

OAMARU Architecture/Heritage/Walk

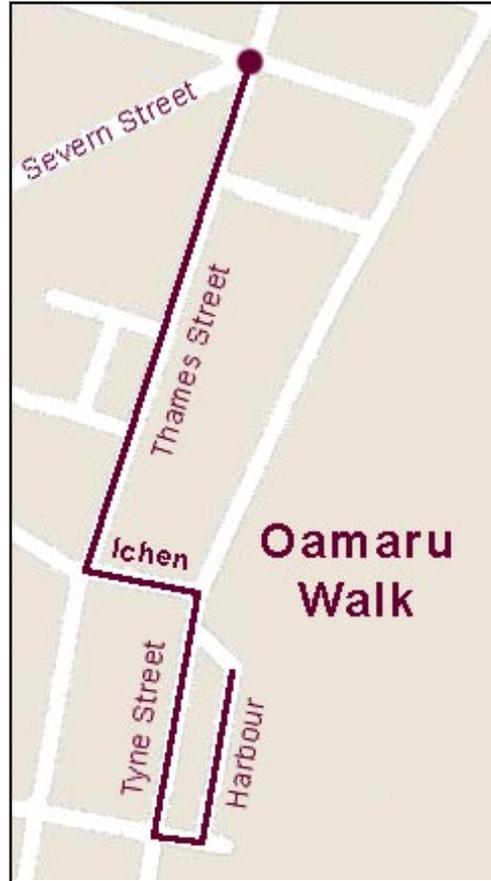
Introduction to Oamaru Architecture Walk

Oamaru has given its name to a limestone building block that is now mined at Weston. This stone was popular with both poor and rich when it was first mined in the 1870s. Quarried in 7 locations then, it was readily available and cheap. The rich also liked it because it could easily be sawed and chiselled into elaborate designs for buildings reflecting their status.

During rural boom times for North Otago wool and grain barons, architects and stonemasons prospered. Businesses spent lavishly on Italian designs embellished with urns, scrolls, wreaths, acanthus capitals, columns and pilasters. Government departments followed suit and Oamaru became known as Whitestone City and the 'best built and most mortgaged town in Australasia.'

Over time, the limestone buildings at the south end of **Thames Street** have changed in use. The closure of the Port of Oamaru in the 1970s resulted in a virtual abandonment of the **Tyne and Harbour Street historic area** described by Janet Frame in a novel as, 'The parts of Oamaru that caused you to shiver with a sense of yesterdays....'

Now the Oamaru Whitestone Civic Trust and the N.Z. Historic Places Trust work together to preserve and restore Oamaru's outstanding Victorian buildings.



Walk to view the Architecture

Start at the junction of Thames and Severn Streets and walk towards the south hill. On the right side of Thames Street you will find the first two major buildings:

The Waitaki County Council Chambers (1906) and the Opera House (1906)



The Opera House has a new 200 seat movie theatre plus a large 800 seat general theatre. These buildings, though fine examples of architecture, serve only as an entrée to arguably the finest

building in Oamaru, the Courthouse.

The Courthouse (1883)



Local architects Forrester and Lemon produced a classical design renowned for its balanced, harmonious proportions. At the entrance to the Courthouse, three doors open to a portico supported by six fluted columns. The

Supreme Court no longer sits here, but the building is still used for regular District Court sessions.

From the Courthouse, look across the road to the corner of Wear Street. There stands:

The Brydone Hotel (1880)

For almost 60 years this could have been called 'the pub with no beer'. It's hard to believe when you see the solid respectability of Oamaru today that it was known as 'a wild and turbulent frontier town' in the late 19th Century. The citizens, tired of drunkenness and violence, voted for prohibition in 1905.

The next building on the right hand side of Thames Street is:

Annie Flanagan's

The sober classical pillars of the former ANZ Bank have been brightly painted in keeping with its new role of Irish Bar.

Turn right down the alley past Annie Flanagan's to see:

The Gaol Stables ((1869)

Only the stables remain of the prison described as, 'Without exception the handsomest building devoted to the punishment of crime in the country.'

Continue along Thames Street, passing the more recent library.

Public Library (1974)

Unique to Oamaru are two new major collections:

- The Heritage Collection contains multi-media information about Oamaru's past
- The Janet Frame Collection is a comprehensive collection of material relating to the town's famous author. It is proving to be useful to scholars all over the world.

Continue along Thames Street.

North Otago Museum (1882)

This building, also designed by Forrester and Lemon, started life as the Athenaeum - a library and Mechanics' Institute. It now houses the district's museum and archives.

The Former Post Office (1883)



Houses the Waitaki District Council. Another of the designer duo's successes, although the 28 metre clock tower was added by Forrester's son, John, in 1893. Its clock was donated as a memorial to John McLean, a prominent runholder.

The First Post Office (1864)



Now the Last Post Restaurant, this is Oamaru's oldest surviving public building. Dwarfed by its younger neighbour, it has a simple Portuguese style, the work of W.H.Clayton. However, you'll have to imagine a clock in the tower. Openings were left for one but it was never installed.

Look across the road to two very impressive, classical style buildings. On the left is:

The National Bank.

Architect R.A.Lawson designed this building in 1870 for the short-lived Bank of Otago which was soon absorbed by the National Bank. Solid and imposing with its pillared portico, it set a new standard for Oamaru's commercial buildings, even if it did look like 'a temple strayed from Athens.'

Next to the National Bank is:

The Forrester Gallery (1884)



Another Lawson design, the former Bank of New South Wales is now an art gallery and cultural centre. The Corinthian columns and carved acanthus leaves on their capitals make it a harmonious neighbour for the National Bank with its similar architectural features.

Cross the road now, pausing in the middle of the street to look at:

The 1914 - 1918 War Memorial

Below the sculpture of a soldier with his arm around a young boy is inscribed a verse of Kipling - a moving tribute to the 'little towns in a far land' that gave their young men to fight in the war.

Adjacent to the Forrester Gallery on the corner of Thames and Itchen Streets is:

The Information Centre (1878)

This building once belonged to two banks, first the Colonial Bank and then the Bank of New Zealand.

Turn left into Itchen Street to reach:

The Harbour and Tyne Historic Precinct

Here narrow streets are lined with dignified, limestone commercial structures. Grainstore, woolstore, warehouse, hotel, bank and office - all were housed in impressive, well-designed buildings. These are now solid evidence of the importance of the harbour area in Oamaru's early development.

As you continue down Itchen Street, you pass:

The Oamaru Steam and Train Station

On Sundays and public holidays, a steam train shunts visitors from here to the harbour area.

When you reach the end of Itchen Street, turn right into Tyne Street. On the harbourside corner stands the imposing:

Criterion Hotel (1877)



Another Forrester and Lemon design, but this time in the Victorian Italianate Style. The hotel closed when the district 'went dry' and trading of alcohol was made illegal in 1906. It reopened for business in 1998 as a Victorian style pub.

Tyne Street

Here, shops have been set up in the **historic precinct**.

The **Woolstore Complex** (1 Tyne Street) has a variety of shops selling souvenirs and craftwork. At No. 5 a **market** with local crafts, food and produce opens on Saturdays and Sundays from 10 a.m. until 4 p.m. At No. 7, Michael O'Brien has an **historic bindery**, binding books by hand in the traditional way. His wife, Kahren Thompson and her mother, Jenny Lynch-Blosse, wear Victorian clothes in their **bookshop café** at No. 11.

As you walk along the harbour side of Tyne Street, look across the road at another Forrester and Lemon design.

Union Bank (1878 - 9)



Now almost certainly New Zealand's most ornate squash and badminton club building, the former bank is one of the country's earliest examples of commercial architecture in the Venetian palazzo style.

Continuing along Tyne Street, you pass an equally elaborate building:

Smith's Grain Store (1881 - 2)

Built by James Johnston, a rival to Forrester and Lemon, this ornately carved grain store could hold over 30,000 sacks of grain.

At the end of the block on the corner of Tyne and Wansbeck Streets is:

The Customs House (1883)

Another design by the partnership, it has had many uses since its first day as the customs house and is now occupied by the North Otago Arts Society.

Turn left into Wansbeck Street and left again into Harbour Street. On the harbour side corner is:

The N.Z. Loan and Mercantile Warehouse (1882)

Commissioned by the largest stock and station agency at the time, the warehouse had four grain lifts and could store 100,000 sacks of grain. This design by Dennison and Grant is much plainer than Smith's Grain Store but has interesting detail.

At the town end of Harbour Street, on the right is:

The Harbour Board Office (1874)

Have a look at one of the first public buildings designed by Forrester and Lemon. The ornamentation here is typical of the Venetian Renaissance style.