



WHANGANUI DISTRICT HERITAGE INVENTORY

Register Item No: 311 **Type:** Building(s)

Site: Pre-1900 Archaeological Interest

Name: SELWYN BUILDINGS

Location: 74-84 Victoria Avenue, Whanganui

Legal Description: Lot 1, DP 34385

Current Details: Owner: [Contact Whanganui District Council for details]

Occupier: Automobile Association

plus Donut Shop, Money Manager, Avenue Tobacconists, AMI Insurance, Cactus Crème Café.

Original Owner: Anglican Diocesan Trustees

Date: 1923

Architect/Designer: C Newton Hood

Builder: A G Bignell

B17.2: AA Service Centre at rear – built 1955, building provided by Permabuild of Christchurch.

Status: District Plan Class: Class B, 2013

Thematic Context: Transport & Communication plus Cultural/Social

Significance: Historic, Architectural, Cultural, Context

Integrity: Substantially intact (with altered verandah/AA entrance)

Photo Reference:

WDC File Ref: Heritage/Inventory/B17 16m&n03

Date: December 2003

See p4 for additional photograph(s)



The Avenue frontage of Selwyn Buildings (B17 16m03).

History:

Of the site:

The first **Anglican church** in Wanganui was built nearby in 1848, replaced on this site by the second Christ Church built in 1866. This church, designed by HC Field, was moved to Gonville and renamed St Peter's in 1921. The Sunday School, designed by Edward Morgan, was built on the site in 1876 and also moved in 1921 to Durie Hill where it served as the St Barnabas Church Room and hall (now demolished).

Of the building:

Built by a local syndicate on Diocesan-owned land, it was originally to be known as Avenue Buildings. However, the Diocesan Trustees must have made the suggestion that it be called "Selwyn Buildings" in honour of the first Anglican Bishop of New Zealand. With its 164 foot frontage to Victoria Avenue, it was the most extensive single building erected in Wanganui at the time. The use of reinforced concrete was fortuitous, and was chosen to enable the building to be strong enough to take up to three more storeys as more office space was needed. Provision was made for a lift well to be installed in the entrance lobby. This is an excellent example of the style of building in Wanganui at a time when the Borough was about to become a City and future growth seemed assured. The *Chronicle* on 16 June 1923 commented that "Wanganui is growing rapidly, more rapidly than many realise, and the day of two-storied business premises in our main thoroughfares will soon be a thing of the past." They considered a further storey should be built right at the start given the importance of the site.

The first shops were let quickly and by 1929 Wise's Directory noted the following occupying the building: Mrs Maud Buller, tea rooms; the Lady Jellicoe Club; Mrs Bond, toilet specialist; Christie & Johnson, costumiers; Peter Dickson, solicitor; Dominion Newspaper; Australian Provident Assurance; **Mark Lampe, photographer.**

1941 occupiers: Wanganui College Board of Trustees; Mark Lampe, photographer (Tesla Studios); Mrs K Miller, toilet specialist; Mrs Rusco, elocution teacher; Marjorie Kitson & Mrs Betty Dewe, dressmakers; Mrs Joan Peters and **Mrs Muriel Swan, dancing teachers**; Manawatu Loan and Discount Co; Wellington Publishing Co.

1955 occupiers: Tesla Studios; Mrs Miller, toilet specialist; A Wilks, engraver; Madame Neilsen, dressmaker; Mrs Joan Withers, milliner; Mrs [sic] Muriel Swan, dance teacher; Manawatu Loan & Discount Co; Dominion Newspapers; Armitage, jeweller; W Groves, watchmaker. Mutual Rental Cars took over Slater's Gown Salon in 1958 (having already erected the garage at the rear).

The most significant change in the building's history came in 1981 when the **Automobile Association** moved all its Wanganui operations into one of the shops and the first floor offices. The Wanganui Branch of the AA was formed in 1911 and had previously been based at 249 Victoria Avenue. Extensive work was done on the building by local architects, Earles & Co, to renovate it for the AA, but nothing that altered its character apart from the curved entrance on the verandah. Wanganui AA General Manager, Kevin Allum, was quoted in the *Herald* at the time as saying "A modern frontage on the building would look out of place."

The AA shop was refurbished again in 1990 (Dickson Lonergan plans) and today serves as the local Driver Licensing Centre as well as AA Travel Centre.

Of the photographic studio and ballet centre:

Australian-born photographer, **Mark Lampe**, established his "**Tesla Studios**" in Wanganui in 1908, first located in Ridgway Street opposite the Post Office. He moved into Selwyn Buildings in 1923, designing his new first floor studio space to his own specifications, incorporating a skylight and two darkrooms. With a ground floor shop and large upper vestibule/display area, Tesla Studios became the most important tenant of Selwyn Buildings. Lampe made a significant contribution to Wanganui's photographic heritage up to his retirement in 1955, when he sold Tesla Studios to Geoffrey Brent. Tesla Studios remained in Selwyn Buildings until c1980 when the business moved to Taupo Quay and Lampe's photographic collection was purchased by Leigh Mitchell-Anyon. As well as his own photographic contribution, Lampe purchased Frank Denton's photographic collection in 1930 and housed this, together with the negatives of other photographers, including WJ Harding, in four rooms at Selwyn Buildings. Much of this collection was later deposited in the Alexander Turnbull Library (although some later disposed of); Lampe's own collection is still in Wanganui, owned by Leigh Mitchell-Anyon.

Ballet teacher **Muriel Swan** was another long-standing tenant of Selwyn Buildings. Her dance studio on the first floor was in operation for at least 30 years and was the training ground for two known members of

the New Zealand Ballet Company: Patricia Rianne and Jill Sunderland. Miss Swan taught British Ballet, an older style of dance run under the auspices of the BBO. She retired and moved to Hawkes Bay in the late 1960s.

Of the AA Service Centre (B17.2):

This “garage” at the rear of Selwyn Buildings was erected in 1955 by Mutual Rental Cars. It became the AA Service Centre in 1980.

Description:

Two-storey reinforced concrete building with extensive frontage to Victoria Avenue. Has original double-hung upper windows with distinctive 8-paned tops. Mock classical detailing with dentils under parapet ledge. Verandah now has curved section over AA entrance; otherwise the verandah is the original suspended style with its wooden framing visible underneath. The original parapet has been replaced with a lighter wooden version that copies the original. The main staircase retains its original wooden banisters.

Condition:

Good.

Resources Consulted:

Whanganui District Council Building files – 74-84 & 78 Victoria Avenue (latter file has garage plans).

Basement files include C Newton Hood’s plans dated 14 April 1923 for “Avenue Buildings”.

Whanganui Borough Council Building Permit Register, Archives Ref AAF 174:1 – permit issued 21 June 1923 to Selwyn Buildings Ltd. for 10 shops, £14,700; builder: AG Bignell.

1990 Heritage Study, Item #17/7.

Whanganui Chronicle, 16 June 1923 – article and illustration of Proposed Building Scheme, Victoria Avenue for Avenue Buildings Ltd.

Whanganui Herald, 25 Aug 1980 – feature on new AA headquarters in Selwyn Buildings.

Whanganui History in the Making, *River City Press*, 29 May 1997 – article on AA in Whanganui.

Heritage Library Index – entries for AA in Whanganui.

Wise’s Directories 1929, 1941, 1955.

Lampe Light: Whanganui in the 1930s-1950s: Photographs from the camera of Mark Lampe – booklet to accompany exhibition at Whanganui Regional Museum, March-July 1999.

Shirley McDouall – personal information about Miss Swan’s ballet school (8 July 2004).

Comments on Significance:

Historic

The building was developed by Anglican trustees on the site of the second Christ Church. It was named after the first Anglican Bishop of New Zealand, George Selwyn, to commemorate this historic link.

Architectural

This was the first extensive building in the Avenue, taking up the entire frontage of the Christ Church site. It was also the first “church” site built upon that has its original building still standing (the first St Paul’s site buildings were lost in the 1987 fire).

Cultural/Social

Mark Lampe’s Tesla Studio was located in the building as well as Miss Swan’s ballet school, both of which made an important contribution to Whanganui’s cultural life.

Context

Selwyn Buildings is a significant feature in this block of the Avenue, complementing the other 1920s structure on the same side of the street: Victoria Court.



Recommendations:

The name “Selwyn Buildings” should be restored to the building, on the front underneath “AA Centre.”

Date: 8 July 2004

Research: Wendy Pettigrew



Verandah altered for AA Centre entrance (B17 16n03).

Historical photographs to scan (from 1990 Heritage Study collection):

ATL 20978 1/1 – 1920s view of Selwyn Buildings showing original verandah.