

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

St John's Collegiate School and the Pah, Onehunga

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St John's School began at St John's College, Tamaki, in 1882. The College buildings had been vacated by theological students; they were living at Parnell so that they could be close to Auckland University College. The School was a private establishment for boys, under the headmaster, the Revd Frederick King. It was a successor to several previous schools at St John's going back to Bishop Selwyn's time. There were strong church connections with the College Chapel being used for daily services and the headmaster acting as priest in the local parish.

Following the death of Frederick King in 1890, the Revd Percy Smallfield became headmaster and the School's proprietor. The School flourished with eighty-six pupils in 1894 including thirty-four boarders. Graham Bruce became a partner with Smallfield, but in 1895 Bruce established King's College in Remuera as a rival private grammar school. Percy Smallfield alongside his school responsibilities was appointed Tutor to theological students when they returned to live at St John's College in 1896, – a 'temporary position' that went on for six years!

The Anglican General Synod decided in 1901 that the theological work should be based at St John's College, and they needed to have access to all the College buildings. Percy Smallfield was faced with relocating the School. He was offered a lease of College grounds but decided it was uneconomic to rebuild his school there. A debate took place over this in the Auckland Diocesan Synod with twenty-seven clergy signing a memorial to the Primate requesting support for the School as a subordinate institution based at St John's. This flowed over into a lively correspondence

between John Haselden and C. A. Tisdall in the New Zealand Herald. The petitioners were not successful.

Eventually Percy Smallfield secured 'The Pah' in Onehunga and fifty acres of land for £8,000. Known initially as the 'Williamson Mansion', the Pah was erected in 1879 as a grand residence for the Hon James Williamson. A member of the Legislative Council, Williamson was also President of the Bank of New Zealand. Following Williamson's death in 1888, the mansion and property were taken over by the Bank. After the Bank nearly collapsed, Williamson's land and buildings were claimed by the Assets Realisation Board.



'The Pah' Homestead

The School was relocated to the Pah in January 1902. This involved shifting some of the buildings Smallfield had erected at Tamaki, lifting the drainpipes he laid at his own expense and reaching a financial settlement with the St John's College Trustees for the water system he installed. Smallfield later sold the Pah and leased it back from its new owner. When they were unwilling to renew the lease at the end of 1912 the School closed and the following year was amalgamated with Kings College.

St John's School flourished at the Pah. The following are some brief snippets from its history:

- On Sunday mornings, boarders walked the four miles to St Peter's Church, Onehunga. Older pupils repeated the same journey to attend Evensong.
- Smallfield was School Chaplain and prepared boys for Confirmation. He also assisted at St Peter's and was an honorary chaplain at the nearby Veteran's Home.
- The cadet force was an important part of the School's life, including participation in an annual camp under canvas and large public military parades held in the Domain. These were a feature of the years after the South African War. Smallfield was given a Captain's commission when the School was at St John's, and after twelve years advanced to the rank of Major.
- The school buildings were reticulated for gas lighting with gas supplied from Onehunga.
- The School was one of the first in the country to have swimming baths when in 1904 they converted a large water storage tank for that purpose.
- Great effort went into levelling ground near the house for an upper sports field. A railway line, a tip truck and ten wheelbarrows were used to fill in a deep depression. Sixteen large pine trees, much to one neighbour's distress, were felled. Trimmed of their branches they were rolled into the excavation. Hundreds of tons of soil were shifted over several years. The record number of barrow-loads by one student in one day was 185.
- Following a visit of students from Wanganui Collegiate, St John's School followed their example, and was one of the first schools to adopt a school uniform.

At the last prize-giving in 1912, Smallfield spoke about the achievements of the College:

'he ... emphasised the fact that though the school was closing it was not from any want of success. On the contrary, the institution had never experienced such a successful year. Pah College would be closed with flying colours, and a record such as none of its students need be ashamed of.'¹

At the similar function at King's College, their headmaster, C. T. Major, using rhetoric infused with the sentiments of muscular Christianity, pointed to the common source for both St John's Collegiate School and his own institution: 'Though separated, their ideals had been kept identical. Both had stood for the Bible as the foundation of all true education, had insisted on the value of a strong boarding element as the best protector and inspirer of that tone without which the school was worthless, and on the value of games and sports in the true development of a perfect man. Thus, after 18 years of separate existence, they could join forces without any adjustment of preconceived ideas. Energy which had previously been dissipated in friendly rivalry between the schools could now support one institution. For the future, the issue was clear, both schools stood for religion as the basis of education; and all who were like-minded could give them support.'²

As a postscript to the School's time at the Pah, an advertisement appeared in the New Zealand Herald, for a public auction under the heading 'Pah College, Onehunga', listing for sale:

- 4 fine Dairy Cows, in full milk
- 3 upright Grand Pianos, all with beautiful tone
- Geological Specimens, Chemistry
- Apparatus, School Furniture
- Gymnasium Accessories
- Household Furnishings and Effects

St John's Collegiate School's eleven years at the Pah had come to an end.

A second postscript. It is interesting to note that during the Depression, when King's College was facing financial difficulties, the St John's College

Trust Board took over King's and assumed responsibility for its liabilities. A separate King's College Trust Board was appointed in 1960.

Sources:

- Allan K. Davidson, *Selwyn's Legacy: The College of St John the Evangelist, Te Waimate and Auckland, 1843-1992, A History*. Auckland: The College of St John the Evangelist, 1993.
- W.M. Smallfield, *St John's School Story*. Trentham, 1964.
- Extracts from an autobiography by Canon Percy Scott Smallfield. John Kinder Theological Library, Ms SJC 10/5/8.

Endnotes

¹ *New Zealand Herald*, volume xlix, issue 15175, 14 December 1912, p.5.

² *New Zealand Herald*, volume xlix, issue 15174, 13 December 1912. p.8.