



A Bridge Worth Preserving

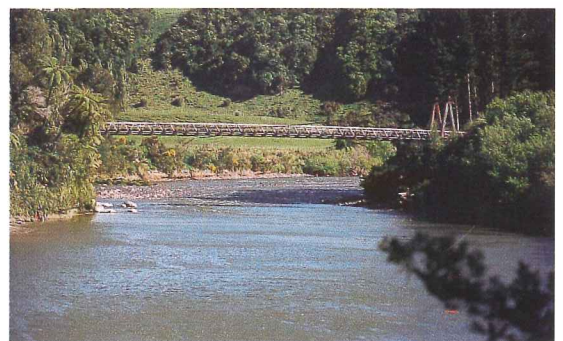
Peter Wilson

Local enthusiasts are keen to preserve an historic Taranaki suspension bridge.

Head of page: *The opening of the original Bertrand Road suspension bridge. (Photo: Collection of Peter Wilson)*

Right side of page: *The graceful line of the bridge today. (Photo: Peter Wilson)*

Before the Bertrand Road suspension bridge was built in 1897 people wishing to cross the Waitara River at this place used a ford a couple of hundred metres upstream of the bridge site. It seems that a flying fox may have been in existence there also but lives were still in danger at this major river crossing. A newspaper article written at the time the bridge was opened suggests that another bridge was being built at a different site about the same time but flooding and “other mishaps” caused it to be abandoned while the suspension bridge at the present site proceeded.



The description given of the bridge includes the following statistics: “the length of the decking is 210 feet [64 metres] and the span between piers 200 feet [61 metres]; the width of the bridge is fourteen feet [4.2 metres] and that of the roadway eleven [3.3], while the towers reach a height of twenty feet [6 metres]



Left: The bridge today in its attractive wooded setting. (Photo: Peter Wilson)

above the deck. The four cables which each consist of 396 straight wires, no. 9 gauge, will stand a safe working strain of sixty-six tons. The weight of the bridge between the piers is about forty tons, of which about one-third is borne by the piers leaving about twenty-seven tons supported by the cables. The contract price was 695 pounds and the contractor, H. George, has carried out the work in a thoroughly workmanlike manner." The plans of this bridge, drawn on oiled silk, are still in existence and are held by descendants of the builder.

The bridge was opened after "a substantial luncheon in the boatshed" (now the rowing club's headquarters downstream from the bridge) on 15 July 1897 in atrocious weather conditions by the Minister of Public Works. He was accompanied by a long list of other dignitaries, from both local and central government, and by a large crowd of local people and well-wishers.

This bridge served the community until 1927 when it was dismantled to allow the present bridge to be built on the same site but with the western end piers further out of the river. The remains of the original piers on the western end can still be seen at the water's edge if the river is not too high. Local history tells us that neighbouring farmers used the old no. 9 wire for their fences when the bridge was dismantled.

The present bridge was designed by the Clifton County engineer of the time, N.C. Fookes, and the

design seems to follow the original design reasonably closely with the hangers sloping inwards from the cables to the transoms giving greater stability in windy conditions. To my knowledge very few suspension bridges have been built in New Zealand with this design feature; most have the hangers dropping vertically from the cables. This design feature adds dramatically to the attractive appearance of the bridge.

A local resident, who was five years old at the time the bridge was rebuilt, remembers the flying fox used by the builders. As well as using it to carry materials and themselves back and forth they had a cage, a contraption with a bottom and sides but no front or back, which could be attached to the flying fox cables and this was used to transport children across the river on their way to and from Tikorangi school.

Since it was built most floods have passed under the bridge without ever touching the structure itself, but, on four occasions, logs being carried by the river in flood have actually damaged the bridge. As this bridge is some thirty-five feet (10.6 metres) above what is considered a normal level for the river, this indicates an enormous amount of water flowing under it. 1935, 1965, 1971 and 1994 saw water either up to or over the lowest parts of the bridge. Damage was done to the sides, decking and bracing but all the supporting structures were left undamaged. During the 1935 flood the Waitara town bridge was so badly damaged that for several months the Bertrand Road bridge was

the only access across the river. For that period two men were on duty twenty-four hours a day to prevent too many vehicles being on the bridge at any one time.

Since the original building the bridge has had new sides (in 1970) and been repiled on the western end (in 1978). The eastern end is built on a solid rock cliff. The original solid heavy Australian hardwood sides, which were about six feet (2 metres) high and restricted the carriageway to a very narrow lane of only eight feet (2.4 metres), were removed and replaced with the present steel sides. These form an important part of the bridge as they provide the rigidity necessary to prevent too much movement. Regular maintenance has seen decking replaced, painting done and corrosion proofing of the cables and steel work from time to time.

Time has been the bridge's greatest enemy and with deterioration of some of the timbers in the bridge, loadings were gradually reduced but the period from 1970 to 1983 saw a number of firms being prosecuted for taking overweight loads over the bridge and, in some cases, doing considerable damage. In an effort to enforce the restrictions, height barriers were put up across either end of the bridge in 1983. This caused great frustration to drivers of oversized but not overweight vehicles. With continued deterioration it was declared unsafe and closed to vehicular traffic in 1985. It has continued to be used by pedestrians, cyclists, motorcyclists (one at least found it a good escape route when being pursued by a traffic officer in a car), bridge jumpers and horse riders.

The attractive setting of the bridge with its bush clad banks, rapids and a small sandy beach make it a popular spot for picnickers and swimmers during the summer months. It is not uncommon to see forty or fifty people in the area on a hot summer day.

The historic interest of the bridge should soon be formally recognised as it is being considered for an A rating in the New Plymouth District Council's planning scheme.

Detailed engineering reports have been received on the present state of the bridge and a trust dedicated to preserving the bridge is currently considering plans to raise finance to re-open it to some light traffic. A complete upgrading and re-opening of the bridge to this status, while maintaining its original design, is considered the most feasible and economical option available to preserve it. Admired and used by many people over many years, this bridge is well worth preserving.

Peter Wilson is a local resident of Waitara who greatly admires the suspension bridge.

The Prudential Saved?



Many members will be aware of the campaign to "Save the Prudential". "The Prudential" is an invaluable triptych which signposts some of the varied influences on New Zealand's architectural history. It comprises the exceptional art deco high-rise Prudential building, the stripped classical CBA building, and the South British building which is also stripped classical but verges on Georgian. The buildings are a key component of the South Lambton Quay Historic Area, which is registered

by the Trust. The buildings came under threat when Prudential applied for a resource consent to demolish all three of them in order to construct a glass tower block as its trophy head office. Wellington City Council had become deeply embroiled in negotiations with Prudential in an effort to retain one of Wellington's valued corporate presences without sacrificing an essential element of a streetscape it was working hard to preserve. The Council even designed a skyscraper which sacrificed the CBA building in its efforts to reach a compromise. When the resource consent was heard before three independent commissioners, the Trust was called upon to play the principal role in defence of the three buildings, supporting the heritage aims of the Council.

After a week-long hearing which saw evidence given on behalf of the Trust by a number of experts, the commissioners unanimously declined the application for consent to demolish. Prudential appealed the decision and it appeared that the action would have to be replayed before the Environment Court. However, other forces were at work and late last year Colonial Mutual Limited announced that it had taken over Prudential. Colonial already possessed a trophy head office nearby on Willis Street — would this avert the threat to the Prudential's heritage trio? Indeed it seems to have done just that, as the Prudential has withdrawn its appeal. For now it seems "The Prudential" has been saved. The buildings are apparently for sale and the Trust will continue endeavouring to assist their owners to find the best way to keep these beautiful reminders of New Zealand's architectural heritage a vital part of Wellington's commercial heart.



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