

Government Buildings

15 Lambton Quay



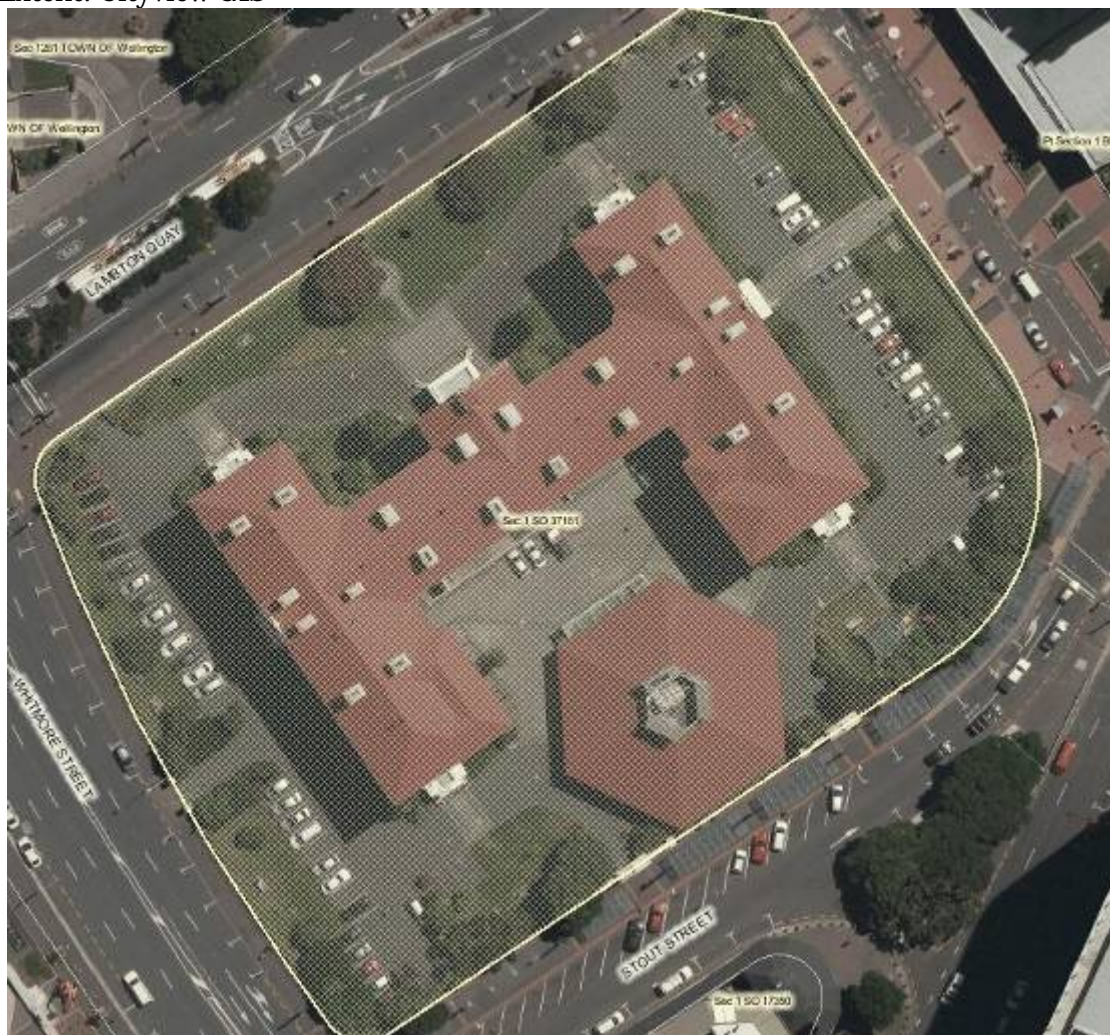
Image: *Charles Collins, 2015*

Summary of heritage significance

- The Government Buildings is one of New Zealand's finest civic buildings. It was designed in a Palladian Neo-Classical style, but executed in a typically New Zealand manner – with timber weatherboards adapted to imitate stone detailing. It was a very significant aesthetic and technical achievement for 1870s Wellington, and is the nation's largest, and grandest, timber building.
- This building is associated with Colonial Architect William Clayton. It was built to house all of Wellington's civil servants and Government ministers as part of the Vogel Ministry's ambitious public works and immigration programme.
- This building is held in very high public esteem and has been selected as one of the Department of Conservation's list of Icon Sites that tell the story of New Zealand "who we are."

District Plan:	Map 17, reference 179
Legal Description:	Sec 1 SP 37161
Heritage Area:	Parliamentary Precinct Heritage Area
HPT Listed:	Category 1, reference 37 Department of Conservation – Government Centre Conservation Area
Archaeological Site:	NZAA Central City R27/270
Other Names:	'OGB', Old Government Buildings 15 Lambton Quay
Key physical dates:	Construction: 1876. Restoration: 1996
Architect / Builder:	Architect: William Clayton. Builder: Scoular and Archibald.
Former uses:	Government and Administration – Government Offices
Current uses:	Education – Tertiary
Earthquake Prone Status:	Not Earthquake Prone – SR 188847

Extent: Cityview GIS



1.0 Outline History

1.1 History¹

The Old Government Building is one of New Zealand's most significant civic buildings. It was built in 1876 to house the entire Wellington-based civil service and the executive, and is the largest timber buildings in New Zealand. The building is a fine example of Palladian Neo-Classical architecture, but executed in a typically New Zealand style – with timber cladding adapted to imitate stone detailing.

The building, and the reclaimed land on which it stands, are both a legacy of public works of the 1870s. The land was reclaimed from 1873 and the Colonial Architect, William Clayton, called for tenders for a new concrete or timber building soon-after. There were five tenders that ranged from £29, 975 for a timber building, while the lowest concrete tender was £40, 900. None of these were accepted and the building project was put on hold.

Although the project was in abeyance, an arrangement was made for the supply of kauri timber. Timber was landed directly from scows before the reclamation works were complete - site remained surrounded by water on three sides for much of the construction.

Tenders for construction were again called – this time only in timber, due to the high cost of concrete. This was despite William Clayton's concern about the risk of fire, and his preference for stone or concrete. Local contractors Scoular and Archibald won the contract with a tender of £29, 103. The government negotiated for £24, 685 – a figure that had been reached by adding up the lowest amount from each tender under the six categories – brickwork, carpentry, plumbing, plastering, gas, and painting.

Work on the building began in February 1875 with a proposed completion date of May of the following year. Construction schedules, however, quickly fell behind and final costs were significantly higher than anticipated. Such was the size of the task that hundreds of men were hired to work on the construction, extra tradesmen were brought out from Britain, and a saw-mill was constructed on the site to produce the joinery. The northern wing of the building was the first to be completed and was occupied from May 1876. The remainder of the building was finished by November and fully occupied by the following month.

In 1877 the construction of new timber buildings was prohibited in the Wellington CBD – under new bylaws to prevent the spread of fire.² This building was not only the largest, but one of last to have been built in the Number 1 District – an area that included all the reclaimed land and property within “150 links” of Lambton Quay, Willis Street and Manners Street. It is one of only two surviving timber buildings in or near the CBD – the other is the Thistle Inn at 3 Mulgrave Street (1866 - WCC ref 18/222)

¹ Michael Kelly, *The New Zealand Government Buildings: Past and Future*, Department of Conservation, Wellington Conservancy: Wellington, 1996; Wellington City Council, “55 Lambton Quay”, *Wellington Heritage Building Inventory 2001: Non-Residential Buildings*. (Wellington City Council, 2001), LAMB 1.

² Chris Cochran, 'Styles of Sham and Genuine Simplicity: Timber Buildings in Wellington to 1880' in David Hamer and Roberta Nicholls (eds) *The making of Wellington: 1800 – 1914*, (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1990) 122-123



c.1877 Government Buildings, Lambton Quay ³

Eleven Government departments and a number of other agencies were housed in the New Government Buildings. Government ministers also moved into their offices and maintained their presence in the building until 1921. The Executive Council – the Governor General and Ministers of the Crown – met in the building until 1948. Although the building was opened with little fanfare it was, by the standards of the day, opulent and a highly desirable place to work. As a major civic work the new building offered two major benefits: - the public now could visit just one place for government business; and ministers were now surrounded by their officials. This close working arrangement was maintained for close to fifty years.

After the ministers moved into the new Parliament Buildings, the building was confined to departmental use. Few departments survived intact over the next century, with some merging, and some disappearing entirely. By the mid 1960s just three departments remained in the building and by 1975 only the Education Department remained. Some restoration work was carried out during the 1980s; however by 1990 the building was empty, awaiting restoration and strengthening.

The building has had a number of additions, and the earliest were the minor changes that were made soon after its completion. The most significant external alterations were the extensions to the north and south wings that were completed in 1897 and 1907 respectively. The interior has been much altered. Internal partitions were removed as early as 1892 to create large open-plan offices, and this in turn entailed the removal of some fireplaces and chimneys. Electric lighting was installed in 1895 and in the same year electric water heaters were also installed. Provision for female workers – including women's bathrooms and lunchrooms – were soon required. Grace Neil was employed as New Zealand's first inspector of factories in 1894, and was the first female civil servant to work from this building.

Works to improve the seismic safety of the building followed the 1931 Hawkes Bay earthquake when all of the building's remaining chimneys were removed at roof height. This also put a stop to the use of the fire places as a means of heating the building. Following the 1942 Wellington Wairarapa earthquake much of the internal

³ Government Buildings, Lambton Quay, Wellington. Ref: 1/2-070300-F. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. <http://natlib.govt.nz/records/22670927>

lath and plasterboard was removed from the ceilings (and some walls) and replaced with 'pinex'. The building was also re-piled in the early 1980s, and this process was completed in the course of the 1994 – 1996 restoration.

The mid-1990s refurbishment of the building can be seen as part of a movement to restore and reuse historic buildings that had built momentum since the 1980 “New Lives for Old Buildings” National Symposium. In 1991, the Government Buildings, as part of a historic reserve, were placed under the responsibility of the Department of Conservation. Assisted by consultants they began to look for appropriate tenants for the building. In 1993, the Victoria University Law Faculty was chosen and the \$25 million restoration project began.

An early decision was made to return the building to its 1907 appearance. Missing original features were replicated – sometimes in modern materials. The chimneys were reinstated, but in a simplified form and in lightweight materials – timber, polystyrene and sand finished plaster. Porticos were rebuilt behind the wings, and the original forms of all portico stairs were reinstated. The verandahs which had been glazed were returned to their original appearance; carved decorative timber embellishments were replicated and fixed back in place; and every original piece of lead weatherproofing on the building's exterior was replaced. Internally, a number of original features were restored to give the building an authentic appearance. Original joinery, doors, architraves, windows, timber dado, and panelling were stripped and repaired. Forty-two new cast iron fire surrounds were created in Dunedin and these were based on patterns of those found in the building. The new fire-surrounds are decorative rather than functional features of the building.

The most important element of the interior preservation was the restoration of the cantilevered staircase. New steel members were installed to strengthen the stairs; the timber balustrades were stripped and varnished; and new carpet bearing the 'VR' (Victoria Regina) logo was installed to replace the original stair-leathers. Considerable effort was put into earthquake strengthening the building. The timber piles were replaced with concrete and each floor was levelled. The vaults were strengthened with steel cables and bands to ensure they could withstand an earthquake and to allow the rest of the building to be buttressed against them. The tensioned cables were secured to the foundations and the roofs, with the bands wrapped around the vaults – all of this has been carefully hidden. Walls that required extra strengthening were lined with metal lath and plaster.

Government buildings is one of New Zealand's most significant historic places, and the considerable effort and cost put into its restoration is testament to this value. It is Colonial Architect William Clayton's finest achievement and has substantial aesthetic, historic, social and technical values. The building was deemed to be one of the Department of Conservation 'Icon sites' in c.2003 – a status it shares with other DoC assets that “tell the story of who we are”. These 17 sites include Cape Reinga, Ruapekapeka Pa, Ship Cove, the Otago Central Rail Trail and the Arrowtown Chinese Settlement.⁴

⁴ 'Icon Sites: conserving New Zealand's Historic Heritage.' DOC website accessed March 2014 <http://www.doc.govt.nz/conservation/historic/icon-heritage-sites/>

1.2 Timeline of modifications (Original plans could not be accessed – see Archives NZ. Modifications history is based on history and Historic Places Trust Register Report

1875	Original building construction
1892	Modifications to interior – partitions removed to create open plan offices
1897	Building additions – extension to south wing
1907	Building additions – extension to north wing
1931	Building alteration - removal of chimneys following Napier earthquake
1942	Building alterations – removal of all lath and plaster from ceilings and some walls, replacement with 'pinex'
1980-1990	Building modifications – limited restoration work, replacement of Totara piles with concrete
1994-1996	Building modifications – extensive restoration to interior and exterior, earthquake strengthening

1.3 Occupation history

1875	New Zealand Government
1996	Faculty of Law Victoria University of Wellington

1.4 Architect⁵

Clayton, William Henry – Architect

Born in Tasmania, Clayton (1823-1877) travelled to Europe with his family in 1842. He studied architecture in Brussels and was then articled to Sir John Rennie, engineer to the Admiralty, in London.

He returned to Tasmania in 1848 and worked in private practice until he was appointed Government Surveyor in 1852. He resumed private practice in 1855 and was involved with surveying in the Launceston area. In 1857 he was elected an alderman on the Launceston Municipal Council. By the time Clayton immigrated to Dunedin in 1863 he had been responsible for the design of many buildings including churches, banks, a mechanics' institute, a theatre, steam and water mills, breweries, bridges, mansions and villas, in addition to being a land surveyor and road engineer.

In 1864 he entered partnership with William Mason. Mason and Clayton were responsible for some important buildings in Dunedin including All Saints Church (1865) and The Exchange (former Post Office) (1865) as well as the Colonial Museum, Wellington (1865). These were two of the most prominent architects of their day in New Zealand. In 1869 Clayton became the first and only Colonial Architect and was responsible for the design of Post and Telegraph offices, courthouses, customhouses, Government department offices and ministerial residences. His acknowledged masterpiece is Government Buildings, Wellington (1876) a stone-simulated wooden building and the largest timber framed building in the Southern Hemisphere. Clayton was a prolific and highly accomplished architect both within the Public Service and in private practice, in New Zealand and Australia

⁵ New Zealand Historic Places Trust Professional Biographies, 'William Clayton', accessed 17 April 2013, <http://www.historic.org.nz/corporate/registersearch/ProfessionalBio/Professional.aspx?CPName=Clayton,+William+Henry>

2.0 Physical description

2.1 Architecture⁶

The timber Government Buildings were completed to the design of Colonial Architect William Clayton in 1876. Intended to house the entire Civil Service, and Parliament for part of the year, the building was constructed on reclaimed land downhill from the Parliament buildings.

Clayton originally intended the building to be constructed in masonry, and he designed it in a formal Palladian neo-Classical style with traditional design and materials reflecting the importance of its purpose and its intended permanence. While the parsimonious government of the day soon had the building's construction changed to timber to reduce costs, Clayton's detailing remained much as for the intended masonry building. This gives the building its distinctive appearance today. Four stories high, Government Buildings has an H-shaped plan with a central wing. The building is symmetrical around its central wing, with corridors running centrally along each wing with offices on either side. There are two major staircases where the section portion meets the north and south wings. The building has seven portico'd entrances, 22 replica chimney stacks (false, as they no longer serve fireplaces) and matching balconies overlooking the rear courtyard. It is notable for the extent and richness of its finishing details, including the re-created complex roof-scape of chimneys and acroteria above the pitched corrugated iron roof, the distinctive cladding with its prominent quoined corners and rustications, the Doric porches and the regular vertical pattern of the windows.

The building's style has been described as Italian Renaissance. It is characterised by the different treatment of the fenestration on each floor, from arched windows, to pedimented windows, to square headed windows on the third and top floors. Timber details are applied to these openings, as well as to the porticos and the eaves, in a Classically correct manner. Quoin blocks at the corners are worked in timber, while each floor is emphasised with a string course and the roof line with a bracketed cornice. The whole effect is one of dignity and repose.

The ground floor of the building is set as the plinth, with deep rustications to the cladding and arched windows with prominent moulded architraves springing off a string course line; "keystones" to the arches join to a cornice line at the first floor. Further string courses divide the succeeding floors and provide a horizontal contrast to the predominant vertical emphasis of the building created by the pattern of windows. The first floor windows have triangular pediments on corbels, those of the second floor have flat pediments on corbels and the third floor windows have plain architraves, but are set against the eave which has closely-spaced console blocks adding considerable texture to the building. A further interesting design feature are the curved window bays in the corners of the H.

The piles, originally totara, are now concrete. All structural framing is Tasmanian hardwood (now augmented with *pinus radiata*), while weatherboards, flooring and finishing timbers are kauri. There is great technical interest in the construction of the building, with 19th century carpentry techniques evident in all parts of the structure and in finishing work. There are two vaults that reach from the basement to the top floor at the conjunction of the wings and central portion. Internal surfaces, including the walls of the vaults, are lined with lath and plaster or manufactured sheet linings.

⁶ Repeats: Michael Kelly et al, 'Parliament Precinct Heritage Area', WCC unpublished report for DPC 48, 2006

The 1994-96 restoration also reinstated fireplaces and various decorative features long missing from the building.

As it stands today, the building is shorn of the many outbuildings that had accreted over the many years of government service and has been refitted for use by the Victoria University Law School, including a new octagonal lecture theatre and courtyard constructed at the rear of the building which crams the space around the main building and detracts somewhat from it.

The Government Buildings are complemented by generous grounds which include a number of features of interest, particularly the restored timber fence on the east side of the site which is particularly notable for the (replica) carved lion-head gates and the monumental plastered masonry fence and gate posts around the other boundaries (and the huge lamps set on top of the front gate), the marks recording New Zealand's first standard surveyor's chain and sculptures including a memorial to Fraser.

2.2 Materials

The building is significantly constructed in timber. The piles were originally Totara, but have now been replaced with concrete. All structural framing is Tasmanian Hardwood (which has been augmented with Pinus Radiata), while weatherboards, flooring, and finishing timbers are Kauri. Internal surfaces are lined with lath and plaster or manufactured sheet linings. The 1994-96 restoration reinstated fireplaces in cast iron.

2.3 Setting

The restored building is a key feature of the Government Centre Conservation Area reserve and the WCC . This building fills a large site of reclaimed harbour land. It's setting, the Lambton Quay/Bunny Street/Molesworth Street area, is a place of high heritage value and this building makes an important contribution to the setting.

It is the oldest remaining building in Wellington's government centre and is part of a significant group of historic buildings, including the former High Court and the Parliament Buildings. It is also part of a wider historic area that includes the Mission to Seamen building and the Wellington Railway Station.

3.0 Sources

Alexander Turnbull Library, 'Government Buildings, Lambton Quay, Wellington'.
Ref: 1/2-070300-F. <http://natlib.govt.nz/records/22670927>

Historic Places Trust Professional Biographies, 'William Clayton', accessed 17 April 2013,
<http://www.historic.org.nz/corporate/registersearch/ProfessionalBio/Professional.aspx?CPName=Clayton,+William+Henry>

Historic Places Trust Register Report,
<http://www.historic.org.nz/TheRegister/RegisterSearch/RegisterResults.aspx?RID=37>

Kelly, Michael. '*The New Zealand Government Buildings: Past and Future*,'
Department of Conservation, Wellington Conservancy: Wellington, 1996

Wellington City Council. "15 Lambton Quay", Wellington Heritage Building Inventory 2001: Non-Residential Buildings. Wellington City Council, 2001

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 Government Buildings is one of New Zealand's finest civic buildings. It was designed in a Palladian Neo-Classical style, but executed in a typically New Zealand manner – with timber weatherboards adapted to imitate stone detailing. It was a very significant aesthetic and technical achievement for 1870s Wellington, and is the nation's largest, and grandest, timber building.

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 Government Buildings is a local landmark as a vast timber building on a key commuter route from the railway station to the CBD, and for its use by the Government, and later by the Victoria University Law School.

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 is a part of a Department of Conservation Reserve that includes that Parliament Buildings, former High Court, and the Wellington Cenotaph/Citizens War Memorial. It is a landmark building in an area that is made up of historic buildings including those in the WCC Parliamentary Precinct Heritage Area and adjacent Stout Street Heritage Area.

Historic Value:

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

This building is associated with Colonial Architect William Clayton. It was built to house all of Wellington's civil servants and Government Ministers as part of the Vogel Ministry's ambitious public works and immigration programme.

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

This building is associated with the New Zealand Government and the public service in Wellington.

Scientific Value:

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

This building is constructed on reclaimed land and is included in the New Zealand Archaeological Association Central City R27/270 site listing.

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?*

This building has significant technical value for its construction in timber. The 'hanging' or cantilevered staircases are an important construction method – although not entirely successful in their original state. The building is irreplaceable as remaining kauri forests are under permanent protection.

Social Value:

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

This building is held in very high public esteem and has been selected as one of the Department of Conservation's 17 Icon Sites that tell the story of New Zealand "who we are."

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 some traditional and cultural value for its historic association with the New Zealand Government, civil service and Executive.

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 contributes to a sense of place and continuity in Wellington as it is the oldest remaining building in Wellington's government centre and a part of a significant group of historic buildings.

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?*

This is a rare building type in New Zealand due to its construction in timber. It has outstanding historic heritage value due to its long association with the public service in Wellington and the New Zealand Government.

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

This building is a good example of a Classically influenced Italian Renaissance design. It is the finest design by colonial architect William Clayton. It remains the largest timber building in New Zealand.

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?*

This building has significant authenticity despite the number of alterations it has had. It retains a large amount of its original fabrics, particularly the exteriors; the interior has been through a number of changes.

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 nationally significant building – it is New Zealand’s grandest wooden building and is an outstanding example of our architectural heritage. It was built to house the public service following massive reforms that ended provincial government and set up a central government in Wellington. It retains significant original materials, most importantly extensive retention of original Kauri that could never be replicated due to modern forest protection.

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)		