

# INSPIRED

THE DUNEDIN ARCHITECTURE OF  
R.A. LAWSON

George O'Brien's watercolour painting of the Designs of R. A. Lawson (below) shows one man's vision for a new city of churches, houses and institutional buildings with the Victorian Gothic and Neo-Classical styles of architecture harmoniously co-existing side by side. Although he may not have achieved his aspiration to shape an entire cityscape, in a career lasting over forty years Robert Arthur Lawson gave Dunedin many iconic buildings.



A MAP & INFORMATION GUIDE  
to the architectural highlights of R A Lawson  
in the city of Dunedin

◀ Taking centre stage and dominating this ideal diorama is the emphatic spire of First Church, Lawson's masterpiece of architectural bravura, and the design that brought him to Dunedin from Melbourne in 1862.



cover image: George O'Brien (1821-1888)  
**Designs of R A Lawson, c.1868** (detail)  
 Watercolour on paper  
 Otago Settlers Museum Collection

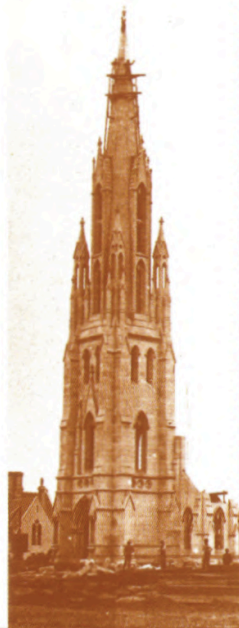
◀ Robert Arthur Lawson (1833-1902)  
**Self Portrait, aged 21 years, 1854**  
 Watercolour on paper  
 From MS 807 R A Lawson Diary  
 Hocken Archives and Manuscripts Collection,  
 University of Otago

A carpenter's son, he was born at Grange in the parish of Abdie in Fife in 1833, but left Scotland for the opportunities of the new world 21 years later in 1854. His training as an architect in Perth and Edinburgh at a time when the Gothic Revivalism of Augustus Pugin (1812-1852) was ascendant proved useful for ecclesiastical work both in Australia and New Zealand. Evidence of his artistic skill is seen in his diary of the passage to Melbourne on board the Tongataboo. Not only are his fervent Presbyterian beliefs recorded in an elegant hand, but there are also little portraits capturing both his own youth and zeal and that of his fellow passengers.

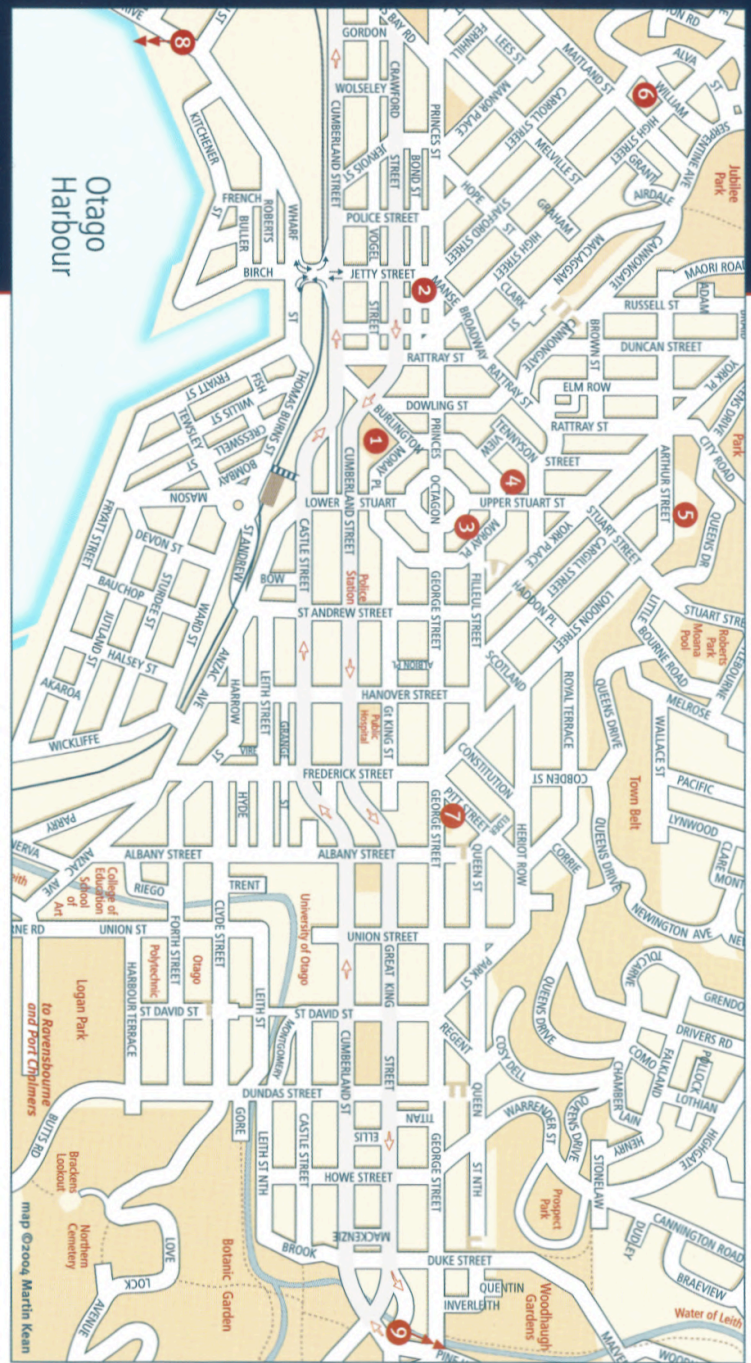
Joseph Weaver Allen  
 (1822-1886)  
**First Church under  
 construction, 1868**  
 Carte-de-Visite, Album 99  
 Hocken Photographs  
 Collection, University of Otago

## 1 FIRST CHURCH

From his architectural office in Melbourne in 1862, Lawson entered the design competition for the principal Presbyterian church in the burgeoning town of Dunedin. His pseudonym was "Presbyter", guaranteed to appeal in a settlement that had been founded by the Free Church of Scotland in 1848. Gothic was considered to be the only architectural style suitable for a Protestant church in this period, while Catholic churches recreated the classical revival basilicas of the Italian Renaissance. Lawson's design followed Pugin, who favoured the revival of fourteenth-century Gothic and a coherent interior. With no ritual or religious processions, there was no need for a large chancel or side chapels, and the transepts (the arms that extend north and south from a crossing point in a cruciform church) are limited. Instead of being placed traditionally above the axis of nave, chancel and transepts, the 54 metre spire crowns the entrance to the church. Two-storeyed gabled windows on all sides of the tower make it appear even higher.



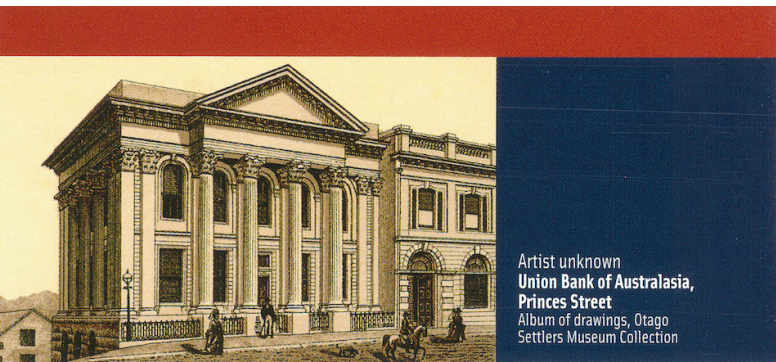
Lawson arrived in Dunedin in June 1862, but excavations of Bell Hill ordered by the Provincial Council meant it was another eleven years before First Church was opened on 23 November 1873. Meantime Lawson's practice flourished with commissions for many other churches and commercial buildings including the massive Union Bank of Australasia in Princes Street, which was erected in a mere six months using Oamaru stone from Kakanui quarries.



map courtesy of f\*INK. Copyright © 2006 Martin Kean / f\*INK

Brochure content developed by Linda Tyler and Ann Barsby in association with the Hocken Collections Library, University of Otago. This is a partnership project between the Hocken Collections and Otago Settlers Museum.





Artist unknown  
**Union Bank of Australasia,**  
**Princes Street**  
 Album of drawings, Otago  
 Settlers Museum Collection

## 2 UNION BANK OF AUSTRALASIA

Nineteenth century society was newly democratic, but architectural expression maintained order by using the classical style for commercial buildings and keeping Gothic for churches and schools. Lawson's bank projects an image of tradition, security and solidity by using the colonnade and projecting pediment of a Greek temple which is perfectly symmetrical in composition. A giant (two-storeyed) order of four Corinthian columns, carved by Louis Godfrey, carry an enormous entablature and create a portico with the eight engaged pilasters behind, all elements which give the impression of stateliness and formality.

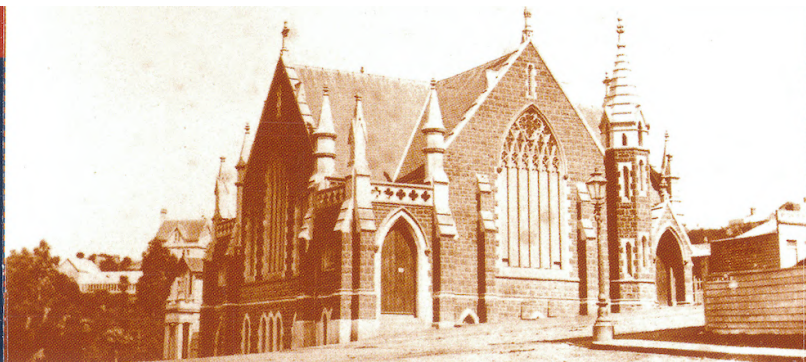
## 3 MUNICIPAL CHAMBERS

In 1874 the Municipal Corporation of Dunedin called for designs for a building for its Octagon site to express the importance and wealth that the gold rush had given to the city. Council chambers and offices, a hall that could seat 2000 people, an observation tower with a clock, accommodation for the fire brigade and its appliances as well as a market on the English model, all had to be included. Lawson was actually second place getter in the competition but as a Dunedin resident got the commission to supervise construction and saw to it that his own design was used. With a Port Chalmers stone base and Oamaru limestone construction the building occupied a difficult site and had a hefty price of £20,390 when the contract was let in February 1878, yet was able to be officially opened for business just over two years later on 25 May 1880. Using a façade design based on the style of an Italian Renaissance palazzo dominated by a grand tower, Lawson's essay in Vitruvian proportions and consistency in classical architecture has become a landmark building.

Tyree Brothers  
**Municipal Chambers,**  
**Octagon, Dunedin, c.1900**  
 Photographic Collection,  
 Alexander Turnbull Library,  
 Wellington



The rusticated stonework on the lowest level and the column-framed windows show his knowledge of George Gilbert Scott's recently completed Colonial Office, Whitehall (1858) although there is no statuary along the roofline in Lawson's design. Like the Union Bank, the Municipal Chambers suggest dignity and sensible judgement with a symmetrical building governed by simple, geometric forms, monumental proportions and plenty of smooth surfaces.



Joseph Weaver Allen  
 (1822-1886)  
**Trinity Wesleyan Church,**  
**Moray Place, Dunedin,**  
**1869-1870**  
 Hocken Photographs  
 Collection, University of  
 Otago, Dunedin

## 4 TRINITY WESLEYAN CHURCH

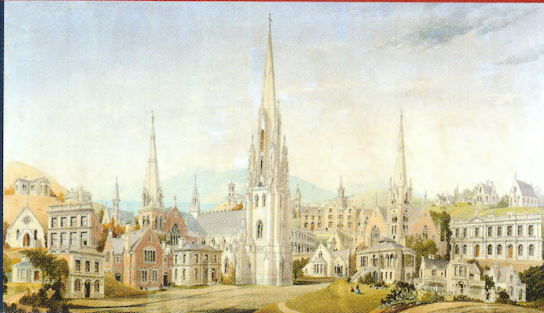
Officially opened on 10 July 1870, Trinity was Dunedin's first large church. It was originally intended to have a spire topping the square tower at the street corner. Like First Church, it is a Gothic Revival building and its imposing siting and style is the legacy of the Reverend Alfred Fitchett, who was minister from 1867-1870. Described as a cultured man, his knowledge of ecclesiastical architecture would have matched Lawson's own, and the building is an unconventional and asymmetric response to the problem of finding an architectural language appropriate to Methodism. An independent thinker, Fitchett published a paper supporting Darwin in 1876, then became an Anglican priest, and was the first Dean of St Paul's Cathedral in 1894. The Church was sold to the Fortune Theatre in 1979.

## 5 OTAGO BOYS' HIGH SCHOOL

Baronial in design, and visible from many parts of Dunedin, Lawson's towering Otago Boys' High School rises 38 metres above Arthur Street at its highest point. Skilled in constructional polychromy, the Victorian Gothic architect's method of creating pattern out of arrangements which emphasised the natural colours of the materials used, Lawson envisaged three types of stone to be used in the construction: dark Leith Valley basalt, lighter Port Chalmers breccia and creamy Oamaru limestone. Window embrasures and corners are picked out with lighter quoins from the main dark stone of the fabric of the building. With its many square turrets and towers, its chunky proportions and squat appearance, the style is more Tudor than Gothic, and could be described as "Jacobethan", with inspiration from the English Renaissance (1550-1625) combining Elizabethan and Jacobean architectural styles.

James Tyree **Boys' High School,**  
**Arthur Street,**  
**Dunedin 1885**  
 Hocken Photographs  
 Collection, University of  
 Otago, Dunedin





## 6 PARK'S SCHOOL

On the left in the George O'Brien tableau of Lawson's designs is the small Post Office that still stands on its hill in Lawrence, and below that in red brick with Oamaru stone facings is John Brown Park's two-storeyed school in William Street. Now painted white, this building is used as a private residence. Designed so that the classrooms all converged on a central oval space on one floor, the Lawson structure was intended as a model school building. Building plans were exhibited for the South District School at the 1889-90 New Zealand and South Seas Exhibition but the design was too expensive for the Education Department to adopt.



Photographer unknown  
Park's School, William St,  
Dunedin, 1864  
Otago Settlers Museum  
Collection

## 7 KNOX CHURCH

Inducted as first minister of Knox Church in 1860, the popular Reverend Dr Donald McNaughton Stuart grew his congregation over the following decade to the extent that a competition for a new design for a church that would seat 1,000 people was advertised in 1871. Again first prize eluded Lawson, but he was appointed architect after a dispute over building materials with the original winner, David Ross. Lawson's design uses Leith Valley andesite and Oamaru limestone to bold effect to create a chequered pattern on the corners of the tower and buttresses. Insistent that the building contract included a 50 metre spire (Lawson was wary of churches left incomplete for lack of funds) the church was completed to Lawson's exact design in 1876 at a cost of £18,332 18s 7d. Sited at the corner of George and Pitt Streets, it has more elegant proportions than Trinity Methodist Church, but is appropriately distinguished from First Church in its more rugged finish with surfaces of the stone left textured with the pattern of their quarrying.

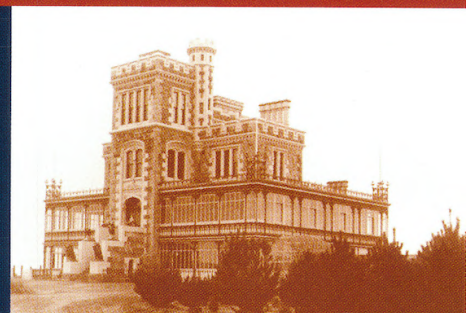


Photographer unknown  
Knox Church 1876  
Hocken Photographs  
Collection, University of  
Otago, Dunedin

*At the age of 67 in 1900, Lawson had ended his exile and returned to Dunedin to go into practice with his former pupil, James Louis Salmond (1868-1950). His reputation was rehabilitated and he was elected Vice-President of the Otago Institute of Architects, but the partnership was not to last long. In 1902 Lawson suddenly died, leaving behind three daughters and a son. His wife, Jessie Sinclair Hepburn (whom he had married in 1864 in Dunedin) was to survive him by a further 21 years, and was a stalwart member of the congregation of First Church, the cornerstone of Lawson's legacy as an architect of Victorian Dunedin.*

Frank Arnold Coxhead  
(1851-1919)  
**Larnach Castle c.1883**  
Hocken Photographs Collection,  
University of Otago, Dunedin

below: Photographer Unknown  
**Seacliff Lunatic Asylum c.1890**  
Hocken Photographs Collection,  
University of Otago, Dunedin



## 8 LARNACH CASTLE

As a prominent Dunedin architect, Lawson had the opportunity to design several houses for wealthy clients. "The Camp", begun in 1871 for William Larnach, businessman and politician, now known as Larnach Castle, has been described as "a castellated villa wrapped in a two storeyed verandah". Dominating the façade is a central tower with stair turret, but the encircling cast-iron glazed verandah owes more to the Crystal Palace Great Exhibition Hall of 1851 than it does to the solid stone walls of Scottish baronial castles, and is a concession to the warmer climes of the Southern Hemisphere. Reputedly taking 200 men three years to build, the interior took a further twelve years to be completed with imported marbles, Venetian glass and ornate carvings by Louis Godfrey. Following the death of his first wife in 1880, Larnach commissioned Lawson to design a miniature First Church for the Northern Cemetery for her tomb. Following heavy financial losses caused by the collapse of the Colonial Bank, Larnach (who had been Minister of Finance and Mines) committed suicide at Parliament House in Wellington and came to occupy the Lawson-designed mausoleum himself in 1898.

## 9 SEACLIFF LUNATIC ASYLUM

Construction of Seacliff Hospital on the site 38 kilometres north of Dunedin commenced in 1879 despite discouraging geological reports from James Hector. He was particularly dubious about Lawson's design for a massive tower. Lawson argued that the tower was not merely an architectural feature, but provided necessary surveillance over the buildings and grounds that had to house 500 patients and 50 staff. As early as 1883, plaster was falling and ominous creaks could be heard, and in 1887 a major slip made the northern wing uninhabitable. Found guilty of negligence by a Royal Commission of Enquiry in 1888, Lawson was forced to return to Melbourne. His Scottish baronial design, based on Norwich County Asylum in England, stood until 1942 when a fire swept through one of the women's wards and 37 patients were burnt to death. In 1945 the tower had to be demolished because of earth movements, and by 1959, when patients were moved to Cherry Farm, little of the Lawson structure remained.

