Ashburton’s Chinese settlement in Allens Road could become one of just a handful of post-1900 sites recognised by Heritage New Zealand as having significant historical value.

The land was once home to a large community of Chinese settlers who established a thriving market garden and while the site has been recognised in the Ashburton District Council’s district plan as a group one heritage item, it currently has no status with Heritage New Zealand.

This is about to change, said heritage consultant Arlene Baird, with that organisation indicating a desire to bring the site under its umbrella.

There are only seven other post-1900 sites in New Zealand on its register.

“It’s very rare for them to do this and it’s very important.

“This means they see it as one of the most highly significant sites post-1900 in the country.

“This is a very exciting thing they’re proposing,” she said.

Baird completed a heritage assessment of the site and its buildings last year and Heritage New Zealand’s interest was been sparked by that assessment.

National heritage status would also open funding doors, Baird said.
“This would also give more formal recognition for families of their ancestors and what they brought to the locality and it also means that Heritage New Zealand would provide funding for interpretive panels for the site.”

The path to national status would involve a visit by an archaeologist and the proposal would then be assessed at a Canterbury level before being approved nationally.

If it is accepted, the paperwork would be signed off by June.

It was an opportunity that would protect the site and it came with virtually no negatives, Baird said.

National status would mean there would be some restrictions placed on the site, but not the buildings.

Restrictions would come into play if any earthworks were required for any purpose.

A Heritage New Zealand-approved archaeologist would be required.

The organisation had looked at the council’s proposal and was happy with its demolition and restoration plans, she said.

Next year marks the 75th anniversary of the abolition of the Chinese Poll Tax (a fee Chinese immigrants to New Zealand were charged).

“Heritage New Zealand said that this would be perfect timing for your group to be telling people about what you’re doing.

“This is a real opportunity for you, it’s really positive and it’s a really good way forward.

“It shows the site has not only local value, it also has high national value too,” Baird said.

In terms of site work, some salvage work had been carried out in recent weeks and a number of loose items, such as bottles, had been collected and put aside.

In the future these would be displayed in an on-site museum, she said.

Five tenders have been received by the Ashburton District Council for demolition and restoration work on buildings in the settlement.

Members of the council’s Chinese Settlement working group met yesterday to discuss those tenders.

– By Sue Newman, Guardian Online