

## **Cambridge Terrace Post Office (Former)**

21-23 Cambridge Terrace



Image: *Charles Collins, 2015*

### **Summary of heritage significance**

- The former Cambridge Terrace Post Office is an excellent representative of a civic building designed in the transitional Classical/Art Deco style of the 1920s and 1930s. It is a significant work by Government Architect, John Mair and is notable for the strong vertical emphasis of its well-designed, and well-proportioned, street façade.
- This building served an important purpose as a post office for over 60 years, and represents something of the importance that this benign state institution had in our recent history. Its ownership and use have passed from the public to the private sector, reflecting social and political change from the late 1960s onwards
- This building is part of a group of commercial buildings on Courtenay Place which all date from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and contribute to the sense of place and continuity of the Courtenay Place Heritage Area.

District Plan:	Map 16, reference 52
Legal Description:	Lot 1 DP 67814
Heritage Area:	Courtenay Place Heritage Area
HPT Listed:	N/A
Archaeological Site:	NZAA Central City archaeological area R27/270
Other Names:	Cambridge Terrace Post Office
Key physical dates:	Built: 1930
Architect / Builder:	Architect: John Mair
Former uses:	Postal and telecommunications – post office
Current uses:	Commercial – backpackers hostel
Earthquake Prone Status:	Not Earthquake Prone – SR 179556

Extent: Cityview GIS 2013



## 1.0 Outline History

### 1.1 History

The building at 21-23 Cambridge Terrace, now known as 'Oriental Chambers', was originally constructed as the Wellington East Post Office. The new building replaced the old Courtenay Place Post Office, and was designed as a 'counter office' only. It featured a large public office for the transaction of general postal business, but had no operative telegraph office or mail sorting room. These services were provided at the nearby General Post Office at Queens Wharf / Post Office Square.<sup>1</sup>

The building was designed by Government Architect John Mair and is an excellent representative example of the transitional styles of architecture in the 1920s and 1930s, which blended Classical motifs with those of Art Deco.<sup>2</sup> The tender submitted by Hansford and Mills Construction Company for an eight-storey, steel frame structure, was accepted by cabinet in 1930 and construction commenced.<sup>3</sup> The building was completed by December 1931.<sup>4</sup>

During the 1960s automated postal sorting machines were introduced throughout New Zealand, and this marked the beginning of a new search for efficiencies within the postal system. In 1968 the Cambridge Terrace post office was sold as commercial premises. In 1987 the government split the Post Office into three state-owned enterprises – New Zealand Post, Telecom and Postbank – and Telecom and Postbank were subsequently sold into private ownership.<sup>5</sup>

The former Cambridge Terrace post office initially operated as commercial offices, but was redeveloped as a backpacker's hostel in the early 2000s. Although it has been in private ownership since the late 1960s the building retains some symbolic value as a representative of the older order of dependable institutions under a benign government.

### 1.2 Timeline of modifications (original plans cannot be accessed)

- 1930 Construction of Post Office building
- 1972 21-23 Cambridge Terrace, demolition (00058:792:C35617)
- 1990 22 Cambridge Terrace, business additions and alterations (00059:358:E19350)
- 1990 22 Cambridge Terrace, office building additions and alterations (00059:408:E20902)
- 21-23 Cambridge Terrace – additions and alterations – café (00059:458:E22413)
- 1994 22 Cambridge Terrace, office fit-out (00060:101:3695)
- 2002 22 Cambridge Terrace, removal of 5.5 x 7.5 advertising sign from north wall of Oriental Chambers (00078:831:85471)
- 2003 22 Cambridge Terrace, new basement floor bar & facilities, interior refit to existing building - change to accommodation for backpackers. 3 part floors of new construction for accommodation – PIM (00078:1792:99249)

<sup>1</sup> 'New Post Office', Evening Post, Volume CXI, Issue 152, 28 June 1926, Page 10.

<sup>2</sup> Wellington City Council, 'CAMB1', *Wellington Heritage Building Inventory 2001: Non-Residential Buildings*. (Wellington City Council, 2001), CAMB1.

<sup>3</sup> 'New City Post Office', Auckland Star, Volume LXI, Issue 21, 25 January 1930, page 11.

<sup>4</sup> 'New Post Office', Evening Post, Volume CXII, Issue 145, 16 December 1931, page 13.

<sup>5</sup> Tim Shoebridge. 'Mail and couriers - Mail in the 20th century', Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand, updated 13-Jul-12, accessed 12 July 2013, <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/mail-and-couriers/page-3>

2003 22 Cambridge Terrace, demolition and stage 1 of backpackers  
(00078:2377:101550)

### 1.3 Occupation history

1930-1968 New Zealand Government (Postal Department)  
2003 X-Base Holdings Ltd – Base Backpackers

### 1.4 Architect<sup>6</sup>

#### **Mair, John Thomas – Architect**

John Thomas Mair (1876-1959) was born in Invercargill and began his career with the New Zealand Railways on the staff of the Office Engineer, George Troup. In 1906 he travelled to the United States of America where he studied architecture at the University of Pennsylvania. He then worked in the office of George B. Post in New York before travelling to England where he was admitted as an Associate of the Royal Institute of British Architects. He became a Fellow in 1940. On his return to New Zealand he entered private practice, one of his first buildings being the Presbyterian First Church, Invercargill (1915), a prominent building of Romanesque character. He then practised in Wellington, carrying out largely domestic commissions. In 1918 he was appointed Inspector of Military Hospitals by the Defence Department, and in 1920 he became architect to the Department of Education. Following the retirement of John Campbell in 1922, Mair was appointed Government Architect, a position which he held until his retirement in 1942. During this period he was responsible for a variety of buildings, including the Courthouse, Hamilton, the Post Office in High Street, Christchurch, Government Life Office and the Departmental Building, both in Wellington, and the Jean Batten Building, Auckland. Such buildings show a departure from tradition, with the emphasis on function, structure and volume as opposed to a stylistic treatment of the building fabric. A Fellow of the New Zealand Institute of Architects, Mair was made a Life Member in 1942. His son John Lindsay Mair also practised as an architect.

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<sup>6</sup> Historic Places Trust, 'Mair, John Thomas', *Professional Biographies*, accessed 12 July 2013, <http://www.historic.org.nz/corporate/registersearch/ProfessionalBio/Professional.aspx?CPName=Mair,+John+Thomas>

## **2.0 Physical description**

### **2.1 Architecture<sup>7</sup>**

The former Cambridge Terrace Post Office is an eight-storey 1920s civic building that is a significant example of the work of Government Architect, John Mair.

In designing for this narrow inner city site, the architect has emphasised the vertical to produce a neatly-contrived effect of height and civic importance. The middle section of the building is eight-storeys high, the two flanking 'wings' are six storeys. The inter-war Classical style is most evident in the middle section of the first two storeys. Here, four pilasters with Ionic capitals are capped by an architrave, frieze, and cornice in something of a classical temple motif. The storey above hints at an attic storey, with a plain cornice below a scrolled crest carrying the Post Office coat of arms. The window fenestration is painted steel joinery, a departure from the Classical model. The emphasis of the upper façade and the two 'wings' is more contemporary, with a functional emphasis on interior light through plain windows. The top-storey windows of the middle section are arched, which gives a subtle indication of greater volume within.

This building contains an intriguing blend of Classical and Art Deco motifs in its design, highlighted in the juxtaposition of characteristic Deco set-backs and vertical proportions to the two wings, the strong Neo-Classical composition of the central block, all resting on a Classically inspired base, which is particularly distinctive for the giant arches.

### **2.2 Materials**

Steel framing

### **2.3 Setting**

The former Post Office building has high townscape value and is one of the most visually interesting buildings on Cambridge Terrace. As a part of the Courtenay Place Heritage Area, it is a part of a large open area made up of a number of important historic buildings. This area is characterised by a high proportion of old commercial buildings of a wide range of purposes, styles, and scales.

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<sup>7</sup> Wellington City Council, 'CAMB1', *Wellington Heritage Building Inventory 2001: Non-Residential Buildings*. (Wellington City Council, 2001), CAMB1.

### **3.0 Sources**

Historic Places Trust, 'Mair, John Thomas', *Professional Biographies*, accessed 12 July 2013,

<http://www.historic.org.nz/corporate/registersearch/ProfessionalBio/Professional.aspx?CPName=Mair,+John+Thomas>

Shoebridge, Tim. 'Mail and couriers - Mail in the 20th century', Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand, updated 13-Jul-12, accessed 12 July 2013,

<http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/mail-and-couriers/page-3>

Wellington City Council. *Wellington Heritage Building Inventory 2001: Non-Residential Buildings*. Wellington City Council, 2001.

#### **Papers Past**

'New City Post Office', Auckland Star, Volume LXI, Issue 21, 25 January 1930, page 11.

'New Post Office', Evening Post, Volume CXII, Issue 145, 16 December 1931, page 13.

'New Post Office', Evening Post, Volume CXI, Issue 152, 28 June 1926, Page 10.

## 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 former Cambridge Terrace Post Office is an excellent representative of a civic building designed in the transitional Classical/Art Deco style of the 1920s and 1930s. It is a significant work by Government Architect, John Mair and is notable for the strong vertical emphasis of its well-designed, and well-proportioned, street façade.

**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?*

This building has significant townscape presence because of its height and distinctive architecture, adding considerable visual interest to the street.

**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?*

This building has a group relationship with the other heritage buildings in the Courtenay Place Heritage Area, on Cambridge Terrace, and at the Eastern End of Courtenay Place.

#### **Historic Value:**

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

This building served an important purpose as a post office for over 60 years, and represents something of the importance that this benign state institution had in our recent history. Its ownership and use have passed from the public to the private sector, reflecting social and political change from the late 1960s onwards.

The former Post Office is also a significant work of the Government architect John Mair and an excellent example of his architectural style.

**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?*

This building is situated in the NZAA Central City archaeological area R27/270 and on land that is known to have had pre 1900 human activity.

**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?*

There is some technical value in the steel construction of this building. It is an early example of the use of this technique by Mair, and can be seen as a precursor to his later work.

**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?*

**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?*

This building is part of a group of commercial buildings on Courtenay Place which all date from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and contribute to the sense of place and continuity of the Courtenay Place Heritage Area.

**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?*

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

This building is a good representative of the transitional style of architecture in the 1920s and 1930s, and is a visually interesting blend of Classical motifs and Art Deco.

**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 exterior of this building has retained a high level of authenticity, although its prominence has been reduced recently by new high-rise developments nearby. The interior has been through a number of alterations and have less integrity.

**Local/Regional/National/International**

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

This is a locally important building that has a place in our national history. It is important in the context of a local post office serving the needs of the community for over 60 years. It is a representative of the old order of benign government institutions that were subject to dramatic changes in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## 4.0 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*