



All that glitters

WORDS: ANNA DUNLOP / IMAGERY: MIKE HEYDON

Strengthening and restoring Arrowtown's former Bank of New Zealand building has involved everything from applying sparkle to its quoins to smearing walls with cow dung

Gold-coloured cornerstones now adorn the newly painted former Bank of New Zealand building in Arrowtown – an apt touch for what was once a prestigious bank in a thriving goldfields town.

The Category 2 historic place, which occupies a prominent corner site in the Buckingham Street Historic Area, is now part of the Lakes District Museum and was reopened last December following a two-year earthquake-strengthening and restoration project.

The RA Lawson-designed stone building was built in 1875 during the post-goldrush economic boom and was home to BNZ's Arrowtown branch for more than 40 years.

According to the Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga listing information, the former bank is a key element in

Arrowtown's historic streetscape, significant for its proximity to neighbouring timber and stone buildings, such as the recently restored Fork and Tap, the former Postmaster's House and the Post Office (all Category 2 historic places).

Andrea Farminer, Conservation Advisor at Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga, says the building is a vital part of Arrowtown's fascinating heritage.

"It's an important reminder of the town's prosperity and role in the New Zealand goldrushes of the late 19th century."

That prosperity, however, did not last; by 1916 the town's fortunes were dwindling and BNZ had installed an agency of the Queenstown branch in the building. The domestic quarters on the rear ground and lower levels, which had once housed the bank manager's family, were being used as a maternity hospital, where the local midwife delivered several Arrowtown residents.

When the agency eventually closed in 1953, the building, along with its gardens and stables, was donated to the Lakes District Museum. And not a moment too soon, says the museum's director David Clarke.

"The museum was founded in 1948 in the billiard room of the old Ballarat Hotel. It was a tiny room that quickly filled up with post-war and goldrush artefacts – we needed somewhere bigger."

The museum moved into the former BNZ building in 1955 and significant alterations were made, including replacing the original roof, pediment and chimneys with a heavy, iron-clad roof. The museum expanded in the 1970s and '80s, and the bank and stables are now incorporated seamlessly within the building complex.

It was not long after the 2011 Canterbury earthquakes that David foresaw a significant problem.

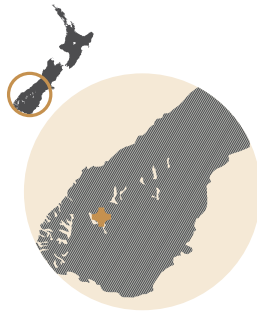
"I realised they would come after unreinforced masonry buildings, so I engaged an engineer to assess the seismic standard of the former bank and stables – they didn't shape up too well."

The buildings were found to be just 10–15 percent of the New Building Standard and were deemed earthquake prone.

It took a while – and some tireless lobbying by David – for the project's \$3.5 million in funding (from the government's Provincial Growth Fund, Queenstown Lakes District Council and the Central Lakes Trust) to come through. Heritage restoration expert Origin Consultants, along with structural engineering firm Lewis Bradford, were soon engaged to seismically strengthen the building.

"We needed to reinforce the building without suffocating the historic aesthetic value by clamping lots of steel to the outside and inside," says architect Kirsten Gibbs.

They settled on core drilling vertically into the middle of the walls and installing steel rods – 35 in the main building and 12 in the stables – with the aim of making the strengthening work invisible.



✦ LOCATION

Arrowtown is located 19.5km to the east of Queenstown.

The challenge, says Kirsten, was the unknown.

"The walls are stacked schist, but we had no idea what was actually in them; the stones were not uniform shapes or sizes, and back in the day they even threw in river boulders."

A trial drilling gave the team confidence, and the final process went smoothly, if a little dustily.

When it came to the roof, David says, there was debate over restoring its original features.

"The heavy-lidded roof had been there since the 1950s – nearly 70 years; that's almost the same amount of time it had had its decorative chimneys."

In the end, it was painstakingly reinstated to Lawson's original design with a parapet, a rectangular pediment with decorative scrolls

and a small cornice, and six chimneys, all made using glass-reinforced concrete for its durability and lightweight properties.

The pediment's recessed frieze featuring 'Bank of New Zealand' lettering was reinstated, and lead capping was added to the top of the external cornice by a roofer from a Cromwell-based company who had been trained in ancient roofing techniques in France.


Artisans with local knowledge were also employed to restore the outside of the building, which had been painted with non-breathable acrylic paint, trapping water behind it and damaging the plaster. This was chipped off and replaced with traditional lime plaster – mixed with chopped horsehair to bind it – followed by limewash paint. But during the plastering stage a problem arose.

"We noticed this brown stuff leaching through the plaster," says David. "It was sulphur, drawn out from remnants of coal in the old chimney breasts. The plasterer told me the traditional solution was to smear it with cow dung – it worked a treat." (The dung, smeared on the outside of the wall, acted as a poultice to draw out the sulphur. The wall was then cleaned and limewashed again.)

Inside, the large ground-level room was returned to its original layout; half-height partitions show where the bank office, parlour and bedrooms once were. These areas are now galleries displaying exhibitions on banking, medicine and the goldrush. The door and windows are original, but the three Victorian-era fireplaces were sourced by David from a demolition yard in Christchurch.

The ceiling, which was lowered when the 1950s roof was added, has been raised, and the decorative ceiling roses and corning restored. Downstairs, what was once the kitchen and dining room is further gallery space, featuring contemporary exhibitions on tourism and the holiday cribs of the 1950s and '60s.

David says one of the final external restoration touches was to paint the quoins a sparkling, vibrant gold. He admits the colour was controversial but says it was based on the shades of historical paint found under layers of newer paint ("they probably used oxides that were easily obtainable"). He says the gold was used to highlight the two-tone look that can be seen clearly in black-and-white photographs of the original design.

"The ultimate aim was to restore the fabric of the building to how it would have been. I hope RA Lawson would be proud." 



To see more of the Lakes District Museum, view our video story here: youtube.com/HeritageNewZealandPouhereTaonga