

# Whanganui District Heritage Inventory

## Heritage Assessment and Statement of Significance

### Item: Coronation Band Rotunda

**Register Item No: 470      Class: B**

**Address: Rotokawau Virginia Lake**

**Legal Description: Part Section 16 Right Bank  
Wanganui River**

**Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga List Number and Category (if applicable):**



Fig. 1. Looking roughly southwest towards the northeast elevation of the Coronation Band Rotunda at Rotokawau Virginia Lake (December 2023).

#### Heritage Values:

- Archaeological
- Architectural
- Cultural/Social
- Historic
- Scientific
- Technological
- Setting/Context
- Interior

### Statement of Significance

The Coronation Band Rotunda was completed in 1912 as a memorial commemorating the coronation of King George V. and Queen Mary. It was designed by noted Whanganui architect Thomas Battle and is influenced by the Arts and Crafts and Queen Anne Revival styles. As a coronation memorial the rotunda highlights Whanganui's and New Zealand's strong ties to Britain and the British Monarchy at the time. It is linked to the rise of leisure activities, outdoor recreation, and the increasing popularity of brass bands in the late-19<sup>th</sup> and early-20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and with the development of Rotokawau Virginia Lake into one of Whanganui's premier public recreation areas. The prime movers for the construction of the rotunda were the St John's Hill branch of the Whanganui Beautification Society, who were responsible for much of the early work in developing the Virginia Lake Reserve. The Coronation Band Rotunda is located on a prominent knoll on the eastern side of Rotokawau Virginia Lake and is part of a larger group of heritage items across the wider Rotokawau Virginia Lake Reserve that contribute positively to the unique historical character of the reserve as a valued public recreation space.

## Historical Background

Rotokawau Virginia Lake is a 4.5 hectare lake located near the centre of Whanganui. Known to Māori as Rotokawau (Lake of the Black Shag).<sup>1</sup> It was an eeling reserve, with young eels finding their way to the lake by the Mangawhero Stream.<sup>2</sup> The lake stands on the top of a hill known to Māori as Taiorenui.<sup>3</sup> Toronui Pa was built on a small peninsula at the north-west end of the land.<sup>4</sup> Māori legends recall that Ranginui fought Turere for the hand of Tainui in this location.<sup>5</sup> Ranginui strangled Turere, and was himself killed by lightning as he started to prepare a meal afterwards.<sup>6</sup> Tainui, who followed her beloved Turere, came to the spot where he died and shed tears in grief.<sup>7</sup> These tears formed Virginia Lake.<sup>8</sup>

The lake was named “Virginia Water”, by Henry Shafto Harrison, after a lake he had left in Surrey, England.<sup>9</sup> Harrison had purchased the Crown Grant lands, which including the lake, in 1839 via ballot in London.<sup>10</sup> He arrived in Whanganui on the barque “Clydeside”, accompanied by two servants and a quantity of sheep stock, in 1841. “Virginia Waters”, the Harrison farm, covered an area of six hundred acres.<sup>11</sup> Harrison built two homes on the farm, both of which were destroyed by fire shortly afterwards.<sup>12</sup> The first, a small cottage, was burnt to the ground by Māori raiders.<sup>13</sup> The second, a larger homestead, was razed by Captain Laya of the Militia in 1847, when it was decided that any houses of strategic importance should be destroyed.<sup>14</sup> Harrison’s farm at the time was considered to be the most complete and his house the finest in Whanganui.<sup>15</sup>

With his land occupied by the militia and his homes destroyed, Harrison went back to Wellington.<sup>16</sup> When he later returned to Whanganui he took up a large area of land that stretched from Fordell to the Whangaehu River.<sup>17</sup> He named this farm “Warrengate” after his ancestral home in Yorkshire, England.<sup>18</sup> The “Virginia Waters” sections were broken up and sold in 1859 to William Russell and John Murray, and in 1862 to Mrs Hair, John Garner and William Park.<sup>19</sup> The lake was purchased by the Wanganui Borough Council in June 1874 as a potential water supply for the town.<sup>20</sup> The first piped water supply in Wanganui was drawn from the lake, but found so unsatisfactory that additional supplies were sought from Westmere Lake shortly afterwards.<sup>21</sup> In 1900, the lake levels

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<sup>1</sup> Athol Kirk, *Street Names of Wanganui* (Whanganui: Wanganui Newspapers Ltd, 1978).

<sup>2</sup> Kathleen McDonald, “Virginia Waters,” *Journal of the Whanganui Historical Society* 1, no. 1: 48.

<sup>3</sup> Max Smart and Arthur Bates, *The Wanganui Story* (Wanganui: Wanganui Newspapers Ltd, 1973), 35.

<sup>4</sup> Smart And Bates, *The Wanganui Story*, 35.

<sup>5</sup> Smart And Bates, *The Wanganui Story*, 23-25.

<sup>6</sup> Smart And Bates, *The Wanganui Story*, 23-25.

<sup>7</sup> Smart And Bates, *The Wanganui Story*, 23-25.

<sup>8</sup> Smart And Bates, *The Wanganui Story*, 23-25.

<sup>9</sup> McDonald, “Virginia Waters,” 49.

<sup>10</sup> McDonald, “Virginia Waters,” 49.

<sup>11</sup> McDonald, “Virginia Waters,” 49.

<sup>12</sup> McDonald, “Virginia Waters,” 50.

<sup>13</sup> McDonald, “Virginia Waters,” 50.

<sup>14</sup> McDonald, “Virginia Waters,” 49-50.

<sup>15</sup> McDonald, “Virginia Waters,” 49-50.

<sup>16</sup> McDonald, “Virginia Waters,” 49-50.

<sup>17</sup> McDonald, “Virginia Waters,” 49-50.

<sup>18</sup> McDonald, “Virginia Waters,” 49-50.

<sup>19</sup> McDonald, “Virginia Waters,” 51.

<sup>20</sup> Kirk, *Streets of Wanganui*, 58.

<sup>21</sup> Smart And Bates, *The Wanganui Story*, 191.

fell revealing a large quantity of matai logs, subsequently removed.<sup>22</sup> A new water supply was commissioned in 1903 and the lake was left as a reserve.<sup>23</sup>

Residents and members of the Beautifying Society on St John's Hill insisted that the Borough Council should do something with the abandoned reserve.<sup>24</sup> In 1904 a competition was held by the Borough Council for the best plan to develop the area.<sup>25</sup> The winning plan "Hercules", by Henry Sarjeant, Ellen Sarjeant, and John Tiffin Stewart, was adopted and the Beautifying Society spent the next ten years carrying it out.<sup>26</sup>

During June 1911 it was reported that a decision had been made by the Wanganui Borough Council to construct a band rotunda at the Virginia Lake Reserve as a memorial commemorating the coronation of King George V. and Queen Mary. It seems that the construction of the rotunda was at the behest of the St. John's Branch of the Wanganui Beautifying Society who were largely responsible for the development of Virginia Lake. As the rotunda was a coronation memorial the Borough Council received a subsidy from the Central Government towards its construction.<sup>27</sup>

Whilst most contemporary comment appears positive, there was some public criticism surrounding the decision to spend money on the construction of a band rotunda at Virginia Lake. It seems that there was a feeling that St John's Hill, then located outside the Wanganui Borough Council area, was receiving a disproportionate amount of funding for beautification projects at expense of both the central area and other suburbs.<sup>28</sup> There was also some criticism of the lack of public consultation as to what form Whanganui's coronation memorial should take.<sup>29</sup>

Architect Thomas Battle was asked by the Borough Council to prepare plans for a rotunda costing no more than £300.<sup>30</sup> Thomas Battle was a noted Whanganui builder and architect who designed a number of prominent Whanganui commercial, civic and residential buildings during the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Prior to designing the rotunda Battle attended a meeting of the St John's Hill Beautifying Society to obtain ideas as to what style of rotunda they would like to see erected on the site.<sup>31</sup> Plans prepared by Thomas Battle show an elevated rotunda with shelter space underneath for picnic parties (Figure 5).

Tenders for construction of the new band rotunda were advertised during early-October 1911.<sup>32</sup> Six tenders were received and that of Messrs Russell and Bignell for £315 18s 6d was accepted and construction commenced in earnest.<sup>33</sup> The location for construction of the rotunda was a small promontory on the eastern side of Virginia Lake. It seems this location was already used for open-air concerts prior to construction of the rotunda and where "music is carried to charming effect" across

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<sup>22</sup> McDonald, "Virginia Waters," 51.

<sup>23</sup> "Virginia Lake," *Journal of the Whanganui Historical Society* 9, no. 2: 5.

<sup>24</sup> "Virginia Lake," 5-6.

<sup>25</sup> "Virginia Lake," 5-6.

<sup>26</sup> "Virginia Lake," 5-6.

<sup>27</sup> "Local and General," *Wanganui Herald*, 21 June 1911, p.4.

<sup>28</sup> "Beautifying Society," *Wanganui Chronicle*, 3 July 1911, p.4.

<sup>29</sup> "Beautification Questions," *Wanganui Chronicle*, 7 July 1911, p.5.

<sup>30</sup> "Borough Council," *Wanganui Chronicle*, 21 June 1911, p.2.

<sup>31</sup> "Beautifying Society," *Wanganui Herald*, 17 August 1911, p.8.

<sup>32</sup> "Tenders," *Wanganui Herald*, 10 October 1911, p.1.

<sup>33</sup> "Borough Council," *Wanganui Chronicle*, 18 October 1911, p.6.

the waters of the lake.<sup>34</sup> Prior to construction commencing a path was carved from the main entrance, where formal entrance gates were under construction, to the proposed band rotunda site, by volunteers during weekend working bees.<sup>35</sup>

The new Coronation Band Rotunda was officially opened on the King's Birthday, 3 June 1912. The opening, although marred somewhat by poor weather, attracted a large public attendance. The mayor, Charles Mackay, delivered a speech, both the Garrison and City Bands performed, and rowing races were held on the lake.<sup>36</sup>

Since completion the Coronation band Rotunda has been used for many open-air concerts and other events. Although no longer open to the public, the space at the base of the rotunda was for many years well patronised by picnicking members of the public, and for a time gas burners were installed for the use of visitors.

Whilst concerts are no longer as common as they once were, the rotunda is still well utilised by visitors and is a high vantage point offering views across the lake. The Coronation Band Rotunda is Whanganui's only surviving band rotunda, with other such as the Jubilee Band Rotunda at Queen's Park, and the rotunda at the racecourse, both since removed.

## Physical Description

The Coronation Band rotunda is located on a prominent knoll on the eastern side of Rotokawau Virginia Lake and is visible from many parts of the Virginia Lake Reserve and Main North Road. This visibility has been somewhat reduced over time by the growth of surrounding trees. The rotunda is octagonal in shape and constructed over two levels with a raised band platform above a shelter space originally designed for visitors and picnickers to use. A storage space is provided under the steps. Infilled arched openings on the ground level were originally open.

The foundations, floors and ground floor walls are constructed from concrete, whilst the upper floor and roof structure is of timber with a Marseille style tile roof. The style of the rotunda incorporates both elements of the Arts and Crafts and Queen Anne Revival styles popular at the time. The ground floor exterior walls, which taper outwards, are finished with roughcast stucco. A plaque commemorating the erection of the rotunda is located on one side. The steps terminate at a pair of substantial concrete newel posts with simple caps.

The structure of the upper band level incorporates groupings of plain upright posts, between which are a decorative balustrade and frieze incorporating geometric timber designs. Large brackets extend from the top of each post to support the eaves. The ceiling is finished with battened tongue and groove panelling.

The Coronation Band Rotunda remains much as it was when first constructed. The exceptions being the enclosing of the ground level shelter space, replacement of the original handrails, and some steel bracket reinforcement added to structural joints. Thomas Battle's plans and early photographs also show a weathervane at the apex of the roof that is no longer present.

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<sup>34</sup> "Local and General," *Wanganui Chronicle*, 17 July 1911, p.4.

<sup>35</sup> "St. John's Beautifying Society," *Wanganui Chronicle*, 2 August 1911, p.6.

<sup>36</sup> "Local and General," *Wanganui Chronicle*, 4 June 1912, p.4.

## Historical Significance

None Low Moderate High Outstanding

*Whether the place is associated with important or representative themes or aspects of local, regional, or national history; whether the place is associated with historically important events, persons, groups, ideas, movements, social patterns, activities, or developments or advancements; and/or whether the place retains a use, function or integrity of association that contributes to the historical importance of the place.*

The Coronation Band Rotunda was completed in 1912 as a memorial commemorating the coronation of King George V. and Queen Mary. The erection of such a memorial highlights the strong ties to Britain and the British Monarchy that were present in Whanganui and across New Zealand at the time. The development of the rotunda was supported by the public, the Wanganui Borough Council, and central government, who offered a subsidy towards its construction as a coronation memorial.

The rotunda is associated with the development of Rotokawau Virginia Lake into one of Whanganui's premier public recreation areas. It was one of the earlier features to be developed at the reserve and was then located closer to the main entrance of the reserve, being the gates on the eastern side of the lake. The prime movers for the construction of the rotunda at the Virginia Lake location was the St John's Hill branch of the Whanganui Beautification Society, who were responsible for much of the early work in developing the Virginia Lake Reserve. The Wanganui Beautification Society carried out planting and other works across Whanganui that continue to benefit the city into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The Coronation Rotunda is linked to the rise of leisure activities, outdoor recreation, and the increasing popularity of brass bands in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is part of a group of structures which represents New Zealand's response to international trends in musical entertainment, leisure, and outdoor activities, generated during the Industrial Revolution.

## Social Significance

None Low Moderate High Outstanding

*Whether the place has a strong or special association with, or is held in high regard by, a particular community or cultural group for its symbolic, spiritual, commemorative, traditional or other cultural value; whether the place makes a significant contribution to the uniqueness or identity of the locality, district, region or nation; whether the place is an icon or marker that a community or culture (past or present) identifies with; and/or whether the place is significant to tangata whenua.*

The Coronation Rotunda was well used during the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century for outdoor band concerts and as part of celebrations and other public events held at Rotokawau Virginia Lake. As the century progressed, gas burners were installed in the base of the rotunda and it became a favourite picnic spot for families. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, although public concerts are now rare, the Coronation Rotunda is still appreciated by locals and visitors alike, and is a well photographed historic attraction providing a restful elevated spot to admire the view across the lake.

## Architecture, Technological and Construction Significance

None Low Moderate High Outstanding

*Whether the place has architectural value; whether the place belongs to important architectural styles or is a good example of vernacular architecture; whether the place has distinctive attributes of an aesthetic or functional nature (including massing, proportion, materials, detail, fenestration, ornamentation, artwork, functional layout, landmark status or symbolic value); whether the place demonstrates innovation or accomplishment, through design, use of materials or technology,, method of construction or of craft skill; and whether the place is associated with an architect, engineer, designer or builder who has made a special contribution to their profession or work.*

The Coronation Band Rotunda has architectural value as well-proportioned example of a band rotunda influenced by the Arts and Crafts and Queen Anne Revival styles. It was designed by noted Whanganui architect Thomas Battle who contributed significantly to the built and architectural heritage of Whanganui during his career. Battle's design for the Coronation Band Rotunda demonstrates both the breadth of his architectural skill, and variety of his commissions.

## Setting and Contextual Significance

None Low Moderate High Outstanding

*Whether the place contributes to or is associated with a wider historical or cultural context whether the place contributes to the streetscape, townscape or landscape; whether the place has collective value as a part or member of a group of inter-related, but not necessarily contiguous, heritage features or places or a wider heritage landscape; and whether the place is part of a group of heritage features or places (contiguous or discontinuous), that, taken together, have a coherence because of such factors as age, history, appearance, style, scale, fabric or use.*

The Coronation Band Rotunda is located on a prominent knoll on the eastern side of Rotokawau Virginia Lake and is visible from many parts of the Virginia Lake Reserve and Main North Road. It is part of a larger group of heritage items across the wider Rotokawau Virginia Lake Reserve that contribute positively to the unique historical character of the reserve as a valued public recreation space. Other items contributing to this historical character include the Winter Gardens, former caretaker's residence, the public toilet blocks, and Higginbottom Fountain, amongst others.

## Archaeological and Scientific Significance

None Low Moderate High Outstanding

*Whether the place has the potential to contribute new or important information about the history of the place or wider area through archaeological or scientific investigation; whether the place retains a physical form that can be appreciated by the community to aid in the understanding of past uses or history; whether the place has the potential to provide evidence to address archaeological or scientific research questions.*

N/A

## Representativeness, rarity and integrity

None Low Moderate High Outstanding

*Whether the place is a representative example of a particular class or type of place; whether the place or a component of it is rare, unique, the first such place or is the only such place in the locality, district, region or nation; whether the place retains a significant amount of original or early fabric, or fabric from an important period in the place's history.*

The Coronation Band Rotunda is a good and representative example of the type of commemorative band rotunda structures erected in towns and cities throughout New Zealand in the late-19<sup>th</sup> and early-20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Although some modifications have been made to the rotunda over time, and there has been some limited loss of detailing, overall, the Coronation Band Rotunda retains a high degree of integrity and is much as it was when first opened in 1912.

**Date: March 2024**

**Research by: Hamish Crimp**

### References:

#### Books

Kirk, Athol. *Street Names of Wanganui* (Wanganui: Wanganui Newspapers Ltd, 1978).

Smart, Max and Bates, Arthur. *The Wanganui Story* (Wanganui: Wanganui Newspapers Ltd, 1973).

#### Journal Articles

McDonald, Kathleen. "Virginia Waters". *Journal of the Whanganui Historical Society* 1, no. 1.

"Virginia Lake". *Journal of the Whanganui Historical Society* 9, no. 2.

#### Maps and Plans

Battle, Thomas. "New Band Rotunda - Virginia Park for the Wanganui Borough Council". 1911. Digitised copy of architectural drawing. Series: 168 - Engineers Registered Maps and Plans. Item: 366. Whanganui District Council Archives.

#### Newspapers

"Borough Council," *Wanganui Chronicle*, 21 June 1911, p.2.

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“Beautifying Society,” *Wanganui Herald*, 17 August 1911, p.8.

“Tenders,” *Wanganui Herald*, 10 October 1911, p.1.

“Borough Council,” *Wanganui Chronicle*, 18 October 1911, p.6.

“Local and General,” *Wanganui Chronicle*, 4 June 1912, p.4.

**Additional Photographs and/or images:**



Fig. 2. Looking roughly east towards the western elevation of the Coronation Band Rotunda at Rotokawau Virginia Lake (December 2023).



Fig. 3. The plaque presented by the Wanganui Borough Council commemorating the opening of the Coronation Rotunda (December 2023).



Fig. 4. Looking roughly south-west across the lake from the interior of the Coronation Band Rotunda (December 2023).

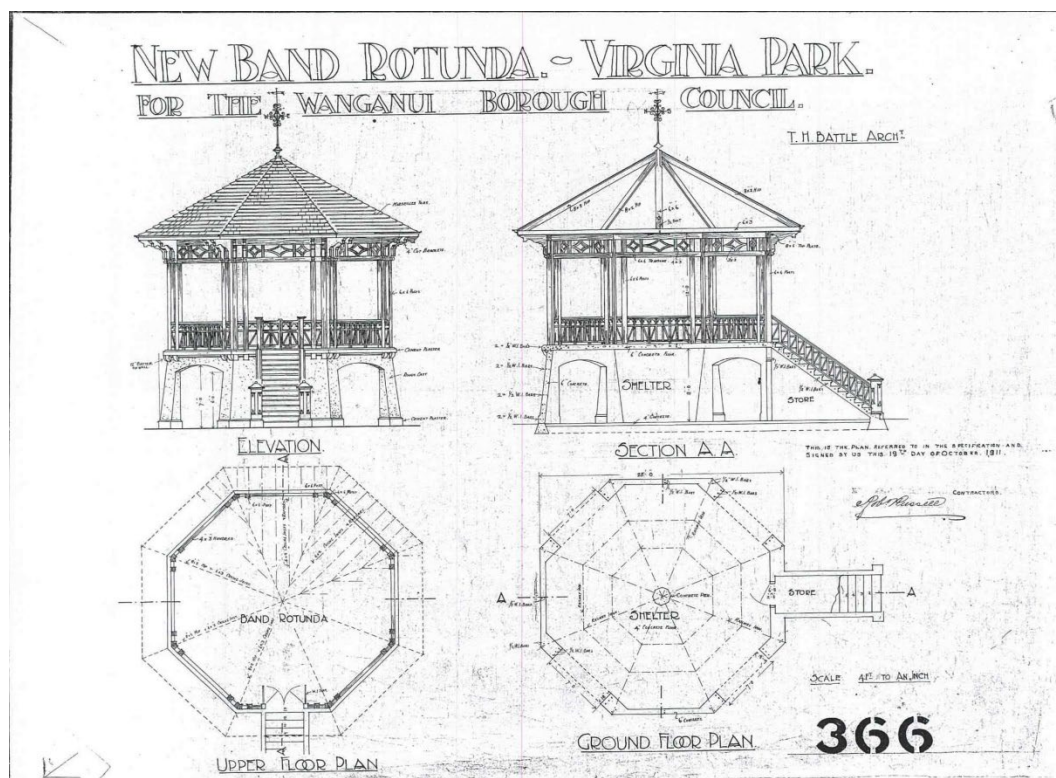


Fig. 5. Architectural drawings of the proposed Coronation Rotunda at Rotokawau Virginia Lake (Thomas Battle, “New Band Rotunda - Virginia Park for the Wanganui Borough Council,” 1911, digitised copy of architectural drawing, Series: 168 - Engineers Registered Maps and Plans, Item: 366, Whanganui District Council Archives).



Fig.6. Rotokawau Virginia Lake showing the recently erected Coronation Band Rotunda. (Frederick George Radcliffe, Virginia Lake Wanganui NZ, 35-R1700, Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections).