



# Built Heritage Inventory



WHANGANUI  
DISTRICT COUNCIL  
Te Kaunihera a Rohe o Whanganui

## Registered owner:

## Legal Description:

**History:** The former Gonville Fire Station, more recently known as the Kokohuia Hall, was built at a time of fast growth in the vicinity. For example, at the opening of the fire station, town hall and swimming baths in 1911, the chairman of the Gonville Town Board commented that three years earlier some 350 people had lived in the district. The recent census, however, had revealed that the population had since increased to 1,554.<sup>i</sup>

The *Wanganui Herald* of 19 March 1909 (p. 4) records that a preliminary meeting had been held the previous evening with a view to forming a Volunteer Fire Brigade for the fast-growing Gonville district. Several ex-members of the Wanganui and other Brigades had been present, and all were very enthusiastic about entering into the proposal. The costs of obtaining plant, reel house, bells, etc., were also gone into, and it was considered that with the loyal support of local residents, that it should not be difficult to equip an efficient brigade. A public meeting was to be held when the local hall was available, and it was considered that senior firemen from the Wanganui Brigade should also be present to assist with answering questions. It was also noted that Gonville had high water pressure.

The public meeting duly took place on 31 March 1909, and the audience was told that the Gonville Town Board had just about completed laying 5¼ miles of water mains, and that 42 fireplugs had been installed. It was estimated that 20 firemen could be equipped for £250, which would include 1,500 feet of hose, a shed to accommodate the plant, and uniforms. The motion to form the Brigade was passed unanimously, and a committee was elected.<sup>ii</sup>

The *Wanganui Herald* of 6 May 1909 (p. 2) recorded that the Gonville Fire Brigade had applied to the Gonville Town Board for permission to “*erect a reel house in front of the school where a (portion) of the road was fenced off*”. Permission was granted. Work was soon underway, and at the September 1909 monthly meeting of the Gonville Volunteer Fire Brigade, it was announced that: “*Thanks to the liberality of the timber merchants and ironmongers, the cost of erecting the reel house would be small, and the working bee hoped to have it completed before next meeting. The building would be larger than was originally intended and will be divided into reel shed, meeting room, and workshop.*”

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*Tenders for the plant were considered by the Plant Sub-Committee and were referred to the General Committee for endorsement. It is expected that plant to the value of about £100 will be ordered in a day or two.*” A concert was also to be held to raise funds for the Brigade.<sup>iii</sup>

The Gonville Volunteer Fire Brigade was inaugurated on Friday evening, the 18<sup>th</sup> February 1910. At the time, the Brigade (which consisted of 22 active members and 43 honorary members) possessed *“a reel, 1,000 feet of hose, a reel house, two bells and all necessary fittings.”* The brigade was under the charge of Lieut. Halligan. The ceremony comprised the ringing of the station’s two bells, the firemen running out the hose, and Miss Bignell (presumably the daughter of the chairman of the Gonville Town Board) turned on the water, which came from a double-headed fire hydrant. After this ceremony, those present adjourned to the hall for addresses by various dignitaries, and officials from the other local fire brigades. Miss Bignell received a silver hydrant as a memento of the occasion.

The new Gonville reel house had been erected by the members of the fire brigade themselves, and *“great credit was due to the members of the Brigade for what they had done.”* The *Wanganui Chronicle* reporter commented that now the Brigade was in existence, that the members “would have to sacrifice a considerable amount of time to keep it going.” A number of the Gonville members were former members of the Wanganui Fire Brigade.

One of the two bells associated with this fire station, was located in Alma Street, while the other was opposite the hall at the end of Caius Avenue. For fire-fighting purposes, the Gonville district was divided into two areas. No. 1 Ward included the area from the river to Tawa and Bignell Streets, and its alarm was “one dong and a peal”. No. 2 Ward was from Tawa and Bignell Streets to Koromiko Road, Puriri and Matipo Streets, and its alarm was “two dongs and (a) peal.”<sup>iv</sup>

Although no architect for the reel house (or the extent of it) was traced during this study, it is likely to have been T.H. Battle. Certainly, he designed the neighbouring Gonville Town Hall and swimming baths for the Gonville Town Board later in 1910 – and also at the same time, the Gonville Fire Station. He was also an ex-captain of the Wanganui Fire Brigade, and a participant in the

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public meeting where the decision was made to form the Gonville Fire Brigade.<sup>v</sup>

At the Gonville Town Board's September 1910 meeting, it was moved that architect, T.H. Battle be asked to draw up rough plans and specifications for the planned Town Hall and swimming baths. At the October 1910 meeting, Battle presented plans for the Town Hall, the swimming baths – and also a Fire Brigade Hall. The plans were adopted and tenders were to be called in time for the Board's next meeting. The tenders of Messrs Woolston and Hewetson for the construction of the two buildings and the baths were duly accepted at the November meeting, the price being £1,282.7s.3d.<sup>vi</sup>

The Gonville Town Board minutes then follow the progress of their new buildings. Of the fire station they recorded in January 1911 that the original plans for Fire Brigade accommodation had been upset by the appointment of a married caretaker. The February 1911 meeting recorded that the contract for building the hall and fire station would expire on 8<sup>th</sup> March. At the same meeting, the Fire Brigade thanked the Board *“for the manner in which it had met the brigade regarding the reel-house.”*<sup>vii</sup> The fire station was officially opened at the same time as the town hall and pool, on 11<sup>th</sup> May 1911. The fire station was described in an associated newspaper article as providing: *“room for reels, etc., meeting rooms and accommodation for the caretaker.”*<sup>viii</sup>

Other developments included a request in May 1910 to erect a gas lamp at the firebell near the Gonville Hall; a new firebell to be installed on a new tower in September 1910, if the bell could be obtained; and complaints in April 1912, that boys were damaging the reel house and plant. The Town Board's caretaker was to keep an eye out with a view to stopping the boys.<sup>ix</sup>

In May 1915, the five-roomed Gonville Avenue home of Mr Sim, was completely destroyed by fire. The Gonville Brigade responded and saved neighbouring residences, but the building was doomed. When describing the fire, the *Wanganui Chronicle* of 31 May 1915 (p. 4) commented that: *“The opinion has been expressed that the time has arrived for the acquisition of a light motor-reel for the Gonville district, seeing that the number of residences in that locality is rapidly increasing, and that it is a distance of about two miles from the fire brigade station to the extreme boundary. With the present hand-reel, the firemen have an exhausting experience, to say nothing of the valuable time lost.”*

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Wanganui had graduated from buckets and hooks bought by the Wanganui Town Board in 1862, to operating the first self-propelled fire engine in Australasia in 1903. However, by 1918, dissatisfaction with the existing brigade was mounting, and a municipal investigation of the brigade following the loss of Foster's Hotel on Taupo Quay, in the early hours of the 22<sup>nd</sup> February 1918,<sup>x</sup> recommended the establishment of permanent fire-fighters, rather than the previous volunteer brigades. This transformation took effect in 1919, and in 1921, a large, two-storied chief fire station was commissioned on the corner of Guyton and Wilson Streets. The Gonville Fire Brigade was then absorbed into the Wanganui Fire Board in 1924, and their station closed.<sup>xi</sup> Meanwhile, Castlecliff received a new substantial fire station in 1926, and that building is also part of this study.

The redundant and comparatively small Gonville fire station is said to have subsequently used as a tram shed. Certainly it was on the Gonville tram route - which operated from 1912. However, a photo of Tawa Street showing the Gonville Town Hall and the fire station (then with its bell tower still in place above the window in the upper façade) appears in Ron Alexander's book *Wanganui Corporation Tramways 1908-1950* (p. 28). This shows that the tramlines were closer to the opposite side of the street. Also, the trams appear to have been taller than the building entrance would have permitted access to, and nothing in that respect appears to have changed to the present day.

Still, oral history states that this building filled a role in the tram network, and more research will undoubtedly confirm just what that was. One possibility is that in some way the building became linked to the steam tram 'Puffing Billy' (which doubtless also had a height issue where access to this building - let alone operating inside it - was concerned). In 1967, the *Wanganui Herald's Centennial Issue* (p. 22), in recalling the community's delight when the Greyhound buses had replaced the trams in 1950, remarked that the 'last day' parade of trams through the city, had been led by the "popular" old 'Puffing Billy'. This tramway locomotive had hauled trailers on the Gonville route for years, having previously been involved with hauling gravel on the tram track-laying project. The article continued: "*Puffing Billy' lay in ignominious retirement behind the Gonville Town Hall from 1912 to 1920, but for a period was used to heat the Gonville swimming baths.*" However, 'Puffing Billy' was back operating

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on the tram network by the time the Gonville Fire Station closed in 1924.

Presumably, therefore, it was after the departure of the trams (in 1950), that the building was converted to become the Kokohuia Hall. Still later, it became the Kokohuia Play Centre, the building being leased by that group in 1989.<sup>xii</sup> However, the playcentre, which listed its address as 41 Tawa Street, was long gone by 2009.

The Mayor's e-column media release of 15 May 2006 recorded that a Bycroft Petherick seismic assessment of various rural and community halls, had listed the Kokohuia Hall, along with the neighbouring Gonville Town Hall, as being amongst those halls to owned with seismic ratings of less than 30%. The buildings would need a structural upgrade under the earthquake provisions of the then new Building Act. The Mayor (Michael Laws) added that while *"the private sector might get away with the risk and the cost, the public sector will not."*<sup>xiii</sup>

In August 2009, a community group organised a petition to try to save the two halls and the old swimming pool alongside them. The pool had by this time been *"closed to the public as it leaked, required maintenance and was considered uneconomic with the proposed expansion of the Splash Centre."* The community group considered that these buildings were once part of the heart of Gonville (which the group now regarded as one of Wanganui's most troubled suburbs), and that it would be *"marvellous to see (the suburb's heart) come alive again."*<sup>xiv</sup>

The Kokohuia Hall and the Gonville Town Hall (q.v.) were advertised for sale for removal in late 2009.<sup>xv</sup> In mid-2010, the whole complex (two halls, pool, changing sheds, swimming club room and artesian bore) was sold for \$150,000 (+GST) to Bobbi Magdalinos and Ross Mitchell-Anyon. The couple were aiming to repair and restore the buildings.<sup>xvi</sup>

## Bibliography

Alexander, Ron, *Wanganui Corporation Tramways 1908-1950* (Rangiora, 2006).

Maclean, Gavin, *New Zealand Tragedies: Fires and Firefighting* (Wellington, 1991).



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*Wanganui Herald Centennial Issue, 1867-1967* (Wanganui, published 3 June 1967).

Also newspapers and online articles as referred to in the footnotes.

**Architect/Designer:** T.H. Battle

**History of changes:**

**Date Period:** 1910s

**Rarity / Special Features:** The grouping of two Gonville Town Board buildings and a Masonic Lodge is an unusual grouping of small local authority buildings surviving intact with a Lodge building.

**Integrity:** From a cursory visual inspection for the purposes of this inventory, the building appears to be in a fair state.

**Representativeness:** Each of the three neighbouring buildings is representative of their building type and style of architecture.

**Context/Group Value:** Associated with the Castlecliff Fire Station and the Gonville local authority.

**Diversity (Form and Features):**

**Fragility / Vulnerability:** As a timber building it is potentially vulnerable to fire.

## Summary of Significance:

### *Architectural Qualities*

Although shorn of architectural details the town hall still retains its essential Queen Anne style of multiple gables dominant roof and but unusual symmetrical street elevation. Early photos show ornate gable screens and finials along with the entry porch, fretwork which are more common characteristics of the Queen Anne style.

The building is associated with well-known local Wanganui architect T H Battle

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## Historic Qualities

The building is associated with the history of local government in Gonville as well as its use as a community hall.

## Technical Qualities

The building uses typical construction materials and technologies of the period.

## Reference Source:

Alexander, Ron, *Wanganui Corporation Tramways 1908-1950* (Rangiora, 2006)

Maclean, Gavin, *New Zealand Tragedies: Fires and Firefighting* (Wellington, 1991)

*Wanganui Herald Centennial Issue, 1867-1967* (Wanganui, published 3 June 1967)

Also newspapers and online articles as referred to in the footnotes.

## Associated Pictures:



Above: Tawa Street, with the Swimming Bath and Gonville Town Hall on the left. In this 1920's picture the horse and cart was still to be seen on the streets opposite the approaching tram. Geoff Potts Collection, Wanganui

A photo of (from left) the Gonville swimming pool, Town Hall and Fire Station taken between 1912 (when the trams opened to Gonville) and 1924 (when the fire station closed), from Ron Alexander's book *Wanganui Corporation Tramways 1908-1950*, (p. 28).

Date of Survey: 2012

Prepared by: Ian Bowman and Val Burr



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- i *Wanganui Chronicle*, 12 May 1911, p. 8
- ii *Wanganui Herald*, 1 April 1909, p. 2
- iii *Wanganui Chronicle*, 18 September 1909, p. 4
- iv *Wanganui Chronicle*, 18 February 1910, p. 4, 21 February 1910, p. 3
- v *Wanganui Herald*, 1 April 1909, p. 2
- vi *Wanganui Chronicle*, 8 September 1910, p. 4, 13 October 1910, p. 4, 11 November 1910, p. 3
- vii *Wanganui Chronicle*, 7 January 1911, p. 5, 2 February 1911, p.2
- viii *Wanganui Chronicle*, 12 May 1911, p. 8
- ix *Wanganui Chronicle*, 5 May 1910, p. 8, 8 September 1910, p. 8, & 5 April 1912, p. 2
- x eg. *Wanganui Chronicle* of 22 February 1918, p. 5, & 4 April 1918, p. 4
- xi Gavin Maclean, *New Zealand Tragedies: Fires and Firefighting* (Wellington, 1992), p. 165
- xii Archives Central: Wanganui District Council: Ref. No. WDC 00316 : 0 : 6786:  
[http://archivescentral.org.nz/wanganui\\_dc/topics/show/22374-kokohuia-play-centre-lease-39-tawa-street-kokohuia-hall-a4](http://archivescentral.org.nz/wanganui_dc/topics/show/22374-kokohuia-play-centre-lease-39-tawa-street-kokohuia-hall-a4) *Wanganui Chronicle*, 28 August 2009: <http://www.wanganuichronicle.co.nz/news/suburbs-icons-could-be-going-gonville/1008912/>
- xiii Wanganui District Council: Mayor's e-column – 15 May 2006:  
<http://www.wanganui.govt.nz/news/showNews.asp?id=542&show=single>
- xiv *Wanganui Chronicle*, 28 August 2009: <http://www.wanganuichronicle.co.nz/news/suburbs-icons-could-be-going-gonville/1008912/>
- xv Wanganui District Council: Community Link – 3 December 2009:  
[http://www.wanganui.govt.nz/news/commsLink/issue443\\_page2.asp](http://www.wanganui.govt.nz/news/commsLink/issue443_page2.asp)
- xvi *Wanganui Chronicle*, 20 September 2010, <http://www.wanganuichronicle.co.nz/news/couple-seek-to-pool-in-community/1027624/>