

## WHANGANUI DISTRICT HERITAGE INVENTORY

**Register Item No:** 320      **Type:** Building  
**Name:** WANGANUI AIRPORT TERMINAL and CONTROL TOWER

**Location:** Wanganui Airport

**Legal Description:**

**Current Details:** Owner: Whanganui District Council (Control Tower); rest of Airport owned jointly by Whanganui District Council and Government

Occupier: Wanganui Airport Management Board

**Original Owner:** Wanganui City Council & Civil Aviation Authority (Control Tower)

**Date:** 1961

**Architect/Designer:** Gordon Smith of Newman Smith & Associates

**Builder:** Cook Construction

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**Status:** Whanganui District Plan Heritage Inventory Item 320 (Plan Change 15, 2009), (Plan Change 29, 2013, Class A)

**Thematic Context:** Transport

**Significance:** Architectural, Technological

**Integrity:** Substantially intact with minor alterations to terminal building

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**Photo Reference:**

WDC File Ref: Heritage/Inventory/Land1

Date: February 2006

*See p4 for additional photograph(s)*



Wanganui Airport Terminal and Control Tower, opened in December 1961.



## History:

### *Of the site and the Airport:*

The Landguard Bluff area has long had important associations for local Maori. The pa sites of Kaiwharawhara and Wahipuna are located at the seaward and riverbank ends of the bluff respectively [see photocopies of map plus info about pa sites from *The Wanganui Story*] with the Pihai sandhills urupa being the ancient burial ground of the Putiki people [the exact location of this is not known; it is thought to be buried under pine trees]. The first Europeans to arrive in Wanganui landed at Landguard Bluff, which was given its European name in 1840 by Edward Jerningham Wakefield.

Rev Henry Williams came to Putiki on December 1839 and preached the first sermon by a European to more than 300 Maori who were assembled on the beach at the foot of Landguard Bluff. When Edward Jerningham Wakefield first came to Wanganui in March 1840 he camped at Wahipuna and from there went to Putiki to meet the Whanganui chiefs to discuss the sale of Wanganui to the NZ Company. Apparently, before leaving Wanganui, Wakefield went to the top of the cliffs near the river mouth and, as an act of good faith carved the name of his parent on a half-burnt post, the remains of a carved stockade post which had once adorned the pa on this site, which was then named Landguard Bluff. [Information from *The Wanganui Story*.]

By the late 1920s, the site consisted of lupin-covered sandhills but was soon seen to be an ideal location for an airport. Aeroplanes had already used an airstrip on the Jockey Club's farm at Westmere and the Aero Club was formed in 1929, following the flying visit of Charles Kingsford Smith on 23 September 1928 when an estimated 25,000 people flocked to Westmere to greet the "Tasman fliers". In July 1930, the Wanganui Harbour Board (as landowner) approved plans for the proposed airport at Landguard Bluff. On 29 November 1930, Major GA Cowper landed his 3-seater Desoutter plane from Hawera and the newspaper announced that the "city airport opens". In 1931 the Aero Club built a hangar and levelled a landing strip on the Landguard Bluff sandhills, with a rough road providing access around Landguard Bluff from the main road at Putiki. (The Airport Road was later deviated to its present route through the sandhills.)

The City Council used unemployed labour during the Depression to level the ground to create the present runway area, with sheep being grazed to maintain the turf. During the Second World War, the airport was often used as a back-up for Ohakea. Although there was a brief commercial passenger service from the airport in 1938, it was not until 1954 that the National Airways Corporation (NAC) began services from Wanganui Airport. Air Wanganui had been formed to lobby for this service, with local auctioneer John Coull as its chairman. The runway was extended to accommodate the DC3 aeroplanes operated by NAC at the time. In 1960, the runway was sealed, enabling NAC to use Fokker Friendship aircraft for its services into Wanganui. This work was done ahead of other North Island centres to ensure that NAC could bring the Friendship service to Wanganui. A year later, Hamilton still had a grass runway at its airport.

### *Of the building:*

In 1960 Wanganui City Council commissioned the architects who had designed the newly-completed War Memorial Hall to develop plans for the airport terminal. Gordon Smith, partner in Newman Smith & Associates, recalled in February 2006 that he "was appointed architect to design the airport building and ancillary buildings including the control tower. The Ministry of Works insisted that the tower I had designed should be replaced with the standard MOW design and would not approve the scheme. The [Wanganui City] Council insisted on my design and after a Government-appointed commission chaired by Sir Leonard Isitt approved it, and the passage of some years, it [the design] was approved for all secondary airports." The still-operational control towers at Palmerston North, Tauranga, New Plymouth and Invercargill follow the same design.

Cook Construction of Wanganui were the appointed contractors, having recently completed notable buildings in town including the new Wanganui Girls' College, and construction commenced in November 1960.

The completed terminal complex was opened officially on Saturday 9 December 1961 by the Minister in Charge of Civil Aviation, Mr Macalpine. Following the civic ceremony, a number of aerobatic displays took place throughout the afternoon, stopping briefly to allow scheduled NAC flights to use the airport. As noted in the *Wanganui Chronicle*, "Wanganui can now claim with pride to have the finest airport facilities of any secondary airport in the country."

The Taranaki/Manawatu/Wanganui branch of the NZ Institute of Architects gave the building an Award of Merit, as published in the *NZIA Journal* in March 1963 (and also featured in *Home & Building* in 1965). The NZIA article focussed on the control tower which it deemed “attracts special attention”.

Alterations have been made to the terminal building: the roof-top viewing platform, accessed by an external stairway, was removed; an air-side atrium was added to provide shelter for passengers prior to embarkation and on arrival; part of the front wall has been altered in the vicinity of the public toilets. The control tower, however, has had no alterations since it was built. Many panes of glass have been removed recently for safety reasons.

During the 1960s and 1970s, Wanganui airport retained its scheduled NAC/Air New Zealand services and passenger numbers remained relatively high. However, the general down-turn in Wanganui’s fortunes in the 1980s meant that fears for air services were being voiced as early as July 1980. With the subsequent decline in scheduled services, by 1992 there were fears that the airport might be closed. With flights only to and from Auckland, Wanganui was no longer such an important link in the national air network. However, the situation has improved since 2000. Origin Pacific briefly operated flights to the South Island and now Air New Zealand operates flights to Wellington as well as Auckland. The runway was re-sealed in 2002 and the terminal is to be renovated to maintain its profile as the gateway to Wanganui.

However, the control tower ceased to be operational in 1989 when an “Approach Control Service” was provided by RNZAF Ohakea. From this time, Wanganui operated as an “unattended aerodrome” with air traffic control clearance being obtained from Ohakea for all aircraft flying on instrument flight plans. By 1997, there were plans to demolish the control tower so the District Council took over the tower to enable other plans to be developed to retain the tower.

The Wanganui Airport Control Tower Restoration Group was formed in July 2002 with the aim of restoring the tower and developing new uses for the building, including a civil aviation museum and learning centre. The group has received grant aid from the District Council for reports on the fire safety implications for the tower as well as an engineer’s structural analysis and a report on legal issues. A conservation report has been prepared to inform the restoration plans for the tower, which continues to deteriorate. Safety measures have been taken by the District Council to ensure that glass panels do not fall out of windows while leaks in the roof will also be repaired.

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#### **Description:**

The terminal is a single-storey rectangular building with links to the control tower and stand-by power plant and utility garage. The terminal itself has extensive glass on the airfield and road sides of the building, noted in 1961 as being a feature of the design. The building is of timber construction with a flat roof originally covered in British Mastic Asphalte 988 finished with white marble chips. The terminal provided excellent facilities at the time for both the public, with a cafeteria, and for air crew and office staff.

The control tower is a four-storey building with a reinforced concrete base. The 54ft high tower building features a “control cab” with octagonal top which is similar in style to that of Christchurch Airport designed in the late 1950s by Paul Pascoe. Supported by four central posts, steel-frames cantilever above the concrete base of the tower providing both a distinctive shape and gradually increasing floor space for the operational needs of the control tower staff. A feature of the tower when built was the spandrels clad with white vitrolite glass, a dominant material used in the wall construction. This was the only design using this material in New Zealand at the time. The architect also repeated a design feature of the War Memorial Hall in the base of the tower and the adjacent crash tender garage by using silver sand-faced blocks in the construction.

The ground floor houses electrical equipment, while the first and second floors provided office space and facilities such as a kitchen and shower/toilet for the airport control staff as well as the air conditioning plant. The cab at the top was the operational base for the airport controllers providing panoramic views. Much of the original furniture including the console remains in the cab.

#### **Condition:**

The terminal building is currently undergoing renovations, mainly to the interior. Externally it appears in good condition. The control tower is suffering badly from lack of maintenance and continual weathering in this exposed site. The steel frames to the windows are rusting badly and need to be replaced, preferably with aluminium which will be able to withstand the weather conditions. The flat roof below the cab also needs repairing as leaks are occurring.

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**Resources Consulted:**

*Wanganui Herald*, 24 Sept 1928 – “Tasman fliers arrive in Wanganui”: report of Kingsford Smith’s flying visit to Westmere.

*Wanganui Herald*, 22 July 1930 – Wanganui Harbour Board approves plans for proposed airport at Landguard Bluff.

*Wanganui Chronicle*, 1 Dec 1930 – “City airport opens” with first landing at Landguard Bluff on 29 Nov by Major GA Cowper in 3-seater Desoutter plan from Hawera.

*Wanganui Chronicle*, 9 Dec 1961 – feature on opening of new terminal and control tower, with history of the airport.

*Wanganui Chronicle*, 26 March 2002 – report on proposals to demolish the control tower.

*Wanganui Chronicle*, 20 April 2005 – report on plans to renovate airport terminal.

*The Wanganui Story*, MJG Smart and AP Bates, 1972, Wanganui Newspapers.

*NZ Institute of Architects Journal*, March 1963, pp 25-27 – feature on Airport Terminal buildings.

*Home & Building* 1965 – feature on Air Terminal Buildings, Wanganui. Notes the buildings received an Award of Merit from the Taranaki-Manawatu-Wanganui Branch of the NZ Institute of Architects.

Wanganui District Library Subject Index – entries for Wanganui airport.

Letter from Gordon Smith, architect of Airport Terminal and Control Tower, to Airport Control Tower Restoration Group, 15 Feb 2006.

*Gateway offers style, function and heritage*, unpublished article by Stephen Salt, 2003 (written for Heritage New Zealand) with comments from Randal Springer, ex Ohakea Control Officer, on matters relating to the control tower. Copy with Whanganui Branch, NZHPT.

*Wanganui Airport Control Tower Conservation Plan*, Ian Bowman, (draft) October 2006 with final copy due April 2007.

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**Comments on Significance:**

*Architectural*

This award-winning building was commissioned by the City Council at a time when Wanganui was still a dominant regional centre with a developing airport. The chosen architect, Gordon Smith, had just designed the War Memorial Hall for Wanganui City Council. That building is regarded as one of the finest examples of modernist architecture in New Zealand. Smith’s design for the Wanganui airport terminal and control tower was later accepted by the Ministry of Works as the recommended design for all secondary airports. Airport control services at Palmerston North, Tauranga, New Plymouth and Invercargill still operate in towers built to this design. The Wanganui terminal and tower was, however, the prototype for all the later buildings.

*Technological*

The design of the control tower, in particular, represented a new move in technological advances for such buildings, especially in the use of the vitrolite glass panels. The airport is also a reminder of Wanganui’s long aviation tradition and history. The Aero Club, established in 1929, and Wanganui Aero Work still operate from the airport and many of Wanganui’s distinguished World War II aviators learnt to fly here.

**Recommendations:**

The Control Tower should be restored so it can remain as an integral architectural feature of the terminal building. New uses for the Control Tower need to be determined with the input of the Control Tower Restoration Group, Wanganui District Council and the Airport Management Board. The Terminal and

Control Tower should be listed in the District Plan Heritage Inventory and consideration given to registration under the Historic Places Act 1993.

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**Date:** Revised May 2007

**Research by:** Wendy Pettigrew



The Control Tower, now in need of restoration. Some glass panes have already been removed.



The terminal and control tower viewed from air-side. Note the atrium for passengers, an addition to the original building, which once had a viewing platform on the roof.