

# Oamaru Port and Central Business District

## SITE LOCATION

Part of Oamaru township, on the North Otago coast, South Island.

## SITE DESCRIPTION

The site consists of four sectors of the town:

- The artificial breakwater port
- Harbour/Tyne St historic precinct
- Buildings at the southern and western ends of Thames St
- The area running between Humber St and the sea, north from Harbour/Tyne St and including the Oamaru Railway Station.



Oamaru serviced the Central Otago and North Otago gold rushes of the early 1860s. The Otago and Westland gold rushes were one of three Pacific Rim gold rushes that drew multitudes of prospectors and merchants from Europe and Asia. The wealth generated by the industries and services associated with the gold, and the production and transportation of grain and wool, laid the foundations for a very prosperous commercial town.

The first shipment of frozen sheepmeat to be exported to Britain was slaughtered at Totara Estate just south of Oamaru. Although this shipment left from Port Chalmers, once the Oamaru harbourworks were completed in 1884 the town became a major exporter of frozen meat.

Other economic and trade cycles are reflected in the buildings of the town. A building spree in the late 1870s and early 1880s was as a result of a short grain boom. The national economy went into sharp decline from 1879 following financial failures, and a depression lasted until the mid 1890s; Oamaru, however, languished until the 1920s.

The artificial breakwater port was constructed largely between 1875 and 1908. Its main elements include: a concrete and rubble filled breakwater; the Macandrew

Wharf (1875); the Cross and Normanby wharves (both 1878); the Sumpter wharf built especially for the new frozen meat trade in 1884; stretches of handplaced stone seawall, mooring chains, late Victorian steam cranes; and small harbour-related sheds, workshops and a quarry.

The Harbour/Tyne St historic precinct is probably the most well-known historic part of Oamaru, and includes over 20 historic buildings, including the Scottish Society Hall (1864), the Criterion Hotel (1877), Smith's Grain Store (1882), the former Customs House (1884), the former NZ Loan and Mercantile Grain Store, the former Oamaru Harbour Board Offices and Meek's Grain Elevator (1883). All of these buildings are registered by the NZ Historic Places Trust, and many of them were designed by Forrester, an architect strongly linked to Oamaru.

The numbers refer to the following historic sectors of Oamaru:

1. Oamaru artificial breakwater port
2. Harbour/Tyne St historic precinct
3. Thames St.
4. Area between Humber St and sea.



Oamaru limestone buildings.  
 Left: National Bank (former Bank of Otago), right: Forrester Gallery (former Bank of New South Wales).  
*Gavin McLean*

Buildings at the southern and western end of Thames St include some of the earliest buildings and structures, such as the Thames St Bridge and the Last Post Restaurant (former Post Office, 1864). Most date from the period between the 1880s and the end of the Edwardian era, and include the Oamaru Courthouse, the former ANZ Bank, the North Otago Museum and the former Chief Post office. Again, most of these buildings are registered by the Historic Places Trust, and many were designed by Forrester.

The area running between Humber St and the sea, north from Harbour/Tyne St and including the Oamaru Railway Station, has relatively few 20th century intrusions. This area has several significant buildings and structures, such as the former NZ Refrigerating Company's Beach St

Freezing Works (1886), remains of the Oamaru gasworks, and the Oamaru Railway Station.

The four Oamaru town sectors involved in the proposal are outlined in the map.

## VALUES THAT MAY JUSTIFYING CULTURAL WORLD HERITAGE LISTING

The town of Oamaru is distinguished by its buildings of local and distinctive limestone. Not all buildings are large and grand, but entire streetscapes retain a high degree of authenticity of material, form and coherence.

- The growth of the town and the grandeur of many of the buildings is a direct statement of the booming economy of the gold rush era, and of the later expanding imperial economy.
- The town and port played a key role in the development of the pivotal frozen meat trade, which had national significance for the New Zealand economy.
- The historic development of a frozen meat trade from New Zealand to Britain is of international significance as illustrative of the theme of long distance international trade which has subsequently dominated the world economy.
- There is a remarkable degree of material authenticity in the port and Central Business District. The town buildings have a notable degree of uniformity of architectural style and material, featuring the locally produced Oamaru limestone.
- The long period of economic decline has resulted in largely intact buildings and streetscapes.
- The 19th Century port of Oamaru is still largely intact. There are few 20th Century interventions, due to the decline of the port along with the decline of the town.



Neill's store, and Loan and Mercantile Building, Harbour St precinct, Oamaru.  
*Gavin McLean*

## RELEVANT AUTHENTICITY AND INTEGRITY ISSUES

Ironically the city's decline and slow growth during the 20th Century ensured a remarkable degree of material authenticity in the port and CBD. The long period of decline and stagnation has resulted in largely intact buildings and streetscapes.

Many of the buildings are in sympathetic ownership to retain and promote their heritage value. The Whitestone Civic Trust is actively promoting the revitalisation of the historic precinct through encouragement and assistance to sympathetic and appropriate business owners and occupants. Many of the buildings, structures and features are either included in the New Zealand Historic Places Trust's register of historic places, or are contained within a registered historic area, or are listed by the District Council.