

**HERITAGE ASSESSMENT – STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**

***FORMER NEW BRIGHTON VOLUNTEER FIRE BRIGADE  
SOCIAL HALL/ OPAWA CHILDREN'S LIBRARY AND  
SETTING -  
2 LOUISSON PLACE, CHRISTCHURCH***



**PHOTOGRAPH: B. SMYTH APRIL 2022**



**PHOTO: New Brighton Fire Station, Shaw Avenue, c1939. SOURCE: *Fire on the Foreshore*, Cockburn. 2008**

## **HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE**

*Historical and social values that demonstrate or are associated with: a particular person, group, organisation, institution, event, phase or activity; the continuity and/or change of a phase or activity; social, historical, traditional, economic, political or other patterns.*

The Former Opawa Children's Library building is of historical and social significance for its association with the former New Brighton Fire Station building from c1930 to 1965, and with library services, in particular for children and in the Opawa area 1965 – c2020.

The building was originally the social hall on the upper storey of the New Brighton Fire Station. The building is of historical value as part of an early suburban fire station – the earliest known to be remaining in the city. A volunteer fire service in New Brighton was first proposed in 1905, and the first meeting of the fire committee took place in 1907. The brigade's first premises (1908) were in Shaw Avenue (approximately no.179 today – the site of Shaw Park) behind the New Brighton Borough Council Chambers. In 1932 the Brigade recommended that rather than extending the existing social room, a new social room be added to the top floor of the engine room and living rooms of the station. The Brigade fundraised with social events to fund the build, and Council funding was also provided. The brigade held fortnightly fundraising concerts at the Joyland Theatre to help fund the works. The station building was owned by Council and leased to the Fire Board.

The new social hall was approved by Council in 1933 and completed in 1934. There is reference in the Minutes of the New Brighton Borough Council to Returned Servicemen undertaking the work and receiving some reimbursement (30.11.1933). A billard table that had been purchased in 1927 remained a feature of the social hall until the station moved to new premises in 1963. The social hall provided a place for brigade meetings, annual meetings, tributes, ceremonies and official events. It was also a feature of social life in New Brighton with dances being held there. Councillors, the Superintendents of the local brigades and the president of the New Brighton RSA were invited to the opening on 6 January 1934, and tickets were also sold for the event. Dances, suppers and socials were held in the social hall. The brigade were thanked by the New Brighton Borough Council Mayor for their work and also for the social gatherings they provided 'for the relief of distress' at an inspection and event in September 1935. It is noted in the history publication of the Fire Brigade that the social hall became a great asset to the Brigade. The fire bell tower was located on top of the social hall roof. By 1953 it appeared the buildings were suffering from a lack of maintenance – the roof of the social hall was noted as leaking, and the roof iron was replaced at the end of the year.

The fire station is connected with local New Brighton people including Roy Stokes who served as a fireman there and was a life member. Roy J. Stokes (1911-1978) a local builder, who was heavily involved throughout his adult life with the New Brighton community. Roy Stokes Hall is named after him in honour of his contribution to Central New Brighton School and the school hall.

A new Fire station was opened in Hawke Street in October 1963. The old station was considered to be long outdated and too small for modern requirements. Other modern stations were built around the city in the 1950s.

At the time the old New Brighton Fire Station building became vacant, across town In Opawa there was a need for a building to serve as a Children's library.

In the 1950s there was increased recognition of the need to provide specific and increased library services for children. This was part of a national trend at the time to accommodate the educational and recreational needs of the baby boomer generation. The Opawa Library was providing specific services for children for free from 4 June 1953, through the Christchurch Public Library scheme of aid for suburban libraries. New Brighton, Sumner, Beckenham and

Redcliffs libraries already participated in the scheme. In 1954 a new Children's department opened in the Spreydon Public Library. It was the ninth library to accept children's services from the pool established by the Canterbury Public Library. In 1963 extensions to the Opawa Library were planned in order to provide sufficient room for the demands of Children's library facilities. These did not eventuate, and a new building was designed by Council for the location on the riverbank at Louisson Place. Tenders were called for a new hexagonal shaped library building on 24 November 1964. One tender was received and this was unsatisfactory due to the high costs. A vacant Council building that could be relocated was sought to fill the need, and the New Brighton Fire Station social hall was decided upon.

The building had previously been considered by the Council for relocation to the neighbouring New Brighton Library to serve as an extension, however it was not considered to be suitable.

The building is noted in Council meeting minutes to have been scheduled to be relocated in the week of 8 June 1965, however it was still not completed by 19 July 1965. Mr Frank Hughes was the successful tenderer for the demolition of the fire station and the removal and relocation of the social hall to Opawa.

By the 22 November 1965 landscaping works and finishing of the building was underway, with a view to it being occupiable in two weeks time. The provision of increased library facilities for children in Opawa was long overdue and the riverbank location was chosen due to its availability and proximity to the footbridge and the existing Opawa Library. It was initially considered to be a temporary measure, with an expectation that the Opawa Library would eventually be rebuilt. This was not to happen until 2020. Initially the Council investigated the possibility of locating the building on land to the rear of the Opawa Post Office, however approval from the Chief Postmaster was not obtained for this.

The relocated building on the riverbank attracted some negative comments in letters to the editor before landscaping and repainting were undertaken. The riverbank was reported by the City Engineer as having been in an untidy state for some time before the building was relocated.

The building during its time as a library is associated with Ms F.W. Gunz, who was Children's librarian at the Opawa Library for many years. Mrs Gunz was appointed as executive director of the Y.W.C.A in June 1965.

The Opawa Library was damaged in the Christchurch Earthquakes, closed and demolished. The replacement building was intended to also provide for children's library services, leaving the Opawa Children's Library building vacant and without a use in 2020.

## **CULTURAL AND SPIRITUAL SIGNIFICANCE**

*Cultural and spiritual values that demonstrate or are associated with the distinctive characteristics of a way of life, philosophy, tradition, religion, or other belief, including: the symbolic or commemorative value of the place; significance to Tangata Whenua; and/or associations with an identifiable group and esteemed by this group for its cultural values.*

The Former Opawa Children's Library building and setting are of cultural significance for the building's use as a former fire brigade social hall, a library specifically for children, and for the location on the banks of the Ōpāwaho – Heathcote River which is of significance to Tangata Whenua.

The building is associated with the way of life of firemen in suburban Christchurch, reflecting their need for a space relax and socialise whilst on duty, and the way that volunteer fire brigades and staff were an integral part of the community.

As a library, the building specifically provided for the needs of children.

“Ōpāwaho was a pā on the river banks between what is now Judge Street and Vincent Place in Christchurch that was also used as a resting place for Ngāi Tahu travelling between Kaiapoi and Horomaka/Te Pātaka-a-Rākaihautū (Banks Peninsula). The river was part of the

interconnected network of ara tawhito (traditional travel routes) that crossed the once-widespread wetland system of greater Christchurch. The river, and its immediate area, was an important kāinga mahinga kai (food-gathering place).”<sup>1</sup>

### **ARCHITECTURAL AND AESTHETIC SIGNIFICANCE**

*Architectural and aesthetic values that demonstrate or are associated with: a particular style, period or designer, design values, form, scale, colour, texture and material of the place.*

The Former Opawa Children’s Library building and setting are of architectural significance as a 1930s building, originally designed as a social hall and part of a fire brigade complex, which was removed, relocated and adapted for a library.

When the building was relocated, it was necessary to weatherboard and line one wall, build a new entrance porch and construct shelving and a lavatory.

The building is a simple rectangular form, with casement windows and toplights, a shingled gable at one end and a hipped roof at the far end. The shingled gabled façade was the street facing part of the building when it was the top story of the fire station. The style, form, materials and detailing are typical of the 1930s era. The scale and detailing are domestic in character.

Shelves of the childrens’ libraries were specifically designed to be within reach of children of 4-14 years, and there were special stands for picture books.

### **TECHNOLOGICAL AND CRAFTSMANSHIP SIGNIFICANCE**

*Technological and craftsmanship values that demonstrate or are associated with: the nature and use of materials, finishes and/or technological or constructional methods which were innovative, or of notable quality for the period.*

The building is of some technological and craftsmanship significance for its typical 1930s and 1960s (foundations, porch, shelving, lining of one exterior wall) construction techniques and materials.

The Council’s library carpenter undertook the building of the shelves.

### **CONTEXTUAL SIGNIFICANCE**

*Contextual values that demonstrate or are associated with: a relationship to the environment (constructed and natural), a landscape, setting, group, precinct or streetscape; a degree of consistency in terms of type, scale, form, materials, texture, colour, style and/or detail; recognised landmarks and landscape which are recognised and contribute to the unique identity of the environment.*

The building and setting are of contextual value for their locational relationship to the Opāwaho - Heathcote and the building’s relationship to the riverside residential area.

Although relocated from New Brighton in 1965, the building strongly relates to the Opawa residential neighbourhood it sits within, in terms of the era of the building, its materials (timber weatherboard and shingles, and corrugated iron roofing), its form and scale.

### **ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND SCIENTIFIC SIGNIFICANCE**

*Archaeological or scientific values that demonstrate or are associated with: the potential to provide information through physical or scientific evidence and understanding about social historical, cultural, spiritual, technological or other values of past events, activities, structures or people.*

The Former Opawa Children’s Library and setting are of archaeological significance for their location directly on the banks of the Opāwaho – Heathcote, a place of early Ngāi Tahu

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.kahurumanu.co.nz/atlas> ‘Opāwaho’, viewed 7/4/2022

activity, and for the evidence of c1930s construction the building can provide (above the foundations). Noting however that the foundations date from its relocation in 1965.

**REFERENCES:**

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Library Committee Minute Books: 6 April 1965; 8 June 1965; 6 July 1965

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**REPORT DATED:**

PLEASE NOTE THIS ASSESSMENT IS BASED ON INFORMATION AVAILABLE AT THE TIME OF WRITING. DUE TO THE ONGOING NATURE OF HERITAGE RESEARCH, FUTURE REASSESSMENT OF THIS HERITAGE ITEM MAY BE NECESSARY TO REFLECT ANY CHANGES IN KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF ITS HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE.

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