

Parliamentary Library

Parliament Grounds, Molesworth Street



Image: *Charles Collins, 2015*

Summary of heritage significance

- The Parliamentary Library is an outstanding example of Gothic Style substantial public building. It is a major work by Thomas Turnbull, one of Wellington's most influential 19th century architects and is notable for the high quality of its design, materials and workmanship.
- This building has historic value through its association with the New Zealand Government. It has ongoing use as the working library that provides research services for members of Parliament and parliamentary staff.
- The library is the oldest building in the Parliamentary Precinct Heritage Area. The heritage area is a collection of parliamentary buildings and associated grounds and features that, together with the nearby Government Buildings, Cenotaph and Waititi Landing Park, form one of the most important historic precincts in the country.

District Plan:	Map 18, reference 215
Legal Description:	Sec 1 SO 38114
Heritage Area:	Parliamentary Precinct Heritage Area
HPT Listed:	Category 1, reference 217
Archaeological Site:	NZAA Central City R27/270
Other Names:	Parliamentary Library, General Assembly Library
Key physical dates:	Construction: 1889-1901
Architect / Builder:	Architect: Thomas Turnbull (John Campbell)
Former uses:	Civic Facilities and Recreation – Library; Government and Administration – Government Office Building
Current uses:	Civic Facilities and Recreation - Library
Earthquake Prone Status:	Unknown at time of writing

Extent: Cityview GIS



1.0 Outline History

1.1 History

As the oldest building in the Parliamentary precinct and one closely identified with the processes of parliament, the Parliamentary Library encompasses most of the historical and social values of the institution. It is an important example of Thomas Turnbull's architectural proficiency despite Turnbull's wish to disassociate his name from the building. Designed in the Gothic style to be compatible with a now lost neighbour, it is now part of a distinct but compatible trio of government buildings.

The General Assembly first met in Auckland in 1854 but a library was not established until 1865, when a select committee recommended that £100 be spent on books. The library originally was housed with the Auckland Provincial Council until the capital was transferred to Wellington in 1865. New premises were built to be used as a library alongside the Wellington Provincial Council chambers, which were later taken over by the General Assembly.¹

From 1865 the library's holdings grew steadily and by 1872 8,000 volumes were listed in the catalogue. These were housed in six substantial rooms at the rear of Parliament buildings' and heating was provided by open fires which was potentially hazardous for the library's contents. The library became the country's premier library. The collection kept on growing and finally flowed out into committee rooms and even the ladies' tearooms and the offices of two ministers. It was apparent that a purpose built, and fireproof building was fast becoming a necessity.²

In 1883 Thomas Turnbull had designed a brick addition for the timber General Assembly building and in 1897 was contracted by Premier Richard Seddon to design a new Parliamentary Library building. Turnbull produced a set of plans for an ornate three storey structure, Gothic in design, to match the General Assembly building. The foundation stone was laid on the 13 April 1898. Construction was hindered following the completion of the brickwork of the second storey, when Prime Minister Seddon decided that the £50,000 cost was prohibitive,³ and to save money the third storey would not be built. Turnbull was upset by this decision stating "the building, having been designed and proportioned for a three storey building, the cutting out of the third storey [will] have a dwarfing effect and would altogether spoil the architectural appearance of the edifice". Turnbull demanded that his name be removed from the commemorative stone and disassociated himself from the project.

Government architect John Campbell completed the building, redesigning the parapets, gables, and roof to accommodate the reduction in the buildings height. The building was completed in 1899 but was not fully occupied until 1901 because the brick and plaster took some time to dry out.⁴

¹ This is an updated version of the Wellington City Council *Heritage Building Inventory 2001: Non-Residential Buildings*, MOLE 2.

² 'Library - Parliament Buildings', URL: <http://www.nzhistory.net.nz/politics/parliament-buildings/library>, (Ministry for Culture and Heritage), updated 20-Dec-2012

³ NZHPT, Classification Proposal for Parliamentary Library, May 1988

⁴ J. McKenzie, "Government Centre Conservation Area, Wellington", NZHPT, Wellington, 1984

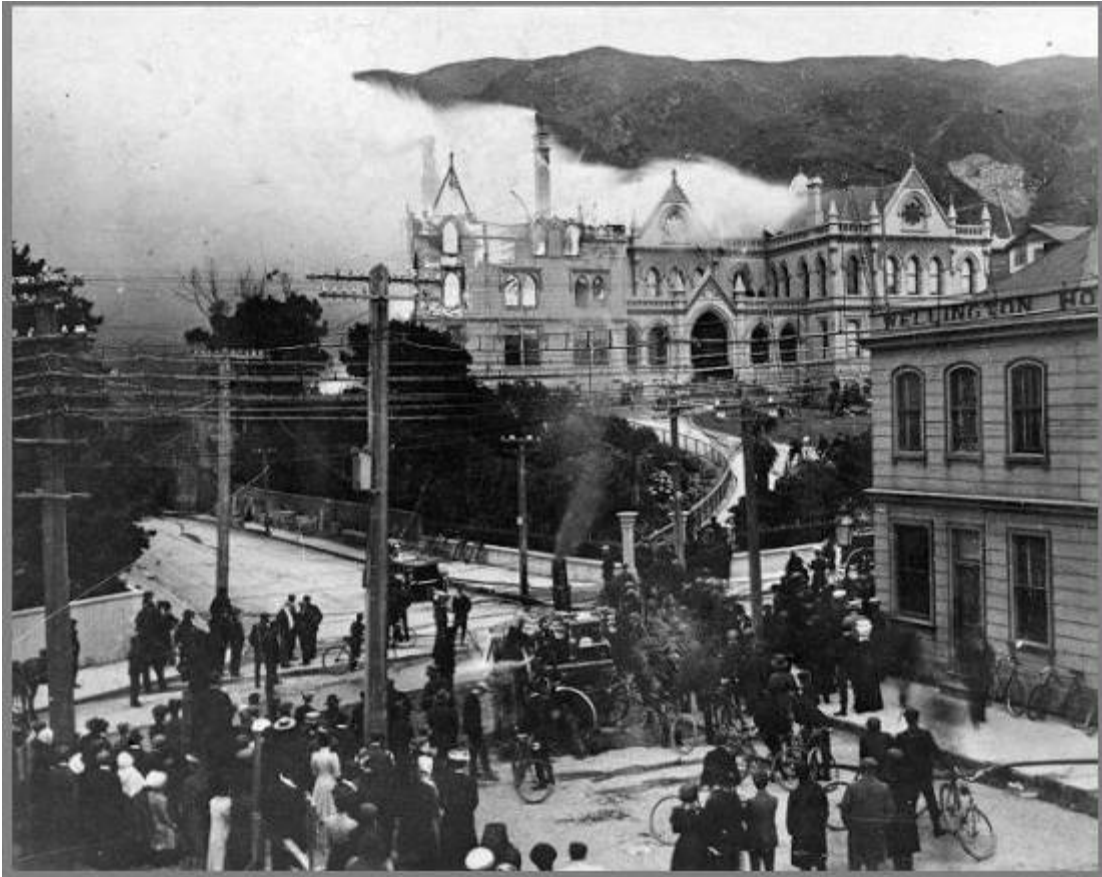


Zachariah, Joseph 1867-1965: Crowd outside Parliament Buildings, Wellington, celebrating Dominion Day, Thursday 26 September 1907 [Reference Number: 1/2-153019-F](#) Crowd outside Parliament Buildings, Wellington, celebrating Dominion Day on Thursday 26 September 1907. There are flags draped across the roof and also a line of flags flying from one side of the Parliament Buildings to the other. The statue of John Ballance can be seen near the middle of the photograph. Photograph taken by Joseph Zachariah. Alexander Turnbull Library.

The new library meant that the now 40, 000 volume collection had a permanent home. The General Assembly Act 1903 required copies of all books and periodicals published in New Zealand to be presented to the library, and as a result the library now possesses the most comprehensive collection of 20th century New Zealand productions. The library now had plenty of room, so collections also extended to include paintings, photographs and documents. By 1926 there were 110, 000 volumes, and 40 years later there were 300, 000.⁵

The value of making the library fire proof became apparent in 1907 when a fire destroyed the parliamentary complex, except the library, which had been saved by its iron fire-door. As the flames got out of control, people hurriedly carried loads of books out of the library to safety – 8000 in the space of 45 minutes was reported by one newspaper.

⁵ 'Library - Parliament Buildings', <http://www.nzhistory.net.nz/politics/parliament-buildings/library>, (Ministry for Culture and Heritage), updated 20-Dec-2012



1907 fire at Parliament Buildings, Wellington, 11 December 1907 [Reference Number: 1/2-022885-F](#) The fire at Parliament buildings on the 11th of December, 1907. Shows a crowd in the foreground and hoses following up through the gate to the Legislative Council steps. Sydney Street West is visible. Photographer unidentified. Alexander Turnbull Library

In 1992 a second fire struck the Parliamentary Library, severely damaging the main staircase, the plasterwork, the stained glass, and the roof. Later the same year, another fire destroyed some of the original toilets in the library's basement. The 1990s saw the building refurbished. The library was moved into temporary accommodation on Bowen House and refurbishment commenced. Master craftsmen were commissioned to work on the elaborate stained glass and ornamental stone and plaster work. The project included recreating the 19th century lobby as a reception area and newspaper room. The exterior work included replication of the chimneys and the rebuilding of gables and ornaments that had been removed from the building following the 1942 and 1950s earthquakes. The refurbishment, along with Parliament House, included base isolating the buildings and introducing reinforced concrete to support the walls. The building now functions efficiently and meets modern information requirements and the needs of Parliament.



General Assembly Library, Wellington, November 1955 [Reference Number: 1/2-177170-F](#) View of the General Assembly Library (now the Parliamentary Library) from the front from Parliament grounds, taken by Morrie Hill. Alexander Turnbull Library



Parliamentary Library. Photographed by Greg O`Beirne 28/12/2006, accessed 6/03/13, <http://www.historic.org.nz/TheRegister/RegisterSearch/RegisterResults.aspx?RID=217>

1.2 Timeline of modifications

Modifications based on history – Original plans could not be accessed at time of writing.

1899 – 1901	Original Construction
1942 – 1950s	Removal of exterior ornamentation following earthquakes
1992	Earthquake strengthening, installation of base isolators, refurbishment of interiors, restoration of exterior ornamentation.

1.3 Occupation history

New Zealand Parliamentary Library

1.4 Architect

Turnbull, Thomas (1824-1907)

Thomas Turnbull (1824-1907) was born and educated in Scotland and trained under David Bryce, Her Majesty's Architect. He travelled to Melbourne in 1851 and after nine years there moved to San Francisco. He arrived in New Zealand in 1871 and soon established a thriving business. His son William, a distinguished architect in his own right, became a partner in the firm in 1891. Turnbull was a member of the Royal Institute of British Architects. He was a pioneer in the design of buildings to withstand earthquakes and he was responsible for breaking down prejudice against the use of permanent materials for building construction. He specialised in masonry construction for commercial purposes but was also responsible for some fine houses. Among his most important buildings were the Willis Street churches of St Peter (1879) and St John (1885), the former National Mutual Building (1883-84), the General Assembly Library (1899) and the former Bank of New Zealand Head Office (1901), all in Wellington.⁶

Campbell, John (1857–1942)

“John Campbell (1857-1942) served his articles under John Gordon (c1835-1912) in Glasgow. He arrived in Dunedin in 1882 and after a brief period as a draughtsman with Mason and Wales joined the Dunedin branch of the Public Works Department in 1883. His first known work, an un-built design for the Dunedin Railway Station, reveals an early interest in Baroque architecture. In November 1888 Campbell was transferred to Wellington where in 1889 he took up the position of draughtsman in charge of the Public Buildings Division of the Public Works Department. He remained in charge of the design of government buildings throughout New Zealand until his retirement in 1922, becoming in 1909 the first person to hold the position of Government Architect. Government architecture designed under his aegis evidences a change in style from Queen Anne to Edwardian Baroque. His best-known Queen Anne design is the Dunedin Police Station (1895-8), modelled on Richard Norman Shaw's New Scotland Yard (1887-90). Among his most exuberant Edwardian Baroque buildings is the Public Trust Office, Wellington (1905-09). Although Campbell designed the Dunedin Law Courts (1899-1902) in the Gothic style with a Scottish Baronial inflection, he established Edwardian Baroque as the government style for police stations, courthouses and post offices throughout New Zealand. In

⁶ Historic Places Trust, “Thomas Turnbull”, *Professional Biographies*, accessed March 06, 2013, <http://www.historic.org.nz/corporate/registersearch/ProfessionalBio/Professional.aspx?CPName=Turnbull,+Thomas>

1911 Campbell won the nation-wide architectural competition for the design of Parliament Buildings, Wellington. Although only partially completed, Parliament House is the crowning achievement of Campbell's career."⁷

2.0 Physical description

Note: the description of the architecture of this building repeats the 2006 WCC Heritage report for DPC 48⁸

2.1 Architecture

The Parliamentary Library is the most important building designed by the prolific local architect Thomas Turnbull. The Gothic Revival design is a response to the preceding Parliament buildings lost to the 1907 fire. The Library is elevated with respect to Parliament House and physically separated from it by a walkway.

Completed in 1901, the Parliamentary Library is a substantial two-storey masonry building constructed using Mount Cook gaol bricks (with the distinctive arrow mark) and finished in plaster render over wire lathing. It is designed in a distinctive late-Victorian Gothic Revival style with a strong Venetian influence apparent in the detailing and is infused with the characteristic and picturesque irregularity of profile of the style. While the finished building is a full storey short of Turnbull's original design, and has a weaker vertical emphasis than intended due to this lesser height, it is nevertheless a very carefully composed and strong piece of architecture and is commonly regarded as Turnbull's finest work, although the architect himself repudiated any association with the building.

As it stands today, the building is two storeys high, with an L-shaped front elevation and two distinct roofs, both hipped but set behind heavily detailed and prominent gables. There is a distinct vertical emphasis in the heights of the windows and in the arches over the entrance portico that signals a taller building - as a consequence the building seems a little squat. The high gables on the north (front) and west (Hill Street) elevations indicate something of the intended vertical emphasis. The elevations are replete with typical Victorian Gothic motifs including pointed arches, crocketed gables, steeply-pitched corrugated-iron roofs trimmed with ornamental ironwork at the ridges and a battery of chimneys, and rose windows in the gables. The roof edges are trimmed with a prominent arcaded balustrade, spanning between elaborate moulded pinnacles at each corner of the main façades and at each side of the gables. The east and south façades have extensively moulded external plasterwork with raised, indented or tooled patterns (pargetting) and are set off with strong cornice lines – an acanthus frieze below the roof-top balustrade and an egg and dart pattern at the top of the ground floor – which provide a horizontal contrast to the predominant verticality of the design. The ground floor windows are square-headed, while those on the first floor are set into pointed arches. Both sets of windows have well-defined label moulds.

⁷ Historic Places Trust, "John Campbell", *Professional Biographies*, accessed March 06, 2013, <http://www.historic.org.nz/corporate/registersearch/ProfessionalBio/Professional.aspx?ID=38>

⁸ Michael Kelly et al, 'Parliamentary Precinct Heritage Area' unpublished heritage report for District Plan Change 48, 2006

The composition of the façades is regular but notably asymmetric and each elevation of the building presents a different arrangement of parts to view. The principal façade faces out to the east and contains the main entrance, set in a flat-roofed single-storey porch arcaded with pointed arches, which is reached up a long flight of steps from the forecourt past a substantial rose garden and the awkwardly placed modern entrance to the subterranean car-park. The secondary elevation faces Parliament House, and views of it are substantially constricted by the close proximity of that building. A modern precast concrete and glass bridge connects the Library to Parliament House on this side. The tertiary elevation is to Hill Street; this falls partly below the rising street towards the west, giving passers-by an opportunity to better appreciate the complex roof-scape and intricate detailing of the building.

At the west the building opens out to a modern landscaped area including large lawns (the roof to the car-parking area below) and features a modern steel loading dock which reproduces the general form of a former cast-iron pavilion.

The building is particularly notable for its complex exterior and interior detailing and the extensive and elaborate ornamentation applied inside and out (particularly in the main foyer), all clearly designed to impress the visitor. The interior is a remarkable example of high Victorian hierarchy of ornament and decorum. Elements of note include the cast iron stairway with its ornate decorative work, ceilings which repeat the Gothic foliate capitals of the interior and exterior columns, fine cabinet work, and the high faceted glazed dome over the main circulation space which has been designed to take full advantage of natural light.

Recently restored, the Parliamentary Library retains a high level of exterior and interior authenticity and high overall heritage values. It makes a significant contribution to the heritage values of the parliamentary precinct as a whole.

2.2 Materials

The construction is load-bearing brick masonry on concrete foundations. The bricks were manufactured locally at the Mt Cook Gaol and feature the trademark convict arrow. Exterior decoration was carried out in plaster and stucco with rolled wire lathing.

The interior is made up of timber, stained glass, cast iron, and decorative plaster.

2.3 Setting

Occupying the highest point of the Parliament Grounds, this building has a commanding presence and significant townscape value in terms of Parliament and adjoining Thorndon streets.

Originally designed to be compatible with its Gothic neighbour, this Gothic building is now partnered with the Baroque Parliament Buildings and the Brutalist Modern Beehive. The three buildings form a distinct but compatible trio and are a rare display of different architectural styles working harmoniously.

3.0 Sources

Alexander Turnbull Library, [Reference Number: 1/2-177170-F](#), accessed 06 March 2013, <http://mp.natlib.govt.nz/detail/?id=8152&l=en>

Alexander Turnbull Library, [Reference Number: 1/2-022885-F](#), accessed 6 March 2013, <http://mp.natlib.govt.nz/search/?l=en&q=1%2F2-022885-F&t=items&s=a>

Alexander Turnbull Library, [Reference Number: 1/2-153019-F](#), accessed 6 March 2013, <http://mp.natlib.govt.nz/search/?l=en&s=a&q=1%2F2-153019-F>

Ministry for Culture and Heritage, 'Library - Parliament Buildings', URL: <http://www.nzhistory.net.nz/politics/parliament-buildings/library>, (Ministry for Culture and Heritage), updated 20-Dec-2012.

Historic Places Trust, "John Campbell", *Professional Biographies*, accessed March 06, 2013, <http://www.historic.org.nz/corporate/registersearch/ProfessionalBio/Professional.aspx?ID=38>

Historic Places Trust, "Thomas Turnbull", *Professional Biographies*, accessed March 06, 2013, <http://www.historic.org.nz/corporate/registersearch/ProfessionalBio/Professional.aspx?CPName=Turnbull,+Thomas>

Historic Places Trust, Parliamentary Library, Photographed by Greg O`Beirne 28/12/2006, accessed 6/03/13, <http://www.historic.org.nz/TheRegister/RegisterSearch/RegisterResults.aspx?RID=217>

Kelly, Michael. et al, 'Parliamentary Precinct Heritage Area' unpublished heritage report for District Plan Change 48, 2006

Wellington City Council, "General Assembly Library. Parliament Grounds, Molesworth Street. *Wellington Heritage Building Inventory 1995: Non-Residential Buildings*. (Wellington City Council, 1995), M.

Wellington City Council, Parliamentary Library, Molesworth Street, *Wellington Heritage Building Inventory 2001: Non-Residential Buildings*. (Wellington City Council, 2001), MOLE 2.

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 Parliamentary Library is an outstanding example of Gothic style substantial public building. It is a major work by Thomas Turnbull, one of Wellington's most influential 19th century architects and is notable for the high quality of its design, materials and workmanship. Key elements include the finely detailed rose windows, the external decorative plasterwork, the prominent gables, and the Tudor turrets. The interiors are an excellent example of Victorian design. The spaces are highly ornamental and decorative with tiles, plasterwork, timber, and stained glass mirroring many of the exterior features.

The redesign by John Campbell, following Thomas Turnbull's departure, of the parapets, gables, and roof to accommodate the reduction in the buildings height is a success, fitting cohesively with the Turnbull design.

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?*

This building occupies the most prominent space of the Parliament Grounds and has a commanding presence. It has significant townscape value both in terms of Parliament and nearby Thorndon Streets.

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 library is the oldest building in the Parliamentary Precinct Heritage Area. The heritage area is a collection of parliamentary buildings and associated grounds and features that, together with the nearby Government Buildings, Cenotaph and Waititi Landing Park, form one of the most important historic precincts in the country.

Historic Value:

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

This building has historical value through its association with the New Zealand Government. Its collections provide the most important source of information available to members of parliament and it holds a unique collection of parliamentary and government publications from New Zealand and other countries. It is the working library that provides research services for members of Parliament and parliamentary staff, and responds to requests from the public for information on any aspect of Parliament.

It is also associated with not one but two of Wellington's most important architects – Thomas Turnbull and John Campbell.

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

This building is associated with the governance of New Zealand over the past century and has served its original purpose for 100 years.

Scientific Value:

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

This building is built on the same site as pre 1900 buildings. It is included in the NZAA R27/270 Central City archaeological area.

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?*

The building is likely to be held in high public esteem as a prominent landmark within the Parliamentary Precinct Heritage Area, and as one of architect Thomas Turnbull's finest buildings.

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?*

This building has considerable cultural heritage value for its ongoing use as the working library for Parliament.

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 modern alterations or additions over the past 100+ years and contributes to the sense of place and continuity of the Parliamentary Precinct 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?*

This building is an outstanding example of the Gothic style in Wellington and is regarded as one of Thomas Turnbull's best designs. The quality of the design, finishings, and modifications give this building an extremely high cultural heritage significance.

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

The building is a good, representative example of a Gothic-style grand public building.

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 Parliamentary Library has authenticity and integrity due to the retention of significant amounts of original fabrics. Restoration of the exterior ornamentation, including crockets, pargetting, and cast iron that was removed in the 1940s and 1950s has been carried out in a harmonious and cohesive manner, adding to the authenticity of the building.

Local/Regional/National/International

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

This building is important at a local and national level.

4.0 Appendix

Research checklist (desktop)

Source	Y/N	Comments
1995 Heritage Inventory		
2001 Non-Residential heritage Inventory		
WCC Records – building file		
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		
Heritage items folder (electronic)		
HPT website		
HPT files		
Conservation Plan		
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*