

Ward Observatory



Location: Cooks Garden

Heritage NZ Pouhere Taonga 1

Registration Number: 179

Physical Description: The single storied timber framed building has a multi-faceted faceted plan to support a half dome observatory roof with sliding segments for the telescope. The building has timber louvers on one side and a fixed four paned timber window on the other. Its entry projects slightly from its north side. A single storey timber framed rectangular planned building is adjacent to it.

Other known names:

Current Use: Observatory

Former Uses:

Heritage Status: HNZPT Registered **District Plan Class:** Class A
(Cat. 1)

Architectural Style: **Date of Construction:** 1903

Materials: Painted timber rusticated weatherboards, coverboards and joinery, sheet metal roof

Registered owner:

Register Item Number:

1

Building Type:

- Residential
- Commercial
- Industrial
- Recreation
- Institutional
- Agriculture
- Other

Significance:

- Archaeological
- Architectural
- Historic
- Scientific
- Technological
- Cultural

Thematic Context

- Early Settlement
- Residential
- Industry
- Agricultural
- Commerce
- Transport
- Civic/Admin
- Health
- Education
- Religion
- Recreation
- Community
- Memorials
- Military

Built Heritage Inventory



WHANGANUI
DISTRICT COUNCIL
Te Kaunihera a Rohe o Whanganui

Legal Description: Pt Res H - Observatory

History: The Ward Observatory in Wanganui reflects the growing interest in astronomy in late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century New Zealand, and the important contribution of amateur astronomers to the study of astronomy.¹ During the late 1880s, interest in astronomy in New Zealand grew, sparked by the establishment of the Colonial Observatory in Wellington in 1868 and a number of astronomical events, such as the transit of Venus in 1874 and 1882, and a total solar eclipse of the sun seen in the Wellington region in 1885. Throughout New Zealand enthusiastic amateur astronomers, such as Joseph Thomas Ward (1862-1927), established astronomical societies.

Ward had immigrated to New Zealand in 1879 or 1880 and after marrying Ada Evelyn Wright, settled in Wanganui in 1894. Ward established a bookshop and stationery business, but his real passion was for astronomy. In 1901 he was instrumental in forming the Wanganui Astronomical Society. The new society, of which Ward was elected president, successfully sought permission from the Wanganui District Council to build an observatory in Cook's Gardens. In 1902 the society acquired a second-hand 9-½ inch refractor telescope that had been built in England in 1865 by Isaac Fletcher. The telescope arrived in New Zealand in December of that year and was stored by the Railways Department free of charge until its new home could be built. Based on plans supplied by Ward, the new observatory was designed by Alfred Atkins (1850-1919) a noted architect who had designed a number of public buildings in Wanganui. It was built by Russell and Bignell, and was officially opened on 25 May 1903 by the Premier, Rt. Hon Richard J. Seddon, with Ward appointed the honorary director. Ward, and his assistant, local lawyer Thomas Allison, made a special study of double stars. Many of these observations are now recognised in international star catalogues as 'Ward doubles'. He also made astronomy accessible to the general public through lectures, opening the observatory to visits, and in his weekly column in the Wanganui Herald. Ward is also credited with making the first astronomical telescopes in New Zealand. In 1926 the observatory was handed over to the Wanganui City Council. Ward died in 1927, and his son William Herschel Ward was appointed the honorary director of the observatory. In 1952 the facilities at the observatory were expanded with the construction of a lecture room and toilets. In 1979/1980 the aperture of the dome was 'heavily modified' by the Wanganui City Council. Today the Wanganui Astronomical

¹ NZHPT register, <http://www.historic.org.nz/TheRegister/RegisterSearch/RegisterResults.aspx?RID=170>

Built Heritage Inventory



WHANGANUI
DISTRICT COUNCIL
Te Kaunihera a Rohe o Whanganui

Society continues to use the observatory as a venue for their meetings.

Joseph Ward was one of New Zealand's most important amateur astronomers of the twentieth century. The observatory established by Ward, is one of the oldest observatories founded by an amateur still extant in New Zealand.

Architect/Designer: Alfred Atkins

History of changes:

Date Period: 1900s

Rarity / Special Features: The building is one of the oldest established by an amateur astronomer in New Zealand.

Integrity: From an external inspection, the building appears to be in good condition.

Representativeness: The building is representative of building and astronomical technology of the period.

Context/Group Value: One of a number of similar observatories constructed throughout New Zealand at the time.

Diversity (Form and Features): the form and materials are typical for the building type for the period of construction.

Fragility / Vulnerability: As a timber building, it is vulnerable to fire, and in a prominent and publicly accessible location, it is vulnerable to vandalism.

Summary of Significance:

Architectural Qualities

The building is designed as a simple and pragmatic response to the needs of housing and using an astronomical telescope. The building is a minor local landmark as its form is unusual and is visible from local viewing points. The building has few architectural stylistic characteristics and is built using ubiquitous, standard timber framing building technology and construction techniques. The building was a collaborative design of local Wanganui Astronomical Society President, J S Ward, after whom the building is named, and local architect Alfred Atkins.

Built Heritage Inventory



WHANGANUI
DISTRICT COUNCIL
Te Kaunihera a Rohe o Whanganui

Historic and Scientific Qualities

The building is associated with J S Ward, a local amateur astronomer, who formed the Wanganui Astronomical Society, and who's enthusiasm for and interest in astronomy in Wanganui enabled the construction of the observatory in 1903 and its continued use today. Ward and his assistant Thomas Allison, made a special study of double stars whose work is internationally recognised. The building is also associated with local architect Frederick Atkins who collaborated with Ward on the designs of the building.

The building is one of the oldest observatories in New Zealand established by an amateur astronomer and its construction reflects a nationwide interest in astronomy in the late Victorian and Edwardian eras with international interest in the Transit of Venus of 1874 and 1882 as well as the solar eclipse of 1885.

Cultural Qualities

The building is now owned by the Council and continues to be used for the promotion of astronomy to the public and for meetings of the Wanganui Astronomical Society.

Reference Source:

HNZPT register.

Associated Pictures:

Date of Survey: 2012

Prepared by: Ian Bowman and Val Burr