History: The original building was designed as a two-story fire hall with a tall tower that provided drying space for the canvas hoses and also housed a large bell for signaling a fire. Use of the bell for alarm purposes ceased in 1944 when an automatic system was installed. A later addition to the hall (south side) had a weigh scale set into the floor. This feature was used as an auto-mechanic area to keep fire engines whatever their vintage in top repair. For many years the bell was rung at noon and 6pm. In the 1930’s and 40’s, Edgar Bowles boarded in town and twice daily climbed to the second floor to ring the bell. He also maintained the weigh station and charged 25 cents a weigh for a small truck load. For more than 80 years the hall was staffed by a volunteer fire brigade. The seven fire chiefs who led these unsung heroes are commemorated on a plaque in the new fire hall, erected 1995. After that date, the building housed a variety of community services including Chamber of Commerce, Agricultural Society, Tourist Information and a weekly Farmers Market. 2012 the hall was closed due to safety concerns. After designation the municipality sold to Chris Steele who created Fire & Ice, a casual venue for fire-roasted coffee, local ice cream plus food, drink, entertainment, WIFI and etc.

Architecture: The simple, purpose-built structure with few embellishments uses locally made red brick (mostly double bond). The 75 foot tower, used for drying canvas hoses, is unusually tall for this type of structure and features texture courses for triple-bond, a modified onion dome with finial and is also a distinctive visual landmark. The four open tower bays were enclosed to prevent further water damage. The large alarm bell that is still in the tower may eventually be brought down for display purposes. The original windows which had been boarded up were replaced in the renovation. The south wall of the building is painted with a nostalgic mural of the (demolished) Markdale train station.

Designation: Bylaw 2013-59 Municipality of Grey Highlands protects the entire 1913 portion of the structure as well as the iconic landmark status of the tower. For more information see: http://www.greyhighlands.ca/downloads/1099.pdf
Cultural Significance: As many of the early homes and businesses were of log or board-and-batten construction, Markdale suffered several tragic fires, especially in the Mill and Main Street business blocks. Volunteer fire fighters considered it a simple matter of civic duty to respond to these fires as well as to vehicular crashes and other emergencies. On sunny days it was not uncommon for the large door to be open so people could admire the shiny red engine. Occasionally fully suited firemen turned Hwy 10 into a toll road, soliciting donations from passing cars. As home to the farmers’ market and tourist information, the fire hall attracted many visitors, and in its new role continues to attract both locals and tourists. This unique, highly recognizable landmark is important to the visual streetscape as well as to the cultural heritage of the town and surrounding area.