

A Place of Learning

Sally Maclean



A New Plymouth mission school building has seen many changes leading up to its present use as a Kohanga Reo, a Maori Language Nest.

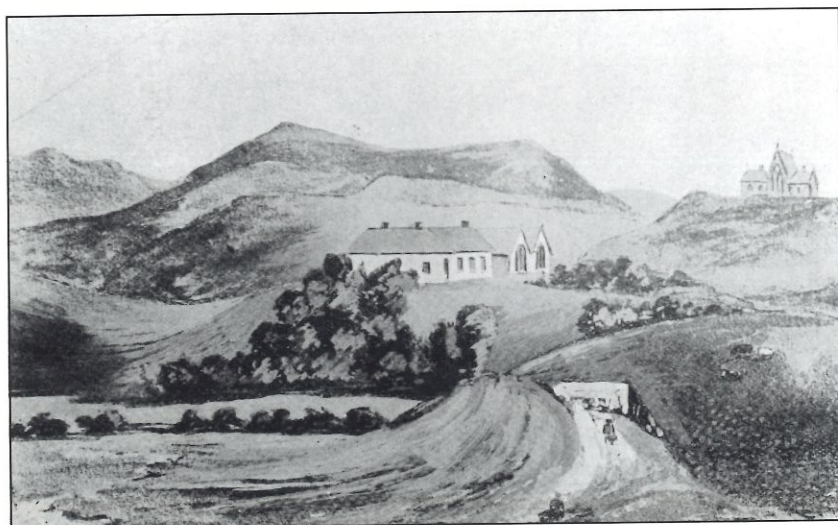
Head of page: The building in this painting is presumed to be the mission house, formerly the girls' school, after the cob mission house had been demolished. (Painting: Taranaki Museum.)

In June 1840, a group of Taranaki Maori constructed a solitary raupo whare at Moturoa, between the windswept beach and Wahitapu urupa (burial ground). This isolated dwelling was a mission house, forerunner of a complex of buildings which housed the Wesleyan Methodist Ngamotu mission station and its school, the Grey Institution. The whare was built at the suggestion of a visiting Wesleyan missionary, but it was not until 13 January 1841 that Charles and Eliza Creed and John Lee (Hoani Ri) Tutu arrived to establish the station. Thousands of fleas had had taken up residence in the whare soon after it was built. They were soon smoked out, but the missionaries had been landed with nothing to improve the comfort of

their dwelling. Charles made his own door and window frames, but he could do nothing about the damp sand floor. He later blamed the house for his debilitating rheumatism, the chronic ill-health of Eliza, and the death of their first child.

Less than three months after the missionaries established their station, 148 settlers landed on the beach at Ngamotu. They had come to found New Plymouth. For a missionary to live in a basic whare in the wilderness was one thing; to do so in a Pakeha settlement was another. A meeting of Wesleyan missionaries at Kawhia in February 1842 gave authority for £95 to be spent on erecting a new mission house at Ngamotu. By September, the house had been built, though the lining was not completed until 1845. Constructed of cob, the new house was in a more elevated position, further back from the beach.

In May 1843, Charles was found by his fellow missionaries to have been "guilty of the greatest imprudence and folly" in relation to a young Maori woman. He had become demoralised and disenchanted with the mission, an attitude influ-



Top: In this sketch by E. Watkin, the building on the left is the cob mission house. On the hill above is the newly completed Grey Institution. (Sketch: Private owner, c/o Alexander Turnbull Library)

Above: This watercolour by H. Arden shows the girls' school beside the cob mission house. The girls' school is the only surviving building of the three. (Reproduced in W. Morley, History of Methodism in New Zealand)

enced by the discomforts of the first mission house. He denounced the dwelling as being "so bad" that "in England it would not be used for a cow-shed it was so extremely cold and damp".

The Creeds were replaced by Henry and Susanna Turton, who arrived at New Plymouth in March 1844. The Turtons' main interest was educating Maori children and young people. Their ambition was to have a boarding school. A lack of funds meant they had to be content with running a day school at the local pa. The Turtons' school and its pupils caught the attention of the Governor, George Grey, when he visited New Plymouth early in 1847. Later that year, the Legislative Council, under Grey's influence, passed an education ordinance. The Grey Institution, established at the Ngamotu mission station in 1848, was the first school built under the ordinance.

The Institution occupied the site of an old pa on top of what is now known as Mission Hill. Built of wood in Gothic Revival style, it included

a classroom, teacher's room, dining room and sleeping accommodation for forty scholars. The architect may have been Frederick Thatcher who designed St Mary's and the Colonial Hospital (now known as The Gables), or George Robinson, who built both of these buildings to Thatcher's designs. The Institution was an industrial boarding school for boys and young men, mostly Maori. The boys were taught the English language, reading, writing, and religion. Much of their time was spent working on the school's farm, where they learnt agricultural skills.

A girls' department was added to the Grey Institution in 1854. Susanna Turton had died in late 1849 and in April 1851, Henry married Mary Ellen Walsall. She was an experienced missionary teacher, who taught the girls the same subjects as the boys, except their industrial lessons were in the skills of running a European-style household.

Victorian propriety demanded that the girls' school be some distance from the boys'. The new school building is thought to have been designed by Robinson, who used the same Gothic Revival style of the main Grey Institution building. It was smaller than the boys' school, but had a dining room and a sitting room, a dormitory, wash-house and kitchen. The accommodation was adequate for twenty pupils. The building was located beside the cob mission house, which had been extended. The girls' school was opened in 1854, but the building was not completed until 1855. The girls' school building is the building now known as the mission house. The date of its construction has been widely but erroneously published as 1843 because of confusion between this building and the cob mission house.

Within a year of the opening of the girls' department in 1854, the Grey Institution was closed. Tensions in the Maori community over land selling led to civil war. Parents, worried for the safety of their children at the schools, took them back to their villages. Shortly afterwards, in 1856, the annual meeting of Wesleyan missionaries decided to remove the Turtons from New Plymouth and lease out the mission farm.

The Turtons did not wish to leave, and John and Mary Ann Whiteley, who were directed to replace them, felt even less enthusiastic about moving from Auckland. Turton's reluctance to go was partly related to the extensive farming operation he had developed on land adjoining the mission station. He was denounced by the head of the New Zealand mission as being "more a Farmer than a Minister". An inquiry by his fellow missionaries found his "habits of smoking,

snuff taking and the free use of intoxicating drinks" were such as to "greatly affect his spirituality, injure his usefulness and excite the most serious apprehensions for his spiritual safety". He resigned from the ministry in 1859.

When peace was made in the Maori community in early 1857, the boys' school re-opened, but the girls' school never resumed. Whitely kept the boys' school functioning, even after the civil war among the Maori resumed in 1858.

When war broke out between the settlers and the Maori in February 1860, Whiteley unhesitatingly took the part of the settlers, the Government and the land-selling Maori. Although the mission house and Grey Institution were well outside the defensive perimeter established around New Plymouth, Whiteley chose to trust in the "protection of God and the Natives' respect for the Missionary character". However, in August, 1860, after several scares, the family moved into town. Whiteley visited the station during the day.

The Grey Institution became a vital point in the southern defences of the town. The "rebel" Maori from the south put it about that they intended to take the building. Maori allied with

the Government were stationed at the Institution. Amazingly, the Grey Institution continued to function as a school throughout the first Taranaki War. The boys who remained at the school belonged to hapu against which the Government was fighting. Their presence behind enemy lines must have been condoned by their families. They occupied a unique position of neutrality. One one occasion, the "rebels" refused to allow the Pakeha missionaries to bury the European dead left on a battlefield — the boys from the Institution were nominated as the only acceptable burial party.

During 1863, a road leading south from New Plymouth was constructed across the mission station land. The few boys remaining at the school took up paid labouring work. Believing the Grey Institution had become nothing more than a "lodging house" for road-builders, Whiteley closed it in January 1863.

When the war recommenced in March 1863, the "friendly" Maori living south of New Plymouth were removed from their homes and placed at the Grey Institution. The Government paid the mission rent for the use of the buildings. Whiteley ran a school for the children of these

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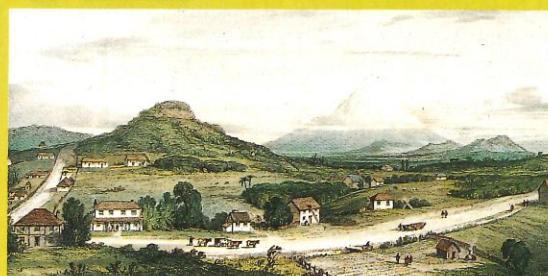


The Gables Colonial Hospital 1847


Detail from *Tukotahi*
Pukeariki Landing 1991



Pohutukawa, Pukewharangi Pa



Emma Wickstead Central New Plymouth, Marstrand Hill 1843

 **NEW PLYMOUTH
DISTRICT COUNCIL**
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Left of page: The mission house today, with a kohanga reo play hut to the right. (Photo: Kelvin Day)

displaced communities. When the fighting subsided early in 1866, these families returned to their homes and the Whiteleys to the mission house. A day school was run at the Institution.

An earthquake rocked New Plymouth shortly after midnight on 19 October 1868. No lives were lost, but among the buildings damaged beyond repair was the old cob mission house. It was "so broken up as to be dangerous for habitation". The girls' school, which was probably already being used by the Whiteleys, was converted into a dwelling. A scullery and possibly the verandahs were added at this time. The old mission house was demolished.

John Whiteley was killed at Pukearuhe on 13 February 1869. He had ridden north to hold a service with the military settlers, unaware that there had been a massacre at the redoubt earlier that day. Mrs Whiteley and her dependent daughter moved into New Plymouth. The house and other buildings on the mission land, including the Institution, were rented by the farmer who was already leasing the farm. The mission house became a farm house.

In 1872, management of the mission property and buildings was placed under a new body, the Grey Institute Trust. The change in name from Institution to Institute seems to have occurred at this time. The mission farm was subdivided in 1902. A new suburb developed over the next three decades. No longer required as a farmhouse, in 1914 the mission house was leased to the St Aubyn Methodist Trust. Conscious of the historical significance of the house, the Grey Institute Trust resumed direct control of it in 1924.

The Grey Institution boys' school building, once the pride of the mission, had long since become derelict and been sold for removal in 1878. The mission house (the former girls' school), needed as a dwelling on the mission farm, was regularly maintained. The house has always been regarded by the Grey Institute Trust as an asset that should be used, rather

than as an historical treasure to be preserved in its original form. In 1877, and again in 1893, the house was repaired and renovated. The shingle roof was replaced with iron, gutters and bargeboards were replaced and the chimney was rebuilt.

In 1930, the house once again became the residence of a missionary family, when the Rev. E.O. Haddon was appointed to New Plymouth. The house became a town base for rural Maori, providing many social services. Maori who were to be admitted to hospital and their families often stayed with the missionary's family. The sun porch on the northern side of the house was built in 1939 when two of the children of the Rev. Moki, who succeeded Haddon, were ill with tuberculosis.

Rangiatea, a Methodist college for Maori girls, was opened in the mission house in 1940. No-one at the time apparently recalled that the old house had originally been a girls' school. It was extensively renovated for its new role. The house was used as a hostel for the students, who learned "domestic science" and "hygiene" in a hall built for the purpose. The old Mangorei church (1869), which had been moved onto the property, was used as a chapel. The college transferred to new buildings at Spotswood in 1951.

The mission house was now empty and in need of expensive repairs. Only the intervention of the Home and Maori Mission Department of the Methodist Church prevented its removal or demolition. The repairs were made, though many believed that the money should have been spent on church work. Various uses for the building were considered. Eventually, in 1960, the house became a Maori community centre. For many years, members of the Keenan family lived there, running the centre. The mission house still functions as a community centre, and in recent years has provided a home to a kohanga reo.

Further renovations were undertaken in 1980. As with previous work, they were carried out to make the house safe and useful, rather than to preserve its historical character. The building has always been a working resource for the Church and Trust. Although this has led to many alterations and unsympathetic additions, the front of the house retains its Gothic Revival style. And the kohanga reo continues its original use as the place of learning. □

Sally Maclean has been working on the Dictionary of New Zealand Biography.