

Dominion Observatory

34 Salamanca Road



Image: *Charles Collins, 2015*

Summary of heritage significance

- The Dominion Observatory is good representative example of an Edwardian Baroque-style public building designed by the Government Architect, John Campbell. It is notable for its prominent octagonal tower, and for its elegant Classical proportions and ornamentation scheme.
- The Dominion Observatory was erected for the Government Time Service in 1907, has been used since the 1920s for recording seismological activities. The site has historic significance for the adjoining remains of the Garden Battery.
- The building is part of the Dominion Observatory Historic Area (as registered by New Zealand Historic Places Trust) which contains two other historic observatories; the Carter Observatory (1940) and the Thomas King Observatory (1912).

District Plan:	Map 17 reference 269
Legal Description:	Sec 1223 Town of Wellington
Heritage Area:	No
HPT Listed:	Category I reference 4700, Dominion Observatory Historic Area
Archaeological Site:	Central City NZAA R27/270
Other Names:	Hector Observatory
Key physical dates:	1907 1925 (extensions)
Architect / Builder:	Architect: John Campbell
Former uses:	Observatory
Current uses:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Laboratory
Earthquake Prone Status:	124 Served expires - 31/7/12 SR 172138

Extent: Cityview GIS 2012



1.0 Outline History

1.1 History

The Dominion Observatory was erected for the Government Time Service, originally established in 1868 when standard time was established for the entire country. At that time the observatory was called Hector Observatory after Sir James Hector (1834-1907), the founder of the time service, the director from 1869-1903 and the man dubbed the 'Father' of New Zealand science. Hector was, at various times, Director of the Colonial Museum, Colonial Laboratory and Geological Survey.

The first observatory was located in the Bolton Street cemetery reserve, not far from the Colonial Museum complex behind Parliament Buildings. With the expanding cemetery threatening the observatory's existence Hector instructed that the new observatory be built on the hill above the Botanic Gardens. The Wellington Botanic Gardens Vesting Act 1891 allowed the city council to vest the land in the government's hands.¹ The building was designed by John Campbell, Government Architect, in his typical Edwardian Baroque style and built in 1907.

The building became responsible for seismology and, after 1940, when the Carter Observatory was built this became the building's primary function. The name was changed to the Dominion Observatory in 1925, the same year that the observatory was incorporated into the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research (DSIR). There has been just one substantial addition to the building, an extension to the west in 1926. Many prominent New Zealand scientists have worked at the Dominion Observatory including Dr. Charles Edward Adams (1870-1945) and Robert Cecil Hayes (1900-1977).² The building remains the centre of seismology in New Zealand.³

In 1994 the New Zealand Historic Places Trust registered the area containing the three observatories (the Meteorological Office, Carter Observatory, and the Dominion Observatory) as the Dominion Observatory Historic Area.⁴ Below the building lies the magazines of the old Garden Battery built in 1886 as part of the fortifications erected in the four main ports after the second Russian Scare of 1885.

¹ New Zealand Historic Places Trust, 'Recommendation for registration: Dominion Observatory Historic Area,' p.1.

² Wellington City Council, 'Dominion Observatory heritage assessment,' unpublished report prepared for Wellington City Council, File no. 1041-06-SAL32, Wellington City Council Records.

³ History is an updated version of: Wellington City Council, "Salamanca Road Dominion Observatory," *Wellington Heritage Building Inventory 2001: Non-Residential Buildings* (Wellington City Council, 2001), SALA3.

⁴ New Zealand Historic Places Trust, 'Dominion Observatory Historic Area,' accessed 1 October 2012, <http://www.historic.org.nz/TheRegister/RegisterSearch/RegisterResults.aspx?RID=7033>.



Dominion Observatory, Wellington Botanic Gardens. Jeffares, Isaac Henry Bowen, 1868-1936: Photographs. Ref: 1/2-076775-G. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.

1.2 Timeline of modifications

1926 West extension

1.3 Occupation history

1907 Hector Observatory

1925 Dominion Observatory (as part of Department of Scientific and Industrial Research)

1.4 Architect

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 unbuilt 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 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. ⁵

⁵ New Zealand Historic Places Trust Professional Biographies, 'John Campbell,' accessed 10 September 2012,

2.0 Physical description

2.1 Architecture

The Dominion Observatory is a pleasant Edwardian Baroque style building, originally designed as a pavilion of one storey capped by an octagonal tower. Although Edwardian Baroque was the signature style of its designer, Government Architect John Campbell, it has also been suggested that the style was chosen to establish similarities between the Dominion Observatory and England's Royal Observatory (designed by Christopher Wren in 1675).⁶

The Dominion Observatory originally consisted of a transit room, and an octagonal clock room with an office above, forming the tower. It was augmented by an addition to the western side in 1925 which added a further pavilion. Both the original building and new wing were constructed of load-bearing brick masonry on concrete foundations. The facades consist of regular, double-hung windows, each framed by a Gibbs surround - that is, alternating square bands which have the appearance of intermittent quoins. These bands are rendered in plaster. The corners have smaller quoins in plaster, and there is a plastered base to the building. The observatory is capped by a simple cornice and shallow parapet.

The alternating cladding of brick and plaster has been effectively exploited to give the facade textural interest. The octagonal tower is the centrepiece of the Observatory and features an ornamental band of plasterwork at eaves level.⁷

2.2 Materials

- Masonry

2.3 Setting

The building is located in the Dominion Observatory Historic Area (as listed by the Historic Places Trust), next to the Botanical Gardens on reserve land. Also included in the area are the Carter Observatory (1941) and the Thomas King Observatory (1912). The hill upon which they stand overlooks Wellington to the east and the Botanical Gardens to the west and northwest. Below the building lies the magazines of the old Garden Battery, built in 1886 as part of the fortifications erected in the four main ports after the second Russian Scare of 1885.

The nearby Meteorological Office (1968), although not included in the designation of the NZHPT historic area, is another nearby scientific institution set within the same demise of reserve land.

<http://www.historic.org.nz/corporate/registersearch/ProfessionalBio/Professional.aspx?CPName=Campbell.+John>.

⁶ Department of Conservation, 'Dominion Observatory,' accessed 11 September 2012, <http://www.doc.govt.nz/upload/documents/conservation/historic/by-region/wellington/dominion-observatory-factsheet-2007.pdf>.

⁷ Architecture is an updated version of: Wellington City Council, "Salamanca Road Dominion Observatory," *Wellington Heritage Building Inventory 2001: Non-Residential Buildings* (Wellington City Council, 2001), SALA3.

3.0 Sources

Department of Conservation. 'Dominion Observatory.'
<http://www.doc.govt.nz/upload/documents/conservation/historic/by-region/wellington/dominion-observatory-factsheet-2007.pdf>. Accessed 11 September 2012.

New Zealand Historic Places Trust. 'Dominion Observatory Historic Area.' Accessed 10 September 2012.
<http://www.historic.org.nz/TheRegister/RegisterSearch/RegisterResults.aspx?RID=4700>.

New Zealand Historic Places Trust. 'Recommendation for registration: Dominion Observatory Historic Area.'

New Zealand Historic Places Trust Professional Biographies. 'John Campbell.' Accessed 10 September 2012.
<http://www.historic.org.nz/corporate/registersearch/ProfessionalBio/Professional.aspx?CPName=Campbell,+John>.

Wellington City Council. "Salamanca Road Dominion Observatory." *Wellington Heritage Building Inventory 2001: Non-Residential Buildings*. Wellington City Council, 2001. SALA3.

Wellington City Council Records

Wellington City Council. 'Dominion Observatory heritage assessment.' Unpublished report prepared for Wellington City Council. File no. 1041-06-SAL32. Wellington City Council Records.

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 Dominion Observatory is good representative example of an Edwardian Baroque-style public building designed by the Government Architect, John Campbell. It is notable for its prominent octagonal tower, and for its elegant Classical proportions and ornamentation scheme.

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 position on a ridgeline within Wellington's Botanic Gardens.

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 Dominion Observatory is part of a group of nearby scientific buildings and military fortification that include the Thomas King Observatory (1912), the Carter Observatory (1940), the Meteorological Office (1968), and the former Gardens Battery (1886). The New Zealand Historic Places Trust have recognised this relationship of the scientific and early military buildings and designated Dominion Observatory Historic Area, which includes all but the 1968 Meteorological Office building.

Historic Value:

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

The building is associated with famous New Zealand scientists such as Sir James Hector, Dr. Charles Edward Adams and Robert Cecil Hayes. It is also associated with organisations such as the Government Time Service and the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research.

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

The Dominion Observatory was erected for the Government Time Service in 1907, and the Time Service itself had been established in 1868 when a standard time was established throughout New Zealand. The building has been used since the 1920s for recording seismological activities, a very important function in an earthquake prone country. The site has historic significance for the adjoining remains of the Garden Battery (currently partly in use in association with the seismographic recording).

Scientific Value:

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

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?*

The building has educational value as it offers an insight into how observatories were designed during the early twentieth century.

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

The building has technical values associated not only with its masonry construction, but also with the extant observatory dome and other associated items of scientific equipment.

Social Value:

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

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 has had few intrusive modern alterations or repairs and contributes to the sense of place and continuity of Wellington's Botanic Gardens.

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?*

The building part of a unique group of historic, early twentieth century observatories located on reserve land adjacent to Wellington's Botanic Gardens.

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?*

Although additions were made in 1925 the building has retained a significant amount of its original 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 important on a national level as it was once the Dominion Observatory, the site of the Government Time Service and since 1920s it has been a centre of seismological research in New Zealand.

4.0 Appendix

Research checklist (desktop)

Source	Y/N	Comments
1995 Heritage Inventory		
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		
Heritage items folder (electronic)		
HPT website	Y	
HPT files		
Conservation Plan		
Searched Heritage Library (CAB 2)		

Background research



Overlooking Kelburn, Wellington, 1935. Evening post (Newspaper. 1865-2002):
Photographic negatives and prints of the Evening Post newspaper. Ref: PAColl-5927-