

## Castlecliff Pill Boxes



**Location:** Castlecliff Beach, Whanganui  
**Heritage NZ Pouhere Taonga List Number:** nil

**Physical Description:** The structure is a circular painted concrete structure with an entry and two openings equidistant from the entry. The structure has a slightly domed concrete roof.

The remains of at least five more pillboxes are located along Castlecliff Beach.

**Other known names:** Wanganui District – PB no.2-18

**Current Use:** Unused

**Former Uses:** Pill box

**Heritage Status:**

**District Plan Class:** Class B

**Architectural Style:**

**Date of Construction:** 1942

**Materials:** Painted concrete

**Registered owner:**

**Legal Description:**

**Register Item Number:**

91

**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



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**History:** During World War 2, the port at Wanganui was highly active and classed as a secondary port requiring coastal defences.<sup>1</sup> Defence experts thought the most likely attack on New Zealand would be from a Japanese raiding ship.<sup>2</sup> A coastal artillery battery was positioned on Languard Bluff, consisting of a 5 inch ex-US naval gun.<sup>3</sup> A large bell was placed on top of Lundon Park.<sup>4</sup> Blockades and other fieldworks were positioned on the key roads around the port with the intention of preventing the enemy from being able to progress inland via the roads.<sup>5</sup> These included tank traps on Heads Road near the soap factory, Puriri Street and Mosstown Road.<sup>6</sup>

A network of pillboxes was constructed along the whole coastline, positioned so that their fields of fire overlapped.<sup>7</sup> "Pillboxes", a term coined in 1917, were fortified machine gun posts constructed by the Army and Home Guard as an emergency defensive measure.<sup>8</sup> Some 340 pillboxes were constructed across the country in 1942 and 1943.<sup>9</sup>

Twenty-eight pillboxes were planned for Wanganui, although only five had been completed by the Public Works Department by 23<sup>rd</sup> February 1943.<sup>10</sup> A further eighteen were completed in March 1943.<sup>11</sup> Most of these were of the "Arrowhead" type, due to their shape being similar to that of an arrowhead.<sup>12</sup> This style of design was the preferred choice for the Wellington district.<sup>13</sup> It allowed for a heavy machine gun at the head of the structure and three or more riflemen on the wings.<sup>14</sup> Known as the "T49", plans for this type were drawn up in February 1942.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sole 2008 p.200; Waters 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Sole 2008 p.40.

<sup>3</sup> Waters 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Sole 2008 p.40.

<sup>5</sup> Waters 2005.

<sup>6</sup> Sole 2008:202.

<sup>7</sup> Sole 2008:200.

<sup>8</sup> Cooke 2000:766.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Waters 2005.

<sup>13</sup> Cooke 2000:768.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

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Several "Round" pillboxes were also constructed, with one surviving example located near Morgan Street. This type was unusual in the North Island, as these were commonly built in the South Island only.<sup>16</sup> The prefabricated pillboxes were based on a precast reinforced concrete pipe design from Hume Pipe Co. of Hornby which was intended as cheap and quick manufacture although was ultimately rejected by the Army.<sup>17</sup> The revised PWD design, by Bob Semple, was made from two diameters of precast steam-cured reinforced concrete piping, with a small cavity between filled with 2 inches of bitumen.<sup>18</sup> The structure was sunk vertically in the ground far enough to leave just the weapon port (a light machine gun only) visible.<sup>19</sup> The top was covered by heavy concrete 20inch thick slabs, while a narrow door allowed entry for a two-men crew.<sup>20</sup>

Sandbags and earth protected and concealed the structures, and the roofs were covered in turf and camouflage netting.<sup>21</sup> Tunnels connecting the structures were made of concrete with manuka and scrub poles and covered with scrub.<sup>22</sup> Inside the pillboxes, a machine gun would be mounted on a heavy table.<sup>23</sup> Bunks were also fitted along the back walls.<sup>24</sup>

The coastal defences were manned by members of the Home Guard, New Zealand's last line of defence.<sup>25</sup> There were two platoons of D company in the Castlecliff Home Guard.<sup>26</sup> Typical exercises including digging slit trenches and manoeuvres with the regular forces.<sup>27</sup> The Castlecliff Beach was fenced off with barb wire and patrolled by the soldiers, with the only entrances being via Morgan and Rangiora Streets.<sup>28</sup>

The threat from Japanese invasion existed until 1943.<sup>29</sup> After this time, the Home Guard forces were wound down and beach defences abandoned.

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<sup>16</sup> Waters 2005.

<sup>17</sup> Cooke 2000:768.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Sole 2008 p.200.

<sup>22</sup> Sole 2008 p.200.

<sup>23</sup> Sole 2008 p.200.

<sup>24</sup> Sole 2008 p.200.

<sup>25</sup> Sole 2008 p.203.

<sup>26</sup> Sole 2008 p.204.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

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Children growing up in the post-war era recall playing in the pillboxes and connecting tunnels.<sup>30</sup>

There at least six pillboxes still surviving along the Castlecliff Beach.

Two pillboxes are buried in the sand dunes near the Castlecliff Surf Lifesaving Club.<sup>31</sup>

One arrowhead pillbox is located in the sand dunes of Castlecliff Beach, facing the sea opposite No. 5 Seafront Road.<sup>32</sup>

One arrowhead pillbox is located in a large clearing in the sand dunes at the north end of Castlecliff Beach, midway between Bamber Street and Egmont Street.<sup>33</sup>

A round pillbox is located just off the end of Morgan Street at the north end of the Castlecliff Beach.<sup>34</sup> This is the structure identified above.

One arrowhead pillbox is located on Short Street, Castlecliff. A small pilot house has been built on top of the pillbox, possibly for use as a port control or Coast Guard.<sup>35</sup>

An arrowhead pillbox and a small round pillbox were also located in what is now Lndon Park.<sup>36</sup> Both structures were dynamited and bulldozed. Other destroyed pillbox locations include a section at the end of Heads Road and on the corner of Seafront Rd and Rangiora Street (buried with a house over it now).<sup>37</sup>

**Architect/Designer:**

**History of changes:**

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<sup>30</sup> Sole 2008 p.42.

<sup>31</sup> Waters 2005.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Sole 2008 p.202.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

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**Date Period:** 1940s

**Rarity / Special Features:** The **Integrity:**

structure is one of a number of similar WWII military defence positions throughout New Zealand in general and Wanganui in particular.

**Representativeness:** The structure is one of a number of similar WWII military defence positions throughout New Zealand in general and Wanganui in particular.

**Context/Group Value:** The structures form part of a nationwide group of WWII military locations throughout New Zealand, a number of which survive today.

**Diversity (Form and Features):** **Fragility / Vulnerability:**

## Summary of Significance:

### *Architectural Qualities*

This circular pill box is a functional military design associated with the defence of Wanganui. There are two surviving designs of pill boxes one of which may have been locally designed and manufactured and the more sophisticated pillboxes were designed by the military. The construction of the pillbox is representative of the use of reinforced concrete for wartime structures built in the 1940s.

### *Historic Qualities*

The structure is one of a number constructed near Wanganui as the town was considered a potential location for Japanese attack. It's likely local design and construction and is indicative of the volunteer work carried out throughout wartime, particularly that of the Home Guard

## Reference Source:

Cooke, P. 2000. *Defending New Zealand – Ramparts on the South Seas 1840s-1950s*. Defence of New Zealand Study Group, Wellington.

Waters, D. 2005. "Wanganui Gun Emplacements." From "Capital Defence: Wellington's Built Military Heritage" website URL:

<http://capitaldefence.orconhosting.net.nz/prfiles/post1930/wngpil1.htm>.

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Sole, L. 2008. *Castlecliff: The Community on the Coast*. H&A Design & Print, Wanganui.

## Associated Pictures:

### Wanganui District - 28 total

- 1? Mowhena Beach, Kai Iwi [still there, just]
- 2-18? Castlecliff Beach [many?]
- 19? Pilot Station, Wanganui River
- 20 Landguard Bluff beach, northernmost
- 21 Landguard Bluff beach, seaward of aerodrome
- 22 Landguard Bluff beach, seaward of aerodrome
- 23 Landguard Bluff beach, seaward of aerodrome
- 24 Landguard Bluff beach, northward of Kaitoke Stream mouth
- 25 Wanganui River, east of Landguard Bluff [survivor]
- 26 Wanganui River, in front of coast defence battery on Landguard Bluff
- 27 on sandhill inside aerodrome perimeter
- 28 east of Kaitoke Stream, by aerodrome

List of pillboxes from Cooke (2000:769).



5 inch coastal battery emplacement (Waters 2005).

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Pillbox in Dunes near Seafront Rd, Castlecliff (Waters 2001).



Pillbox in clearing at end of Morgan St, Castlecliff (Waters 2003).

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Pillbox under Pilot House, Short Street, Castlecliff (Waters 2003).

*Date of Survey: 2012*

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