



WHANGANUI DISTRICT HERITAGE INVENTORY

Register Item No: 322 / **Type:** Building **Site:** Pre-1900 Archaeological Interest

Name: WAIRERE HOUSE

Location: 1 Bates Street, Whanganui

Legal Description: Lot 1, DP 41123

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

Occupier: National Library of New Zealand, Wanganui Service Centre; Stephen Ross & Associates; Stoneman Financial Services

Original Owner: New Zealand Government

Date: Completed 1975

Architect/Designer: Works Consultancy Services Ltd.

Builder:

Status: District Plan Class: Class A, 2013

Thematic Context: Government; Transport and Communication

Significance: Historic, Technological

Integrity: Substantially intact exterior; alterations since construction still to be checked.

Photo Reference:

WDC File Ref: Heritage/Inventory/Bates2

Date: 2006 & 2010 (see last page)

See p4 for additional photographs



The building seen from Somme Parade; the red canopy is over the front entrance.

History:

Of the site:

A brewery was formerly on this site from 1877 at least and the corner of Bates Street and Somme Parade was known locally for many years as “Brewery Corner”. Although known by a number of different names in its early years, the Wanganui Brewery was owned by Messrs Garner and Williams in 1883 and in 1895 it was purchased from TB Williams by Hopeful Gibbons who ran it in partnership with Henry Hole. The old wooden buildings on the site were demolished in 1908 to make way for a new brick building which covered the corner of Bates Street and Somme Parade where there is now a car park. In 1950 the Gibbons family sold the brewery to New Zealand Breweries who renamed it Western Brewery and continued to operate on the site for 10 years making “Western Ale”. In 1960 Western Brewery’s operations were transferred to Palmerston North and the old buildings became redundant. In August 1961 the buildings were sold to Rod Sinclair who planned to rent them out. However, by February 1973 the site had been purchased for the government’s new computer centre and demolition of the old brewery buildings took place shortly afterwards.

Of the building:

Wairere House (as it appears to have been named from 1974) was purpose-built to house the Government’s computer that was to hold records on people from paper file systems previously held by the Ministry of Transport, Justice Department and Police. The National Party’s manifesto for the 1972 general election outlined plans for a computerised data system; when Labour came into power they decided to proceed with plans for what became a highly controversial project as it raised questions about the state’s ability to gather information on its citizens. In October 1973, the government decided that the name for the system should be Justice Data Bank, rather than Law Enforcement Data System (Wanganui) as originally proposed although the name reverted later to National Law Enforcement Data Base. Also, an act of Parliament would be required to define the regulations for use of the system. Responsibilities of the users of the system were to be considered as well as the rights of individuals whose records would be kept on the computer. A government committee also recommended the establishment of the post of Commissioner of Privacy for what was becoming known as the Wanganui Computer Centre.

Construction was overseen by the Ministry of Works through their Works Consultancy Services in Head Office. The contract cost was \$1,690,376 for the building itself and construction commenced in 1974. By August 1974 the partially-constructed centre was photographed in the *Wanganui Chronicle*. In May 1975 the first computer system arrived in Wanganui to be installed in the new building. Made by Univac in USA, the computer system with its data storage requirements was large and took up much of the space in the new building. It took some time to input all the information on people and vehicles held in Ministry of Transport, Justice and Police files; although the system was operational by 1976 it was not completed until 1978. A new computer was installed in 1981 with a replacement Sperry Univac 1100/72 computer system in 1984/85. By August 1985, the Centre had 91 staff operating the computer system 24 hours/365 days a year.

Operations of the computer system were governed by the Wanganui Computer Centre Act 1976 which was passed on 9 September 1976. There were a number of amendments to the Act, from 1977 to 1988. The Privacy Commissioner for the Wanganui Computer Centre made annual reports to Parliament while the Centre itself reported to government on an annual basis. The system was always controversial as it was the first really large computer system in New Zealand that stored personal information, giving rise to the “Big Brother” concept.

The building gained national notoriety for a different reason when an anarchist punk rocker, Neil Roberts, blew himself up outside the entrance just after midnight on 18 November 1982, damaging the building’s foyer in the process. It appeared Roberts was acting on his own behalf, his suicide being his personal protest that he considered life was not worth living.

In the 1990s work began to transfer the data to a new computer system to Auckland, a task that would take nearly 10 years and was embroiled, in part, with the ill-fated Incis project to develop computerised records for the Police. In 1994, the government decided to sell GCS Ltd, by then operator of the Computer Centre and this sale was completed in March 1995 with new owners, EDS New Zealand Holdings, taking over. In October 1996, the old Sperry Univac computer was given to the Whanganui Regional Museum and staff from the Computer Centre building moved to the IRD offices in Wanganui.

In 1997 the National Library purchased the building to house part of their heritage collection from the Alexander Turnbull Library. However, two years would pass before National Library would move into the

building. In April 2000, Cameron Ross lawyers moved to the top floor of Wairere House, where they still operate but known now as Stephen Ross & Associates.

In June 2005 the “Big brother” computer in Wanganui was switched off for the last time as all information was now in Auckland on the new system.

Description:

This is a large three/four-storey reinforced concrete building that has the appearance of a large bunker. The only windows are on the top floors, especially the upper floor that now houses the law firm of Stephen Ross. Its fortified appearance close to the riverbank led Wanganui residents to nickname it The Kremlin. There is a lift shaft (or power house?) prominent at the top of the building. There is a large car park on the Bates Street corner and birch trees soften the harsh architecture of the building.

Condition:

Good. The roof is to be replaced as tenders were advertised in May 2010 by the National Library of New Zealand.

Resources Consulted:

Wanganui District Council Building files: **CHECK for any alterations to building**

Wanganui Borough Council Register of Building Permits, Archives Ref AAF 174:1 – not applicable.

Wanganui Borough Council 1908 Insurance Assessment Plan – shows the wooden buildings of Gibbons Brewery and Bottling House on sections 93 and 94, Bates Street with a wooden dwelling on section 92, Bates Street.

Wanganui Chronicle 29 July 1960 – report that brewery was closing.

Wanganui Chronicle 23 August 1961 – report that Rod Sinclair had purchased the brewery site.

Wanganui Herald 10 Feb 1973 – report on pending demolition of brewery buildings, with history of the site and breweries that operated there.

Wanganui Chronicle, 5 Oct 1973 – report on decision to proceed with computer centre in Wanganui.

Wanganui Chronicle, 1 Aug 1974 – photograph and report on building of NZ Data Bank.

Wanganui Chronicle, 2 Aug 1974 – report that security veil on Wanganui Justice Data Bank (current name) was to be lifted slightly. Legislation to be drafted to cover operations of the Wanganui computer.

Wanganui Chronicle, 15 May 1975 – report that computer had arrived in Wanganui.

Wanganui Chronicle 18 Nov and 19 Nov 1982 – reports on punk rocker, Neil Roberts, who blew himself up outside Wairere House.

Wanganui Chronicle, 6 Aug 1985 – report on operations of Wanganui Computer Centre. Notes that computer systems were replaced in 1984-85.

Wanganui Chronicle 12 July 1991 – future of Computer Centre questioned.

Wanganui Chronicle 15 April 1994 – Government to sell GCS Ltd, operator of the Computer Centre.

Wanganui Chronicle 10 Nov 1994 – report on p3 that Computer Centre faces an uncertain future.

Wanganui Chronicle 15 Mar 1995 – New owners of Computer Centre are EDS NZ Holdings.

Wanganui Chronicle 17 Oct 1996 – old Sperry Univac computer given to Whanganui Regional Museum.

Wanganui Chronicle 26 Oct 1996 – Staff move from Wairere House to the IRD building.

Wanganui Chronicle 1 May 1997 – National Library takes over Wairere House to house part of its heritage collection. Oct 2005 briefing for Incoming Minister notes that the building was purchased specifically for long-term storage of Turnbull Library material.

Wanganui Chronicle 18 June 1999 – National Library ready to start moving in to Wairere House.

River City Press 6 April 2000 – Cameron Ross, barristers and solicitors, move to top floor of Wairere House. (Firm changes name to Stephen Ross & Associates after 2006.)

Wanganui Chronicle, 21 June 2005 – “Big Brother” logs off for the last time.

21 June 2005 – “Big brother” switched off. Report from www.nzherald.co.nz.

www.NZHistory.net.nz has information that the Wanganui Computer Centre Act was passed on 9 September 1976.

Wise’s PO Directory 1959-60 – has Western Brewery on corner of Bates St and Somme Parade.

Memories of Old Wanganui, Vol 1 has a Tesla Studios photograph of the 1908 building.

www.dgmarket.com has information about tenders being sought for roof replacement for Wairere House by National Library of New Zealand.

Not yet consulted:

Government records at Archives NZ in Wellington. Ministry of Works Contract Records for 1974 note the cost of Computer Building Wanganui, Wairere Centre was \$1,690,376. Record ref: ABKK; W4546, box 270, record no: 27439R.

Comments on Significance:

Historic

This building is a reminder of the first time the Government decided to develop a national computer database on New Zealand residents. It was very controversial at the time as people did not like the “Big Brother” attitude of government keeping information about citizens and required an Act of Parliament to set out the parameters for operating such a system. The building is also remembered for the suicide of punk rocker, Neil Roberts, who blew himself in the entrance of the building in 1982. Wairere House is now a service centre for the National Library and stores part of the Alexander Turnbull Library collection which is an important heritage resource in its own right.

Technological

The concept of having a government computerised database in the early 1970s was deemed groundbreaking, especially as the Police department considered it would be a significant aid to crime-fighting in the country. The size of this building also reminds us that in the 1970s computer systems were large and bulky, requiring numerous operators to input information and space for data storage.

Recommendations:

Date: September 2010 **Research by:** Wendy Pettigrew



Rear and front views of the building taken in 2010.

Historical photographs to scan:

Tesla Studios photograph of the Brewery (see Memories of Old Wanganui, vol 1.)

Memories of Old Wanganui, Vol 6, H&A Print, 2007, p104 – has interior photograph showing computers and staff inputting data. Maxilab/Tesla Collection photograph.