

## STORY OF THE "ROUND HOUSE".

When I heard there was a round house in New Plymouth my curiosity was teased, and I said: "Oh, where is it? I'd like to see it". But I was told I couldn't see it. It had been demolished in 1938. What a shame," I thought. "It must have been unique". Then, not long ago, I picked up an English magazine, and there was an article on round houses in South Cornwall. Two of them guarding the road into the village of Veryan. No reason can be given for the shape, but there is a legend that they were built to keep the devil out of Veryan.

I wonder whether that was the reason for the shape of New Plymouth's round house?

At any rate it was a pioneer building that all you older residents of New Plymouth will remember. And it seems to me it is remembered with affectionate interest. I was surprised when I enquired about the round house, at the number of people who had little anecdotes to tell about it.

This house must have been one of New Zealand's first pre-fabricated jobs, for the lower storey was brought to New Plymouth in sections by the Hirst family, as early as 1852. A second storey, utilising a good deal of kauri, was added during the next few years.

It changed hands many times in its 86 years. During the Maori Wars it was used as headquarters for the military authorities, and it's said that no less a personage than General Pratt was resident there for a period. There is a story of a scare he got while he was there. A volley of shots at him, he thought it was, and he rushed outside to find a bullock team struggling up the road, the driver urging his beasts on with whip cracks.

It led a chequered career, this quaintly shaped building. At one time it became a sort of boarding house. Country people who needed medical attention used to stay there during their illnesses, and I have spoken to one person who'd had his tonsils taken out in one of its triangular bedrooms - and to die there at the age of 18 years was the tragic fate of the cousin of a friend of mine.

I asked Mr. Derby to describe the house to me. It sounded fascinating, and I thought what fun it would be to furnish - an interior decorator's joy. Being built of wood, and not of cob like its English counterparts, it was not really round. Hexagonal rather, with vertical weather boards, typical of the early wooden New Zealand houses. Each storey was centred by a large rectangular room, from which opened triangular compartments forming bedrooms and subsidiary living rooms. But, Mr. Derby said, it had its disadvantages. The staircase, for instance, was so narrow that it was almost an engineering feat to get larger pieces of furniture in and out.

After standing in Devon Street for many years, the old house was moved to the back of its section, and ended its life in Courtney Street, just opposite the Plunket rooms. There it stood, beside its equally ancient neighbour known as the square house, till it was demolished in 1938 to allow for extensions to an adjoining garage. At that time, I am told, the original timber was still sound. Even the stout old door locks had never been changed.

You'd have thought it could have been brought for the town, and moved to another site. It seems a pity it couldn't have been preserved for posterity. I sometimes wonder whether we are losing too many pioneer landmarks throughout the country. More practical people would perhaps point out that we must make way for progress. I know that's essential, and that many of the decayed relics of the early years are better to be replaced by the modern way of life.

But I, for one, do hope that the worthwhile mementos of old New Zealand will be more carefully preserved in future years. For our children. I know I want my children to feel they have roots in the New Zealand of the pioneering days; not that they belong to a brash, brand new country.

And as for the English legend regarding the devil and his abhorrence of round houses, it evidently didn't worry anyone in 1938. Anyway I doubt whether it was a very successful experiment in New Plymouth. Life for the early settlers here was at times the very opposite of heavenly blissfulness, according to the history books.

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