

**The Thistle Inn**  
3 Mulgrave Street



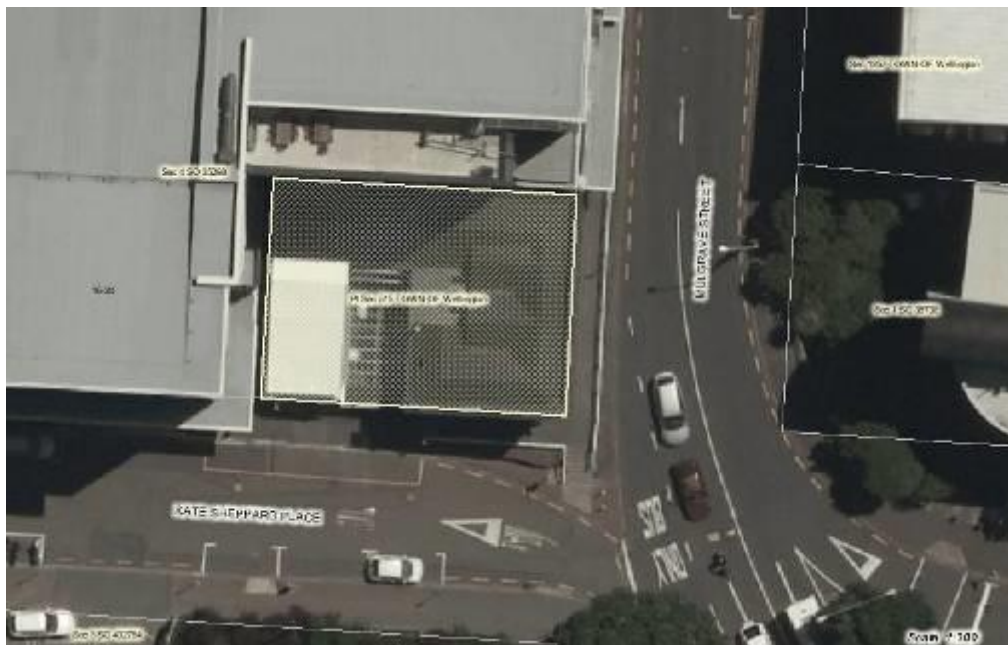
Image: *Charles Collins, 2015*

**Summary of heritage significance**

- The Thistle Inn is a rare example of a mid-19<sup>th</sup> century timber Victorian hotel/public house, and is one of the oldest surviving commercial buildings in Wellington.
- The building has a long and eventful history and some of the most the significant historic associations include: - Carne Bidwell, a 'Sydney merchant', and noted explorer and naturalist who purchased the land in 1841; Katherine Mansfield used the hotel as her as the setting for the story 'Leves Amores'; J. Staples and Co Ltd. purchased the hotel in 1915. Staples established a brewery in Thorndon in 1866 and this was later amalgamated into New Zealand Breweries in 1923.
- Although the building has been constantly adapted for its ongoing use as a hotel/licensed public house, the building retains much of its early or original form, structure and built fabric.

District Plan:	Map 18 reference 222
Legal Description:	Pt Sec 515 Town of Wellington
Heritage Area:	N/A
HPT Listed:	Category 1, reference 1439
Archaeological Site:	Pre 1900 construction, NZAA R27/270
Other Names:	
Key physical dates:	Construction: 1866
Architect / Builder:	Architect: Unknown
Former uses:	Public House / Hotel
Current uses:	pub/bar/tavern/hotel

Extent: Cityview GIS 2013



## 1.0 Outline History

### 1.1 History

The Thistle Inn has outstanding heritage value as one of Wellington's oldest remaining large timber commercial buildings, its value increased by the fact that it continues today in its original use. The site of the current building has been occupied by a Thistle Inn since 1840, although the present building does not date to this time.

The 1840 Thistle Inn was situated on a slight rise above the beach on Town Acre 515, which was originally owned by Dudley Sinclair. It was leased to William Couper, a carpenter by trade, who built the first Thistle Inn. The first hotel licences in New Zealand were issued in July 1840, and Thistle Inn opened on the 5<sup>th</sup> October that year. By the 10<sup>th</sup> of October that year there were 12 licensed hotels in Wellington and 18 by 1843.<sup>1</sup>



John Carne Bidwell bought the land, but not the lease, in 1841. In 1844 Couper sold his lease to Samuel Bell who, six years later, sold it on to Charles Brown. Brown kept the lease for many years, but by 1862 it appears that the proprietor was Stephen Cooper. The two men appear to have been in partnership when in 1866 the timber building was destroyed in a fire. Within six months the hotel had been rebuilt, possibly by Cooper himself.<sup>2</sup> The 1866 Thistle Inn is the one that survives to this day.

Wellington from Mulgrave Street, looking towards Te Aro. ca 1858]. Taylor, Richard, 1805-1873: Sketchbook. 1835-1860.. Ref: E-296-q-170. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.

<http://natlib.govt.nz/records/22581516>

The original Thistle Inn survived both the 1848 and 1855 earthquakes which led to the belief that “wooden buildings are about the only class of habitations which can be deemed secure against such dreadful shocks.”<sup>3</sup> By the time its replacement was built in 1866 timber was the dominant building material in what was then the capital city of New Zealand - but fires in the commercial districts of Wellington were a significant risk. In 1867 the Wellington City Council proposed bylaws to control the risk of fire. In 1877 the council established a system of fire districts, and the Number 1 Fire District included all of the reclaimed land and all properties within 150 links of the ‘Golden Mile’ from Thorndon Quay, along Lambton Quay, Willis Street and Manners Street. All new buildings in this CBD zone were then required to be sheathed in incombustible materials – such as corrugated iron, or slates.<sup>4</sup> The Thistle Inn and the

<sup>1</sup>The New Zealand Gazette and Britannia Spectator, 3 October 1840.

<sup>2</sup> Clendon J, Research report on the Thistle Inn, NZ Historic Places Trust, 1975, p.5.

<sup>3</sup> Independent, 18 October 1848

<sup>4</sup> Chris Cochran, ‘Styles of Sham and Genuine Simplicity’ in David Hamer and Roberta Nicholls, *The Making of Wellington: 1800 -1914*, (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1990) 111, 123

old Government Buildings (1876 WCC ref 17/179) are the only two surviving timber buildings within this zone.

Although now dwarfed by modern high-rise developments and by the nearby Government Buildings, at the time of its rebuild the two-storey Thistle Inn was one of the largest in the area. Ownership changes in the land and the building are difficult to determine, but it appears that Cooper ran the hotel until 1882, after which it had a succession of owners.



---

Thorndon Quay and Mulgrave Street, Wellington. Davis, William Henry Whitmore, 1812-1901: Photographs of Wellington and district. Ref: 10x8-2087-G. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. <http://natlib.govt.nz/records/23073579>

In 1876 the foreshore in front of the Thistle Inn was reclaimed to create more land for development, since that time the single storey buildings seen in photographs from the 1850s and 60s have disappeared to be replaced with modern high-rises. The Wellington Railway Station is situated upon what used to be the beach in front of the hotel.

The plot of land occupied by the Thistle Inn was sold by Charles Brown to his son James Richard in 1879. By 1882, T.G. McCarthy had purchased the land surrounding the Thistle Inn. He purchased the hotel, amalgamated several sites onto one title and sold the enlarged property to a licensed victualler named Brady. Upon the death of Brady in 1889, the estate was transferred to the Public Trustee who leased the land to a number of people; the first was H. Gilmour, who two years later assigned his interests to the brewing company J. Staples and Co. Ltd. In 1896 Thomas Turnbull was commissioned to design additions and alterations to the ground floor of the building.

In 1899 Staples obtained a new 21 year lease from the Public Trust, and in 1900 subleased the Thistle Inn to John Curran for nine years and eight months, followed

by a five year lease to Ellen Kenney. Following these leases, the property was purchased outright by Staples in 1915.

From 1920 to 1936 leases on the property changed hands many times, including one prior lessee, John Curran, who reacquainted himself with the property in 1924 and 1925. In 1936 Staples and Co. leased the Thistle Inn to William O'Grady who was to hold the license for the next 25 years. The following year the building ownership was formally changed from J. Staples and Co. Ltd to New Zealand Breweries (of which Staples was a part) who took over the title. In 1951, the Licensing Control Commission ordered that the Thistle Inn be rebuilt; however, little was done about this despite a deadline of 31 May 1952. In 1957 William O'Grady left the hotel and New Zealand Breweries sold the Thistle Inn to the Thistle Inn Company headed by Joe Aspell. Aspell had a long association with the building which only ended with his death.

In 1962, after another licensing Commission report stated that the conditions of the Thistle Inn were not up to standard, a building consent application was made to Wellington City Council to renovate the building. This work was carried out to designs of architect James Craig in 1963 and included replacement of the bar floor, strengthening of the building with steel girders, and the provision of new linings and partitions. Craig was also responsible for minor alterations in 1969 that included a new 'flagon store' and a new canopy.<sup>5</sup>

During the 1960s the building was threatened with demolition twice, once from the development of the Government Centre in Thorndon, and once by a proposal to widen Mulgrave Street as a motorway link.

In 2004 the building was 'stripped back' to its 1866 form, and works included the demolition of the 1960s additions, and the construction of a new cool room, bathroom facilities, roof deck, and entranceway.

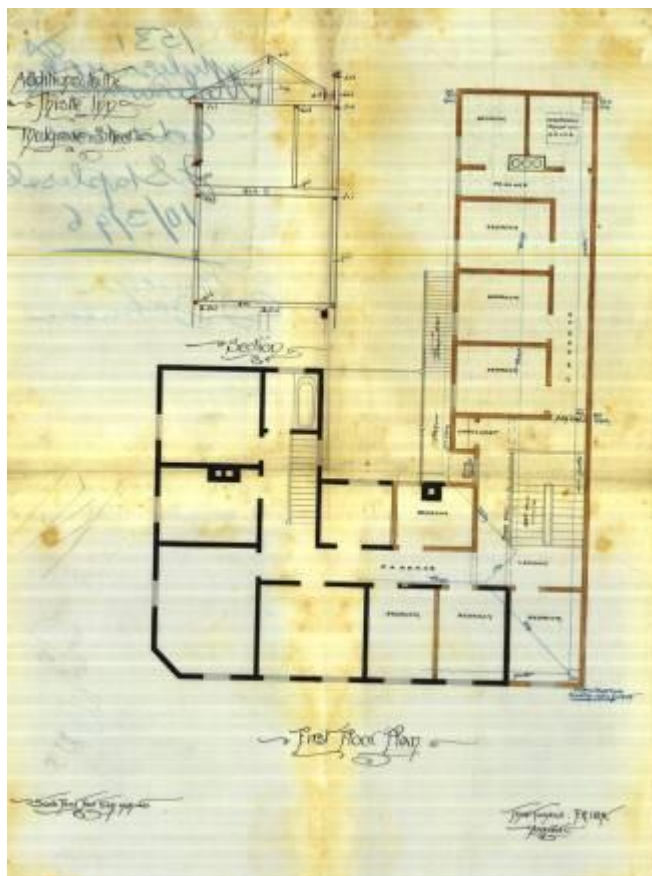
Well-known writer Katherine Mansfield (1888-1923) set her 1907 short story 'Leves Amores' there. The story features what is strongly suggested as a romantic and sexual relationship between two women who return to the Thistle after a night at the opera, the narrator opening the story with the line 'I can never forget the Thistle Hotel. I can never forget that strange winter night.'<sup>6</sup>

---

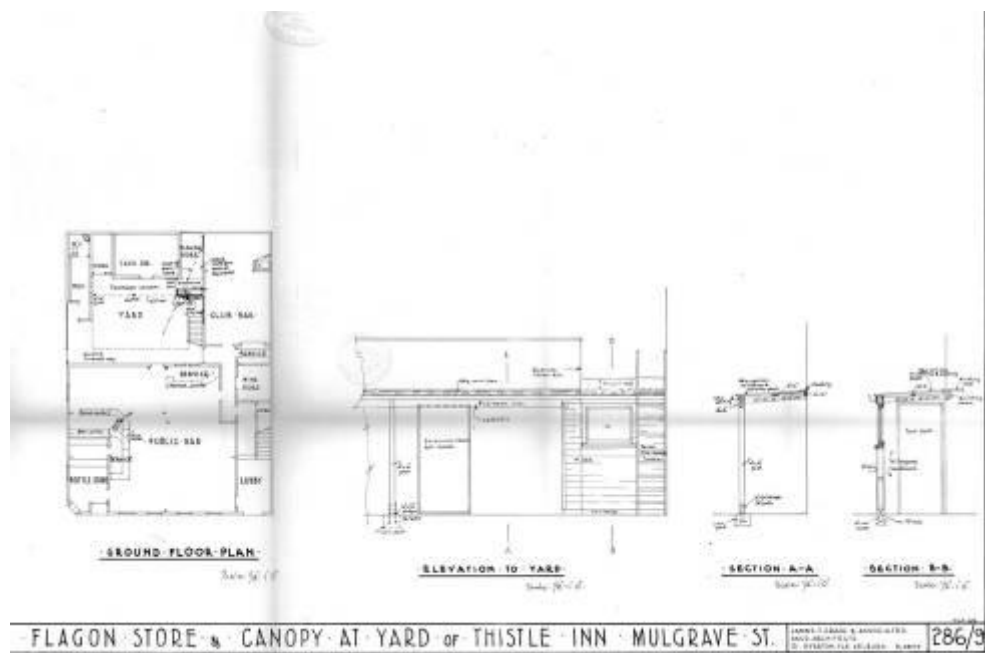
<sup>5</sup> WCA 00058: 662: C30415: 001

<sup>6</sup> Rebecca Chrystal and Rebecca O'Brien, 'Thistle Inn – 3 Mulgrave Street and Kate Sheppard, Thorndon, Wellington', Heritage New Zealand – Pouhere Taonga, 8 January 2021, accessed 10 August 2022, <https://www.heritage.org.nz/the-list/details/1439>





Plans for Additions to the Thistle Inn – Turnbull (WCA 00053: 26: 1531: 003)



Additions of Flagon Store and Canopy in yard – 1969 (WCA 00058: 662: C30415: 001)

---

**1.2 Timeline of modifications** (Original plans 1840/1866 cannot be accessed – Plans available are Thomas Turnbull 1896 Craig and Associates 1969)

1840	Original Thistle Inn Constructed
1866	Original Thistle Inn destroyed by fire – replacement Thistle Inn (preset building) constructed
1896-97	Additions and alterations to the building (see William Turnbull plans – 00053: 26: 1531: 001 – 011)
1952	Additions – Build a new store shed at back of the Thistle Inn (00056: 437: B33327)
1962-63	Additions and alterations – replacement of the bar floor, strengthening of the building with steel girders, and the provision of new linings and partitions (based on history – unable to find any plans)
1965	Addition – Awning to hotel (00058: 400: C17077)
1969	Additions and alterations – new ‘flagon store’ and a new canopy
1970	Alterations to Thistle Inn (00058: 662: C30415)
2004	Additions and alterations – Demolition of outbuildings, construction of new cool room, toilets, roof deck, and entranceway.

**1.3 Occupation history**

Not assessed

**1.4 Architect**

The architect of the original building is unknown – Thomas Turnbull is associated with the earliest available plans.

**2.0 Physical description**

**2.1 Architecture**

The Thistle Inn is a very rare example of the commercial timber buildings that made up central Wellington in the mid-19th century. Timber was the predominant building material for the first three decades after settlement, but from 1880, masonry began to replace timber until, today, the Thistle remains as one of only two timber buildings left on the Golden Mile – the other is the much larger Government Buildings on Lambton Quay (WCC 17/179).

The building has two street facades, one to Mulgrave Street and one to Kate Sheppard Place. Each has a moulded cornice at eaves level. There is a regular row of matching double-hung windows at first floor level (6 on Mulgrave St and 3 on Kate Sheppard Place, with one now covered on the chamfered face at the corner). Ground floor openings had been altered and modernised – but following the c.2004 renovations have been returned to something that approximates the original design.

The cladding is rusticated weatherboards, important technically as one of the two earliest recorded examples in Wellington of a profile that later became very popular (the other example is 22 The Terrace, 1866). The side walls, and the hipped roof, are clad in corrugated iron.

The designer of the Thistle is not known. It is possible that William Cooper designed the building since it follows a form that was traditional for the time (public bar with

corner entrance from the street, bedrooms on the first floor with separate entrance). While the bar has been extensively modified, the exterior form and first floor joinery have remained intact. The building is therefore reasonably authentic for its age and is very rare in continuing its original use for over 140+ years.

## **2.2 Materials**

- Timber framing
- Weatherboards
- Steel girders
- Corrugated mild steel roofing

## **2.3 Setting**

The overall setting of the Thistle Inn has been significantly impacted upon by the demolition of smaller scale buildings and the construction of modern high-rise structures. The size of the building, however, does mean that it is not overwhelmed by being overshadowed by these buildings.

Due to its position on a slight rise and on a prominent corner near the railway and bus station, this building has gained a landmark status. It also plays an important role in illustrating the relationship between the early development of Wellington and the original foreshore.

In the wider setting of Thorndon, the Thistle Inn has two near contemporaries. The much-altered Shepherd's Arms Hotel (1870) and the Shamrock Hotel (1893) both on Tinakori Road. All three of these buildings were built as timber hotels / licensed Public Houses in the mid – late 19<sup>th</sup> century.



### 3.0 Sources

Alexander Turnbull Library. Davis, William Henry Whitmore, 1812-1901 : Photographs of Wellington and district. 'Thorndon Quay and Mulgrave Street, Wellington'. Ref: 10x8-2087-G. <http://natlib.govt.nz/records/23073579>

Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. Taylor, Richard, 1805-1873 :Sketchbook. 1835-1860.. 'Wellington from Mulgrave Street, looking towards Te Aro. ca 1858'. Ref: E-296-q-170. <http://natlib.govt.nz/records/22581516>

Chrystal, Rebecca and Rebecca O'Brien. 'Thistle Inn – 3 Mulgrave Street and Kate Sheppard, Thorndon, Wellington'. Heritage New Zealand – Pouhere Taonga. 8 January 2021, accessed 10 August 2022, <https://www.heritage.org.nz/the-list/details/1439>

Clendon, J. *Research report on the Thistle Inn*. NZ Historic Places Trust, 1975.

Cochran, Chris. *Turnbull House Conservation Plan*. Wellington: Department of Conservation, 1991.

Historic Places Trust, "Turnbull, Thomas - Architect", *Professional Biographies*, accessed September 25, 2012, <http://www.historic.org.nz/corporate/registersearch/ProfessionalBio/Professional.aspx?CPName=Turnbull,+Thomas>; *site inactive*

Historic Places Trust, "Turnbull, William (1868-1914) - Architect", *Professional Biographies*, accessed September 25, 2012, [http://www.historic.org.nz/corporate/registersearch/ProfessionalBio/Professional.aspx?CPName=Turnbull,+William+\(1868-1914\)](http://www.historic.org.nz/corporate/registersearch/ProfessionalBio/Professional.aspx?CPName=Turnbull,+William+(1868-1914)); *site inactive*

*The New Zealand Gazette and Britannia Spectator*, 3 October 1840

Wellington City Council, *Wellington Heritage Building Inventory 2001: Non-Residential Buildings*. Wellington City Council, 2001.

#### Wellington City Archives

00058: 662: C30415

00053: 26: 1531: 003

00058: 662: C30415: 001

00058: 400: C17077

00056: 437: B33327

William Turnbull plans – 00053: 26: 1531: 001 – 011

## 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 Thistle Inn is a rare example of a mid-19<sup>th</sup> century timber Victorian hotel/public house, and is one of the oldest surviving commercial buildings in Wellington.

**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 local landmark. It is located on a prominent corner that is visible from Thorndon Quay (formerly the beachfront). It stands in contrast to its many high-rise neighbours on Mulgrave 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 has some group value with the nearby former J. Staples and Co Ltd. owned brewing tower on Murphy Street (WCC 18/224), and with the two 19<sup>th</sup> century timber hotels in nearby Thorndon – the Shamrock and Shepherd's Arms hotels on Tinakori Road.

#### **Historic Value:**

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

The building has a long and eventful history and some of the most the significant historic associations include: -

Carne Bidwell, a 'Sydney merchant', and noted explorer and naturalist who purchased the land in 1841; Katherine Mansfield used the hotel as her as the setting for the story 'Leaves Amores'; J. Staples and Co Ltd. purchased the hotel in 1915. Staples established a brewery in Thorndon in 1866 and this was later amalgamated into New Zealand Breweries in 1923.

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

The Thistle Inn is one of the oldest commercial buildings in Wellington and is associated with the early settlement and development of the city. It is the oldest hotel in Wellington and among the oldest in New Zealand, having held its liquor license since 1840. The hotel was built on the foreshore prior to reclamation of the harbour, and is an important reference point and landmark in a much-altered the cityscape. The Thistle Inn played an important role in the social history of Wellington and continues in its use as a licensed public house.

**Scientific Value:**

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

This area on the historic harbour/waterfront was also used by Maori prior to European Settlement and is close to the Pipitea Pa site.

There were two known pre 1900 buildings on this site – the original 1840 hotel, and the present building that was built in 1866.

**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 is thought to be the first in Wellington to be clad in rusticated weatherboards. It is a rare surviving example of an 1860s commercial building and there is technological value in its form, structure, building materials, and any accumulated fixtures and fittings.

**Social Value:**

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

The building is likely to be held in high public esteem as one of the oldest surviving commercial buildings in Wellington. It is a contemporary of the nearby, and highly regarded, Old St Paul's Cathedral.

**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 Thistle Inn contributes greatly to a sense of place and continuity in Wellington as it is Wellington's oldest pub and has been in continuous use since it was rebuilt in 1866. It also plays an important role in the relationship between the developing town of Wellington and the original foreshore.

**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 a now rare example of a timber hotel/ licensed public house. Timber hotels were a common New Zealand building-type in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, but many have been lost to fire, decay and commercial development. This building is the last timber hotel, and one of only two timber buildings, to remain on the Golden Mile. The building gains value because it has been retained on its original site, in its original use, and because it is relatively unmodified.

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

This building is a good representative example of the type of timber hotels that were common to many New Zealand towns and cities in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> 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?*

Although the building has been constantly adapted for its ongoing use as a hotel/ licensed public house, the building retains much of its early or original form, structure and built fabric.

***Local/Regional/National/International***

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

This is a nationally important building as it is a rare example in Wellington, and along with the Shamrock Tavern, tells an important part of Wellington and New Zealand's history. It retains authenticity of design, materials, craftsmanship, and function although the integrity of its setting has been impacted upon negatively by modern buildings. Its long social history in Wellington, as well as association with important and well known Wellingtonians make this building significant. It contributes greatly to a sense of continuity in what is now a much changed area of the city.

## 4.0 Appendix

### 2021 - Review against revised heritage assessment criteria

Significant heritage values – [A, B, C, E, F]

<b>A: Historic values</b>	Significant
(i) Themes	Y
(ii) Events	
(iii) People	Y
(iv) Social	Y
<b>B: Physical values</b>	Significant
(i) Archaeological	Y
(ii) Architectural	Y
(iii) Townscape	Y
(iv) Group	Y
(v) Surroundings	Y
(vi) Scientific	
(vii) Technological	Y
(viii) Integrity	Y
(ix) Age	Y
<b>C: Social values</b>	Significant
(i) Sentiment	
(ii) Recognition	Y
(iii) Sense of place	Y
<b>D: Tangata whenua values</b>	Possible
<b>E: Rarity</b>	Significant
<b>F: Representativeness</b>	Significant