

Former Hastings Post Office, 131 Russell Street North, Hastings.

Inventory Number 15; Property ID 21307; TRIM Reference 21307#002#0006

NZHPT Registration Number: 1087

Report by Michael Kelly / Chris Cochran, draft 14 August 2007; Final Report November 2012, Updated 2015 by the HDC
Environmental Policy Team

Hastings CBD Heritage Inventory Project



HASTINGS POST OFFICE (FORMER)



Photo: P. Huddleston 2015

LOCATION:

Street and Number: 131 Russell Street North

City / Town: Hastings

Region: Hawke' Bay

Location Information: Corner Queen Street East and Russell Street North

LEGAL DESCRIPTION:

Legal Description: Lot 6 DP 325578

Certificate of Title (includes Registry): 103284, Hawke's Bay Land District

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SUMMARY OF SIGNIFICANCE:

Architectural Value:

This post office building of 1932 was an intelligent response to the fate of the Edwardian building - severely damaged by the Hawke's Bay earthquake - which it replaced. The new building was built in reinforced concrete, in a compact, unornamented, Stripped Classical style, which offered no extraneous detail that could be lost in an earthquake. It is a very good example of the style, with subtle and original Classical details providing visual interest in a well-ordered composition of base, pilasters and parapet.

It is a good exemplar of the work of the Government Architect of the time, J T Mair, who was responsible for some very high quality buildings (including courthouses, post offices and office buildings) for the Government from 1923 – 1941.

It also has high aesthetic value, especially for its contribution it makes to two of the most important groups of period buildings in the city. These are the buildings on the east side of Russell Street, and those of Queen Street East. It plays a pivotal role in linking these two groups – its scale, visually interesting detail and quiet authority on this prominent corner make it a valuable building in the townscape.

Cultural Value:

Post offices throughout New Zealand were once significant places of community activity; the importance of Hastings' post office was demonstrated by the celebrations held when the building was opened in 1910. The building's status remained largely unchanged for a great deal of the 20th century, with the Post Office one of the busiest places in the town. The vast array of functions the Post Office had to undertake on behalf of the Government brought many to its doors and its social value during that period was unmatched by any other government building. However, the Government reforms of the late 1980s ended the Post Office's pivotal role. It was no different in Hastings, although it took some time before postal operations finally left the building. Today, the social value of the building is partly diminished for the loss of NZ Post, but as the home of one of Hawke's Bay's largest medical practices, the building retains some of that significance through its busy new use.

Historical Value:

The former Hastings Post Office was in use as a post office for 90 years and for much of that time was one of the most important government buildings in Hastings; it was from this building that much government work was undertaken. It housed postal, banking and telephone exchange services, along with myriad other government functions. It was arguably the building of greatest familiarity to locals. The building's present appearance is the direct result of the Hawke's Bay earthquake, the single most important event in the building's history. The collapse of the tower that surmounted the previous post office led to the death of one man and injuries to many others.

Technological Value:

The building has technical value for its reinforced concrete design, presumably state of the art in the immediate post-earthquake period, the best that Public Works engineers could produce. The excellent condition of the structure today is evidence of a sound structural design.

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HISTORY:

Hastings' first post office opened in 1872, located on the corner of Heretaunga Street and Karamu Road within Tobias Hicks's general store.¹ In 1875 it was moved to the railway station building in Station Street (now Russell Street), opening on 1st December that year. The situating of a post office within a railway station was common in small towns connected by railway. The post office remained in the railway station building until 1896, when the railway station was moved.

A stand-alone post office was opened in 1896 on the site of the former railway station. By 1907 more room was required, despite the Telephone Exchange moving to its own building. A new post office was commissioned for a site on the corner of Russell and Queen Street East. Designed by government architect John Campbell in his signature Edwardian Baroque style, complete with a clock tower, the building was opened with much fanfare by Prime Minister Sir Joseph Ward on 24 January 1910. The builder was J. Renouf.² Funds to install a clock were raised by the community and augmented by the government. James Collin donated £500, a subscription fund was started, and the government offered to match every pound raised. The chimes were donated by E.H. Williams, the borough solicitor.³ In 1912, there were 65 people working in the building.⁴

The building was badly shaken during an earthquake in 1914 and the clock chimed more than 100 times before it could be stopped. As a response to concerns about public safety, the tower was altered to prevent it from falling inwards.⁵ In 1928, the building underwent major extensions - by as much as four times its original size according to one source⁶ - to designs by Government Architect J.T.Mair. The work cost £16,500.

When the Hawke's Bay earthquake struck in February 1931, the building was badly damaged. The clock tower fell out onto the street as intended, but it resulted in the death of local journalist A.L. Ryan and injuries to many others.⁷ While a decision was made on the provision of new premises, a temporary post office was set up in the railway station and in a shed in St Aubyn Street; in March 1931 the temporary post office was moved to Oddfellows' Hall in Market Street.⁸

The government decided to rebuild the Post Office. Government Architect J T Mair designed the building in a Stripped Classical style, then much in use for government buildings. (There is some evidence that parts of the old building were re-used in the new. For instance, one contemporary account describes the building as 'restored' and 'rebuilt' in the same report.⁹ However, images of the damaged building suggest that substantial reconstruction would have been required,¹⁰ and in fact it is almost certain that the building was fully rebuilt.)

¹ Fowler, Michael, *From Disaster to Recovery: The Hastings CBD 1931-35*, Havelock North: Michael Fowler Publishing, 2007, p.51.

² Amount of tender £5,125. Hastings Borough Council, *Hastings It's (sic) Progress and Resources*, Hastings: Venables-Wilson Co. Printers and Bookbinders, 1909, p. 10; M.B. Boyd, *City of the Plains*, Wellington: Victoria University Press for Hastings City Council, 1984, p. 165.

³ Boyd, p. 165.

⁴ 'A Souvenir of Hastings', 1912 (Author and publisher not known)

⁵ I Grover, unpublished notes on the history of the Hastings Post Office, 2004. This account has no footnotes or sources.

⁶ 'Hastings New Post Office' in unknown newspaper, 15 October 1932. The plan suggests a doubling in size.

⁷ M Wright, *Town and Country: the history of Hastings and District*, Hastings: Hastings District Council, 2001, pp. 434-435; Boyd, p. 258.

⁸ Fowler, p.54.

⁹ 'Hastings New Post Office' in unknown newspaper, 15 October 1932

¹⁰ See images on New Zealand Historic Places Trust file no 12005-056.

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The new building opened in 1932, at a cost of £12,022. J.T. Mair oversaw the construction and the builder was H.W. Abbott.¹¹ In 1935, a new clock tower was built alongside the Railway Station. The mechanism from the old Post Office clock was fitted to this new tower as a memorial to the 1931 earthquake.¹²

The building was used as the Hastings Post Office until at least 1999. Over that period much changed in postal business, particularly after the election of the Labour Government in 1984. The corporatisation and splitting up of the Post Office in 1987 into telecommunications (Telecom), banking (Postbank, now part of the ANZ/National Bank), and post (New Zealand Post) ended the extraordinary role that the Post Office played in the lives of Hastings' people. Up until 1987, the typical Post Office did even more than that, as it was responsible for more than 60 functions, some of which included the registering of births, marriages, deaths and cars, payment of television and fishing licence fees, enrolling to vote, and collecting pensions. Postmasters were even able to perform marriage ceremonies.¹³ Most of those functions went elsewhere as a result of the Labour Government's reforms in the 1980s. In this regard Hastings was no different. The building was eventually reduced to postal activity only and became a Post Shop under New Zealand Post, a state-owned enterprise.

Over its life, the building underwent a number of minor alterations for postal business. Not all of these have been recorded but in the 1960s there were three changes – unspecified internal alterations in 1963, re-roofing of the building in 1965, and changes to offices in 1969. A bike shed was demolished and a new one built in 1994.¹⁴

In 2001 ownership passed to the Wallace Development Co.,¹⁵ by which time the Post Office had moved to new premises on the corner of Heretaunga and Market Streets. The Hastings Medical Centre became the principal tenant but major changes had to be made to accommodate the new use. The alterations were designed by Chibnall Swann Team Architecture in 2001-02. Care was taken to protect the building's main façade and some elements of the building's interior, such as the original bank vault, which was re-used as the x-ray room. However, the changes also required the demolition of considerable existing fabric, particularly in those less publicly visible parts of the building.¹⁶ The work gained the architects the Gisborne/Hawke's Bay Local Award from the New Zealand Institute of Architects. The medical practice remains the occupant, along with a pharmacy.

In 2002 the building was purchased by Heretaunga Health Centre Properties Ltd., who sold it to the current owners C P Hastings Ltd. the following year. That same year, offices were partitioned.¹⁷

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION:

Architect: Government Architect J.T. Mair

Date of construction: 1932

Construction details: Reinforced concrete.

¹¹ See Hastings CBD Heritage Study Item Identification Sheet, register item no. 33, New Zealand Historic Places Trust file no 12005-056.

¹² *Swamp to Centenary: a history of Hastings, New Zealand*, Hastings: Heretaunga Intermediate School, 1961, p. 92.

¹³ www.nzpost.co.nz/Cultures/en-NZ/AboutUs/CorporateInformation/TheHistoryOfNewZealandPost/

¹⁴ ABA 940638 and 940805, Hastings District Council

¹⁵ CT HB M4/1250, Land Information New Zealand, Hawke's Bay Land District.

¹⁶ The building consents were ABA 20011311 – demolition and ABA 20011443 for the renovations and additions.

¹⁷ Building consent ABA 20030792, Hastings District Council. NB: Final inspection done, Code of compliance not issued as at September 2007.

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Description: The Hastings Health Centre, formerly the Hastings Post Office, is a very good example of Government architecture of the 1930s, and of the Stripped Classical style. This is most evident in the formal elevations to Russell Street North and Queen Street East, which are divided in a very orderly fashion into eight and four bays respectively by tall pilasters rising through the two-storey height of the building. The pilaster capitals have an abstracted Ionic design, with acanthus leaf decoration, incised lines and fluting; windows are set in stepped reveals, and the recessed spandrel panels have an incised diamond for decoration. Despite the strong verticals of the pilasters, the building is given a horizontal emphasis by the long continuous line of the parapet which wraps around both street elevations.

The main (ramped) entrance is half way along the Russell Street façade. The corner has an entrance door too, with an ornamented door case and wrought iron work over the fanlight; there is a balcony and window above, and higher again there is a coat of arms set in the parapet. This is a subtle and formal corner in comparison with the bold tower that stood out as such a major feature of the earlier post office. Despite this, the building has a strong presence in the townscape, as the wide streets and railway line mean that it is seen from some distance away. It is a very important link building, forming a cornerpiece to the line of period buildings on the east side of Russell Street, and to those in Queen Street East.

The building has a large footprint, and although the exterior remains largely unaltered, plan arrangements on both the ground and first floor have been radically altered, especially in the adaptation to the new medical use in 1991.

ELEMENTS OF ARCHITECTURAL IMPORTANCE:

Element	Significance
Street facades	Aesthetic, architectural, technical
Structure	Technical

MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCES:

'A Souvenir of Hastings', 1912 (Author and publisher not known)

Boyd, M.B. *City of the Plains*, Wellington: Victoria University Press for Hastings City Council, 1984.

CT HB M4/1250, Land Information New Zealand, Hawke's Bay Land District.

Dave Pearson Architects Ltd. 'Former Post Office Hastings Proposed Medical Centre', Auckland, 2001.

Fowler, Michael, *From Disaster to Recovery: The Hastings CBD 1931-35*, Havelock North: Michael Fowler Publishing, 2007.

'Great Task Almost Completed: the reconstruction of Hastings Business Area', *Hawke's Bay Tribune*.

Grover I., unpublished notes on the history of the Hastings Post Office, 2004.

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Hastings District Council building files

New Zealand Historic Places Trust file no 12005-056

Richardson, Peter, 'Campbell, John 1857-1942', *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography* updated 16 December 2003 URL: <http://www.dnzb.govt.nz/>

Swamp to Centenary: a history of Hastings, New Zealand, Hastings: Heretaunga Intermediate School, 1961.

Wright M., *Town and Country: the history of Hastings and District*, Hastings: Hastings District Council, 2001.

OTHER RELEVANT INFORMATION:

NZHPT Register: Hastings Post Office (Former) is a Category II historic place (Register No. 1087). It is also part of the Hastings Historic Area (Register No. 7020) and Central Character Precinct

District Plan Listing: Listed as a Category II historic place in the Operative Hastings District Plan (Plan declared operative 10th June 2003). In the Proposed Hastings District Plan, 2015 the building is listed as a Category II heritage item (HB56). The building is located within the Central Character Precinct and both the Russell Street and Queen Street Historic Areas.

New Zealand Historic Places Act 1993: This site has been identified as a potential archaeological site under Section 2 of the New Zealand Historic Places Act 1993.

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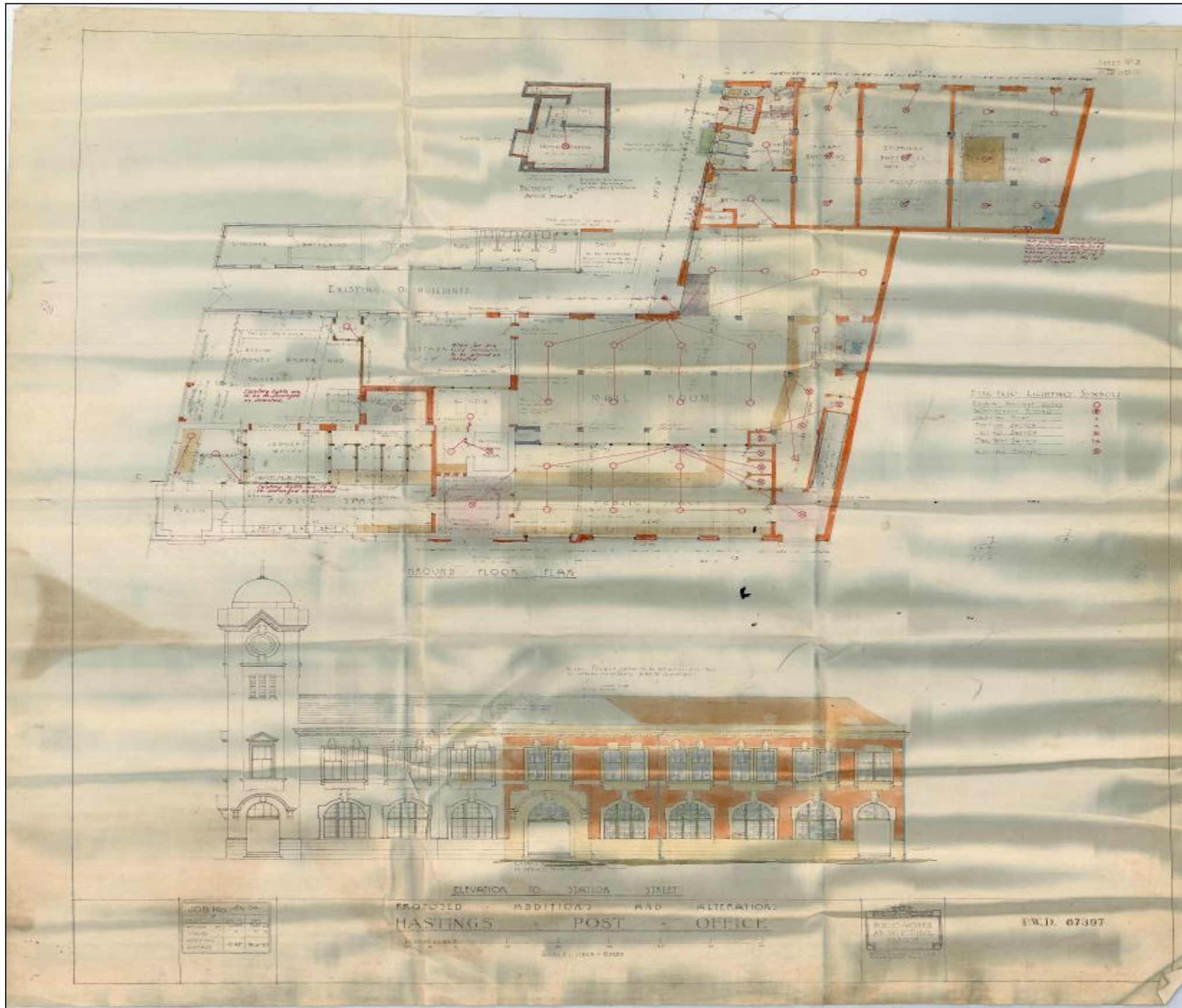
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ARCHIVE PLAN(S):

Proposed Additions and Alterations, Hastings Post Office, Public Works Architectural Branch (1927) (TRIM Ref: 21307#054)



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