

## Former Murray, Roberts & Co. Building

135 Featherston Street



(Image: *Charles Collins, 2015*)

### Summary of heritage significance

- The former Murray, Roberts & Co. Building is a fine example of a Victorian commercial premises/warehouse built in a distinguished commercial Classical style. It is particularly notable for its elegant proportions and its restrained palette of Classical ornamentation and detailing.
- The building has townscape value for its prominent corner site at the intersection of Johnston and Featherston Streets, and can be seen from a distance especially south along Featherston Street and east along Johnston Street to the wharves. It provides visual interest to the streetscape, especially in contrast to the modern high-rise buildings erected in close proximity to it.
- The building is historically significant for its association with Murray, Roberts & Co Ltd, a rural merchants firm that was important in developing New Zealand's rural economy.

District Plan:	Map 17, reference 162
Legal Description:	LOT 1 DP 10768
Heritage Area:	No
HPT Listed:	No
Archaeological Site:	Central City NZAA R27/270, pre 1900 reclaimed land
Other Names:	National Chambers 15 Johnston Street
Key physical dates:	1907: Construction
Architect / Builder:	Penty and Blake
Former uses:	Retail and commercial: offices and warehouse
Current uses:	Hospitality: Bar and restaurant
Earthquake Prone Status:	Not EQP (SR 188273)

Extent: Cityview GIS 2013



## 1.0 Outline History

### 1.1 History

This building at 135 Featherston Street was designed and built in 1907 for Murray, Roberts and Co Ltd, a well-known New Zealand stock and station agents and general rural merchants. Murray Roberts had offices on the ground floor with warehouse space above for storing wool. It was designed by Penty and Blake and built by John Moffatt at an estimated cost of £7700.<sup>1</sup>

The Murray, Roberts Co. was founded in 1868 when John Roberts entered partnership with John Murray in Otago. Originally they operated as a fellmongers, but quickly diversified into the buying and selling of wool and also a land agency for rural properties. The firm played a valuable role in opening up the interiors of Otago and Hawke's Bay for farming and settlement. At one time Murray, Roberts & Co had an interest in over 200,000 acres of pastoral land but, by 1908, it had all been sold and the company concentrated on its commercial role in merchandising, wool broking, livestock, shipping and insurance agency, and in general servicing of its farmer clients. Later, the company acquired companies such as the Mosgiel Woollen Company, the New Zealand Refrigerating Company, Donaghy's Rope and Twine Company, the Milburn Lime and Cement Company, and the Union Steam Ship Company.<sup>2</sup>

Murray Roberts began auctioning wool, in Wellington, in 1897.<sup>3</sup> A wool store was erected on Thorndon Quay the same year as the Wellington office. Later a store was built on Waterloo Quay (1917), which remained until 1999.

In 1961 Murray, Roberts & Co was taken over by the National Mortgage and Agency Co of New Zealand Ltd and an amalgamation with Levin & Co followed in 1963. The Featherston Street building was sold to National Insurance and renamed National Chambers. Today the only reminders of the large rural sector company, Murray Roberts, are its many buildings still standing in various parts of the country.

Today the building's ground floor is occupied by the Leuven Belgian Beer Café, while a hair salon/day spa and recruitment firm fill the upper floors.

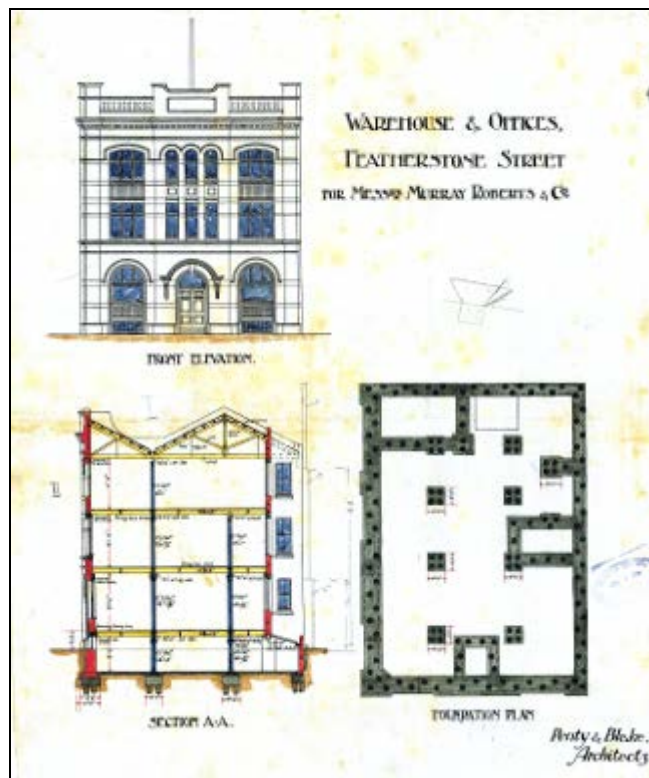
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<sup>1</sup> Permit OC 7883, Warehouse and offices for Murray Roberts and Co, WCC Archives.

<sup>2</sup> H. C. Harraway, 'John Roberts; Man of Business: an Account of John Roberts and the Establishment of Murray Roberts and Company Ltd.', M.A. Thesis (History), Otago University, 1967 p.51. (See also A. A. Roberts, c.1982, *A Family Affair: A History of Murray Roberts & Co Ltd*, Pictorial Publications Ltd, Hastings)

<sup>3</sup> H. C. Harraway, 'John Roberts; Man of Business: an Account of John Roberts and the Establishment of Murray Roberts and Company Ltd.', M.A. Thesis (History), Otago University, 1967 p.51.

## 1.2 Timeline of modifications



1907 elevation, section and foundation plan as proposed.  
WCC Archives ref 00053:142:7883 (002)



1907 plans as proposed. WCC Archives ref 00053:142:7883(001)

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1907	Construction
1942	Reinstatement (00056: 284: B22782)
1963	Building alterations (00058: 318: C13775)
1966	Building alterations (00058: 482: C20749)
1973	Alterations and partitions (00058: 853: C3031)
1983	Alteration to premises and stairs to basement (00058: 0: C63506)
1984	Alterations to staircase (00058: 0: C64147)
1984	Internal alterations – fit out coffee bar (00058: 0: C64801)
1985	Installation of steel stud partitions (00059: 0: D1102)
1989	Addition – sign (00040: 3: E681715)
1994	Hair salon alterations (00060: 116: 4203)
2000	Refurbishment of building (00078: 774: 60130)
2000	Additions and alterations, ground floor, levels 2-3 (00078: 785: 69619)
2001	Hairdressing salon – internal fitout (00078: 799: 75812)
2003	Alterations – construction of open-ended meeting room (00078: 1095: 99693)
2005	Conversion of pokie room to dining room, ground floor and basement (00078: 1514: 125177)
2005	Shop alterations (00078: 2385: 130120)
2006	Restaurant additions and alterations (00078:2122: 146448)
2006	Restaurant additions and alterations (00078: 2122: 146451)
2006	Restaurant additions and alterations (00078: 2133: 149420)
2010	Internal office fit out (00078: 3531: 213440)

### 1.3 Occupation history

1907-1960s	Murray, Roberts and Co Ltd
Current:	Leuven Belgian Beer Cafe, Pearl Hair Design & Day Spa, Absolute IT Recruitment Specialists

### 1.4 Architect

Penty and Blake

Penty and Blake was the architectural partnership of Edward McCallum Blake and Francis Penty. Francis Penty was born in Yorkshire in 1841, and enjoyed a successful career in England before moving to and settling in Wellington in 1887. Penty served as a city councillor for Wellington in the late twentieth century. Edward McCallum Blake we know less about. Penty and Blake operated in Wellington in the early twentieth century, until their partnership was dissolved in 1910 when Blake left the firm. In their relatively short run, however, they designed a number of historically significant buildings.

NZHPT Register entries for Penty & Blake include

- Carrigafoyle – 195 The Terrace (Category I)
- Early State House - 8 Patrick Street, Petone (Category II)
- Early State House – 18 Patrick Street, Petone (Category II)
- Early State House – 43 Adelaide Street, Petone (Category II)
- Hunter Building, Victoria University of Wellington (Category I)(WCC map 17 reference 171)
- James Smith's Department Store, corner 46-69 Cuba and Manners Street (Category II) (WCC map 16 reference 74/2)
- 120 – 126 Courtenay Place, Wellington (Category II) (WCC Map 16 reference 68/1)

Wellington City Council buildings listed on the Heritage Building Inventory, in addition to the National Chambers building, include:

- 1 – 5 Allen Street (map 16, reference 10/1)
- 18-24 Allen Street (map 16, reference 10/5)
- 24-26 Courtenay Place (map 16, reference 64/1)
- Reid House, corner of Cuba and Vivian Street (map 16, reference 87)
- Thistle Hall, 293 Cuba Street, (map 16, reference 94/1)

## **2.0 Physical description**

### **2.1 Architecture**

National Chambers is a three-storey building, with a fourth basement level below the street. The design is characterised by high round-headed windows with hood moulds to the ground floor, while the upper floors have alternating curved headed windows with projecting bays of narrow semi-circular headed windows. A cornice and open parapet complete the whole, making an original and interesting composition. It is a particularly good example of the work of architects Penty and Blake.

The original layout had offices on the ground floor (raised above street level by a flight of steps), with a single telephone booth and a cart dock at the end of the Johnston Street elevation. The first floor was half office space and half warehousing, while the whole of the second floor and the basement was warehouse space. A lift by the cart dock serviced all floors. Today, the building houses a mix of retail and office uses.

### **2.2 Materials**

The structure is masonry with heavy steel joist reinforcement in the lintels, and the foundations are timber piles driven into the reclaimed land and beach gravels. The floors are timber, supported on cast iron columns, while the roof is timber trusses behind a high parapet. This is typical warehouse construction for the time, a reminder that this commercial part of the city once had more utilitarian uses.

### **2.3 Setting**

Located one block from Lambton Quay, one block from the waterfront, and on the corner of the busy intersection of Johnston and Featherston streets, the National Chambers building occupies a prominent and popular position in Wellington's CBD. The building provides a welcome respite from the prevailing high rise buildings on Featherston Street – its scale, height, and pattern are a positive contrast to the monotonous modern commercial buildings nearby.

### **3.0 Sources**

A. A. Roberts. *A Family Affair: A History of Murray Roberts & Co Ltd*. Pictorial Publications Ltd: Hastings, c.1982

Harraway, H. C. 'John Roberts; Man of Business: an Account of John Roberts and the Establishment of Murray Roberts and Company Ltd.'. M.A. Thesis (History), Otago University, 1967

Permit OC 7883. Warehouse and offices for Murray Roberts and Co. WCC Archives

Wellington City Council. '15 Johnston Street – National Chambers'. *Wellington City Council Heritage Building Inventory 1999*.

\_\_\_\_\_. 'National Chambers'. *Wellington City Council Heritage Building Inventory 1995*.

WCC File 00053:142:7883

## 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 Murray, Roberts & Co. Building is a fine example of a Victorian commercial premises/warehouse built in a distinguished commercial Classical style. It is particularly notable for its elegant proportions and its restrained palette of Classical ornamentation and detailing.

**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 for its prominent corner site at the intersection of Johnston and Featherston Streets, and can be seen from a distance - especially south along Featherston Street and east along Johnston Street to the wharves. It provides visual interest to the streetscape, especially in contrast to the modern high-rise buildings erected in close proximity to it.

**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?*

This building can be considered as one of a group of commercial premises built by Murray, Roberts & Co Ltd throughout New Zealand. Another, the Allen Trading Company Building in Gisborne, is a Category 2 heritage listed building.

#### **Historic Value:**

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

This building is associated with the agricultural firm Murray, Roberts & Co Ltd, for whom the building was designed and built in 1907. The firm played an important role in New Zealand's rural sector, and this building at 162 Featherston Street is an important physical reminder of this company's presence in Wellington.

The building is also associated with National Insurance, a former occupier and for whom the building was re-named National Chambers.

**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?*

Central City NZAA R27/270 & pre 1900 reclamations

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



The building is a physical reminder of the changing uses of the central city. The original use of the building as a warehouse reminds us that the commercial part of the city once had more utilitarian uses.

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

The building has technical value for its masonry, cast iron and timber construction, and its exterior form which remains in reasonably authentic condition.

**Social Value:**

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

National Chambers is likely to be held in high esteem, mostly for its aesthetic value.

**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 contributes to a sense of identity for central city commerce. The building is now over one hundred years old, and has been used by commercial operations the entire time.

**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 good example of typical warehouse construction in Wellington around the beginning of the twentieth century.

**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's facade retains a reasonable degree of authenticity.

**Local/Regional/National/International**

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

The former Murray, Roberts & Co. Building is important at a local and national level.

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## 4.0 Appendix

### Research checklist (desktop)

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