



Heritage Buildings and Items Report

Site ID	146
Name	Samoan Methodist Church
Address	505 Devon Street East, New Plymouth



Statement of Significance

The Samoan Methodist Church, formerly Te Henui Primitive Methodist Church, derives some of its heritage significance from its connection to this historic site, the location of the first Primitive Methodist church in New Zealand, built in 1844. A legacy of that time is the presence of gravestones and unmarked graves from the early years of the settlement, along with a stone memorial to the Rev. Robert Ward, the first Primitive Methodist minister in New Zealand, who arrived in New Plymouth in 1844. The present church opened in 1907. It was significantly increased in size in 1923 by prominent local architects Messenger, Griffiths and Taylor, and today is notable for its Gothic revival detailing and strong street presence. The wider property has been much altered over time, with the church's original vestries and Sunday School both removed and replaced by later structures.

The building stands out in the local streetscape both for its distinctive Gothic Revival architectural style and its comparatively large scale and steeply pitched roof within what is a modern low-rise residential and commercial area. Although it is an inherently modest building, it is particularly notable for the fine design of the main south elevation and the rhythmic pattern of the lancet windows along the nave. The later additions to the northern end do not contribute to its architectural character.

Heritage Buildings and Items Report

Legal Information and Heritage Status

Legal Description	Part Section 91 Fitzroy District
Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga List Number	899
Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga Category	2

Construction Information

Date of Construction	1907
Principal Materials	Timber, corrugated steel, concrete
Construction Professionals	1907 church: F.C. Griffiths (designer), Pikett and Wilkie (contractor) 1923 additions: Messenger, Griffiths and Taylor Frank Messenger: https://terangiaoaonunui.pukeariki.com/story-collections/taranaki-stories/frank-messenger-a-legacy-in-design

History

Completed in 1907, Te Henui Primitive Methodist Church in the New Plymouth suburb of Fitzroy is the second church on this historic site.

Primitive Methodism is a branch of the Methodist Christian faith that rose in England in the late 18th and early 19th century. Its name alludes to its purpose – a simple, purer form of Christian worship, but one that is today under the umbrella of the Methodist church. The development of Methodism in New Zealand was dominated by two strands of the faith – Wesleyan and Primitive.

The first Primitive Methodist preacher in New Zealand was the Rev. Robert Ward. New Plymouth had only a small group of Primitive Methodist believers but it was there that Ward went to preach in 1844. That year, a small timber church was constructed on the site of the present church. Ward had two stints in New Plymouth and remains one of the most revered names in Primitive Methodist history in New Zealand.¹

The property at Te Henui was also used as a graveyard and burials continued there until 1871. Several gravestones remain, ranged neatly along the south side of the church, along with a memorial marker recording the 42 burials on the site that were identified from genealogical research. Aerial images from 1950 appear to show a number of graves in the north-west corner of the property.² Two burials were accidentally uncovered when work was carried out on the east side of the building in 1997. Subsequent archaeological investigations identified 21 burial sites in the grounds.³

By the 1860s the Te Henui church was no longer the primary Primitive Methodist church in New Plymouth; that honour fell to the much larger and centrally located Queen Street church.

¹ Drake, Rev. Edward 1944, *Some Account of Primitive Methodism in New Zealand : a souvenir of the centenary of the arrival of the Rev. Robert Ward and the establishment of the Primitive Methodist Church in New Zealand in September, 1844*, Committee of the Primitive Methodist Centennial Celebrations of the Methodist Church of New Zealand

² SN544, 1950, retrolens.co.nz

³ *Taranaki Daily News*, 5 July 1999. See https://terangiaoaonunui.pukeariki.com/media/11090/church_service.pdf



Heritage Buildings and Items Report

Soon after the turn of the 20th century, the Te Henui church – by then in a very poor state – was demolished. The congregation had no church for several years and had to meet in a local hall, but this began to be rectified in November 1906, when, following fund raising efforts, a foundation stone was laid for a new church on the same site. The design of the new church has been credited to New Plymouth contractor F.C. Griffiths, who was primarily an electrician and plumber. The builders were Pikett and Wilkie.⁴ (Arthur Pikett, a Methodist and former borough councillor, died the year the church was completed). The estimated cost – seats included – was £320.⁵ The church opened on 13 January 1907, with Rev Charles Ward, the son of Rev. Robert Ward, presiding.

At the outset, the entry was via an enclosed porch on the south elevation facing the street. There were two vestries behind (and connected to) the rear of the church, with a rear entrance porch.⁶ These were identical in size – 2.6 x 2.13 metres. In 1918 a Sunday School was added behind the vestries,⁷ extended two years later.⁸ The rear additions were later removed, possibly in the 1970s.⁹

In 1923, the nave was extended out to the south boundary, nearly doubling the size of the original church. The entry porch was relocated to the west elevation, one bay back from the street, displacing a nave window. A cover board at the join line on the east elevation, and subtly different weatherboard profiles between the sections, are the only overt physical evidence of this change today.¹⁰ This analysis is supported by the fact that the great southern stained glass window was installed where the porch once stood. This window, 'The Bread of Life', was dedicated to the memory of Rev. Robert Ward.¹¹ The extension was designed by prominent New Plymouth architects Messenger, Griffiths and Taylor.

In 1944, a substantial stone memorial to Rev. Robert Ward, including a cross, was installed on the street front alongside the church as part of the centennial commemorations for Primitive Methodism. This memorial remains in situ, now slightly crowded by the re-positioned entry porch.

Aerial photos show that a modest lean-to had been added to the north side of the entry porch by 1950, bringing it to nearly its present size. By 1963, the porch had been picked up and relocated several metres south to sit flush with the church wall on the boundary, and the nave window it displaced – of a similar style to the south window – was relocated just to the north of the porch.

In 1957, a hall/meeting room (two storeys on its north elevation) was constructed to the immediate west of the church, in concrete block. The gap between this and the church was later infilled with a new structure (not dated, but likely in the 1980s) and a section of the east wall of the hall, presumably including one of the original windows, was cut out to open up the entire space. Likely at the same time, the nave was truncated with a new rear (north) wall built several metres inside the north external wall.

At some point (date unknown), the seating arrangement in the church was reversed, with the congregation looking up at the preacher at the south end rather than the other (more traditional) way round.

By the late 1990s, the future of the church was under question after congregation numbers fell. Sale of the building became a serious option, but the local Samoan Methodist community stepped in to

⁴ *Taranaki Daily News*, 23 November 1906, p.2

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ *Taranaki Herald*, 17 October 1918, p.6

⁸ *Taranaki Daily News*, 2 December 1921, p.8

⁹ These ancillary structures were still standing in 1970. See SN3232, retrolens.co.nz.

¹⁰ Gooch, Mike 2012, 'Fitzroy Methodist Church (Samoan)', <https://terangiaoaonunui.pukeariki.com/story-collections/taranaki-churches/fitzroy-methodist-church-samoan> [retrieved 8 July 2024]

¹¹ Ibid. Gooch cites *The Methodist Church of New Zealand, Seventy-Five Years at Fitzroy*, by John E. Hodder as a source.

Heritage Buildings and Items Report

give the building a new purpose. In 2005, the church was formally signed over to New Plymouth's Samoan congregation.¹²

In 2020, the church received \$444,000 to renovate the church and associated buildings as part of the Covid 19 Response and Recovery Funding, a portion of which was allocated to Pasifika churches.¹³ The funding was intended to make the church's associated facilities – meeting rooms, kitchen and toilets – suitable for outside community use as well as meet the needs of churchgoers. The work involved, among other things, relining, new heating, painting and furnishings, kitchen upgrade, external stairs and new furniture. The vestry (formerly the entry porch) was extended with the external doors opening to a new small deck and steps at the north end.

The listing includes the original church with its 1923 additions, the relocated porch and the Ward Memorial. The listing includes the rear (northern) wall of the original church, although only above the roofline of the modern addition.

Reference Sources

See footnotes.

Description

The Samoan Methodist Church is located within a mixed residential and commercial neighbourhood some distance to the east of the town centre. The site is elevated with an open and sunny northerly aspect. The land slopes gently down towards the sea to the north; the church and adjuncts occupies the southern half of the site, and the northern portion is open lawn fringed by garden beds (this appears to be the original burial grounds). A narrow driveway at the west leads toward the main entry, with the memorial to Rev. Ward standing prominent beside the drive. On the west an open strip of grass leads down the slope to connect with the main lawn, with a series of gravestones arranged neatly along the side of the church.

The primary form of the church is a simple symmetric gabled box with a steeply-pitched roof, a tall single storey in height at the street end and roughly two storeys high at the north end. The roof is covered in corrugated steel; the building is clad with rusticated weatherboards and timber trims, and finished with timber windows, in the main lancets. The main elevation of the church faces south to the street, where it sits hard on the boundary line atop an old concrete wall.

Excepting the relocated entry porch to the left, the elevation is symmetric. It has a strong Gothic Revival character, drawn out by the dramatic timber tracery, stained glass, and heavy moulded trims of the 'Bread of Life' window (which is contained within an overall pointed arch form), the closely-spaced and visually heavy eave brackets, the circular attic ventilator and the use of moulded string courses and vertical battens to subdivide the elevation

The side elevations feature rows of single lancet windows divided in four obscure-glazed lights; the pattern of the windows on the east side illustrates the relative extent of the original building and of the 1923 extension (four closely-spaced windows on the northern portion and two more widely-spaced windows on the southern portion). The west side elevation is less authentic, notable for the relocated entry porch and the associated 1923 window that was relocated after the porch was re-positioned. The modern single storey link structure dominates this side of the church, closing off any view to the sea beyond. It has an entry porch under a flat roof and a high parapet beyond, linking in to the 1957 hall that extends along the west boundary parallel to the church. The north elevation of

¹² Pers. comm. Joshua Robertson to the authors, 3 July 2004

¹³ See spreadsheet All Kanoa – RDU Projects, Provincial Growth Fund – Regional Projects
<https://www.growregions.govt.nz/established-funds/what-we-have-funded/the-provincial-growth-fund/regional/>
[retrieved 8 July 2024]



Heritage Buildings and Items Report

the building is wholly utilitarian; only the gable end of the original building remains visible above the complex of modern additions.

The interior of the church has a high ceiling covered under a series of raised-tie trusses; the south stained glass window is the major feature of the space.

Assessment

Historical	This church, and more particularly the site it occupies, are places of high historic importance to Primitive Methodism, both locally and nationally. The connection of this place with the Rev. Robert Ward, one of the most revered people in Methodist history in New Zealand, is notable. New Plymouth was the first place he chose to come to when he arrived in New Zealand and it was Ward who chose the location of the first Primitive Methodist church in the settlement. That building was replaced by the present church, now well over 100 years old itself. The presence of a number of early, unmarked graves is another important historic connection with the site.	✓
Importance to Community	The nature of the community's connection with this church has changed significantly. It is still a Methodist church but the original Primitive Methodist congregation had been replaced by New Plymouth's Samoan Methodists, who have used the church since 1998 and have developed a strong connection with it. The building's interior, particularly the hall, has been renovated and rearranged to support its use as a facility for the wider community.	✓
Architecture and Technology	The church is a good example of early 20th century Gothic Revival design applied to a quite modest building. It is notable for its scale and distinctive form, for the lively architecture of its main southern elevation and for the rhythmic pattern of its lancet windows. The later additions at the north detract from its character.	✓
Setting and Context	The church stands out strongly in the local streetscape for its evident age, its scale, the steeply pitched roof, and its architectural character. While the wider setting remains largely residential in nature, the surrounding buildings are predominantly modern.	✓
Archaeology	The property is an archaeological site as defined by the Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga Act 2014. Information about the prior uses of the site and the location and nature of the graves on the site could be uncovered by archaeological techniques.	✓
Representativeness, Rarity and Integrity	As the site of the first Primitive Methodist church in New Zealand (and probably the first Methodist church of any kind in New Plymouth) this place can be regarded as unique. The church itself is much altered, although the portion nearest the road is mostly authentic.	✓



Heritage Buildings and Items Report

Meets threshold for listing (three or more ticks, or two ticks in one criterion)