

Heritage Citation



Brisbane General Post Office

Key details

Addresses	At 261 Queen Street, Brisbane City, Queensland 4000
Type of place	Post / telegram office
Period	Victorian 1860-1890
Style	Academic Classical, Free Style, Mannerist
Lot plan	L33_RP48556
Key dates	Local Heritage Place Since — 30 October 2000 Date of Citation — October 2011
Construction	Walls: Masonry
People/associations	John Petrie (Builder)

Criterion for listing

(A) Historical; (B) Rarity; (D) Representative; (E) Aesthetic; (F) Technical; (H) Historical association

The Brisbane GPO was built in 1872 to replace a temporary post office that operated elsewhere in Queen Street. A central tower, southern Telegraph Wing and clock were added in 1879. The complex held Brisbane's first telephone exchange (1880) and was the telegram central distribution centre. A replacement clock was installed in 1908, when a three-storey building facing Elizabeth Street was added. Minor extensions occurred in 1911, 1943-44, 1957 and 1975. During World War II, its front was used as a saluting dais for military parades. A replacement clock was installed in 1982. In 1983, a postal and telecommunications museum was included within the GPO.

History

The major components of this Post & Telegraph complex were constructed between 1872 and 1910.

A postal service operated in Moreton Bay from convict times. After free settlement, various part-time post masters distributed mail from premises in Queen Street. The first full-time Post Master, John Barney, was appointed in 1852. When he died in 1855, his wife Elsie succeeded to the position and she managed the distribution of mail to a growing population which by 1859 numbered 30 000.

By 1863, the new Post Master General Thomas Murray-Prior regarded the Queen Street site as inadequate. He nominated the present site, then containing the former Female Factory, as the most appropriate location for a new General Post Office. Plans were prepared by the Colonial Architect Charles Tiffin, but a severe financial crisis in 1866 halted any further progress. In 1871 tenders were called on a new design prepared by Tiffin's successor FDG Stanley and the contract was awarded to John Petrie. Petrie drew on local materials and expertise in the erection of the new building, using porphyry (probably from Kangaroo Point), sandstone from Murphy's Creek and Breakfast Creek and iron from Smellie & Co for the upper floor columns and railings. By the end of September 1872, the building was complete - at a cost of £7450. A clock for the pediment was to come from England and some interior fittings were to be finished. Stanley's design, like Tiffin's earlier one, made provision for large shaded outside areas to accommodate the hundreds of clients who had to wait for their mail.

Another communication service, the telegraph, had been in existence in Queensland since 1861 when Brisbane was linked with Ipswich, the Darling Downs and with New South Wales via Annidale. Thereafter telegraph lines were erected throughout the colony - by 1872 Brisbane was linked with the Gulf of Carpentaria. The growth of telegraph services strained accommodation at the first Telegraph Office in an old church in William Street and by the late 1870s a decision was made to relocate the Telegraph Office to the GPO site. By 1877 plans for a twin to the GPO were drawn up and, once again, John Petrie's tender was successful. Construction of the new Telegraph Wing proceeded and by November 1879 the new building was complete. The two wings were linked by an arcade and a tower - the latter was never finished. A two-storeyed building behind the Telegraph Wing, facing Elizabeth Street was built in the same year.

Rapidly developing technology and an expanding Queensland population created accommodation pressure on the site and by the time the Telegraph Wing was completed, extensions had already been constructed on the

GPO wing. In late 1880 the government assumed responsibility for another communication service, the telephone. The first telephone exchange was installed in the Telegraph Wing. By 1889, the exchange occupied a new floor on top of the 1879 Elizabeth Street building.

Accommodation continued to prove inadequate and, despite piecemeal extensions, by the 1890s there were calls for an entirely new building on the whole site. Early in 1900 a design competition was announced, attracting entries from architects throughout the colonies. With Federation however, Post & Telegraph affairs became the responsibility of the Commonwealth Government and although designs for a new building were sent to Head Office in Melbourne, the plan lapsed.

In 1908, plans were made to rationalise space on the site which had become cluttered with buildings. On the Post Office side a large extension was erected behind the GPO and a new brick building with basement and three floors, designed by Thomas Pye, was constructed facing Elizabeth Street. A two-storeyed building was erected behind the Telegraph Wing and the whole complex was fitted with an electrical system, including an electric lift .

Since 1911 various extensions have been erected above and between existing buildings. In 1927 the southern colonnade and stairs of the Telegraph Wing were demolished. In the 1930s there was another call for a new building but plans were delayed and then lapsed. The 1970s saw a \$700 000 restoration program including the installation of a new clock in the Post Office pediment and the opening of a Post and Technology Museum in the Telegraph Wing. The interior of the GPO was remodelled in 1989.

Description

Located in Queen Street, the original GPO building by FDG Stanley is an Italianate influenced design with a near square plan form. The building is constructed of brick, porphyry (Brisbane Tuft) and sandstone. It has an arched sandstone colonnade at street level above which is a verandah whose roof is supported on Corinthian columns. The main entry of the building was marked by a triple bay projecting slightly forward and surmounted by a pediment enclosing a clock. The three central projecting bays of the arcade have vermiculated rustication below the line of the arches.

The openings on the body of the building are all arched. Between the plinths supporting the verandah columns is cast iron balustrading. Traces of a lantern light that illuminated the central space remain above the modern suspended ceiling, as indeed does the original lath and plaster ceiling.

The southern wing extension of 1879 was designed to mirror the original building around a central clock tower and arcade. The tower has a vermiculated rusticated base with a broad arched central opening. The upper arched opening is slightly smaller and has Italianate balustrading. In its current form the tower appears squat and unfinished and it was indeed intended to be another two levels taller.

Behind the southern wing, a two storey rectangular telegraph building was added in 1908. This is a similar style to the contemporary Elizabeth Street building with its federation features of red brick and buff rendered bands. Other extensions including an additional storey were subsequently added to this building. Above the modern ceiling and airconditioning of this additional level is hidden a clerestory and timber trusses.

Of the buildings facing Elizabeth Street the later Federation building is the most imposing. The fenestration was designed so as to reflect the occupancy of portions of the building. Large windows indicate public space while smaller windows delineate the storage areas. The building is symmetrically arranged on a dominant central axis in line with that of the original Post Office behind. This is expressed by a segmental pediment over three arched windows, one on each level of the building. The whole is situated on a rusticated stone base with some square openings to the basement. The bays at each end are visually expressed with small triangular pediments above and a Helidon sandstone archway with keystone over the broad lower opening. Three stone bands run across from these to three less elaborate archways with some stone voussoirs and lesser keystones. The openings of the level above have a stone band running continuously at both head and sill level. This is expanded at the head of each window into moulded archways with elongated keystones. The central opening on this level is flanked by two relief panels in Helidon sandstone. These are heavily Arts & Crafts influenced depicting a stylised Paw Paw and Mango tree. Another stone band runs at just above the sill level of the predominantly square openings of the upper floor. A continuous cornice line runs below the pediments. The front section of the building is covered by a transverse gable roof expressed in the parapet. A tall metal ventilator is located centrally on the ridge of this roof. The internal structure of posts and beams still remains but modern office partitioning has been incorporated around

it. The roof structure of the transverse gable is exposed on the top floor facing Elizabeth Street.

The ground and first floors of the earlier Elizabeth Street building date from around 1879 while the additional upper level dates from 1889. The building is simple and utilitarian, constructed of rendered brick on a stone base. The facade of this building is separated into three portions, the central one recessed. Each portion has three window bays across.

The window openings on each level differ in proportion. Below the eaves one of the galvanized iron roof are paired horizontal window openings. A clerestory with a central ventilator is located over the central portion of the building. Projecting hips facing Elizabeth Street are located over the end portions. The dominant feature of this building is the central ground floor opening to the yard at its rear. This is ornamented by a plainly decorated broad arch with keystone. Inside the building has an open square stairwell with cast iron posts.

Behind are numerous smaller ancillary buildings which have undergone alterations with the changing functions of the Post Office. Links have been made above the arcade at different times to the opposing buildings across the laneway - some are enclosed, and others unenclosed.

Statement of significance

Relevant assessment criteria

This is a place of local heritage significance and meets one or more of the local heritage criteria under the Heritage planning scheme policy of the *Brisbane City Plan 2014*. It is significant because:

Historical

CRITERION A

The place is important in demonstrating the evolution or pattern of the city's or local area's history for its central role in the development of postal and telecommunications services in Brisbane since 1872.

Rarity

CRITERION B

The place demonstrates rare, uncommon or endangered aspects of the city's or local area's cultural heritage with its impressive Queen Street elevation acting as the lynchpin of the sweeping vista through adjacent Post Office Square and on through Anzac Square ending with Central Railway Station.

Representative

CRITERION D

The place is important in demonstrating the principal characteristics of a particular class or classes of cultural places

as a Queensland colonial and Commonwealth civic building designed and purpose-built as Brisbane's first General Post Office (GPO).

Aesthetic

CRITERION E

The place is important because of its aesthetic significance

for its ability to demonstrate evolving changes in civic architectural style and building technology plus its association with FDG Stanley and Thomas Pye.

Technical

CRITERION F

The place is important in demonstrating a high degree of creative or technological achievement at a particular period

for its use of local building materials such as Kangaroo Point porphyry, Breakfast Creek sandstone and Smellie & Co. ironwork, plus its design inclusion of relief columns featuring local primary produce.

Historical association

CRITERION H

The place has a special association with the life or work of a particular person, group or organization of importance in the city's or local area's history

for its association with the Queensland colonial Post Master General's Department, the Commonwealth's Post Master General's (PMG) Department, Australia Post and Telecom.

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Note: This citation has been prepared on the basis of evidence available at the time including an external examination of the building. The statement of significance is a summary of the most culturally important aspects of the property based on the available evidence, and may be re-assessed if further information becomes available. The purpose of this citation is to provide an informed evaluation for heritage registration and information. This does not negate the necessity for a thorough conservation study by a qualified practitioner, before any action is taken which may affect its heritage significance.

Citation prepared by — Brisbane City Council (page revised September 2020)



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