

# Wharerata

Massey University Campus, Tennent Drive, Palmerston North

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NZHPT Registration Number: 1188  
NZHPT Registration Type: Historic Place – Category II  
NZHPT Registration Date: 02/07/82  
City/District Council: Palmerston North City Council  
District Plan Status: Category 2

Other Names: Massey University Staff Club



## Brief History

Whare Rata was built in 1901 for successful farmer Arthur Russell and his wife Ethel (née Williams), at this time respectively 54 and 37 years old. Arthur Russell came to New Zealand in 1857. He was the third son of Colonel Andrew Russell and a member of a well-known Hawke's Bay family that included several other high-ranking army officers. He spent his early years farming at Mangakuri in Hawke's Bay. In 1882 he and his younger brother Herbert bought the 300ha property 'Te Matai' situated between Palmerston North and Ashhurst.

In 1900 Russell bought 26 acres from Sir James Prendergast's Fitzherbert estate and commissioned architect Charles Tilleard Natusch to design this 23-room home for his retirement. Natusch designed many grand country houses, mostly in Hawke's Bay and Wairarapa. His designs are in the English Domestic Revival style, which is represented in the design of Whare Rata. The name Whare Rata is said to have been chosen as 'Rata' was the name given to Mr Russell by the Hawke's Bay Maori people because of his red beard. The name was fused into one, Wharerata, when Massey Agricultural College took over the property in 1951.

Alterations were made in 1906 to the eastern wing of the house including the construction of a matai floor for dances in what was the morning room. Ethel Russell soon became a renowned as a hostess but between 1911-1918 the family returned to England for their children's education. Rhododendrons bought in England can still be found in the garden today. Arthur Russell died in 1924 at the age of 78.

In 1928 Massey Agricultural College was opened for teaching and the College and Whare Rata shared a boundary, the students using some Whare Rata land as a playing field. Mrs Russell visited England in 1930, returning with a large collection of valuable antiques. The west wing was demolished and she engaged Christchurch architect Heathcote Helmore to design a new wing enlarging the drawing room, now known as the Russell Room, to its present size of one thousand square feet. The room above became her bedroom. At that time Mrs Russell with her chauffeur and handyman John Cameron built the sunken garden, landscaped in the style of an English manor and the concrete balustrades that run around two sides of the house. In 1936 she supervised the planting of 1,000 new trees following a destructive storm.

In 1949 Mrs Russell died in her 87<sup>th</sup> year, leaving the Crown the first option on the property and the Agricultural College purchased the property and moved into Wharerata in 1951 when her daughter Beatrix vacated the house. The building was then utilised for lecture rooms and staff offices with only superficial alterations. In 1971 the Massey University Staff Club took over the staff common room and began a lunch service. In 1977 a new kitchen and dining room were completed and the restoration and furnishing of the remainder of the ground floor was completed in 1979. The house now serves as a staff club and function centre and also provides a boardroom and three small flats for international academic visitors to the University.

Throughout the years care has been taken to ensure that the interior preserves the original style and atmosphere and a large painting of Mrs Russell donated by Te Manawa Art Society has a prominent position in the Russell Room. The garden has been very well maintained. In March 2007 further alterations designed by Chapple Architects and evaluated by Conservation Architect Chris Cochran were carried out by Gibson & Oliver, Building Contractors. These were undertaken to facilitate the more efficient operation of the building as a function centre. The design reflected the architect's intention 'that much of the heart of the existing house should retain a character and scale of spaces and passages that resembles the original features of the house'. The external finish of wide pattern rusticated weatherboards with facing and detail similar to the existing pattern has been preserved throughout all alterations.

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*Principal Sources:*

Application for Resource Consent, Chapple Architects Limited, 3/9/05.

Pilkington, D, *Massey History Walk*, Palmerston North, Palmerston North City Council, 1994.

'Wharerata - House of Red Beard', *Massey Alumnus*, November 1974.

Palmerston North City Library Photograph Collection: Ma 37-40; Bur 4, 39.