

Tasman Street Brick Wall

Tasman Street, Mt Cook



Tasman Street retaining wall – northern end.



Tasman Street retaining wall – centre



*Tasman Street retaining wall – southern end
All images: Googlemaps (2009)*

Summary of heritage significance

- The Tasman Street Brick Wall is a good example of Victorian engineering. It is notable for the quality of its design, materials and workmanship, particularly the use of high-quality 'prison' bricks, the pronounced tilt of the wall's construction, and for its neatly detailed cornice.
- The brick wall has an association with the former occupants of the Mt Cook Reserve from the era of the Mt Cook Gaol onwards. Its brick construction links it directly to the penal history of the area, to the prisoners who made the bricks and built the wall, and to the general era of brick-making that so characterised this part of Wellington. It later formed part of the perimeter of the Alexandra military barracks, the Dominion Museum, Massey University campus and the Wellington High School grounds.
- The wall has high townscape value as the defining feature along an approximately 250 metre stretch of Tasman Street. It is one of the best places in Wellington to see 'prison' bricks and has become a local landmark for this reason.

District Plan:	Map 16, reference 54
Legal Description:	Lot 2 DP 87064 (C.Ts WN54C/503, WN54D/136), Sec 1253 Town of Wellington (CT WN6C/802), Sec 1 SO 36519 (New Zealand Gazette 1994, p.2705), Wellington Land District.
Heritage Area:	None 2013
HPT Listed:	Historic Place Category 2 ref 7758
Archaeological Site:	R27/440 <i>Tasman Street Wall. Brick retaining wall constructed of bricks made by prisoners on Mt Cook itself, the wall is the oldest structure still standing within the former Mt Cook Reserve.</i>
Other Names:	Pukeahu (former name for Mt Cook) Mt Cook Prison Alexandra Barracks Dominion Museum
Key physical dates:	c.1891 central section built 1893 – 94 northern section built c.1897 -1903 southern section built, and wall completed.
Architect / Builder:	Unknown
Former uses:	Retaining wall
Current uses:	Retaining wall
Earthquake Prone Status:	Unknown at time of writing

Extent: Cityview GIS 2013



1.0 Outline History

1.1 History ¹

The Tasman Street Wall is an important physical reminder of the long occupation and use of Mt Cook. Constructed of bricks made by prisoners on Mt Cook itself, the wall is the oldest structure still standing within the former Mt Cook Reserve.

Mt Cook was originally Pukeahu, a pa occupied intermittently by Maori. In 1842 troops were brought in to protect Wellington from potentially hostile Maori and occupied the hill, and this was the beginning of a long military occupation of the area. The hill was later occupied by barracks, a magazine and a prison. In 1863 the Alexandra Barracks were built to accommodate Imperial troops to protect Wellington during the New Zealand Wars. After the troops left in 1870 the barracks housed immigrants. In 1879 the building was demolished, more levelling took place and the site for a huge gaol was cleared by prisoners from the nearby Terrace Gaol. Only one wing, of the six planned, was built (1882) and the prison finally closed in 1903. The building was taken over by the Army for use as a barracks and it was not until 1930 that it was finally demolished to make way for the National War Memorial and Dominion Museum.

The oldest part of the retaining wall dates from at least 1891, and perhaps earlier. Built by prisoners at Mt Cook from bricks made on site, it extends to within about 5m of the south boundary of the Mt Cook Police Station yard (WCC 16/43). The gap between the first section of retaining wall and the police station yard wall was infilled in 1893-94. The final (southern) section of the Tasman Street retaining wall was built at some time after 1897 and completed by 1903.

¹ Michael Kelly & Karen Astwood, 'Tasman Street Wall, Mt Cook, Wellington', unpublished Registration Report for the NZHPT (2008)

It runs from the pier approximately opposite No.23 Tasman Street, to the edge of the carpark at No.60 Tasman Street.

The Tasman Street retaining wall is primarily associated with the reserve's penal and brick making past. The distinctive prison bricks used in the construction of the wall, and the nearby Mount Cook Police Station, can be identified by their incised broad arrow. The bricks were made on site at the prison industry workshop and kiln at Mount Cook, from the late 1870s onwards. By the mid-1880s bricks were produced at a rate of approximately two million per annum. They were fired in a continuous production 'Hoffmann' kiln and were considered to be of a higher quality than those produced by other methods.

Brick clay was taken largely from the south-western face of Mt Cook, which eventually created the Wellington High School's playing fields. Production at the site continued despite the prison being officially closed and re-designated as the Alexandra Barracks in 1902. Brick production declined as the available clay supply was exhausted, and it is assumed that the kiln and old prison were both demolished in 1920. Three significant structures built with prison bricks within the old Mt Cook Reserve include the Mt Cook Gaol (renamed the Alexandra Barracks and later demolished), the Mt Cook Police Station (WCC ref 16/43) and the Tasman Street Wall. Other buildings in Wellington include the Parliamentary Library (WCC ref 18/215), Shed 7 (WCC ref 17/161), the Wellington Public Hospital (now demolished), the Government Print Office, and the fortifications at Fort Ballance (WCC object ref 13/49 & WCC area ref 13/6). Bricks were also supplied for projects such as the Wellington and Manawatu Railway, as well as to private companies on occasion.

The Tasman Street Wall formed the eastern boundary of the Mt Cook Reserve. The topography of the retained hillside has been altered considerably over the past 120+ years. The top metre, or so, of the retaining wall appears to have been a free-standing fence for the horse paddocks beyond. This 'void' appears to have been backfilled to the full height of the wall to form terraces, paths and tennis courts. The wall, itself, has been altered in places, particularly by the addition of two stairs, at least one of which was built to give access to air raid shelters constructed in 1942. It was extended in height in the 1940s with the construction of two tennis court terraces at its southern extent. This newly levelled ground was achieved by the addition of between two and nine courses of new brickwork to the top of the retaining wall at the northernmost court. The last substantial alteration was in 1969 when part of the retaining wall was reduced in height for the construction of a new substation. The wall otherwise retains much of its original form and built fabric.

Brick walls of the age of the Tasman Street Wall are very rare in Wellington and there is almost certainly nothing of this size in the city. It is likely to be rare nationally. While the wall is on the one-hand a functional and prosaic structure, it is also the oldest construction of any kind left on the Mt Cook Reserve. Its brick construction links it directly to the penal history of the area, to the prisoners who made the bricks and built the wall, and the general era of brick-making that so characterised this part of Wellington. It is an important historic structure of regional significance.



c.1910 – Alexandra Barracks, from the St Patrick’s College tower. The police station and associated stables are located to the right of the image. The open land behind the Tasman Street Wall is in use as horse paddocks. The barracks buildings can be seen at the centre of the image, and the chimney for the brickworks can be seen at the top-left.²



Detail of the retaining wall – note the horse paddocks behind the wall. The wall appears to serve partly as a stock-fence and partly as a retaining wall.

² Mount Cook Prison and buildings on Buckle Street, Wellington. Smith, Sydney Charles, 1888-1972: Photographs of New Zealand. Ref: 1/1-020192-G. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. <http://natlib.govt.nz/records/22410901>



1913 – Mounted Special Constables during the 1913 waterfront strike. These were housed at a temporary camp within the Alexandra Barrack grounds.³



1933 – Aerial view over Mt Cook, while the Dominion Museum was under construction. The Mt Cook Police Station is at the bottom-left of the image, the Carillon at the bottom-centre, army buildings can be seen at the bottom-right, and the Wellington High School at the centre-top.⁴

³ Mounted Special Constables during the 1913 waterfront strike, Wellington. Smith, Sydney Charles, 1888-1972: Photographs of New Zealand. Ref: 1/2-049059-G. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. <http://natlib.govt.nz/records/22325661>

⁴ Aerial view over Mount Cook, Wellington, while the Dominion Museum was being constructed. Ref: 1/2-053018-F. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. <http://natlib.govt.nz/records/23021711>

1.2 Timeline of modifications

1891	The first (central) section of the retaining wall appears on a plan of the Mt Cook Reserve.
1893	Construction began on the Mt Cook Police Station and the associated police station retaining (and yard) walls (WCC16/43). The second (northern) section of retaining wall was built between the police station yard and the existing retaining wall.
1903	The final (southern) section of the retaining wall was completed
1942	Air raid shelters were built at the eastern side of the Mt Cook Reserve. These were set just above the height of the retaining wall and steps were cut through the retaining wall to give access from street level.
c.1940s	Tennis courts were built at the far southern end of the wall. Bricks were added to the top of the boundary wall at the northernmost tennis court.
1969	Part of the brick wall was removed to construct a substation
1995	The wall became a Heritage Object in the WCC District Plan Heritage Inventory
c.2006	Water, grit, sand or 'garnet' blasting of graffiti caused damage to the wearing faces of some brickwork, particularly at the northern end of the wall. ⁵
2009	Graffiti removal using chemical poultice methods ⁶

1.3 Ownership history

Requires CT search but the NZHPT registration report lists the following as owners:-

Massey University
The Wellington Tenth Trust
Crown - reserved for secondary school purposes (Wellington High School)
Vector (substation)

1.4 Occupation history

Not assessed

1.5 Architect

Unknown

2.0 Physical description

2.1 Architecture

The Tasman Street wall is a brick retaining wall. It is a gravity retaining wall that utilises its mass to retain the earth behind. The width of the wall is not known, but it is assumed to be substantial – wider at the bottom than the top. A clue may be found in the profile of the western police yard wall (see photograph in Appendix 2, fig 23 of the NZHPT registration report).

⁵ See email from Ian Bowman to Barbara Fill dated 22 June 2006

⁶ See email from Councillor Ian McKinnon to Debra DeLorenzo & Alexandra Teague dated 11 December 2009

This nearby wall has been built on a 'rake' or angle, and the wall widens in profile from one-and-a-half bricks at the top to three bricks at the base.

The brickwork of the Tasman Street Wall was built in an English Bond, with courses of stretchers that alternate with courses of headers. The wall was built at a shallow pitch to form a rake, or tilt in the wall, of about two or three degrees from vertical. The wall is topped by a brick coping that is built up from a 'cornice' of two corbelled brick courses, topped by one or two brick courses.

From north to south, the wall shows evidence of the construction sequence. The northernmost (1893- 94) section of retaining wall abuts the adjacent Mt Cook Police Station yard wall. The yard wall is approx 20 brick courses taller than the retaining wall and is built to a true vertical, rather than at a raked angle (see WCC 16/43). The 1893 – 94 retaining wall coping is topped by two brick courses laid in English bond with the top row as stretchers. The wall is approximately 10 brick courses taller than the adjacent c.1891 wall and the bonding detail between the two wall sections is crudely executed. The bricks for the 1893-94 are marked with broad arrows on the headers and are all incised horizontally. Weep holes are formed between headers at the third, thirteenth and the twenty-seventh course. They are one brick high, and one header wide.

The c.1891 wall is laid level with no steps to the coping, except for a sweeping convex curve to adjust the height at its northern end. The coping is made up of a single course of headers above the brick 'cornice'. The bricks are marked with a broad arrow on both headers and/or stretchers, and the arrow varies in orientation. The weep holes are set in a single line at just under half the height of the wall and are one brick header wide, and two brick courses high. The southern end of this section terminates in a brick pier approximately opposite No. 23 Tasman Street.

The c.1901 wall is stepped in height at regular intervals to suit the topography of the hill at Mt Cook/Pukeahu, and the slope of the street. The bricks, coping detail, and weep-holes match those of the c.1893 – 94 wall. The c.1901 section is the most modified part of the retaining wall and has been cut back to form two sets of steps and a platform for a substation, and raised in height to suit a modern (c.1940s) tennis court terrace.

The northern steps are formed in concrete and are utilitarian in design. The southern stairs appear to have been built at an earlier date and some care has been taken to integrate them into the old brick retaining wall. The path, steps and risers are of concrete with a particularly coarse aggregate. The path retaining walls are built in brick and have a curved brick detail at each vertical edge.

The c.1969 substation was built at the immediate south of the (southernmost) steps. The retaining wall has been reduced in height to form a low terrace about half a metre above pavement height. A similar curved brick detail has been used at the vertical edges of the steps and flank retaining walls. There is some evidence of the reuse of old prison bricks, particularly at the c.1969 cornice.

The tennis court terraces have been somewhat more crudely constructed. The northernmost tennis court terrace was levelled by increasing the height of the retaining wall by between two and nine courses of new brickwork. There is evidence of cracking and subsidence in the c.1940s brick work.

The c.1901 wall terminates abruptly in line with the boundary of the tennis courts and 60 Tasman Street. The return wall here was built of concrete, perhaps at the time of the construction of the tennis courts in 1942.

2.2 Materials

Red bricks, cement mortar and concrete

2.3 Setting

The Tasman Street Wall is a brick retaining wall that extends approximately 250 metres south from the south of the rear wall of the former Mount Cook Police Station on the corner of Tasman and Buckle Streets. It forms the boundary between the western side of Tasman Street, and the eastern side of the Mt Cook Reserve. The eastern side of Tasman Street is occupied by residential apartments and houses, with the notable exception of the empty site at the southern side of the Rugby and Tasman Street intersection. A short distance to the west is the National War Memorial and the former National Museum (now Massey University). To the south-west behind the university, is Wellington High School. The wall sits near the northern margins of the suburb of Mt Cook, an inner-city suburb that gets its name from the landmark hill.

3.0 Sources

Aerial view over Mount Cook, Wellington, while the Dominion Museum was being constructed. Ref: 1/2-053018-F. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. <http://natlib.govt.nz/records/23021711>

Kelly, Michael & Karen Astwood, 'Tasman Street Wall, Mt Cook, Wellington', unpublished Registration Report for the NZHPT (2008)

Mount Cook Prison and buildings on Buckle Street, Wellington. Smith, Sydney Charles, 1888-1972: Photographs of New Zealand. Ref: 1/1-020192-G. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. <http://natlib.govt.nz/records/22410901>

Mounted Special Constables during the 1913 waterfront strike, Wellington. Smith, Sydney Charles, 1888-1972: Photographs of New Zealand. Ref: 1/2-049059-G. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. <http://natlib.govt.nz/records/22325661>

4.0 Criteria for assessing cultural heritage significance

Cultural heritage values

Aesthetic Value:

Architectural: Does the item have architectural or artistic value for characteristics that may include its design, style, era, form, scale, materials, colour, texture, patina of age, quality of space, craftsmanship, smells, and sounds?

The Tasman Street Brick Wall is a good example of Victorian engineering. It is notable for the quality of its design, materials and workmanship, particularly the use of high-quality 'prison' bricks, the pronounced tilt of the wall's construction, and for its neatly detailed cornice.

Townscape: Does the item have townscape value for the part it plays in defining a space or street; providing visual interest; its role as a landmark; or the contribution it makes to the character and sense of place of Wellington?

The wall has high townscape value as the defining feature along an approximately 250 metre stretch of Tasman Street. It is one of the best places in Wellington to see 'prison' bricks and has become a local landmark for this reason.

Group: Is the item part of a group of buildings, structures, or sites that taken together have coherence because of their age, history, style, scale, materials, or use?

The brick wall is the oldest remaining built object on the Mt Cook Reserve. It has a particular association with the adjacent Mt Cook Police Station, with which it shares a similar history, design and materiality.

Historic Value:

Association: Is the item associated with an important person, group, or organisation?

Association: Is the item associated with an important historic event, theme, pattern, phase, or activity?

The brick wall has an association with the former occupants of the Mt Cook Reserve from the era of the Mt Cook Gaol onwards. Its brick construction links it directly to the penal history of the area, to the prisoners who made the bricks and built the wall, and to the general era of brick-making that so characterised this part of Wellington. It later formed part of the perimeter of the Alexandra military barracks, the Dominion Museum, Massey University campus and the Wellington High School grounds.

Scientific Value:

Archaeological: Does the item have archaeological value for its ability to provide scientific information about past human activity?

The site has a specific designation - R27/440

Tasman Street Wall. Brick retaining wall constructed of bricks made by prisoners on Mt Cook itself, the wall is the oldest structure still standing within the former Mt Cook Reserve.

Educational: Does the item have educational value for what it can demonstrate about aspects of the past?

The wall has educational value as part of the infrastructure of the old Mt Cook Gaol and Alexandra military barracks, of which the buildings and other structures have all been demolished.

Technological: *Does the item have technological value for its innovative or important construction methods or use of materials?*

The wall has technological value for the use of brickwork to retain a bank. The wall is a technically fine example of brick construction. Of particular interest is the rake of the wall, which required the bricks to be laid on a shallow angle. Although not unusual, it is well handled, certainly when contrasted with the work to form the c.1940s tennis courts.

Social Value:

Public esteem: *Is the item held in high public esteem?*

Symbolic, commemorative, traditional, spiritual: *Does the item have symbolic, commemorative, traditional, spiritual or other cultural value for the community who has used and continues to use it?*

Identity/Sense of place/Continuity:

*Is the item a focus of community, regional, or national identity?
Does the item contribute to sense of place or continuity?*

The wall has had few intrusive modern alterations or additions over the past 120 years (with the notable exception of the levelling for the c.1940s tennis courts and the c.1969 substation). It contributes to the sense of place and continuity of Tasman Street and the Mt Cook Reserve.

Sentiment/Connection: *Is the item a focus of community sentiment and connection?*

Level of cultural heritage significance

Rare: *Is the item rare, unique, unusual, seminal, influential, or outstanding?*

The wall demonstrates 19th and early 20th century brickwork techniques in brick wall retaining that are rare in Wellington. It is likely to be the largest extant example in the Wellington region.

Representative: *Is the item a good example of the class it represents?*

The wall is a particularly competent example of brick retaining wall design and workmanship.

Authentic: *Does the item have authenticity or integrity because it retains significant fabric from the time of its construction or from later periods when important additions or modifications were carried out?*

The wall retains a substantial proportion of its early/original form and built fabric.

Local/Regional/National/International

Is the item important for any of the above characteristics at a local, regional, national, or international level?

The wall is of regional significance

5.0 Appendix

Research checklist (desktop)

Source	Y/N	Comments
1995 Heritage Inventory	N	
2001 Non-Residential heritage Inventory	N	
WCC Records – building file	N	
WCC Records – grant files (earthquake strengthening, enhancement of heritage values)	N	
Research notes from 2001 Non-Residential heritage Inventory	N	
Plan change?	N	
Heritage Area Report	N	
Heritage Area Spreadsheet	N	
Heritage items folder (electronic)	N	
HPT website	Y	
HPT files	Y	
Conservation Plan	N	
Searched Heritage Library (CAB 2)	Y	

Background research

Insert any relevant background information into this section. This may include:

- *Additional plans, such as those for alterations*
- *Chunks of text from other sources such as Cyclopedia of NZ, Papers Past*
- *Additional images*