

The former Government Life Insurance Building
50-64 Customhouse Quay



The former Government Life Insurance Building (2015). Image: *Charles Collins*

Summary of heritage significance

- The former Government Life Building is a product of the 1930s transitional period in architectural styles from Classicism to Modernism. It is a very good example of the work of the Government Architect's office and is notable for its well-proportioned facades, for the quality of its design, materials and workmanship, and for its restrained palette of details and ornamentation. The interior retains some significant interior features, including stairwells, foyers and halls.
- The building has townscape value as a dominant presence on Customhouse Quay and is highly visible in views from Oriental Bay. It has group value for its contribution to the Post Office Square Heritage Area.
- The building has historic value for its association with Government Life, an insurance provider that was created as a state-run alternative to private insurance providers, and the site was occupied by the insurer from the 1870s. The present building has an historic association with Government Life from 1938 and was the national headquarters for its successor, the Tower Corporation, until c.2005.

District Plan:	Map 17, reference 98
Legal Description:	All DP 10633
Heritage Area:	Post Office Square Heritage Area
HPT Listed:	Category II ref 3618
Archaeological Site:	Pre 1900 reclaimed land; Central City NZAA R27/270
Other Names:	Tower Corporation Building Government Life Assurance
Key physical dates:	1934 - 38
Architect / Builder:	Government Architect: John Thomas Mair Contractor: M. G. Templeton
Former uses:	Insurance offices
Current uses:	Office building
Earthquake Prone Status:	SR 170332 , Bdg StrengthInv, Bldg - Tower Corporation Building NOT Earthquake Prone

Extent: CityView GIS 2013



1.0 Outline History

1.1 History

Tower Corporation began as the Government Life Insurance Department in 1869. The Government of the day, the Fox ministry, with Treasurer Julius Vogel at the forefront, wanted to provide New Zealanders with a broader choice in life assurance; it also offered them a state guarantee of security.¹ Later governments created organisations such as the Public Trust Office (1872) and State Insurance (1905) in the same vein, to broaden New Zealanders' choice or as an alternative to monopolistic or unscrupulous companies.²

Government Life grew quickly and by 1894 it had attracted 32,726 policies,³ the state guarantee being a major attraction to policy holders.

The Department had offices in the first structure that occupied this site, the old Wellington Provincial Council building (1871). It was built on land reclaimed in 1866-67. When that building was pulled down Government Life constructed a three storey masonry building, designed by Clere, Fitzgerald and Richmond and completed in 1893. It was a prominent landmark on Customhouse Quay, then directly across from the road from the sea.⁴

After the 1931 Napier earthquake the building was thought unsafe and was pulled down to be replaced by the present structure. Designed by John Mair, Government Architect, the new building was completed in 1938.⁵ For many decades this very large building was shared with other public and private tenants, among them the Department of Trade and Industries.

Government Life became a corporation in 1983, with control being vested in a Board of Directors and Managing Director. On 1 October 1989 Government Life became Tower Corporation and in July the following year the passing of the Tower Corporation Act (1987) turned the corporation into a mutual life office owned by its policyholders. The company de-mutualised in 1999 and converted to a shareholder owned company. The building at 50-64 Customhouse Quay was held as an asset by the Tower Life Fund, and Tower Ltd occupied four out of a total of nine let-able floors when the company called for 'expressions of interest' in c.2005.⁶ It was redeveloped by Maurice Clark of McKee Fehl soon after,⁷ and appears to have since been divided into unit titles.

¹ McLintock A.H. 1966, *An Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, Vol.1, Government Printer, Wellington p.476. See also McLean G. 1998, *Historic Wellington Walking Tour*, Reed Books, Auckland.

² This report is an updated version of WCC Heritage Building Inventory 2001 ref CUST1

³ *New Zealand Cyclopaedia Co.* 1897, *The Cyclopaedia of New Zealand*, Vol.1 Pt.1 pp.533-34

⁴ *Evening Post*, 20 May 1931, Page 7

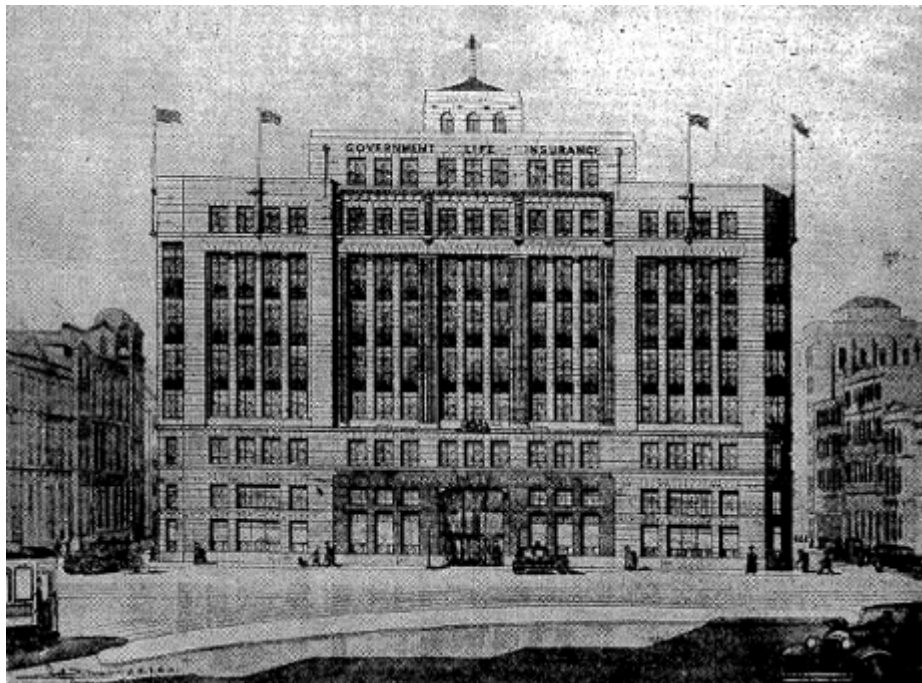
⁵ IMPRESSIVE BLOCK *Evening Post*, 10 February 1938, Page 11; NEW BUILDING *Evening Post*, 2 December 1938, Page 12

⁶ 'Tower to seek expressions of interest ...' (12 May 2005) Tower website accessed July 2013 <http://www.tower.co.nz/company/investor-centre/market-announcements/archived-announcements/2005/tower-to-seek-expressions-of-interest-for-its-custom-house-quay-building-in-wellington>

⁷ Schouton, Hank. 'An eye for the potential of old buildings' *Dominion Post* 23/02/2013



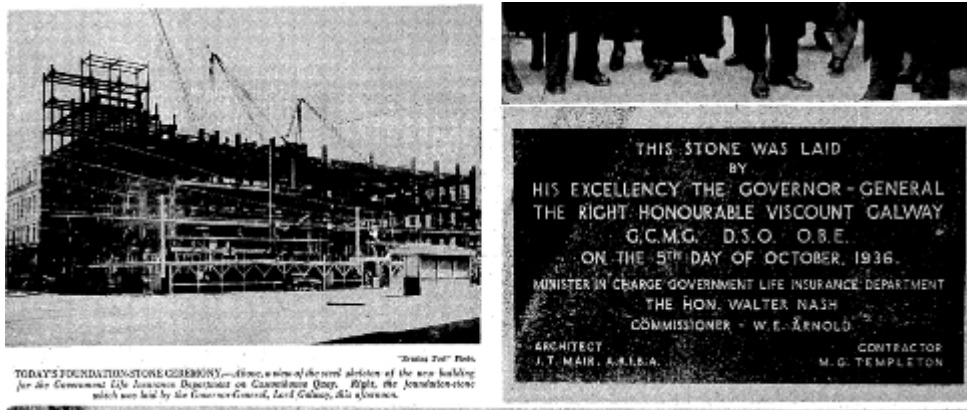
c.1930 The former Government Life Insurance building (1893) before demolition.⁸



1934 Proposal for the new Government Life building⁹

⁸ Government Life Insurance, Government Departments in Wellington. Negatives of the Evening Post newspaper. Ref: EP-0391-1/2-G. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. <http://natlib.govt.nz/records/23164919>; *Evening Post*, 20 May 1931, Page 7

⁹ *Evening Post*, 22 June 1934, Page 7



1936 Laying the foundation stone¹⁰



1940 Post Office (left), Government Life Building (middle right).¹¹

¹⁰ *Evening Post*, 5 October 1936, Page 7

¹¹ Customhouse Quay, Wellington. Deste, Eileen, 1908-1986: Collection of prints and negatives. Ref: 1/2-004264-F. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. <http://natlib.govt.nz/records/22740368>

1.2 Timeline of modifications (external only)

c.1949	Rooftop addition
c.1959	Rooftop addition
c.1965	Rooftop addition ¹²
1980	Alterations to roof boiler house 00058:1256:C53360
1986	New canopy 00059:49:D4943
2000	New entrance and substation 00078:547:70128 & 70279
2004	Ground floor access to tenancy SR105967
c.2005-2011	Major internal fit-out, various SR numbers
c.2006	Proposal for 4 No. additional floors at roof level and a new mezzanine parking floor
2013	Proposal to remove verandah/canopy SR286581

1.3 Architect

Government Architect – John Thomas Mair

The colonial government established the office of the Superintendent of Public Works in 1840 and a Colonial Architect's office in 1869.¹³ The position of Government Architect was established in 1909 and the first incumbent was John Campbell who had earlier held the position of draughtsman in charge of the Public Buildings Division of the Public Works Department. Although the government had previously commissioned private architects to design many public buildings, this became the norm after 1988 when the position of Government Architect was disestablished.¹⁴

John Thomas Mair (1876–1959)¹⁵ was appointed Government Architect on the retirement of John Campbell and served as Government Architect from 1923- 1942. Key works designed in the office during his term include: -

- Rotorua's Blue Baths (1929) Spanish mission style
- Napier post office (1930)
- Hamilton Courthouse (1931)
- Post office on High Street, Christchurch (1932)
- Post office Cambridge Terrace, Wellington (1932)
- Departmental Building in Stout Street, Wellington (1937).
- Ashburton Courthouse (1938)
- Blenheim Courthouse (1939)
- Tauranga post office (1938)
- Lower Hutt post office (1943).

¹² City Engineer, memo for the Town Clerk 3 October 1963 re: proposed rooftop addition to the Government Life Building

¹³ Ben Schrader. 'Public buildings - State-sector buildings', Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand, updated 29-May-12 URL: <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/public-buildings/2>

¹⁴ Ben Schrader. 'Public buildings - State-sector buildings', Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand, updated 29-May-12 URL: <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/public-buildings/2>

¹⁵ Peter Shaw, 'Mair, John Thomas - Biography', from the Dictionary of New Zealand Biography. Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand, updated 1-Sep-10 URL: <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/biographies/4m31/1>

2.0 Physical description

2.1 Architecture

Built during the Depression, this massive building has three street frontages and rises to a total height of 41 metres. Ernst Plischke described it as ‘distinctly functional and modern, but does not ignore tradition entirely, and shows that a building can be modern without being in the least bit bizarre...’¹⁶ The plain design of the building reflects the economic conditions of the time although it remains something of a mixture of parts. The Sullivan-esque device of designing a building as base, shaft and cap is evident here in an understated way, with divisions being marked out with simplified cornices. In fact, this is a Stripped Classical building in which the vertical divisions of the façade - the pattern of windows and piers - mark out a kind of visual tempo that is classical in origin.

The main entrance is more traditional, taking the form of a recessed portico, with attached, fluted columns framing the door jambs and set into a polished granite surround. Inside, the peculiar geometry of Art Deco has been adopted as a decorative motif. Also of interest are the copper spandrels and oriel windows on the corner of the lighthouse tower on the roof. This departmental symbol had projecting wings of plate glass around the lantern to reflect the sun.

2.2 Materials

Steel frame structure

2.3 Setting

The Post Office Square heritage area is a significant and popular urban open space of over 100 years standing surrounded by a group of important former harbour board and commercial buildings. The area is named for the former General Post Office (GPO), which occupied the site of the present-day Hotel Intercontinental and IBM Tower on Customhouse Quay from 1863 to 1974.

The heritage area is not really a square in the conventional sense but it is an open, definable space at the confluence of a number of important streets, and is closely related to the establishment and use of the waterfront by the former Wellington Harbour Board (WHB). In particular, the square was, and is, the key point of access to Queens Wharf, Wellington’s most historically important wharf.

The square was created partly by 19th century additions to the original 1857-63 reclamation which gave room to construct buildings on the eastern side of the square and accommodate traffic and even, for a period, a railway. A statue of Queen Victoria was placed there in 1906 (and later removed in 1911), while the island was formed in 1912 to accommodate the tram shelter that later became Clarrie Gibbons. The island has grown considerably in extent since then. With a couple of notable exceptions, the square has undergone only incremental change since the early 20th century and, as a result, it has maintained its basic configuration and essential characteristics. It is, despite the presence of modern buildings on the edges, still recognisably the same place it was 100 years ago.

Post Office Square is a place of high heritage value and importance to Wellington and contains a number of significant heritage buildings. It is a place very familiar to many Wellingtonians and is passed daily by thousands of people, in cars or on foot.

¹⁶ Quoted in Gardyne, Stuart, 1981. *Wellington Between the Wars*. VUW Thesis. 141

The Post Office Square heritage area is principally an open space defined by a number of significant heritage buildings. The area includes all the buildings bounding the square – on Grey Street and Customhouse and Jervois Quays, as well as Sheds 11 and 13 to the immediate north and the nearby Wharf Offices and Bond Store buildings. The boundary follows the property lines of the key buildings surrounding the square and extends across Jervois Quay to pick up the four former WHB buildings. With one exception, all the buildings within the area boundary contribute to the formation and qualities of the square.

Buildings

- Wharf Offices (Shed 7 / Wharf Office Apartments, 1896)
- Head Office and Bond Store (Museum of Wellington - City and Sea, 1891-92)
- Shed 11 (1904-05)
- Shed 13 (1904-05)
- Clarrie Gibbons Store (and traffic island, 1912)
- Huddart Parker Building, 2-6 Jervois Quay (1924)
- Tower Building, 50 – 64 Customhouse Quay (1936)
- Intercontinental Hotel, 2 Grey Street (1988)
- Todd Corporation Building, 95 Customhouse Quay, (1987)
- Chapman Tripp Building, 1-13 Grey Street (1976)

With the exception of the latter two, these are all buildings of high heritage significance.

There are a number of other features within the square and on its margins that can be considered part of the heritage area, many of which contribute to its values, including the Queens Wharf gates (1899), a heritage telephone box (c.1938) and a heritage postal box (dating from between 1879 and 1910).¹⁷

¹⁷ Kelly et al, 'WCC Post Office Square Heritage Area' unpublished WCC heritage area report for DPC 48 (2006)

3.0 Sources

City Engineer, memo for the Town Clerk 3 October 1963 re: proposed rooftop addition to the Government Life Building

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Evening Post, 20 May 1931, Page 7

Evening Post, 22 June 1934, Page 7

Evening Post, 5 October 1936, Page 7

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WCC Heritage Building Inventory 2001 ref CUST1

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 former Government Life Building is a product of the 1930s transitional period in architectural styles from Classicism to Modernism. It is a very good example of the work of the Government Architect's office and is notable for its well-proportioned facades, for the quality of its design, materials and workmanship, and for its restrained palette of details and ornamentation. The interior retains some significant interior features, including stairwells, foyers and halls.

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 building has townscape value as a dominant presence on Customhouse Quay and is highly visible in views from Oriental Bay.

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 former Government Life Building is one of a group of heritage buildings that together form the Post Office Square Heritage Area.

Historic Value:

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

The building has historic value for its association with Government Life, an insurance provider that was created as a state-run alternative to private insurance providers, and the site was occupied by the insurer from the 1870s. The present building has an historic association with Government Life from 1938 and was the national headquarters for its successor, the Tower Corporation, until c.2005.

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

Scientific Value:

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

Pre 1900 reclaimed land; Central City NZAA R27/270

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

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

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 building has had few intrusive external alterations and additions over the past 70 years and contributes to the identity and sense of place of the Post Office Square Heritage Area

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?*

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

The building is a particularly good example of the work of the Government Architect's office in the 1930s.

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 building exterior retains much of its original 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 building is important on a regional level for its contribution to the Post Office Square Heritage Area streetscape.

4.0 Appendix

Research checklist (desktop)

Source	Y/N	Comments
1995 Heritage Inventory		
2001 Non-Residential heritage Inventory	Y	
WCC Records – building file	Y	
WCC Records – grant files (earthquake strengthening, enhancement of heritage values)	Y	
Research notes from 2001 Non-Residential heritage Inventory	none	
Plan change?		
Heritage Area Report	Y	
Heritage Area Spreadsheet		
Heritage items folder (electronic)	Y	
HPT website	y	
HPT files	y	
Conservation Plan	none	
Searched Heritage Library (CAB 2)	none	

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*