Courtenay Chambers
15 Courtenay Place

Summary of heritage significance

- Courtenay Chambers was designed by well known Wellington architect, Llewellyn Williams, and is a good representative example of Chicago-style Stripped Classical architecture. The building is notable for its restrained palate of Classical ornamentation, the well-proportioned composition of its Courtenay Place façade, and for the quality of its design and workmanship.
- The building is part of an important group of heritage buildings which together form the Courtenay Place Heritage Area.
- The building has had an uneventful history that is typical and representative of many of its neighbours on Courtenay Place.
- The building is a local landmark and is one of the tallest buildings within the Courtenay Place Heritage Area.
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**Extent:** Cityview GIS 2012
1.0 Outline History

1.1 History

Courtenay Chambers, with its elegant Classical proportions, was designed in a ‘Chicago’-esque style by Wellington architect Llewellyn Williams for Courtenay Chambers Ltd in 1927.1 The tall and narrow 7-storey building stands tall above Courtenay Place, a street where two and three-storey buildings predominate. Its height and form give an indication of how this part of the city may have developed in the inter-war period if the commercial and banking interests had no concentrated in the Lambton Quay and Featherston Street area.

Courtenay Chambers Ltd formed as a private company in 1918 with a capital of £8000. Subscribers included H. Marment, R.C. Renner and J.R. Morris, and the company was formed with an intention ‘to acquire certain land and buildings, and in particular land situate in Wellington with buildings.’2 The company built a 3-storey reinforced concrete building in 19203 on the south of this site with an entrance from 12 Alpha Street. This building was designed by Clere and Williams, and was also originally known as ’Courtenay Chambers’4 but later renamed ‘Haydon’s Building’.5

Architect Llewellyn Williams called for tenders to construct a seven storey steel and concrete office-block at the north of this long narrow site in April 1926. The office building had a street entrance from Courtenay Place, and was built by local building contractor, L. Driscoll. It was a grand new development for a street that was (and still is) occupied predominantly by two and three storey buildings. That the building was well-regarded can be seen in an illustrated advertisement for ‘British Burnside’ strong-rooms in 1927 that grouped Courtenay Chambers with other substantial newly-built commercial buildings including the Evening Post Building on Willis Street, the AMP Society Building and the T&G Mutual Life Society Building on Lambton Quay. The strong-rooms were said to be ‘fire, thief, explosive and blow-pipe resisting’6, features that would have been useful in the original (1920) building when it was damaged in a fire in September 1927.7 The new seven storey building opened in August 1928 and its rooms were advertised as ‘attractive premises [that] are highly suited for all professions, club rooms, show rooms, office, etc. They are exceedingly well lighted, and sunny, and have the very latest modern convs.’8

Courtenay Chambers Ltd retained ownership of the building until was purchased in 1966 by Phyllis Mary Jessen, a married woman, who owned the property until her death at age 74 in 1985.9 The building then changed hands several times and is today owned by Geneva Investments.10

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1 “15 Courtenay Place, building”, 1927, 00056:34:B3303, Wellington City Archives.
2 NEW COMPANIES Evening Post, 30 March 1918, Page 10
3 Untitled Otago Daily Times, 8 July 1919, Page 4
4 Page 1 Advertisements Column 9 Evening Post, 2 October 1920, Page 1
5 WCC Archives 00056_34_B3303; 0053_198_10934
6 Page 7 Advertisements Column 1 Evening Post, 29 June 1927, Page 7
7 FIRE IN ALPHA STREET Evening Post, 29 September 1927, Page 8
8 Page 3 Advertisements Column 2 Evening Post, 27 August 1928, Page 3
10 Land Title Service CT WN 31C/940
The early occupants of the building were a varied assortment of small and medium-sized businesses. In the 1930s these included everything from Martin’s ‘Busy Boot Store’ and Madam Claire’s ‘matrimonial agency’ to McDonald & Croker, Barristers & Solicitors. In the 1930s many of the tenants were involved in the arts. Eric Meier (a well-known Wellington violinist) taught music in the building, Maude & Edna Cotterell operated a costumier business and Mavis Pearce operated a dance studio. Several businesses associated with the movie-theatre business also occupied offices in the building. Other Wellington businesses who tenanted the building in this period include Courtenay Place Investments Co. Ltd and Goodwin & Chichester Ltd., land agents. In the 1940s several Wellington company offices, including the Wellington Co-o Taxi Owner-Divers Assn. Ltd and the Wellington Master Butchers Co-op Society Ltd were based in the offices.

The Courtenay Chambers, 1920s
(1/1-015371-G, Gordon Onslow Hilbury Burt Collection, Alexander Turnbull Library).
1927 full page advertisement for British Burnside strong-rooms that features substantial and newly built office buildings including Courtenay Chambers, the Evening Post Building, the AMP Building, and the T&G Mutual Life Society Building.\[11\]

Newspaper advertisements for the services of 'Madam Claire', a matrimonial agency on the 2nd floor, 1930.\[12\]
1.2 Timeline of modifications

1920 - 3-storey building constructed to the south of the site (0053_198_10934)
1927 – Courtenay Chambers constructed at the north of the site (00056:34:B3303)
1966 – Fire escape. (00058:450:C19318)
1986 – Business additions and alterations. (00059:9:D3378)
1987 - Partitions on Level 6. (00059:83:D5975)
1994 – Altered shop front. (00060:123:4495)
1997 – Office fit-out Level 5. (00078:184:33085)

1.3 Occupation history

**Ground floor:** Martin’s Ltd., boot importers (Stones 1930). Martins Boot & Shoe Stores Ltd. (Stones 1935 - 1945; Wises 1950-51 to 1955); Lamphouse Ltd., electrical goods (Wises 1961-2 to 1980).

**First floor:** Ultra Violet Ray Ltd. (Stones 1930 - 1945; Wises 1950-1 to 1955); Courtenay Place Land Agency; Second floor: Healey's Varex Treatment, Nurse A Colquhoun; Claire Madam, matrimonial agency & registry office.

**Third floor:** Kemball Theatres Ltd.; De Luxe Theatre Co.; Picture Enterprises (Petone) Ltd. (Stones 1930 - 1935); New Princess Theatre Co.; Hastings Picture Ltd.; De Luxe Advertising Co.(Stones 1930); Lyall Bay Pictures; Picture Supplies & Kemball Ltd.; Carterton Picture Co. Ltd.; Stratford Theatres Ltd.; Woodville Amusements Ltd.; Otaki Amusements Ltd.; Napier Amusements Ltd; Paramount Amusements Ltd (Stones 1935); NZ Motion Pictures Exhibitors Assn (Incorp.); J. Robinson (MP) Dominion Secretary (Stones 1940); R.C. McDonald Ltd., importers & exporters (Wises 1955 - 1961-2).

**Fourth floor:** McDonald & Croker, Barristers & Solicitors; Eric Meier, violin teacher (Stones 1930 - 1940); Courtenay Place Investments Co. Ltd.; Maude & Edna Cotterell, costumiers (Stones 1930).

**Fifth floor:** Mavis Pearce, dance teacher; British International Oil Co. (Stones 1930).


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\(^{13}\) Wellington City Council, *Courtenay Place Heritage Area spreadsheet*. (Wellington City Council: Unpublished report, prepared for Plan Change 48, 2006).
1.4 Architect

Llewellyn Williams

Llewellyn Williams migrated to New Zealand in 1919 after studying in France and Italy. He was well known for his work in the Art Deco style and the buildings that he designed include the Chevening Flats (1929), part of the Kirkcaldie and Stains Department Store (1928), the De Lux (now the Embassy) Theatre (1924), the Regent Theatre in Greymouth (1933) and the Avon cinema in Christchurch (1934).14

2.0 Physical description

2.1 Architecture

The building is a good example of the Chicago style, with a clear definition of the base, a tall shaft of four storeys emphasised by continuous columns rising between the windows, and a recessed seventh floor capping the top. This has plain windows and a straight cornice with dog-tooth moulding and parapet. While a modern verandah detracts from the ground and first floors, the rest of the facade is completely authentic. It is a well proportioned and detailed building of its period, and a good example of the work of Llewellyn Williams.15

The interior of the building has been totally modified, the only indication of interior style being the marble stair from the ground to first floors.

2.2 Materials

Reinforced concrete structure including foundations, walls, floors and beams.

2.3 Setting

Courtenay Chambers dwarfs its immediate neighbours at the eastern end of Courtenay Place, rising to 7-storeys in an area where two and three storey buildings predominate. It forms an exclamation in the townscape, and a prominent termination to the view south along Blair Street.

The row in which the Courtenay Chambers is set is characterised by a continuous line of buildings between Cambridge Terrace and Tory Street which emphasise the original survey line. The buildings are diverse in nature and age but, despite some particularly intrusive modern buildings, have a high streetscape quality which contributes significantly to the heritage value and character of Courtenay Place as a whole.16

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3.0 References

CT WN 46/173, Land Information New Zealand

CTWN384/299, Land Information New Zealand

CTWN31C/940, Land Information New Zealand


Newspapers


Wellington City Archives

“15 Courtenay Place, building”, May 26, 1927, 00056:34:B3303, Wellington City Archives.

“15 Courtenay Place, building additions - fire escape”, April 21,1966, 00058:450:C19318, Wellington City Archives.

“15 Courtenay Place, business additions and alterations”, 1986, 00059:9:D3378, Wellington City Archives.

“15 Courtenay Place, partitions, level 6”, 1987, 00059:83:D5975, Wellington City Archives.

“15 Courtenay Place, office fitout”, 1988, 00059:253:D11492, Wellington City Archives.


“15 Courtenay Place, shop front”, May 11, 1994, 00060:123:4495, Wellington City Archives.
“15 Courtenay Place, office fit-out, level 5”, December 6, 1995, Wellington City Archives.

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?

Courtenay Chambers was designed by well known Wellington architect, Llewellyn Williams, and is a good representative example of Chicago-style Stripped Classical architecture. The building is notable for its restrained palate of Classical ornamentation, the well-proportioned composition of its Courtenay Place façade, and for the quality of its design and workmanship.

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 is a local landmark and is one of the tallest buildings in the Courtenay Place Heritage 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?

The building is part of an important group of heritage buildings which together form the Courtenay Place Heritage Area.

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

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

The building has had an uneventful history that is typical and representative of many of its neighbours on Courtenay Place.

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

This building is included in the NZAA Central City Archaeological Area R 27/270.

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?

**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 building façade above ground floor level has had few intrusive, modern alterations or additions and the building contributes 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?

**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 retains much of its early or original external built fabric and is in near authentic condition above verandah level.

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

Research checklist (desktop)

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**Background research**
Fire broke out a few minutes after midnight last night at 12, Alpha street, in a concrete building of three floors, owned by Courtenay Chambers, Ltd., and insured in the New Zealand Insurance Office for £6000. The flooring on the ground floor, which is occupied by Christensen, Oldfield, and Son, motor body builders and painters, was damaged by fire and water; and a motor-car, owned by Ernest James Trevor, of 37, Stoke street, and insured in the Norwich Union Office for £200, was also damaged. The machinery and stock-in-trade on this floor, which were insured for £350 in the Queensland Office, suffered slightly from smoke. The first and second floors, occupied by Haydon’s, Ltd., clothing manufacturers, escaped damage, the plant and stock being only slightly affected by smoke. The insurance on these floors is not available.

Evening Post, Volume CIV, Issue 78, 29 September 1927, Page 8

The Courtenay Chambers, 1920s.
(PAColl-5584-26, Library Collection, Alexander Turnbull Library).

17 WCC Archives File: 2007:11:14:15
Original plans, 1927. (00056:34:B3303)