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Heritage New Zealand

Beyond engineering achievement: Heritage New Zealand's recognition of why bridges are important

Heritage New Zealand is the country's national heritage organisation and in 1979 the Springvale Suspension Bridge was the first bridge to become one of its properties. What is surprising about this selection is that it is a relatively humble 1920s rural suspension bridge which does not rank among the nation's impressive engineering achievements. Heritage New Zealand has since added another bridge to its properties portfolio and acknowledged over 90 bridges as historic places on the New Zealand Heritage List/Rārangī Kōrero (the List), with many others included as places contributing to the heritage values of historic areas.

In this paper I will closely examine the List to explore why New Zealand bridges are recognised as historic places. I argue that bridges have always meant more to New Zealanders than simply being utilitarian structures essential for traversing our dramatic landscape. I will discuss common themes, including bridges as symbols of progress, commemorative outlets, political soap boxes, and representing this little country at the far reaches of the British Empire's desire for international connection.