

Historic Church Celebrates First Hundred Years

"Whether right or wrong, as I never attend any church myself, I think it is fair that attention should be drawn to what is said to be the most dangerous condition of the Anglican Church at Omata.

"The old building is fast going to decay. It presents the most dilapidated appearance—anything but a credit to the place.

"A strange but observant person must naturally conclude that all Omata-ites are careless of spiritual welfare."

Obviously this was a fair criticism of the church from an agnostic writing in the Taranaki Herald on April 18, 1849, because he was proved quite correct.

Two months to the day after that comment came a story reading: "word was received in town this morning that the Church of England structure at Omata has been blown down."

These excerpts from the life of the Anglican Church of St John the Evangelist at Omata represent only a very short period in the 100-year history of a church which made the first effort to minister to the people outside New Plymouth.

And next weekend St John's celebrates its centenary. The first church at Omata was built in 1848 and it survived through the Maori Wars and until 1874, when it was blown down in a gale.

The present church was officially opened on February 14, 1875 by Archdeacon Govett, from the New Ply-

mouth parish of St Mary's. Next Sunday the centenary will be celebrated with a service at St John's, followed by a luncheon at St Chad's Parish hall in Upper Westown. Omata's is included in the parish of the Rev. R. Caudwell, the vicar of St Chad's.

The Omata block of 12,000 acres was brought from the Maoris in 1847 for £400 and was the most southerly settlement in the New Plymouth area. The road from New Plymouth was mostly along the beach and elsewhere mud or dust, and took a day to traverse.

Section

In 1848 a church building was established on Waireka Rd on a section given by Mr J. T. Wickstead, a former representative of the English company responsible for settling of New Plymouth. As such he had helped Bishop Selwyn to choose sites in 1842 for church properties in the town and district.

In 1854 Omata became a Parliamentary constituency and as settlement was rapidly spreading inland, it was decided that another church was needed.

In September 1855, 22 Omata settlers subscribed £96.13.0 and the Taranaki Herald of September 26 carried an appeal for further funds.

This money was held for four years and finally used

to build St Bride's Church on Puketuru (Burton's Hill), on land given by Mr Adolphus Kyngdom. The first service was early in 1860.

A newspaper article shows how the church was financed. Dated September 26, 1855, it read: Omata new church building fund: It having been agreed to at a district meeting convened at Omata the 21st August last by the Bishop of the Diocese that the co-operation of the population be solicited toward the erection of a new church, the committee therefore appeals to the public to aid them in the carrying out of the project."

Following this announcement was a list of donations tallying about £96, and mention that "further donations will be received by the committee."

Tragedy struck the area suddenly in March 1860, when settlers were ambushed and shot down, farms abandoned and armed Maoris gathered in strength on Waireka Hill.

Omata village was pillaged and sacked, curtains and calico linings torn down for Maori bandages. Even children's dolls hung derisively by the neck on fences.

Yet all was not hate and destruction. British regulars and Taranaki volunteers in separate groups advanced on Waireka on March 28, 1860, in an attempt to rescue the Rev. H. H. (Parson) Brown and other settlers' families

Story:
STEVE JONES
Pictures:
MERV GASTON

west of Waireka Hill. These were saved, however, by a notice signed by three chiefs and placed on the door of Brown's home. The troops did not know this as they pushed on to be involved in the Battle of Waireka.

Headquarters

The Maoris used St Bride's Church as headquarters during the war, but did not destroy the building, though they pulled up the floor. It is of interest that no church building or residence in or near New Plymouth was destroyed during those times.

The Rev. H. Handley Brown came into the district in 1859, on the eve of the Maori wars, and was appointed priest-in-charge under Archdeacon Govett.

During the years 1860-1866 the Maoris conquered all the outlying area and burnt the Omata settlement, with the exception of the church and the home of Mr Brown.

Because of the war, the church was out of use for many years and was offered for sale in 1873 in the auction rooms of Mr Yems, Brougham Street, New Plymouth. In 1874 it was decided to move the building to the present site of St John's, but while being put there a gale demolished it.

Residents agreed to build a smaller church and raised £130 for this purpose. On February 14, 1875, Archdeacon Govett came from New Plymouth to hold the opening service of the new church on its present com-

paper articles show it became very run-down, as shown by the writer complaining about the church's condition in April 1894. He said persons who attended worship in the building felt nervous at the creaking and shaking of the old building.

"When, as is the case when the mountain breeze is raging, the safety of remaining inside the building is positively dangerous."

Church officials had in fact been preparing for renovations to the building before these words of warning were written. However, they were beaten by a gale when the building was blown down before the contractor had started repairs.

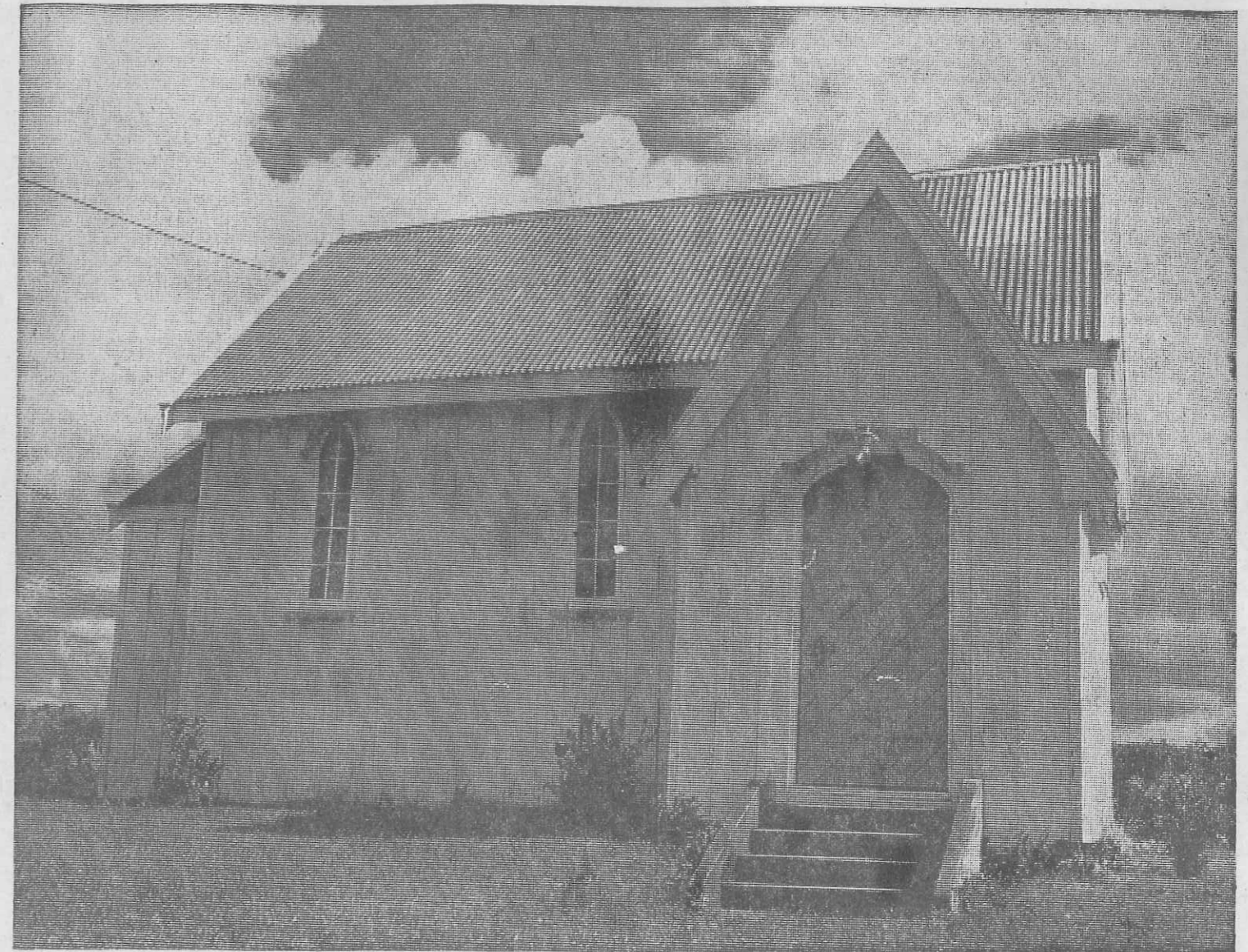
Archdeacon Govett obtained a small grant from St Mary's vestry and, helped by donations from a few friends and a concert given at Omata, funds were raised to rebuild the church, though on a smaller scale. This work cost £40, with much of the old structure being re-used.

Undoubtedly the greatest character in the church in those pioneering times of the 1860s was the Rev. Brown.

Comfortable

The Rev. H. H. Brown was 46 years old when he reached New Plymouth in March 1859. He had been persuaded to leave a comfortable living near Sleaford, Lincolnshire, of which he had been vicar for some years.

He was a Lincolnshire man by birth and was or-



ABOVE: 100 years old next Friday. The Anglican Church of St John the Evangelist at Omata, which was opened on February 14, 1975.

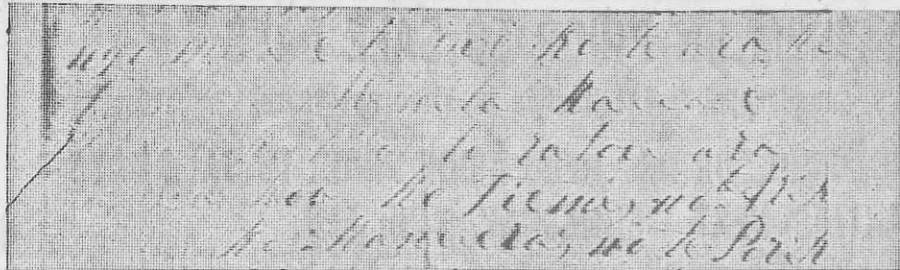
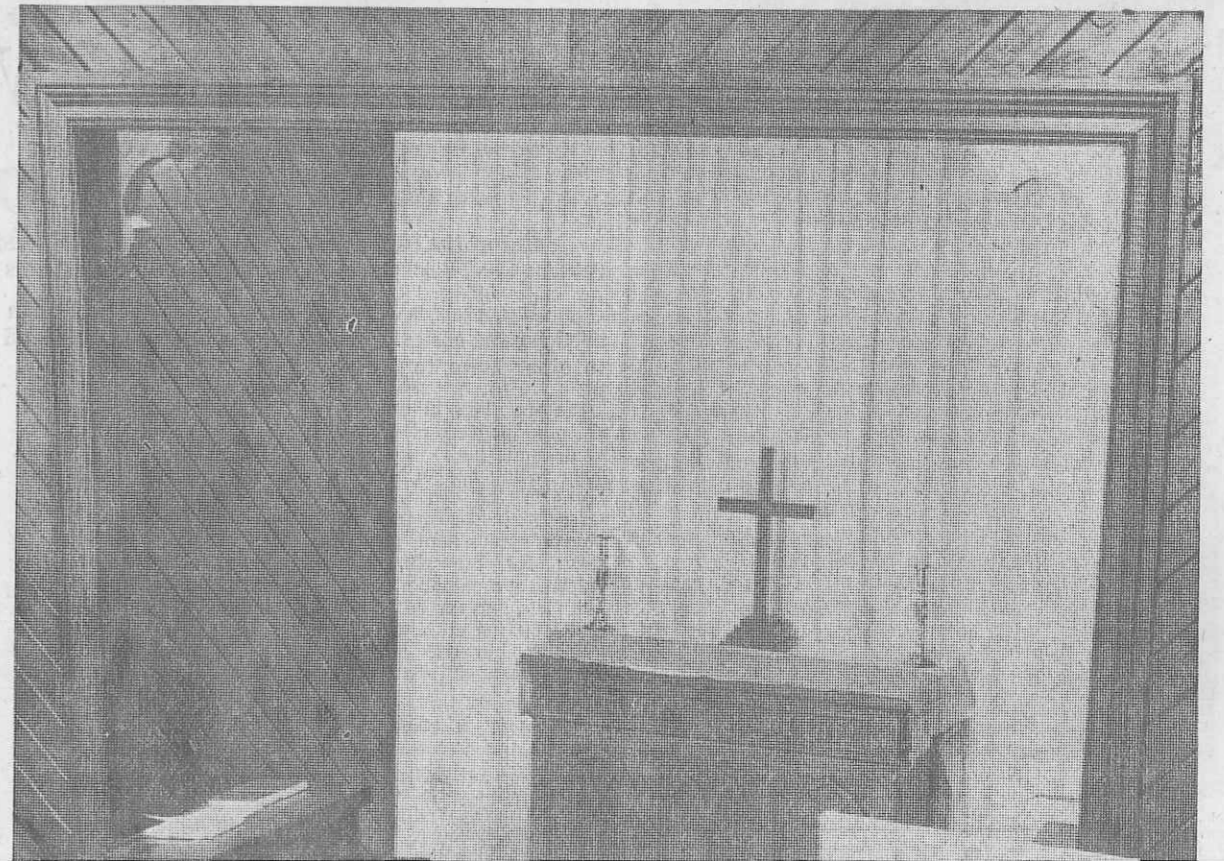
As the years passed and European settlement in the province accelerated, Mr Brown became a missionary to the outlying settlers. During the period when the "Moa Block" became the town and district of Inglewood, after a struggle by the first settlers few can appreciate today, the visits of Mr Brown were very welcome.

Many of the settlers at Inglewood were Lincolnshire folk, to whom "Parson Brown" could talk with knowledge of their local dialects, customs and prejudices.

Many of the immigrants were not Anglicans, but this did not deter "Parson" from giving them service and stimulus for fresh effort when things were harsh.

He held the first services in Inglewood and later at Stratford and along the railway then being pushed southwards, occasionally going as far south as Hawera and Patea.

Indeed, whenever it was possible in that scattered

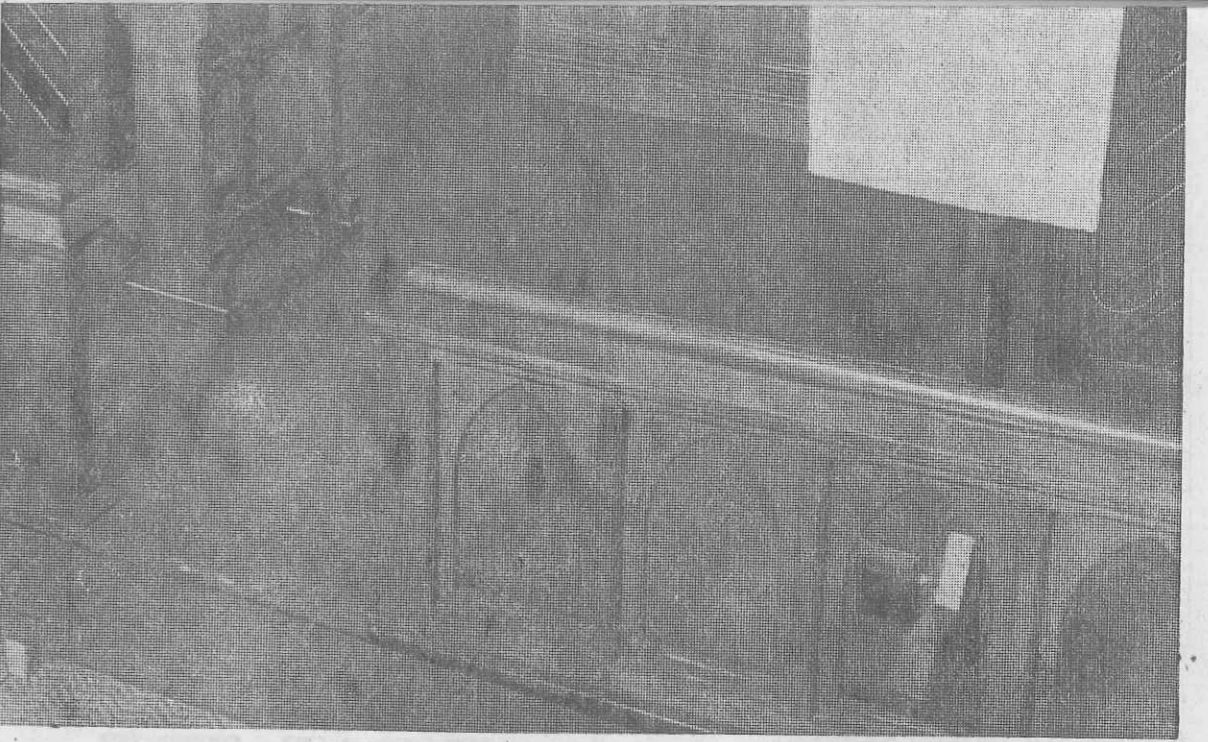


Handwritten Maori text, likely a notice or historical document, written in a cursive script. The text is partially obscured by a vertical line and some ink blots.

Historical booklets tell little of the church in the years after 1875, but news-
LEFT: This is the notice from Maori chiefs which ensured the safety of the Rev. H. H. Brown and his family at Omata during the Maori wars. It was pinned to his gate and is now kept at the New Plymouth Museum. A copy has been made of the notice, as well as an English translation, which reads:
 Listen, listen O people. The road up to our minister must not be trampled upon. This road and that of his friend James belong to the English. Manuel belongs to the Poriki and his children and his wife. Tui and his children and his wife belong to the French. Let the understanding be clear of these three tribes concerning their gardens and all that they possess be clear. Thoroughly understand because word has reached those people from Paratene, Hoani and Kingi that they will be thoroughly respected by us. Be not confused, especially the three tribes Taranaki, Ngatiruanui and as far as Ngarauru. Thoroughly understand. This is all.
 From Paratene. From Hoani. From Kingi. From Porikapa. From all the tribes of Ngamahanga as far as Nekotumu.
BELOW: Traffic passes St John's Church, a reminder of pioneering days in North Taranaki.

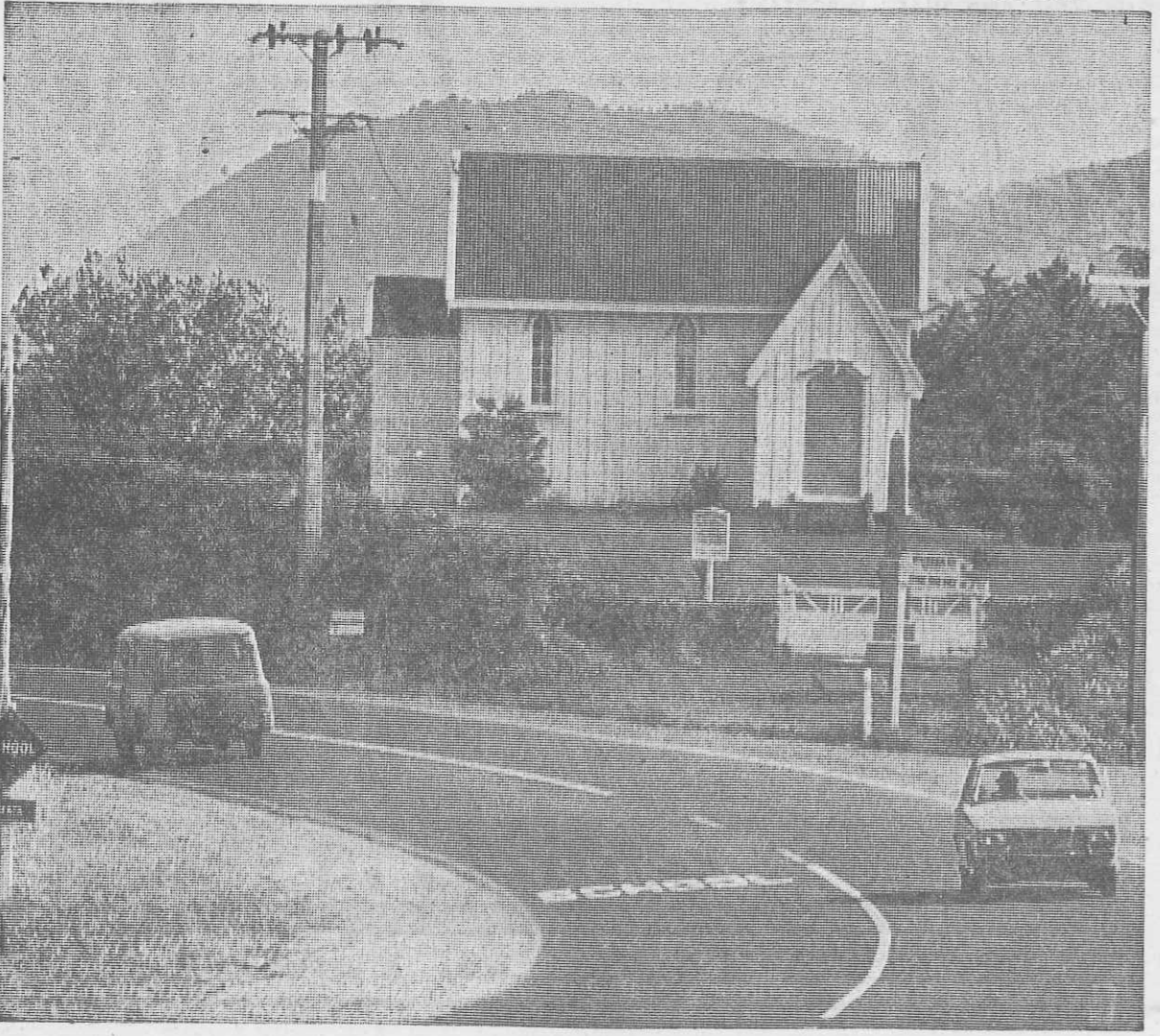
...rived in Taranaki with his wife and family of five sons and four daughters he had considerable private means, but he died a poor man because of his sympathy with others.
 On arrival in Taranaki, Mr Brown settled at Omata, where he bought a farm which he later gave to the church. He found himself in the midst of the quarrel between Europeans and Maoris over land.
 Threats by Maoris were as grave in the Omata district as anywhere in Taranaki, but Mr Brown and his family remained there until hostilities forced them to move to New Plymouth.
 In his first year in the province Mr Brown made friends with many Maoris. He employed them on his holding and soon earned the respect and admiration of both races in the district.
 He lost one son in an engagement, but this did not deflect him from service among the Maori people whenever they would permit.
 After the wars ended he assisted pakeha and Maori in rehabilitation. His purse was always open and this help was given so unostentatiously that sometimes the recipient of a gift would not know, although he often guessed, by whom it had been made.

spiritual and often material, there Mr Brown would find his way.
 He maintained his good work until prevented by failing health, and died in September 1893, aged 80.
 "Parson Brown", as he was affectionately known, was a man loved by both Maori and pakeha and did some of the finest pioneering work for the Church of England.
Personality
 He gave all he had to his church and his people, and many stories were told of this benevolence and personality. One of his peculiarities was his refusal to be photographed and only one portrait of him — on horseback — is known to exist.
 This century the church has been maintained keep it up to standard, the only major difference from its original state being the removal of the belfry. This was taken down in 1969 because the roof was leaking badly under it. A local resident is at present looking into the possibility of replacing it.
 Until 1956 the church was administered from the St Mary's parish. St Chad's parish then became a separate identity and St John's is included in that parish.



ABOVE: Part of the interior of St John's Church at Omata. Maintenance has been carried out whenever necessary over the years, and the building's appearance belies its 100 years.

BELOW: The nearby historic graveyard at Waireka, where lie the soldiers killed during the Battle of Waireka, 15 years before the present church was opened.



Brush Up Your Bridge

Top Of The Castle

By Red Knave

Only a super-conservative would settle for anything less than the top of the castle when his partner opened the action on this deal.

- | | | |
|--------------|------------------|-----------|
| | North | |
| | ♠ A Q 6 4 | |
| | ♥ 6 | |
| | ♦ A K 8 4 3 | |
| | ♣ Q 8 5 | |
| West | | East |
| ♠ K 10 7 | | ♠ J 9 5 |
| ♥ 5 | | ♥ J 8 4 3 |
| ♦ Q J 10 9 7 | | ♦ 6 5 2 |
| ♣ J 7 6 3 | | ♣ 9 4 2 |
| | South | |
| | ♠ 8 3 2 | |
| | ♥ A K Q 10 9 7 2 | |
| | ♦ — | |
| | ♣ A K 10 | |

North started with one diamond. As quick as a wink, South, having found his partner held two aces and a king, was in seven hearts.

When West commenced operations by leading the queen of diamonds, declarer saw all was well, provided trumps broke normally.

But he took a little insurance just in case things were awkward. Instead of winning immediately with dummy's king and taking a spade discard, he deferred this action.

Playing low from table, South ruffed in his own hand with the two of hearts and cashed up the ace and king of hearts.

Had both opponents followed suit, South would have drawn the missing trump, crossed to table with the ace

of spades to throw his two spade losers on the top diamonds and claim the rest.

But West failed, placing his partner with a seemingly sure trump winner.

Declarer thought otherwise. But desperate measures were entailed if he was to succeed in his now awkward contract.

He played off ace, king and queen of clubs and ruffed a second diamond with the seven of hearts.

The king of spades just had to be right. At the eighth trick, dummy's queen was finessed and the luck held.

The ace of diamonds was cashed enabling South to discard a spade and another diamond was ruffed with the nine of hearts. East threw a spade but it didn't help him.

Dummy was entered for the final time with the ace of spades and East followed suit.

At the 12th trick the king of diamonds was led from table. Both East and South were down to two trumps.

East chose to ruff with the eight of hearts but declarer over-trumped with the 10 and took the last trick with the queen in a most elegantly played triple coup.