

The Anglican Historical Society of New Zealand Te Rōpu Hītori o te Hāhi Mīhinare ki Aotearoa

150 Years of Worship:

St John's Church, Te Awamutu and St Paul's Church, Rangiaowhia

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Easter 1854 saw the opening services in **St John's Church, Te Awamutu**, the first service being held on Good Friday, 14 April, and the second on Easter Sunday.

Later in 1854 services began at **St Paul's Church, Rangiaowhia**, although there is no record of the actual date.

The parish of St John, Te Awamutu, in which both churches lie, celebrated 150 years of worship since 1854 on Sunday 18 April 2004.

Longstanding parishioner Roger Swarbrick has written a brief history of both churches. This is available from the Parish Office, PO Box 38, Te Awamutu.



Saint John's Church, Te Awamutu; and Saint Paul's Church, Rangiaowhia

The first building erected for Christian worship at Otawhao (now Te Awamutu) was described in 1834 by the Reverend Wade of Tasmania as 'a spacious native building with an enormous pulpit erected in it'.¹ However when Bishop Selwyn visited the Otawhao Mission on Christmas Day 1842, he held morning service in the open air, the chapel having blown down. Whether this was the same chapel as that mentioned by Wade is not clear, but by 1844 a new chapel had been built

and was described by G. F. Angus as a 'commodious place of worship which will comfortably hold upwards of one thousand natives.'² The ridge pole was made of single tree trunk, 86 feet long; the rafters and most of the woodwork were tied together with flax; the sides were beautifully worked with woven flax; the thirteen Gothic shaped windows had been carried from Tauranga. This notable building, designed and built by local Māori converts, has

left no trace but may have stood on or near the present site of Old St John's Church, which is about 200 yards from the site of the Mission House.

In 1850 John Morgan reported to the Church Missionary Society in London that the Otawhao Mission required a new chapel, the present building being partly unroofed and so old that it was not worth repairing. Later in the year he reported that he had had to take down the chapel in order to save the windows and timber after a gale. He was using as a chapel a building intended as a stable. He also urged the need for a proper wooden building at Rangiaowhia, the principal village in the district, where there was a raupo chapel. Morgan continued to press the CMS for funds to build the two chapels, arguing that they were urgently necessary, that the local CMS Committee refused to make grants, and that the Māori Anglicans could not afford to pay for them. In support of his claims, he cited the difficulties experienced by Bishop Selwyn on his visit for confirmations in March 1852. 'Morning Prayers were held in the children's bedroom, their beds and bedding having been cleared, and the classes for Confirmation were in the schoolroom - the consequence was that all our school arrangements were upset. On the Lord's Day we had to leave the station and proceed to Rangiaowhia, four miles distant, it being the nearest chapel'.³ The party of about one hundred left the mission station after breakfast and returned in the evening after dark. The day was very warm and dusty and the poor children reached the chapel tired and covered with dust and perspiration. Finally in June 1852 Morgan's persistence was rewarded by a grant of 200 pounds towards the erection of two churches. Local Māori gave 300 pounds and European

friends 100 pounds.

The opening services at St John's, Te Awamutu at Easter 1854 were conducted by Archdeacon Abraham. He walked overland from Auckland via Pokeno to Maungatawhiri on the Waikato River, then traveled by canoe to Mr Ashwell's mission station at Taupiri where he stayed several days. Then he went by canoe to Kirikiriroa (Hamilton) from where he walked to Otawhao, probably on much the same route as the Great South Road of today. He described St John's as 'a large handsome wooden church', holding about 250 people, which should last 60 to 70 years 'unless an earthquake comes and knocks it down'.⁴ Abraham took morning and evening services in the new church on Good Friday and Easter Day, preaching in both English and Māori. On Good Friday local Māori attended but on Easter Day there was a large gathering from the surrounding district, with 120 communicants. Sometime later that same year St Paul's was opened at Rangiaowhia. In the building of both churches Māori supplied the timber and most of the labour under the supervision of two English carpenters.

The further history of both St John's and St Paul's was affected by the Waikato wars in the 1860s and then by Pakeha settlement and the development of the town of Te Awamutu. In 1870 the former mission churches came under the control of the diocese of Auckland, being within the Parochial district of Waikato West. In recent years significant restoration work has been undertaken in both churches. To all outward appearances however the two churches remain much as they were in 1854 and if John Morgan were to return today, he would have little difficulty recognizing the two buildings for which he worked so hard.

Endnotes

¹ R L Swarbrick, *150 Years of worship 1854-2000: A History of Old St John's Church Te Awamutu and St Paul's Church Rangiaowhia*. Published for the 150th Anniversary Celebrations (Te Awamutu: 2003), 2.

² Ibid., 3.

³ Ibid., 8.

⁴ Ibid., 10.