



Men and their shed

Whāngārei's neglected railway station becomes a renovation project for a group of men with the time and the skills to honour its heritage values

WORDS & IMAGERY: LIZ LIGHT

It's a bit of a wreck. Most of the corrugated-iron roof needs replacing, the floor slopes because some of the piles have given way and the interior has been so changed that passengers who arrived or left on the train in 1925, when the Whāngārei Railway Station was proudly new, would hardly recognise it. But renovation to its glory days is underway and the skilled and enthusiastic members of

the Whāngārei Men's Shed estimate that the job will take about three years to complete.

President Mike Mansel and his offsider Peter Schenker, Shed Co-ordinator, are under no illusions that restoration will be an easy job. But they are thrilled that the group has the opportunity to do it and, in the process, this community organisation, and others, will have a home base. The Men's Shed has 48 members, of whom most are retired. In the group there are builders, joiners, furniture makers, engineers, mechanics and administrators – all valuable contributors to a project such as this.

Peter explains the Men's Shed concept. "It brings men together to share their skills and work on practical tasks individually or for the community. The group is concerned with men's health and happiness, especially when they retire and 'underfoot syndrome' can occur. This often happens to men who have been busy working, away from the house, for decades and suddenly they are home with the wife and not enough to do.

"Our members have the opportunity to learn new skills, to have man time and a laugh and, in the process, tackle community projects. The railway station is a terrific job; it gives the Shed a home, provides a community facility and saves a heritage building from demise by neglect."

The building was designed by George Troup, the New Zealand Railway architect who designed railway stations, bridges, viaducts and railway houses for more than two decades until 1927.



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His greatest claim to fame is the grandiose Flemish-style Dunedin Railway Station.

The wooden villa style of the Whāngārei Railway Station was appropriate for this provincial city and features bay, double-hung sash windows, tongue-and-groove match lining on internal walls and wide external weatherboards. The cafeteria would have been swanky with a large U-shaped wooden bar in the middle of the light-filled room. Staff served inside the U, the top ends of which joined the kitchen. George wisely inserted a masonry fireproof wall next to the kitchen to protect the booking office and goods area.

The platform roof supports make practical and artful use of old railway lines. Two bolted together branch out just above head height and these branches, with the help of a steel circle, support the roof struts. The foundations are unusual: a series of solid timber ground beams laid on scoria and the jack studs that support the building are made from old sleepers. Geoff King, Architects H+K, working on the restoration plans, says that considering their age most of the ground beams, except those at the vulnerable weather edges of the building, are in reasonable condition. "It's a big building and there's a lot of work to be done but the Men's Shed has the perfect people to do it."

Bill Edwards, Area Manager Heritage New Zealand, is "delighted that this important building is being reused and revitalised for the benefit of the community. If the walls could talk they would be gleeful about its rejuvenation to something akin to the glory days of the 1930s and the positive ambience that the Men's Shed brings to the old station." 

1 From left to right: Graeme Nelson, Bob Mossman, Jack Freeman and Harry Hextall, enthusiastic members of the Men's Shed which is restoring the station.

2 The foyer makes it clear that this is a place for men.

3 The station exterior. The 1960s' addition at front right will be removed.

4 The platform roof supports make artful use of old railway lines.

TIMELINE

1880 Whāngārei's first railway linked coal mines at Kamō to the town wharf.

1911 The line was connected to the Kawakawa-Ōpua line.

1925 The line was connected to the main trunk line and the station complex completed south of the town centre. The station was opened by the Minister for Railways, Gordon Coates, later Prime Minister. It cost £9000 and incorporated a ticket office, luggage and cafeteria facilities and office space. It was modelled on the Troup Type B and C designs.

1967 Rail passenger services declined and the station also became the base for the inter-city bus service.

1977 The passenger trains ceased although bus services continued until the 1980s.

1997 The station was sold to the Whāngārei District Council and, pending the possibility of removal to make a new road, was rented to various community organisations.

2014 The Men's Shed bought the building from the council for \$1.

2015 Restoration begins.