

WORDS: ANNA DUNLOP

# A PERFECT SHOT

Considered New Zealand's most photographed building, Dunedin Railway Station is again ready for its close-up

At its peak, 100 trains departed Dunedin Railway Station each day, taking thousands of passengers to Mosgiel, Port Chalmers, Invercargill and beyond. When it was built, the station was New Zealand's busiest, and its lavish design reflected a growing prosperity and confidence in the railways, which were undergoing a period of rapid expansion.

Today the building has lost none of its wow factor. Looming majestically over the manicured gardens of Anzac Square, Dunedin Railway Station has undergone a three-year, \$7 million restoration. And following the much-anticipated removal of the scaffolding in September last year, a clean, bright facade – certainly worthy of what is thought to be New Zealand's most photographed building – was revealed.

The project was undertaken in recognition of the historical and architectural significance of the building – a Category 1 historic place and a Tohu Whenua (a place that has shaped our nation and tells its stories) – and to preserve it for the future.

It was commissioned by the Dunedin City Council (DCC) – owner of the building since 1991 – after a detailed survey highlighted areas of deterioration and the need for substantial maintenance. Anna Nilsen, DCC Group Manager



Property Services, says it was important that the architectural integrity of the building be maintained without compromising its historical aspects.

“We strived to retain as much of the original building fabric as possible and only replaced components that were irreparable or too significantly deteriorated to be saved.”

With this strong focus on conservation repair, a team of skilled (and, where possible, local) tradespeople was vital. Salmond Reed Architects and Naylor Love were engaged as the lead contractors (the latter received a Bluestone Award from Southern Heritage Trust for its work on the project), and they assembled a group of talented subcontractors. These included stonemasons Wainwright & Hickey, metalworkers Allan's Sheetmetal & Engineering Services, roofers John Meegan

Roofing, lead worker Michael Sinclair, mastic asphalters National Waterproofing, and painters Wrens Painting, Decorating & Tiling Services.

For Wrens' senior painter, Wayne Pennington, it was another chance to work on this special building, after having painted the windows and doors in their signature red, cream and green livery during the 1990s.

“Employing skilled craftspeople and restoration experts ensured that period-appropriate materials, techniques and moulds were utilised,” says Anna.

Sarah Gallagher, Area Manager Otago Southland for Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga, agrees:

“The project provided some incredible opportunities for tradespeople to work on a unique building requiring bespoke solutions.”

The project was divided into three stages: first, the northern single-storey addition; second, the northern half of the main building, including the northwest corner turret; and third, the southern half of the main building, including the clocktower.

Work began on stage 1 in 2020, and according to Phillip Hartley, Senior Associate at Salmond Reed Architects, it was important to “start small”.

“The one-storey addition has several features also found on the main section, which meant the contractors could get to understand the building.”

Phillip’s comment points to the complexity of the station’s architecture. It was designed by New Zealand Railways’ chief draughtsman George Troup, an architect well known for his elaborately decorative style (which earned him the nickname ‘Gingerbread George’), and its ornate Flemish Renaissance style cemented its reputation as one of Aotearoa’s most impressive buildings.

The station’s central hall features a stained-glass window depicting locomotives, and a mosaic floor fashioned from around 750,000 Minton tiles, which is flanked on either side by long wings. These wings, once busy waiting rooms, now house various local businesses, including Cobb & Co. restaurant, the New Zealand Sports Hall of Fame and the Otago Art Society. The platform, which at the time of opening was the longest in the country, now sees Dunedin Railways’ trains – The Seaside,

1. The restoration project focused on conservation repair, with much of the original building fabric retained.

2. The station’s ornate Flemish Renaissance style makes it one of the most impressive – and photographed – buildings in New Zealand.

*Imagery:  
DunedinNZ*





1

The Inlander and The Victorian – chug in and out throughout the summer months.

The station was built from Kokonga basalt (taken from a Central Otago quarry opened specifically for the station's construction), with cream Oamaru stone detailing providing a striking contrast to the black rock. The roof is fitted with Marseille terracotta tiles and features five 'domes': a central domed turret in the middle of the main building and two smaller domed turrets on either side, all featuring tall finials; and upper and lower domes on the clocktower.

Phillip says these domes proved one of the most challenging aspects of the restoration.

"The domes are very important because they are the most significant feature above the roof line."

The two smaller domed turrets on the main building were clad in zinc lozenge (diamond-shaped) tiles around the base, with a zinc-clad cupola roof. The base of the central domed turret was also clad in zinc lozenge tiles, while its cupola roof featured zinc fish-scale (oval-shaped) tiles laid in diminishing courses – the largest tiles being at the base of the dome and the smallest at the top. The zinc had been painted verdigris (a blue-green colour) to replicate aged copper.

Strangely, says Phillip, the two domes on the clocktower were tiled in copper fish-scale tiles rather than zinc. "We have no idea why the building had two different materials."

These were also laid in diminishing courses and painted verdigris.

"The copper tiles had survived, so we stripped the paint off and refixed them in their original layout," he says. "However, the zinc tiles, cladding and finials



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1. The minute hands on two clock faces were replaced, while the capitals were recarved and reinstated.  
*Image: DunedinNZ*

2. Many of the roof's terracotta tiles were cleaned and reused; the rest were sourced from the original manufacturer in France.

3. Manufacturing and installing the copper tiles of the roof domes was one of the most difficult parts of the restoration.  
*Imagery: Samuel White*

4. One of the station's carved lions watches over Anzac Square Gardens.  
*Image: DunedinNZ*

on the three smaller domed turrets had oxidised and were disintegrating, so they had to be replaced."

Research by Andrew Barsby (formerly of Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga, now Origin Consultants) revealed that the lozenge and fish-scale shape of the original tiles matched those supplied by Sydney-based company Wunderlich – but unfortunately they had been discontinued.

"These were tile shapes that I'd never undertaken in New Zealand," says Phillip. "Yet Dunedin is a special place with a lot of very talented craftspeople."

In stepped Allan's Sheetmetal & Engineering Services – conveniently based just behind the station. Metalworker Greg Pritchard says copper was selected to make the new tiles for its durability and to match the clocktower domes.

"The two different tile shapes required different processes: the lozenge tiles were folded, while the fish-scale tiles were pressed using wooden dyes that we had made."

Greg says installing the fish-scale tiles was one of the most difficult parts of the job, along with

recreating the finial on the central domed turret. “It was made of a series of hand-formed, lathe-spun copper shapes – which we also created using wooden dyes – as well as hand-beaten spheres.”

He adds that seeing the finial and fish-scale tiles restored was the most rewarding aspect.

“It was the first heritage building I’d worked on, and we were doing something that hadn’t been done for 120-odd years. I had to learn on the job, but I love challenging myself, so I was in my element.”

The roof was another significant part of the restoration. Around 75 percent of the original Marseille terracotta tiles were salvaged, with the reusable ones carefully removed, cleaned and used to re-cover the roof of the single-storey addition, as well as the main building’s west-facing roof slopes and dormer and north- and south-central gable roof slopes. Phillip says it was an important conservation decision.

“Visitors looking at the front of the building are still seeing the original roof tiles,” he says.

To replace the 25 percent that were too degraded to be reused, 15,000 Marseille terracotta tiles in two finishes – plain and aged – were sourced from Tereal, the original manufacturer in France.

Terry Shearstone of Naylor Love says these were fixed to the south and east roof slopes – the areas less visible to the public.

“We used a ratio of one aged tile to two plain tiles; using this pattern produced a look similar to that of the salvaged tiles, which are all different colours due to their age.”

## “I haven’t worked on another project that has been quite so special to the local people”



The three wrought-iron weathervanes, which feature a central spire with decorative scrolls around the base, were also restored and revealed a surprise: when stripped of their paint, gold leaf was uncovered. Allan’s Sheetmetal dismantled the vanes and reassembled them with ball bearings, allowing them to move in the wind. To replicate the original gilding, a topcoat of gold-coloured paint was applied.

“The weathervanes are spectacular and it’s a special achievement that after all these years they are now operating,” says Phillip.

Other important details were also painstakingly restored: two old timber flagpoles, including the one on the clocktower, were refurbished, while two that had been removed were replaced in modern stainless steel; the minute hands on two of the clocktower clock faces had to be replaced and weighting was crucial for the mechanism to function properly.

The stonework also received a spruce-up (the masonry had last been restored during a two-year project in the mid-1990s, which concentrated on cleaning and repairing the Oamaru stone). This time, the hardwearing basalt was in good condition, and repairs to the Oamaru stone were mostly confined to deteriorated edges of cornice mouldings and ledges.

According to Marcus Wainwright of Wainwright & Hickey, there was some challenging carving involved.

“The capitals [the top parts of columns] on the clocktower were eroded, so they were removed, recarved and reinstated,” he says.

Marcus says he was struck by the sheer scale of the building. “We knew we were working on a very significant landmark,” he says.

Terry adds: “I was approached by many members of the public asking about the restoration work. I haven’t worked on another project that has been quite so special to the local people.”

Sarah says this interest in the restoration work illustrates just how much the community treasures the building.

“In a city where we have many examples of stunning architecture by notable architects, this building holds its head high as one of our most significant and most recognisable locally, nationally and internationally.”

One community hub particularly enjoying the newly restored building is Otago Farmers Market, which has been hosted in the station’s northern carpark every Saturday for the past 20 years. Market manager Michele Driscoll says it is a privilege to have such an iconic backdrop for the event.

“We particularly love being able to showcase on the working platform some of our smaller local Otago businesses and innovative vendors.”

For Anna, the importance of Dunedin Railway Station to the people of Ōtepoti Dunedin can’t be overstated.

“It’s an iconic symbol of the rich cultural history of Dunedin and holds a special place in the hearts of its residents,” she says. “I’m thrilled that the restoration has brought its unique, intricate architectural details back to life for future generations to enjoy.” ■