



The History of St George's Anglican Church

A remnant of the Goldfields of the Coromandel Peninsula, Saint Georges Thames stands as a

witness to a time when Thames was bigger than Auckland, supplied the Auckland province with food! and had around 30,000 people living and working in the borough.



Volunteers from the Inspire groups (named after the fact that Saint Georges is the only church in Thames with a Spire) are on duty regularly during the week to welcome visitors and to explain the beauty and specific features of this 19th century wooden gothic building - probably the best wooden gothic church still in regular use as a parish church in New Zealand.

The Thames Anglican Parish was established in 1865 as a Pakeha unit. For half a dozen decades before that a Maori Anglican Church, enabled by the Church Missionary Society (CMS) was active, established in the gold fields. In fact an early ordination to the diaconate of a local Maori leader was the first ordination in the district.

The first Saint Georges church was built in Rolleston Street, on land gifted by Chief Taipari, in 1865. Quickly it proved too small a gathering place for three Sunday services and plans were underway to built the new Saint Georges which opened in 1872. The much larger Saint Georges, based on the Gothic stone European churches, has been a central feature of the town ever since. ~ the spire rising above the Central Business District and visible by land and sea for miles.

Although Christian services had been held in Thames district since 1833, when the early missionaries established a mission station at Puriri, on the banks of the Waihou River, it was not until January 1868, just a few short months after Thames had been declared a Goldfield¹ that a meeting was held by a large number of local residents with an aim of either providing a hall or a Church as a place of worship. The Church of England (Thames) minute book has that meeting recorded as follows:

At a meeting held in Capt Butt's Hotel, Shortland, on the 20th or January 1868, The Ven Archdeacon Lloyd in the chair, resolved that a committee be appointed for the

purpose of devising measures for the erection of a Church of England place or worship, and for carrying them into execution. The committee to consist of the following gentlemen with power to add to the number, Messrs J. Mackay, A. Baillie, Rev G. Mounsell, C.F. Mitchell, W. H. Taipari, D. Eyre, W. Goodall, Dr Hooper, H. Beere, J. Petschlie, W. Copeland, and R. Hunt. Resolved that Mr Mackay act as treasurer, and that the Rev G. Mounsell act as convenor to the committee.

Votes of thanks were then passed to W. H. Taipari for his gift of a site for the church, and to the Ven Archdeacon Lloyd, Chairman.

The meeting then adjourned until Wednesday the 29th inst. at 8 pm. at the store of Mr Morton Jones.

(Signed) G. Mounsell
Convenor.

It is interesting to note the minute of the Standing Committee of the Diocese of New Zealand, held at Auckland in February 1896 regarding the gift of a section of land at Shortland by the Maori Chief, Wiropi Hoterini Taipari:

That the Ven Archdeacon Lloyd reported that the Native chief Taipari had granted a site for a church at Thames, and that Mr Mackay had promised to get it passed through the Native Land Court. The Ven Archdeacon applied on behalf of the people of Thames for a grant towards a Church. The Standing Committee, on a motion of Mr R.B. Lusk, seconded by Mr S. W. Hill, granted the sum of £20 to be given when the site is secured and the building erected.

John McEnteer and Taimoana Turoa (1993: 17) state that Te Hoterini and Wiropi Hoterini Taipari, as chiefs of Ngati Hape and Ngati Hauauru exercised their rangatiratanga over much land south of the Te Karaka Stream.

These lands were held on behalf of the hapu, as a trustee on behalf of the beneficiaries. Following instructions by the Maori Land Court, and in some cases before "official" ownership was established, various gifts of land were made to the Thames Community for public use (including the Anglican Church site).

At the meeting held at Mr Morton Jones' store on the 29th of January, 1868, the following names were added to the committee: Dr Sam, Dr Lethbridge, Messrs G. Gilhard, W. Wilkinson, E. Hewitt, J. Schultz, Capt Butt, J. Gibbons, A. Young, Capt. Best, H. Sheen, J. W. Hall, R. Menzies, J. Gwynne, C. Richards, T. Sands, G. Spencer and M. Jones. A. Hogg was appointed secretary, and each member of the committee was supplied with a subscription list, the list having been opened at the meeting when £62/8/- was subscribed. The first expenditure was also authorised at

this meeting when the sum 2/6 was made available for the purchase of a minute book.

The donation from Bishop Selwyn and the grant from the Standing committee was also added to this amount. At a meeting on February 13, 1868, the following were appointed to a building committee: Messrs Mackay, Mitchell, Beere and Gilhard, with power to invite tenders prepared by Mr Beere. Nine tenders were received, and that of Mr Craig, of £165 (with Gothic windows) 2 was one that was accepted. The Church was soon erected on a site in Rolleston Street and was opened on 5 May 1868.

It was in the minutes of a meeting on 8 June 1868 that the name Saint George's appeared. It is not really clear how the Church was given this name but it is thought by some to have been named after Bishop George Augustus Selwyn.

In August 1868, Bishop Selwyn visited Thames. This was to be the last time that the Bishop would be in Thames as he left New Zealand shortly afterwards to travel to England and become Bishop of Lichfield. He held two farewell services which were well attended despite bad weather which made the roads difficult to travel. Collections were made at the close of each service in aid of the organ fund, amounting in the morning to £8/2/9, and in the evening £8/7/1.

Bishop Selwyn left the next day and was accompanied to the wharf by the Committee of Management and a large number of personal friends and admirers. Prior to his departure, a farewell address was presented to him by Mr James Mackay, who expressed the pleasure he felt in carrying out the wishes of the Church management Committee and apologised for the hasty manner in which it had been put together. He remarked that although His Lordship was about to take his departure from amongst them, he was sure they would not be forgotten by him.

Bishop Selwyn expressed the pleasure he felt in accepting the address, which needed no apology on their part. It was a fact in natural history that the birds of the most colourful plumage did not always have the most melodious notes, and although the address might have been hastily put together, it was not the less acceptable on that account. Although he was leaving for England, he would continue to take a warm interest in the spiritual welfare of this country; he would never be backward in its interests, whether in procuring a clergyman, or in any other way he might be of service to them. As far as funds were concerned, however, he thought the place ought to be able to provide sufficient for the maintenance of a resident clergyman amongst them. After a few parting words the deputation withdrew.

The Bishop left for Auckland by the steamer Royal Alfred at 2 pm, and was conveyed on board in a whaleboat, rowed by the members of the Church Committee.³

In that same year:

4 Mr Power was the first organist and choirmaster at St George's and had been organist at St Paul's in Auckland before coming to Thames. It was Mr Power who introduced the first Choral service to Thames. (The full story of the row about the Church music was reported in The Advertiser and Miners' News on the 24 September 1868 and may be read in the 1868 - 1968 booklet.) Mr E. T. Wildman later presented an organ to the Church which cost £400, on condition that the congregation raised a similar sum towards the liquidation of the debt on the Church. The organ was built by T. P. Hewlett of Auckland and was presented in loving memory of Mr Wildman's mother and sister. This is essentially the same organ that we use today.

3 Details of this address may be read in the 1868 - 1968 booklet, page 36.

(June) Mr E. H. Power, the organist, was collecting money to buy a harmonium since the one in use was a borrowed one. It was decided to purchase a harmonium from Mr Webb by instalments.

(August) There were objections to the altar coverings on account of the Cross. After long discussion it was agreed that the cloth should remain, but not embellishments.

(September) There were complaints of too much music and Mr Power offered to resign. However he was persuaded to stay.⁴ Many people expressed a desire to get a resident Parson, as visiting clergy were costing over £100 per annum. There was still no lay reader.

(November) The Rev Vicesimus Lush was recommended as the resident minister at a salary of not less than £250, for one year. He was asked to come as soon as possible.

1869

(February) Mrs Mackay was thanked for initiating the Sunday School. There were suggestions and ideas put forward for enlarging the Church, but as there was still the sum of £146 owing on the building, plans had to be dropped.

(June) Long discussions were held on the subject of the erection of a parsonage, and the rent of a house for the Vicar.⁵

By 1870, gold was being found in large quantities in many of the mines in Thames, with the result that people were flocking to the town in thousands, from all parts of the country, in fact from all parts of the world. With the increase of the population, it was found that a much larger Church was required. In fact, the plan to build the new

Church had been formulated at a vestry meeting in April 1869. The chairman of the Vestry, the Rev Mr Lush, was authorised to write to a firm of architects seeking a plan for a suitable building. He wrote:

Sir, At a meeting of the vestry of Saint George's Church on the 27th inst., it was resolved that the chairman should write to the architects of Auckland and Shortland to invite them to send to the vestry a design for a Church capable of holding a thousand people. I therefore, in accordance with this resolution, write to you to enquire whether you would kindly take the trouble to prepare a design and estimate for a Church and submit the same to me. The intention of the vestry is to submit the design that may be forwarded to a general meeting of the congregation for their approval. The site is perfectly level, on the flat between Shortland and Grahamstown. It is proposed to build the Church of timber and the spend from £1000 to £1200 not including seats and other internal fittings.

Erection of the new Saint George's Church began in 1871 but a terrific storm on March 24, which flooded the goldfields and wreaked havoc in the town generally, blew down the skeleton of the new building. The newspaper at the time commented:

5 As far as can be ascertained, the Church did not possess a Vicarage until 1890, when Rev V. Lush first resided in Grey Street, afterwards building his own house, which is now the Thames Club, on a site opposite the Church.

This was a first attempt, an ugly and far too costly design. Probably no-one will be too much grieved.

The parishioners set about raising funds for the erection of a new Church. A subscription list was opened, concerts and other attractions were arranged, and soon a considerable amount of money was on hand. The Rev Mr Lush gave the following account in a journal with reference to the building fund:

A soiree and concert on April 13th, 1871, raised for the Building Fund about £90. A day after the soiree four men gave me unsolicited £52, so with my £50, and the proceeds of the entertainment, we have started with nearly £200. The soiree was a great success; a thousand persons sat down to tea at Smailes Building at Shortland, and the concert at Grahamstown afterwards was crowded. The price of admission to the double event was 2/6.

The Church in Rolleston street was over-crowded at every service. One Monday morning a woman met Mr Lush and said to him, "There were 40 persons turned away for want of room last night, and one gentleman says he will never go again, for it is the sixth time in succession that he has been unable to get a seat."

"Will you tell me his name?" said Mr Lush, "for I will call upon him and tell him that it is his own fault for always coming so late." She would not tell him this, so he asked her for a subscription towards the building of the new Church, which she willingly gave. By May 4, £232 had been banked. When the first contract was let for the building, the vestry had over £500 in hand. After two contractors had failed to carry out the work, Mr McCaul undertook to complete the building, and he started work on 9 September 1871.⁶

On the 25 September, a concert was held, which brought in the sum of £59, then a gift auction which resulted in a further £150 being added to the Fund. On Thursday, 14 December, the Messiah was a brilliant success, and the singers had such a happy time during their stay in Thames, that they used to ask for years afterwards, when they would be invited again.

6 On 21 August 1871, it was reported that materials for the new Church were being stolen from the site while waiting tender. The tender was also let at that meeting to Mr James Page who submitted the price of £960 omitting the spire and tower.

2 £160 without Gothic windows.

Picture: Thames pre-1900 showing the original Saint Georges in Rolleston Street in the foreground - Photograph from the late Johnny Williams collection supplied by Zelma Williams.

The sittings in the new Church were allotted on Tuesday, 14 November 1871. The following note of the allotment is taken from Mr Lush's journal:

A considerable number of ladies and gentlemen applied for sittings in the new Church, and paid one-half year's rent in advance. Their names having been written on pieces of cardboard, placed in a bag and tossed up, a lad began to draw. He handed each card to Mr Fitzgibbon, who gave me the name, which I called out, the person so called name to where I was standing with a large map of the new Church in my hands, and then and there chose his or her on seat. This system of allotting the seats gave, I believe, general satisfaction. Mr Honiss was fully occupied in recording in the Church Warden's book, the number of the seats taken, and their respective occupants, with the four front rows and every fourth seat right across the church free, and those allotted, it left very little accommodation left for selection.

The New Church 1872 - 1916

The opening service in the New Church took place in Septuagesima Sunday, 28 January 1872, under the directorship of Bishop Cowie. His Lordship arrived by the steamer Royal Alfred, and was met by the Committee of Management of the Church, he said that he was well satisfied with the outside and the inside of the new building, and considered it to be the foremost church in the Diocese.

Sunday was a very hot day, and the whole town turned out for the service. The Volunteers, including the Naval Brigade, the Engineers, and the kilted Scottish Regiments, with the band, marched in full force to the 11 o'clock service. Hundreds of the Volunteers and over 200 civilians were unable to secure seats. The evening service was also very well attended; the offertories amounted to £41/13/6, and everyone was very pleased with the new building.

In that same year

(March) The Vestry decided that the old Church should be let to Mr D. Schofield, a qualified teacher, at the rental of £20 per annum.⁷

December) The need for a second clergyman was discussed. The decision was to be made by the Bishop. The Bishop had already stated that one should be appointed and become resident at Parawai.

1873

Mr Power was no longer the organist, and Mr R. A. Owen was appointed to take his place.

(October) The stained glass windows arrived. This was recorded in The Thames Journals of Vicesimus Lush as follows:

28. Edward and Anne and Edith were thrown into a state of pleasurable excitement by the arrival of the case containing the stained glass windows. I was sent round to Kennan⁸ to ask him to bring a man with him tomorrow to open it. I determined not to touch it without him being present.

29. Soon after breakfast Kennan and his man came and the case ... was carefully opened and I am most thankful to report the window came in perfect order, uninjured in the slightest degree. The group of figures in the centre window I consider remarkably good and much larger than I had expected. Kennan was delighted and at once sent two men to clean the glass of the chancel windows to serve as a guard (instead of wire) to the stained glass. The plain glass already in is in one huge plate, very thick. Tomorrow we begin the task of putting up the stained glass within the present one.

30. The central window was safely placed today. Everybody who has seen it - and many came into the Church during the afternoon - expresses great satisfaction at the improved appearance of the chancel apse. The sheet of thick glass on the outside just softens the colours without throwing any shadow, as there must be more or less with wire.

6 November. Kennan's men cleared out of the Church this morning, leaving the three windows ... in their places in the Chancel of Saint George's, where I hope they remain for many years uninjured, a monument to Kennan's liberality. I expect the great improvement they have made will keep down a "row" which my Church Wardens feared the Orangemen (would) try to get up on account of the Crucifixion staring them in the face right over the Altar.

1876

(December) The following are excerpts from the same journals concerning the Altar and Altar cloth:

9. Wrote to the Bishop and thanked him for granting me the privilege of being custodian of the Cathedral Altar Cloth. Further I expressed a hope that I might use it for Xmas day. As the Cathedral is not yet begun - yea, nor thought of as I know - this committing the Cathedral Altar cloth to my care is practically making a present of it to Saint George's

20. Came today from the Bishop a parcel containing the Altar cloth We took it at once to the Church and tried it on the old Table which proved too short and too narrow. So I went for one of my choir men, a Cabinet maker and he took the dimensions and promised to have the new Table on my Verandah by Saturday night, so that we may smuggle it into the Church on Xmas Eve, in order that the new Altar cloth may be first seen on Xmas morning

1881

The Reverend Vicesimus Lush, who had been Vicar of Thames since 1868, left Saint George's to take up an appointment at Archdeacon of Waikato. He died in 1882.

- Archdeacon Lush was educated for the Church at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, England, where he gained his MA degree. Soon after coming to New Zealand, he was appointed as the first incumbent of Saint George's. He was a man of many parts - all good, it is faithfully recorded.

The following interesting anecdote is found in The Auckland Journals of Vicesimus Lush (1850 - 1863) regarding the origin of his Christian name:

Charles Lush of Charles Square, London, was at a dinner party on 17 August 1817 when a message was brought to him announcing the birth of his twentieth child, "whereupon," writes his grandson Edward Lush, "the assembled guests drank to the babe's health, the father's health and the mother's." So Vicesimus Lush owed his unusual Christian name to his position in the family. Many years later, in New Zealand, he was to christen a child Decimus with the subsequent comment that "the tenth" had been baptised by "the twentieth".

A memorial window was donated by Captain E. T. Wildman, depicting the appearance of St George among sleeping soldiers, whose imminent defeat changed to victory the next day.

Archdeacon W. Calder became the new Vicar at Saint George's.

1882

(February) Sunday school started at St John's with 40 pupils. Miss Lush also started Bible classes with the assistance of Archdeacon Calder.

1884

Owing to Mrs Calder's bad health at Thames, Archdeacon Calder was reluctantly compelled to leave Thames.

He went to All Saints', Ponsonby, where he remained for many years, and was appointed Archdeacon some years before his death.

About this time, Mr Stewart of the Queen of Beauty mine, presented to the Church a large and richly illumined text round the chancel arch. Mr Barker, another shareholder in the same mine, gave The Lord's Prayer and Creed painted on plates of zinc, 7 ft long and 2 1/2 ft broad. These were placed on either side of the central east window and were illuminated by Mr Slator.

Archdeacon F. G. Evans became the new minister. The following is an account by the Archdeacon of the difficulties he experienced as Vicar from March 1884 to July 1889:

I received two invitations to become incumbent at Thames early in 1884. For many reasons, which I need not mention here, I refused the first, but, on the advice of Bishop Cowie and my native tutor, Dr Kidd, I agreed to accept the second. When I arrived at Thames, I found a population of about 8,000 people, and several of the mines, the Alburnia, Waitotahi and others were producing a good amount of gold. Prospecting was going on in various parts of the field.

Unfortunately, Saint George's was in a bad state. A storm had blown it out of the perpendicular and the roof was badly strained. Its piles were mostly rotten and it groaned for paint. There was no house, except a rented one, for the Minister. The schoolroom in Rolleston Street was in a serious state and when we had meetings there, the audience had to bring umbrellas in case of rain. A great deal of furniture was rotting in the room at the back. In addition to all this, there was an overdraft at the Bank of New Zealand of many hundreds of pounds, and a debt to the Diocesan Office of about £600.

All this was enough to daunt a young man, especially as I had not been informed about the debts before I arrived. My predecessor, The Rev William Calder, had begun a fine system of week by week collections and, following his example, I put my strength into carrying on the good work. The Church people rallied round me in a wonderful manner and we began to pay all our income from this source towards the overdraft, which bore a higher rate of interest than the Diocesan debt. By means of £1 cards and other inducements, we were able after a year or two to pay in full this grievous overdraft and, as far as I can remember, we never received from the Bank any note of gratitude for liquidating a debt that must have been hopeless for many years.

We then went on with collecting for the other debt, and slowly reduced it month by month. Unfortunately, all this collecting made it impossible to do anything towards repairing the Church and school. But I think it must have been in 1887, the idea of holding a monster fete was mooted and was very enthusiastically taken up. A splendid committee was elected, with Mr Horatio Phillips as chairman and Mr W. Coath as secretary, and the people everywhere became interested. It was held on Easter Monday and was a triumphal success. There was a great procession to Parawai with contingents of sailors, huzzars, athletes, notables, Maoris on horseback, etc., led by St George himself, glittering in silver armour and helmet, and carrying the pennant of red cross on white ground. All marched out to the strains of the Naval Band to the grounds of Mr & Mrs Spencer, where bands of lady workers had erected stalls covered with beautiful fancy and other work; where refreshments counters groaned with good things. Races for boys and girls and sports of all kinds took place. Before 12 o'clock the Church Wardens came to me with the splendid news that the remainder of the debt was paid off and money enough was left to repair the Church and school.

As soon as possible the Church was jacked up on to the level brick piles inserted underneath, and the whole woodwork painted. The schoolroom was moved about 40 feet, reroofed and enlarged.

The congregations in these days were excellent and the spacious Church was generally crowded on Sunday evenings. The musical services were much appreciated, the choir being composed of talented choristers, who put their hearts, as well as their beautiful voices, into what they did. The organ was the gift of Mr E. T. Wildman, and was a sweet-toned instrument; the efficient organist was Mr Treweela. Bishop Cowie told me, after one of his visits, that I had one of the most intelligent congregations in the Diocese. Mr H. C. Lawlor was the lay reader during my stay at the Thames, and even after so many years my heart swells at the recollection of his loving and loyal friendship.

Among the many great services held in Saint George's during that period were: a Maori thanksgiving, at which were 11 Maori clergy, and 300 Maori laymen and women; the Queen Victoria Jubilee thanksgiving; the Codrington and Mason Missions; the visit of the Rev Joseph Hill, afterwards Bishop Hill, of Nigeria. Many wonderful confirmations took place.⁹

9 In 1886, Bishop Cowie visited the district and held confirmations services at St George's and St John's

The main Sunday School was, of course, in Rolleston Street,¹⁰ and there were branch school at Tararu, Parawai and Waiotahi. The total number of scholars on the rolls was about 700; the average attendance at the main school was 400. Having a missionary spirit, I held services down the coast at Whakatete and Tapu, and in the other direction at Parawai, Hikutaia and Paeroa.

An unfortunate German was the immediate cause of my leaving the Thames. He was drowned at Turua and a fortnight later his body was found and brought for burial. Unhappily the road to the Shortland Cemetery in those days was very rough, and the hearse turned over on the hill. The coffin broke open and it can be imagined what the effluvium was like. I thought, like a young soldier, that I must boldly face the enemy, and took the service at the gravesite. In a few days blood poisoning attacked me and my life hung in the balance. But by divine mercy I was spared, and, finding that I should be delicate for some time, decided against the Bishop's wish, to resign.

When Te Aroha parish was offered to me a little after, I accepted, for health reasons, and stayed there over seven years. I have before me a I write the farewell address presented to me before leaving Saint George's. As I read once more the loving messages it sends me, I must, with deep thankfulness, believe that my brief Vicarate of the Thames parish was not in vain in the Lord.

Final visit to the district of Bishop Cowie prior to his departure to England.¹¹ Full details of these may be read in the 1868 - 1968 booklet, pages 39 to 45.

1889

Archdeacon Evans retired and the Rev T. O'Callaghan was appointed to replace him. A scheme was approved to build a parsonage next to the Church, and a loan was raised for £350; work to start immediately. This does not appear to have gone ahead.¹² Parawai Sunday School closed owing to a leaky roof. the repairs to this were to cost £8, and as the people of the district could not afford this amount, Sunday School lapsed. The roll at the time was 66.

1891

The Sunday School at Tararu closed down, presumably on account of lack of numbers. Dr O'Callaghan called this a scandal and said that he would not take any more afternoon services until it was resumed. This prompted Mr Poulgrain to write to the Bishop on Vestry's behalf enquiring whether it was incumbent on Dr O'Callaghan to continue services there as before.¹³

1892

¹³ The full text of this letter may be read in the 1868 - 1968 booklet, pages 52-53.

(March) A special meeting was called at Tararu. Dr O'Callaghan agreed to return and try and re-start Sunday School

1896

Meetings were being held regularly at Kopu, Tararu and Puriri, and at Tapu on 5th Sundays.

1898

26/4/- was paid on the first instalment to the purchase of the old Maori Church at Parawai.

1900

The Sunday School at Parawai gained the use of the old Maori Church. It is not recorded where they met before this.

1905

The Ladies' Guild was formed. Church property in Rolleston Street was offered for sale.

1907

Three gas heaters were installed in Saint George's Church. There were also suggestions about re-roofing the Sunday School building. The decision was delayed owing to the building possibly being removed to the Church site.

1909

Tenders were received for the removal and re-erection of the Sunday School to the Mary Street site. Potterton and Black's tender was successful; £297/5/-.

1910

The motion was proposed and carried that it be an instruction to representative of the Parish in the Synod, to move and support a motion granting lady members of the congregation, to vote and take part in the meetings of the Church of England.

There were instructions not to sell the Rolleston Street site for less than £140.

Mr Poulgrain asked that the affairs of St John's Tararu, be taken over. He was told that the matter would be considered once a statement of accounts since its foundations had been submitted.

A letter was sent to Mr Treweela (organist for the past 30 years), pointing out that the Vestry were not too pleased with the musical part of the services, and that if he did not do something to improve it, they would have no alternative but to seek a new organist. (Mr Wildman, who presented the organ on the condition that the congregation raised £400, was still owed most of the money when he left the district, but he waived all claims, on the condition that his good friend Mr Treweela remained organist for life.) This could have been the reason why it was hard to keep musical directors.

1911

The Vestry retired Mr Treweela with two months salary in advance. Mr Midgley was then appointed organist at a salary of £50, but he refused to fulfil his acceptance. The position was then given to Mr Webb of Timaru.

The organ was taken to pieces and turned round, and a hydraulic motor installed. This was the gift of A. G. Price.

1912

The Rolleston Street property sold for £105.

1916

The Rev A. J. Beck became the Vicar on the retirement of Dr O'Callaghan