

Watt Memorial Fountain



Location: Victoria Avenue (Ridgway Street intersection), Wanganui
Heritage NZ Pouhere Taonga List Number: 2 1013

Physical Description: This concrete fountain has four main sections, with a circular base above which are four shallow gabled buttresses with niches, water fountains and basins underneath. The niches above the water fountains are lined with green encaustic tiles (originally blue and white). The next level has four sides with plaques and narrow columns with a cast iron column supporting a central light and four branches, each of which have ornate glass lamps. The style of the memorial is Gothic with trefoils in the gabled buttresses and Gothic columns. A new base was provided when the fountain was relocated to Victoria Avenue. A memorial plaque to William Hogg Watt is located on the side facing the river.

Condition: Excellent. The fountain was last cleaned in November 2003.

Other known names:

Current Use: Memorial

Former Uses:

Register Item Number:

9

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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Heritage Status: Heritage NZPT List **District Plan Class:** Class B
(Cat. 2)

Architectural Style: Gothic **Date of Construction:** 1881

Materials: Cement render, cast iron, marble

Registered owner: Wanganui District Council

Legal Description:

History: The fountain was erected by public subscription to commemorate Wanganui's first mayor, William Hogg Watt, who donated Westmere Lake to provide a water supply to the town in 1877. Born in Dundee, Scotland, Watt served in the merchant navy and set up in partnership with fellow Scot, T. B. Taylor. They arrived in Wanganui in 1842 with the first of their many ships, the cutter "Catherine Johnstone". The firm of Taylor and Watt was one of the most important businesses in the early years of Wanganui's development. As well as importing and conveying goods, they were general merchants to the settlers and had extensive stores and warehouses on Taupo Quay. The partnership ended with the death of TB Taylor in 1872, although the firm carried on under the management of other family members.

Watt was a member of the Wellington Provincial Council for its duration from 1853 to 1876, during which time he was responsible for securing the town's name change from Petre to Wanganui; he then became MP for Wanganui in 1881 and served for three years. In Wanganui, he was elected to the first Town Board in 1862 and became the first mayor of the new Borough in 1872, serving two more terms up to 1881. He also had an interest in education, having served on the board of the first Common School in Wanganui in 1855 and later became chairman of the Wanganui Education Board when it was established in 1877. In addition, he served on the Harbour Board from 1877 and was a founder of the Presbyterian Church in Wanganui.

W.H. Watt died at his residence, Sandridge Hall, in Wanganui on 7 March 1893.

On 11 Dec 1879, a public meeting held at the Steam Packet Hotel resulted in the establishment of a committee to take forward the idea of erecting a fountain to commemorate W.H. Watt's "gift" of the water supply from his Westmere property to the town – which had previously suffered from a chronic water supply which was a major problem as fires were frequent with the many timber buildings in town. (It later transpired that the Borough had paid Watt £800 to

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erect a sheep dip on his property in return for the use of his lake, so the water supply was not exactly a gift.)

Peter Bell was elected chairman of the fountain committee, with JL Stevenson the secretary and G Howe the treasurer. It took a year to decide where to place the fountain and even longer to raise sufficient public subscriptions to pay for it. The decision was made in January 1881 to site the fountain at the junction of Victoria Avenue and Ridgway Street and a rejuvenated committee commissioned the local architectural partnership of Donald Ross and John R Wright to prepare designs to a budget of £250.

Construction was under way by June 1881 but there was apprehension in some quarters about the siting of the fountain. "There appears to be a general consensus of opinion that the erection of the Watt memorial fountain at the site selected will prove to be a huge mistake" noted the editorial in *The Yeoman*, 11 June 1881. "We believe the design includes drinking troughs for horses. Obviously it would be highly inconvenient to allow the street to be practically blocked while a horse was taking a modest quencher, but such an eventuality is possible." Letters to the editor follow a similar vein, but the fountain continued to be built on the chosen site. By July 1881, *The Yeoman* was reporting another concern: "The marble tablet on the Watt memorial fountain bears so funereal an inscription that it is evidently the production of a committee of undertakers." This lettering was produced in Wellington; the ironwork and lamps were cast in D Murray's foundry and cost £76 while the brick and cement work (by John Jones) cost £147.

The fountain was unveiled at a public ceremony on 7 September 1881. The Volunteer Rifle Corps and the Fire Brigade were present when Peter Bell addressed Mr Watt to thank him for his "noble gift of the waters of Westmere to the inhabitants of this town". The afternoon was "strictly observed as a half-holiday, the principal shops shutting at one o'clock".

Not long after the opening, four posts were placed at the corners of the fountain to protect it from passing carriages and carts. Ironically, for many years the fountain had no water supply as it became subject to restrictions during periods of water shortage. Nevertheless, it became a popular meeting place in what was then the busiest part of town. In June 1894, a new lamp was ordered to

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place over the fountain. This was supplied by the London firm of Messrs Hick, Martin and Dripdale and was 7ft 7in high and 4ft 2in wide with a 400 candle-power "Westminster" gas lamp. This huge lamp can be seen in the photograph below; it replaced the original lower lamps and was itself removed at a later date, probably when the fountain was first moved to a new site.

The fountain was moved from the Avenue in November 1906 prior to the construction of the tramway system. John Jones, who erected the fountain in 1881, was also the contractor who moved it in 1906. The fountain's first new site was at the southern end of Cooks Gardens, but this was not popular so the fountain was stored for many years in a council yard. In June 1933, it was moved again to Queens Park where it was sited on the lawn in front of the (then new) Alexander Library. However, with no water supply it did not function as a fountain and its lower lamps had been removed.

The historic interest in the fountain was recognised in 1982 when it was registered by the Historic Places Trust as an historic place in its Queens Park location.

With the Mainstreet development of Victoria Avenue in 1992, the decision was made to shift the fountain back to its original site at the intersection with Ridgway Street and reconnect its water supply. As was the case in 1881, this move did not meet with approval from all sides when proposed. Even the national office of the Historic Places Trust was not in favour of the move and notes it as being "Relocated" in its Register listing. By June 1993, the fountain was back in its original location in the Avenue and is featured in many promotional materials for Wanganui.

On 7 September 2007 a birthday party was held for the Fountain, organised by Mainstreet Wanganui. This was also the launch of Marion Rainforth's book on the fountain, written and illustrated to appeal to children.

Architect/Designer: Donald Ross and John Robinson Wright

History of changes:

1881 Unveiled on Victoria Ave/Ridgeway Street

1906 Moved to southern end of Cook Garden, then stored in Council Yard

1933 Relocated to Queens Park in from the Alexander Library.

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1993 Relocated to original position on Victoria Ave.

Date Period: 1880s

Rarity / Special Features: It is the only surviving example of the 1881-1882 architectural partnership of Ross and Wright and the only structure of its kind in Wanganui. Wright also designed the Public Library in 1882 (now the Repertory Theatre) but left Wanganui for Australia by 1884. Ross was a cabinetmaker up to his death in 1896. One of his apprentices, Thomas H Battle, went on to become one of Wanganui's foremost architects.

Integrity: The condition of the fountain is good, the history of the design, its manufacture and modifications are clearly documented. With the relocation of the fountain back to its original Victoria Avenue site a new base was provided. The recesses above each "fountain tap" are lined with green encaustic tiles. These replaced the original blue and white tiles. Although the fountain has been relocated/stored numerous times the original is substantially intact and the present location is the original location.

Representativeness: The monument design and materials is typical of the Gothic style used for memorials throughout the Empire. The construction materials of concrete and cast iron are common for the period.

Context/Group Value: This is the only outdoor memorial to William Hogg Watt. The fountain also commemorates the development of the town's water supply, which was a major issue in the 19th century. Now that the fountain is back in its original location, it serves as a beacon for Wanganui's heritage and the redevelopment of the Avenue. The clock is one of a number of significant heritage items and buildings in the OTCOZ.

Diversity (Form and Features):

Fragility / Vulnerability: Being located on a road roundabout, it is potentially at risk from vehicle damage.

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Summary of Significance:

Archaeological Qualities

The structure has been relocated and then reinstated onto its original site

Historic Qualities

The structure was built to commemorate Wanganui's first mayor, William Hogg Watt and his gift of the water supply from his Westmere property to the town

Technical Qualities

The structure is designed using typical materials and techniques for the period

Cultural Qualities

Memorial water fountains are a not untypical means of commemorating citizens, with another not dissimilar memorial to Alice Honeyfield at New Plymouth. There is also a water fountain memorial to a popular dog on the Wellington waterfront.

Reference Source:

W. Pettigrew – 2003 Wanganui District Heritage Inventory, No. B17.20.

1990 Wanganui Heritage Study, item. Q/9.

Wanganui District Library Monuments Information File – various newspaper reports, etc.

Memorial Fountain, BH Barkle, 1991 (unpublished leaflet, GR Springer personal library)

The Yeoman: 11 June 1881, 9 July 1881, 27 Aug 1881, 10 Sep 1881 (report on unveiling ceremony) and 30 June 1894 – all articles about the erection of the Fountain.

Wanganui Herald, 19 Oct 1906 – Tender notice for removal and re-erecting of Watt Memorial Fountain from Victoria Ave to Cook's Gardens. George Murch, Town Clerk.

Wanganui Herald 7 Nov 1906 – Personal: notes that John Jones, contractor who will remove Fountain from Victoria Avenue to Cook's Gardens, was also the contractor who erected the Fountain in 1881.

Wanganui Herald 21 Nov 1906 – L&G: notes that work started this morning to dismantle the Watt Memorial Fountain for removal to Cook's Gardens.

Wanganui Chronicle 28 June 1933 – resiting in Queens Park.

Wanganui Chronicle 29 Feb 1993 – Athol Kirk article on WH Watt.

Wanganui Chronicle 1 Oct 1992 – trick photo showing fountain in position in

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Avenue prior to move.

Associated Pictures:



The fountain at left (with large lamp installed in 1894) in its original location by the Post & Telegraph Office. Photograph from Wanganui District Council 1990 Heritage Study.



The Fountain's birthday party on 7 Sept 2007 included a re-enactment of Peter Bell's 1881 Address honouring WH Watt. Photograph: Wendy Pettigrew.

Date of Survey: 2012

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