

The Old High Court – 140 years old

The Old High Court, as it is known today, was officially opened on 11 April 1881. It was the second building constructed on newly reclaimed land in Wellington.

Inspired by court buildings in England, Pierre Finch Martineau Burrows, the Chief Draughtsman in the Public Works Department, designed a grand building to be made from brick and mortar.



Supreme Court 1880 ATL1/2230694-G



The foundation stone was laid in 1879 in a ceremony attended by over 2000 people. The plasterwork above the entrance records this date as was the usual practice for buildings at the time.

Construction cost an estimated £16,000. However, the final cost ended up being £24,785, which would be around \$5 million today.

When the building opened, it was gas-lit and had no indoor toilets, with staff and judges having to use long drop toilets erected behind the new building. This was not unusual for the time; indoor plumbing was still to be developed.



Photo of portrait by Cameron Drawbridge

On 11 April 1881, the building opened for business with a criminal session. Chief Justice Prendergast at the first session described the building as “handsome” and commented that he was glad to find the court list was unusually light with not a single case of violence.

First known as the Wellington Supreme Court, the building changed to the Wellington High Court in the 1980s when it became the High Court. In 1993, the court relocated to Molesworth Street and the old building closed, becoming known as the Old High Court.