



Heritage Buildings Report

Site ID	-
Building/Site Name	Devonport Flats
Address	131 St Aubyn Street, New Plymouth



Statement of Significance

Devonport Flats is one of the most remarkable buildings ever constructed in New Plymouth. The conception of Scottish-born businessman Alexander Waldie, it was designed by the noted local firm of Messenger Griffiths and Taylor. It is composed of three four-storey buildings planned and built one after the other on St Aubyn Street between 1922 and 1924. Its significance lies not only in its size but in its construction in reinforced concrete and its lively and interesting facades. It has historical significance for its connection with Waldie, a flawed but compelling personality, whose vision it was to build what was the country's largest apartment building up to that point. The building is important too for the century of relatively affordable accommodation it has provided near central New Plymouth, to renters and owner-occupants alike.

Devonport Flats is a significant architectural accomplishment. A complex of three buildings, it has a strong composition and rhythm and a distinctive style that set it apart from its neighbours and its contemporaries alike. The building is significantly larger in scale and bulk than its neighbours and it has a dominant presence that stands out in the local streetscape.



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Legal Information and Heritage Status

Legal Description	Part Section 600, Lot 1 DP 13810, Part Section 602, Town of New Plymouth
District Plan Item/ Map No.	N/A
Heritage New Zealand List	890

Construction Information

Date of Construction	1923-24
Principal Materials	Reinforced concrete
Construction Professionals	Messenger, Griffiths and Taylor (architects)

History

Devonport Flats was built in 1923-24 for A.B. Waldie, a farmer, mining engineer and businessman. The complex of buildings was celebrated at the time of its completion for its ambition and presence in the townscape.

Alexander Blackwood Waldie (1862–1928) was born in Edinburgh and emigrated to Australia in 1886. Queensland was his first port of call but he also spent time in Adelaide and New South Wales. In 1897 he married Margaret Reid (known as Maggie), also from Scotland, in Sydney.¹ Waldie and his new wife moved to New Zealand in 1898. A mining engineer by training he was initially involved in mining on the Mokau River but then in the early 1900s took up farming at Lepperton, about 12 kilometres east of New Plymouth. In 1910, he gave up farming but purchased other land in the Lepperton area and later (1914) built a house there that he named Airlie. A keen enthusiast for the volunteer movement (he was almost certainly a volunteer back in Scotland), he was involved in the Taranaki Guards from shortly after his arrival in New Zealand.² He was also a car enthusiast and a founding committee member of the New Plymouth Automobile Association in 1924.³ He even found time to build bridges; he built one over the Waiongana River in 1925.

Waldie's personal life was often disordered and even tragic at times. He and his wife were childless. In 1910, while in Melbourne on a trip back from the United Kingdom, Margaret Waldie took her own life.⁴ In a note left behind for a hotel maid, she cited her poor health and her belief that her life had not worked out for her. The reason for her state of mind may have been her husband's behaviour.⁵ By that time, he had fathered three children by Isabella Munro, thought to have been the Waldies' housekeeper. The first child, Margaret, was born in 1908,⁶ while twins were born in 1909. Both the twins and their mother (aged 34) died after complications with the birth.⁷ So, by 1910, Waldie had lost both his wife and the mother of his only living child.

¹ Australia Marriage Index Citation, Registration No. 2277, 1897

² An Alexander Blackwood Waldie was a commissioned officer in the 1st Midlothian Artillery Volunteers before resigning in 1886. (<https://www.thegazette.co.uk/London/issue/25558/page/688/data.pdf>, retrieved 5 September 2018). He was Hon. Secretary of the Guards Club from 1900.

³ *Stratford Evening Post*, 2 September 1924, p.5

⁴ *The Age*, 14 October 1910, p.8. Her death was not announced in Taranaki until the following year. See *Taranaki Herald*, 23 February 1911, p.2

⁵ *The Herald* (Melbourne), 13 October 1910, p.5

⁶ The evidence for this can be found in Births, Deaths and Marriages. The parents listed for Margaret Munro were Isabella Munro and Alexander Blackwood (i.e. without Waldie on the end).

⁷ *Taranaki Daily News*, 14 April 1909, p.2



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Six years later, in 1916, at the age of 54, Waldie married Mercy Cage, then 44. Remarkably, she gave birth to a son, David, in 1919,⁸ by which time she was 47. Mercy Cage already had a daughter, Gabrielle, from a previous marriage in England. One account states that Waldie's daughter Margaret and Gabrielle grew up together.⁹ When Mercy Waldie died in 1960, her death notice listed her as the mother of Margaret Waldie.¹⁰ A.B. Waldie also had a lengthy and often unsuccessful battle with alcohol. He had regular brushes with the law over public drunkenness, mostly for driving while drunk.¹¹

Despite his travails, Waldie managed to establish himself in business with an early foray into the motor trade. His business, the Criterion Garage, in Liardet Street, was the agency for Darracq and Oakland cars and various motor cycle brands and the success of his business meant he was able to extend his premises in 1915. In 1916, Waldie sold Criterion Garage to Andrew Smith.

Waldie did not take up another venture until 1920, when he bought J.J. Jenkinson's electro-plating business in Brougham Street,¹² moving it to St Aubyn Street later that year. In 1922, Waldie, clearly restless and ambitious, began planning a block of flats to sit on the land immediately to the east of his business premises. It was designed by Messenger, Griffiths and Taylor (Frank Messenger designed the extension to the Criterion Garage) and was constructed of reinforced concrete. The plans for this block were completed in May 1922¹³ and the building finished in 1923. The builder was Frederick Payne and the value of the application was £6,000.¹⁴ Payne went on to build all of the flats for Waldie.

A significant feature of this building was that it was first intended to be three storeys;¹⁵ Waldie added another floor during construction (plans for the extra floor have not been located). This is the only one of the buildings that included flued coal ranges (with the exception of the additional floor) and chimneys. The kitchens in the other two buildings of the group were provided with room for an electric stove and no chimneys. The addition of the top floor on the first building displays evidence of Waldie's growing ambition.

While the first of the flats was being built, Waldie and his builder were in close co-operation over a patent they lodged for a construction method 'capable of being easily and rigidly erected' using pre-cast concrete slabs and reinforcing (similar in many ways to modern construction techniques).¹⁶ There is no direct evidence in the surviving drawings and specifications that this type of construction was used in the Devonport Flats, but it shows Waldie's enquiring mind and entrepreneurial skill at work.

Just where Waldie found the money (or the means to borrow the money) to pay for such an ambitious venture is not known, but before the first building was barely underway, he planned an extension to this block on the Dawson Street corner. This included a new shop and workshops for his electro-plating business on the ground floor and 10 more flats. Plans, again by Messenger,

⁸ *Taranaki Herald*, 9 June 1919, p.2

⁹ Wilson Peter 2012, *Even the Dogs Have Forgotten to Bark: the events and people of Lepperton, Sentry Hill and Waiwongona*, PT & LM Wilson, New Plymouth p.190

¹⁰ *Taranaki Herald*, 9 May 1960

¹¹ In 1901, Waldie went missing in Sydney on a trip back to the United Kingdom. His wife, back in New Plymouth, contacted the police because she was concerned that due to his 'addiction to drink' he would have gone missing or been arrested. (*New South Wales Police Gazette*, 19 June 1901). Waldie struggled to get on top of his issues with alcohol. In 1916 he was convicted of drunken driving on two occasions on the same day, despite having made promises to a local magistrate that he would stay off liquor. (*Taranaki Daily News*, 23 June 1916, p.3)

¹² *Taranaki Herald*, 31 August 1920, p.7

¹³ Residential Flats, St Aubyn St for Mr A.B. Waldie ARC 2006-004, Puke Ariki

¹⁴ Building inspector's book, April 1922 – March 1927, ARC2011-204, Puke Ariki (12 June 1922)

¹⁵ *Ibid.* Residential Flats, St Aubyn St for Mr A.B. Waldie ARC 2006-004, Puke Ariki

¹⁶ New Zealand Patent Specification 49744, 8 March 1923, Baldwin and Rayward, Patent Attorneys, Wellington

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Griffiths and Taylor, were completed in December 1922¹⁷ and the building completed later in 1923. The application value was £7,400 and in two parts, one for Dawson Street and the other for St Aubyn Street.¹⁸ Specifications for this building refer to the removal of an existing timber building on the site (presumably his business) to make way for it.¹⁹ Provision was made for a covered way halfway along the ground floor, which gave vehicular access to the rear of the flats. This was filled in some time after the early 1980s.



Devonport Flats, most likely early in 1924, just before work began on the last of the three buildings. Waldie's electroplating business is on the corner. (Puke Ariki, pho2012_0385)

Waldie still wasn't finished. He commissioned another block of flats, to the east of the original block but significantly bigger. Messenger, Griffiths and Taylor designed this in the same style as the existing block along St Aubyn Street, but a return to the south gave the finished complex a U-shape. Plans were completed in June 1924²⁰ and provided for 32 flats at an estimated cost of £25,000.²¹ This building is date-stamped 1924 but it may have been completed in early 1925. None of the builders of the three blocks of flats are known. Included in the plans was a solid concrete fence that Waldie must have been given permission by the council to build in front of the buildings on St Aubyn Street (excluding the corner building). It created something of an enclosure in front of the buildings. This was finally removed by the early 1970s and the footpath shifted across.

By the time Waldie had finished, the combined size of the flats was on a scale never seen before in New Plymouth. In fact, they were more than likely bigger than any block of flats constructed anywhere in New Zealand up to that point. In 1927, a single-storey garage for six cars, with another

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Building inspector's book, April 1922 – March 1927, ARC2011-204 (8 January 1923)

¹⁹ Residential Flats, Dawson St for Mr A.B. Waldie – specification, ARC 2006-004

²⁰ Residential Flats, Dawson St for Mr A.B. Waldie, ARC 2006-004

²¹ Building inspector's book, April 1922 – March 1927, ARC2011-204 (28 June 1924)



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for bicycles, was added to the rear, with access off Dawson Street.²² Again designed by Messenger, Griffiths and Taylor, these were later demolished (date unknown).

Waldie called the complex Devonport Flats, although his name was sometimes put in front. The name related to a now unused name for the area that the flats were located in, which was close to where early ships dropped anchor. Devonport was the naval port of Plymouth and was formerly known as Plymouth Dock.²³ The building was also known as Waldie's Devonport Flats.

Waldie died in 1928. Obituaries ignored the turmoil in his personal life and praised his contribution to Taranaki and the 'monument to his enterprise...in the form of the massive Devonport Flats...which townspeople take an excusable pride as bring one of the architectural features of the town.'²⁴

Waldie intended to retain the buildings, rent the flats and collect the rent. This arrangement continued after his death, at which point his estate was inherited by his wife and three children (including his stepdaughter) as beneficiaries of the Waldie Estate Trust. The property was owned by the descendants of Alexander Waldie until the 1970s. Waldie's electro-plating business ended its occupation of the ground floor of the corner building by the mid-1930s but the space remained commercial premises (various bakeries) until at least the mid-1960s.



Devonport Flats in the early 1970s, during a period when it became quite rundown. A number of openings on St Aubyn Street had still not been filled with windows by this time. (Puke Ariki)

The general composition of the tenants changed relatively little over the first four decades. At the outset they were mainly tradesmen – mechanics, builders, painters and the like – and their families. Single or widowed women were also early occupants. By the 1930s more professional people had moved in – salesmen, journalists, clerks and travellers. This mixture of occupants (tradesmen, professionals and single females) remained the norm for several decades.

²² Proposed Garages, Dawson St for A.B. Waldie, ARC 2006-004

²³ 'Of Passing Interest' in *Taranaki Daily News*, 8 July 2013

²⁴ *Taranaki Daily News*, 21 May 1928



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By the 1970s the buildings were looking rather rundown but an external paint job in the early 1980s restored some of their lustre. It was during this time that the Waldie family relinquished ownership and the flats were sold off as unit titles to individuals. A body corporate was established and it slowly lifted the appearance and reputation of the building. The body corporate remains an active and enthusiastic organisation that takes considerable pride in the heritage status of the building. It is not certain how many of the original purchasers lived in their flats, but by the early 21st century the vast majority of occupants were not owners.

One of the striking original features of the flats were the recessed balconies on the St Aubyn Street elevations and rear elevations and the open bays on the Dawson Street block. By the mid-1960s half of these openings were enclosed and all but two of the openings facing the streets were enclosed by the early 21st century (the access balconies on the rear elevations remain open). Enclosing the porches created more internal living space but also blocked out traffic noise, a growing problem by the second half of the 20th century. Today, the vast majority are fitted with aluminium window joinery.

Themes in History

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Reference Sources

See footnotes

Description

Devonport Flats is a singular complex of buildings that would be a distinctive work of architecture in any urban setting in New Zealand. It is made in three separate but architecturally related blocks, which clearly show the staged process of the complex's design and development. It is designed in a Stripped Classical idiom with a strong Italianate influence – this is most obvious in the early photos where the striking sense of depth and rhythm of light and shade created by the original open balconies clearly illustrates the building's architectural intentions and antecedents (the effect of this has been undermined by the infilling of the balconies over the years).

Each block is four storeys in height and all share a common parapet and cornice line as well as a commonality of strong architectural rhythm, rich detailing, and elegant proportioning. The two major blocks facing St Aubyn Street are more or less identical in style and detail, although the 1924 block (the eastern one) is more than twice the width of the 1923 block (10 bays versus 5 bays).

The composition of both blocks is symmetric about a central entrance (this is one bay off centre in the 1924 building) with square-headed openings at each level. At the base of the building, two-storey semi-circular arched bays give the strong impression of an arcade running the length of the building, above this the next storey has rectangular openings with heavy moulded frames and aprons and attenuated keystones, running up to a large projecting cornice with heavy dentils. The late addition of the fourth storey sits above this, again with rectangular openings and a simple parapet above. The third block is built to face Dawson Street. It shares some of the detailing of the other two, but is otherwise formed quite differently – at least partly in deference to its long slender site. The main elevation has three cantilevered semi-hexagonal three-storey bay windows projecting out over the footpath. At the back of the building, there are open access balconies to all levels.

The building is little changed from when it was first constructed, except for the infilling of the St Aubyn Street balconies (a process started fairly early on in its life) and the prevalent use of aluminium window joinery in place of the original timber windows, along with a modern colour scheme (the building appears to have been unpainted originally) and it can still be seen and understood as first intended by its architects.

Devonport Flats occupies a large and prominent corner site just to the west of the city centre, where it has long frontages to two streets, and a semi-enclosed rear yard. The surrounding area has a

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predominant height of two storeys and is made up of a mixture of residential and commercial uses, including several (smaller) blocks of apartments, a few individual houses and the out-of-scale Richmond Estate building on the seaward side, along with a variety of commercial buildings. In this context, the building, at four storeys tall, is significantly larger in scale and bulk than its immediate neighbours and it has a dominant and distinctive presence in the local streetscape. Its interesting architecture stands out amongst a collection of bland neighbours.

Assessment

Historical	Devonport Flats, completed in 1924, is historically significant as (almost certainly) the largest apartment complex built in New Zealand up to that point. Its conception and construction in a regional centre like New Plymouth were extraordinary and a testimony to the vision of its developer, the entrepreneurial but flawed Alexander Waldie. The buildings have provided 50 low-cost flats near central New Plymouth for generations of tenants and, more latterly, owner-occupants. Alexander Waldie is not a well-known figure today but his many and varied achievements and unconventional personal life suggest a person who should have a higher historical profile.	✓
Importance to Community	Devonport Flats remains a very well-known landmark in New Plymouth, without the huge prominence it had when it first opened.	✓
Architecture & Construction	Devonport Flats is one of New Plymouth's most striking and visually interesting buildings. Its strong architectural form and rhythm, along with its distinctive style and startling scale, mark it out from its contemporaries and neighbours alike.	✓✓
Setting and Context	The building is significantly larger in scale and bulk than its immediate neighbours; consequential to that, and to its interesting architecture, it has a dominant and distinctive presence in the local streetscape.	✓
Archaeological	-	
Rarity, representativeness, integrity	This building may well be unique. It was almost certainly the largest apartment building constructed up to that point in New Zealand but the fact that it was built in a regional rather than main centre gives it even greater interest. The 1920s was an era when apartment buildings began being built in earnest so Devonport Flats has strong representative value. It retains significant external integrity, with its concrete structure almost entirely intact, bar the odd infill and the closing up of the openings on the east, north and west elevations. Many of the flats retain original fabric, with some in highly original condition.	✓
Meets threshold for listing	(three or more ticks, or two ticks in one criterion)	✓