



**DISTRICT PLAN – LISTED HERITAGE PLACE
HERITAGE ASSESSMENT – STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE
HERITAGE ITEM NUMBER 1352
*FORMER ST ALBANS AUTOMATIC TELEPHONE EXCHANGE
AND SETTING – 29 ST ALBANS STREET, CHRISTCHURCH***



PHOTOGRAPH: 20/1/2015, M.VAIRPIOVA

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 St Albans Automatic Telephone Exchange has historical and social significance for the role it played in Christchurch and New Zealand's telecommunications history between 1916 and 1984. The building is a significant surviving asset associated with successive telecommunication technologies in the city and it also has historical significance for its association with the New Zealand Post Office which ran the telephone system until the 1980s.

Christchurch was at the forefront of New Zealand's early telecommunications developments. The first public telegraph in New Zealand was opened between Christchurch and Lyttelton in the early 1860s and by 1879 there were five private telephone lines in the city, in addition to the government lines used by the Lyttelton Harbour Board, the Police, Lunatic Asylum and Public Works Department. The first telephone exchange in the country was opened in Christchurch in 1881, located on the first floor of the new Chief Post Office (1879) in Cathedral Square. The exchange system grew steadily and by 1902 there were 1,164 subscribers in the city.

The advent of automatic telephony in the early 20th century accelerated the government's underground cabling operations and the building of new exchanges. Tenders were called in

February 1916 for an automatic telephone exchange in St Albans, although wartime conditions delayed the delivery and installation of the new equipment it was built to house until after the war had ended. In 1919 the first Strowger semi-automatic exchange equipment was installed in Hereford Street and in 1921 two smaller Strowger exchanges were installed in the Sydenham Post Office and the St Albans exchange building. By this time there were c. 5,500 subscribers in Christchurch. The Strowger semi-automatic equipment was a temporary measure installed to relieve the high demand for telephone connections in the city. A fully automatic system employing a Western Electric 7A Rotary Exchange was installed at St Albans in 1926 and by 1929 a fully automatic telephone service was in operation throughout Christchurch, catering for 8,500 subscribers.

In the early 1950s St Albans was part of the first stage of the expansion of the Christchurch Automatic Telephone Exchange network. At the time, a weatherboard extension at the rear of the building was built in to accommodate batteries and other equipment for the new 'step-by-step' switch automatic exchanges that were replacing the old rotary exchange, together with facilities for staff. The new automatic switches combined rotary selection with a vertical selector which engaged the rotary selectors according to the order of the digit.

In 1981, the contract was let for the erection of a new exchange building in St Albans Street. The new building was erected on a site adjacent to the existing building. At the time the Post Office intended to demolish the original brick and stone exchange building while keeping the weatherboard extension to the rear, but these plans did not proceed. The new St Albans telephone exchange opened on 9 June 1984. Having been surplus to requirements, the old telephone exchange building and its associated land parcel were sold to a private trust company in 1989, and subsequently were used as a sculptor's studio.

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 St Albans Automatic Telephone Exchange has cultural significance for its association with the way of life that the development of telecommunications technology allowed the residents of Christchurch.

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 St Albans Automatic Telephone Exchange has architectural significance as it was designed by RA Patterson for the Public Works Department in 1915-16. Roberts Adams Patterson (1892-1971), had become an architectural draughtsman in the Public Works Department in 1914, after joining it as a clerical cadet in 1908. He went on to become Assistant Government Architect in 1930, and held the post of Government Architect between 1942 and 1952, during which time he oversaw the design of numerous defence installations, including the American camp at Mackay's Crossing. His most notable Christchurch work was the design of the former Christchurch Women's Hospital building on Colombo Street, which was demolished in 2008.

The single-storey building has a symmetrical Edwardian classical street façade with rusticated stone corner piers framing three multi-pane windows. Medallions bearing the

initials 'GR' and the date of construction are mounted on the corner piers and the sides of the building are lit with the same windows as those set into the façade. The original parapet has been removed at some point. In the original floorplan, more than half of the building space was taken up by the switching room, the remainder being occupied by the accumulator room and power room. Access to these rooms was via doors on the east elevation of the building. A small lean-to at the rear of the building housed a toilet, coal store, and heating chamber, but this replaced by the much larger 1950s weatherboard extension remains in place today. At present the building it is awaiting post-earthquake repairs.

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 former St Albans Automatic Telephone Exchange has technological and craftsmanship significance for its construction methods and materials and previous association with the functional requirements of telecommunications technology from the late 1910s until the early 1980s.

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 former St Albans Automatic Telephone Exchange has contextual significance because its distinctive design, construction materials and scale distinguish it as a landmark within the streetscape, and because of its common purpose with the adjacent exchange building constructed in 1984 that rendered itself obsolete. Together the two buildings convey a sense of the development of successive telecommunications technologies and offer a contrast to the street's predominantly residential character.

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 St Albans Automatic Telephone Exchange has archaeological significance because it has the potential to provide archaeological evidence relating to past construction methods and materials, and human activity on the site, including that which occurred before 1900. A deposit plan dating from 1907 (DP 2378) shows a small building straddling the boundary between the parcels occupied between the 1916 and 1984 telephone exchange buildings.

ASSESSMENT STATEMENT

The former St Albans Automatic Telephone Exchange has overall significance to Christchurch, including Banks Peninsula. The building has historical and social significance

for its association with the city's evolving telecommunications technology and cultural significance for the changes to the way of life of Christchurch's residents that home phones brought about. The former St Albans Automatic Telephone Exchange has architectural and aesthetic significance as an early work by RA Patterson, who worked in the Government Architect's office and later attained that role himself. The building has technological and craftsmanship significance for its association with modern telecommunications technology and its brick and stone construction. The building has contextual significance for the landmark contribution it makes to the local streetscape and its relationship with the exchange that superseded it. The former St Albans Automatic Telephone Exchange has archaeological significance because it has the potential to provide archaeological evidence relating to past construction methods and materials, and human activity on the site, including that which occurred before 1900.

REFERENCES:

Lewis Martin, *Built for Us: The Work of Government and Colonial Architects, 1860s to 1960s*

Douglas Lloyd-Jenkins 'The sparkling, the homely and the cool' *NZ Books* 1 June 2005
<http://nzbooks.org.nz/2005/non-fiction/the-sparkling-the-homely-and-the-cool-douglas-lloyd-jenkins/>

A. C. Wilson, *Wire & Wireless: a history of telecommunications in New Zealand 1890-1987*

J. Wilson, *Contextual Historical Overview of the City of Christchurch*

The Press 6 September 1922, p. 5.

REPORT DATED: 10 MARCH 2015

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.