

## St John's Lutheran Church



**Location:** 98 Harrison Street, Wanganui Central, Whanganui  
**Heritage NZ Pouhere Taonga List Number:** Nil

**Physical Description:** the nave of this timber framed church is a steeply sloping gabled structure parallel with Liverpool street and with a lean-to entry porch facing Harrison Street with a small gable on the centre line of the nave. Under the entry gable is a cross and either side are two lancet shaped windows. The lean-to entry is extended to the east with a small gabled open porch. On the side opposite Liverpool Street is a further lean-to roof. A bell-cote with a single bell is mounted above the south end of the nave gable under which is a Serliana window.

**Other known names:** St. John the Baptist Anglican Church, St. John's Anglican Church, St. John's Lutheran Church, Reformed Church of Wanganui

**Current Use:** Lutheran Church & Reformed Church of Wanganui

**Former Uses:** Anglican Church

**Heritage Status:** District Plan Class: Class C

**Architectural Style:** Carpenter Gothic **Date of Construction:** 1887

Register Item Number:

351

**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

# Built Heritage Inventory

**Materials:** Painted vertical weatherboards, timber joinery, corrugated steel roofing

**Registered owner:**

**Legal Description:** Pt Subn Sec 30 Twn Of Wanganui

**History:** Harrison Street Community Church, also known now as St. John's Lutheran Church,<sup>1</sup> was built in 1887 as St. John the Baptist's Anglican Church. J.B. Bennett's book, *Christ Church Wanganui: the continuing story* (p. 86), records that this was the first "daughter church" of the parish of Christ Church. However, Christ Church's Vestry minute books throughout this period are missing<sup>2</sup>, and the first reference to St. John's in the existing minutes was not until 1900.

Earlier references in local newspapers include a notice in the *Wanganui Chronicle* of 11<sup>th</sup> September 1886 (p. 3) advertising a tea meeting, along with vocal and instrumental entertainment at the Princess Theatre, to raise funds for the St. John's Church Room Building Fund.

The *Wanganui Chronicle* of 6<sup>th</sup> May 1887 (p. 2) announced that its staff had: *"Had the pleasure of inspecting the drawings of the new English Church of St. John the Baptist, which is now being erected at the corner of Harrison and Liverpool-street's. The design, which is by Messrs Atkins and Clere, is being carried out by Mr Barnott; and it is hoped that it may be ready for opening on the festival of the Patron Saint, on the 24<sup>th</sup> June. The building will consist of nave, aisles, and chancel. The portion at present being erected is the nave, which is 40 feet long by 20 feet wide (the same width as the nave of Christ Church). The height of the floor to plates is 14 feet, and the roof being open, will give about the same height more. There is to be a porch at the west end and a small vestry on the south side. The site is an excellent one, being as nearly central for the district the church is intended to provide for, as possible. The ground was the generous gift of Mrs White, of St. John's Hill, and it is not the only instance of this lady's liberality in aid of this struggling congregation. A large number of children are always among the attendants at the St. John's services, and an effort was made some time back to establish a Sunday School for them; but the*

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<sup>1</sup> Websites applicable to: St. John's Lutheran Church / Harrison Street Community Church: [http://www.lutheran.org.nz/c08.php?info\\_id=1](http://www.lutheran.org.nz/c08.php?info_id=1) and The Reformed Church of Wanganui, which also occupies this building: <http://www.rcnz.org.nz/about/church-view.php?church=wanganui>

<sup>2</sup> The missing years are 1878-1896 - Colin Venimore, *In the Steps of the Roasted Saint: a history of the Aramoho Parochial District* (Wanganui, 1992), p. 23

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*schoolroom in which the services are at present held being otherwise occupied, this had to be given up for a while. The promoters have, however, by no means relinquished the intention, and a Church of England Sunday School will, we understand, be opened very shortly. The design for the new church is pretty, though simple, and the erection of this and the State school on the adjoining section will be a great improvement to Liverpool Street."*

The opening of St. John's took place on Friday, 1<sup>st</sup> July 1887. The *Wanganui Chronicle* of 2 July 1887 (p. 2), recorded that the first services at St. John's "Churchroom" had been intended to have been held on "Sunday next", however, the clergy had other engagements that day, and so it was decided with two day's notice to bring the event forward. "This greatly hurried the preparations, decorative and musical; but by dint of hard work, everything was ready in time." The article stated that despite the bad weather, a full choir and good congregation had been present.

The *Chronicle* went on to describe the new church. "*The quasi-chancel is furnished with a temporary altar, prayer-desk, and lectern, with the proper ecclesiastical ornaments, kindly lent by a church man living near. The altar was vested in red, with the monogram I.H.S. worked in gold. The reredos was hung with white and gold stars, and surmounted with the text, 'Except the Lord build the house, their labour is but lost that build it.'* Vases of beautiful flowers were placed about the holy table, the lectern also being florally adorned. The lighting of the church last night was by candles, and the effect was very pretty, but not sufficiently strong. It is hoped that gas may be available shortly."

The activities and singing of the evening were then described, led by the curate, the Rev. T.L. Tudor and the Rev. Mr Williams. Mr Holden was choirmaster and Mrs Browne was organist. The preacher, Mr Williams, told those present that the object of the new churchroom was two-fold. It was for "*the worship of God, and the training of the young in His service.*" He also considered "*how great a work the new church might be capable of doing in the neighbourhood in which it had been built.*" The article concluded by advising that there would be a service the following day at 11:00am, and also that arrangements had not yet been completed for regular services twice a day. Sunday School would also be held weekly starting the following day at 2:30pm.

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Susan Maclean's book, *Architect of the Angels: the churches of Frederick de Jersey Clere*, contains little on this church, simply recording that it was built of timber and dedicated on 1 July 1887. However, it does record that the partnership Atkins & Clere operated in Wanganui between March 1883 and April 1888, and that Clere had lived in Wellington from February 1886.<sup>3</sup>

The church's builder, Thomas Barnott, had been a well-known builder and contractor in Wanganui, his work including "Mr George Hutchinson's house on the edge of Queen's Park." An inadequate tender price on this house had led to his being bankrupted by January 1885. His 1884 advertisement adds that he had just imported a sawing machine powered by a 6hp water engine, and was able to turn out shop fittings, glass cases and jobbing work. He also won the tender to build the Catholic Church in Waverley in 1888 at a cost of £198. At the time of his sudden death in 1892, apparently from a heart attack, he was at his workbench in prominent fellow building contractor Mr Meuli's workshop in St. Hill Street.<sup>4</sup>

Presumably the candles or oil lamps that were also not-too-satisfactory in July 1887, had to light the church for its first few years, as the aforementioned entry in the Christ Church Vestry minutes in mid-June 1900 related to Capt. C.W. Collins being deputised to inquire as to the cost of laying gas to the church and the necessary lighting connections at the church. The churchwardens were also given the power to act on the resulting information. The following year, the church received two coats of paint, with the winning tender of £8/5/- being that of Mr Sparkes. This work was to be "*subject to possible modifications due to contemplated alterations to the building.*"<sup>5</sup>

The Christ Church Vestry minutes reveal little of the story of St. John's, other than references to occasional painting and repairs. Service books, however, record the number who attended services there and the offertories received, and these showed that attendance was gradually declining.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Susan Maclean, *Architect of the Angels: the churches of Frederick de Jersey Clere* (Wellington, 2003), pp. 183, 190

<sup>4</sup> *Wanganui Chronicle*, 9 October 1884, p. 1, 20 January 1885, p. 2, 3 October 1888, p. 2. & 28 January 1892, p. 2. See also 'Ayrshire House' in the *WC* edition of 29 May 1889, p. 3

<sup>5</sup> J.B. Bennett, *Christ Church Wanganui: the continuing story* (Wanganui, 1976), p. 84

<sup>6</sup> Bennett, p. 105

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Archdeacon F.O. Ball was at Christ Church between 1955 and 1970, and it was during his time that St. John's was sold. By this time, the church was the oldest in the parish<sup>7</sup>, and while it had been a centre of a lot of activity in its heyday, and had at one time had a large congregation, by the latter 1950s *"only a handful of people regularly attended services. A live (lively?) St. John's Council did much to assist in maintaining interest in the Church and in carrying out necessary repairs to the buildings. (However) on occasions the roof leaked badly while the floor was on different levels in various parts of the structure as the piles underneath rotted away. The Vestry felt that the size of the congregations did not warrant the expenditure of large sums of money on the decaying building."*<sup>8</sup>

As a result, the vicar called a meeting of people in the St. John's part of the parish and after a "full discussion" it was unanimously agreed to discontinue services at the church. Finally the Christ Church Vestry minutes in July 1960 record that *"It was resolved that St. John's Church be closed as from August 31<sup>st</sup>, 1960."* In October 1960, an offer of £2,500 was received from the Lutheran Church for the purchase of St. John's. The Vestry committee duly accepted the offer.<sup>9</sup>

J.B. Bennett, in *Christ Church* (p. 160), writes that: *"To close an old church, especially when some of the older communicant families are still alive, is always a disheartening occasion, for many of their most cherished memories are centred in and around the old building: christenings, confirmations, weddings, even funerals of loved ones took place there. Under the circumstances it was not surprising that a certain amount of opposition was aroused, but with modern transport available parishioners soon adjusted to the new conditions and attended worship at the Parish Church."*

## St. John's Lutheran Church

Jean A. King's book, *The Lutheran Story: a brief history of the Lutheran Church in New Zealand*, does not suggest that Whanganui was historically a hotbed of Lutheranism. However, the neighbouring districts of Rangitikei and Maxwell certainly had this heritage, and population drift doubtless led to the presence of a Lutheran community in the city.

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<sup>7</sup> The older St. Peter's Church, at Gonville, (formerly Christ Church's second church, built 1866 and relocated in 1921) was not in the same parish.

<sup>8</sup> Bennett, p. 160

<sup>9</sup> Bennett, p. 160

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The possible presence of a previous Lutheran Church in Whanganui has not been researched. However, in 1884, a regular advertisement appeared in local newspapers stating that “*The German Lutheran Congregation in Wanganui intend building a Church. Any subscriptions thankfully received by Carl Ruge, Churchwarden, Niblett Street, Wanganui.*”<sup>10</sup> It is not clear if this money was ultimately raised to build the German Lutheran Church at nearby Maxwelltown. That church opened on 22 December 1889 – an event attended by visitors from Whanganui and Waitotara. This church, called St. Peter’s, closed in 1919 and was then demolished.<sup>11</sup>

The *Photo News* of 9 February 1963 published a series of photos taken at the time the church was dedicated into its new role by Rev. G. Noller of Marton. The attached captions stated that the church was packed for the occasion, with many people unable to fit inside and thus having to stand outside and to listen to the ceremony over loud speakers.

The church is now known as the Harrison Street Community Church, and it is one of eighteen congregations throughout the country under the Lutheran Church of New Zealand.<sup>12</sup> The Reformed Church of Wanganui – which has a Dutch heritage<sup>13</sup> - also uses the church. The sign outside the church in January 2012 indicates that the Lutherans hold their services there on Sunday mornings, while the Reformed Church members hold their services in the church on Sunday afternoons and evenings. There is also a church hall behind the building.

**Architect/Designer:** Atkins & Clere

**History of changes:** 1887 - Built as nave with aisles and chancel to come later.

The date the building took its present form was not located.

**Date Period:** 1880s

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<sup>10</sup> eg. *Wanganui Herald*, 16 September 1884, p. 2

<sup>11</sup> *Wanganui Herald*, 2 January 1890, p. 2; Jean A. King, *The Lutheran Story: a brief history of the Lutheran Church in New Zealand* (Lutheran Church of New Zealand, Palmerston North, 1994), pp. 28-30

<sup>12</sup> Lutheran Church of New Zealand: [http://www.lutheran.org.nz/information.php?info\\_id=14](http://www.lutheran.org.nz/information.php?info_id=14)

<sup>13</sup> The Reformed Churches of New Zealand: <http://www.rcnz.org.nz/about/who-history.php>

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**Rarity / Special Features:** The church was designed by Atkins and Clere. Frederick de Jersey was a prominent church architect. The window design is atypical.

**Integrity:** The building is largely intact and appears on superficial visual inspection to be in acceptable condition.

**Representativeness:** The Church design is a typical de Jersey Clere Anglican Church design and is representative of his work.

**Context/Group Value:** Association with Christ Church Anglican Parish until 1960 with continuous spiritual workshop until present.

**Diversity (Form and Features):**

**Fragility / Vulnerability:** Building, from a superficial visual, inspection appears to be in an acceptable condition.

## Summary of Significance:

### *Archaeological Qualities*

The church is a pre-1900 building and is an 'archaeological site' as defined by the HPA 1993.

### *Architectural Qualities*

The architect Frederick de Jersey Clere was the designer of many Anglican Churches throughout the country particularly in Wellington, Nelson and Manawatu/Wanganui. De Jersey Clere mainly designed Carpenter Gothic style buildings and churches using unique window designs instead of the more usual lancet shaped windows.

### *Historic Qualities*

At the time at which the church ceased to be Anglican and was sold to the Lutheran Church it was the oldest in the parish. Despite the sale the building was retained for religious worship and has had continuous use.

### *Cultural Qualities*

The Church has been for religious purposes since its initial construction in 1887 despite its change in denomination. It has played a prominent role in the spiritual life of the community.

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## Reference Source:

Bennett, J.B., *Christ Church Wanganui: the continuing story* (Wanganui, 1976)

King, Jean A., *The Lutheran Story: a brief history of the Lutheran Church in New Zealand* (Lutheran Church of New Zealand, Palmerston North, 1994)

Maclean, Susan, *Architect of the Angels: the churches of Frederick de Jersey Clere* (Steele Roberts Ltd., Wellington, 2003)

*Photo News*, Issue 9 February 1963. 'Church Dedicated' (My photocopy has no page number showing)

Venimore, Colin, *In the Steps of the Roasted Saint: a history of the Aramoho Parochial District* (Christ Church Parish, Wanganui, 1992)

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

## Associated Pictures:

*Date of Survey: 2012*

*Prepared by: Ian Bowman and Val Burr*