nathan Memorial is composed of various cast iron pieces fixed together to form an assembled structure. It consists of a pedestal and base with small figures, a dish base, a dish with bearded faces affixed, a stand for the statue, and the statue itself. The fixings are mostly screws and the structure stands 2.5m tall.

2.2 Materials

- Cast iron
- Concrete

2.3 Setting

The memorial sits close to the corner of Grant Road and Wadestown Road at the southern tip of Queen's Park, which extends in a triangular shape a considerable distance to the north and consists of trees, plantings, and open space, which are all part of the Green Belt. The immediate setting is grass, paths, and steps, but further north are plantings of various types. Opposite the memorial are houses and apartments of the mid section of Grant Road. In the area is also the Grant Road Fountain (1913) another item listed on the Wellington City Council District Plan.

3.0 Sources

Kelly, Michael and Paul Cummack. '*Nathan Memorial Fountain: Grant Road, Thorndon.*' Unpublished draft conservation plan. Prepared for Wellington City Council, July 2013

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?

The Nathan Memorial Fountain has considerable aesthetic value for its design and construction. There are few other examples of decorative cast iron work on public display in Wellington, so this is a noteworthy historic and cultural relic.

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 Nathan Memorial Fountain has significant townscape value and has received some public recognition due to the prominent location that it occupies.

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 Nathan Memorial has significant historic value and is closely connected to several prominent early Wellington families and was created in one of England's most famous cast iron manufacturing areas. The Brandon's had a significant impact upon Wellington and the fountain was in the family's possession for over 60 years. Its reuse for the memorial of Benson Nathan is a remarkable turn of events. It is a physical demonstration of S. George Nathan's grief, and his determination to contribute something beautiful to the city. There are few individually dedicated public memorials to servicemen/women in Wellington which makes this memorial particularly special.

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

The installation of the memorial is associated closely with WWII and the devastation that the war caused for those involved both directly and indirectly.

Scientific Value:

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

The archaeological values of the memorial are unknown, and as it was installed in the 20th century, it is not counted as an archaeological site by the HPA.

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?*

The Nathan Memorial has technical value as the cast iron pieces created at Coalbrookdale represent a high water mark in the art of decorative and ornate cast iron work, and this fountain is an excellent example of this work.

Social Value:

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

The fountain has some public recognition, but despite its prominent location, its profile is not particularly high. This could be lifted by the installation of some interpretation at the site.

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?*

This memorial carries a lot of emotional and symbolic value and importance for the Nathan family, and for the community that was affected by the losses of the war.

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?*

There are few comparable works on display publicly in Wellington, so this memorial has some rarity value. It is also a rare example of a memorial dedicated to an individual serviceman who was killed in World War II.

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

This memorial is an excellent representative of a Classically influenced memorial.

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 fountain has had few major modifications made and is in reasonably authentic condition. It has been through restoration and has had a conservation plan prepared to ensure its survival.

Local/Regional/National/International

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

The Nathan Memorial Fountain is locally important as it is an object of significant historic and artistic interest for its relationships and associations, and its creation in one of England's most famous cast iron manufacturing regions. It has aesthetic,

townscape, historic, technical, and social values as well as having some rarity value, and high levels of representativeness and authenticity.

5.0 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*