

## **The End of the Golden Weather Whanganui Architecture in the 1930s**

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*"I invite you to join me in a voyage into the past, to that territory of the heart we call childhood"*<sup>1</sup> begins *The End of the Golden Weather* – the Bruce Mason play set in 1930s New Zealand...and so it is at the beginning of this paper when we consider Whanganui Architecture of the 1930s period. The 1930s was the beginning of the end of Wanganui City's unbridled adolescent optimism and innocence – a beginning of the end of the time when anything had seemed possible.

Wanganui City is located in a sheltered river valley with a favorable microclimate. In the beginning and developing stages of European settlement it was also a favorable geographical location. Its river gave direct access to a fertile hinterland and it was an important part of the main NZ North-South travel route. Its ports gave early traders direct access to international markets. After land tenure issues in the 1840s and the disputed New Zealand Company purchase of Wanganui, colonial settlement was assisted by the ready access to good farming land and many local Maori who were supportive of European settlement. The early Whanganui years were characterised by extraordinary growth and building especially in the period from 1870. This was briefly interrupted by the First World War but continued through the 1920s. In 1924 Wanganui, Gonville and Castlecliff boroughs combined and the town became recognised as a city. With a population of 23,745 at the time it was New Zealand's fifth largest urban area<sup>2</sup>. The *Wanganui Herald* reported that *"New industries have been established, and trade has gone ahead in leaps and bounds. The back country has been opened up, and the leagues of forest which produced nothing have been replaced by sheep and dairy farms whose wealth benefits town and country alike... and the future is full of still greater promise... If the city grows during the next twenty years as it has in the past period under review – and we see no reason to believe otherwise – the population by 1944 should reach the 60,000 mark"*<sup>3</sup>.

Whanganui was a burgeoning regional commercial and industrial trade centre of national significance. Its architecture reflected the commercial successes of its recent history and the implied future that this suggested. The 1920s were a boom period for architecture when the following large scale buildings occurred:

In 1920 Victoria Court and 1921 Central Fire Station by Reginald Ford and RG Talboys. In 1923 Selwyn Buildings by C Newton Hood. In 1924 Woollen Mills and Fertilizer Works. The 1924 Fosters Hotel and 1926 Wanganui Commercial Club by Leopold Atkinson. In 1926 Levin and Co Building by S&A Luttrell Architects of Christchurch and 1927 Trinity Buildings by RG Talboys.

In 1926 the *Chronicle* noted *"Wanganui's rapid commercial and industrial expansion finds reflection in demands made upon the existing businesses and mercantile facilities, with corresponding activity in city building and the appearance of new structures along the street frontages"*<sup>4</sup>. The city's rapid growth and its perceived ad hoc town planning, particularly the effects of the expansion of the wharves and railways along the river's edge, and the need for new civic buildings, resulted in Christchurch Architect Samuel Hurst Seager being appointed in December 1925 by Mayor Hope Gibbons to *"Conceive a new Civic Centre"* for Wanganui in the Queens Park precinct<sup>5</sup>. Hurst Seager's design for an expansion of the Queens Park precinct and the location of civic buildings was followed soon after by Talboys' Alexander Museum design in

1927. Talboys' design located the museum in Queens Park as proposed by Seager and also included top lit glazed lanterns to the main atrium space of the museum as per Seager's lighting recommendations. This continued the Hurst Seager Wanganui connection that had begun with his setting and assessing the Sarjeant Gallery competition and its top side lighting in 1916, his design of the Durie Hill Garden Suburb in 1919 and the 1926 Civic Centre design.

Other substantial buildings built in the late 1920s included the completion of Spriggens (now Grand) Hotel, Trafalgar Buildings, and the Bastia Hill Water Tower. In 1928-1930 the Robert Talboys' designed Broadway Buildings and the adjacent Wakefield Chambers were built. The design of these and the other major commercial buildings constructed during this period all anticipated future expansion. They were designed to accommodate additional floors and included space for the addition of future passenger lifts.

The depression was clearly affecting the local Wanganui economy by the early 1930s when the National Bank designed by architect Cyril Mitchell of Atkins & Mitchell was completed. Another major project at the time was the Margaret Watt Memorial Orphanage which was the subject of an architectural competition won by Wanganui architect Clifford Newton Hood. When the results of the competition were announced in July 1930 the Trustees intended that "*the work will be done in such a way as to give the maximum employment to laboring men. In connection with the leveling of the grounds it is their intention to engage as many as possible under the architect's supervision*"<sup>6</sup>. Similar concerns to provide work for local people were evident in the approvals by the council to proceed with the Alexander Library in 1931. The Mayor suggested that tenderers be confined to local builders with much discussion resulting over the definition of what constituted a local builder<sup>7</sup>. Other significant 'leveling of grounds' occurred during this same period to level an airport runway. This was completed in time for the first landing on the 29<sup>th</sup> of November 1930. Thomas Battle the major architect in Wanganui over the previous thirty years was working on his last project - the Ladies' Rest Rooms.

The early 1930s also co-incided with work resulting from earthquake damage following the Murchison earthquake of June 17<sup>th</sup> 1929 and the Napier earthquake of February 3<sup>rd</sup> 1931. The effects of these earthquakes in Wanganui were relatively minor compared with other regions, however there was still widespread damage. This was restricted to chimneys and parapets falling and major cracks in brick walls and plate glass. There was significant remedial, reinstatement and structural upgrading work required, reinstating and lowering chimneys, removing parapets strengthening buildings and remodeling facades. The upper floor of the Technical College's two-storey buildings were removed between the two earthquakes. Significant towers on corner buildings such as John Campbell's Post Office building and Thomas Battle's Chronicle building were also removed.

The effects of the earthquakes went deeper than the remedial and remodeling work that they required. They forced a fundamental reconsideration of the use of brick as a building material. This was realised in 1929 when Henry Holland the leader of the Labour Party noted that "*one fact established by the earthquake was that brick building must go, and that wood and concrete must constitute the building material of the future. Furthermore, in Earthquake areas one storey buildings must be insisted upon*"<sup>8</sup>. This imperative became urgent after the Napier earthquake when the Wanganui Development League acted to halt construction on the Technical College hostel that was under construction. Additional strengthening measures were taken, comprising additional foundation work and new concrete columns and beams introduced to reinforce the brickwork construction. Major façade remodels from this period also included the Hallenstein's building and Warnock's Drapery.

Wanganui had been a mecca for architects in the period between 1900 and the mid 1920s when the city experienced a building boom, only briefly interrupted by World War One. Some 12 registered architects were in practice in Wanganui by the 1920s. However, by the early 1930s this number had dwindled to just four. Reginald Ford had moved to Auckland and was now in partnership with William Gummer. George Maclachlan and Henry Monk Helm retired from architecture and Harry Stroud got a job with the City Council. Thomas Battle died in October 1930 and Leopold Atkinson moved away at some time, depressed at the lack of work and unable to keep up his NZIA registration. He later returned to work as a draughtsman with the Wanganui Education Board.

Thomas Harvey James retained his NZIA registration and kept on working in a part-time capacity although he was still architect to the Wanganui Hospital Board. He was able to supplement his income by pursuing other interests, being appointed as a Fisheries Officer and Inspector of Scenic Reserves<sup>9</sup>.

That left Wanganui with three full-time practising registered architects during the 1930s: Robert Talboys, Clifford Newton Hood and John Duffell, the latter two being in partnership from 1930-1934 as Hood and Duffell.

Robert Talboys was the better businessman of these three. He designed an elegant two-storey house for his family on St John's Hill in 1922 but by 1929 this had been sold and the family moved into an older house in town which remained their home until the 1960s. Bob Talboys probably sold his St Johns Hill house to enable him to develop other business opportunities in town, especially the office blocks of Broadway Buildings and Wakefield Chambers which he designed for a consortium led by local accountant, Mat Silk.

Cliff Newton Hood had a tougher time during the Depression. He had been very busy during his first years in practice in the 1920s and had a good working relationship with local solicitors Norman Armstrong and Maurice Barton, designing houses for both men. In 1927 Armstrong Barton were Cliff's solicitors in the Supreme Court case of Hood v. Ratana<sup>10</sup>. In 1926 Hood had prepared plans and specifications for the temple at Ratana but was not retained as architect for the project. Upon discovering that the temple bore a distinct resemblance to his design, Hood claimed his architect's fees of £250. The two-day hearing resulted in Hood being granted a lesser amount, £130 as the Judge considered "the plans had been prepared according to instructions and the temple building had many points in common with Hood's plan" but he had not done all the work expected of an architect in overseeing such a project.<sup>11</sup> The relationship between Hood and Norman Armstrong no doubt contributed to the 1931 decision by Armstrong, when Mayor of Wanganui, to commission Hood to design the Alexander Library. However, getting this important commission in addition to the Watt Memorial Home project didn't help Cliff's finances. In June 1932 he was declared bankrupt and was fortunately discharged from this state in May the following year, just in time to celebrate the opening of the new Library<sup>12</sup>.

John Edwin Duffell had worked with Cliff Newton Hood since arriving in Wanganui in the early 1920s and was taken on as partner in 1930 when Hood won the competition for the Watt Home. It is not yet known why this partnership was dissolved by 1935, but a complaint for professional misconduct was held against Duffell in December 1936 – for failing to return tender deposits<sup>13</sup>. Jack Duffell remained working in Wanganui until at least 1937. However, by 1939 he was no longer a registered architect and had moved to Wellington. He later joined the architect's department of the Ministry of Works and died in Wellington in 1950.

Hood and Duffell's Watt orphanage was completed in 1932 having been designed in 1930 after the Murchison Earthquake. At the same time these architects were working on the Alexander Library – a project funded by a major bequest. The library building was *“modelled on earthquake resisting lines, special provision being made in the reinforcing of the foundations and by concrete piers and beams. The possibility of dampness is obviated by the outer walls being of the cavity type<sup>14</sup>”*. The library design is also intended to be sympathetic to the Alexander Museum and Sarjeant Gallery designs to form a unified civic precinct. The relationship to the Sarjeant design in particular is direct, reinterpreting the Sarjeant's entry design and adopting the Union Jack motif prevalent in the window design and ornamentation of the gallery.

There is little evidence of much building in Whanganui during the mid 1930s, The Cliff Newton Hood Bacon Factory in Taupo Quay of 1935, Talboys' remodeling of the Woolworths premises, Duffell's AMP Society façade remodel of 1936 and Hood's Art Deco façade for Dustin's Tearooms were indicative of the type and scale of building activity in the city at the time. The depression had hit hard. The relative isolation and difficulty of access to much of the surrounding farmland, together with the steep and difficult nature of the land, and its deterioration over time had also had an effect. Much of this land had been settled in smaller blocks as rehabilitation settlements by returned servicemen after the war. The small block sizes, regenerating forests, erosion, and low wool prices, contributed to a reversal in farmers' fortunes and flow on stagnation to the city's growth after this time. The problem was recognised by the government as early as 1925 with the Deteriorated Lands Act giving loans for topdressing, land development and revaluation.

One such rehabilitation settlement was at Mangapurua up the Whanganui River where there were 30 farms at the peak of settlement serviced by difficult road access from the north. Although promised for years, it was not until 1935 that the Mangapurua bridge was started. It was intended to link the remote settlement to the Whanganui River and the regular riverboat service at the Mangapurua landing. When completed in 1936 the road ceased at the bridge and did not yet connect to the river. Later a very rough road continued the 4 kilometres to the river but by then it was too late. Settlers were unable to make a living from the land and were walking away and leaving their farms. By 1942 the valley was completely abandoned after the original access road was destroyed by floods. The bridge remains today surrounded on both sides by regenerated forest and is now a Registered Historic Place and a tourist destination known as the Bridge to Nowhere.

At the end of 1937 the fifth Putiki mission church was completed. The church for the Putiki Maori community was a significant undertaking that was considered to have blended the arts of two races. *“In the first place the object was to erect a purely European structure and outwardly at least, that intention has been faithfully adhered to...but the interior of the structure has been moulded on different lines<sup>15</sup>”*. *“The matter was taken up so enthusiastically that it was eventually decided to blend European construction with the carving, weaving, and other ancient arts of the Maori...<sup>16</sup>”* The work was supported by the efforts of Maori politician Sir Apirana Ngata and his wife Lady Ngata who personally undertook some of the weaving. Sir Apirana Ngata was an advocate of Maori arts and crafts and the building of carved memorials or meeting houses. The design caused considerable local interest at the time and was considered to be symbolic of a unity between Maori and European. The blended architecture was not however unified. It was a Maori interior within a European structure and commentators were varied in how they reviewed it. *“An English bell...rests in an English Church, overlooking a clump of English trees planted by an Englishman”* began one review. It continued *“On entering that portal the worshipper is confronted first with the font, which has been canopied in ancient Maori fashion – a covering thatched with raupo reeds held in place with strong limbs of manuka. Looking down the church from east to west the view is striking. Weird Maori art, which is dominated by faces with protruding tongues*

*and wildly opened eyes, adorns the walls*<sup>17</sup>.” The interiors with their assertive renaissance of Maori Arts and Crafts were challenging. In his opening address the Bishop of Wellington, the Rt Rev H St Barbe Holland rejoiced that “*you will have the joy of worshipping in a church which will remind you that you can be truly Maori in your faith and worship as you are in your meeting house*” then went on to say “*This church is not to be a museum of Maori art applied to Christian worship*<sup>18</sup>”.

The decision to build a new Chief Post Office for Wanganui was taken by 1937. The old Post and Telegraph Office on the corner of Ridgway Street and Victoria Ave was no longer large enough to house the national telegraph activities and the local postal needs. There had been considerable pressure since the late 1920s from Wanganui people who needed a new Post Office capable of serving what was then still a growing city. This project was also part of the Labour government’s programme of public works to stimulate economic activity.

In March 1937 the Post & Telegraph Department instructed Wanganui architect, Robert Talboys, to prepare plans for a post office building of a modern design. Talboys had hoped to have the plans completed that year, but his final plans are dated 1938, indicating that several versions may have been prepared before the P&T Department was ready to proceed. Building tenders were advertised in *Building Progress*, Oct 1938. WM Angus, contractors from Napier won the tender for the £90,000 building. The structure was largely in place by the end of 1939 but it took nearly a year to complete the building. The new Chief Post Office was opened by the Postmaster-General, Hon PC Webb, on 11 Dec 1940<sup>19</sup>.

A three-storeyed ferro-concrete structure covering an area approx 4645 sq metres, the Chief Post Office was the largest single building in Wanganui at the time. The Ridgway Street frontage extends for 41.5 metres and the building height is 16 metres. The frontage is slightly stepped back on either side of the entrance façade, with an additional step back to the part of the building housing the PO boxes. A central void provides a light well serving the internal parts of the building.

The *Wanganui Chronicle* 11 Dec 1940 described the façade as “*simple and not bold in its proportion, the character being strengthened by a fine use of materials. The bold pink Hamner stone base and columns are finely axed, giving a sure foundation to the finer finish of the coloured plaster above.*” A particular feature is the use of bronze spandrels linking the four sets of windows above the entrance. One of these above the entrance still has “GR VI” as the building was erected in the reign of King George VI.

The most significant feature of the building is the use of Maori ornamentation as capitals for the four stone columns supporting the main entrance. Here the Maori ornamentation is not part of the minor decorative motifs, it has become the capitals to the main columns. Robert Talboys’ Chief Architect Ron Prince went to considerable trouble to research the koruru motifs which were sculptured in Christchurch. The parapets are ribbed at the top, and also contain Maori spiral motifs derived from canoe prows. These are located on each corner of the stepped facade. The *Wanganui Chronicle* (11 Dec 1940) noted that “*the architect is to be complimented on breaking away from the orthodox Greek and Roman capitals to perpetuate that of his own country.*” The Maori ornamentation was considered an appropriate architectural expression of a New Zealand identity in Architecture at a time when New Zealand was celebrating its first centenary as a Nation.

Inside the building, the main vestibule was finished with polished marble on the walls. The stairs and letter slots were constructed from terrazzo. Marble was used on the counters in the public

office. The electrical installation was considered to be a particular feature of the new building. The heating system in the building used an electrically-driven centrifugal pump, believed to be the most efficient of its kind at the time. The basement area was also ventilated by electrically-driven fans. Electricity was also used in a number of ways to increase the efficiency of the post office organization. Telegrams were delivered to an upper floor by electrically-driven tubes; more than 50 electric clocks around the building guaranteed that everyone worked to the same time and glass-diffusing units were used for the lighting to reduce glare. The night-time use of the mail room was addressed with the installation of imported glass steel units to assist with the lighting needs.

The Decade ended architecturally with the centennial celebrations and the construction of the Golden Gates designed by Robert Talboys as an entrance to the Cook's Garden reserve at the opposite end of the Maria Place axis to the Sarjeant Gallery. Talboys was by then one of the two remaining architects still practising in the city. Other significant city events at the time included the wreck of the Port Bowen and the major 1940 Whanganui River flood. These two events marked the end of an era for the city as a significant national centre. The decline in coastal shipping coupled with problems maintaining the wharves in town and at Castlecliff resulted in a reduction of exports from Whanganui. The ongoing problems of the difficult river bar access to the ports were brought sharply into focus with the wreck of the Port Bowen, and after the initial flurry of economic activity that arose from salvage activities and recycling of the ship's materials there remained the reality of a difficult and declining port serving a difficult to access and develop hinterland. From this time there was a marked growth in railway freight with goods transferring to the Main Trunk Line that did not travel through Wanganui, and the newly established direct rail link from Auckland to New Plymouth that also bypassed the city. From this period the adjacent cities of Palmerston North and New Plymouth began to grow much faster than Wanganui and soon surpassed it in size and economic importance. It was the end of Wanganui's period of youthful growth and the time that anything had seemed possible – the end of the golden weather and the beginning of Wanganui City's more modest adult future.

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<sup>1</sup> Mason, Bruce. *The End of the Golden Weather*, Price Milburn, 1962.

<sup>2</sup> Saunders, BGR (ed). *Introducing Wanganui: The Geography of New Zealand: Study No. 2*, Massey University, 1968. Wanganui's urban area was the fifth largest in New Zealand by the 1901 Census, but with several different boroughs and built-up areas in the neighbouring counties, it was not until these were all combined to create the city in 1924 that Wanganui's full status was recognised.

<sup>3</sup> *Wanganui Herald* 1 April 1924, p4.

<sup>4</sup> *Wanganui Chronicle* 9 July 1926.

<sup>5</sup> Correspondence in Wanganui District Council Archives file 72:114aaf with Civic Centre Plans 168:990/991aaf.

<sup>6</sup> *Wanganui Herald* 1 July 1930.

<sup>7</sup> *Wanganui Herald* 10 Feb 1932 (from Library cuttings scrapbook).

<sup>8</sup> *Wanganui Chronicle* 27 June 1929.

<sup>9</sup> *NZ Gazette* 14 May 1931 (p1459) and July 1932 (p1746).

<sup>10</sup> Hood's file and diary of Ratana case in Talboys Collection, Ref B24, Whanganui Regional Museum.

<sup>11</sup> *Wanganui Herald* 26 February 1927 (with other case reports on 24 and 25 February)

<sup>12</sup> *NZ Gazette* 6 June 1932 and 15 May 1933.

<sup>13</sup> *NZIA Journal* Dec 1936 pg 83

<sup>14</sup> *Wanganui Chronicle* 15 June 1933 (from Library cuttings scrapbook).

<sup>15</sup> *Wanganui Chronicle* 20 November 1937.

<sup>16</sup> *Wanganui Chronicle* 6 December 1937.

<sup>17</sup> *Wanganui Chronicle* 20 November 1937.

<sup>18</sup> *Wanganui Chronicle* 6 December 1937.

<sup>19</sup> *Wanganui Heritage Inventory for Wanganui District Council* B16.19 Chief Post Office. Wendy Pettigrew and Robert Young, Dec 2003.