

Anglican Historical Society (NZ)
Te Rōpu Hītori te Hāhi Mihinare ki Aotearoa

*Serving Saint Heliers Bay for One Hundred Years:
the Church of Saint Philip 1898-1998*

An address by Colin Percy to the Anglican Historical Society, 18 October 1998.

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Imagine if you can, the St Heliers of the 1880s. Some twenty permanent homesteads nestled in the farmlets and orchards of this seaside, holiday settlement. The population grew over the summer as people moved out of town to their cottages and baches by the beach - coming out through Newmarket, along the Remuera ridge, to the dusty roads of Tamaki West. There was not to be a Tamaki Drive around the waterfront for another forty years but the long wharf stretching out into the bay allowed a few boats a week to ply back and forth to Auckland (still a garrison town with a population of about 13,000). Early accounts tell of the farms, the overpowering scent of hawthorn blossom and the blaze of colour with drifts of pink watsonias on the slopes below St John's College down to St John's Lake (now Waiatarua).

And it was to the tiny chapel at St John's College that the people of St Heliers came to worship. The stone church of St Thomas had been built in 1847, but salt impurities in the mortar and an earthquake in 1859 caused its deterioration and eventual collapse. At this time Tamaki West was only part of the much larger Parish of Tamaki which included East Tamaki and was centered on Otahuhu. Even after Tamaki West became a separate Parish in 1889, there were times (e.g., 1902 – 1910) when there was no resident Vicar and responsibility for services fell on the clergy at Otahuhu. The Warden of St John's College, Rev. P. S. Smallwood, also the headmaster, became the first Vicar of Tamaki West and it was he who saw the need for better provision for the people

of St Heliers. He arranged for services to be conducted in a private home (we believe this to be the still-standing house of Glen Orchard in St Heliers Bay Road) and for Sunday School to be held in a tent on the adjoining lawn tennis court.

One of his students, Cecil Watson, was given responsibility for this outpost and he, with enthusiasm and vigour, personally collected enough money from his growing congregation to buy for £60 (in 1897) a church site on the corner of St Heliers Bay Road (then Wharf Street) and



Rev Cecil
Watson

Paunui Street - diagonally opposite the present church. Cecil Watson had great plans for a fine church building, but this architectural design was to cost £600, so a more modest, wooden structure 50ft by 20ft with an iron roof was built by two local builders, Mr. Keats and Mr. Watts, for £200. It had seating for eighty with the chancel able to be shut off by folding doors when the body of the church was used for Sunday School or social events. No dancing was allowed! Later it was said: 'The church was much less pretentious than the people had hoped for and was not expected to serve for many years' - little did they know!

The Church of St Philip, decorated by the ladies of the parish with arum fillies and ferns, was opened on 9 October 1898. The Curate, Rev. Cecil

Watson, became the first Vicar and served until 1902. Later, he became Vicar of St Paul's for 36 years. The church had a small organ and three kerosene lamps with tin reflectors were suspended from the timbered ceiling. Electricity was installed sometime about 1910 (before it was generally available in St Heliers) - made possible by an extension from Mr. Brookfield's private generator nearby. Alas this was not always reliable, and lamps and candles were kept at the ready!

There was no heating, no interior lining and no insulation, although a small wood burning stove and some lining was added some forty years later! A room beneath the church was so arranged that bicycles could be placed there for safe keeping during services.

As the parish grew, especially after the opening of the Tamaki Drive in 1925, an adjoining section was purchased, and a Vicarage built in 1928.

Up to this time, accommodation for the Vicar had been a problem. No less had been the difficulties of servicing such a large parish, from Orakei through Mission Bay, Kohimarama and St Heliers, to Glendowie and Glen Innes, on foot or by bicycle!

In 1931, a hall was moved onto the site. This had been the YMCA Recreation Hut for the workers at Purewa Camp - workers building the railway tunnel by St John's. The Saint Philip's Hall was the social and community centre for the district over the next twenty years - guides, scouts, regular dances, Sunday School, youth group, annual flower shows, farewells for those going off to the war. Anzac Day services all took place in the Church Hall for there was no other.

But plans were underway for a new Church and Hall. Designed by Mr. C. Towle, it was to be an imposing stone structure to seat six hundred and would be the centre of worship for the eastern suburbs of Auckland - even a future Cathedral perhaps? Plans were completed in 1938, but it



Saint Philip's Church 1902

would never be built for it was to cost £66,000, well beyond the £1500 in hand!

There was rapid building and residential expansion after the War of 1939-45. Churches had been built in Orakei (St James) and Kohimarama (St Andrews) and later the Church of St Thomas would be rebuilt. And with the subdivision of the enormous and now populous Parish of Tamaki West, the Parish of St Heliers and Glendowie became centred on the tiny and rather overcrowded Church of St Philip. In 1945 further money was raised and the tiny wooden church was extended to seat 112 but this was still far short of what was required within an active parish.

The growing suburb of Glendowie with farms and market-gardens giving way to sections provided under rehabilitation schemes for returning servicemen, repeated the St Heliers story. Sunday services were held in a private home and Sunday School was conducted for children of all denominations in a nearby garage. A Mr. Kerridge (who would later become Sir Robert) helped by taking the hay out of an old boatshed so that it could become a Sunday School but after frequent flooding and the organ being invaded by mice, it was decided to move to higher ground!

A section was purchased in Colchester Avenue

for a hall and classroom block to be used both by the Sunday School and for church services. Sunday School was big business on those days with over 400 students and teams of teachers in three different locations. And fund raising was, as many of you will recall, also very big business with the Wells Organisation and Loyalty Dinners obtaining massive pledges for church development. The Reverend James Mee was a powerful driving force in these days. He gathered a strong fund-raising committee around him as they pressed on towards a new church.

The sloping corner section across the road was proving difficult for the new design especially in the light of revised City Council off-street parking requirements. The breakthrough came when (for £10,000) the Parish was able to buy the present site, previously the home of Bishop Averill and his family. A new design by Mr. Reynolds of Kingston, Reynolds Thom and Alladice, for a church and hall was prepared and this complex built in 1959-60 for £60,000. Sales of property plus pledges raised £40,000 and a £20,000 loan was secured. The new Church was dedicated on 19 June 1960 by Bishop Caulton who preached to a congregation of over seven hundred filling the church and the hall and spilling out into the street. Music was a very strong feature of the time with Peter Wilson as organist and choirmaster, and a boys' choir adding to an experienced adult choir. In the following year, 1961, the Vicarage was completed.

Across the way, the original church was on the move. After some delays, it was transported on that day in September 1960 (when all ears were tuned to hear Peter Snell win gold at the Tokyo Olympics) to its new site alongside the church hall in Glendowie. Now the **Church of St James**, it served the parishioners for many years and built a very supportive congregation who loved the old building.

But as the declining attendances of the seventies moved into the eighties, as inflation began to bite

into the weekly offerings, and as the original loan repayments became more pressing, the decision was made to consolidate the parish on St Philip's.



The original wooden church, such an important part of the life of St Heliers and Glendowie since 1898, was gifted to the **Parish of Te Atatu** and now, as the **Church of St Paul** (consecrated 27 May 1982), continues to be loved and enjoyed by a very appreciative congregation. The hall and its site on Colchester Avenue were sold as was, a little later, the adjacent clergy house.

And so, St Philip's became debt free and was consecrated on 3rd November 1985.



And now let us look around this church - a building regarded by architects and others as a classic of its time, an icon of the 60s, which we hope will remain unmodified for years to come.

[Although we have just added a false ceiling packed with insulation, for as you can see there is no cross ventilation and temperature-humidity control has been a problem.]

The magnificent West Window was installed in April 1961 shortly after the Church was dedicated. Made by Whitefriars Ltd of London, it was the first of its kind in New Zealand being of thick slab glass set in concrete. The six windows of the Lady Chapel commemorate events in the life of the Blessed Virgin Mary, while the Sanctuary Window, also made in three large sections by Whitefriars, represents the twelve apostles.

Above us in the church tower is the bell, which is a parish memorial to our first vicar, the late Canon Cecil Watson.

The organ is a special feature. Its design was supervised by Peter Godfrey, built by George Croft, organ builders of Auckland, and dedicated in 1965. Unfortunately, damage arising from the ventilation problems mentioned above required the organ to be rebuilt in 1979 and the character of the organ was changed from a romantic to a more classical style.

And so, in this our centennial year, we pause and remember the countless benefactors who with love, faith and commitment served the Parish of Tamaki West and who continue to serve the Parish of St Heliers and Glendowie.