

Dominion Farmers' Institute (Former)

110-114 Featherston Street



Seabridge House, the former Dominion Farmer's Institute Building, 110-114 Featherston Street, Wellington

(Photo: *Charles Collins, 2015*)

Summary of heritage significance

- The former Dominion Farmers' Institute is a work of one of New Zealand's most important architectural firms, Collins and Harmon (formerly Armson, Collins and Harmon). The building is a fine example of Gothic Revival architecture, and had significant aesthetic value.
- The building has historical value as a symbol of agriculture's importance to the country. Built to house farming representatives in the capital city, it was an important statement about farmers' intent to gain political attention. Seabridge House is also important for having housed the Reserve Bank from 1935-1972.
- The building is a well known landmark in the Featherston Street streetscape, and is highly visible to traffic travelling south into the city. Its location on a prominent corner site, and its vertical proportions and tower, make it a local landmark.

District Plan:	Map 17, reference 116 <i>Featherstone Street and Ballance Street facades, the corner entrance lobby and the two entry doors</i>
Legal Description:	Lots 1, 2, 4 DP 3373, Subdivisions 1, 2 Section 3 BLK IV Thorndon Reclamation
Heritage Area:	No WCC but see NZHPT registration
HPT Listed:	Category II, register no. reference 1359 HZHPT Government Centre Historic Area
Archaeological Site:	Central City NZAA R27/270, pre-1900 reclaimed land
Other Names:	Dominion Farmer's Institute Building Seabridge House
Key physical dates:	1918-1920: Construction
Architect / Builder:	Collins and Harman / Fletcher Brothers
Former uses:	Retail and commercial: office buildings
Current uses:	Retail and commercial: office buildings
Earthquake Prone Status:	Not Earthquake Prone (SR 188271)

Extent: Cityview GIS 2013



1.0 Outline History

1.1 History

The Dominion Farmer's Institute was formed during World War I as an attempt to co-ordinate and focus the various farming organisations in New Zealand and improve primary production. Led by farmer's co-operative leader, Leigh Hunt, also a real estate agent and valuer, the institute was formed with a capital of £75,000, all subscribed by farmers.¹

One of the first things that the institute did was to plan an organisational headquarters in Wellington, with offices, showrooms and a hotel for farmers. Land was bought with frontages on three streets – Featherston, Ballance and Maginnity Streets. Three sections were involved, occupied by a coal and wool yard, a hide and skin store, and a timber yard.

The architects were Christchurch neo-Gothic specialists Collins and Harman. The permit was granted for the building's foundations in June 1917, at an estimated cost of £7470. The contractors were Fletcher Brothers, later Fletcher Construction, in what was one of their first successful Wellington tenders. They also secured the main contract, the permit for which was granted in January 1918.

Work was not completed until 1920. Hunt's vision of a farmer's hotel on the top three floors never transpired – the space was initially needed for offices and wool storage and the idea was never revived. Some of the associated producer organisations moved out because of space constraints. In 1929 the building was extended to the south by Collins and West (successors to Collins and Harman). In 1935 the newly constituted Reserve Bank took space on the ground floor, while another tenant was the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries.

Some of the building's ornamentation was removed after the 1942 earthquake and there was major refurbishment in 1964 and again in 1968. In 1984 the building was completely refurbished, with the main entrance vestibule retained, and the 1929 addition was removed and replaced with a new building. The architects were Peddle, Thorp and Maidens. The building was also once called Seabridge House, for its tenants, the New Zealand arm of a consortium of European shipping companies (no longer trading).

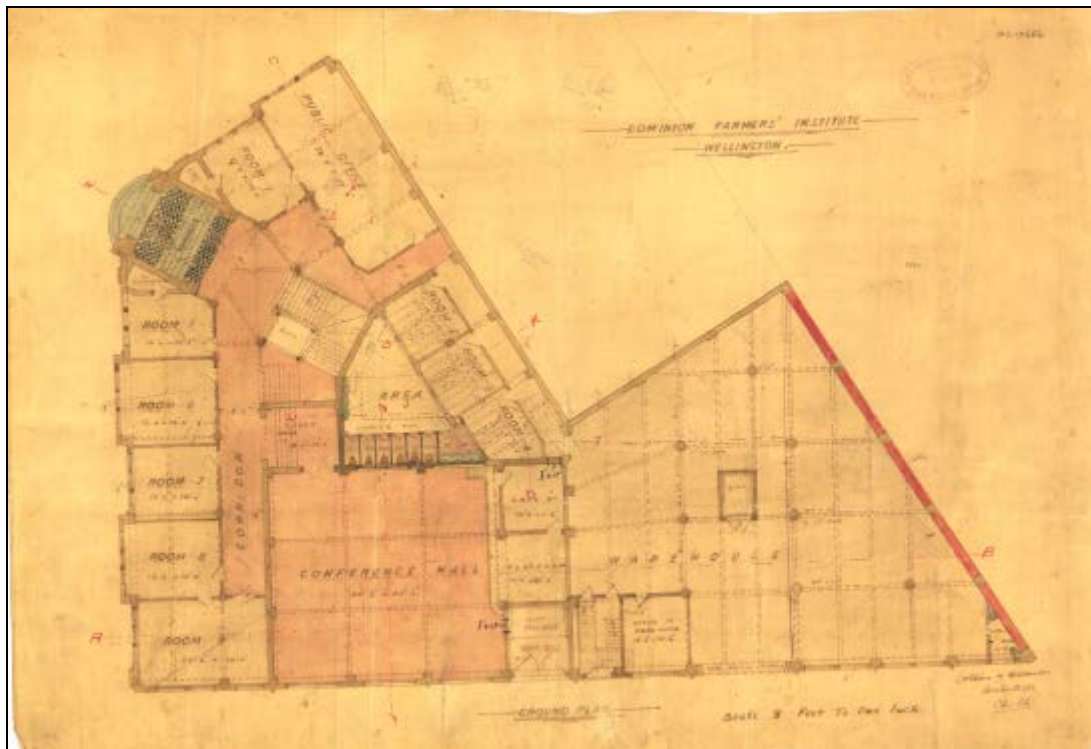
The former Dominion Farmers' Institute is a building with multifaceted heritage value. Firstly, there is the historical value in its reason for being: to provide farmers with a unified voice and presence in the capital. The construction of a major commercial building so close to Parliament signalled farmers' intent on becoming a political force. Secondly, the building's historical value extends to being the first residence of New Zealand's Reserve Bank. Finally, there is the architectural and aesthetic value of the building. Designed by the firm Collins and Harmon, it is a work of one of New Zealand's most important firms. The building is a fine example of Gothic Revival, and provides visual interest in a stretch of the city that lacks it.

¹ This report is an updated version of the WCC Heritage Building Inventory 2001 ref FEAT1

1.2 Timeline of modifications



Dominion Farmers' Institute, Front Elevation as proposed. WCC Archive File 00053:194:10666



Dominion Farmers' Institute, Front Elevation as proposed. WCC Archive File 00053:194:10666

Construction

1929	Extension to the south
1942	Partial removal of ornamentation
1964	Major refurbishments
1968	Further refurbishments
1984	Complete refurbishment. 1929 southern extension removed, replaced with a new building

1.3 Occupation history

1920	The Dominion Farmer's Institute
1933-?	Department of Agriculture and Fisheries
1935-1972	The Reserve Bank

1.4 Architect

From the New Zealand Historic Places Trust entry on Collins and Harmon²:

One of the two oldest architectural firms in New Zealand, Armson, Collins and Harman was established by William Barnett Armson in 1870. After serving his articles with Armson, John James Collins (1855-1933) purchased the practice after the former's death in 1883 and subsequently took Richard Dacre Harman (1859-1927) into partnership four years later. Collins' son, John Goddard Collins (1886-1973), joined the firm in 1903. Armson, Collins and Harman was one of Christchurch's leading architectural practices in the early years of this century. Notable examples of the firm's work include the Christchurch Press Building (1909), Nazareth House (1909), the former Canterbury College Students Union (1927), the Nurses Memorial Chapel at Christchurch Public Hospital (1927) and the Sign of the Takahe (1936). Their domestic work includes Blue Cliffs Station Homestead (1889) and Meadowbank Homestead, Irwell. In 1928 the firm's name was simplified to Collins and Harman and the firm continues today as Collins Architects Ltd. With a versatility and competence that betrayed the practice's debt to Armson's skill and professionalism, Collins and Harman designed a wide variety of building types in a range of styles.

² Information taken from NZHPT, 'Collins and Harmon – Architectural Partnership', accessed July 2013, at [http://www.historic.org.nz/corporate/registersearch/ProfessionalBio/Professional.aspx?CPName=Collins+ amp +Harman](http://www.historic.org.nz/corporate/registersearch/ProfessionalBio/Professional.aspx?CPName=Collins+amp+Harman)

2.0 Physical description

2.1 Architecture

The farmers' co-operative leader, Leigh Hunt, laid down the brief for the (former) Dominion Farmers' Building; he wanted 'a proven structure of distinctive architecture, owned and controlled by farmers, and housing all their city activities'.³ What he got was a very late (1917) essay in what is essentially high-Victorian Gothic Revival architecture, constructed in reinforced concrete. Despite the stripping of ornament from the building, notably the pinnacles on the roof line and moulding from the tower, the exterior remains reasonably intact. The archaism and deliberate conservatism of the building's architectural style is presumably an accurate reflection of the image they wished to project at national level. At any rate, this reinforced concrete building is quite a mixture of parts, stylistically, although it carries off its eclecticism with an airiness and refinement of structure that remains impressive.⁴

The slender piers of the facade form a sequence of shallow bays capped by Gothic gables. The central tower element is the outstanding feature of the building, with its oriel windows, Gothic arch at sixth-floor level, and main doors that are reputedly based on 13th century Welsh chapel doors. The structural refinement of the facade, a direct consequence of reinforced concrete construction techniques, brings to mind (but does not directly allude to) the slender verticals of the English Gothic tradition, again emphasising the eclecticism of the building.

The interior, following extensive renovations, has no authentic integrity apart from the entrance vestibule.⁵

The building has some technological value that dates from its adaptation for use as the Reserve Bank in 1935. Arthur Leigh Hunt's *Confessions of a Leigh Hunt* comments on the security considerations of the Reserve Bank before it moved into the (then) Dominion Farmer's Institute Building and provides some curious insight about the bank's procedures. It also comments on the building's location on reclaimed land.⁶

2.2 Materials

Reinforced concrete

2.3 Setting

The Former Dominion Farmers' Building occupies a prominent city corner in Wellington's central business district. The building has a principal facade to both Ballance and Featherston streets, and a lesser, secondary, facade to Maginnity Street. It looms large and impressive as one travels south down the key transport route of Featherston Street, and is a welcome foil to the monotonous row of bland modern office buildings that predominate the nearby streetscape.

³ Gavin McLean, *Historic Wellington Walking Tour*, (Auckland: Reed Books, 1998)

⁴ NZHPT, C & D Listed Buildings, 1993

⁵ NZHPT, Heritage Building Interiors Project: Seabridge House, 1997

⁶ Arthur Leigh Hunt's *Confessions of a Leigh Hunt* (A.H. & A.W. Reed, 1951), pp 85-87 for details.

The Former Dominion Farmers' Building lies just outside the boundary of the Stout Street Heritage Area and is also close to the Parliamentary Precinct Heritage Area; and this is a part of the city that is particularly rich in heritage buildings. What sets Seabridge House apart is its dedicated commercial purpose, when compared with the government, university and court precincts nearby. Other heritage commercial buildings on Featherston Street include the former NZI building at No.131-133 (WCC 17/117), Riddiford House at No. 150 – 152 (WCC17/118) and the former Murray, Roberts and Co. Ltd building on the corner of Johnston and Featherston Streets (WCC 17/162)

3.0 Sources

Permit OC 10522. Foundation of building for Dominion Farmer's Institute, WCC Archives

Kernohan D. and Kellaway T. *Wellington's Old Buildings*. Wellington: VUW Press, 1994

Leigh Hunt, Arthur. *Confessions of a Leigh Hunt*. A.H. & A.W. Reed, 1951.

McLean, Gavin. *Historic Wellington Walking Tour*. Auckland: Reed Books, 1998

New Zealand Historic Places Trust. 'C & D Listed Buildings'. 1993

Wellington City Council. File: District Plan: Heritage Building – 100-114 Featherston Street – Seabridge House (Former Dominion Farmers' Building). File Number 1041-06-FEA110 Vol.1.

_____. Heritage Building Interiors Project: Seabridge House. 1997

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 Dominion Farmers' Institute is a fine example of an early 20th century commercial building that was built in a Gothic Revivalist style. It makes full use of the structural possibilities of reinforced concrete for the interpretation of Gothic forms and is the work of one of the oldest most and important architectural practices in New Zealand, at that time known as Collins and Harman.

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 is a well known landmark in the Featherston Street streetscape, and is highly visible to traffic travelling south into the city. Its location on a prominent corner site, and its vertical proportions and tower, make it a strong focal point.

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?*

Historic Value:

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

With the formation of the Dominion Farmer's Institute, farming organisations had a co-ordinated voice, and the construction of a major commercial building in central Wellington was a potent symbol of their ambitions. The high historic value of the building derives principally from its construction and occupation by the Institute, further enhanced by later tenants, the Reserve bank in particular.

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?*

The building is located in the Central City archaeological site reference 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?*

The building has some technological value for its adaptation for use the Reserve Bank in 1935.

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 former Dominion Farmers' Institute contributes a sense of continuity to Wellington's central business district.

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

The former Dominion Farmers' Institute is a focus of connection for the many that have worked or conducted business there, including New Zealand's farmers, for whom it was built. Also, there is some novelty for those Wellingtonians who know the building for the full-size moa model that once occupied its foyer.

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?*

Seabridge House is a good example of Gothic Revival architecture.

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?*

Though several features of the building's exterior have been removed over the years, it still retains a high level of authenticity. The interior's numerous refurbishments means it has a very low authenticity factor.

Local/Regional/National/International

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

The former Dominion Farmers' Institute is primarily important at a local/regional level, but does possess some national importance as the home of farming interests from around New Zealand in Wellington.

4.0 Appendix

Research checklist (desktop)

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