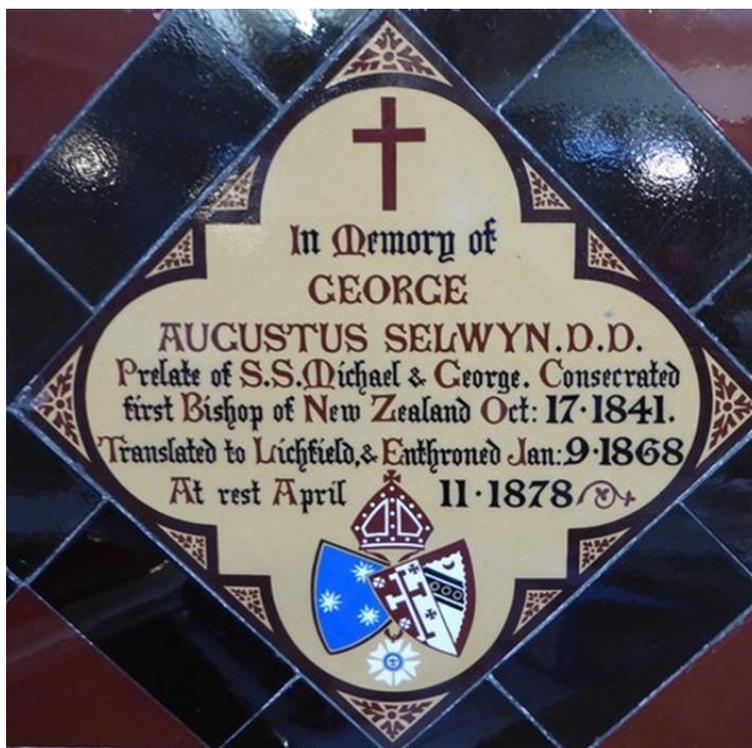


# *The Anglican Historical Society of New Zealand Te Rōpu Hītori o te Hāhi Mīhinare ki Aotearoa*

## *The Tale of the Selwyn Tile*

**Author: John McCaul**

(AHS Newsletter 70, 2001)



In May 2017 an email from Judy Metz of the Historical Society of Trinity Episcopal Cathedral in Omaha, Nebraska, arrived at Wellington Cathedral of St Paul, and was passed on to me for research and answer.

Judy wrote: 'We are researching Bishop Selwyn because we have a large stained-glass window honouring him. We have discovered that he made at least one trip to Omaha (1874) and inspired our missionary bishop, Robert H. Clarkson, which led to the memorialization in the window ... We are wondering about a Minton tile in memory of Bishop Selwyn. Ours is a direct match to a tile which is listed as being in St Paul's. Do you know anything about the tile or its origins?' <sup>1</sup>

Answering this has been a fascinating journey, and one that will possibly never end!

Judy wrote that in Omaha they had a programme after church on Sunday in which they gathered interested people and showed them around and explained various aspects of their cathedral. One such event focused on the stained-glass window in memory of Bishop George Augustus Selwyn and the ceramic tile in his memory.

So why in Omaha, I wondered? Bishop Selwyn, it must be remembered, when as Bishop of Lichfield, he had two trips to United States and Canada (1871 and 1874), in the course of which he stayed in Omaha and became friends with the Bishop, Robert Harper Clarkson. Perhaps they were kindred spirits, missionary bishops serving in distant and vast territories. Evidently when Bishop Selwyn died, a memorial ceramic tile was produced, one of which was given to his friends in Omaha. They told me that we in New

Zealand have Bishop Selwyn; their equivalent was the revered Bishop Clarkson.

In the course of researching Selwyn, and his New Zealand connection, the Omaha people had looked up Wikipedia, and found included in the Selwyn entry a photograph of our tile, exactly the same as theirs.<sup>2</sup> Their question to us was what did we know of the history of our tile? How did we come to have it?

In common with other cathedrals and churches around New Zealand, Wellington Cathedral has a strong connection with Selwyn, and many of us have made Lichfield a place of pilgrimage when we have been in the United Kingdom. The interesting thing was how little we knew about the Wellington tile. Our tile is on an ambulatory wall outside the clergy offices, and where Sunday by Sunday the processions assemble before entering the cathedral for worship. Below the tile is a small brass plaque, and alongside, an aerial photograph of Lichfield Cathedral and an outline of the Wellington connections with Selwyn that include Frederick Thatcher (Incumbent of the original St Paul's Church and architect of the second St Paul's, sometimes known as the Pro-Cathedral, and more latterly as Old St Paul's), and Bishop Charles John Abraham, Wellington's first Bishop.

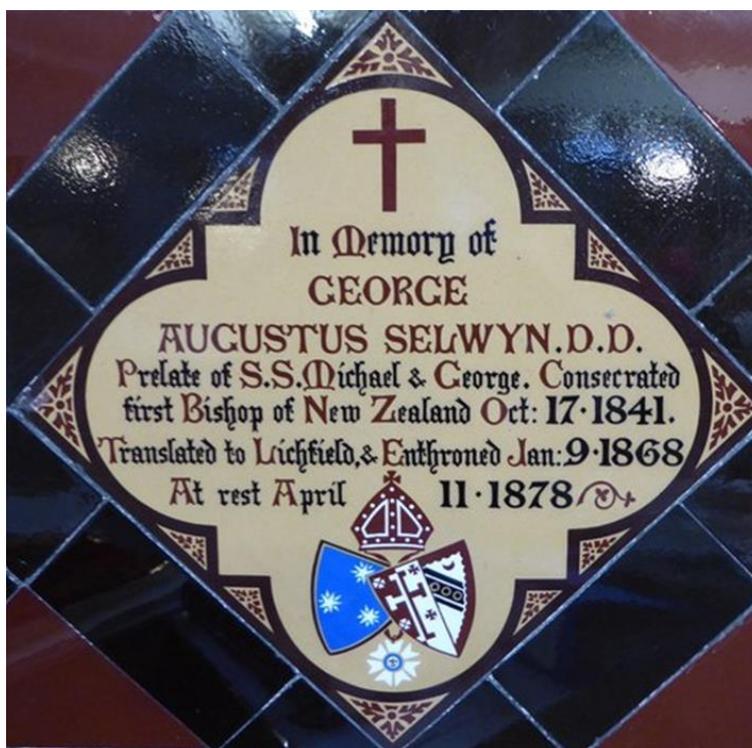
Knowing so little ourselves about the tile, we contacted a past Dean of Wellington (1985-2002), the Very Rev Michael Brown, for information he might recall. His reply proved to be very helpful: 'At some time during my sojourn in the Cathedral I had a visit from a couple who had recently returned from a world trip ... Their story was that in a visit to Lichfield they passed a church which was being demolished. They went inside and the person on the job greeted and welcomed them and asked them where they had come from. When they said New Zealand, he said they may be interested in the plaque. It was of the Bishop of Lichfield, Bishop Selwyn, who had been the first Bishop of New Zealand. He said, 'if you would like it, take it.' They carried it with them all over Canada and the US and then back home. It was quite heavy for baggage, and I remember the guy's wife making a joke about her husband carrying it and stowing it in rail compartments and aircraft lockers. For them the question, when they got home, was 'what do they do with it?' That is how it came to the Cathedral. I received it as it had the coat of arms of the New Zealand Diocese, and we also had as our Archbishop the Bishop of Wellington (Archbishop Brian Davis). I received it and at the time we were heavily involved in the Completion Project. Afterwards we enclosed it in brass, put an explanatory note about it, and the link with Bishop Selwyn, and screwed it to the wall. We had in my time a link with Lichfield because of our common heritage.'<sup>3</sup>

**MEMORIAL PLAQUE TO GEORGE AUGUSTUS SELWYN  
ONLY BISHOP OF NEW ZEALAND, NINETIETH BISHOP OF LICHFIELD.  
THIS PLAQUE WAS RESCUED DURING THE DEMOLITION OF A PARISH CHURCH  
IN THE LICHFIELD DIOCESE.  
GIFT OF W. V. AND J. M. MIDDLEDITCH<sup>4</sup>**

This information helped fill out detail of how we acquired the tile. The donors of the tile, Mr William Verdon Middleditch and his wife Mrs Jessie Mary Middleditch, were a local family. They were building contractors, hence the interest in a church that was being demolished. We can be very grateful to them for the gift of the tile.

The next source of information was the Diocese of Lichfield itself - what could they tell us about the tile? A number of Lichfield clergy made fairly extensive local enquiries on our behalf. Canon Tony Barnard, a former Lichfield Cathedral staff member, gave the following information: 'The Minton ceramic plaque is well known to us in Lichfield. Not a great deal is, I think, known about it, beyond the fact that it was made by Mintons, whose tiles, at that time, were being extensively used in the restoration of many parish

churches and the Cathedral, mainly by the Architect, Gilbert Scott. My hunch is they went to all Lichfield Diocese's parish churches, and many still have them - once in situ always in situ! There is also one in the school chapel, originally Selwyn's chapel, attached to the Palace, where paintings also recall his work in NZ.'<sup>5</sup>



**Stoke Minster: Minton Hollins memorial tile**<sup>6</sup>

We believe Wellington Cathedral's tile, is one of several Minton memorial or commemorative tiles made in the period. Other tiles included one commemorating Bishop Lonsdale, Selwyn's predecessor who was Bishop of Lichfield for 34 years. How widely they were spread around, and whether the tiles were sold or given away is unclear. Obviously, one went to the Cathedral in Omaha, another is said to have turned up at one stage in a gallery in Melbourne, Australia, and another is in Jackfield Tile Museum, UK.<sup>7</sup>

It would appear that a number of the tiles were made, and were given to, or purchased by churches. 'Bishop Selwyn tiles can be seen in many Staffordshire churches'.<sup>8</sup> How many of them can still be seen is unknown. It is recorded that there was one in the former St Mark's Church, Derby.<sup>9</sup>

The identity of the church building that the tile came from has also caused some interest, but nothing has yet been proven. It is possible that the church was not being demolished at all, so much as being substantially renovated or remodelled, and is still standing. But how the tile could be given away (as it was to passing strangers) raises some unanswered questions.

The next area of enquiry was New Zealand itself. If Wellington Cathedral has a Selwyn tile, then could there be another, or others, in New Zealand or anywhere else? Given the strong Auckland links with Selwyn, several senior Auckland clergy and church historians who I thought would be familiar with local churches were contacted and asked whether they knew of any Selwyn tiles in churches in the Auckland area. This produced no further information. It seems that the Wellington Cathedral tile is the only one in New Zealand on view.

Is it possible that Wellington has the only Selwyn tile existing in New Zealand? This was answered by a sleuth from the Anglican Church Archives who said there was a tile in the Auckland Holy Trinity Cathedral vault. Apparently, this tile is damaged or broken. But this raises the question of how it came to in Auckland. Was it a gift to Auckland, where the Bishop of New Zealand spent much of his time? Did Selwyn's successor in Auckland, Bishop W. G. Cowie (1869-92), or Bishop W. J. Simkin (1940-60) or someone else who had a Lichfield connection bring it back to New Zealand? What is its provenance? There must be an answer somewhere.

We may never know the full story of the tile, but this whole research project has been useful for the issues that have been raised. The first is our church buildings and their connection with our church's history, how do they connect us with our past, or do we just walk on by, not noticing what is around us? The second is recording our past, documenting, photographing our treasures. How thorough are our written and photographic records? Are they up to date? Third, when questions are asked of us, can we give answers? How helpful are the guides, and guidebooks, and are they up to date? Fourth, I am impressed with the enthusiasm and enterprise of Judy Metz and especially the Historical Society of Trinity Cathedral, Omaha, NE. Is this something we can learn from?

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Email from Judy Metz to John McCaul, 11 May 2017

<sup>2</sup> "George Selwyn (bishop of Lichfield)",  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George\\_Selwyn\\_\(bishop\\_of\\_Lichfield\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Selwyn_(bishop_of_Lichfield)) accessed 31 March 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Email from Dean Michael Brown to John McCaul, 16 May 2017

<sup>4</sup> Text of brass plaque on wall below the Selwyn tile, Wellington Cathedral of St Paul South ambulatory

<sup>5</sup> Email from Canon Tony Barnard to Elizabeth Kay, 17 May 2017.

<sup>6</sup> © Copyright [Basher Eyre](#) and licensed for [reuse](#) under this [Creative Commons Licence](#).  
<https://www.geograph.org.uk/photo/4936165> accessed 19 March 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Email from Judith Bright

<sup>8</sup> Lynn Pearson, *The Tile Gazetteer, The Tiles and Architectural Ceramics Society*, Department of Continuing Education, Reading. 2002. p 3. Mr George Frost from Lichfield Cathedral kindly assisted us with local enquiries and has sent a very valuable list of churches in the Lichfield Diocese which currently have Selwyn tiles.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.* p.1.

## Further Reading

Alington, Margaret H. *An Excellent Recruit*. Polygraphia Ltd, Auckland, 2007. Chapter 12, "Episcopal Secretary and a fulsome retirement in Lichfield".

Terry M. Brown, "*Bishop George Augustus Selwyn in North America: Missionary Hero and Ecclesiastical Diplomat*," ch. 9 in Allan Davidson, ed., *A Controversial Churchman*. Bridget Williams Books, Wellington, 2011.

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Pearson, Lynn. *The Tile Gazetteer, The Tiles and Architectural Ceramics Society*, Department of Continuing Education, Reading. 2002.