

## The Monument that Was

by Robin Astridge

Pukearuhe, a past scenic reserve, is the ancient gateway to northern Taranaki, situated on the southern side of the Mount Messenger Range where it reaches the Tasman Sea. The towering White Cliffs (Pari-Ninihi – Steep Cliffs), directly backing the beach, form an almost impenetrable barrier to those travelling from the north into Taranaki by foot other than along the beach. Today it is a peaceful spot, at the beginning of the popular White Cliffs walkway to Tongaparutu. However, in 1869 it was quite far from being like today's tranquil scene!

On 13 February 1869, the Pukearuhe Redoubt was almost defenceless, being garrisoned by two military/settlers and Lieutenant Gascoigne living there with his wife and four children. The rest of the district's military settlers were absent, working their farms. On that Saturday morning, a war party of Mokau Maori, led by Hone Wetere te Rerenga, managed to lure the two military settlers (Milne and Richards) separately down the path to the beach with a story of having some pigs for trading and on the ascent struck and killed them. The war party then proceeded up to the Redoubt and found the Gascoigne family at work in their garden. After an initial friendly approach Lt Gascoigne was struck down, along with his family, tomahawked, and killed. Later in the day, the Reverend John Whiteley was observed approaching the Redoubt and he was ordered to turn back by the Maori party. However, Whiteley had a perception that something was wrong at the Redoubt due to his meeting with others as he travelled from Mimi to administer to his parish people. Whiteley insisted in continuing towards the Redoubt, and his horse was shot from under him. He was then shot and killed. (Cowan writes Rev Whiteley freed himself from his downed horse and was kneeling in prayer at the time of his shooting.)

When the war party returned to Mokau the Ngati-Manipoto were horrified when told of Whiteley's death, despite their approval of the Pukearuhe raid. The result of this disapproval was that the shots that killed Whiteley were almost the last fired in conflicts between the races in Taranaki, other than a few shots fired at Te Kauri kaianga (at Mokau) by the troop steamer *Stuart*. (These few cannon shots were the last shots fired in the Land Wars in New Zealand.)

To mark the place of Whiteley's death at some stage prior to 1923 a stone was placed apparently at the spot where he was shot down. This stone is about the size of a grave's head stone and has inscribed on it the following:-

TO  
JOHN WHITELEY  
MISSIONARY  
WHO WAS KILLED HERE  
13TH FEBRUARY 1869  
ERECTED BY HIS RELATIVES  
KIA  
HONE WAITERE

(There were two further lines in Maori that the writer was unable to read due to weathering and topography.)

On 2 February 1923 a second, larger monument was dedicated and unveiled at Pukearuhe. This monument, built by way of public subscription, was erected in a more prominent position. The *Taranaki Herald* of 3 February 1923 states:-

*"The monument stands on the high ground, a little to the left of the slab which has hitherto marked the spot of the occurrence, and in a conspicuous position facing the road which leads to the locality, being visible for some considerable distance."*

Again from the *Taranaki Herald* later in the same article.

*"The Monument, as already indicated, is made of grey stone obtained from the cliffs in the vicinity, and stands in a conspicuous place facing the road approaching the reserve. It is of an obelisk design, built from a base about 6ft square and gradually tapering to the top. The total height is about 12ft. On the face, at the top, a cross has been simply worked, and a marble slab a little above the base contains the following inscription:*

*In Memory of  
JOHN WHITELEY  
Pioneer Methodist Minister  
Who was killed on this spot.  
February 13, 1869  
Erected by admirers all over the  
Dominion*

*The inscription is also written on the slab in the Maori language."*

This monument stood on that spot for the next eighty-three years. Sometime during the month of September 2006, the New Plymouth Methodist Church authorised contractors to remove the plaque

from the monument and 10 October 2006 contractors took to the rest of monument with sledgehammers. Why?

This is the full text of a press release issued by the Methodist Church of New Zealand to the Taranaki Daily News. General Secretary of the Church Jill van de Geer, in a letter to the author of 24 October 2006 confirms "neither this press release nor any other releases ... have been printed".

#### WHITELY MEMORIAL

*Support for the return of land to Ngati Tama and removal of the Whiteley Memorial Monument is consistent with an agreement made between Ngati Tama and the Methodist Church in 1995," said the Reverend Alan Upton, Superintendent of the New Plymouth and Waitara/Urenui Methodist Parishes. The plaque has been removed from the monument and will be relocated to an accessible location at the Whiteley Memorial Church in New Plymouth.*

*"The Monument was erected to the memory of the Rev John Whitely in 1923 from funds collected by the Methodist Church throughout New Zealand. It was erected on a former Ngati Tama pah site close to the spot where Whitely, a renowned Wesleyan missionary, was killed in 1869 during the Taranaki Land Wars.*

*"The former Crown reserve on which the monument was erected has now been transferred back to Ngati Tama iwi as part of a Waitangi Treaty settlement," said Mr Upson. "The Methodist Church is committed to addressing the causes of past grievances between Maori and Tau-iwi and acknowledges Ngati Tama's right to receive the land free of any encumbrance, as agreed by the Office of Treaty Settlements. It would clearly be hypocritical for the Church to support Ngati Tama's Treaty claim, then seek to have a monument in which it has an interest retained on site against Ngati Tama's wishes."*

*"The Church is conscious that a number of parties have expressed concern at the plan to remove the monument. It has been a landmark at Pukearuhe for 81 years and its removal has been the subject of front page articles and editorials in The Daily News. It has also been the subject of numerous letters to the editor," said Mr Upson.*

*While being sympathetic to the views of those people, the decision to dismantle the cairn and relocate only the plaque recognises that there are other memorials to the Rev Whiteley in the area, notably the church erected in his memory in New Plymouth and his gravesite at Te Henui Cemetery. It is believed*

*that Whiteley met his death down by the river mouth. The Cairn was located on the hilltop for prominence, not associated with any grave.*

*"Given that Whiteley's commitment to mission to both Maori and settler alike it would be a tragedy for his memorial monument to be an ongoing source of discontent," Mr Upson said. "Perhaps the best memorial the church of today can erect to the Rev Whiteley is the removal of a significant past grievance to pave the way forward." The site is being restored to the condition that existed for 54 years following Rev Whiteley's death.*

A feeling exists that the debate as to the correctness of the actions of the Methodist Church will go on for a long time – BUT what of the removal of the monument and the Church's statement to return the site to the condition it was in prior to 1923?

The writer visited the site in 2007 and 2009. On both occasions, it was observed that the central core of the monument had defeated the contractor's sledgehammers as a concrete base was still standing, highly visible from the road. Upon a closer inspection, it was obvious that the rest of the fragments that had been smashed from monument in an effort to demolish it were scattered around the still standing base and down the hillside in front of the site.

A wise decision by the Methodist Church or political correctness gone mad – your choice.

The original "tombstone" size monument remains, reputedly on the exact spot where Rev Whiteley was shot and killed. Concerned locals have placed a large stone with a plaque attached as a memorial to Rev Whiteley on private property directly opposite the entrance to what was once a public reserve. Paulette Wallace has some very interesting perspectives on this particular issue in her "A fraction too much friction: heritage dissonance and the Whiteley Memorial" at <http://www.museums-aotearoa.org.nz>

#### Bibliography:

James Cowan, *New Zealand Wars and the pioneering period Volume II The Hauhau Wars, 1864-72*, 1983, P D Hasselberg, Government Printer, Wellington

*Taranaki Herald*, 3 February 1923, New Plymouth  
*Daily News*, 10 and 11 October 2006