

Cathedral of the Sacred Heart

40 Hill Street, Thorndon



Cathedral of the Sacred Heart (Basilica) (*Charles Collins, 2015*)

Summary of heritage significance

- The Cathedral of the Sacred Heart has architectural and aesthetic significance as one of the city and country's finest examples of the basilica style.
- The Cathedral is an outstanding work of the architect, Francis Petre, and is his only major work in the North Island.
- The Cathedral occupies a prominent site in Thorndon, elevated on a hill opposite Parliament grounds, and is a landmark for the area.
- The building holds historical significance for Wellington's Catholic community. The Catholic Church has occupied the site since its arrival in Wellington in the 1850s, and has been the hub of the Wellington Catholic community ever since.

District Plan:	Map 18, reference 146
Legal Description:	Pt Lot 3 DP 10013
Heritage Area:	No
HPT Listed:	Category 1, Register number 214
Archaeological Site:	Pre 1900 building Central City NZAA R27/270
Other Names:	Basilica of the Sacred Heart
Key physical dates:	Constructed 1899-1901
Architect / Builder:	Francis William Petre
Former uses:	Church
Current uses:	Church
Earthquake Prone Status:	Building Strength Inventory Status 'Not Earthquake Prone' (SR 164211)

Extent: Cityview GIS 2013



1.0 Outline History

1.1 History

The general area on the north side of Hill Street has been associated with the Catholic Church from 1850 when Bishop Viard, of the Marist fathers, took possession of land here. The first Catholic Church, St Mary's Cathedral, was completed in 1867 and was regarded as one of the most beautiful in the colony. The Cathedral was central to a group of buildings that included a convent, three schools, a bishop's residence and a large church hall.

St Mary's burned down in 1898. Planning began immediately for a new church and Francis William Petre, the most prominent Catholic architect of the day, was asked to produce designs.¹ It has been suggested that a more modest parish church was proposed for this site and the new cathedral was destined for the centre of town near St Patrick's College, Cambridge Terrace² (hence the decision to opt for a basilica design). The foundation stone was laid by Archbishop Redwood on 16 July 1899 and the building was completed in 1901. The chief contractor was J. Small of Dunedin.³ The pressed metal ceiling was manufactured by Wunderlich.⁴ Bishop Viard's tomb in the old St Mary's (he died in 1872) was incorporated in the new church. The bell-towers, only one of which had a bell, were added a couple of years later.

In 1935 administration of the parish by the Marist fathers ended. The 1942 earthquake required the removal of the twin towers and the bell was hung on a frame alongside the church. It has since been put back on the south tower. Ernst Plischke designed a new altar and redecorated the interior in the 1950s. In the late 1960s plans were mooted to completely redevelop the church's Hill Street property, including building a new church.⁵ The plans were never pursued.

The church was elevated to cathedral status in 1984 by Cardinal Williams. In 1987 work began on the biggest changes to the church. The north facade was opened out and a large foyer, reception area, sacristy, and, upstairs, whispering gallery, were built. The rear of the church was raised to allow congregation a better view of proceedings. The 1980s also saw the church undergo extensive refurbishment and strengthening. The chancel was substantially altered in line with Vatican II precepts and this work was completed by 1990.

A condition assessment in 2010 by Salmond Reed architects found the exterior to be in good condition.⁶

¹ Francis Petre was the son of the Hon. Henry Petre, a founder of Wellington. Henry Petre and was one of the original donors of the land that the church would be built on.

² M. Kelly, "The Story of the Basilica is part of City's History", in *Evening Post* 26/9/1970, and booklet, Sacred Heart Parish, Wellington 125th anniversary, November 1975.

³ *New Zealand Mail* 9/11/1899

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Evening Post* n.d. 1962

⁶ Salmond Reed Architects Ltd, 'Sacred Heart Cathedral: Hill Street, Wellington – Exterior Condition Assessment Report', June 2010, p 15

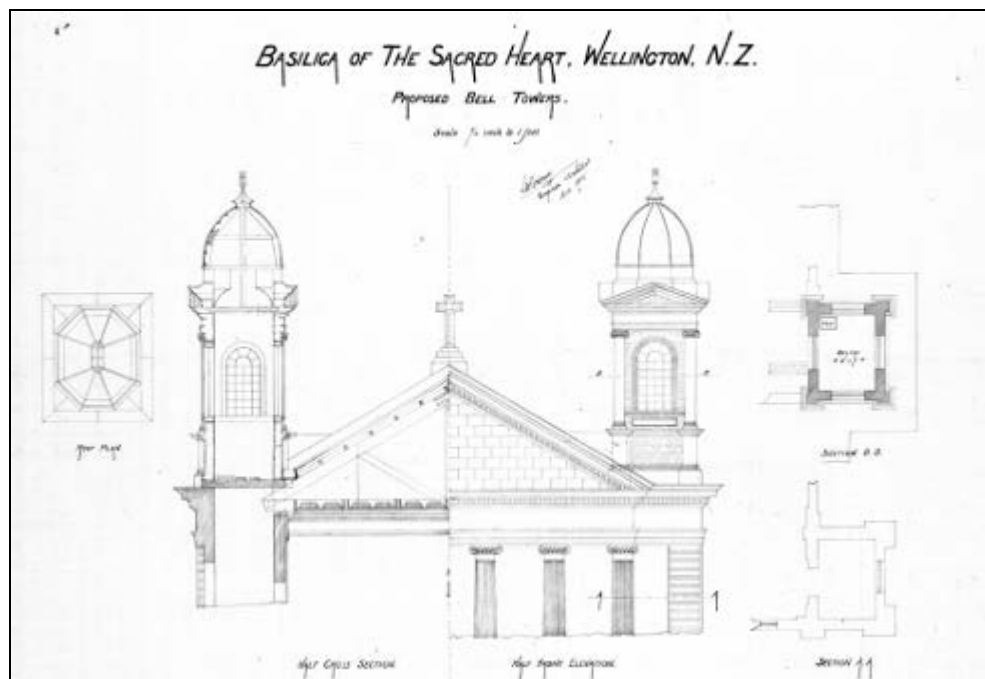
The Catholic Church precinct at Hill Street

The main heritage value of the Cathedral of the Sacred Heart comes from its central importance to the Catholic Church in Wellington. The Catholic Church has been associated with the northern side of Hill Street since the 1850s.

The Cathedral has high social value for its continuing role as the central hub to the large complex of buildings owned by the Catholic Church. The Cathedral Precinct is a large inner-city site that covers approximately 4099m² (just over 0.4 hectares). Remaining Catholic Church associated entities in this Precinct include Connolly Hall, Sacred Heart Cathedral School (founded 1892), Saint Mary's College (founded in 1850), and Saint Mary's Convent. The two schools were once superintended, and partly staffed, by the Sisters of Mercy nuns who lived at the nearby St Mary's convent.⁷ The Sacred Heart Cathedral School once served as the parish church when the original church burned down in 1898.

The Cathedral has a historic association with buildings and institutions that were once located in the Cathedral Precinct but have since been demolished. These include Viard House, which housed the eponymous bishop; a clergy house for the Marist Brothers; and a Marist Brothers School. This school was demolished to make way for the motorway in the c.1970s.⁸ Next to the Cathedral, where the British high commission is now, used to be St Francis Hall, the scene of many of the church's social events.

The Cathedral's influence spreads beyond its immediate vicinity too: it is the Mother Church of the Archdiocese of Wellington and New Zealand (with the exception of Auckland).



c.1899 Part elevation as proposed. WCC file 00053:130:7268

⁷ Sister M de Porres, RSM, 'Mercy Comes to Wellington: A History of St Mary's College', Wellington: Sisters of Mercy, 2000.

⁸ Dan Kelly, *On Golder's Hill: A History of the Thorndon Parish*, Wellington: circa 2001, p 64



Basilica of the Sacred Heart, c. 1910 (Photo: Wikimedia Commons)



c. 1910 Sacred Heart interior, (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

1.2 Timeline of modifications

1899-1901	Construction
1942	Demolition of the twin bell-towers due to earthquake damage; the bell was hung, temporarily, on a frame alongside the church, but has since been returned to the south tower.
1950s	New altar and interior redecoration
1987-1990	The north facade was opened out and a large foyer, reception area, sacristy and, upstairs, a whispering gallery were built. The rear of the church was raised to improve sight-lines and seismic strengthening work commenced.
1998-99	Conservation repairs.

1.3 Architect

Francis William Petre, 1847-1918⁹

Petre was born in Lower Hutt. He was the son of the Hon. Henry William Petre and grandson of the eleventh Baron Petre, Chairman of the second New Zealand Company. Petre trained in London as a naval architect, engineer and architect, returning to New Zealand in 1872. During the next three years he was employed by Brogden and Sons, English railway contractors, superintending the construction of the Dunedin-Clutha and the Blenheim-Picton railways.

He set up office in Dunedin in 1875 as an architect and civil engineer. He designed a house for Judge Chapman (1875), followed by “Cargill’s Castle” (1876) for E. B. Cargill, and then St Dominic’s Priory (1877), all constructed in mass concrete. On this note, the New Zealand Historic Places Trust writes that ‘[Petre’s] frequent use of concrete at a time when masonry was the standard building material, earned him the nickname ‘Lord Concrete’.¹⁰

Petre is best known for his Basilica church designs, and for his pioneering use of concrete in these buildings. His church buildings include St Joseph’s Cathedral, Dunedin (1878-86); Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament, Christchurch, (1904-05) – now partly demolished; Sacred Heart Basilica (now Cathedral of the Sacred Heart), Wellington (1901); and St Patrick’s Basilica, Oamaru, (1894 and 1903). Petre’s commercial buildings include the Guardian Royal Exchange Assurance Building (1882-82) and Phoenix House (now Airport House, c.1885), both in Dunedin.

2.0 Physical description

2.1 Architecture

The church is unusual in that it is one of the few in New Zealand built to a traditional basilica plan.¹¹ The basilica form – a standard church design based on Roman Public Buildings, which takes the form of a clerestoried nave flanked by two or more lean-to aisles and an apse at the end of the nave – was used as the Classical imagery was thought appropriate to the expression of the Catholic Church’s Roman origins.

⁹ Updated version of the WCC Heritage Building Inventory 2001 Appendix III

¹⁰ NZHPT WRC Files, in District Plan: Heritage Building – 40 Hill Street – Cathedral of the Sacred Heart, WCC File No. 1041-06-HIL

¹¹ Ibid.

Furthermore, a Gothic-style alternative was deemed unsuitable as being both more costly, and having a longer nave unsuited to Catholic liturgical requirements.¹²

The Cathedral has a fine interior which demonstrates a subtle balance of monumental forms with restrained classical detailing. The high central nave is supported by arcading rather than the traditional colonnades. The sanctuary is framed by Palladian window openings. The altar painting is in a small barrel vault supported by Ionic columns. An arch further forward in the chancel cleverly creates the illusion of depth.¹³

The exterior of brick, with Oamaru stone facing, is equally impressive. The portico is as pure a piece of Classical design as can be found in the city. Six columns form a giant Ionic order which support a classical entablature of architrave, frieze and cornice, capped by a fine triangular pediment. The frieze has the words inscribed: "SS. CORDI JESU DEDICATUM. A.D. MCM I" (dedicated to the most Sacred Heart of Jesus, AD 1901). Two flanking "wings" on either side of the portico are rusticated and once supported twin bell-towers. The Hill Street side has two well proportioned banks of windows set into wide round arches.

In the 1950s Ernst Plischke was responsible for the redecoration of the interior and the design of a new altar in the manner of the original. Michael Fowler was responsible for the redecoration of the exterior in the 1970s.¹⁴

2.2 Materials

- Brick exterior cladding
- Oamaru stone facing and Ionic columns. A considerable amount of stone was replaced in 1999 and other areas patched.
- Concrete 'core'. The concrete is described as 'no fines', meaning there is little sand in the mix. The core was constructed by pouring layers of the concrete between the interior and exterior walls.
- Ceiling of pressed zinc

2.3 Setting

The Cathedral shares its immediate site with Connolly Hall and Sacred Heart School. These buildings, as well as St Mary's Convent and St Mary's College, form a large Catholic complex running between Hill and Hawkestone streets. The heritage value in this complex alone is significant.

The Cathedral is located in the heart of the high-value Thorndon heritage area; the parliamentary complex is across the road, and the former Government Buildings (now, Victoria University Law School), the Wellington Railway Station, and Old St Pauls are all in close proximity. Still, with its site on the hill and bold architecture, the Cathedral stands out. The Cathedral is a landmark in the area, and provides a clear contrast to the Gothic Revival General Assembly Library and Edwardian Baroque Parliament Buildings.

¹² Peter Shaw, *New Zealand Architecture*, 1991, p. 74-75.

¹³ *Ibid*, p.74.

¹⁴ NZHPT WRC Files, in District Plan: Heritage Building – 40 Hill Street – Cathedral of the Sacred Heart, WCC File No. 1041-06-HIL

3.0 Sources

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Phillips, Jock. 'Irish - The Catholic Church'. Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand. Updated 21 September 2012.
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WCC archives – 00053:53:3370; 00053:130:7268.

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 building is a fine example of a Basilica, designed by one of New Zealand's leading architects at the time, Francis Petre. The building is notable as the only major example of his work in the North Island, and for the quality of its design, workmanship and materials.

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 considerable townscape value and is a major landmark in the Thorndon area.

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 Cathedral is part of a group of buildings in its immediate proximity that made up a considerable Catholic enclave in its time. Today the grouping still remains, though not in as greater numbers as it once did.

Historic Value:

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

The building is strongly, and primarily, associated with the Catholic Church.

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

The building is located on a site that has had an association with the Catholic Church for over 160 years. This Cathedral was constructed in 1901 and has a strong historic association with Catholic worship, and to a degree, Catholic education, and with the development of early Thorndon.

Scientific Value:

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

The building may be deemed to be part of an archaeological site under the Historic Places Act (1993) due to the presence of pre 1900 buildings.

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?*

There is some technological value in its use of concrete as the major building material at a time when stone masonry was the norm.

Social Value:

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

The building is held in high esteem by the local Catholic, and architectural, communities.

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?*

The building has considerable value for religious, community, and historical reasons. That the Catholic Church has been associated with the site since the 1850s is a strong factor in this.

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 Cathedral is a source of identity for Thorndon's Catholic community, as they have continually used the church and the site for their place of worship for over a century. The building has had few intrusive modern alterations or additions (with the notable exception of the loss of the bell-towers) and contributes to the sense of place and continuity of Thorndon.

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

The cathedral has been the site of traditional social ceremonies associated with the key events in the lives of its congregation. It will therefore form the focus of community sentiment and connection for many of its parishioners, and their friends and family.

Level of cultural heritage significance

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

The building is rare in that it is one of the few true basilica style churches in New Zealand.

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

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 has retained authenticity in its 100 plus years of existence. Significant efforts have been undertaken in maintaining this.

Local/Regional/National/International

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

The Cathedral is important at a local, regional, and to a lesser degree, national, level as the Mother Church of the Archdiocese of Wellington and New Zealand, and is part of the Wellington Central Pastoral Area.

4.0 Appendix

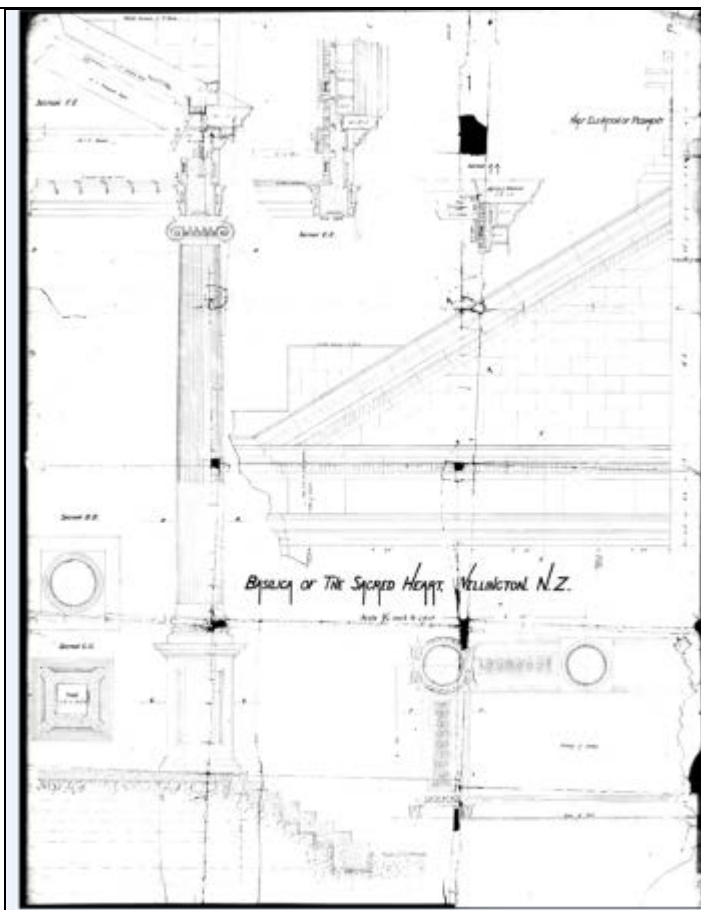
Research checklist (desktop)

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)		
Research notes from 2001 Non-Residential heritage Inventory		
Plan change?		
Heritage Area Report		
Heritage Area Spreadsheet	Y	
Heritage items folder (electronic)		
HPT website	Y	
HPT files	Y	
Conservation Plan	Y	
Searched Heritage Library (CAB 2)		

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*



WCC file 00053:53:3370