

# Purangangi at peace with its past

In the latest in his series on Taranaki's forgotten places, DAVID BRUCE visits Purangi



own in 1903 and its salvaged timber later used to make the altar cross for the new church at Purangi.

THE little church of St Peter's at Purangi is old, two years short of its century. It is also unusual because, built entirely by Maori hands, it resembles more a traditional wānanga or meeting house than the popular conception of an old Anglican country church.

Hosting services just twice a year, in the stillness of its lonely valley, it is treasured and jealously guarded by the district's few residents. It is a taonga, a tangible link with Purangi's busier past. Purangi lies on a natural route between the coast at Waitara and inland Taranaki. Followed northwards, the Waitara River leads to the old Ngatamaru hātunehi at Te Nau and through Pehu, to Okai or Uruti and the coast.

Eastward, old trails, now roads, led through Mataua and the Pohukura saddle to Whangamomona. Following the river south to its tributary Mangaopapa Stream, another road leads to Kioro, Huiroa and eventually to Toko and the old overland trail to the Whanganui River.

It was in 1853, 151 years ago, that the district's original church, Te-ti-te-Arovo was consecrated on the site of the Pukemahoe Pa, a short distance downstream. Then, Pukemahoe was a busy community, the main centre of the Ngatamaru, a pretty site in a fertile valley overlooking an upper reach of the Waitara River.

In the early 1850s the Rev Henry Govett, who at the end of the decade would become Archdeacon of Taranaki, ventured into the hinterland of Taranaki.

Well-prepared, having taught himself to speak and preach in Maori, Govett worked his way up the Waitara River by canoe, calling at riverside villages to preach the gospel. Reputed to be the first pakeha to visit Pukemahoe, he made a big impression and became a frequent visitor, returning sometimes by river, but often by the bush tracks that threaded in from the coast.

The way may have been made easier for him by the preaching of one of the first Maori martyrs, Te Manihiera Poumaha from Waikanaa near Hawera. Te Manihiera worked with the Rev Richard Taylor and had been sent to Pukemahoe and other inland villages some time before 1846. Te Manihiera and his colleague and friend Kereopa were martyred in the resolution of an old inter-tribal ūhi, near Tokaanu on the shore of Lake Taupo in 1847.

The suggestion of building a mission centre was made by the tribal elders, but Govett's influence could be seen in the construction, which was of wooden boards and shingled roof, albeit with an earthen floor. An old brass ship's bell taken from a wreck, was brought in to call the faithful and the building was furnished with hand-hewn pews and altar. The name of the mission, Te-ti-te-Arovo, means literally "you are out of order to speak on any other subject".

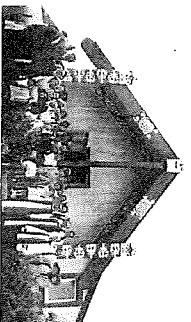
For a few years the church received regular visits from Govett and the Maori deacons, but in the early 1860s the introduction of Palmairiti, Ringatu or Hanu Hanu worship brought the decline of Christianity in the district. An eight-metre pole capped with a wooden weathercock, the symbol of the Pakeha mission, was erected in front of the church, which was allowed to fall into disrepair.

The church was still standing when Tikohora took refuge at Pukemahoe between 1869 and 1873 and was visited by surveyor William H. Skinner when he passed through the deserted pa in October 1897. Skinner records "the whole area of the pa and the space between the protecting earthworks being closely packed with carved totara head stags with the names, dates of death and details of the departed, probably the result of the Christian influence."

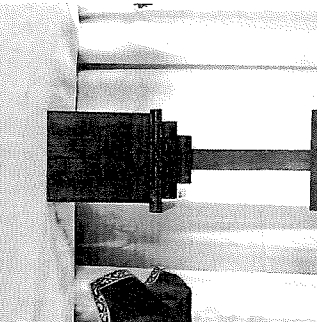
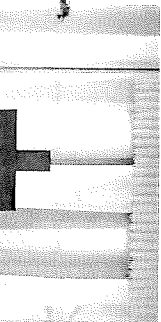
Although derelict and unused, the old mission church stood until 1959, when it burned down in a bush-clearing fire. Its bell had been given to Skinner in 1888 and taken to St Mary's in New Plymouth where it was used in the Sunday School until returned to the new church. The charred centre pole, the only thing left standing after the blaze, was cut



PURANGI'S GUARDIANS: Local historian Laurel Aitken and St Peter's Church, holding the memories of an almost forgotten eastern Taranaki town.



CENTENNIAL VISIT: The Bishops of Aoteaora and Waitako with members of the St Peter's congregation in May 1952.



HISTORIC CROSS: The altar cross in St Peter's, made from timber salvaged from the original mission church at Pukemahoe.

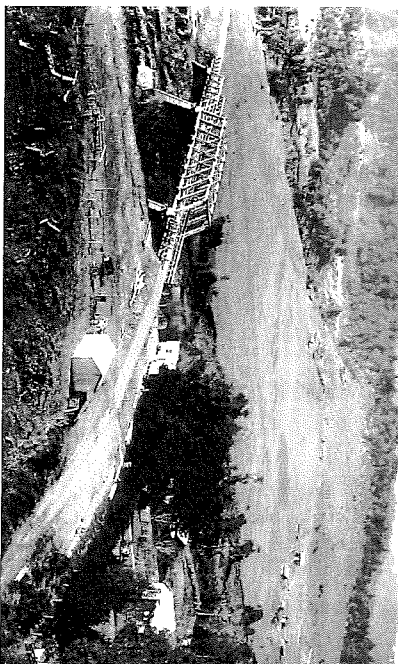
settlements, was erected in the centre of the new settlement. Boxing matches staged after hours in the school helped raise funds for the first Purangi Hall. Built in 1913, the hall was torn down and replaced in 1918. With the school in its own premises, the boarding houses' front room became a billiard saloon.

The decision to build the new church followed a visit to the district by the Reverend F. A. Bennett, later to become the first Maori Bishop. The visit was a resounding success, the remnants of the Ngati Maru tribe, who had earned a reputation for opposition to religion, made him welcome.

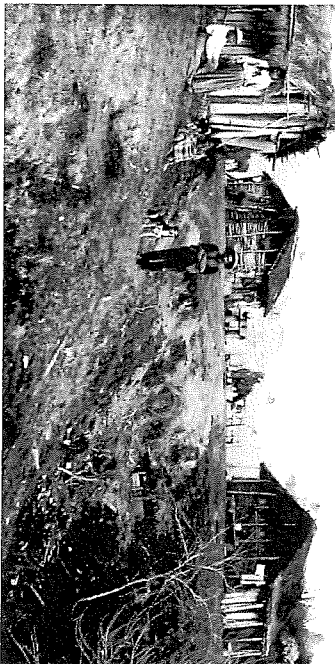
Settlers offered financial help and C. H. Harding and C. O. Roberts gave the land on which a new church could be built. Neighbours of Te Manihiera, local elder Turamahu Tume, his brother Te Manihiera Tume, and Te Manihiera's grandson Tohe Palanga, did the carpentry. A renowned artist of Wanganui, the carpenter and administrator, the only paid hand on the job was W. F. Downman, who built the shingled roof, which was



MEETING HOUSE: Mataioa, the whareniui at Ngakoraka Marae with additional tent accommodation for consecration day in 1906.



NEW BRIDGE: Purangi shortly after the completion of the new bridge in 1900. The village, school and St Peter's church would all be built across the river from the existing buildings. Smith's store is closest to bridge.



CHANGING TIMES: Whare and Purangi residents at the turn of the century, 1900.

replaced by iron in 1912. A great-great-grandfather of Te Manihiera, Billy (Tume) Bertrand, was the handy boy on the building site when not at school.

Billy Bertrand's schooling was a bone of contention between himself and the teacher. Later to be church-warden of the church he helped build, the roadman who went on to become a county councillor, as an old man, of one teacher in particular: "If he couldn't push knowledge in at one end he belted it in at the other."

THE new church was consecrated on St Peter's Day — Friday, 29 June, 1906. Preparation on a huge scale was needed to cater for the large number of Maori visitors, who came from all over Taranaki and from settlements along the Whanganui River with familial links to the area.

Two large tents were brought from New Plymouth to bolster the district's limited accommodation and the settlers' contribution ensured there was no shortage of food.

Even the weather cooperated, for after a week of kororaitia rain the sun came out to allow the procession and the day's celebrations to proceed unhindered.

Led by Kere Negataterua, the highest-ranking chief present, a procession including Pouni from Te Ahi Hānui, Tuarua from Ngati Kura, Kauika from Nga Karua, and Whakani and Tuna from Ngati Kura and Maori layreaders and clergy from Purangi, Ureuni, Waitara and the Bay of Islands wended its way to the church, which was dedicated to the Archdeacon of Taranaki the Venerable R. H. Cole.

Archdeacon Cole also gave the church its first organ, which was replaced by the present one in 1920. Mevyn Jensen of Matau crafted the sanctuary chandelier and Frank Webb made the rima cast-iron that still holds church men and hanging. The vestry and the church's concrete pathways were added in 1928 and in the same year the Ladies Guild was

formed and raised funds for books and kneelers.

Around 1910 an estimated 140 Ngatamaru and Te Ahiawa returned to the upper Waitara from Parhaka and a subsistence lifestyle centred around the Neakoraka Pa, later to be the site of the Purangi sportsground. By 1918 their numbers had dwindled to around 50 as families left for the company of whānau in Waitara, Wanganui and Waitotara.

Billy Bertrand believed that only 10 survived the 1918 influenza epidemic. The Ngakoraka meeting house, Mataioa

was picked up and shifted to Henry Nukui's orchard on Neaoro Rd. It was demolished in the late 1960s for safety reasons.

"It was on a lean, and when the wind blew it swayed," Ngati Te Ika hapu chairman Eddie Nepu said, "you never knew when it was going to fall down."

The Maori exodus was matched by the settlers. The creamery closed at the end of the 1909-10 season as home separation was introduced and by 1921 only eight families remained, providing a scant income for the post-office-store that, in 1914, had relocated into the boarding houses' veritable front room. With his numbers down, Purangi could no longer field a team to contest the (unpublished) Schneider Shield rugby trophy. The district could still, however, send six of its young men to serve overseas in World War II, following in the footsteps of the 12 who served in the Great War.

When the last storekeeper, Henry Watkins, retired in 1948 after 20 years at Purangi, the store closed. The post and telephone office operated from a private residence until the rural mail

service and the toll circuit were extended from Inglewood in 1959. The school closed in August 1949, with the remaining children attending Mataua School.

Declared unsafe in 1929, the Purangi bridge rotted on for nearly another 20 years before it was finally closed to all but foot traffic in 1948. For the next eight years, wool and cream from the district had to be carted to the railway at Kioro for freighting to Wanganui. The new bridge opened in March 1956, banished local government politicians from the Stratford, Inglewood and Clifton counties, the Minister of Works, Mr Ernie Adamsman and New Plymouth MP Bill Goosman making the dusty journey over the unsealed Purangi saddle for the official gala opening. With electricity still a year away from Purangi, batteries were needed to power the loud-speakers.

It was almost as big an event as the St Peter's Church centenary on June 28, 1953. On that occasion the Archdeacon of Taranaki, the Venerable G. H. Gavin, and another large party of church and civic dignitaries made the pilgrimage to celebrate with an afternoon service followed by a jubilee party in the Purangi Hall.

Twenty years later an arrangement by the parish to sell the church to the Stratford Pioneer Village was thwarted by the vociferous objections of the locals.

HERE is little to Purangi today. Three chimney stacks and ancient fruit trees indicate where homes once stood. The rickety hall was pulled down to become a tractor shed in 1971. Road names recall the site of Pukemahoe and the Ngaturo track. Much of the hard-won farmland of a century ago has blurred under a canopy of pine forest, blackberries' fastown roadsides. The remaining farms are sheep and beef units, the 300 dairy cows that prompted the creamery are a memory.

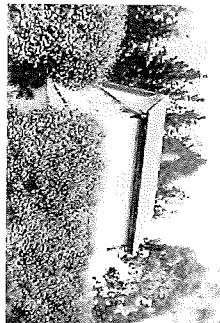
Eddie and Tina Nepu run an adventure eco-tourism operation from the old orchard site where Mataioa once stood. Recently Mr Nepu proposed a \$500,000 project to rebuild the Ngakoraka marae on the site.

Tim and Laurel Aitken have a more modern orchard with subtropical perennials and avocados on their property, which spreads over the entire one-time village. Behind their recently-built home is the old school, still on its original site but for 13 years their temporary home. Nearby, treasured, is St Peter's, almost unchanged despite the passage of a century.

The changes to the little church are subtle, the results of age. Pines have rotted and need replacement, borer has attacked the sanctuary chair. Removed more than 20 years ago when the church was last painted, the lipity carved and painted iron panels were taken down for restoration. It didn't happen. In 1987 they were hurried alongside the church. New panels, to be painted to tell a different story, have been talked about but that too has not happened. Instead plain boards suffice to keep the weather out.

Recently more than 40 members of the community along with descendants of Te Manihiera, crowded the little church for a memorial service taken by Bishop Philip Richardson. A day later, Laurel Aitken took down the painted white altar, vestments and returned them to their rima cask.

Until the next season, to be held sometime in the future, St Peter's Church at Purangi will be left alone with its memories. □



LEARNING CENTRE: The second Purangi School as it was in 1932. The school closed in 1949.