

Backbencher Pub and Cafe

34 Molesworth Street, cr Kate Sheppard Place



Photo taken from the corner of Kate Sheppard Place and Molesworth Street.

Charles Collins, 2015

Summary of heritage significance

- This building is a well-designed Edwardian corner pub designed by notable Wellington architects Swan, and Swan and Swan.
- It occupies a prominent corner site on the corner of Molesworth Street and Kate Sheppard Place and sits on the cusp of the Parliamentary Precinct Heritage Area, a historically important part of the city.
- The hotel was owned and operated by the major Wellington brewery of Staples & Co. (later part of New Zealand Breweries). It also has a close association with parliamentarians and staff who have frequented the establishment for generations.
- The building has rarity value as one of Wellington's oldest masonry hotels, the facades of which are relatively unmodified.

District Plan:	Map 18, Symbol 216
Legal Description:	Lot 2, DP318644
Heritage Area:	Not in a Heritage Area (2012)
HPT Listed:	Category II reference 1449
Archaeological Site:	Central City NZAA R27/270
Other Names:	Wellington Hotel, The Unofficial Bellamy's
Key physical dates:	1912 and 1917
Architect / Builder:	John Sydney Swan, Swan and Swan
Former uses:	Hotel, accommodation, pub, cafe
Current uses:	Retail and commercial - pub
Earthquake Prone Status	Resolved, SR189701

Extent: Cityview GIS 2012



1.0 Outline History

1.1 History

This building occupies a site long associated with hotels. The 'Wellington Hotel', a timber structure, was built on the property in 1869.¹ The fabric of that hotel became part of the story of the present building.

The first Wellington Hotel occupied both sides of the corner site with the two arms of the building forming a courtyard at the back. The building was built, or later bought, by prominent brewers J. Staples and Co., whose brewery was a short distance up Molesworth St. The hotel's close proximity to Parliament made it a popular drinking hole for parliamentarians and officials alike.

In 1912, the brewers undertook a major addition to the building. It was designed by architect John S. Swan and constructed by contractors Jones and Cameron.² This new addition, obscured from the road, was built of more permanent materials – concrete and brick and cost a total of £1454.³

This hotel benefited from its location near the busy Thorndon Quay tram terminus, and its proximity to Parliament and the Staples' owned brewery on Molesworth Street. It provided accommodation and sold a range of alcohol, and it is probable that that included the Staples and Co. brand of beer.

A fire early in the morning of 12 April 1917 destroyed the original timber building.⁴ Most escaped, but Patrick Twohill, a well-known local identity died in the blaze. The fire was believed to be caused by a cigarette or lighted match.⁵ The brick and mortar 1912 addition survived.

Later that year architects Swan and Swan prepared a design for J Staples and Co. to replace the section of the hotel that had been destroyed. This addition, like the previous one, was constructed of brick with concrete foundations by contractor P. Robinson.⁶

For a half century after World War I, drinking at the Wellington Hotel was, as other in all Wellington pubs, characterised by the six o'clock closing of pubs, a regulation that led to the frantic swilling of beer in the half-hour after work.⁷ This changed when pubs' opening hours were extended in 1967 and again in the 1980s.⁸ Drinking became less frenetic and it is probable that the ambiance of the drinking culture at the Wellington Hotel reflected this change.

¹ Board of Works', *Wellington Independent*, Volume XXIV, Issue 2930, 18 December 1869, Page 5.

² "Corner Molesworth Street and Sydney Street [34 Molesworth Street], additions to the Wellington Hotel", July 29, 1912, 00053:170:9360, Wellington City Archives.

³ Ibid.

⁴ "Fatal Fire", *Marlborough Express*, Volume LI, Issue 85, 12 April 1917, Page 4.

⁵ 'Fatal Fire: Wellington Hotel Burnt An Old Man Meets His Death', *Marlborough Express*, Volume LI, Issue 85, 12 April 1917, Page 4.

⁶ Wellington City Council, "The Backbencher Pub and Cafe", *Wellington Heritage Building Inventory 2001: Non-Residential Buildings*, (Wellington City Council, 2001), MOLE3.

⁷ Phillips, Jock, "Sports and leisure - Home and city", in *Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, updated Jan 15, 2010 accessed June 20, 2012, <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/sports-and-leisure/1>

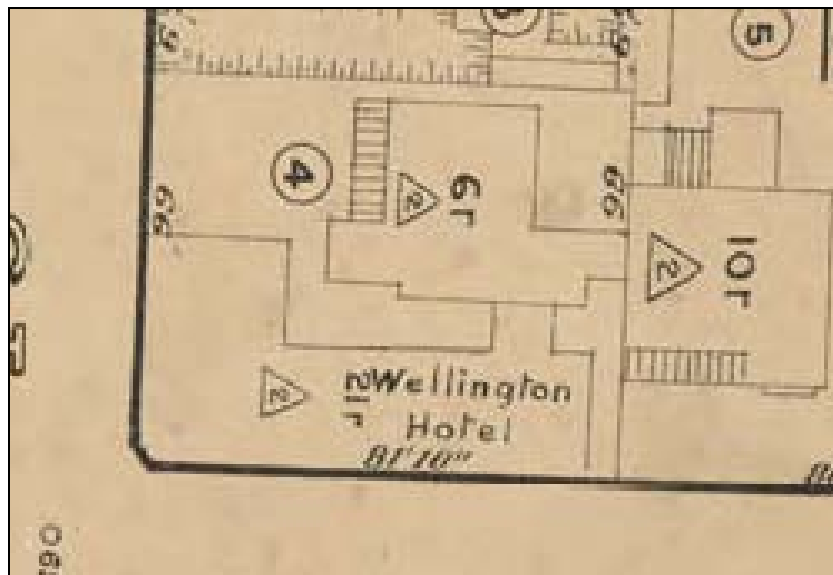
⁸ Phillips, Jock, "Culture and recreation in the city", in *Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, updated September 28, 2011, accessed June 20, 2012, <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/culture-and-recreation-in-the-city>

The hotel's link with Parliament was significant. Between debates politicians would gather at the pub and it earned the nickname the 'Unofficial Bellamy's'.⁹ MP Sir Maui Pomare was among those who made good use of the particularly fine billiard table.¹⁰

Although it continued in use as a public house, the hotel stopped taking guests in the early 1970s.¹¹ In 1990 Lion Nathan purchased the property and carried out extensive refurbishment to a design by Dunning Thornton Consultants.¹² The work was completed in 1991 and it reopened as 'the Backbencher'. It soon earned a reputation as one of Wellington's best patronised inner city bars.¹³ It took advantage of its proximity to Parliament to develop a satirical theme to the pub's décor. The interior was decorated with cartoons from well-known satirists Tom Scott and Trace Hodgson. Original polystyrene puppets of prominent political figures were acquired from the television comedy show, 'Private Eye', and some still adorn the walls.¹⁴ The pub's menu is also a satirical take on current political events. Despite two more changes of ownership, the themed pub continues to operate.

'Back Benches', a New Zealand political interview show presented by Wallace Chapman and Damian Christie, began using the pub as a venue for their show when it began airing on TVNZ 7 in April 2008.¹⁵

On 8 June 2012 a fire damaged the interior of the building. Several puppets were badly charred and the kitchen was gutted. A second fire four months later further caused damage, mainly to the interior. The owners intend to restore some of the surviving puppets and build more and reopen the pub in February 2013. (2012)



The Wellington Hotel on the corner of Molesworth Street and Sydney Street East in 1892. (WCC 1892 Thomas Ward Map)

⁹ Pat Lawlor, *Old Wellington Hotels: Some History, Personalities and Anecdotes*, (Wellington: The Millwood Press, 1974), p.66.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ 'Political puppetry presides at the pub with no peer', *Evening Post*, 17 August 1994, p.28.

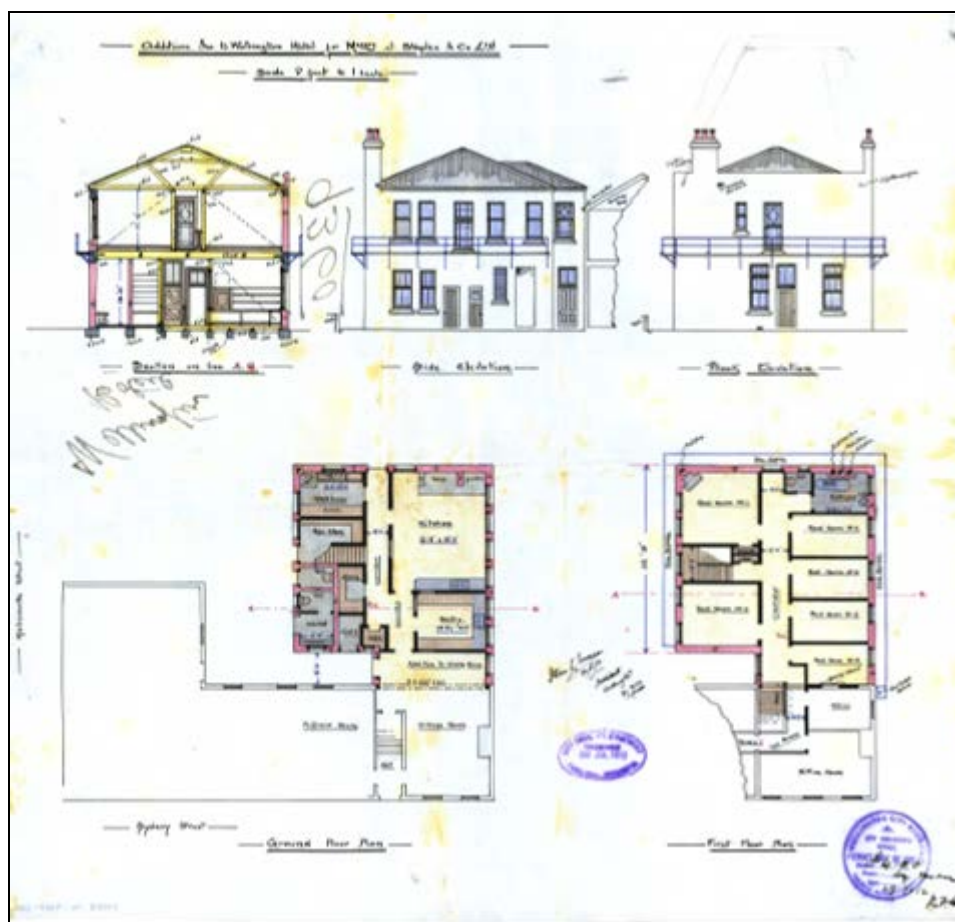
¹² Wellington City Council, "The Backbencher Pub and Cafe"

¹³ 'Political puppetry presides at the pub with no peer', *Evening Post*, 17 August 1994, p.28.

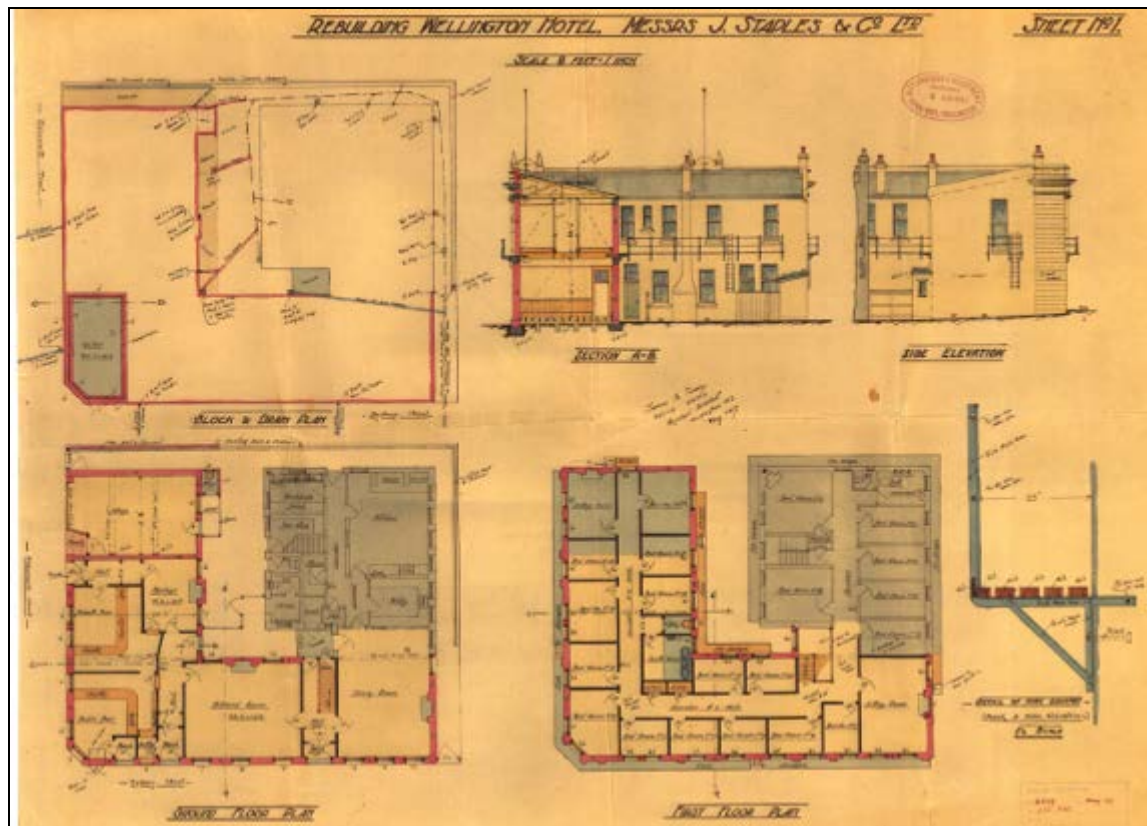
¹⁴ Wellington City Council, "The Backbencher Pub and Cafe"

¹⁵ "Political puppetry presides at the pub with no peer", *Evening Post*, 17 August 1994, p.28.

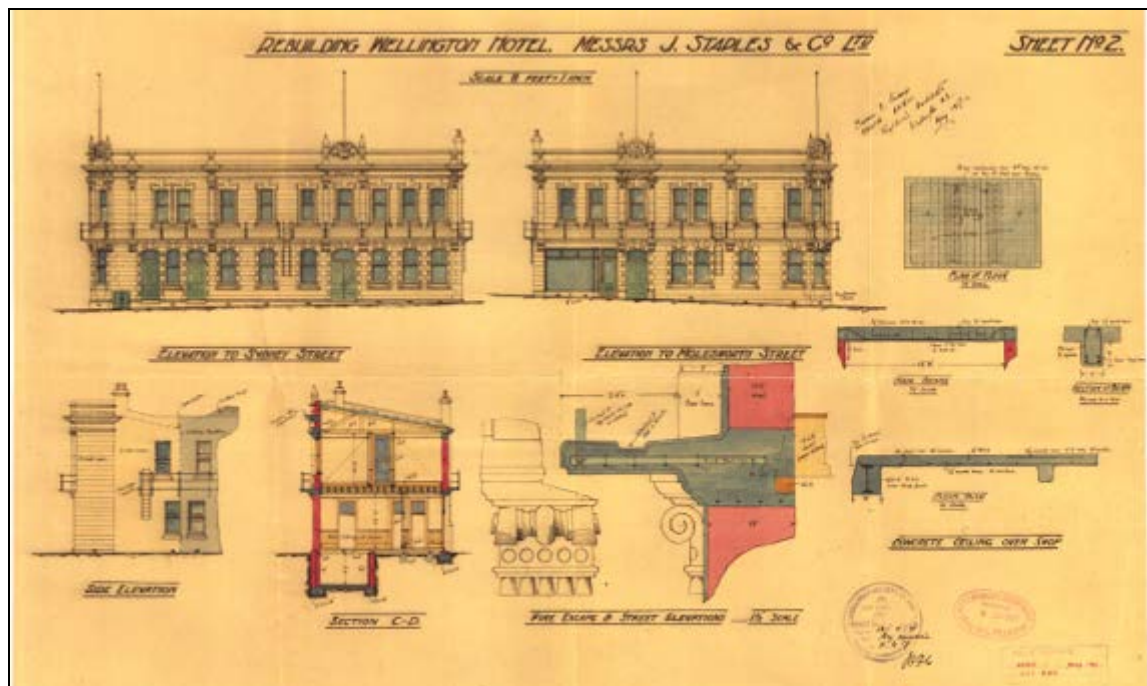
¹⁶ "Back Benches", http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Back_Benches, Accessed: June 2012



Plans of the first major addition designed by architect John S. Swan in 1912.
(00053:170:9360)



Wellington Hotel, the ground floor and first floor addition plans, 1917.
(00053:191:10524)



Wellington Hotel, elevations of the addition, 1917. (00053:191:10524)



Molesworth Street and surrounding area in Thorndon, c.1939. (MNZ-1775-1/4\F, Making New Zealand Centennial Collection, Alexander Turnbull Library)



The Hotel, Kate Sheppard Place façade, 1992. (000540:1:4)



The Hotel, Molesworth Street façade, 1992. (000540:1:5)



Helen Clark, Jim Bolger, Winston Peters puppets at The Backbencher, 2012¹⁶

¹⁶ "Backbencher", accessed June 2012, http://www.backbencher.co.nz/index.php?option=com_phocagallery&view=category&id=4&Itemid=7



Damage to the interior caused by the June 2012 fire.¹⁷

1.2 Timeline of modifications

1869	Construction of the first Wellington Hotel. ¹⁸
1912	The first major addition is made to the buildings to a design by Wellington architect John S. Swan for the brewing company J.S. Staples & Co. Ltd. The contractor was Jones and Cameron. Contract Price: £1454. (00053:170:9360)
1913	Alterations. (00053:174:9605)
1917	Fires destroys timber hotel, which is replaced by J.S. Staples and Co. in brick and concrete to a design by architects Swan and Swan. The contractor was P. Robinson. (00053:191:10524)
1954	Alterations. (00056:484:B36427)
1957	Cellar alterations. (00058:42:C2094)
1958	Hotel alterations. (00058:77:C3815)
1969	Building alterations. (00058:603:C28311)
1990-1991	Dunning Thornton Consultants refurbishes the building. ¹⁹ Work includes office partitions and business additions and alterations. (00059:406:E20824 and 00059:411:E20985)
1992	Sign. (00059:530:E24863)
1994	More refurbishment. (00060:103:3781)
2002	Seismic strengthening. (00078:1085:95268)
2003	Internal alterations to café and bar. (00078:1161:104431)
2012	8 th June - A fire destroys the kitchen and guts the interior. 3 rd October – A second fire damages the interior.

1.3 Occupation history

- 1912 – Wellington Hotel.²⁰
- 1990 – The Backbencher.²¹

¹⁷ "Stuff.co.nz", accessed June 2012.

<http://www.stuff.co.nz/national/photos/7064447/Backbencher-Pub-fire>

¹⁸ 'Board of Works', *Wellington Independent*, Volume XXIV, Issue 2930, 18 December 1869, Page 5.

¹⁹ Wellington City Council, "The Backbencher Pub and Cafe"

²⁰ Wises Street Directory 1912

²¹ Wises Street Directory 1990

1.4 Architect

John Sydney Swan (1874-1936)

Swan was born in Wellington, the eldest of 13 children. His early architectural training was with the noted Wellington architect Frederick de Jersey Clere. Swan was articled to Clere and worked with his mentor on a number of designs, including the Wellington Rowing Club (then Naval Artillery Boat Shed), 1894 and several churches. From 1901-05 he was a partner with Clere. Among the buildings that survive from their partnership is Kelburn Chambers (or Stoneham's Building), Lambton Quay (1905).

While Swan was in practice with Clere he had already started designing on his own account. The earliest sole commission he is understood to have undertaken was in 1902, when he designed a building at 118 Cuba Street for P.D. Davis. He left Clere in 1905 and was in sole practice until 1915. He is probably best known during this time for a series of major commissions for the Catholic Church, including Sacred Heart Convent, later Erskine College, Island Bay (1906), St Gerard's Church (1908-10), Our Lady of Compassion Convent, Island Bay (1908-1921) Sacred Heart Convent, Wanganui (1911), and, with his brother, St Bede's School, Christchurch (1919). Swan also designed a number of commercial buildings, including the now demolished National Bank head office (1907) and Clarendon Hotel, Wellington (1908), now The Glasshouse. Perhaps one of Swan's best known domestic design is his own house, "The Moorings", Thorndon (1905), which features imaginative use of nautical motifs.²² He was a keen sailor and a Commodore of the Port Nicholson Yacht Club.

Swan was first joined in practice by his brother Francis in 1915. Francis Swan (1885-1956) was the second youngest child in the Swan family. The practice was then renamed Swan and Swan. They were soon joined in practice by Charles Lawrence who had previously been in partnership with Francis Penty.

Swan, Lawrence and Swan was responsible for, among others, the former Home of Compassion Creche, Buckle St, (1916), the library wing of the Hunter Building, Victoria University (1918) and the Physics Wing (1920). Swan also designed, with William Gray Young, the Wellington Technical School (1919) (now Wellington High School) and in 1930, the celebrated Erskine College Chapel. John Swan was a director of the Kelburn and Karori Tramway Co. which led to the firm's commission to make major changes to the cable car Winding House in 1933.

Charles Lawrence died in 1933 and a year later John Swan left the practice he established to form Swan and Lavelle with Jim Lavelle, but he died in 1936. This firm later became Strutron Group, a practice which continues to this day. Francis Swan continued Lawrence and Swan, as it became, and then later practised on his own.²³

²² NZHPT, *Buildings Classification Glossary of Architects, Engineers and Designers*, (NZHPT, unpublished, 1990).

²³ Information on the practice of Swan, Lawrence and Swan and its principals from: Stone's Directories 1915-1940; ATL 13/191/1; "Glossary of New Zealand Architects, Engineers and Designers", NZHPT 1990; and David Kernohan and Tony Kellaway, *Wellington's Old Buildings*, (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1994), 24-25

2.0 Physical description

2.1 Architecture

This is a well designed and carefully proportioned two storey Edwardian corner pub constructed of brick masonry. The façade consists of segmentally-arched windows on the ground floor and square-headed windows on the first floor. The window and door surrounds are rendered in plaster and treated, on the ground floor, as a shallow Gibbs surround (alternate squares and vertical stripes). The first-floor windows have a surround with square corners and an exaggerated keystone. A metal balcony runs the length of the façade at first-floor level. String courses run above the upper windows, and the building is capped with a plain entablature, projecting cornice, and a parapet that is built up over the corner and above the two main street entrances with a round crest and two short pinnacles.²⁴

2.2 Materials

Construction is load-bearing brick masonry on concrete foundation and piles. Internal partitions and window joinery are timber, with tongue and groove floors and pressed-metal ceilings.²⁵ Note that there has been extensive internal refurbishment and the status of the floor is unclear.

2.3 Setting

The Backbencher occupies a conspicuous location adjacent to the Parliamentary Precinct Heritage Area. It sits amidst a row of major Government buildings, including the High Court and Appeal Court and National Library. Directly opposite is the large open space of Parliament grounds, with its statuary, trees, and a backdrop of nationally significant heritage buildings – Parliament Buildings, the Executive Wing (the Beehive) and the Parliamentary Library. The own hotel's backdrop is less distinguished, with several large neighbours overshadowing the building, including the Kate Sheppard Apartments and Environment House.

²⁴ Wellington City Council, "The Backbencher Pub and Cafe"

²⁵ Ibid.

3.0 Sources

CT WN 157/246, Land Information New Zealand

“Backbencher”, accessed June 2012,
http://www.backbencher.co.nz/index.php?option=com_phocagallery&view=categor&id=4&Itemid=7

Historic Places Trust, “John Sydney Swan”, *Professional Biographies*. Accessed June 2012.
<http://www.historic.org.nz/corporate/registersearch/ProfessionalBio/Professional.aspx?ID=209>

Kernohan, David and Tony Kellaway. *Wellington's Old Buildings*. Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1994.

Lawlor, Pat. *Old Wellington Hotels: Some History, Personalities and Anecdotes*, Wellington: The Millwood Press, 1974.

NZHPT, *Buildings Classification Glossary of Architects, Engineers and Designers*, NZHPT, unpublished, 1990.

Phillips, Jock. “Culture and recreation in the city”, in Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand. Updated September 28, 2011. Accessed June 20, 2012.
<http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/culture-and-recreation-in-the-city>

Phillips, Jock. “Sports and leisure - Home and city”, in Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand. Updated Jan 15, 2010. Accessed June 20, 2012,
<http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/sports-and-leisure/1>

Stone's Street Directories 1915-1940

“Stuff.co.nz”, accessed 20 June 2012,
<http://www.stuff.co.nz/national/7064126/Puppets-charred-in-Backbencher-fire>

“Stuff.co.nz”, accessed 20 June 2012,
<http://www.stuff.co.nz/national/photos/7064447/Backbencher-Pub-fire>

Wellington City Council, “The Backbencher Pub and Cafe”, *Wellington Heritage Building Inventory 2001: Non-Residential Buildings*. Wellington City Council, 2001, MOLE3.

Wises Street Directories, 1912 and 1990.

Newspapers

Board of Works', *Wellington Independent*, Volume XXIV, Issue 2930, 18 December 1869.

“Fatal Fire”, *Marlborough Express*, Volume LI, Issue 85, 12 April 1917.

‘Political puppetry presides at the pub with no peer’, *Evening Post*, 17 August 1994.

Wellington City Archives

“Corner Molesworth Street and Sydney Street [34 Molesworth Street], additions to the Wellington Hotel”, July 29, 1912, 00053:170:9360, Wellington City Archives.

“34 Molesworth Street, alterations to the Wellington Hotel”, May 21, 1913, 00053:174:9605, Wellington City Archives.

“Corner Molesworth Street and Sydney Street [34 Molesworth Street], rebuilding of the Wellington Hotel”, June 11, 1917, 00053:191:10524, Wellington City Archives.

“34 Molesworth Street, alterations hotel”, July 8, 1954, 00056:484:B36427, Wellington City Archives.

“34 Molesworth Street, cellar alterations”, November 13, 1957, 00058:42:C2094, Wellington City Archives.

“34 Molesworth Street, hotel alterations”, October 24, 1958, 00058:77:C3815, Wellington City Archives.

“34-38 Molesworth Street, building alterations”, January 31, 1969, 00058:603:C28311, Wellington City Archives.

“34 Molesworth Street, office building – partitions”, 1990, 00059:406:E20824, Wellington City Archives.

“34 Molesworth Street, business additions and alterations”, 1990, 00059:411:E20985, Wellington City Archives.

“34 Molesworth Street, Backbenchers Tavern – sign”, 1992, 00059:530:E24863, Wellington City Archives.

“34 Molesworth Street, refurbish offices”, February 22, 1994, 00060:103:3781, Wellington City Archives.

“34 Molesworth Street, seismic strengthening”, 2002, 00078:1085:95268, Wellington City Archives.

“34 Molesworth Street, internal alterations to cafe and bar”, 2003, 00078:1161:104431, Wellington City Archives.

4.0 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 well designed, carefully proportioned example of a two-storey Edwardian corner pub.

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 occupies a prominent corner site and is one of the last remaining Edwardian buildings on Molesworth Street.

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 building is part of a group of early Wellington pubs which include The Thistle, The Tramway Hotel and The Shamrock.

Historic Value:

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

The hotel is historically associated with Staples and Co., Wellington's biggest brewing company in the 19th and early 20th centuries and located a short distance north along Molesworth Street. It has had an association with generations of parliamentarians, and many still frequent it.

The earlier part of the building was designed by the well known Wellington architect John Swan, while the main building was the work of the successful partnership of Swan and Swan - the brothers Swan.

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

The Backbencher is a surviving example of the corner pub, a place where Thorndonites and politicians could gather to drink and socialise.

Scientific Value:

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

There was pre-1900 human activity on this site. Although part of the site has been altered by rebuilding or landscaping, there is potential archaeological value in the immediate 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 was known to a national audience as the venue for the television show, 'Back Benchers' until June 2012.

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?*

There has been a public house on this site since 1870 and the current Backbencher Pub, which evolved from the earlier timber hotel, contributes to the identity, sense of place and continuity of Molesworth Street.

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 is a rare surviving example of an Edwardian building in Molesworth Street. It is also one of Wellington's increasingly rare older public houses.

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

The Backbencher is a good representative example of a traditional Wellington pub.

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 facades to Molesworth Street and Kate Sheppard Place are relatively unmodified and retain substantial areas of original building 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 of local importance.

5.0 Appendix

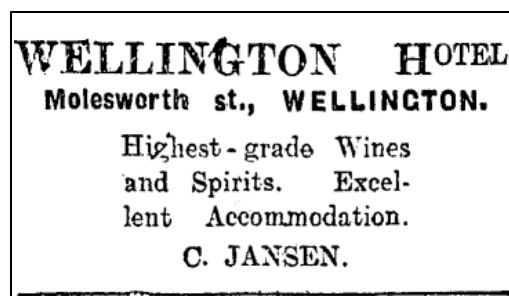
5.1 Background research

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

5.2 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)	Y	
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		
Conservation Plan		
Searched Heritage Library (CAB 2)	Y	



Maoriland Worker, Volume 2, Issue 75, 16 August 1912, Page 8

WCC Permits

00053:170:9360	Corner Molesworth Street and Sydney Street [34 Molesworth Street], additions to	Applicant: Jones and Cameron. Owner: Staples and Co. Architect: John S Swan.	Building Permit/Consent	29 Jul 1912
----------------	---	--	-------------------------	-------------

	the Wellington Hotel	Legal Description: Section 4 Town Acre 531.			
00053:174:9605	34 Molesworth Street, alterations to the Wellington Hotel	Applicant: Humphries Bros. Owner: C Jansen. Legal Description: Section 4 Town Acre 531.	Building Permit/Consent	21 May 1913	
00053:191:10524	Corner Molesworth Street and Sydney Street [34 Molesworth Street], rebuilding of the Wellington Hotel	Applicant: P Robinson. Owner: J Staples and Co. Architect: Swan and Swan.	Building Permit/Consent	11 Jun 1917	
00056:484:B36427	34 Molesworth Street, alterations hotel	Owner: NZ Breweries. Builder: J Rawston	Building Permit/Consent	08 Jul 1954	
00058:42:C2094	34 Molesworth Street, cellar alterations	Owner: N.Z. Breweries. Builder: K Huggard and Co. Note: Wgtn Hotel	Building Permit/Consent	13 Nov 1957	
00058:77:C3815	34 Molesworth Street, hotel alterations	Owner: N.Z. Breweries. Builder: J Rawston	Building Permit/Consent	24 Oct 1958	
00058:603:C28311	34-38 Molesworth Street, building alterations	Legal description: . Owner: NZ Breweries Limited. Builder: FL Jeffries & Company Limited. Application value: \$8000	Building Permit/Consent	31 Jan 1969	
00059:406:E20824	34 Molesworth Street, office		Building Permit/Consent	1990	

	building - partitions		t	
00059:411:E20985	34 Molesworth Street, business additions and alterations		Building Permit/Consent	1990
00432:362:30261	2 - 34 Molesworth Street	Applicant: Department of Justice	Map/plan	1991
00059:530:E24863	34 Molesworth Street, Backbenchers Tavern - sign		Building Permit/Consent	1992
00277:832:3	Building: 34 Molesworth Street: Lion Nathan Ltd		File	1993-1995
00060:103:3781	34 Molesworth Street, refurbish offices		Building Permit/Consent	22 Feb 1994
00666:122:369041	34 Molesworth Street		File	1996-2003
00078:1085:95268	34 Molesworth Street, seismic strengthening		Building Permit/Consent	2002
00078:1161:104431	34 Molesworth Street, internal alterations to cafe and bar	Legal Description: Lot 1 A 2270.	Building Permit/Consent	2003