

**Our Lady Star of the Sea Chapel**  
69 Tio Tio Road



Image: *Charles Collins, 2015*

**Summary of heritage significance**

- The Chapel of Our Lady, Star of the Sea, is a good representative example of a Gothic Revival chapel by well known ecclesiastical architect Frederick de Jersey Clere. The building is notable for its outstanding site and bold form, and the interior is known for its fine acoustics.
- The building has historical significance for its association with the Sisters of Mercy, a Catholic religious order.
- The building is part of the Star of the Sea Historic Area (as registered by the New Zealand Historic Places Trust) which also contains a former school run by the Sisters of Mercy and a convent building.
- The building has landmark value for its outstanding site and bold form.

District Plan:	Map 7 reference 120
Legal Description:	PT LOT 8 DP 51930
Heritage Area:	No
HPT Listed:	Category II Star of the Sea Historic Area
Archaeological Site:	Risk unknown
Other Names:	Our Lady of the Star of the Sea Convent Chapel Stella Maris Retreat and Conference Centre 16 Fetes Crescent, Seatoun
Key physical dates:	1924
Architect / Builder:	Frederick de Jersey Clere
Former uses:	Convent chapel
Current uses:	commercial
Earthquake Prone Status:	SR 148441 – Section 124 notice issued

Google Maps 2012



## 1.0 Outline History

### 1.1 History

Our Lady Star of the Sea chapel is part of a precinct registered by the Historic Places Trust which includes a retreat house and connecting stairway. The three structures belong to the Roman Catholic order of the Sisters of Mercy. The property was purchased in 1909 with an existing building (now known as the Retreat House). This was used as a preparatory school for boys, containing classrooms and dormitories as well as a small chapel.<sup>1</sup>

The building was designed by Frederick de Jersey Clere and dedicated in August 1924. It is the earliest of Clere's many commissions for the Sisters of Mercy.<sup>2</sup> It was erected in memory of Sister M. Cecilia Benbow, one of the pioneering Sisters of Mercy who arrived in Wellington from Melbourne in 1873. Sister Cecilia lived for many years at St. Mary's Convent in Guildford Terrace and was a gifted teacher, musician and artist.<sup>3</sup> Many of the decorative elements were dedicated to former members of the local Catholic community, including Sister Cecilia, and the altar which was donated by the parents of D. Barrett, a former pupil who was killed in the First World War.

The chapel served daily mass to both the Sisters and the local Catholic community up until the 1980s. By this time the convent (a new building which had been built in the 1950s to replace the cottages) had been converted for use as a training centre for novices. The order relocated to Christchurch in 1990 and, although the chapel no longer offered mass, it continued in use as a wedding venue during the summer. In 1981 the New Zealand Historic Places Trust registered the area in which the convent, chapel and school stands as the Star of the Sea Historic Area.<sup>4</sup>

In 2002 the building was deemed to be unsafe in the event of an earthquake and it was closed to the public. Unable to meet the costs of preservation the Sisters were forced to sell the building.<sup>5</sup> There was public concern that the 1.35 hectare site would be demolished and the site subdivided for a development of townhouses. A consortium that included high profile movie directors Sir Peter Jackson and Fran Walsh purchased the building in 2007 for use in 'low-key work and film editing,'<sup>6</sup> and works to earthquake strengthen the building commenced in 2012.

### 1.2 Timeline of modifications

- 1923 Erect convent chapel (00055:16:A1568)
- 2012 Seismic strengthening – SR 233024 & 230404

### 1.3 Occupation history

<sup>1</sup> Information Brochure, Stella Maris Retreat and Conference Centre, [n.d]

<sup>2</sup> McKenzie, J., 1984, Star of the Sea Precinct, report prepared for the NZHPT, Wellington, p.1

<sup>3</sup> Information Brochure, op.cit.

<sup>4</sup> New Zealand Historic Places Trust, 'Star of the Sea Historic Area,' accessed 1 October 2012, <http://www.historic.org.nz/TheRegister/RegisterSearch/RegisterResults.aspx?RID=7042>.

<sup>5</sup> New Zealand Historic Places Trust, 'Our Lady of the Star of the Sea Convent Chapel,' accessed 24 August 2012,

<http://www.historic.org.nz/TheRegister/RegisterSearch/RegisterResults.aspx?RID=1413&m=advanced>

<sup>6</sup> 'Sir Peter Jackson quake-strengthening chapel' DomPost 11/02/2012

1924 Sisters of Mercy

2002 Unoccupied

#### **1.4 Architect**

Frederick de Jersey Clere (1856-1952) was born in Lancashire, the son of an Anglican clergyman, and was articled to Edmund Scott, an ecclesiastical architect of Brighton. He then became chief assistant to R J Withers, a London architect. Clere came to New Zealand in 1877, practising first in Feilding and then in Wanganui. He later came to Wellington and practised there for 58 years.

He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Institute of British Architects in 1886 and held office for 50 years as one of four honorary secretaries in the Empire. In 1883 he was appointed Diocesan Architect of the Anglican Church; he designed more than 100 churches while he held this position. Clere was a pioneer in reinforced concrete construction; the outstanding example of his work with this material is the Church of St Mary of the Angels (1922), Wellington.

As well as being pre-eminent in church design, Clere was responsible for many domestic and commercial buildings including Wellington's Harbour Board Offices and Bond Store (1891) and Overton in Marton. Clere was also involved in the design of large woolsheds in Hawkes Bay and Wairarapa. He was active in the formation of the New Zealand Institute of Architects and served on their council for many years. He was a member of the Wellington City Council until 1895, and from 1900 a member of the Wellington Diocesan Synod and the General Synod. He was also a member of the New Zealand Academy of Fine Arts.<sup>7</sup>

#### **2.0 Physical description**

##### **2.1 Architecture**

The Chapel of Our Lady, Star of the Sea is two storeys high. The upper level consists of the Chapel proper and the lower level consists of rooms for novice training. A long covered stairway (1925) links the Chapel with the Retreat House.

The building is a good representative example of Frederick de Jersey Clere's skill in Gothic Revival design. The architect employed a standard repertoire of lancet windows, steep-pitched gables, flying buttresses, but minimal decoration. The plain red brick exterior relies on the bold, clear massing of elements for its visual interest, deriving three dimensional life from the gabled transepts and eight-sided apsidal sanctuary. This last element has subtle overtones of the French Chateau style, and this is possibly because a convent proposed for the site was to have been built in this style.

The interior of the Chapel is comparatively large and is noted for its fine acoustics.<sup>8</sup> Rectangular in shape, one of the features of the interior is an apsidal sanctuary with a radiating roof truss in Jarrah. The interior furnishings match the character of the building. The Gothic altar is of Carrara marble, the stained glass windows are from

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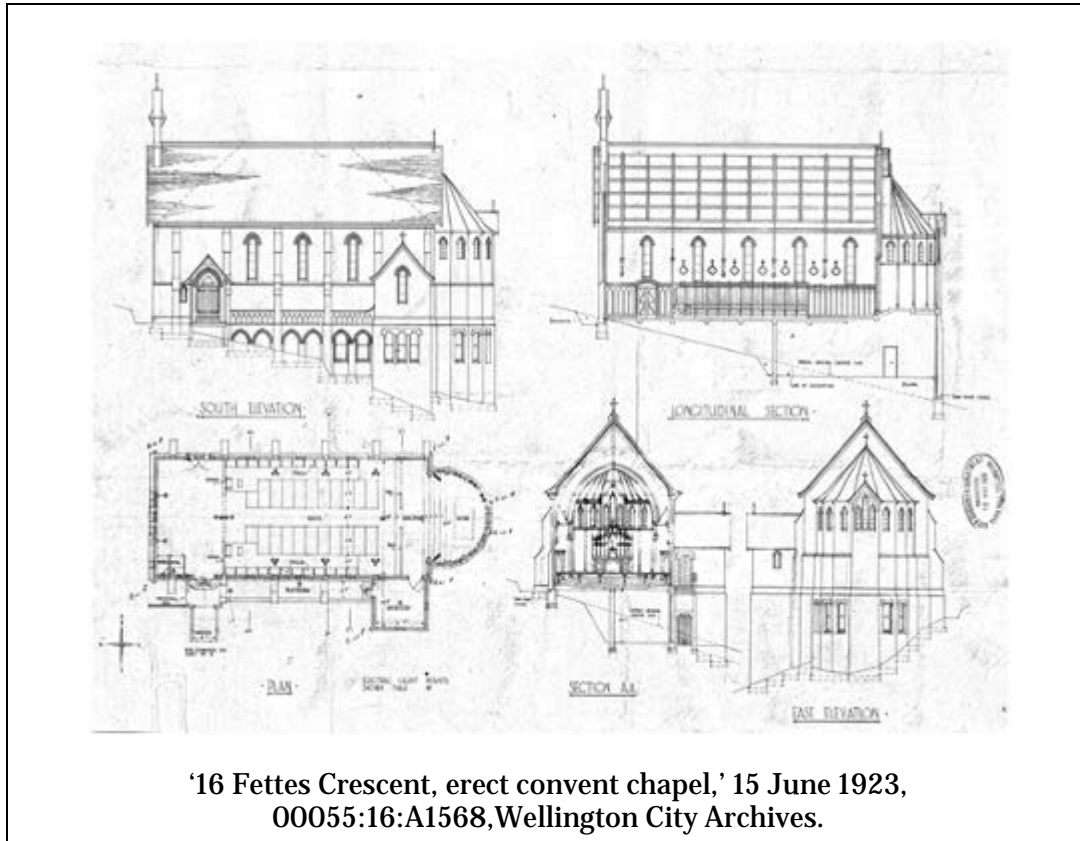
<sup>7</sup> New Zealand Historic Places Trust Professional Biographies, 'Frederick de Jersey Clere,' accessed 24 August 2012.

<http://www.historic.org.nz/corporate/registersearch/ProfessionalBio/Professional.aspx?ID=54>.

<sup>8</sup> J. McKenzie, 'Star of the Sea Precinct: report prepared for the New Zealand Historic Places Trust,' (Wellington: 1984), p.2

the Munich studios of F.X. Zettler. On the west gable is a memorial window to Sister M. Cecilia Benbow, featuring St Cecilia.<sup>9</sup>

The building is an important landmark in Seatoun and it contributes significantly to the character of the area as a result. It is constructed of red brick on concrete foundations. The roof is Welsh slate over a jarrah truss system, while the interior panelling is made of oiled rimu.<sup>10</sup>



## 2.2 Materials

- Brick masonry on concrete foundations
- Welsh slate roof on a jarrah truss system
- Interior panelling of oiled rimu

<sup>9</sup> Stellamaris Retreat and Conference Centre: Information Brochure.

<sup>10</sup> Architecture taken from: Wellington City Council, '16 Fettes Crescent Seatoun,' *Wellington Heritage Building Inventory 2001: Non-Residential Buildings* (Wellington City Council, 2001), FETT1.

### **2.3 Setting**

Our Lady of the Star of the Sea is situated within the Star of the Sea Historic Area (as registered by the New Zealand Historic Places Trust), an area which is situated on the eastern hillside of Miramar Peninsula overlooking the suburb of Seatoun. The historic area also contains a former Catholic school and convent. Although connected to the former school by an enclosed walkway, the chapel stands apart from the surrounding buildings. Due to its prominent position on the hillside, the chapel is highly visible from many parts of Seatoun. Although the chapel and surrounding historic area is private-property members of the public can still view the building from Fettes Crescent.

### **3.0 Sources**

McKenzie, J. 'Star of the Sea Precinct: report prepared for the New Zealand Historic Places Trust.' Wellington: 1984.

New Zealand Historic Places Trust. 'Star of the Sea Historic Area.' Accessed 1 October 2012.

<http://www.historic.org.nz/TheRegister/RegisterSearch/RegisterResults.aspx?RID=7042>.

New Zealand Historic Places Trust. 'Our Lady of the Star of the Sea Convent Chapel.' Accessed 24 August 2012.

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New Zealand Historic Places Trust Professional Biographies. 'Frederick de Jersey Clere.' Accessed 24 August 2012.

<http://www.historic.org.nz/corporate/registersearch/ProfessionalBio/Professional.aspx?ID=54>.

'Sir Peter Jackson quake-strengthening chapel' DomPost 11/02/2012

Stellamaris Retreat and Conference Centre: Information Brochure.

Wellington City Council. '16 Fettes Crescent Seatoun.' *Wellington Heritage Building Inventory 2001: Non-Residential Buildings*. Wellington City Council, 2001. FETT1.



#### **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 Chapel of Our Lady, Star of the Sea, is a good representative example of a Gothic Revival chapel by well known ecclesiastical architect Frederick de Jersey Clere. The building is notable for its outstanding site and bold form, and the interior is known for its fine acoustics.

**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 landmark value for its outstanding site and bold form.

**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 Star of the Sea Historic Area (as listed by New Zealand Historic Places Trust), an area containing buildings which formerly belonged to the Sisters of Mercy and were part of their convent school, Star of the Sea.

###### **Historic Value:**

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

The building is associated with the Sisters of Mercy, a Catholic order which inhabited the area until the late 1980s. It commemorates one of the pioneering Sisters of Mercy who arrived in Wellington in 1873.

**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?*

Unknown risk

**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, and this can be seen from the public outcry when the building was proposed for demolition in 2007.

**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?*

The building has spiritual value to both the Sisters of Mercy and the wider Catholic community.

**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 has been a prominent feature on the Seatoun landscape for over 90 years contributes to the suburb's sense of place, continuity and identity.

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

The building has sentimental value to former Sisters and pupils, as well as members of the wider Catholic community who attended ceremonies there.

**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 has retained a significant amount of its original fabric and features 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 of its historical association with the Sisters of Mercy, the Wellington Catholic community and the suburb of Seatoun, the building is important on a local level.



## 5.0 Appendix

### Research checklist (desktop)

Source	Y/N	Comments
1995 Heritage Inventory		
2001 Non-Residential heritage Inventory	Y	
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	Y	
HPT files		
Conservation Plan		
Searched Heritage Library (CAB 2)		

### Background research



Star of the Sea convent chapel, with covered walkway, Seatoun, c.1962-1970. Winder, Duncan, 1919-1970: Architectural photographs. Ref: DW-5113-F. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.

