

**WAIMAKARIRI DISTRICT COUNCIL
HISTORIC HERITAGE ITEM RECORD FORM**

2021 District Plan Item No. HH026
HERITAGE ITEM NAME former Linen Flax Factory building
ADDRESS 501 Woodstock Road, Oxford
PHOTOGRAPH



(supplied)

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

LEGAL DESCRIPTION Part RS 26568

VALUATION NUMBER 2154001501

DATE OF CONSTRUCTION 1940-41

**ARCHITECT/DESIGNER/
BUILDER** JT Mair, Government Architect, Public Works
Department; W Williamson Construction Company,
contractors (?)

STYLE Industrial

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

Two-storey building with rectangular footprint and flat and gabled roof forms. Symmetrical, north-facing façade has tall parapet screening gabled roof above central 'barn door' style opening. Side elevations have square-headed barn-door and recessed window openings, chimney centred on west side of gable roof.

MATERIALS/STRUCTURE

Concrete block and cement plaster, corrugated metal.

ADDITIONS/ALTERATIONS

Demolition/removal of other structures on the site (c.1955?). Residential development of south-west corner of the property (c.1990). Paved access and parking around the factory (c.2010).

SETTING

The former linen flax factory building stands on the south side of Woodstock Road, east of its intersection with Domain Road and west of the intersection with Warren Road. The township of Oxford is to the north of the property, on the other side of the Eyre River. The setting is rural and rural-residential in nature. The extent of setting is limited to the immediate setting of the former factory.

HISTORY

Seventeen linen flax factories were established in the South Island by central government during the early years of World War II to help meet Great Britain's need for linen fibre for military use. 500 tons of seed was sent out from Britain in mid-1940 and subsequently commercial production of flax linen commenced in New Zealand. The British government funded 90% of the enterprise. Crop growing was to be supervised by the Fields Division of the Department of Agriculture, the erection of factories was the responsibility of the Public Works Department and the Railway Department was to manufacture the necessary machinery. In Canterbury factories were opened at Waikuku (in the Andrews' twine factory), Oxford, Leeston, Methven, and Washdyke. Factories at Geraldine, Fairlie and Makikihi followed the initial Canterbury cohort. Dew-retting of the flax fibre was initially carried out at Oxford, whereby the cut flax was left to lie in the fields and be softened by dew. Tank retting had a higher capital cost but lower labour costs. By October 1942 there were five retting tanks at the Oxford site. At the same time a second scutcher, for cleaning the fibre, was under construction. The first shipment of linen flax fibre left New Zealand in June 1941. Accommodation for workers was also provided at each factory site. The Oxford factory went in to production in late March 1941, at which time tenders had just been called for a number of 'miscellaneous buildings' on the site. The manager of the Oxford factory, HD McCrostie, later became General Manager of the Linen Flax Corporation of New Zealand. By the late 1940s only six factories were still running; of the other eleven the Methven and Makikihi factories had been destroyed by fire in September and December 1948 respectively. Only three linen flax factories continued production in to the 1950s and only the Geraldine factory survived until it closed in 1977. By May 1947 the former linen flax factory buildings at Oxford had been either sold or were under offer to the Public Works Department and the State Forest Service. By c.1955 the concrete factory building and two tanks to its west were the only remaining structures on the site; the latter had been removed or filled in by c.2004. The surviving structure was in hospitality use as an event venue in the mid-2010s, it is now in light industrial use.

HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE

The former Linen Flax Factory building has high historical and social significance for its association with the production of linen flax fibre for the British war effort during World War II and, more generally, with the historic association that the district has with flax milling, which began in the late 1860s. Linen flax milling was a labour intensive industry and sourcing workers during the war was difficult.

CULTURAL AND SPIRITUAL SIGNIFICANCE

The former Linen Flax Factory building has cultural value as a demonstration of the way of life of its former operators. It is esteemed by members of the local community for its war-time history.

ARCHITECTURAL AND AESTHETIC SIGNIFICANCE

The former Linen Flax Factory building has architectural significance as a monumental industrial structure designed by the Public Works Department to be fit for purpose. John Thomas Mair (1876-1959) was the Government Architect when the Oxford factory was designed and built. He had held the post of Government Architect in the Public Works Department since 1923 and he is regarded as one of New Zealand's preeminent mid-20th century architects. Notable among his larger works are the Departmental Building in Wellington (1938) and the Jean Batten Building in Auckland (1937-42). Mair was succeeded by Assistant Government Architect RA Patterson in February 1942.

TECHNOLOGICAL AND CRAFTSMANSHIP SIGNIFICANCE

The former Linen Flax Factory building has technological significance as an industrial building that was built from concrete to address the high fire risk associated with linen flax fibre

production. The factory building may have been erected by W Williamson Construction Company, a noted Christchurch contracting firm, which won the tender for other buildings at the site in early 1941. WH 'Billy' Williamson (1887-1971), the founder of the company, was a third-generation builder and had been in business for many years before his limited liability company was registered in August 1937. Williamson gained his first building contract when he was an apprentice carpenter aged 17. His construction company enjoyed nationwide success, securing contracts for major projects such as hydroelectric power stations, freezing works, hospitals, bridges, hotels and theatres, including the Avon, Civic, Grand and Regent in Christchurch. Williamsons were also responsible for the construction of the Edmonds' Factory in Ferry Road (1920-23, demolished) and the Nurses' Memorial Chapel in Riccarton Avenue (1927-28), which he described as the finest building he ever built. Williamson served on the Christchurch City Council, the Tramway Board, was a Justice of the Peace, a Fellow of the Institute of Builders (London) and the Institute of Building (Australia). He was also one of the founders of the Canterbury Aero Club. The science block at the University of Canterbury and the South Pacific Hotel in Auckland were among some of the company's last major contracts with which Williamson was personally associated. William Henry Williamson was Chairman and Managing Director of the company until his death in 1971. His son Peter carried on the business from its offices in Montreal Street until the late 1980s, before it went into receivership in 1991.

CONTEXTUAL SIGNIFICANCE

The former Linen Flax Factory building has contextual significance as a local landmark that stands out within its rural setting and evokes the scale of war-time linen flax production in the district. An aerial photograph of the site taken in the early 1940s shows that the subject building was originally attached to a longer, gabled structure, which was likely built from timber and corrugated iron. The whole of the land parcel was once devoted to linen flax growing and production.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND SCIENTIFIC SIGNIFICANCE

As the factory post-dates 1900 its site may have limited archaeological value, although below-ground evidence of the other structures erected for the factory may have survived.

SUMMARY OF HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE

The former Linen Flax Factory building has high overall heritage significance to the Oxford area and Waimakariri district as a whole. The building has high historical and social significance for its association with New Zealand's war-time linen flax production at the behest of the British Government and cultural value as a demonstration of the way of life of the people who operated the mill and for the esteem in which it is held today. The former Linen Flax Factory building has architectural significance as an industrial structure designed to be fit for purpose by the Government Architect's office and technological significance for its concrete construction, possibly by noted Christchurch contracting firm W William Construction. The former Linen Flax Factory building has contextual significance as a local landmark; the former mill's site may have limited archaeological value although below-ground evidence of the other structures erected for the factory may remain.

HERITAGE CATEGORY

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REFERENCES

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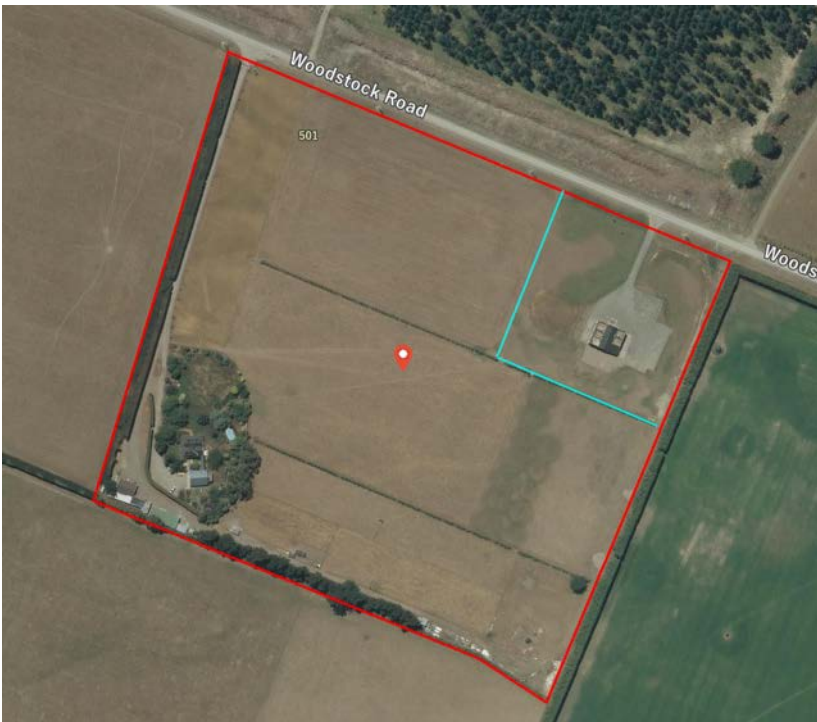
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REPORT COMPLETED

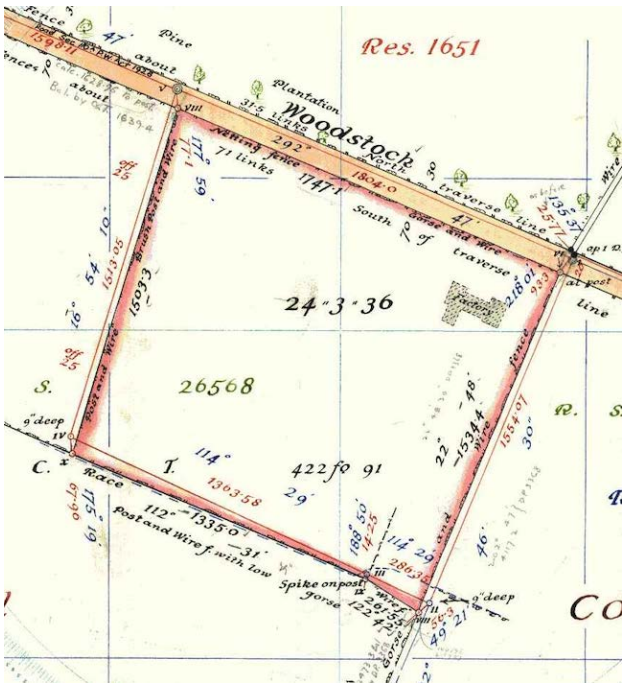
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AUTHOR

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Extent of setting, limited to immediate surrounds, 501 Woodstock Road, Oxford.



Detail of SO 7484, dated August 1942, showing factory in situ. LINZ.



Aerial view of the site, c.1944. WDC.





Four photographs of the Oxford linen flax factory and its workers were reproduced in the *Press* 22 October 1942, p. 3.