

TIMARU DISTRICT COUNCIL
HISTORIC HERITAGE ITEM RECORD FORM

HERITAGE ITEM NAME former State Fire & Accident Insurance Office Building

ADDRESS 21 Church Street, Timaru

PHOTOGRAPH



(www)

DISTRICT PLAN ITEM NO. New **HNZ LIST NO. & CATEGORY** n / a
(at time of assessment)

LEGAL DESCRIPTION Lot 1 DP 7427

VALUATION NUMBER 2500063300

DATE OF CONSTRUCTION 1929-30

**ARCHITECT/DESIGNER/
BUILDER** Cecil Wood, architect; WJ Harding & Co., contractors

STYLE Art Deco classicism

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

Three storey-building plus basement with rectangular footprint and flat roof. Steel-framed windows framed by fluted piers. Flat dentilled cornice has scalloped panels and decorative plasterwork referencing Maori, Mayan and Art Deco motifs. Decorative flame motif in spandrels between windows. Suspended canopy over main entry off Church Street. Entry framed by recessed piers with koru-style plaster motif. Additional fenestration on plain north-west elevation.

MATERIALS/STRUCTURE

Reinforced concrete, cement plaster.

ADDITIONS/ALTERATIONS

Internal modifications (R Munro, architect; early 1950s). Canopy and keystone motif over entry added (date unknown).

SETTING

The building stands at the north corner of the intersection of Church and Sophia Streets. To the south-east is the former Public Trust Office (heritage item # 32), to the west the Timaru Library and to the south is St Mary's Anglican Church (heritage item # 50). The South Canterbury Museum, the Timaru Post Office precinct and the Timaru District Council offices (heritage item # 48) are further to the south. The extent of scheduling is the land parcel on

which the building is located. It is noted that it appears the building extends beyond the lot boundary on its Sophia Street frontage.

HISTORY

The State Fire Insurance Office was established by central government in 1903 in response to increasing premiums by private insurers. Timaru Borough Council had taken a leading role in advocating for state provision of fire insurance in the late 1890s. The new government department, which was the first in the British Empire and only the second such company in the world, commenced business in January 1905. Timaru people were served by either agents or a branch office before purpose-built premises were erected in Church Street in 1929-30. The South Canterbury Hospital Board and the Transport Department originally occupied the upper two floors of the building. Later the Government Life Insurance Department and the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research (DSIR) also had offices in the building. In the 1980s the State Insurance Office moved to a new building in Church Street, at which time the Transport Department took over the whole building. In 1994 the building was taken over by a real estate agency. It remains in commercial use today.

HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE

The former State Fire & Accident Insurance Office building has historical and social significance for its association with the State Insurance company and the inter-war development of the Timaru town centre. The building also represents central government's efforts to provide public access to affordable insurance and its role in constructing substantial office buildings in provincial New Zealand.

CULTURAL AND SPIRITUAL SIGNIFICANCE

The former State Fire & Accident Insurance Office building has cultural value as a demonstration of the way of life of the staff of the State Fire Insurance Office, as well as those of other government departments previously accommodated in the building.

ARCHITECTURAL AND AESTHETIC SIGNIFICANCE

The former State Fire & Accident Insurance Office building has architectural significance as a notable commercial design by preeminent Christchurch architect Cecil Wood (1878-1947). Wood trained in the office of Frederick Strouts and attended classes at Canterbury University College. After working in London and practising for a time in partnership with Samuel Hurst Seager, he established his own practice in 1909. Wood also designed the Hare Memorial Library (1916) and Memorial Dining Hall (1923-25) at Christ's College, and he later designed the State Fire Insurance Office building in Christchurch (1933-35). Construction of the Timaru branch office was overseen by local architects Walter Panton & Son and the Macmillan Brown Library at the University of Canterbury holds drawings for the building. Ruth Helms has demonstrated that the modern classical styling of Wood's late 1920s commercial buildings was influenced by his study tour of the United States.

TECHNOLOGICAL AND CRAFTSMANSHIP SIGNIFICANCE

The former State Fire & Accident Insurance Office building has technological and craftsmanship significance for its reinforced concrete construction and the quality of its facade detailing. The government favoured robust, fire resistant materials for the construction of their insurance and Public Trust Office buildings, hence the use of reinforced concrete and steel-frame windows. William Harding (c.1873-1963) was a local builder who also erected the former Public Trust Office and the 1933 clock tower addition to the Timaru Borough Council Offices in conjunction with Panton & Son.

CONTEXTUAL SIGNIFICANCE

The former State Fire & Accident Insurance Office building has contextual significance as a notable historic feature on the edge of the Timaru town centre. Together with the former Public Trust Office building (Walter Panton & Son, architects, 1922-23, heritage item # 32), the former State Fire Insurance building frames the entry to the eastern portion of Church Street.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND SCIENTIFIC SIGNIFICANCE

Although the building post-dates 1900 its site may have potential archaeological significance relating to its earlier development and use. An 1875 map of Timaru (South Canterbury Museum) shows a building on Lot 99 and it is recorded that the previous building was demolished to make way for the new insurance office.

SUMMARY OF HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE

The former State Fire & Accident Insurance Office building has overall heritage significance to Timaru and Timaru district as a whole. The building has historical and social significance for its association with the State Fire & Accident Insurance Office and the interwar development of the town centre and cultural value as a demonstration of the way of life of its former staff and their clients. The former State Fire & Accident Insurance Office building has architectural significance as the work of leading Christchurch architect Cecil Wood and technological and craftsmanship significance for its reinforced concrete construction and ornamental plaster detailing. The former State Fire & Accident Insurance Office building has contextual significance for the contribution it makes to the Timaru town centre streetscape and its site may have potential archaeological significance in view of the colonial use of the property.

HERITAGE CATEGORY

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REFERENCES

- *Timaru Herald* 11 May 1905, p. 1; 4 January 1911, p. 1; 11 February 2017 (available online).
- *Press* 12 September 1936, p. 20.
- *NZ Herald* 4 September 1933, p. 16.
- *Hawera & Normanby Star* 30 March 1898, p. 3.
- *NZ Truth* 21 November 1925, p. 8.
- *Dominion* 13 August 1909, p. 8.
- R Helms 'The Architecture of Cecil Wood' PhD thesis, University of Canterbury, Christchurch, 1996.
- <https://teara.govt.nz/en/insurance/page-2>
- <https://teara.govt.nz/en/insurance/page-3>
- <http://www.timarucivictrust.co.nz/activities/cecil-wood>
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Extent of setting, 21 Church Street, Timaru.

