

A new home for old church



Heritage

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Mark and Trish Stevenson took just minutes to choose a spot for a church on their farm, but the journey through red tape to get it there lasted years.

After 127 years at Otakeho on SH45 in South Taranaki, St John the Divine Anglican church has just been moved 12km to the Stevenson's family farm at Pihama.

The church, which closed a few years ago, will be restored – starting with a new roof and paint job.

The vestry will become a home for a museum for a collection of memorabilia from the district's history gathered by Mark's late father, Ian, who was a respected historian.

"I'll be hearing confessions in there on Thursdays at 5pm, and I've told a lot of my stock agent friends to book in. They'll be needing a long time, and they won't get away with



The church was moved on two trucks from Otakeho to Pihama, 12km away. TRISH STEVENSON

just one Our Father and three Hail Marys. Everyone laughs when I tell them that," Mark said.

The couple bought the deconsecrated building in 2018, but getting a resource consent to shift it took until September last year, after Heritage New Zealand opposed the move.

"It's cost us tens of thousands of dollars to get resource consents to shift it," Mark said.

"Fortunately at the hearing the [South Taranaki District] council members could see, we had 22 submissions for us from the Otakeho community, people from

the parish, even the police."

The couple first visited the church in 1990, when it was opened for a floral art display during the Taranaki garden festival.

"We looked at that and thought, wow, what a beautiful building, we will have a go if it is ever for sale.

"I guess you've got to have faith," Mark said.

The old church has a leak in its roof and a bullet hole in one window pane from an unknown person's misguided target practice.

A gigantic beehive had to be removed from one of the walls by a beekeeper, ahead of the shift.

People watched the trucks carrying the church and vestry from gateways along the road during the six-hour trip on April 28, over a convoluted route that included cross-country detours over farms to avoid passing under power lines.

"We only dropped four sets of lines, thanks to the farmers who let us use their tracks," Mark said.

It took just five minutes for them to choose the right spot for the church in its new home, sheltered by high hedges on the farm Mark's great-grandfather bought in 1886.

The church will eventually have its own grounds and garden again.

"We will keep the landscaping quite simple, the old churches didn't have fussy landscaping," Trish said.

They plan to open the building for the local community to enjoy and for visitors passing by.

"It's so beautiful you do want to share it," she said. "I have this idea we could do Christmas carols for the neighbourhood."



Mark and Trish Stevenson are about to begin restoring the 127-year-old church which sits in a paddock near the road on their family farm. CATHERINE GROENESTEIN/STUFF