



NEWSLETTER March 2026

At the time of preparing this newsletter, the Palmerston North City Library has taken the lead in organizing a varied Heritage Month. Many of our historic places and buildings feature, including Caccia Birch, the Regent Theatre, the Victoria Esplanade, the Edwards Pit Park, and the Terrace End and Ashhurst cemeteries.

The fact that there is such an event, with an immensely full programme supported from Palmerston North City Council resources, denotes a huge advance in commitment to heritage over what was evident twenty years ago. Some of the activities which Historic Places Manawatū-Horowhenua would once have undertaken now form part of Heritage Month.

Another indication is the establishment of a Palmerston North City Council Heritage Advisory Group in March 2025. The group, now includes three of your committee members (who serve as individuals, not as representatives of HPMH). Margaret Tennant co-chairs this group (with Peter Te Rangi), and the wide expertise of your chairperson Cindy Lilburn and committee member Val Burr has been recognised by their appointment. The group has already given useful advice on such matters as signage, street and reserves naming policy and the Council's Heritage Plan. There is still much to do. Your committee (Cindy Lilburn, Margaret Tennant, Don Irvine and Leah Crisp) meets most months and continues to monitor heritage issues. It also liaises with Historic Places Aotearoa and Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga.

The new PNCC Reference Group members serve as individuals, and this body simply gives us another channel through which to promote heritage and voice concerns.

And there have been losses and on-going disquiet: below, Cindy Lilburn reports on the Opiki Bridge (which has taken many hours of committee members' time over the years), the on-going saga of earthquake-strengthening of buildings, and the implications of proposed changes on the Resource Management front.

Signage, local history topics for schools, the War Memorial and last, but by no means least, 'The Skunk' are among developments of note. We hope you enjoy our newsletter!

Margaret Tennant

The Opiki Bridge

In what has felt like déjà vu Historic Places Manawatu Horowhenua has once again been called upon to defend the Opiki toll bridge. In late December last year the cabling for one side of the bridge collapsed into the Manawatu River. This was the same cabling that was uplifted from the river in 2023 when it dropped into the water.



Opiki toll bridge 1996. (Val Burr)

The Opiki toll bridge has a Category I rating with Heritage NZ Pouhere Taonga. When built in 1917 it was then the longest suspension bridge in New Zealand and gained further fame as this country's only private toll bridge from 1920 to 1969 when owned by the Akers family. Its engineer was Joseph Dawson of Pahiatua who constructed some 20 suspension bridges around the lower North Island during the 1890s to 1910s. Most of these have now succumbed to age and heavier vehicle ratings.

Our society has argued that the cabling is essential to the understanding of the Opiki Bridge as a suspension bridge. But unfortunately the cabling is now over 110 years old and rust has set in. Over the past ten years we have seen cables be cut away and temporary repairs made with clips. Had we started sooner, it may have been possible to put supporting cables across the top but at what cost and whose expense?



Opiki Toll Bridge October 2025 (Cindy Lilburn)

The choice to remove the cabling was made after discussion between Horizons, the bridge owner and Heritage NZ Pouhere Taonga. The cabling is being held in reserve and after a lot of ‘flogging old rope’ by this committee, the Akers family and three local museums have all expressed interest in taking a sample for posterity. We would like to thank the Horizons engineering team for their willingness to organize these snippets, probably in March.

As you pass the bridge towers now, a chimney is clearly in view. This was for the Tane flaxmill, the reason for building the bridge in the first instance to transport flax across the river from the Makerua swamp on the Manawatu side. The chimney and flaxmill remains are also a protected historic site.

Heritage Bills Before Parliament

Two bills which will have a significant impact on historic heritage are currently before Parliament. Consultation for the first reading closed in mid-February and they are likely to be passed by July. So welcome to summaries of the Planning Bill and the Buildings (Earthquake-prone buildings) Amendment Bill (sparing you some 500 pages of reading!)

The Planning Bill in combination with the Natural Environment Bill will replace the Resource Management Act of 1991. The RMA has been New Zealand’s primary planning legislation for 35 years, balancing environmental protection with sustainable development. The two new bills are stated to encourage economic development and infrastructure by reducing the need for regulation and planning consents.

The Planning Bill will legislate for the built environment. It does acknowledge ‘significant historic heritage’ as a matter which needs to be taken into consideration, however unlike the RMA this is no longer a matter of national priority with greater weighting against other factors.

Clause 14 of the Bill allows owners to make modifications to their properties if the effects are minor. Now permitted will be changes to internal and external layouts of buildings and most worrying, changes to the visual amenity of a property. This has the potential to alter the look of ‘character areas’ (those with similar styles of building) with housing intensification and subdivision permitted. The proposal has been causing political conniptions with those in Auckland’s inner-city suburbs, a vital voting bloc. In Palmerston North Savage Crescent is

one such character area which has been mostly maintained as is through property owners' buy-in.

This clause also limits public complaint to only those 'materially affected' by changes to a property.

Under both the Planning and Natural Environment Bill, all district councils in a region (seven for Horizons) will be required to create one common plan with rules in common. This will go some way towards creating consistency in how rules are applied but there are fears that protection for lesser local heritage buildings and notable trees may fall out from a final master plan.

The other concern is that all the new regional plans must be subsumed to a set of National Instruments (standards, policies and philosophies) which have yet to be developed. At this point we do not know how greatly central government priorities will alter plans at the local level.

Our submission to this bill covered mostly the uncertainties for heritage, significant and local under this bill both in its definition and when put into practice.

The Buildings (Earthquake-prone buildings) Amendment Bill comes from re-consideration of earthquake strengthening in New Zealand. The bill attempts to balance strengthening costs against likely earthquake risk and prevention of damage to people and property. It has become obvious that remediation is economically unviable for many commercial property owners in smaller towns. Also, some regions such as Northland and Auckland are at much lower risk of earthquakes but were still required to strengthen their buildings.

As a result of consultation including with heritage experts in this field, the following table summarizes the requirements for high-risk areas. Locally, Horowhenua, Palmerston North, and Manawatu then Tararua up the east coast to Gisborne / Tairāwhiti fall within the high-risk zone. Small urban areas are defined as those below 5,000 population such as Foxton, Marton, Woodville or Dannevirke [with Feilding as a medium-size urban area]. These criteria would greatly reduce the number of buildings to be strengthened.

For high risk areas:

		BUILDING TYPE		
		3+ storey high risk heavy construction (eg concrete) buildings	Unreinforced masonry buildings (URM)	
			1-2 storey	3+ storey
LOCATION	Rural or small town	Targeted retrofit ¹	Risk register ²	Façade securing ³
	Urban centre		Façade securing	Full retrofit ⁴

Actions required for size vs. material of building in high-risk areas

Our submission to the bill has generally been in favour of the proposals. We were concerned however that owners could still seek 15-year extensions on remediation work given the five years already to make arrangements. Priority buildings - hospitals, emergency shelters and educational buildings have also been granted 15-year extensions, unsuitable we felt for

buildings which would be crucial in the case of emergencies. Most importantly Historic Places believed some form of central government finance for owners was essential to help with remediation.

Members please note: one last government bill in progress is the Environment (Disestablishment of Ministry for the Environment) Amendment Bill. This is a necessary legal step to merge the Ministry for the [physical] Environment, Ministry of Transport and Ministry of Housing and Urban Development into a proposed new agency, the Ministry of Cities, Environment, Regions and Transport (MCert). The amalgamation is aimed to drive growth, infrastructure and climate adaption. MCERT is set to be established from 1 April 2026 and become operational from 1 July 2026.

Cindy Lilburn

Manawatū History in Schools

We thought it important that the distinctive history of our area should be made available to local learners. Cindy Lilburn, Margaret Tennant and Geoff Watson have been gathering resources on local history topics for teachers to use, particularly in primary schools. These have then been developed into PowerPoint lessons by a small group of kaiako/teachers. Expectations for more New Zealand history in schools have since been rolled back by the government, and the material provided is now framed more within a literacy and skills context. It is being trialled in classrooms.

The first topic developed was on 'deforestation', and the second is on the railway in the Manawatū. Themes within the second topic included global transport in the nineteenth century, 'opening up the country', 'Palmerston North as a crossroads', and 'the railway community', for example.



Railway housing in Milson, Manawatū Heritage. Students are encouraged to consider the design of these houses (many prefabricated in Frankton) and what they tell us about how families lived at the time they were built.

Margaret Tennant

New signage

Urban explorers may wish to enjoy the new heritage signage which has gone up recently around Palmerston North.



First is the foundation stone for the former **Palmerston North Opera House**, built in 1905 and demolished in the late 1990s. Together with the house's plaster ceiling cherubs Historic Places Manawatu Horowhenua helped re-home, the stone was one of the relics of the building passed back to the City Council recently. The foundation stone is now close to its original location outside the Church St entrance of the Farmers department store complemented by a sign on the Opera House's history. Kudos to the City Library Heritage Team who organized the stone's placement and text.



Warren Warbrick and Marise Clark unveil the Pitt Park display board, 14 February 2026. (Margaret Tennant)

The **Edwards Pit Park** on Featherston Street now has signage commemorating its original history as a clay pit for brickworks around it and the dedicated work of the Pit Park People. Over 27 years this community group has “re-wilded” the space with native plants, the creation of wetlands and walking tracks. From a dumping ground for building materials, the pit is now advertised as a city attraction. See if you can also spot the sign about the geology of this area as revealed in the cliff face on one side of the pit.

All Saints Church on the Square has added four signboards along its left-hand side to state it is ‘more than just a building’. The 1913 brick church has been closed since 2013 for

earthquake strengthening. Plans are well underway to remediate the building - expect an announcement in due course.



One of the All Saints display boards (Margaret Tennant).

Finally, the **Pathways Presbyterian Church** (the former St Andrews) on Church Street has also been successful in financing signage outside their church. Watch this space for developments.

Palmerston North War Memorial



February 7th 2026 was the centenary of the unveiling of the Palmerston North War Memorial. It marked the earnest desire of New Zealanders in communities nationwide to commemorate the many lost in the Great War of 1914 - 1918. Our monument with its statue of a grieving mother on top is a copy of the Folkestone war memorial in England. Its placement at the exact centre - heart - of the Square forced a bend in the railway tracks to pass behind it.

The photograph at left shows the opening event, with the 'sorrowing motherhood' figure be-draped with Union Jacks. Prime Minister Gordon Coates, himself a returned soldier, is speaking, at right.

Manawatū Heritage

The City Library Heritage section on the second floor held a display in February around the War Memorial's design and creation. There was a service in the Square on the day for the centenary. The display included a stunning knitted wreath made for the occasion which features the language of flowers to symbolize sorrow and loss.



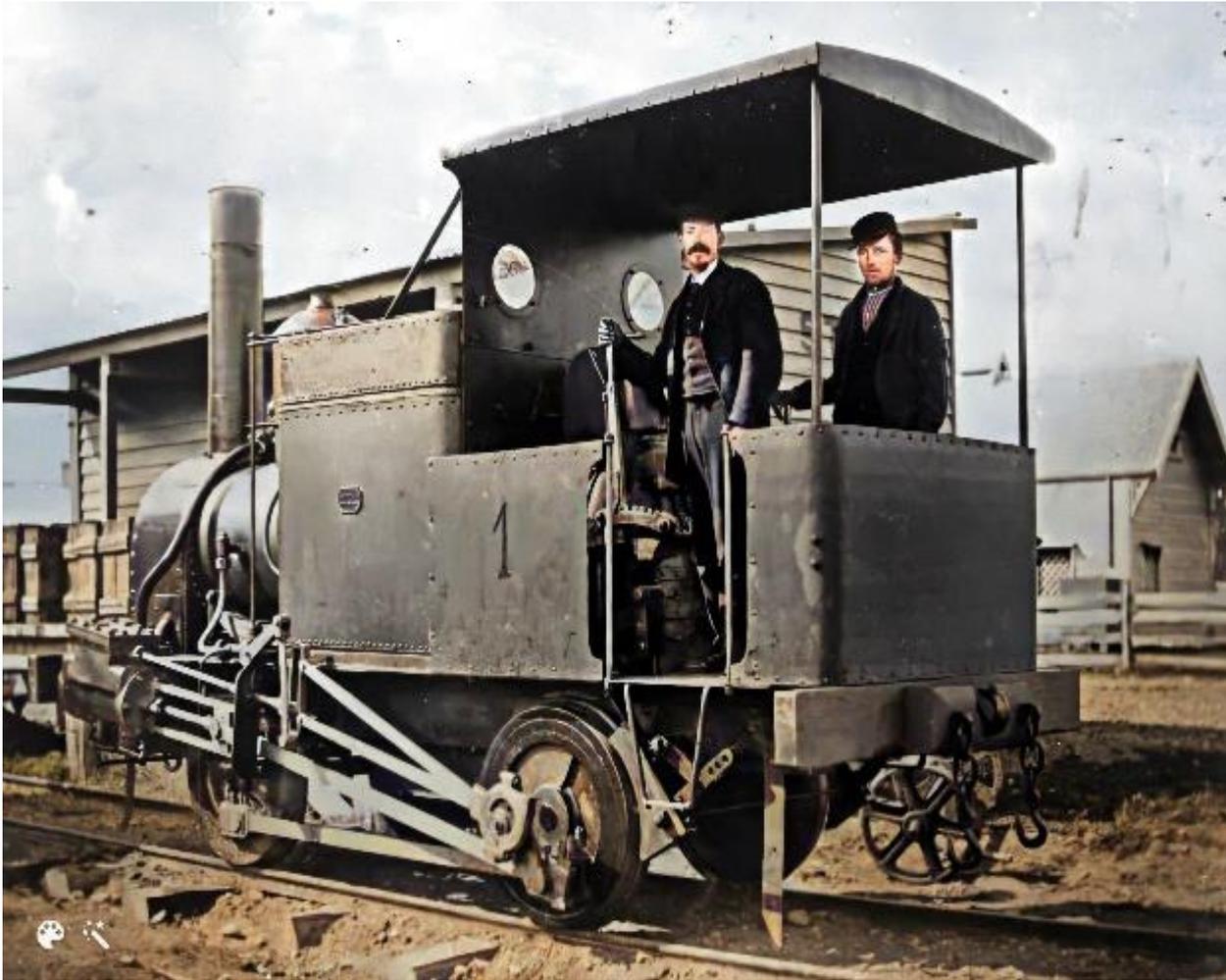
Cindy Lilburn.

'The Skunk'

No-one ever imagined that they might ever find themselves 'face to face' with the historic locomotive 'Skunk'! Some Whanganui people knew where it was supposed to be, but it had vanished into the sand of Whanganui River's South Mole (at the river mouth) over 70 years ago. Then suddenly on September 5th 2025, Foxton man, Brendon Gabbott, who was operating Mills-Albert Ltd.'s excavator, "*struck something hard*" under four metres of sand. This was six weeks short of 150 years since 'Skunk' first puffed its way into Palmerston North.

'Skunk' was one of three little locos built in 1875 by the firm E.W. Mills, at its Lion Foundry in Wellington, for use on the Foxton-Palmerston North Tramway, then under construction. The locos had horizontal boilers, an appearance that resulted in them earning the status of the first 'real' NZ-built locomotives. Previously locos had either been imported or had vertical boilers like the 'Palmerston' replica loco mounted outside the Foxton Courthouse.

The first two locos, subsequently named 'Skunk' and 'Wallaby' departed for Foxton on the paddle-steamer 'Luna' on July 28th 1875. The third, 'Opossum', followed on October 1st. The 'Wallaby' and 'Opossum' served as ballast engines on the railway construction in the Manawatu. 'Skunk' initially did too, before graduating to pulling 'actual' trains on the tramway for a few months during 1876, before the imported F-Class locos began arriving and took over that role. 'Skunk' then reverted to ballast work again.



The Skunk - then and now. Above: photo taken around its time of first arrival in Palmerston North on October 21st 1875 (on its original wheel array). The men are probably its original driver, George Seagar, and its original stoker, Norwegian-born Martin Boesen. Two months later Boesen slipped while boarding the moving loco and ended up with his leg amputated. The photographer was the Danish-born Charles Mariboe - whose stamp is confirmed as being on the back of the original photo held at PN City Library. The two Scandinavians were local Vogel Scheme settlers. (Manawatū Heritage)

Below: Skunk on 18 January 2026 at SteamRail Whanganui's premises, where the rain is washing decades of sand from its rust. The dent in the pipe at the upper front of the loco, is where the excavator first hit 'Skunk'. (Val Burr)



Over the next few years, the notoriously cantankerous 'Skunk' carted metal from what is now Memorial Park, to such random places as PN's Square and Tiakitahuna, as well as (from another ballast pit) creating the reclamation work at the Foxton Loop for Foxton's port and railway station etc. It was there, on November 4th 1880, that the river bank gave way under the ballast wagons 'Skunk' was shifting, leaving 'Skunk' spectacularly almost following all the ballast wagons into the river. Note that the word "skunk" was an actual swear word in those days.

Eventually, its work in Manawatu done, 'Skunk' found its way to the West Coast, where (in addition to gaining an altered wheel array) it undertook similar work until 1909 when the

Whanganui Harbour Board purchased it to work on its South Mole. There it worked until about 1918, after which it was parked up and gradually became buried under the sand.

'Skunk' is now under the care of the local rail heritage group, SteamRail Whanganui, who, needless to say, were somewhat startled at having to suddenly adjust to caring for this precious new charge. They are working with experts in the field at how to preserve this somewhat rusted piece of NZ rail heritage treasure.



Meanwhile, 'Wallaby' ended up working on the Sanson Tramway, before eventually being dismantled in 1899. 'Opossum', however, is safely preserved as a museum piece at Shantytown after a long working life on the West Coast.

*'Opossum' at Shantytown..
Photographer: David Maciulaitis,*

Lest anyone not know this, the Foxton-PN Tramway initially ran along Main Street, Foxton, out onto what nowadays are State Highway 1 and Rangiotu Road (i.e. diverting near the Himatangi Turnoff), and eventually onto Pioneer Hwy, and into Palmerston North. Initially a wooden tramway, it was soon converted to iron rails as locos didn't like wooden rails. Plans are now afoot to turn the old track bed into a walkway and cycleway.

Val Burr

Heritage Week Programme:

A pdf version of the Heritage Month brochure is attached to the email on which you received this newsletter.

Enjoy the wonderful smorgasbord of events!