

## Purnell House



**Location:** 79 Purnell Street, College Estate, Whanganui

**Heritage NZ Pouhere Taonga List Number:** Nil

**Physical Description:** The neo-Georgian building is composed of an elongated main wing parallel with the street, an east wing attached to the south east corner of the front wing, and a further wing to the rear which is cross shaped in plan and aligned with the centre of the front wing. The rear wings are all double storey. The front wing is symmetrical along both axes and has a central two storey section with single storey extensions on either side. The central section of the main wing has a shallow 'U' shaped plan with an open, arched arcade on the ground floor with French doors either side of the central entry, all with fanlights. At either end of the front two-storey section are shallow projecting wings with rectangular windows with fanlights matching the French doors. Windows to the upper floor, with timber shutters, and single storey wings are all rectangular, double hung sash. All roofs are hipped.

**Other known names:** College House, Wanganui South Rotary Community Centre

**Current Use:** Uncertain

**Register Item Number:**

335

**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

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**Former Uses:** School hostel

**Heritage Status:**

**District Plan Class: Class B**

**Architectural Style:** Neo-Georgian

**Date of Construction:** 1931

**Materials:** Cement render, timber joinery including shutters, Marseille tile roofing

**Registered owner:**

**Legal Description:**

**History:** On 27 February 1982, Wanganui Historian, Athol Kirk, outlined the history of Purnell House at an Anniversary Day dinner to commemorate the arrival of the schooner *Elizabeth* with Wanganui's first settlers. The Whanganui Historical Society dinner was, itself, being held at Purnell House. Kirk pointed out that the land the building was sited on, "*was part of the City Council reserve, and had been set aside in the original plan of the town as the site for the Asylum and at that time Purnell Street was named Asylum Road. However the land was not required for this purpose and remained vacant until the Technical College Board leased it in 1927 for the purpose of building a combined boys' and girls' hostel...The hostel was closed in 1980 and the building (then) reverted to the City Council. The Wanganui City Council (then) leased the building to the Wanganui South Rotary Club who set up a trust to manage the building.*"<sup>1</sup>

The book *Wanganui Technical College: Golden Jubilee, 1911-1961* (pp. 6-11) provides some background to the decision to build Purnell House. The Wanganui Technical College – which is now the Wanganui City College – traces to the Will of Dr. George Rees, who died in 1858. After providing for his wife and children, he had left his estate for the education of European children in Wanganui. This had ultimately made it possible to establish the Technical School of Design, which was established in 1892.

In 1911, the next stage in the story occurred with the opening of the Wanganui Technical College, and in 1912, the school had 142 day pupils (including 103 free places) – 30 boys took the industrial course, 14 took the agricultural course, 11 boys and 40 girls took the commercial course, and 34 boys and 13 girls took the general course.

In 1916, the school began taking boarders, with 15 arriving that year, and 26 in 1917. In 1921 there were 46 boarders, the school having taken over a building previously used for Wanganui Collegiate's boarders. The number of boarders

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continued increasing, with 60 being there in 1926. *“New dormitories were added, but the old buildings were lacking in such amenities as a common room and a prep room. Fortunately both the Y.M.C.A. and the School were handy and helped alleviate some of the discomforts suffered by the occupants.”*<sup>ii</sup>

In 1921, the school began taking Fijian students, and a constant stream of these pupils attended the school over the years – and boarded in its hostels. One, named Mutyala Satyanand, subsequently became the father of Sir Anand Satyanand, Governor General of New Zealand (2006-11). He, in turn, attended and spoke at the school’s centennial reunion in 2011.<sup>iii</sup>

The inadequacy of the old hostel was well recognised. However, funding at that time was a particular problem. Finally, after a prolonged period of negotiation, the site of what was to eventually become Purnell House, was leased from the Wanganui City Council.

Early credit for the decision to build Parnell House was given at its opening event to Sir James Parr, at the time Minister of Education, who visited Wanganui in 1926. Authority to prepare plans for a hostel to cost £16,000 was then granted in 1927.<sup>iv</sup> The foundation stone for the new building was then laid on 7 November 1928 by Prime Minister, the Hon. Gordon Coates, who was in the course of his soon-to-be unsuccessful electoral campaign.<sup>v</sup>

However, this unveiling proved somewhat premature. The *“hitch occurred because the sketch plans indicated a building of strictly utilitarian and Spartan design. When Mr Atmore became Minister of Education, he had the hostel question reviewed.”*<sup>vi</sup>

Atmore reviewed more than just the plans for the hostel. In mid-September 1929, after a full investigation of the stability of the Wanganui Technical College building itself (several months after the Murchison Earthquake), he closed the school down! It was found that the college’s main building had brick walls of single thickness, and two stories high – and that one of the walls had developed a distinct bulge. After classes having to be held in various buildings scattered around the area, the main building reopened for the 1930 year - having in the meantime had its upper floor removed.<sup>vii</sup>

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On 5 December 1930, the Hon. H. Atmore unveiled a new foundation-stone at the hostel site – this marking *“the close of a somewhat humorous episode (in the newspapers) which has been referred to as the battle of the foundation-stones.”* At the ceremony, the plans of both hostels were displayed – Mr Atmore’s version being described as the *“more pretentious.”*<sup>viii</sup>



The Minister of Education, Hon. H. Atmore, laying Purnell House's controversial foundation-stone (Mk II) on 5 December 1930.<sup>ix</sup>

The £31,600 building, referred to as ‘College Hostel’ was officially opened by the Hon. R. Masters, Minister of Education, on 7<sup>th</sup> December, 1931. At the ceremony, it was stated that Atmore had not considered the original building to have been big enough, and that *“he had come to the conclusion that a building large enough to meet the demands of (Wanganui and the district surrounding it) should be erected, and he had the plans amended. In the course of time tenders were called and the Fletcher Construction Company (was) successful.”*<sup>x</sup>

Amongst those credited for their work on the building were Fletchers’ foreman, Mr Hall, for having supervised the company’s *“excellent workmanship”*, and the Public Works Department officials Messrs Emmet and Raynor, who supervised the work. The building itself had been designed by the Government Architect, Mr A.M. Mair.

The new hostel, which was expected to accommodate 80 to 100 boys, was

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located on 8½ acres of perpetual lease land owned by the Wanganui City Council. Those present at the opening were also told that it was expected that in time the college itself would be erected alongside the hostel, and that negotiations for a further 14½ acres for that purpose were still proceeding with the council.<sup>xi</sup>

A photo in the book *Wanganui Technical College: Golden Jubilee, 1911-1961*<sup>xii</sup> shows a photo of a truck piled high with baggage and with many boys seated above that, parked outside the new College House – as it was then known. The picture is dated 1<sup>st</sup> November 1931 – and possibly this is the date at which the hostel was first occupied.

A girls' hostel had also been established in 1916, and in 1932, the two hostels were amalgamated in the new Purnell Street building. At first there were concerns about amalgamating both genders, but the result was a success. Girls continued boarding there until 1960, when the school became a boys-only facility.<sup>xiii</sup> The last girls left the school in 1962.<sup>xiv</sup>

In 1964, the school's name was changed to the Wanganui Boy's College - the main reason for this being to avoid confusion with the large number of other technical institutions around the country. In 1994, the school – by then in a new building – once again became co-educational, and at that time it was also renamed Wanganui City College.

Meanwhile, in 1980, the Wanganui Boy's College had ended its occupancy of the hostel, and the property had then passed to the Wanganui City Council. In January 1981, the City Council leased the building to the Wanganui South Rotary Community Trust, and so the former College House then became the 'Wanganui South Rotary Community Centre.' By November 1983, fourteen groups were leasing various parts of the facility and the Trust was seeking some group that required the use of a sports ground to use the Trust's grounds.<sup>xv</sup> Groups (commercial, community and volunteer groups) around this time who were leasing parts of the building included: dance, karate, swimming, dog obedience and railway modellers.<sup>xvi</sup>

In about 1993, a proposal was received to form the Asia Pacific International University in Wanganui, which was to be based in Purnell House. However, the



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Whanganui South Rotary Community Trust held a lease on the property with a perpetual right of renewal for 21 years – plus its chattels, fixtures and improvements. This lease had begun on 1st January 1981 – but with the offer to purchase from the proposed university, the Council bought out the Trust's lease in 1994, after only 17 years.<sup>xvii</sup> However, the proposed university never proceeded with its plans and pulled out after about a year.<sup>xviii</sup>

Despite the university not being established, a significant amount of information on the building was generated during its planning stage. This included a report by I.W. Johnson, of the engineering and valuation firm Bycroft Petherick Ltd., particularly in relation to its earthquake resistance. Johnson described the building as being several linked buildings, which for the purposes of his/her report were divided into eight structures. These were the kitchen services wing (single storey), administration block (two storey, with single storey wing at each end), link building (single storey), north, east, south, and south dormitory extension (all two storey). Meanwhile the west dormitory was erroneously described as "South storey" - however this dormitory is also 'two storey. Other than the south dormitory extension, which was built in 1964, the rest of the building is original.

Johnson stated that *"The original buildings were constructed with plastered double skin cavity brick walls with reinforced concrete ring beam foundations. The ground floor generally consists of reinforced concrete with overlying timber battens and tongue and groove flooring. There are reinforced concrete bands in the exterior walls and reinforced concrete beams across the building at eaves level supporting timber roof trusses. The roof is terracotta 'Marseilles' tiles."*

The 1964-built south dormitory extension consists of a two storey concrete encased steel frame building with cavity brick infill wall panels. The terracotta tile roof is supported by steel trusses.

Johnson considered that although the building was largely constructed prior to the advent of earthquake resistant design codes in New Zealand, the buildings were *"very well constructed and have been well-maintained. Many areas of the building structure are typical of larger commercial buildings of the period or those constructed in the 1940s and 50s."* In about 1947, the east and west dormitory wings *"were strengthened by removing the external brick veneer and*

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*reconstructing the exterior of the walls in reinforced concrete. A similar operation was also carried out to the end corners of the single storey wings of the administration block.”*

The detailed report then went on to consider the earthquake risks and past damage to the building. This included cracking around the building that had been a concern since the 1930s and the effects of the ground beneath building. Johnson’s conclusions included considering that *“the buildings (were) generally in good condition and...very well constructed for their age.”* However, *“because of the substantial use of unreinforced masonry, (they were) considered earthquake risk buildings.”*



Purnell House, from a 2001 advertisement.<sup>xix</sup>

In late 2001, the Wanganui District Council called for Registrations of Interest for the sale or lease of Purnell House. It was described as *“a 3,000 square metre character masonry building, which was constructed in 1930, and is situated on 4.2 hectares of residentially zoned land. It is handy to the Central Business District, close to the Wanganui Racecourse and opposite Wanganui High School.”*<sup>xx</sup>

The building’s recent occupancy and usage was not researched, however, it is noted the Purnell Lifestyle Trust Ltd. lists 79 Purnell Street as its registered office.

**Footnote on Archival Sources** - An old Public Works Department Plan Register, now in private ownership, lists a substantial number of old plans from the Wanganui-Manawatu region – although the whereabouts of the plans themselves has not been researched.<sup>xxi</sup> These entries include many relating to this building over a number of years, including at and immediately prior to its

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construction. Most notable amongst these is Entry No. 866 from 1930 for the Architectural Plans, which cites Plan 'PWD 78174'. The ID of this plan, or set of plans, reappears in an Archives New Zealand file for this building from 1947, at which time the abovementioned strengthening work was undertaken. The file itself was not accessed during this study.<sup>xxii</sup> Also of note in the old Plan Register is an entry (No. 863) for the lowering of the Wanganui Technical College building itself. That work is attributed to Wanganui architect T. Battle.

## Bibliography

Wanganui Technical College Golden Jubilee Committee, *Wanganui Technical College: Golden Jubilee 1911-1961* (Wanganui, 1961)

Kirk, Athol, 'Anniversary Day Dinner', in Whanganui Historical Society, *Historical Record*, Vol. 13, No. 1, May 1982, p. 19. This article appears to have some possibly incorrect dates.

Newspapers, archival sources and online articles as referred to in the footnotes.

**Architect/Designer:** J T. Mair

**History of changes:** South dormitory extension built in 1964. Strengthening of some walls in 1947.

**Date Period:** 1913

**Rarity / Special Features:** The building is a substantial Neo-Georgian complex.

**Integrity:** The building appears from a casual visual inspection to be in reasonable condition. There have been alterations and additions to the building including the construction of southern dormitory extension in 1964.

**Representativeness:** The building is typical of Neo-Georgian style. Masonry construction was typical of the time.

**Context/Group Value:** Purnell House is part of a substantial site associated with the provision of boarding facilities for students and more recently for community based activities.



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## Diversity (Form and Features):

**Fragility / Vulnerability:** Although some strengthening occurred in 1947 the building is constructed of unreinforced masonry and may be vulnerable to earthquakes.

## Summary of Significance:

### *Architectural Qualities*

This is a substantial Neo-Georgian building. The architect J T Mair was the Government Architect whose career in the public service began in 1918 when he was appointed Inspector of Military Hospitals by the Defence Department, and in 1920 he became architect to the Department of Education. Following the retirement of John Campbell (1857–1942), in 1922, Mair was appointed Government Architect, a position which he held until his retirement in 1942. During this period he was responsible for a variety of buildings, including the Courthouse, Hamilton, the Post Office in High Street, Christchurch, Government Life Office and the Departmental Building, both in Wellington, and the Jean Batten Building, Auckland. Such buildings show a departure from tradition, with the emphasis on function, structure and volume as opposed to a stylistic treatment of mass.

Fletcher's were credited with a high standard of construction.

### *Historic Qualities*

Purnell House has had a long educational history. The school has strong Fijian links having schooled a number of students from Fiji including the father of Sir Anand Satyanand, the ex-Governor General.

### *Cultural Qualities*

Purnell House was the home of many students from the 1930s to the 1980s including a number of Fijian students.

## Reference Source:

## Associated Pictures:

*Date of Survey: 2012*

*Prepared by: Ian Bowman and Val Burr*

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- <sup>i</sup> Wanganui Historical Society, *Historical Record*, Vol. 13, No. 1, May 1982, p. 19
- <sup>ii</sup> Wanganui Technical College Golden Jubilee Committee, *Wanganui Technical College: Golden Jubilee 1911-1961* (Wanganui, 1961), p. 23
- <sup>iii</sup> Wanganui City College Centennial Reunion: <http://gg.govt.nz/content/wanganui-city-college-centennial-reunion>
- <sup>iv</sup> *Wanganui Chronicle*, 8 December 1931, p. 12 (3)
- <sup>v</sup> *Evening Post*, 8 November 1928, p. 9
- <sup>vi</sup> Wanganui Technical College Golden Jubilee book: p. 24
- <sup>vii</sup> Wanganui Technical College Golden Jubilee book: p. 13; *Evening Post*, 20 September 1929, p. 10
- <sup>viii</sup> *Evening Post*, 5 December 1930, p. 14
- <sup>ix</sup> *Evening Post*, 6 December 1930, p. 17
- <sup>x</sup> *Wanganui Chronicle*, 8 December 1931, p. 12 (3)
- <sup>xi</sup> Wanganui Technical College Golden Jubilee book: p. 24; *Evening Post*, 8 December 1931, p. 8; *Wanganui Chronicle*, 8 December 1931, p. 12 (3) which also lists the various subcontractors.
- <sup>xii</sup> Wanganui Technical College Golden Jubilee book: Hostel photos between pages 36 & 37
- <sup>xiii</sup> Wanganui Technical College Golden Jubilee book: p. 24
- <sup>xiv</sup> *Wanganui Chronicle*, 12 February 2010: <http://www.wanganuichronicle.co.nz/news/college-set-to-celebrate-100-years/1014963/>
- <sup>xv</sup> Report on Parks & Recreation Committee Meeting, held 29 November 1983, File: 375 : 578 Aby 1982-1993, '79 Purnell Street', Wanganui District Council Archive.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Paperwork at the front of File 375 : 578 Aby 1982-1993, '79 Purnell Street', Wanganui District Council Archive
- <sup>xvii</sup> Lease Document and related paperwork in File 375 : 449 – Aby, 1993-1994, '79 Purnell Street', Wanganui District Council Archive
- <sup>xviii</sup> Pers. Conv. With Simon Bloor, Wanganui District Council Archivist, February 2012
- <sup>xix</sup> Wanganui District Council, Community Link: 15 December 2001  
[http://www.wanganui.govt.nz/news/commsLink/issue28\\_page2.asp](http://www.wanganui.govt.nz/news/commsLink/issue28_page2.asp)
- <sup>xx</sup> Wanganui District Council, Community Link: 15 December 2001  
[http://www.wanganui.govt.nz/news/commsLink/issue28\\_page2.asp](http://www.wanganui.govt.nz/news/commsLink/issue28_page2.asp)
- <sup>xxi</sup> This old plan register which contains thousands of brief one-line entries, is now owned by Bruce Burr of Palmerston North, the writer's brother. He understands that it was disposed of after its contents were placed on computer.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Archives New Zealand: <http://www.archway.archives.govt.nz/ViewFullItem.do?code=23284832>