

# ART DECO

## HERITAGE TRAIL



**Absolutely**  
**POSITIVELY**  
ME HEKE KI PŌNEKE  
WELLINGTON CITY COUNCIL **Wellington**

## ART DECO IN THE CAPITAL WELLINGTON'S 1930'S BUILDING

This trail can be used to work out your own walking tour or to guide you to buildings of particular interest. The tour takes you up to the National War Memorial and along Lambton Quay to the

Railway Station.

### KEY:

	Registered by the New Zealand Historic Places Trust
	Listed on the Wellington City Council District Plan
WCA	Wellington City Archives
ATL	Alexander Turnbull Library



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Wellington City Council is a member of the Heritage Trails Foundation

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Cover image: Four Head office buildings in Lambton Quay, pictured in 1940. On the left, the MIC Building, and opposite from the left, Prudential Assurance Building, CBA Building and South British Building.



# OLD SHORELINE HERITAGE TRAIL

trail 

site no.  corresponds to numbers throughout trail guide

street 

## Introduction

The inter-war period was a rich time for Wellington architecture. Two hundred new buildings (non-residential) were constructed between 1919 and 1939. New architectural styles appeared, based partly on the past but with a definite look to the future.

Backed by an economic upturn, the 1920s was, up until that time, the period of the city's biggest building boom. The Depression largely ended that, but building activity never ceased, and a revival was sparked by the intervention of the government, which set about constructing large public buildings, such as the Wellington Railway Station and the National Museum. Buildings got bigger and, prompted partly by the experience of the 1931 Napier earthquake and partly as a response to new overseas styles, heavy decoration was shed and sleeker forms favoured.

Although the range of styles adopted remained eclectic, certain styles predominated. Art Deco, the style most commonly associated with the 1930s, arose out of the Industrial and Decorative Arts Exhibition in Paris in 1925. It was characterised by simplified ornamentation and an emphasis on geometrical decoration; the use of applied ornament creating an image of modernity. Moderne or Streamlined architecture was essentially a further refinement of Art Deco. It was characterised by a lack of decoration and was inspired by the curved forms of contemporary ship, train and car design. Stripped Classicism took the typical features and motifs of Classicism but pared them back so that decoration was reduced, but an imposing grandeur remained. Stripped Classicism was an authoritarian style adopted by a number of state organisations, including the American Postal Service and the government of Nazi Germany.

## WELLINGTON'S ART DECO HERITAGE TRAIL

First and foremost this was a period of change, although traditional styles continued to be revived during this period. However, as the end of the decade approached, architects began to look towards Modernism. Decoration was all but abandoned and window space and practical construction improvements took precedence. Right at the end of the decade buildings such as the State Insurance head office offered a glimpse of how architecture would look in the second half of the century.

This trail is not a structured walk as such but rather it offers 30 buildings that you can view at your leisure or in one walk. They are grouped largely in geographical proximity. Central Wellington occupies a relatively small area and none of these buildings is too far from the other. If you wanted to follow the entire trail it could be started at either Oriental Bay or the Railway Station.

### 1 Oriental Bay Rotunda (1938)

In 1936 it was proposed to the Wellington City Council that a combined bathing pavilion and band rotunda be built at Oriental Bay on the platform then occupied by the old Town Hall rotunda. A design was prepared by the Wellington City Council Engineer's Department and the building, which included separate changing rooms for men, women, boys, and girls, was completed in 1938. The building retained its dual uses for 40 years but by the 1970s it was showing its age. In 1982 it was decided to create a new public space by building a roof over the rotunda. The revamped building opened in 1985 as a restaurant. Beneath, the area previously occupied by the changing rooms was converted into a meeting room for local residents and an art gallery and teaching space. Although the addition has changed the building, its Moderne features remain intact and it remains a key landmark along Wellington's 'Riviera'.



*Top: The first band rotunda, which was originally sited in front of the Old Town Hall in 1902, pictured in 1932. It was moved to this site in 1917. The seawall dates from the same year. (ATL C45341/2)*

*Below: The present rotunda and bathing sheds in the 1950s. The additional storey was added in the early 1980s. (ATL 1009511/2)*



## 2 **Anscombe Flats, 212 Oriental Parade (1937)**

Anscombe Flats is named for Edmund Anscombe (1873–1948) one of New Zealand's most distinguished 20th century architects. He bought the land in 1933, at the age of 60 and by then widowed, and planned to sell the apartments and live on the top floor. The building was completed in 1937 and Anscombe lived there until his death in 1948. This is one of three celebrated apartment buildings he designed in Wellington. The Moderne style of the building is well demonstrated in the rounded corners and moulded window hoods. The semi-circular penthouse floor is a particular delight, although it was altered in 2002.

## 3 **Herd St Post Office, cnr Herd St and Chaffers St (1939)**

This controversial building has dominated this area of the waterfront since 1939. An imposing structure, it was originally five storeys high, but a tennis court on top of the building was removed and replaced with another floor. Designed by Edmund Anscombe, the building is almost without decoration but for a surprising Moderne flourish on the south-western corner, repeated, slightly less grandly, on the eastern end. The ground-floor foyer features some typical Art Deco chromium and plaster effects. As part of a conversion into flats that started in 2004, major alterations were planned for the building, including considerable changes to windows on the seaside elevations.



*Herd Street Post Office, at dusk, in the 1950s.  
(Duncan Winder Collection, ATL)*



*The Wellington Fire Station on the day of its opening, 1937. (ATL 40001/2)*

#### **4 Central Fire Station, 2–38 Oriental Parade (1939)**

This essentially Moderne building makes good use of a very fine site. Built to replace the previous Central Fire Station, alongside the Wellington Town Hall, it addresses Oriental Parade with a symmetrical facade and a set-back central tower, decorated with vestiges of Art Deco. The building was first planned in 1932 and architect C.H. Mitchell, of the firm Mitchell and Mitchell, was engaged to prepare designs. Mitchell planned a building on two levels with the main station on Oriental Parade and the married men's flats behind. The building was designed to hold nine fire appliances and to provide accommodation for 21 married men and 33 single men. The building was officially opened by the Governor General, Lord Galway, on 1 December 1937. The clock, a gift to the city from the Blundell family, was originally placed in the Wellington Town Hall in 1922 but after the removal of the Town Hall tower for earthquake reasons it was moved here.

#### **5 Building, 10–14 Courtenay Place (1935)**

This Art Deco building has been owned by Westpac Trust since 1975, when it was bought by one of its predecessors, the Bank of New South Wales. It was originally designed by Prouse and Wilson and built as a shop and office building for Mrs M.W. Powley in 1936. The names of electrical contractors Turnbull and Jones on the front facade suggests they were the building's first tenants. The adaptation to a bank was undertaken by Haughton and Mair.



## 6 Former Post Office, 21–23 Cambridge Tce

This building was designed in the office of Government Architect John Mair and completed in 1930. The building housed the Wellington East (later Cambridge Terrace) Post Office on the ground floor and, for much of the 20th century, the Post and Telegraph's Radio Section on the remaining floors. It is a typical example of late 1920s' architecture, particularly in the way that its neo-Classical style is adapted for the 'skyscraper' form. Its proportions, with the large base, stepped shaft and recessed wings, impart the building with considerable dignity. The upper storey additions were added in 2003, when the building was converted into a backpackers' hotel.

## 7 Cambridge Pharmacy, 59 Cambridge Tce (1932)

This building was constructed in 1932 for the Pharmacy Board of New Zealand. The architect was Stanley Fearn, whose best-known work is probably the former Salvation Army Hostel on Aro Street (with Austen Quick). When opened the building had ground floor shops, a flat and the Board's purpose-built areas, including a lecture room and laboratory. This is a restrained but very competent Art Deco design.

*The Wellington East Post Office, as it was known, soon after its completion.  
(VCA 00138:0:1435)*

## 8 National War Memorial, Buckle St (1931–32)

The government began planning a national war memorial soon after the end of World War I. In 1928 it was decided to incorporate the memorial with the new national museum and build the whole complex on the top of the flattened Mt Cook. The building was designed by Gummer and Ford, and was intended as a sister structure to the peace tower carillon in the Ottawa Parliament Buildings, Canada. It is made up of steps, a pool and forecourt, bell tower or campanile, and a base, which contains the Hall of Memories. The building was officially dedicated at the 1932 ANZAC Day ceremonies but the Hall of Memories was not finally completed until 1964. Built on a magnificent site, this is Art Deco architecture at its very best. Aside from the clever use of classic Deco motifs, such as the tower fins, the entire tower is full of visual interest with the use of different materials and motifs. A Tomb of the Unknown Warrior was constructed in front of the Hall of Memories in 2004.

An information panel about Mt Cook can be found on Buckle Street.

*A panorama showing the Carillon, and the former National Museum under construction, in 1934. Note the largely denuded Mt Victoria in the background. (ATL G477571/2)*

## 9 Former National Museum Buckle St (1936)

The former National Museum occupies what was once a small peaked hill, but which was steadily reduced over time to a level site. Built from a half-and-half combination of government funding and public subscription, the museum replaced the Colonial Museum, which was located in cramped conditions in a building behind Parliament. Planning on the new museum did not begin in earnest until the 1920s. In 1928 it was decided that the museum would be combined with the National Art Gallery and War Memorial. Gummer and Ford won a national design competition, and Fletcher Brothers was awarded the building contract. The huge brick Mt Cook prison, then occupying the site, was demolished and construction began in 1932. The building was officially opened in August 1936. During World War II the museum was taken over by the Defence Department but reopened again in September 1949. As the collections expanded, pressure grew on suitable available storage and in 1989 it was decided to build a new museum. This building was closed in 1995 and the new Museum of New Zealand – Te Papa, located on Wellington's waterfront – was opened in 1998. Ownership of the building was transferred to the Tenth Trust and it is presently occupied by Massey University's Wellington campus.



## 10 255 Cuba St (1932)

These flats were designed by King and Dawson and built for the Downes family in 1932. A deft and accomplished design, the building features Art Deco mouldings across the parapet but an identical arrangement of Classically decorated windows, with triangular and segmentally arched hoods, was apparently added after the drawings were completed. At the time of publication, these had been removed.

## 11 Reid House, 191 Cuba St (1930)

Atkins and Mitchell designed this early Art Deco styled building in 1930 for draper D.S. Patrick, who had a long-standing business on this corner. This three storey-building makes excellent use of its corner site, with five distinct portions folding around the triangular site. It is not symmetrical either, with two bays of Spanish Mission style on Cuba Street a contrast with the busy Art Deco decoration on the other four sides.

## 12 The Vic, 154–156 Cuba St (1935)

This facade is one of the most distinctive in Wellington with prominent Art Deco decoration, particularly the sunburst motif between the second storey and parapet, while the parapet itself is interrupted by a series of striking vertical mouldings. The building was designed by James Bennie and planned as a private hotel – York House. It was renamed The Vic in 1951.



*The Vic, recently restored, 2004. (F1000030)*

### **13 James Smith Building, cnr Cuba and Manners St (1907 and 1932)**

James Smith is a famous name in Wellington retailing. Smith, an early settler, bought Te Aro House, a shop on the corner of Cuba and Dixon Streets, in 1866. He built up a prosperous drapery business and expanded into general retailing. This building was constructed in 1907, but within 25 years the firm decided to modernise the appearance of the building and the vogue style was Art Deco. King and Dawson designed the facade in 1932. Just down Manners Street is a 1934 addition to the building, designed by the same architects. The store added two more additions further along Cuba Street in the 1960s. It closed in 1993 and is now a retail centre.

### **14 Valma House, 36 Taranaki Street (1937)**

Valma House, formerly Van Staveren Buildings, was built in 1937 for Van Staveren Bros., merchants and importers of (among other items) sporting goods, tobacco and accessories, hair products, clocks and watches. Barend Van Staveren founded the firm with two of his brothers, Isaac and Herman, in 1905. Barend was managing director for a remarkable 58 years. The firm closed in the 1980s. The building, designed by Swan and Lavelle, has Art Deco features but is otherwise relatively unadorned. The bracing on the south side of the building and visible through the front windows is an unsightly addition (2003) to strengthen it against earthquakes.



*The Art Deco facade of James Smith Building, pictured in 1957. (ATL C301831/2)*

## 15 Wellington Free Ambulance Building, Cable St (1932)

Designed by William Turnbull and built in 1932 this is a celebrated Art Deco building, although it lacks the decorative detailing that is more commonly associated with the style. The architect's efforts in giving all four elevations architectural interest, largely hidden for much of its existence, has always appealed to the building's

admirers. Wellington Free Ambulance, the only free ambulance service in New Zealand, was founded in 1928 by Sir Charles Norwood, businessman, philanthropist and Mayor of Wellington 1925–27. This building was replaced by new premises in Davis Street, Thorndon in 1994, but it has retained a variety of uses since, including a period as a bar and a performance venue.

*The Free Ambulance Building, at night, soon after its completion. (ATL G99922 1/1)*



## 16 City Art Gallery, Civic Centre (1939)

Originally the Wellington City Library, this elegant Stripped Classical building, completed in 1939, was the result of a collaboration between the Auckland partnership of Gummer and Ford, and New Plymouth architects Messenger Taylor and Wolfe, after a competition was held to decide a winning design. The latter firm's exterior design was chosen. In 1990–2 the new Wellington Public Library was built on Victoria Street and its predecessor was successfully converted into the City Art Gallery, as part of the overall conversion of the eastern half of Mercer Street into Civic Square.

*The foundation stone for the former Wellington Public Library being laid by Mayor Thomas Hislop in 1938.*  
(ATL 488351/4)

*Below: The library when it faced Mercer Street.*  
(ATL F159111/1)



## 17 Hibernian Building, 89 Willis St (1930)

This building was erected in 1929–30 and designed by Francis Stewart, who was for some time Fletcher Construction's resident architect. The building was originally owned by the Bristol Piano Company, and one floor was given over to use as a piano showroom. It later became known as the Hamilton Nimmo Building and is now owned by the Hibernian Friendly Society. The most obvious feature of this building is its polychromatic exterior brickwork. Unfortunately a corner tower on the building was destroyed during an earthquake in 1942.

## 18 Hotel St George, 124 Willis St (1930)

The Hotel St George is an outstanding Art Deco building occupying an historic corner site. In the 1850s the Union Bank of Australia built a branch here. In 1877 the bank building was bought by the famous early settler and businessman John Plimmer who converted it into one of Wellington's most celebrated hotels. On the facade were the carved impressions, in timber, of the faces of prominent Wellingtonians of the time, including Plimmer himself. In 1929 the property was bought by the Grand Central Buildings Ltd., which demolished the hotel. The new hotel was designed by William Prouse and opened to considerable fanfare. Probably its most famous guests were the Beatles in 1964. In 1994 the building was converted into a student hostel. The building's main facades are full of visual interest, particularly in the skilful integration of its various facets – podium, bays and recessed balcony – and the clever use of decorative mouldings that enliven the main elevations and give the building its pronounced verticality.



Top: "Get it on, Vocalion". The former Bristol Piano Company building is on the left in this view of Willis Street. The building still retained its tower at this time. (ATL F204501/2)

Bottom: A still gleaming Hotel St George soon after its construction. (ATL EP390)





Top: A view of the United Building in the 1940s before the verandah was added. (ATL G1001801/2)

Bottom: The tower of the MLC Building in the late 1940s. (ATL 21748 1/1)



## 19 United Building, 107–109 Customhouse Quay (1930)

There are few more elegant buildings in Wellington than this neo-Georgian design, built for the Wellington Commercial Travellers' and Warehousemen's Association. Completed in 1930, it was designed by Atkins and Mitchell. Divided horizontally into three main parts, the building's most interesting features are the exposed brick shaft and recessed balcony on the top storey, a neat feature, which suffers only from the absence of its balustraded parapet. The Association, which occupied the ground and first floors, left the building in 1978 when it was bought by the Northern United Permanent Building Society, from which its present name is derived.

## 20 MLC Building, 231 Lambton Quay (1940)

The former MLC building was completed in 1940 on land reclaimed between 1857 and 1863 by the Provincial Council. The first occupant was Wellington's first Presbyterian church, St Andrews, originally erected in the 1840s and moved across the road to this site in 1866. It was turned into an auction house that later evolved into a hotel, the Central. The Central Hotel was finally removed in 1939. The Mutual Life and Citizens Assurance Co. was an Australian-based insurance company. MLC operated its head office out of this building until 1985, when the New Zealand branch of the firm was taken over by New Zealand Insurance. The building was eventually acquired by the Auckland-based St James Group in 1995 and converted into apartments. Mitchell and Mitchell designed this building which is noted for its streamlined features and beautiful faience tiling.

## 21 Prudential Assurance Building, 332–340 Lambton Quay (1934–35)

The Prudential Assurance building is one of a group of head office buildings, built together on Lambton Quay, which offer quite different visual experiences. This building is noted for its four nearly identical Art Deco elevations, a *tour-de-force* of urban design. Of particular interest is the artificial stone 'vener' – Benedict stone – on the ground and first floors. Above that is coloured cement render, lined out to resemble stone blocks, now painted over. The British firm of Prudential Assurance relocated its head office from Auckland to Wellington in 1932. It demolished the landmark Athenaeum and Mechanics Institute (1877) and a new building, designed by the Melbourne firm of Hennessy and Hennessy in association with local architects Gray Young Morton and Young, was built. In what were very difficult economic times the company was encouraged to construct the building by the Government's offer of relief workers. It opened in 1935. The future of the building was the subject of much controversy during the 1990s but its sale by Prudential Assurance ensured its future. It has since been converted into apartments. Additions made to the north elevation and top storey have robbed the building of its symmetry.

*The Prudential Assurance Building just after its completion but before construction of the CBA building began next-door. This period offered a brief opportunity to see the building in all its symmetrical glory. (ATL F15619 1/1)*



**22 Former CBA Building,  
328–330 Lambton Quay (1936)**

The Commercial Bank of Australia (CBA), founded in 1866, was established in New Zealand in 1912 and in 1914 it purchased half of a building on this site previously built for the Colonial Bank of New Zealand. CBA demolished its portion of the building in 1934, two years before South British demolished the other. The new building was designed by Clere & Clere. At the time the main feature was a large banking chamber, now used for retail purposes. The building opened in 1936. The name CBA disappeared when the bank merged with the Bank of New South Wales in 1982 and formed Westpac. This Stripped Classical building uses the Chicago style of base, shaft and capital on its principal facade.

**23 South British Insurance Building,  
326 Lambton Quay (1936)**

Founded in 1872, South British Insurance Company was a significant New Zealand business that achieved international success. South British occupied this site for 100 years – previously leasing part of the CBA's former building – and built its only purpose-built office here in 1936. The building was designed by Auckland architect M.K. Draffin who also designed South British's Auckland office. The design, principally neo-Georgian on a Chicago-style office building, was much less daring than the Prudential Insurance building next door. South British merged with New Zealand Insurance in 1982.



*The Government Life Insurance Department building in 1954. (ATL 37239 1/2)*

**24 Tower Corporation Building,  
50–64 Customhouse Quay (1930)**

Tower Corporation began as the Government Life Insurance Department in 1869. It was formed to provide New Zealanders with a broader choice in life assurance. It grew quickly, with a state guarantee being a major attraction. The Department built its first purpose-built offices on this site in 1893. After the 1931 Napier earthquake the building was thought unsafe and it was pulled down. The present building was designed by Government Architect, John Mair, and completed in 1936. Government Life became a corporation in 1983, and in 1989 it became Tower Corporation. It later severed all connections with the Government and became a mutual life company owned by its policy holders.

## 25 Former Brandon House, 150–152 Featherston Street (1929)

Brandon House is significant for its connection with the Brandon family and the law firm founded by Alfred de Bathe Brandon, an early settler and solicitor. The building was designed by Francis Stewart, also responsible for the Hibernian Building, and construction was completed in 1931. Brandon House is a good example of a transitional design, incorporating elements of the Chicago School, New York skyscraper architecture and Art Deco. Particular features of note are the heavy mouldings at the top of both visible facades (the only example in Wellington of the use of such decoration) and the spandrel panels, which were covered up for many years. Inside are original panelled lifts, machinery and floor indicators, also very rare.

## 26 Agriculture House, 131–133 Featherston Street (1938)

Agriculture House is so named for its association with Federated Farmers, which bought this building in 1983. It was originally constructed for New Zealand Insurance one of New Zealand's most successful and historic insurance companies. NZI began in Auckland in 1859 and opened its first office in Wellington two years later. This building was designed by Auckland architects Gummer and Ford, who had a long association with the company, and construction was completed in 1937. The building's relatively undecorated facade was a significant departure from prevailing styles and can be seen as an important milestone in the transition to Modern architecture.



*Top: Brandon House, soon after its construction. The decorated panels and bold cornice mouldings are both very evident here. (ATL G100825 1/2)*

*Below: Agriculture House, then New Zealand Insurance Building, shown in an unusual rooftop view in 1940. This building was the forerunner to the even more innovative State Insurance Building. (ATL C25377)*



## 27 Former State Insurance Building, 143–149 Lambton Quay (1940)

At the end of the 1930s the Government commissioned a new building for State Insurance on this awkward corner site. The Auckland firm of Gummer and Ford, came up with a brilliant solution – a wavy facade wrapped around the corner. Together with the extensive use of glass it was an utterly novel piece of design for New Zealand and the best-known local example of the new architecture becoming vogue in Europe. To emphasise its innovative design, the building included new features such as fast lifts, fluorescent lighting and fire protection. State Insurance was established in 1903 by the Liberal Government, to provide competition for large monopolist or overseas-dominated insurance companies. State Insurance was sold to Norwich Insurance in 1990. The controversial multi-storey rooftop addition and embedded Classical columns (carrying the former owner's name in bronze letters) were completed in 1999.

## 28 Departmental Building, 15–21 Stout Street (1940)

The Departmental Building was completed in 1940 and up to that point was the biggest office building ever erected in Wellington. It was needed to ease the pressure on accommodation of the civil service in Wellington. The building was designed by Government Architect John Mair and built by Fletcher Construction. Numerous Government departments have come and gone and today just one major tenant, the New Zealand Defence Force, remains. In 1985–86 the original stone facing was removed and replaced with a white stone chip aggregate, partly made from the original Putaruru stone. The building acquired some fame as the "face" of television programmes *Gliding On* and *Market Forces*. Its broad, sweeping Moderne facade is a splendid complement to its contemporary neighbour, the State Insurance Building.



*Top: A close-up of the former State Insurance building soon after its completion. (F18109 1/1)*

*Below: The size and clean lines of the Departmental Building immediately made it a prominent Wellington landmark, even in narrow Stout Street. (ATL F15910 1/1)*



## 29 Hotel Waterloo, 28 Waterloo Quay (1937)

The Waterloo Hotel was built for New Zealand Breweries in 1937 and designed by the local firm of Atkins and Mitchell. A podium and tower design not dissimilar to the Hotel St George, it had 102 rooms and accommodation for 125 when it opened. A contemporary account said it set "new standards in furnishings and interior decoration". The liberal use of chrome in many of the building's fittings was an integral part of the hotel's modern appearance. The hotel went into decline in

the 1980s and finally closed towards the end of the decade. In 1991 the hotel was granted a new lease of life when it was converted to a backpackers' hostel and the bars were reopened to the public.

*At the time it opened, the Hotel Waterloo was a luxurious hotel built with railway customers in mind. (ATL 414031/2)*



## 30 Wellington Railway Station, Bunny Street (1934-37)

By comparison with many other buildings designed in the 1930s, Wellington Railway Station was unusually retrograde in its appearance. Designed by William Grey Young, the station features a grand entrance, highlighted by eight Doric columns, which help make the station building one of the best-known Wellington landmarks. Inside, the huge coffered ceiling, apparently inspired by the Pennsylvania Station in New York, is also a standout feature. The grandeur of the building was

appropriate given that it was (and still is) the busiest railway station in the country and that the building was to house the head office of New Zealand Railways. Today its successor, Toll New Zealand, still keeps some head office functions in the building, but the west wing of the building has been converted for use by Victoria University, as part of its Pipitea Campus.

*The just-completed Wellington Railway Station sparkles in late evening light.  
(ATL 101158 1/2)*

