

**DISTRICT PLAN – LISTED HERITAGE PLACE  
HERITAGE ASSESSMENT – STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE  
HERITAGE ITEM NUMBER 609  
COMMERCIAL BUILDING AND SETTING, FORMER CHIEF POST  
OFFICE – 31 CATHEDRAL SQUARE, CHRISTCHURCH**



**PHOTOGRAPH : M.VAIR-PIOVA, 5/12/2014**

**HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE**

*Historical and social values that demonstrate or are associated with: a particular person, group, organisation, institution, event, phase or activity; the continuity and/or change of a phase or activity; social, historical, traditional, economic, political or other patterns.*

The former Chief Post Office is of high social and historical significance as it functioned as the Chief Post Office for 113 years and is now the oldest building in Cathedral Square. Originally known as the Government Buildings, it housed the Immigration, Customs and Public Works departments in addition to the Chief Post Office. The foundation stone was laid on 14 May 1877 and the building opened two years later. In 1881 the first telephone exchange in New Zealand was installed in the building and remained there until 1929 when it moved to the Hereford Street Post Office site. From 1913 when the Government Buildings opened on the other side of Cathedral Square, the Post Office was the main occupant of the building, although the Tourist Department was located there until the 1950s.

The role of Post Offices in the community was expansive and by the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century they fulfilled political, social and economic needs. As well as traditional communication services, the Post Office provided services such as registering births, marriages, deaths and cars, enrolling people to vote, and collecting pensions. Post Offices also provided daily weather and temperature checks for the Meteorological Office, and postmasters were able to perform marriage ceremonies. In the late 1980s the old New Zealand Post Office split into three

separate state owned enterprises; New Zealand Post Limited, Telecom Corporation of New Zealand Limited, and Postbank Limited. Postbank was subsequently sold to ANZ and New Zealand Post Limited now own Kiwibank Limited.

Plans to replace the current building were first discussed in the 1930s, however the Post Office instead constructed a four storey building in Hereford Street when the Chief Post Office needed more working space. World War II put an end to plans for a new eight storey Post Office in Cathedral Square and it was not until 1968 that the Government announced plans for a new multi-storey postal centre in Hereford Street. In December 1981 it was announced that the old building would be retained and refurbished for continued Post Office and Telecom use. The seven storey Telecom building which overshadows the former Chief Post Office at the rear was constructed in 1992 and resulted in the retention of the façade and single gable span of the roof form with the interior being largely demolished. The building has passed into private ownership and most recently the former Chief Post Office contained food outlets as well as an i-Site Visitor Information Centre.

## **CULTURAL AND SPIRITUAL SIGNIFICANCE**

*Cultural and spiritual values that demonstrate or are associated with the distinctive characteristics of a way of life, philosophy, tradition, religion, or other belief, including: the symbolic or commemorative value of the place; significance to Tangata Whenua; and/or associations with an identifiable group and esteemed by this group for its cultural values.*

The former Chief Post Office is of high cultural significance as it was the central hub for core societal governmental and postal services provided to the city from its construction in the 1870s until recent developments in the late 1980s to 1990s. From early government departments to its role as the Chief Post Office for Christchurch - one of the earliest major post offices in the country - the former Chief Post Office played a cultural societal role as the centre for community services that were provided by the government and as a place of meeting and exchange in Cathedral Square. The buildings sale into private ownership and resultant change of use to provide visitor services and to be leased for other purposes reflects societal cultural changes brought about by governmental changes in the operation of the services the post office provided and the development the internet to provide a different form of access to these services.

## **ARCHITECTURAL AND AESTHETIC SIGNIFICANCE**

*Architectural and aesthetic values that demonstrate or are associated with: a particular style, period or designer, design values, form, scale, colour, texture and material of the place.*

The former Chief Post Office is of high architectural and aesthetic significance as a building by Colonial Architect, W H Clayton and as an example of a masonry building in the Italianate style with ornamentation combining classical and Venetian Gothic elements. Clayton was born in Tasmania in 1823 and trained in Brussels. In 1863 he moved to Dunedin where he set up practise, and entered partnership with William Mason the following year. Mason and Clayton were prominent architects of the time in New Zealand, and were responsible for Dunedin's All Saints Church, and The Exchange (former Post Office) and the Colonial Museum in Wellington. In 1869 Clayton was appointed as Colonial Architect, and was the only person to ever hold this title. In this capacity he designed Post and Telegraph offices, courthouses, customhouses, Government Department offices and ministerial residences. Clayton died in Dunedin in 1877, before the Christchurch Chief Post Office was completed, leaving his senior assistant P F M Burrows to take over as supervising architect.

Burrows also designed the later addition to the west end of the north façade in 1907, which involved the extension of a third gabled bay to the western end of the north frontage. The former Chief Post Office is a two storey masonry building in the Italianate style, with richly textured ornamentation combining classical and Venetian Gothic elements. It combines classical arched windows on the ground floor with Venetian pointed arches on the first floor. A clock tower marks the entrance with the coat of arms above at roof level. Above this is the multi-faced clock which contained a bell which chimed and was in use until the middle of the 20th century when it was quietened due to noise complaints from the neighbouring United Service Hotel. The bell was re-commissioned around the 1990s and in use until the Canterbury earthquakes. The clock is currently boarded up and the hands have been removed and stored. In 1992 the interior was demolished due to the construction of the seven storey telecom building directly behind it. Although the interior alterations reduced the building's heritage values, its imposing L-shaped exterior continues to have a major aesthetic impact on Cathedral Square. The building was damaged in the Canterbury earthquakes but is stabilised and remains a key part of Cathedral Square.

### **TECHNOLOGICAL AND CRAFTSMANSHIP SIGNIFICANCE**

*Technological and craftsmanship values that demonstrate or are associated with: the nature and use of materials, finishes and/or technological or constructional methods which were innovative, or of notable quality for the period.*

The building is of technological and craftsmanship significance for what it may reveal of nineteenth century construction and craftsmanship methodologies and materials through its brick and stone construction and its examples of architectural detailing. These include decorative elements apparent in the string courses, eaves brackets, pediments and arches, as well as the prominent clock tower, with the British coat of arms and entrance on the eastern facade. The Chief Post Office's clock tower was installed in 1879 and contains a multi-faced single mechanism clock with a bell chime.

### **CONTEXTUAL SIGNIFICANCE**

*Contextual values that demonstrate or are associated with: a relationship to the environment (constructed and natural), a landscape, setting, group, precinct or streetscape; a degree of consistency in terms of type, scale, form, materials, texture, colour, style and/or detail; recognised landmarks and landscape which are recognised and contribute to the unique identity of the environment.*

The setting of 31 Cathedral Square consists of the immediate land parcel, that is the same footprint as the building itself. The former Chief Post Office forms part the Maltese Cross form of the southwest corner section of Cathedral Square. The building has high contextual significance for its relationship with the former Government Buildings of 1913, which it faces to its east in Cathedral Square, as many of the services moved from the former building to the latter when it was constructed. The landmark status of the former chief Post Office has increased following the Canterbury earthquakes as the view of the clock tower from High Street has been reinstated following the demolition of the ANZ building on the corner of Colombo and Hereford Streets.

### **ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND SCIENTIFIC SIGNIFICANCE**

*Archaeological or scientific values that demonstrate or are associated with: the potential to provide information through physical or scientific evidence an understanding about social*

*historical, cultural, spiritual, technological or other values of past events, activities, structures or people.*

The former Chief Post Office and its setting are of archaeological significance because they have potential to provide archaeological evidence relating to past building construction methods and materials, and human activity on the site, including that which occurred prior to 1900.

## **ASSESSMENT STATEMENT**

The former Chief Post Office and its setting are of overall high significance to Christchurch, including Banks Peninsula as it functioned as the former Government Buildings then Chief Post Office for 113 years and is now the oldest building in Cathedral Square. 31 Cathedral Square is of high social and historical significance for the role of Post Offices in the community which was expansive and by the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century these services fulfilled political, social and economic needs as well as traditional communication services. The Post Office provided services such as registering births, marriages, deaths and cars, enrolling people to vote, and collecting pensions. It also provided daily weather and temperature checks for the Meteorological Office, and postmasters were able to perform marriage ceremonies. High cultural significance is attributed to the former Chief Post Office as it was a central hub for core services provided to the city from its construction in the 1870s until recent developments in the late 1980s to 1990s. The former Chief Post Office is of high architectural and aesthetic significance as a building by Colonial Architect, W.H Clayton and as an example of a masonry building in the Italianate style with ornamentation combining classical and Venetian Gothic elements. The building is of technological and craftsmanship significance for its brick and stone construction and its examples of architectural detailing. The building has high contextual significance for its relationship with the former Government Buildings, which it faces, also in Cathedral Square, as many of the services moved from the former building to the latter when it was constructed in 1913 and as a significant and prominent inner city landmark on the south west corner of Cathedral Square. The former Chief Post Office and its setting are of archaeological significance because they have potential to provide archaeological evidence relating to past building construction methods and materials, and human activity on the site, including that which occurred prior to 1900.

## **REFERENCES:**

Christchurch City Council, *Heritage File, Former Chief Post Office – 15 Cathedral Square*

Christchurch City Council, *Christchurch City Plan – Listed Heritage Item and Setting. Heritage Assessment – Statement of Significance. Former Chief Post Office – 15 Cathedral Square - 2011*

**REPORT DATED:** 24/10/2014

PLEASE NOTE THIS ASSESSMENT IS BASED ON INFORMATION AVAILABLE AT THE TIME OF WRITING. DUE TO THE ONGOING NATURE OF HERITAGE RESEARCH, FUTURE REASSESSMENT OF THIS HERITAGE ITEM MAY BE NECESSARY TO REFLECT ANY CHANGES IN KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF ITS HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE.

PLEASE USE IN CONJUNCTION WITH THE CCC HERITAGE FILES.