

Church on the Te Henui skyline

This weekend members of the Methodist congregation at Fitzroy are celebrating the 75th anniversary of the church building which stands on Devon Street just a few metres east of the Henui Street corner.

The full story of the 75-year life of this building may be obtained from the special jubilee booklet by Mr John Hodder, to whom the Express is indebted for his permission to use some of his notes, and from whose writing we have borrowed one pertinent quotation: "When the Fitzroy Methodist Church was opened in 1907, it was heir to a heritage that spanned for more than 60 years of Primitive Methodist witness in New Plymouth."

We may leave the telling of the story of the present building to Mr Hodder, while we, instead, concentrate on that aforementioned period of 60 years that preceded its erection.

The story of the arrival of Primitive Methodism in New Plymouth in 1844 is a rather interesting one. Many of the settlers who came on the first ships were members of a Methodist offshoot group known as the Bible Christian Church. Their worship in the new settlement was carried out under the lay leadership of Mr Henry Gilbert. The group early acquired a piece of land and built a small chapel they then entered into a lengthy and frustrating correspondence with the church's ruling body in England in an attempt to attract the services of a minister.

One Sunday morning, in the midst of their frustrations, the congregation emerged from their chapel to find a strange clergyman preaching a sermon from a chair set up in the middle of the Devon Street bridge over the Huatoki. Many stopped to listen. They liked what he had to say, and from that moment the Rev. Robert Ward, newly arrived as a missionary for

the Primitive Methodist Society, had himself a ready made congregation.

Ward applied to the Plymouth Company for a grant of land for his church, and from the sections offered him he selected a tract between Devon Street East and McLean Street in what was then known as Henui Village. Ward chose this out-of-town site out of fairness to the Wesleyan Church whose activities were centred on the town and towards Moturoa. At the end of the year 1844 Ward had a small chapel and a parsonage erected on the Henui site.

Ward's ministry was a busy one, even though the steadily widening friendship gap between Maori and European prevented him from doing as much missionary work as he would have liked among the Maoris. Indeed, on one celebrated occasion his attempt to establish a meeting with some Maoris at Bell Block was brought to an abrupt end by a tomahawk being waved under his nose and a finger being expressively pointed in the direction of home.

When the Omata Block was opened up in 1848 a great many of his Henui Village followers took up their rural land grants there, and Ward was pleased to follow them and set up a chapel in their midst.

Ward ended his term in Taranaki in 1850. His place was taken by the Rev. Joseph Long. He was another of the long line of true pioneering clergymen who were such a feature of Taranaki's formative years, and even though the fifties proved to be a troubled decade, marked by prolonged and often bloody Maori feuding to the



north of the town, long continued to build his ministry. His notable achievement was the building of another chapel at Hurdon and the establishment of the denomination's cemetery there.

Robert Ward returned to New Plymouth for his second term in January 1859. But what a term it turned out to be! War broke out between Maori and European in March 1860. Henui Village was abandoned, and before the houses had long been vacated, the arsonists moved in. Ward's chapel was one of the few buildings to be spared.

The war ended with a

truce being called at Waitara in March 1861, but the situation still remained very touchy. This touchiness was to lead to a new outbreak of warfare in May 1863, but in between the two phases of war the European population was left in such a state of insecurity that it was impossible for those who lived outside of the town to resume the lives that they had known prior to 1860.

The head of the Primitive Methodist congregation was included in this. Unable to return to Henui, Ward had no option but to build a new headquarters church right in the heart of

New Plymouth. This church, built in 1862, was sited in Queen Street, on the section now occupied by the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery.

The Queen Street church became the centre of an extensive and busier-than-ever ministry. By 1870 there were two ministers conducting regular services at the main church and at Henui, Bell Block, Waitara, Mangorei, Hurdon, Omata, Oakura and Tataraimaka. Most importantly, it was a happy church. Although there were barriers between the parent bodies which prevented a union between

the Primitives and other Methodist groups, the relationships in New Plymouth remained good, and indeed, the Wesleyan and Primitive Methodist people often worked together in their servicing of the country ministries.

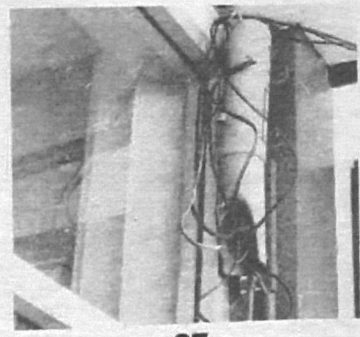
At Henui in 1875 the block of Primitive Methodist land, less the section on which the church stood, was sold. The church building itself remained in use until 1904, when it was demolished to make way for a new church. In the interim, worship was conducted in a local hall.

The foundation stone of the new church was laid on November 22, 1906. It was not a token stone or a fancy plaque, but was literally the key stone of the foundations, as any visitor today may still see for himself. The church was opened on January 13, 1907.

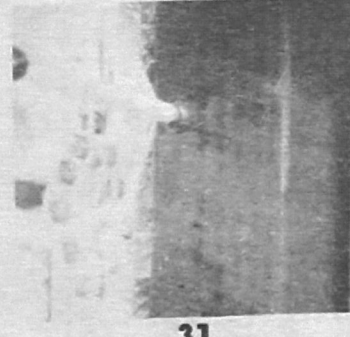
This article has provided only a mere glimpse of the first 60 years of Primitive Methodism in New Plymouth. We now commend the church's 75th jubilee booklet to readers seeking a continuation of the story.



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