

Provincial architect with a competitive edge: Arthur Griffin, the early years

Paul A Addison, designTRIBE, Auckland

ABSTRACT: Arthur Reynolds Griffin was born in Nelson in 1883, and began architectural practice on his own account in that city in 1906. He quickly earned two important commissions by winning competitions for the design of the new Carnegie Library in Hokitika in 1906 and the relocated Nelson Girls' School the following year, kickstarting his career. The latter project led to his appointment as architect to the Nelson Education Board and further school jobs. By 1910, he had completed several prominent commissions in Nelson, including the replacement Trafalgar Hotel in the central city, the new Home for Old People in Waimea Road, and the imposing new premises for the *Nelson Evening Mail*. He went on to design numerous notable Nelson landmarks, such as: the Cawthron Steps in front of the cathedral (1913); Nelson Hospital (1925), since demolished; and the Trathen's Building in Trafalgar Street (1922), demolished in 2016. This paper will, however, focus on his early works, from the first decade of the twentieth century.

Early life and family background

Born in Tasman Street, Nelson, on 26 September 1883, Arthur Reynolds Griffin was the son of John Hollis Griffin and his wife, Martha Lousia Biss.¹ John Griffin was manager of Griffin and Sons Ltd, the well-known biscuit manufacturers, and the son of the company's founder.² Martha Griffin died in 1895, a few days before Arthur's twelfth birthday,³ and John remarried two years later. Arthur grew up in a large family,⁴ one of John Griffin's 11 children from his two marriages.

Young Arthur was unsuccessful in gaining a scholarship to Nelson College,⁵ but was nevertheless educated for a year at that

school, in 1898,⁶ and won the fourth form drawing prize.⁷

Early career

Arthur Griffin worked as a draughtsman for Robertson Brothers in Nelson for four years until the end of 1905, designing a number of buildings in brick or timber in the Nelson area in brick or timber during that period. He left the employment of the Robertsons when he won a competition for the design of the Carnegie library in Hokitika, establishing his own practice in the Norwich Union Chambers in Hardy Street, Nelson, in early 1906.⁸ On 12 January 1906, the first advertisement for his architectural practice appeared in *The Nelson Evening Mail* newspaper. It read, "A. R. Griffin, Architect, Norwich Union Chambers.

Plans prepared and Estimates furnished for Buildings in Town and Country."⁹

Over the remaining four years of the decade, Griffin designed a range of residential, educational and commercial premises. The following list is gleaned from tender advertisements and other reports in various newspapers, but primarily from the *Nelson Evening Mail* and *The Colonist*.

1906

Carnegie Library, Hokitika.

Additions to office of *The Colonist* newspaper, Nelson.

Five-roomed villa residence for FP Rishworth, Mount Street, Nelson

¹ "Birth" p 2.

² "Personal" p 4.

³ "Deaths" p 2.

⁴ "Personal" p 4.

⁵ "Scholarship Examinations" p 2.

⁶ "Full School List of Nelson College, 1856–2005" np.

⁷ "Prize Giving at the Colleges" p 2.

⁸ "A.R. Griffin [advertisement]" p 3.

⁹ "A.R. Griffin [advertisement]" p 3.

1907

Trafalgar Hotel for J Harley & Son, corner of Trafalgar and Bridge Streets, Nelson.
Club rooms for Nelson Golf Club, Tahunanui.
Girls' Central School, Shelbourne Street, Nelson.
Shops for Mrs BH Moller, Bridge Street, Nelson.
Two-storey brick building for Renton & Company, Hokitika.
Permanent double shelter for consumptives, Nelson.
Building for S Kirkpatrick & Company, Nelson.

1908

Additions to office of *The Colonist* newspaper, Nelson.
Home for Old People, Waimea Road, Nelson.
Concrete shop and store for H Preston, Greymouth.
School at Rockville.
Technical school in brick, Westport.
Additions to Pigeon Valley School.
Villa residence for W Kirby, Nelson.
Two-storey residence, Collingwood Street, Nelson.
Additions to premises of George Page & Sons, Hardy Street, Nelson.

Residence for W Rodgers, Trafalgar Street South, Nelson.

1909

School and outbuildings at Wangapeka.
Additions to Motueka High School.
Residence for R Allan, Nelson.
Premises in brick for *The Nelson Evening Mail*.
Strong room at the Education Board offices, Nelson.
Additions to Wakefield School.
Residence and outbuildings for AG Best, Stoke.
Shops for RB Jackson, Bridge Street, Nelson.
Nine-roomed residence for RP Hudson, Motueka.

It is evident from the above list that Griffin rapidly established himself as a successful architect. He gained commissions for a number of substantial private residences, and was able to take on an apprentice, Willie Howard Savage, after the latter left Nelson College in 1907.¹⁰ By 1909, Griffin had moved into a grand old home, Kinloch, at 18 Ngatitama Street,¹¹ where he lived for most of

¹⁰ "Personal Matters" p 4.

¹¹ *Wise's New Zealand Post Office Directory* p 621.

the rest of his life. He had married Barbara Ellen Warnock in 1908.

After Griffin won the competition for Hokitika's Carnegie library, his concept plan was approved by Andrew Carnegie in March 1906,¹² and Griffin completed the full plans and specifications for the new building by June of that year,¹³ when tenders were invited.¹⁴ At about the same time, Griffin offered to prepare plans for a Carnegie library in Hamilton for a fee of 2.5%; the Hamilton Borough Council having received the offer of a donation of £2,000 from Andrew Carnegie for the purpose of erecting a free public library. It seems, however, that Griffin's offer was not accepted.¹⁵

Six tenders were received by the Hokitika Borough Council for their new free public library designed by Griffin by the time that tenders closed in August 1906, but all were above the £2,000 estimate. Consequently, Griffin was required to make modifications to the plans to bring the construction cost back

¹² "[The Hokitika Library Committee]" p 2.

¹³ "West Coast Times: Tuesday, June 6, 1906" p 2.

¹⁴ Griffin "To Builders [Free Public Library at Hokitika]" p 1.

¹⁵ "Hamilton Borough Council" p 2.

within budget, but without departing from the general plan that had been approved by Andrew Carnegie.¹⁶ Two days later, Griffin presented the amended plans and the tender for the construction of the library for £2,034, excluding internal fittings, by William Arnott and Company of Greymouth was accepted by the borough council.¹⁷ The contract construction period was seven months.¹⁸ The foundation stone for the building was laid by the Hokitika mayor, Henry Michel, in November that year, but the library was not completed until December 1907.¹⁹ According to a report in the *West Coast Times* when the building was nearing completion, the new library was "the finest building architecturally on the West Coast." Its "symetrical [sic] beauty" made it "distinctly an ornament to the town," and it was said that Griffin had "combined different orders of architecture harmoniously." Overall, the building was 68 feet long by 57 feet wide, of double-brick cavity walls with black pointing, plastered facings and pillars, slate roof, and timber joinery. Construction was delayed for about three months because of the difficulty in

obtaining the specified pressed bricks, and a further five weeks at Christmas, when no construction work took place.²⁰

In February 1906, the Hokitika hardware firm of Renton and Company announced its intention to replace its building on the corner of Hamilton and Tancred Streets, across the street from the new Carnegie library.²¹ The design for the library by the young architect Griffin evidently attracted the attention of James Renton, as Griffin was engaged to design the new premises in brick. Tenders for the building were called for in late June 1907,²² and construction by the firm of Stevenson and McMillan of Hokitika was completed early the following year. The new building was said to have "imposing proportions" and was described as being "amongst the finest business premises on the West Coast."²³ While being more utilitarian and less ornamented or finely detailed than the nearby free library, also designed by Griffin, the two buildings share semi-circular arch-head windows with central keystones as a

distinctive feature. The Renton building has simple cornices on its exterior, while those on the library are more classically detailed with dentils.

In mid-1906, Griffin was commissioned to draw up plans for the replacement of the Trafalgar Hotel, on the corner of Bridge and Trafalgar Streets in Nelson. Initial plans, which included 12 bedrooms, were presented to the Nelson Licensing Committee in September 1906, but the committee considered that a hotel in such a central location should provide more accommodation, and approved the plans on condition that a further six bedrooms were added and that the new premises would be completed in 12 months.²⁴ Tenders for the new three-storey hotel were invited in January the following year,²⁵ and demolition of the old building began in late March.²⁶ The new Trafalgar Hotel, built by Mr Miller, was formally opened on 9 May 1908, although it was open for business prior to this. The building constructed of timber with brick partitions, contained a total of 36 rooms, and a report of the opening praised Griffin's "skilfully designed architecture and

¹⁶ "[A special meeting of the Borough Council]" p 2.

¹⁷ "Designed by Nelson Architect" p 4.

¹⁸ "Topics of the Day" (17 August 1906) p 2.

¹⁹ "Hokitika Borough Council" p 3.

²⁰ "The Carnegie Free Library" p 4.

²¹ "Topics of the Day" (20 February 1906) p 2.

²² Griffin "Tenders [Two-storey Brick Building at Hokitika]" p 3.

²³ "West Coast Times: Thursday, January 30, 1908" p 2.

²⁴ "Licensing Committee" p 2.

²⁵ Griffin "To Builders [Three-storey Hotel]" p 2.

²⁶ "Summary Notes" p 2.

contrivance [sic]," which made the most of the restricted space available, and that the "handsome and imposing" street frontages "greatly improve[d] the aspect of that portion of the centre of the city."²⁷

Griffin was commissioned to design new club rooms for the Nelson Golf Club in Bolt Road, Tahunanui, and tenders were called for in early March 1907.²⁸ The new wooden Edwardian pavilion, built by John Scott, opened on 6 July 1907, and was capable of housing 150 members. It included a generous verandah that gave views of the golf course and bay, as well as an afternoon tea room, kitchen, lavatories and locker space.²⁹

In February 1907, Griffin won a second architectural competition, this time for the new central girls' school,³⁰ to be built in Shelbourne Street, Nelson, on the site of the old gaol.³¹ One of 14 entrants in the competition, Griffin won the first prize of £25.

²⁷ "City Improvements" p 2.

²⁸ Griffin "To Builders [Club Rooms for the Nelson Golf Club]" p 2.

²⁹ "New Club House at the Links" p 2; "Opening of the New Club House" p 5.

³⁰ "West Coast Times: Friday, March 8, 1907" p 2.

³¹ Shelbourne Villa "The History of Shelbourne Villa" np.

He used the *nom de plume* "Palmar qui meruit ferat,"³² the motto of Admiral Lord Nelson, which loosely and appropriately translates as "Let he who has earned it bear the palm." Griffin's detailed plans for the school were accepted by the Nelson Education Board at its meeting in late March 1907,³³ and tenders were invited two weeks later.³⁴ Robertson Brothers Ltd, for whom Griffin had earlier worked as a draughtsman, were appointed as main contractors, and the new school opened on 28 January 1908, at a cost of over £2500. Newspaper reports at the time congratulated Griffin for achieving a "very presentable commodious building, well suited for its purpose" on a limited budget. The building in timber, described as being an "adaptation of the early English Renaissance," had a street frontage of 92 feet and a depth of 52 feet, with flanking wings of 38 feet by 27 feet at each end. There were five classrooms with a 14-foot stud, one measuring 24 feet by 25 feet, with the remainder being 25 feet by 36 feet. Particular attention was paid to natural ventilation, with plentiful awning-hung windows, controllable Laurence Thompson

³² "Nelson Education Board" (26 February 1907) p 2.

³³ "Local and General News" (26 March 1907) p 2.

³⁴ Griffin "To Builders [Girls' Central School, Nelson]" p 3.

patent slat ventilators, and patent Boyle ventilators on the roof connected to ceiling ventilators within the building. A rear corridor linked the classrooms at the rear and included a 25-foot-long library cupboard, as well as private teachers' offices. A separate toilet block, bicycle shed, shelter, and fuel store completed the complex.³⁵

Following the completion of the new central girls' school, Griffin was appointed as architect to the Nelson Education Board at a meeting of the board on 26 May 1908.³⁶ He remained in that role until September the following year.³⁷ Between 1908 and 1909, Griffin undertook numerous projects for the Education Board, including a new school at Rockville,³⁸ additions to Pigeon Valley School,³⁹ enlargement of Karamea School, a new teacher's residence at Seddonville,⁴⁰ a

³⁵ "New School for Girls" p 2.

³⁶ "Nelson Education Board" (26 May 1908) p 2.

³⁷ "Nelson Education Board" (29 June 1909) p 1.

³⁸ Griffin "To Builders [School at Rockville]" p 2.

³⁹ Griffin "To Builders [Additions to Pigeon Valley School]" p 3.

⁴⁰ "Nelson Education Board" (29 September 1908) p 2.

school and outbuildings at Wangapeka,⁴¹ and additions to Motueka High School.⁴²

However, the most significant design by Griffin for the Education Board during this period was for the new Westport Technical School, in brick, on the corner of Henley and Russell Streets. The contract was let in August 1908 to SM Galbraith for £1325 19s,⁴³ and a Mr McDonald was appointed clerk of works for £3 per week.⁴⁴ With furniture, the total cost was over £1,800.⁴⁵ The school was officially opened by the Minister of Education, George Fowlds, on 27 May 1909.⁴⁶ In connection with the construction of the school, Griffin claimed for his travel expenses and for supervision of the works. At a meeting in June 1909, the Education Board accepted the amount claimed for travel, but considered that Griffin was not entitled to the sum claimed for supervision as a clerk of works had been appointed. At that same meeting, Griffin was given three months' notice of termination of

⁴¹ Griffin "To Builders [School and Outbuildings at Wangapeka]" p 2.

⁴² Griffin "To Builders [Erections to Motueka High School]" p 3.

⁴³ "Board of Education" p 2.

⁴⁴ "Nelson Education Board" p 2.

⁴⁵ "Local & General News" (8 May 1909) p 2.

⁴⁶ "Westport Technical School" p 3.

his contract as architect to the Education Board.⁴⁷

In June 1907, Griffin was engaged by the Nelson Hospital and Charitable Aid Board to prepare sketch plans for a new old people's home.⁴⁸ His original plan included accommodation for 80 residents and was estimated to cost £5,900.⁴⁹ Eventually the board agreed to a construction budget of £4,000, with capacity for 49 men and nine women residents,⁵⁰ and tenders were invited in May 1908.⁵¹ The following month, SM Galbraith was appointed the main contractor, with a tender price of £4,020, with an additional £40 for concrete piles, and a reduction of 3s per square foot if 6 x ¾" lining were used. The matter of appointing a clerk of works was left to Griffin, with payment no greater than 12s per day.⁵² The new complex, officially opened in May 1909, was designed as a series of pavilions, with a total of six separate wings along two frontages, and

⁴⁷ "Nelson Education Board" (29 June 1909) p 1.

⁴⁸ "Hospital and Charitable Aid Board" (7 June 1907) p 2.

⁴⁹ "Hospital & Charitable Aid Board" (18 March 1908) p 3.

⁵⁰ "Hospital and Charitable Aid Board" (2 April 1908) p 2.

⁵¹ Griffin "To Builders [Home for Old People, Nelson]" p 2.

⁵² "Hospital and Charitable Aid Board" (4 June 1908) p 1.

accommodated 44 men and eight women. The central wing on each frontage was two storeys, with single-storey flanking wings.⁵³

The last substantial commission executed by Griffin during the first decade of the twentieth century was the new premises for *The Nelson Evening Mail* in Bridge Street. Tenders were invited in July 1909,⁵⁴ and Chamberlain and Stannard were successful with a bid of about £2,300.⁵⁵ The brick building, finished in stucco and Renaissance in style, was completed in February 1910. It has a frontage of 95 feet, with a central door in each elevation. According to contemporary descriptions, florid ornamentation was eschewed in favour of "good solid lines to the verge of severity drawn with architectural skill" resulting in the building having a "substantial appearance."⁵⁶

Later career

Arthur Griffin continued to be an important architect in Nelson for many years. From the 1940s he was semi-retired, although he

⁵³ "Caring for the Aged" p 2; "The Old People's Home" p 2.

⁵⁴ Griffin "To Builders [Brick Premises]" p 3.

⁵⁵ "Local & General News" (31 July 1909) p 2.

⁵⁶ "A City Improvement" p 7.

remained in practice until about 1960.⁵⁷ He made important contributions to the urban fabric of Nelson City and the wider province, with projects including: the gates to Queen's Gardens;⁵⁸ the Cawthron Steps leading from Trafalgar Street to the cathedral;⁵⁹ the Nelson Institute building in Hardy Street;⁶⁰ commercial premises in Trafalgar Street, including the Trathen's building, the Hannah's building, and Central Motors;⁶¹ the Plunket and Rest Rooms in Trafalgar Square West;⁶² the Church of Blessed Peter Chanel in Motueka;⁶³ and the Church of the Sacred Heart in Takaka.⁶⁴ His most substantial project, however, was the rebuild of Nelson Hospital in Waimea Road in the 1920s.⁶⁵

⁵⁷ Wilson "Thematic Historical Overview of Nelson City" p 30.

⁵⁸ The Prow "Trask Memorial Gates Queens Gardens" np.

⁵⁹ Heritage New Zealand "Church Steps" np.

⁶⁰ Heritage New Zealand "Nelson Institute Building (Former)" np.

⁶¹ Trathen and Arnfeldt *Trathen's: The Building; the Family & the Business* p 13.

⁶² Heritage New Zealand "Plunket and Rest Rooms" np.

⁶³ "Church of Blessed Peter Chanel, Motueka" p 37.

⁶⁴ "New Church of the Sacred Heart, Takaka" p 13.

⁶⁵ Wilson "Thematic Historical Overview of Nelson City" p 30.

Griffin died in 1967, and was buried in Marsden Valley Cemetery.⁶⁶

Conclusion

Arthur Griffin enjoyed a long and successful career as an architect, with almost all of his work being in Nelson city and the wider Nelson region. His success in two architectural competitions at the very outset of his professional career - for the Carnegie library in Hokitika and the central girls' school in Nelson - accelerated his rise to prominence. He appears to have been largely untainted by his removal as architect to the Nelson Education Board in 1909, and continued to receive major public and commercial commissions, many of which remain standing today as a testament to his skill.

⁶⁶ Nelson City Council "Plot Record Details" np.

REFERENCES

- "A City Improvement" *Nelson Evening Mail* (21 February 1910): 7.
- "A. R. Griffin [advertisement]" *Nelson Evening Mail* (12 January 1906): 3.
- "Birth" *Nelson Evening Mail* (27 September 1883): 2.
- "Board of Education" *The Colonist* (26 August 1908): 2.
- "Caring for the Aged" *Nelson Evening Mail* (18 May 1909): 2.
- "The Carnegie Free Library" *West Coast Times* (1 November 1907): 4.
- "Church of Blessed Peter Chanel, Motueka" *New Zealand Tablet* (15 May 1908): 2.
- "City Improvements" *Nelson Evening Mail* (11 May 1908): 2.
- "Deaths" *The Colonist* (23 September 1895): 2.
- "Designed by Nelson Architect" *The Colonist* (17 August 1906): 4.
- "Full School List of Nelson College, 1856–2005" *Nelson College Old Boys' Register, 1856–2006* ed. Ian Lash. Nelson: Nelson College Old Boys' Association, 2006 (CD-ROM).
- Griffin, A. R. "Tenders [Two-storey Brick Building at Hokitika]" *Nelson Evening Mail* (29 June 1907): 3.
- Griffin, A. R. "To Builders [Additions to Pigeon Valley School]" *Nelson Evening Mail* (19 August 1908): 3.
- Griffin, A. R. "To Builders [Brick Premises]" *Nelson Evening Mail* (16 July 1909): 3.
- Griffin, A. R. "To Builders [Club Rooms for the Nelson Golf Club]" *The Colonist* (9 March 1907): 2.
- Griffin, A. R. "To Builders [Erections to Motueke High School]" *Nelson Evening Mail* (19 March 1909): 3.
- Griffin, A. R. "To Builders [Free Public Library at Hokitika]" *Evening Post* (7 June 1906): 1.
- Griffin, A. R. "To Builders [Girls' Central School, Nelson]" *Nelson Evening Mail* (12 April 1907): 3.
- Griffin, A. R. "To Builders [Home for Old People, Nelson]" *The Colonist* (16 May 1908): 2.
- Griffin, A. R. "To Builders [School and Outbuildings at Wangapeka]" *The Colonist* (11 January 1909): 2.
- Griffin, A. R. "To Builders [School at Rockville]" *The Colonist* (13 July 1908): 2.
- Griffin, A. R. "To Builders [Three-storey Hotel]" *The Colonist* (15 January 1907): 2.
- "Hamilton Borough Council" *Waikato Argus* (9 June 1906): 2.
- Heritage New Zealand "Church Steps" <https://www.heritage.org.nz/the-list/details/253>
- Heritage New Zealand "Nelson Institute Building (Former)" <https://www.heritage.org.nz/the-list/details/1603>
- Heritage New Zealand "Plunket and Rest Rooms" <https://www.heritage.org.nz/the-list/details/5169>
- "Hokitika Borough Council" *West Coast Times* (4 December 1907): 3.
- "[The Hokitika Library Committee]" *Nelson Evening Mail* (13 March 1906): 2.
- "Hospital & Charitable Aid Board" *Nelson Evening Mail* (18 March 1908): 3.
- "Hospital and Charitable Aid Board" *Nelson Evening Mail* (4 June 1908): 1.
- "Hospital and Charitable Aid Board" *The Colonist* (2 April 1908): 2.
- "Hospital and Charitable Aid Board" *The Colonist* (7 June 1907): 2.
- "Licensing Committee" *The Colonist* (4 September 1906): 2.
- "Local & General News" *Nelson Evening Mail* (8 May 1909): 2.
- "Local & General News" *Nelson Evening Mail* (31 July 1909): 2.
- "Local and General News" *Nelson Evening Mail* (26 March 1907): 2.
- Nelson City Council "Plot Record Details" http://customer.nelson.govt.nz/cemeteries/plot_records/MV12A007
- "Nelson Education Board" *Nelson Evening Mail* (26 February 1907): 2.
- "Nelson Education Board" *Nelson Evening Mail* (26 May 1908): 2

- "Nelson Education Board" *Nelson Evening Mail* (29 September 1908): 2.
- "Nelson Education Board" *Nelson Evening Mail* (29 June 1909): 1.
- "New Church of the Sacred Heart, Takaka" *New Zealand Tablet* (3 October 1918): 13.
- "New Club House at the Links" *Nelson Evening Mail* (8 July 1907): 2.
- "New School for Girls" *The Colonist* (29 January 1908): 2.
- "The Old People's Home" *The Colonist* (19 May 1909): 2.
- "Opening of the New Club House" *The Colonist* (17 July 1907): 5.
- "Personal" *The Colonist* (11 April 1912): 4.
- "Personal Matters" *Nelson Evening Mail* (23 September 1912): 4.
- "Prize Giving at the Colleges" *The Colonist* (17 December 1898): 2.
- The Prow "Trask Memorial Gates Queens Gardens" 2016.
<http://www.theprow.org.nz/yourstory/trask-memorial-gates/>, accessed 25 November 2019.
- "Scholarship Examinations" *The Colonist* (24 December 1897): 2.
- Shelbourne Villa "The History of Shelbourne Villa" 2008.
<http://www.shelbournevilla.co.nz/About+Us/The+History+of+Shelbourne+Villa.html>, accessed 25 November 2019.
- "[A special meeting of the Borough Council]" *West Coast Times* (15 August 1906): 2.
- "Summary Notes," *The Colonist* (27 March 1907), 2.
- "Topics of the Day" *West Coast Times* (20 February 1906): 2.
- "Topics of the Day" *West Coast Times* (17 August 1906): 2.
- Trathen, Ben, and Arnfeldt, Michelle. *Trathen's – The Building; the Family & the Business* 2015. <http://www.theprow.org.nz/assets/The-History-of-Trathens-The-building-the-business-27-October-2015.pdf>, accessed 25 November 2019.
- "[untitled]" *Evening Post* (7 June 1906): 1.
- "[untitled]" *Nelson Evening Mail* (16 July 1909): 3.
- "West Coast Times: Friday, March 8, 1907" *West Coast Times* (8 March 1907): 2.
- "West Coast Times: Thursday, January 30, 1908" *West Coast Times* (30 January 1908): 2.
- "West Coast Times: Tuesday, June 6, 1906" *West Coast Times* (6 June 1906): 2.
- "Westport Technical School" *West Coast Times* (28 May 1909): 3.
- Wilson, John "Thematic Historical Overview of Nelson City" Nelson City Council, 2011. <http://www.nelsoncitycouncil.co.nz/assets/About-nelson/downloads/1176312-thematic-historical-overview-of-nelson-city-OCT2011.pdf>, accessed 25 November 2019.
- Wise's New Zealand Post Office Directory* Dunedin: Wise & Co., 1909.