

Dominion Observatory



A singular place to observe the skies above and earth below...

Built in 1907, the Dominion Observatory played an important role in New Zealand's early time-keeping efforts and seismic research.

Standard time

The Dominion Observatory housed the Time Service which made astronomical observations to establish the official time for New Zealand. As well as time-reckoning, the Time Service also sent a signal each morning to Wellington's telegraph office which relayed the signal to post offices, ports and railway stations around the country.

The Dominion Observatory replaced the Colonial Observatory which was demolished to make way for the Richard John Seddon memorial and family tomb next to the Bolton Street Cemetery.

The new observatory was built at the top of Wellington's Botanic Garden, partly so that the lights of the growing city wouldn't interfere with the work of the astronomers who, at that time, depended on sun and planet sightings to make their time observations.



The Dominion Observatory c. 1920. The building was extended in 1926. Photo: Isaac Henry Bowen Jeffares (1868–1936), PA Collection 4870, Jeffares Collection (G-76775-1/2), Alexander Turnbull Library.

Did you know?

New Zealand was one of the first countries in the world to adopt a standard time when Dr (soon to be Sir) James Hector persuaded the New Zealand government in 1868 to adopt New Zealand Mean Time.

In 1962 quartz-crystal clocks formally replaced the astronomical regulator pendulums which had been used since New Zealand first started keeping standard time. Through

the 1970s and early 1980s the quartz clocks continued to be maintained at the observatory, and radio signals were still relayed from there, but the clocks were now calibrated to three caesium clocks monitored by the Industrial Research Limited (IRL) Measurement Standards Laboratory in Lower Hutt. The responsibility for maintaining New Zealand's standard time officially transferred to IRL in 1992.

Edwardian architecture

The building was designed by government architect John Campbell in the Edwardian Baroque style. The architectural style was used in the design of many public buildings built in the British Empire during the reign of Edward VII (1901–1910).

Edwardian Baroque architecture used elements from the architecture of France in the 18th century and the work of Sir Christopher Wren in England in the 17th century. In fact, when completed in 1907, New Zealand's new observatory had a number of similarities to England's Royal Observatory which had been designed by Wren in 1675. These similarities included its brick exterior and an octagonal room. Unlike the Royal Observatory's octagonal 'Great Star Room' however, New Zealand's octagonal room housed the astronomical clocks.

Earthquake!

In 1916, the observatory also began to house the government's fledgling Seismological Service. The seismological equipment at this site recorded many earthquakes over the Service's early years, including Murchison (1929) and Napier (1931).

There are still measuring instruments near the building. The site continues to be important for seismological measurements in New Zealand.

Today...

Restored in 2003, the Dominion Observatory building is maintained by the Department of Conservation. It houses several private companies.

Private offices located in the building are not open to the public.





The Krupp gun and Dominion Observatory.
Photo: Jeremy Rolfe.

Garden Battery

In 1896, as part of New Zealand's Coastal Defence Network, a battery was built on this spot to defend Wellington's inner harbour. The "Garden Battery" was built in response to the Russian Scare.

The Scare passed before the seven-inch, seven-ton gun, which was to be used at the site, was ever mounted. The trophy gun you now see is a World War I Krupp. It was captured in 1918 near Laacquerie in northeast France. After standing at Newtown Park for many years, the gun was restored and placed here in 2003.

The Krupp gun and the Garden Battery observation dome.
Photo: Jeremy Rolfe.



The battery's underground concrete bunker remains intact. It was used for many years to house seismological equipment. Stairs near the Dominion Observatory lead down to the bunker. The battery's small observation dome is also still intact.

More Information

Department of Conservation

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How to get there

The Dominion Observatory is located at the top of Wellington Botanic Garden, about 2-minutes walk from the top of the cable car.

