

## Hotel St George

124 Willis Street



Image: *Charles Collins, 2015*

### Summary of heritage significance

- The Hotel St George is one of Wellington's outstanding Art Deco buildings. It is notable for the way in which it 'turns-the-corner' from Boulcott to Willis Street, for its well proportioned facades and restrained scheme of Art Deco ornamentation.
- This building contributes to a sense of place and continuity in the Central city. It is a building that has had a prominent history as a hotel and is a focus of community identity.
- This building has important townscape value as it is sited on a prominent site in the city, is a landmark, and makes a strong positive contribution to the character of the city.

District Plan:	Map 17, reference 354 ( <i>Willis Street and Boulcott Street facades first floor and above</i> )
Legal Description:	Lot 1 & 2 DP 55
Heritage Area:	N/A
HPT Listed:	Category 2, reference 3624
Archaeological Site:	NZAA Central City R27/270
Other Names:	Hotel St George, Majestic Hotel, Albert Hotel
Key physical dates:	1929-30
Architect / Builder:	William John Prouse
Former uses:	Residential and Commercial - Hotel
Current uses:	Residential and Commercial – Hotel/businesses
Earthquake Prone Status:	Not included on 21/05/2014 EQP List

Extent: Cityview GIS



## **1.0 Outline History**

### **1.1 History**

The Hotel St George is a significant Wellington Hotel sited on a prominent corner in the middle of the Wellington Central City. It has an interesting Art Deco façade which is split in the middle, leaving separate but identical elevations to Willis and Boulcott Streets. It was a prominent hotel in Wellington and at the time was called a 'boon to travelling public', 'the Southern Hemisphere's most palatial Hotel, and was noted as being able to 'vie with anything to be found in the Old Country, on the Continent of Europe, or in the United States'.<sup>1</sup>

This site has been occupied by a building since the 1850s. The site had been purchased by the Hon. F. J. Tollemache, who sold it on to the United Bank of Australia in 1851. The bank constructed banking premises on the site, with a manager's residence, carriage house, and stables. The building was erected by Mr. James Wilson, under the supervision of Mr. E. Roberts, a clerk of works to the Royal Engineers. This was rebuilt following the 1855 earthquake which had left the building in ruins. In 1877 John Plimmer purchased the building and converted it into the Albert Hotel, adding a storey to the Willis Street frontage to accommodate suites. At the time it was noted that the hotel would 'when completed will be equal, if not superior' to all others in the area. The hotel remained for many years but in 1929 it was decided that a new hotel that would be worthy of the capital city and the exceedingly valuable site that it occupies was needed.

Demolition of the old Albert Hotel commenced in 1929 and construction of the St George began. Construction was carried out by Hansford and Mills to plans designed by William John Prouse. The building was heralded as being a marked advance upon other buildings in the city. The design was influenced by the Art Deco style that was popular at the time, but it was the construction methods that were the real improvement. The building was constructed with a steel frame and reinforced concrete – the best available structural-system of the time – and a system that had been proven to be earthquake-resistant in San Francisco and Japan. These were new techniques in New Zealand hotel building and were regarded as being extremely innovative. The Hotel was originally intended to be called the Majestic Hotel to compliment the Majestic theatre that Prouse had recently designed. Upon opening, however, the hotel had been named the St George and has operated under that name since that time.

The hotel has hosted a number of extremely well known people including Alfred Hitchcock, Jean Batten, Henry Ford, Laurence Olivier, and The Beatles. During World War two it was used to house American Marines.

The hotel is a cultural and architectural landmark in Wellington City, and although its interiors are no longer in original condition, the Art Deco facades remain. The design is an extremely clever use of a prominent corner site and contributes hugely to the Boulcott and Willis streetscape. Although it is no longer the most luxurious hotel in Wellington, it remains a significant feature in the Central City.

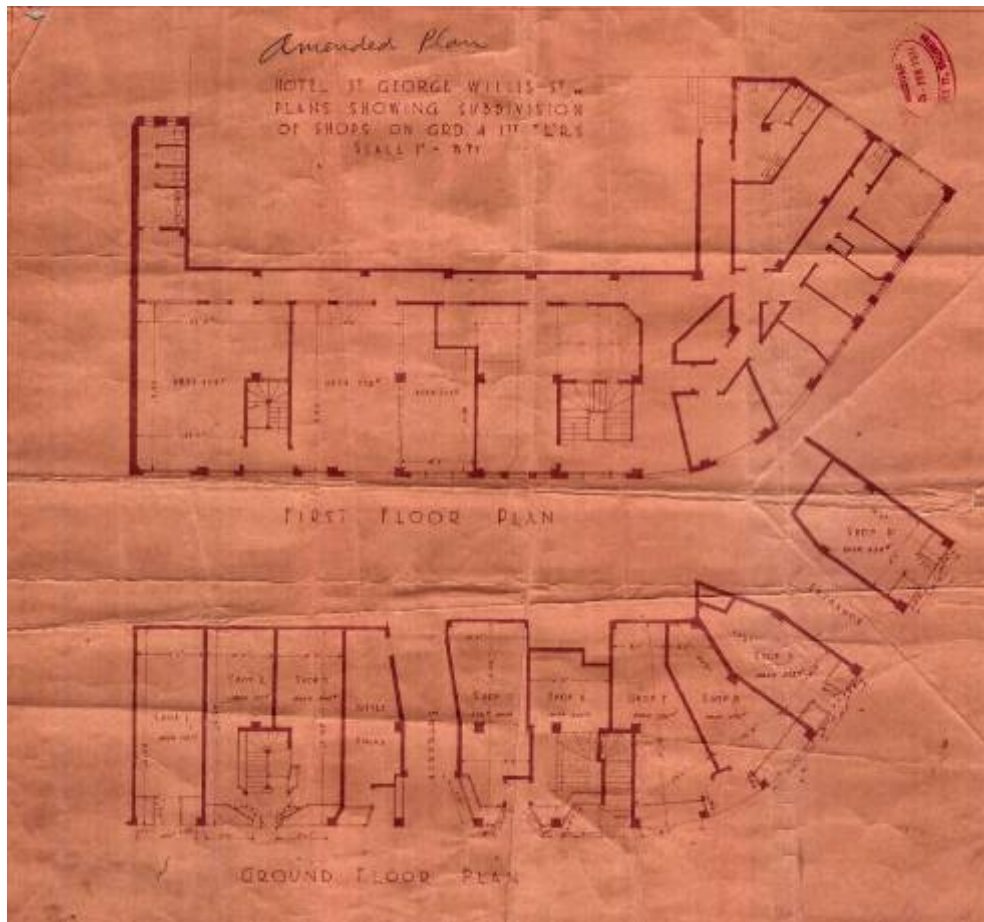
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<sup>1</sup> 'Heritage Building – 124 Willis Street', 1996. 1041-06-WIL124, Wellington City Council Records.



'The Beatles at the St George, Wellington', URL:  
<http://www.nzhistory.net.nz/media/photo/the-beatles-at-the-st-george-wellington>,  
(Ministry for Culture and Heritage), updated 20-Dec-2012

## 1.2 Timeline of modifications



Original plans as proposed:-WCA 00056-86-B8156

1929	Construction of Hotel St George (00056:86:B8156)
1936	Alterations to shop front (00056:182:B15994)
1942	Alterations – Air raid shelter (00056:279:B22496)
1943	Alterations – Staff quarters in roof section (00056:286:B22926)
1945	Alterations – Boiler house (00056:302:B23919)
1951	Alteration – Bottle store (00056:410:B31544)
1961	Alteration – creation of a new manager's office and luggage room (00058:201:C9211)
1962	Alterations to hotel bar (00058:237:C10587)
1963	Alterations to lifts (00058:270:C11946) Alterations to shop (00058:250:C11094)
1965	Addition – New cocktail bar on the second floor (00058:421:C17996) Alteration to lavatories (00058:423:C18103)
1966	Alterations to lift doors (00058:439:C18815)
1967	Additions to toilets (00058:495:C21320) Building additions (00058:499:C21511) Alteration – new manager's office (00058:525:C25402) Alterations to entrance (00058:536:C25865) Alterations to bar and cellar to form new women's toilets (00058:540:C26024)
1969	Addition fire escape (00058:621:C29008)
1971	Alterations to function rooms (00058:742:C33605)
1972	Alterations to dining room and kitchen (00058:780:C35140)

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1977	Alterations to storeroom (00058:797:C35822) Alteration to upper car-park cribwall (00058:1089:C47125) Alterations to house bar (00058:1097:C47425)
1979	Addition to cart dock (00058:1227:C52460)
1981	Alterations to first floor for Cobb & Co restaurant (00058:1327:C55884) Additions and alterations to bar, ground level and level 3 (00058:1334:C56109) Additions to linen store and laundry (00058:1344:C56476) Erect sign and verandah alterations (00058:0:C575030)
1988	Addition – sign (00059:234:D10757)
1994	Addition – install sign (00060:115:4177) Demolition of Wellington polytechnic (00061:23:10673)
1995	Alterations to Level 2 (00061:110:13590) Alterations to office (00061:168:15369)
1996	Subdivision – Wellington polytechnic- St George Hostel- Ground floor tenancy (00078:376:26768)
1998	New building entrance (00078:380:46008)
1999	Minor alterations to front reception office (00078:290:58248)
2003	Additions and alterations – demolition of partition walls and closing off of window and door (00078:1361:110379)
2005	Alterations to toilets and ramp; internal alterations level 1 (00078:1645:132628)
2006	Office building alterations (00078:2104:139747) Shop alterations (00078:2250:145547) Structural strengthening, stage 1 (00078:3047:146690)
2009	Addition/alteration – Dentists, ground floor, new dental surgery (00078:3146:196576)

### 1.3 Occupation history

Not assessed

### 1.4 Architect

#### **William John Prouse (1878-1956)**

Prouse (1878-1956) came from a timber merchants' family. Although receiving no formal architectural training, Prouse practised in Wellington for 46 years. He was one of the first to use steel frame construction in New Zealand. With John Hoggard he established the partnership of Hoggard and Prouse about 1907. They were joined by William Henry Gummer in 1913 and the three were admitted to the New Zealand Institute of Architects in 1914, Prouse as an Associate, Hoggard and Gummer as Fellows. The firm was responsible for many public buildings throughout New Zealand including Brittain's Building (1909), the State Fire Insurance Building (1919), and the Majestic Theatre (1928), all in Wellington, and the Masonic Hotel, Napier (1932).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Historic Places Trust, "William John Prouse", *Professional Biographies*, accessed March 21, 2013, <http://www.historic.org.nz/corporate/registersearch/ProfessionalBio/Professional.aspx?CPName=Prouse,+William+John>

## **2.0 Physical description**

### **2.1 Architecture**

The Hotel St George is a cast in situ reinforced concrete construction on a steel frame. Little of the original interior remains, but the Art Deco facades of the building remain in excellent condition. Prouse has made sensible use of a prominent corner site. The main part of the hotel is articulated in two main projecting tower-blocks, joined by a receding bay with solid balconies, which 'turns' the building from Willis Street to Boulcott Street. Art Deco features such as the Ziggurat are embossed on the facades by way of the decorative moulding.

### **2.2 Materials**

Reinforced concrete on a steel frame.

### **2.3 Setting**

The Hotel St George is an architectural landmark on a prominent site in central Wellington. It is an extremely prominent element of both the Willis and Boulcott streetscapes. Its style, massing and colour easily distinguish it from those adjacent buildings, and the broad streets and view shafts allow it to be seen from some distance. Along with the former Dr Henry Pollen's House (1902) WCC ref 17/31, and St Mary of the Angels (1919 – 20) WCC ref 17/35, and the adjacent McDonald Building (1919) WCC ref 17/348, this building completes a small precinct of heritage buildings.

## **3.0 Sources**

'The Beatles at the St George, Wellington', URL:  
<http://www.nzhistory.net.nz/media/photo/the-beatles-at-the-st-george-wellington>, (Ministry for Culture and Heritage), updated 20-Dec-2012

Historic Places Trust, "William John Prouse", *Professional Biographies*, accessed March 21, 2013,  
<http://www.historic.org.nz/corporate/registersearch/ProfessionalBio/Professional.aspx?CPName=Prouse,+William+John>

**Wellington City Council Records**

'Heritage Building – 124 Willis Street', 1996. 1041-06-WIL124, Wellington City Council Records.

**Wellington City Archives**

WCA 00056-86-B8156



## 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 Hotel St George is one of Wellington's outstanding Art Deco buildings. It is notable for the way in which it 'turns-the-corner' from Boulcott to Willis Street, for its well proportioned facades and restrained scheme of Art Deco ornamentation.

**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 has important townscape value as it is sited on a prominent site in the city, is a landmark, and makes a strong positive contribution to the character of the city.

**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?*

#### **Historic Value:**

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

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

This building is associated with the history of hotels in Wellington and the commercial development of the city.

#### **Scientific Value:**

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

There has been a building on this site since at least the 1850s, it is therefore of archaeological importance. It is also included in the NZAA Central City R27/270 listing.

**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?*

This building is of technical importance as it is one of the first steel framed, reinforced concrete hotels constructed in Wellington.

#### **Social Value:**

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

This is a prominent building that has hosted a number of international celebrities, including The Beatles. It is held in high esteem as it has a long history with Wellington.

***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?*

This building contributes to a sense of place and continuity in the Central city. It is a building that has had a prominent history as a hotel and is a focus of community identity.

***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?*

This building is a good example of an Art Deco Hotel, a class of building that is well represented in Wellington (along with the Hotel Waterloo). It is a well designed representative of Art Deco architecture. It is also a good example of a multi-storeyed building of this design.

***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 exterior of this building retains much of its original material and is in good condition, for this reason it has authenticity and integrity.

***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 level due to its long history with Wellington, its prominent siting, and its contribution to the Willis and Boulcott streetscape.

## 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*