Parliament has been housed in a variety of buildings over more than 150 years since it first met in Auckland in 1854. Following Parliament's move to Wellington in 1865, Parliament's buildings and grounds have been located on Molesworth Street. The original buildings, greatly extended from the 1870s to the 1890s, were largely burnt down in a fire in 1907. Only the Library building survived. Following the fire the site was extended and redeveloped into its modern form and a new Parliament House was built, 1912-1922. In the 1970s a new Executive Wing (the Beehive) was built. Today the refurbished Parliament House, Library building and the Beehive represent key national heritage buildings set in spacious and attractive grounds.

**Parliament in Auckland**

When Parliament first met in 1854 it was in Auckland, which was at that time the seat of government in New Zealand. Members gathered in a building situated on what was then the edge of town behind the High Court and close to the present-day University of Auckland. Government House and the large military barracks were prominent on the rise behind the building. It is marked by a memorial reserve today.

The plain, two-storey structure did not impress the politicians, and it was immediately christened the ‘Shedifice’. It had been hastily built, was little more than a bare shell, the wind whistled through the walls and the roof leaked. There was no clock, division bell or even toilets, nor anywhere to get food and drink.

Curiously, the Legislative Council or ‘upper’ House met on the ground floor and the House of Representatives or ‘lower’ House above. It was very cramped. The chambers were simple halls. Behind the Speaker’s Chair two fireplaces provided some warmth and on either side doors opened into tiny rooms for the Speaker and for select committees. In the House of Representatives the Table in front of the Speaker took up one-third of the room’s length. An elevated hole had to be cut into the side wall of the hall for newspaper reporters. Parliament continued to meet in the building until 1864.
Parliament moved to Wellington in 1865 and into wooden buildings constructed by Wellington’s Provincial Council in 1857-8, on the site now occupied by the Parliamentary Library, bounded by Molesworth Street and Hill Street. These buildings were intended to entice Parliament to Wellington.

Māori had settled on this side of the harbour following the invasion of Te Ati Awa from Taranaki in the mid 1820s but the vicinity of Parliament was not particularly attractive. The site was a slope of clay hillsides, knolls and swampy ground with the Waipiro stream [translation – putrid, stinking water] and Tutaenui stream [translation – great amounts of excrement] draining into the harbour down the line of Sydney Street and Bowen Street respectively. The site of the Parliamentary Library itself was known as Kaiota [translation – unripe, raw – food of dubious quality]. Settlements existed at Pipitea and Kumutoto (Woodward St).

Following the arrival of New Zealand Company settlers in 1840 the area between Pipitea and Kumutoto became a centre of development. Colonel William Wakefield, built his house on the ‘government reserve’ allocated by the Company (site of the Beehive). Down below on the corner of Molesworth Street and Lambton Quay was Barrett’s whare, serving a variety of functions. Initially a ‘grog shop’ it became a library and also operated as a church, school and museum until 1844. On the other side of Charlotte Street was Barrett’s Hotel which became an all-purpose social and official centre. The Legislative Council convened by the Governor met in the
hotel in 1851 and the Wellington Provincial Council used the building until part of it collapsed in
the 1855 earthquake. From 1843 William Fox, at that time involved in the New Zealand
Company and later MP and Premier, had a house on town acre 530 which became the site of
the Provincial Council chambers and later the first Parliament Buildings in Wellington.

Wellington’s Provincial Council chambers had two large chambers so that it could accommodate
the two Houses of Parliament. New refreshment rooms (Bellamy’s), a new library and additional
committee rooms were built at the rear of the buildings not long before Parliament arrived in
1865. The buildings grew like topsy in following years, not just because the number of MPs
increased but also because the buildings had to house government departments until the mid
1870s.

In the early 1870s government architect William Clayton designed substantial wooden
extensions. The existing buildings also had to be strengthened. To the west at the back was a
new Legislative Council chamber; to the east on the Molesworth Street side at the front was a
new three-storey block of offices; and to the south the House of Representatives chamber was
enlarged. The southern face along Sydney Street was remodelled into a more elaborate Gothic
look.

In the early 1880s Thomas Turnbull designed masonry extensions at the back for a much
grander Bellamy’s, a spacious central Lobby and offices. The Lobby, linking the two chambers,
with its ornate rafters and a high ceiling with glass panels in it was a feature. It became the hub
of the buildings. Doors led off it to Bellamy’s, the library, whips’ offices and committee rooms. It
was a gathering place where Parliamentarians warmed themselves around the large fireplaces. It also made a useful dormitory during interminable long debates.

Parliamentary Library

Following the move to Wellington, many wanted a purpose-built fireproof library building for its growing and increasingly valuable holdings that had to be housed in adjacent rooms in the wooden buildings. The issue dragged on for many years but the money was never available. In 1897 Premier Seddon suddenly made a decision to build a new library. Thomas Turnbull produced an ornate Gothic revival three storey masonry design that included a library section, separated by fire walls and an iron fire door from the main entrance portico section and rooms for the Premier, ministers and select committees.

The old wooden structure dating back to the late 1850s was quickly knocked down while Parliament was in recess and the brick structure began to go up. The high cost became an issue of confidence in Seddon’s ministry once Parliament sat again in 1898. The government conceded that the design would have to be truncated. The planned third storey, part of the office section, and much of the external ornamentation were removed in a revised design by
government architect John Campbell. Turnbull’s name was at his request covered over on the commemorative stone.

Despite its more modest proportions the new building, completed in 1899, was a considerable asset for what had become New Zealand’s foremost library. Members finally had a facility befitting Parliament and housing many treasures. With its grand steps, main portico and impressive entrance foyer and stairway, it provided a much more impressive main entrance to the buildings. At the left behind the portico the Premier had his offices; to the right behind the fire door was the library. Cataloguing, reference and newspaper rooms, along with the post office, were on the ground floor. Up the grand staircase was an airy and light reading room, decorated with ornate gilt plasterwork. Behind were mezzanine-height stackrooms.

**The great fire of 1907**

The threat of fire grew as Parliament Buildings expanded and became a maze of increasingly tinder-dry wooden buildings. From time to time serious outbreaks of fire occurred, one behind the Speaker’s Chair that caused an evacuation of the House of Representatives due to the smoke. Some newspaper reporters joked of deliberately setting fire to the building to get rid of the rabbit warren. At the turn of the twentieth century many breathed easier when the library finally moved into its new fireproof building but the threat remained.

At 2 am on 11 December 1907 Parliament’s nightwatchman made his regular check of the buildings and returned to his office for a cup of cocoa. He thought he heard rain on the roof but what he heard was in fact a substantial blaze breaking out. The fire probably started through a short in the electrical wiring in the ceiling of the Māori interpreters’ room. He sounded the alarm, threw open the gates for the fire brigade, and tried to tackle the fire with a hose – which soon burned right through.
The fire spread quickly through the wooden parts of the buildings and then into the Lobby and Bellamy’s masonry additions alongside. By 5 am Bellamy’s had gone and firemen were battling desperately to save the library behind its fire door as the fire penetrated the main entrance to the library building. As people salvaged whatever they could thousands of books were dumped on the lawn – but the library building proved its worth, in the end being saved by its fire door and fire walls.

In daylight the scale of the devastation was apparent. The wooden buildings had been totally destroyed. Of the wooden sections only ‘a couple of gaunt chimneys pointed their ugliness against an ashen sky, and thin wisps of the pungent blue smoke of smouldering wood smarted the eyes of people who stood to gaze at the remnant of the Parliamentary Buildings’. The masonry Lobby and Bellamy’s had been gutted internally and the roof of the Lobby had collapsed.

Parliamentarians were stunned and the country felt the loss keenly. The buildings, prominently placed on the hill, were a familiar sight and had been home to a great number of politicians, officials and journalists. Many of the country’s treasured historical possessions had been displayed within it.
Government House

Across the Sydney Street gully and where the Beehive is now, was Government House, the Governor’s residence. Originally Colonel Wakefield’s house was on the site. It was taken over in 1848 to be used as Government House. By 1871 an impressive new building designed by Clayton in grand Italianate style and with an impressive tower replaced the modest original. It had two spacious drawing rooms, a ballroom, a billiard room, a conservatory, offices, more than twenty bedrooms, stables, coach-houses, servants quarters and cottages for gardeners and grooms.

Following the fire of 1907, Parliament took over Government House. (New premises were built for the Governor in 1910. This is the present-day Government House close to the Basin Reserve. Meanwhile he lived in Palmerston North.) The library building continued to be used and was linked to Government House by a covered elevated footbridge over Sydney Street called the ‘Twopenny tube’ because of its similarity to a fairground amusement of the time.

In Government House the House of Representatives met in the ballroom and the Legislative Council occupied the conservatory. The temporary chambers were cramped and uncomfortable but Parliament had to remain there for the next ten years while Parliament House was built.

Government House continued to provide accommodation for Bellamy’s until the 1970s after the move into Parliament House in 1918. The conservatory became variously a messengers’ room, post office and the tea room, while the ballroom became the Social Hall, used for the frequent
parliamentary functions. The impressive arched doorways remained, as did some of the fine furniture such as large decorated mirrors and substantial sideboards but little was spent on maintaining the place. Leaks were an everlasting problem, dealt with by strategically placed flowerpots and rubbish bins, and hygiene became an issue at times.

The severe earthquake affecting Wellington in August 1942 raised concern that the old Government House might collapse. The distinctive tower at the south end was removed through substantial reconstruction in 1944 that provided new dining rooms, a kitchen and bars. But conditions remained cramped and the building continued to deteriorate. By the 1950s it leaked like a sieve, its upper floors shook at every step, and filing cabinets had to be propped up because of sloping floors. There were regular infestations of mice and rats and the kauri timber and elegant carved woodwork was long covered by yellowing paint and grime.

The front of the building was demolished in 1969 to make way for excavations for the Beehive. The rear half was moved further back to continue to provide services while the Beehive went up. It came down in the late 1970s.

Parliament House

It was difficult to know what to do after the fire of 1907 – rebuild around the existing structure or start with new buildings on the nearby Government House site? In 1910 the entire area (comprising modern-day Parliament grounds) was consolidated into a single block running from Hill Street to Bowen Street, taking in the Government House site. Sydney Street was closed off for the gully to be filled to create a substantial flat plateau for new buildings.

In February 1911 Prime Minister Joseph Ward announced a competition for designs among New Zealand architects. Thirty-three entries were received, with the winning design from government architect John Campbell. Another of Campbell's entries won fourth place; the two designs were blended for the final building.
The new Parliament House was brick faced with marble and granite in the Edwardian neo-classical style then popular for grand public buildings. The first stage provided chambers for both Houses and offices. It had three floors, including the ‘principal’ first floor to which the impressive main entrance staircase provided entry. The second half of the building (never built) was intended to replace Government House and included a Bellamy’s and a large new library.

Cost was an issue from the start. The building’s foundation stone was laid in March 1912 and site preparation was carried out. When William Massey became Prime Minister in July he reluctantly let the planned first stage proceed, but without the prominent domes and ornamentation of the roof. Construction began early in 1914 but fell behind schedule because suitable Takaka marble was hard to find and the war gave rise to shortages of labour and materials.

With members desperate to get out of old Government House, Parliament moved into the incomplete buildings for the second session late in 1918. Construction continued until 1922.

The building remained much the same for more than seventy years, apart from the installation in 1943 of penthouse offices on the roof for the Prime Minister’s Department and a Cabinet Room.

The building as originally conceived was never completed. Cost remained an obstacle and then modernist architects did not like its outdated style and engineers were increasingly concerned at the earthquake risk of the existing Parliament House. Construction of the Beehive confirmed that the second half of Parliament House would never be built. Its demolition remained possible until the 1980s when the government decided to strengthen and completely refurbish it instead, as part of the nation’s heritage. Parliament House was finally opened officially when Queen Elizabeth II did the honours in 1995 after the refurbishment.

**The Beehive**

By the 1960s Parliament confronted a dilemma – what to do with ageing buildings subject to earthquake risk and with great pressure on accommodation. In 1964 Sir Basil Spence, a noted British architect, was asked for his opinion on three options: completing Parliament House; knocking it down; or constructing another building adjacent to it. Spence recommended retaining Parliament House as it was and building a new circular ‘executive wing’ building. His rapidly drawn sketch, thought to have been drawn on a napkin but more likely on his pad, provided a solution to the intractable problem. The building was soon dubbed ‘the Beehive’ from...
boxes of ‘Beehive’ matches used in Spence’s demonstration to Prime Minister Holyoake. Match manufacturer Bryant and May later made special ‘Beehive’ matchboxes for sale to members.

An early Spence sketch of the Beehive. Parliamentary Collection

Spence’s Beehive got a mixed reaction when unveiled in Parliament. Sir Basil Arthur said it was ‘a shocker and should be scrapped’ but Opposition leader Nordmeyer praised it. A few architects and ex-Speaker Oram wanted Parliament House completed but both political parties backed the novel idea, considering that the building might ‘become a source of national pride and international interest’.

The Government Architect got the difficult job of turning the design into something practical. It was not easy to make efficient use of the circular tapering cone with a central ‘drum’ core. Construction started in 1970 with stage I being the basement, underground carpark and the square podium. This was completed in 1972. Then the tapering drum tower (stage II) was constructed. The first three floors were finished over the 1975-6 summer for Bellamy’s to move in. The Queen unveiled a commemorative plaque in the reception hall in February 1977 and Prime Minister Robert Muldoon formally topped-off the building in May 1977. The government moved into the upper floors in September 1979. The Annex on Museum Street behind the Beehive was finished in 1981.
On the top tenth floor cabinet meets, the Prime Minister and staff occupy floors eight and nine, and ministers have their offices on floors four to seven. The Beehive also has three ‘social’ floors on its lower levels: an impressive reception foyer on the ground floor. This is used as Parliament’s public reception area. There are members’ and other dining rooms, bars and lounges associated with Bellamy’s, as well as a television and radio interview room and a theatrette. A grand staircase leads to the first floor reception hall used for state banquets and other social functions.

In the early 2000s the Beehive was comprehensively refurbished internally and its decor updated, floor-by-floor. A new public entrance with security measures was provided between the Beehive and Parliament House.

**Parliament grounds – then and now**

The public is able to walk around and enjoy the grounds of Parliament. Tourists hop off their buses, stretch their legs and take photographs. On fine days, people sit in the sun and eat their lunch on the grass. The grounds have been accessible for more than a century and used for gatherings of various kinds – celebrations, announcements of national significance, protest, and to mourn the death of major public figures.

The original buildings were on an excavated bench carved out of the hill rising from Molesworth Street. Not a great deal of thought was given to landscaping until Premier Seddon took charge in the 1890s when the trees were cut and all the hollows and bumps were smoothed into a gentle grassed slope. Impressive gates were erected on the Molesworth Street main entrance from which a carriage drive swept up to the front of the buildings.
At the same time electric lighting was installed in the grounds. Until then, members had to fumble their way out of the dark grounds aided by a gaslight lit only on nights with no moon and put out at midnight. There were stories of parliamentarians feeling their way along fences with the aid of umbrellas or sticks, and walking into posts and poles in the dark. In the 1890s one MP worse for wear late at night stumbled out onto the wharf and into the sea instead of finding his way to Lambton Quay and his lodgings. Complaints finally led to the appointment of a gaslighter stationed on the corner of the grounds who doused the outside lights in the early hours after the last member left.

The grounds were completely redesigned after the fire that destroyed much of the Parliament Buildings in 1907. Sydney Street was closed and the gully filled, and the grounds of old Government House were taken into the precincts. The remodelling was finished as Parliament House was completed in the early 1920s.

Lawns and drives were set out, and deciduous trees and pohutakawa planted. The main entrance to the complex was sited on the corner of Bowen Street and Lambton Quay where an elm tree stands sentinel. A large forecourt was created in front of the buildings, with the main entrance reached by steps rising to the first (principal) floor of the building. The layout of the grounds has remained much the same to the present day.

Parliament grounds include statues of two former Premiers. The bronze statue of Richard Seddon, Premier between 1893 and 1906, stands in front of Parliament House. It was designed by British sculptor Sir Thomas Brock, and erected in 1915. Today it is one of the most photographed parts of Parliament grounds. Outside the Parliamentary Library is the marble statue of Premier John Ballance (1891-1893). This was unveiled in 1897 and had pride of place on Parliament's front lawn until the relandscaping.

Public gatherings
The grounds have been the focus of important public events for more than a century - the farewelling of troops for the war in South Africa at the turn of the twentieth century, the mourning of Queen Victoria’s death in 1901, the Royal Tour of the Duke and Duchess of York in the same year, and the declaration of New Zealand as a Dominion in 1907.

Parliament is the natural focus for major political events and protests against government policies. In the 1920s and early 1930s demonstrations of the unemployed took place in the grounds. Anti-Vietnam War protesters chanted outside Parliament in the 1960s and on one occasion invaded the Prime Minister’s offices. Demonstrations became increasingly common from that time and Parliament took greater control of its grounds as a consequence. In 1975 and again in 2004 Parliament grounds were the destination of hikoi – marches about issues concerning Māori.

Doing up Parliament

Parliament House and the Parliamentary Library were looking somewhat shabby by the 1980s. There was increasing concern at the earthquake risk – some argued that the two buildings should be pulled down – but the Historic Places Trust’s top rating helped confirm their special value. It was decided to strengthen and refurbish both buildings so that they would withstand an earthquake up to 7.5 on the Richter scale and provide modern working conditions within heritage structures.

In 1991 Parliament moved across Bowen Street to Bowen House which was connected by an underground tunnel to the Beehive. A temporary debating chamber was constructed in a large
basement adjacent to Bowen House. The biggest heritage building conservation project undertaken in New Zealand to that time began.

The project cost about $175 million, and employed more than 400 people on-site at its peak, with another 300 offsite. The marble came from the original quarry near Takaka, granite again from the Coromandel, ceramics were made in Italy and bronze windows were crafted in Australia. The existing marble cladding of Parliament House had to be carefully cleaned to match. The plasterwork, especially in the Library and the chamber of the House of Representatives, was particularly meticulous work and was the largest decorative plastering project in the country for a long time. Restoration of the stained glass was another painstaking task.

Novel technology was used to protect against earthquakes. The buildings were cut away from their foundations, new basements were carved out and 417 base isolator bearings were installed. These were made of steel shims, rubber layers and lead cores. They ‘isolated’ the buildings from the ground, allowing the foundations to move without transmitting the shock to the buildings. The force of an earthquake is dramatically reduced as a result. The bearings were manufactured in Lower Hutt and are exported worldwide.
The refurbishment of Parliament House created new spaces. A feature is an internal courtyard or Galleria made of Takaka marble and Coromandel granite in which a spectacular artwork hangs. The members’ lounge and billiard room is now the Grand Hall, much used as a function space. The new Māori Affairs Committee Room, Māui Tikitiki-a-Taranga, is furnished with carvings and tukutuku. The Pacific Room, dedicated in 2002, has its doorway decorated with Pacific motifs and displays Pacific art works and gifts from Pacific nations.

The Parliamentary Library has been restored into a superb example of Gothic Revival architecture. It also gained much more storage space and its attic under the roof became a third storey. A feature is the recreated nineteenth-century Lobby which serves as the library’s reception area and reading room.

The grounds were relandscaped to reflect more the original style of the 1920s, being based around a number of large pohutukawas on the lawns and boundaries and the cabbage trees along the frontage of Parliament House. Views from Molesworth Street were opened up through the shrubberies along the boundary.

Queen Elizabeth II opened the new-look complex in November 1995 and the first sitting of the House in the restored chamber was held in February 1996. The plan was not only to make Parliament a safe building with high heritage values, but a place that would be accessible to New Zealanders. It was to be an ‘Open House’ with enhanced public access. Sure enough, the revitalised buildings attracted many more visitors. Tours became daily, and a shop and Visitor Centre were established.