
RUSSELL STREET HISTORIC AREA HASTINGS

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Russell Street South - looking south from the Heretaunga Street intersection.

LOCATION:

Street and Number: Russell Street South and North, blocks between Eastbourne Street East and Queen Street East.

City / Town: Hastings

Region: Hawke's Bay

SUMMARY OF SIGNIFICANCE:

Architectural Value: Russell Streets North and South are defined on their south sides by a sequence of eight distinguished buildings, five of which are included in the District Plan Heritage Items register; one is registered as Category I under the Historic Places Act, and three others are registered as Category II. The registrations recognise the buildings as having a high level of heritage value at a regional and national level. All the buildings are included in the Central Character Precinct and as individual listings in the Hastings Heritage Inventory.

Standing alone, most of the buildings would command attention for their assured architectural design (the majority in the Spanish Mission or Stripped Classical styles); taken as a group, with no discordant elements, the architectural value of the ensemble is very high indeed. All were built in the 15 years between 1924 and 1939, and they remain today in relatively unmodified form, so that they encapsulate the architectural styles of the inter-war period and of the rebuilt Hastings in a very vivid manner.

Some of the buildings are the work of important architects, including Albert Garnett and Harold Davies, two very important regional architects; also Swan and Lavelle, Edmund Anscombe, and the Government Architect J T Mair, the latter two in particular with national reputations.

Elements of Architectural Importance:

Element	Significance
Whole of the street elevations of all buildings, form and detail	Architectural, historic, aesthetic, streetscape values

Historic Value: Russell Street is strongly evocative of the impact of the 1931 Hawke's Bay earthquake, since three of the eight buildings (that stand together in Russell Street North) survived and are in use today; the other five of the eight were re-built during the 1930s. The street is therefore like several in the city in having a balance of buildings from before and after the 1931 earthquake, but its history of Government ownership and railway use is unique in the city. This affected its pre-earthquake development in a very fundamental way, with early development restrained by short-term Government leases, although there is little evidence of this in the built form of the street today.

The street stands out in commercial importance because of its pivotal location at the heart of the Hastings CBD. From the beginning the street has played an important role in the commercial life of the city, with a predominance of uses (through to the present day) relating to retailing. The street provides the main 'cross-over' point for the railway line that bisects the city, linking the two parts of the city's commercial heart. Most Hastings people are familiar with the street for having shopped or transacted business there, especially because of the presence of Westerman's, originally a department store with a reputation for quality that extended well beyond Hastings. It is also familiar as the main pedestrian 'cross-over' point for the railway line that bisects the city.

Aesthetic Value: The buildings of these two blocks of Russell Street make up one of the finest streetscapes in the Hastings CBD. The consistent scale of the buildings (there are none more than 2 storeys high); the compatibility of style between the buildings, and the visual interest of their decorative features all lead to an unusually unified and coherent townscape.

The open nature of the west side of the street, that has allowed planting and landscaping on a generous scale, means that a full appreciation of the townscape quality of the east side is possible, since, unusually in the city, one can stand well back from the buildings. They are well oriented to the afternoon sun, the shadows of which enliven the decorative and three-dimensional quality of the facades of the buildings.

The street stands comfortably with the adjacent blocks of Heretaunga Street East and Queen Street East, which share many of the townscape qualities of Russell Street. In addition, Heretaunga Street East shares the original (and generally present-day) use of the buildings in retailing, so that the immediate environs are supportive of the aesthetic qualities of Russell Street. The clock tower too, adds to the visual quality of the area, emphasising the place as a focal point in the city.

HISTORY:

When it was announced by the government that a railway line would go through Karamu (now Hastings) in 1873, Francis Hicks – who owned 100 acres (40.4 hectares) in an area which now forms part of the Hastings CBD – gave 1.5 acres (0.6 hectare) of land to the government at no cost, to create a railway reserve where the Hastings Railway Station would be sited. Hicks did this so the value of his land, which he subdivided, would increase in value, and he consequently made a tidy profit. The railway reserve was situated between Heretaunga Street and Queen Street East, and included the site of the now west-facing buildings (from the R & R to the former Hastings Post Office building) to the railway track area.

The railway station was built in 1874, opposite the former Post Office building), and the first train arrived in October 1874 from Napier. The railway reserve area in front of the railway tracks, on the east side, became known as Railway Street (now Russell Street North), and extended to St Aubyn Street. The street itself is on an angle to the grid formation, as it follows the path of the railway line.

The Railway Hotel also opened in 1874, but faced the railway reserve on Heretaunga Street. Buildings started appearing on the railway reserve during the 1880s.

The area of land now known as Russell Street South was owned by the Knight Brothers, who operated a timber and coal yard on part of this land facing Heretaunga Street East. They had begun their business in 1876, and in 1878 built a wooden store to sell building supplies.

During the 1880s and 1890s more timber buildings began to appear on Railway Street, with the land being leased from the railways. Being so close to the railway meant this land was in high demand.

In 1896, the government built a timber post office on the corner of Railway and Queen Streets; the post office had previously been operated from the Hastings Railway Station. At this time the railway station was shifted to the south of Queen Street East.

Knight Brothers, who had operated their timber and supplies business since 1876, sold their business to Holt's in 1897, after a fire devastated their premises, but still retained ownership of the land.

In 1900, Railway Street's name was changed to Station Street, so as to avoid confusion with Railway Road, which was on the west side of the railway line. Because Station Street was part of the railway reserve, the New Zealand Government Railways owned the street. This changed in February 1907, when the street's ownership was handed over to the Hastings Borough Council.

A disastrous fire in January 1908 destroyed most of the buildings between the timber post office and Webber's on the corner of Station and Heretaunga Streets. In all 13 buildings were destroyed, and the owner of the Silver Grid restaurant, where the fire had started, was charged and convicted of arson. The post office survived because of two intervening brick walls, despite being right next door to the restaurant. A new brick post office was built on the site of the old one in 1909, with the old building being moved around the corner to Queen Street East.

Negotiations were initiated by the Hastings Borough Council in September 1918 to extend Station Street through to Lyndon Road, and were finally completed in October 1919. Knight Brothers gifted part of their land to the council to create the Station Street South extension from Heretaunga Street East to Eastbourne Street East.

In 1920, businesses Westerman's and L J Harvey purchased the new Station Street South sections put up for sale, but did not build on them immediately. Station Street South was formed in 1921, and opened around July of that year. L J Harvey's, which had operated from a building that was required for the street extension, shifted to Heretaunga Street East, and Holt's timber yard moved to new premises in St Aubyn Street.

Part of Westerman's existing building was on the footpath of the Station Street South extension, when L J Harvey's building was demolished, but permission was received from the Council to leave it there until their new building was completed later that year.

The timber buildings on Station Street, which had been rebuilt after the fire of 1908 and were still part of the railway reserve, became quite controversial. They were described in 1921 as being shabby in appearance. The land was leasehold and the Railways were not prepared to offer significant lease periods beyond 21 years – and indeed, could terminate the leases at the discretion of the Minister of Railways without compensation. Given these terms, businesses were not prepared to invest in more substantial buildings. A breakthrough occurred when the Hastings Borough Council and Hastings Chamber of Commerce lobbied the government in 1921 for lessees to have certainty during the lease period, and to have a right of renewal of 21 years. At a later stage, all the land was freeholded.

In August 1922, Station Street was renamed Russell Street – likely as a tribute to Sir William Russell (1838–1913), who was Hastings’ most successful politician from 1870 until 1905. While in parliament he was recognised as leader of the opposition from 1894 to 1901.

With the government offering more attractive leases on the railway reserve land, investment began in substantial buildings in Russell Street North after the 1921 recession had passed. The first building to go up was built for a Mr Fitzpatrick in 1924 in the Spanish Mission style. It became known as Poppelwell’s building, as Harry Poppelwell’s menswear store occupied most of the ground floor from the 1930s to the 1990s. The upstairs area was at one time the offices of New Zealand Aerial Mapping, started by Piet Van Asch. When a green grocer’s store burned down in Station Street North in 1924, and also took with it Webber’s Pharmacy’s timber building, Mr Webber bought the section from the green grocer and commissioned Hastings architect Harold Davies to design a two-storied building, which would contain his pharmacy on the ground floor and an optometry business upstairs. A large amount of steel reinforcing was used in the building, which Harold Davies explained would render it earthquake-proof, saying that it would “roll over like a box, but wouldn’t break”.

In 1928, the Post Office extended their 1909 premises, which adjoined Poppelwell’s building.

Before the 1931 Hawke’s Bay earthquake, the only building that was left from the turn of the century in Russell Street North was a two-storied timber building used by Bell’s as a grocery store. Apart from Westerman’s store, part of which fronted Russell Street South, the land was vacant along that section of the street.

The Hawke’s Bay earthquake on 3 February 1931 would dramatically change the streetscape of Russell Street. Only Poppelwell’s, Webber’s and the 1928 addition to the Post Office survived. Webber’s was burned out but, as Harold Davies had promised, the structure was strong enough for it to be later refurbished. The corrugated iron used to repair the top of the wall of Poppelwell’s building when it bumped against Webber’s during the earthquake can still be seen.

The Post Office’s 1909 building was wrecked when the clock tower crashed out onto to the street and, being beyond repair, was demolished. The surviving 1928 addition was given a facelift to match the Stripped Classical style of the rebuilt post office.

Ironically, the last timber building in Russell Street North – which had survived two other major fires – caught fire from a gas leak and was responsible on the night of the earthquake for the fires that destroyed many buildings in that block in Heretaunga Street and Karamu Road.

The Albert Garnett-designed Westerman’s building – although built in 1921 – was wrecked, and had to be demolished.

When the sailors from the HMS Diomedé arrived on 4 February 1931 to help in Hastings, they set up camp on the vacant land next to Westerman’s wrecked building in Russell Street South. This land was later used to build temporary buildings while permanent business premises were built.

Westerman's damaged building remained untouched during 1931, and their business was carried on in a timber building a few doors down in Heretaunga Street East. Architect Edmund Anscombe was commissioned by Westerman's to design a grand department store in Spanish Mission style, which contained some Art Noveau features. Their new building opened in December 1932, and remains the best example of the Spanish Mission style in Hawke's Bay.

L J Harvey, as mentioned previously, had purchased land in Russell Street South, and in 1933 asked architect Albert Garnett to design a Spanish Mission building that would blend in with Westerman's building. Christies, who despite having 1914 on their building façade (the year they established), constructed their new building in 1935, after having temporary premises in the street. The building's facade contains elements of Spanish Mission and Stripped Classical design.

The last building to complete the Russell Street streetscape was the Swan and Lavelle designed building for Colonial Mutual Life (CML) which was completed in 1939. This eclectic building contains elements of the three styles common in the rebuilt Hastings: Spanish Mission, represented by tiles; Art Deco by the Maori tukutuku design; and Stripped Classical at the top of the façade.

Many of the shop frontages were altered in the 1960s. Since the 1990s, the historic buildings of Russell Street have been rejuvenated in a way that reflects their original decorative features, and today it remains a busy commercial area at the heart of the CBD.



***Russell Street North, looking south to Heretaunga Street.
(Photo, Hawkes Bay Museum and Art Gallery, courtesy Michael Fowler)***



***Russell Street North, looking north towards the Post Office.
(Photo, Michael Fowler Collection)***



***Looking down Queen Street East from the Russell Street intersection,
immediately after the earthquake; the Post Office on the right.
(Photo, Hastings District Library)***

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION:

The physical description of individual buildings can be found in the Hastings Heritage Inventory entries written for the following buildings (from south to north):

- CML Building (No. 4)
- Christie's Building (No. 13)
- Harvey's Building, including the Chemist Shop (No.16)
- Westerman's Building (No. 27)
- R and R Building (No. 21)
- Webber's Building (No. 55)
- Poppelwell's Building (No.19)
- Former Hastings Post Office Building (No.15)

Architects: Architects represented by this group of buildings include Albert Garnett (three buildings); Harold Davies (two buildings); Swan and Lavelle; Edmund Anscombe, and the Government Architect J T Mair.

Builder: Various builders, see separate Inventory entries

Dates of construction: The earliest structure in the group is Poppelwell's Building, 1924; the most recent is the CML, 1939. Many small scale changes have been made to the buildings since this time.

Construction details: Generally the buildings of Russell Street are reinforced concrete structures, all of them are two-storeyed (although the Chemist Shop portion of Harvey's Building is single-storied), with concrete ground and first floors, and plastered finishes. Timber truss roofs are common, clad in corrugated iron, as is steel window joinery. (See separate inventory entries for details for each of the buildings).

Description: The Russell Street Historic Area is made up of two city blocks, Russell Street South (from Eastbourne Street East to Heretaunga Street East) and Russell Street North (from Heretaunga Street East to Queen Street East). Running at a 10 degree angle to the main grid pattern of the city, but parallel to the railway, this is one of the principal north – south streets in the Hastings CBD, and its intersection with Heretaunga Street is the focal point of the retailing heart of the Hastings CBD. This has been emphasised by modern landscaping, with a large circular pool, paving and footpaths spilling over into Russell Street on the east – west axis of Heretaunga Street. It is open to traffic in both directions, although it has a relaxed pedestrian character because of the slow speed of the traffic, and the paving and landscaping around the central water feature.

The street is unusual for being defined on its west side not by buildings, but by this landscaping; by the open and treed space of the railway line, that runs right through the heart of the city, and to a lesser extent by a modest information and toilet building on the railway side of Russell Street North.

On its east side, it is defined by one of the finest period streetscapes of the city, and indeed of the country, which is made up of eight harmoniously-designed commercial buildings dating from the 15 year period 1924 to 1939.

The east side of these two blocks of Russell Street has a remarkably consistent **townscape**. This is made up of eight contiguous buildings of similar scale and aesthetic quality, and while none of them dominate, several stand out from their neighbours. The CML Building anchors the row at the south end, while the former Post Office building performs the same role of terminating the row at the north end. In the middle, and on the corner of Heretaunga Street, Westerman's is a flamboyant and assured piece of architecture that gives a strong focus to the group.

The west side of the street is open space, with carparking, trees, grass and the fenced enclosure of the railway line. Buildings on the far side of the railway line are distant and play little part in the townscape here, with the exception of the clock tower which is a pivotal landmark in the centre of the city. Although slightly removed, this structure contributes to the identity of Russell Street and forms a nice vertical counterpoint to the horizontality of the buildings.

The absence of overhead cabling on power poles is significant in allowing (generally) uninterrupted views of the buildings.

The **height** of the buildings is two storeys, the only exception being the single-storey addition to Harvey's Building. Despite this consistency, there is plenty of variety in the roof profiles, from the turret of the CML Building to the stepped parapets of all the other buildings. There is thus plenty of visual interest in the silhouette of the row of buildings. Since they are all built up to the street boundary, they define the street edge very tightly, with no gaps between buildings.

The human **scale** set by the height of the buildings is strengthened by the manner in which each building is articulated and decorated – each one has strong visual interest in the architectural features, and in details worked in solid plaster, that adorn the facades.

The predominant **style** of the buildings in the street is Spanish Mission, although the Stripped Classical style is well represented, and there are elements of Art Deco to be found too.

The buildings provide an interesting illustration of pre- and post-earthquake styles. The R and R Building, Webber's and Poppelwell's, a group together on Russell Street North, all date from the 1920s, and while none are flamboyantly of a single style, they exhibit features of all three styles mentioned above. Post-earthquake, the buildings are unequivocally Spanish Mission (Westerman's) or Stripped Classical (the former Post Office). This reflects to some extent their function, Westerman's being a high class retail building, while the Post Office adopts the somewhat more sober stripped Classical architecture with its connotations of tradition and security.

Typical features of the Stripped Classical buildings include symmetrical facades; Classical compositions of capital, shaft and base, and relatively plain surfaces; of the Spanish Mission buildings, tiled parapets and roofs; round-headed windows, and fluted barley sugar columns.

Classical design does not readily accommodate the interruption of verandahs, and it is noticeable that the only building without a verandah is the former

Post Office. Verandahs on the other buildings reinforce their retail purpose, providing shelter to pedestrians and potential customers.

Building **materials** provide another unifying influence, since all the buildings are finished in solid plaster on in-situ concrete, generally smoothly finished and painted; ornamentation and finishing details are built up in the plaster. The architectural detail and colours vary between buildings of course, providing considerable visual variety within an ordered framework.

The **age** of the buildings is significant in that they were all built within a 15 year period between the two World Wars, 1924 to 1939, and they span the pre- and post-earthquake history of the city.

Significant pre-earthquake buildings are:

- R and R Building, 1927
- Webber's Building, 1928
- Poppelwell's Building, 1924

Significant post-earthquake buildings are:

- CML Building, 1939
- Christie's Building, 1934
- Harvey's Building, 1933
- Westerman's Building, 1932
- Former Hastings Post Office Building, 1932

Webber's Building survived the earthquake but was badly damaged by the fire that followed. The 1929 addition to the Post Office survived too, and was subsequently incorporated into the new building of 1932.

Given the age of the buildings (all are more than 70 years old), the level of **authenticity** of the area is high. Early architectural drawings, and early photos, show buildings that are still easily recognisable today. Changes to the building exteriors since the time of construction are relatively superficial, even in the shop fronts below the level of the verandahs where commercial pressure often meant that retail frontages were regularly modernised. Westerman's has the most complete and authentic shop-front architecture of any building in the city, and is of national importance partly for this reason.

OTHER RELEVANT INFORMATION:

NZHPT Register: The Russell Street Historic Area is registered under the Historic Places Act (registration no 7020), and four individual buildings are registered:

- CML Building, Category II
- Westerman's Building, Category I
- Poppelwell's Building, Category II
- Former Hastings Post Office Building, Category II

District Plan: The Russell Street Historic Area is specifically listed as a Heritage item in the Hastings District Plan, and it is located within the Central Character Precinct.

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.

MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCES:

Fowler, M 2007 *From Disaster to Recovery: the Hastings CBD 1931-35*, Michael Fowler Publishing Limited, Havelock North p. 139.



Russell Street South - looking north from the intersection with Eastbourne Street.



Russell Street North - looking north from the Heretaunga Street intersection.



Russell Street North - looking south from the Queen Street East intersection.



Russell Street South - looking south from the Heretaunga Street East intersection.



Russell Street Historic Area & Associated Heritage Features