Numerous Nelson landmarks and institutions stand testament to the outstanding contribution of philanthropist Thomas Cawthron. From the mid-1880s he put to good use his considerable fortune, built up over 30 years through his trade, shipping and investment dealings. He lent £700 to the Nelson Institute Library and Museum for alterations and additions to its Hardy Street building and when the old structure burned down, he gifted £500 in 1911 to complete its replacement. The same year he helped finance extensions and additions to Nelson Hospital and the building of a nurses’ home.

In 1912 he donated £5,000 and then made a loan of £2,000 towards the establishment of the Nelson School of Music. He also bought and installed the organ that remains in use at the school today. The same year he paid for the continuation of the posts and chains on Rocks Road and gifted 1,000ha near Dun Mountain to the Nelson City Council as a public scenic and recreation reserve, known as Cawthron Park.

His most visible gift to the city is the granite Church Steps, which he paid for completely. Correctly called the Cawthron Steps, these were officially opened in 1913.

When Cawthron died in 1915 his will provided for “the purchase of land and erection and maintenance of an industrial and technical school, institute and museum to be called the Cawthron Institute”. This opened in 1919 and remains a world class science research centre. In 2008, his name was given to the Cawthron Atkinson Observatory following a major refurbishment undertaken with the help of a $50,000 donation from the Cawthron Institute Trust Board. This brought to completion an unfulfilled benefaction envisaged by Cawthron, once described as “Nelson’s grand old man”, before his death on 8 October 1915.

For more on Thomas Cawthron, visit the Prow: www.theprow.org.nz/people/thomas-cawthron/4

Key
1. Church steps
2. Current Cawthron Institute location
2a. Fellworth house (original Cawthron Institute location)
3. Nelson School of Music
4. Nelson Hospital
5. Rocks Road chains and posts
6. Nelson Institute building (now NMIT fisheries school)
7. Observation park (former location)
8. Wakapuaka cemetery (burial location of Cawthron)
The magnificent flight of granite steps and landings leading from Trafalgar Street to Nelson’s Christ Church Cathedral.


Fellworth House on Milton Street. The original location of the Cawthron Institute from 1921 to the early 1970s.

Fellworth House. Nelson Provincial Museum Collection: C2487

The Cawthron organ in the Nelson School of Music located on the corner of Collingwood and Nile Streets.


The iron chains and posts line the seafront along Wakefield Quay and Rocks Road as far as Tahunanui.


Cawthron donated £5,000, and lent £2,000, towards the Nelson School of Music.


In 1911 Cawthron donated a sum of £15,000 towards the cost of a new general hospital and £1,000 towards the cost of the new nurses’ home.

Copy of cheque for fifteen thousand pounds to Nelson Hospital’s Charitable Aid Board from Thomas Cawthron. Nelson Provincial Museum Collection: C3725

The new Nelson Institute Library and Museum building in Hardy Street opened in 1912 after its earlier premises had been destroyed by fire in 1906.


In 1923 the Atkinson telescope was handed over to the Cawthron Trust and it went to Observatory Park when F.G. Gibbs moved the observatory from Alton St.

Observatory, Observation Hill. Nelson Provincial Museum Collection: C3771