

St Peter's Parish - at the heart of the city



St Peter's has stood on the corner of Willis and Ghuznee Streets since 1848. What follows is the text of a History Board prepared by Tim and Sherrah Frances which stands in the narthex of the church. An updated history is still to be written.

Risen Anew

St Peter's Anglican Church was an off-shoot from the first St. Paul's which was built on a site near where the Beehive now stands. Te Aro was already becoming a mixed area of bustling commercial development, substantial residences for well-to-do business and professional people, and many small and often inadequate houses for working families.

In 1847 Bishop Selwyn bought from the New Zealand Company a plot of land on the corner of Willis and Ghuznee Streets for two hundred pounds. Building began and was completed the next year. The new church was opened on a showery Sunday, 17 September 1848.

The first St. Peter's was a small, plain wooden church. It had few architectural pretensions though it was graced by what came to be known as the town clock bought by public subscription. Originally designed to seat some 250 people the church was soon bursting at the seams. Major additions were carried out in 1857 (when two aisles were built on to the original single nave), 1866, 1868 and 1872.

By 1875 the parish had decided that a new building was needed for, even though the opening of St. Mark's church had taken some of the pressure off St. Peter's, seating for 560 people was still inadequate. Some people, moreover, thought the old church had become "a large, straggling, disproportionate, shapeless deformity". Planning and fund-raising began in earnest.



St Peter's 1863

The second St. Peter's, the one you are standing in now, was built during 1879. The old church was moved to the back of the existing property and subsequently sold. The new St. Peter's Church was consecrated on 21 December 1879.

Grosholtz, the architect whose design for “a handsome Gothic structure” was first accepted, died before the working drawings were completed. Thomas Turnbull was engaged to draw up new plans which were accepted but only after a battle had been fought over the construction material to be used. Turnbull, who had had 10 years working experience in San Francisco and had brought with him the latest “American principle of construction” for dealing with earthquakes was convinced that brick buildings could be built to withstand any likely shocks. The vicar, no doubt recalling stories of the devastation caused by the 1848 earthquake, was unconvinced. Turnbull eventually capitulated and as a result we have the handsome wooden building so much admired today.

One major disappointment was the bell-tower. Money had been raised for a fine set of eight bells. A society of bell ringers enthusiastically practised on handbells in preparation for the great day. Imagine the distress when the bells were first rung and the tower vibrated so wildly as to threaten the structure. So there the bells are above you they can be chimed but they still wait for the day they can peal out in their full glory.

Reaching Out

Within a month of the first service held in St. Peter’s on Sunday 17 September 1848, a severe earthquake hit Wellington.

“About half past one o’clock am. this morning a distant hollow roar was heard: the sound traveling at a most rapid rate, and almost instantaneously, in the course of a few seconds of time, the whole town was labouring from the most severe shock of an earthquake ever experienced by the white residents, or remembered by the Maoris”.

The shocks continued until daylight, smaller shocks were felt for some days. The destruction was appalling. Brick buildings collapsed clay houses crumbled, chimneys tumbled. The area around St. Peter’s was badly hit. Many people became homeless overnight. St. Peter’s opened its doors and for three weeks a large number of people sought refuge in the new wooden church. On Friday 20 October 1848, set aside by proclamation as a day of public fast, prayer and humiliation, large public open air services, morning and evening, were held at St. Peter’s and at St. Paul’s Anglican Churches, mass was held at the Catholic Chapel at Boulcott Street, and, because their churches had been destroyed, services for the Wesleyan, Primitive Methodist and Independent Chapels were held at Scots Kirk at the invitation of the Presbyterians.

Thus was born that reaching out into the community, that concern for the physical as well as the spiritual well being of people in its neighbourhood, and that desire to work with other faith groups which has always fired the social conscience of the people of St. Peter’s.

Gilding the Lily

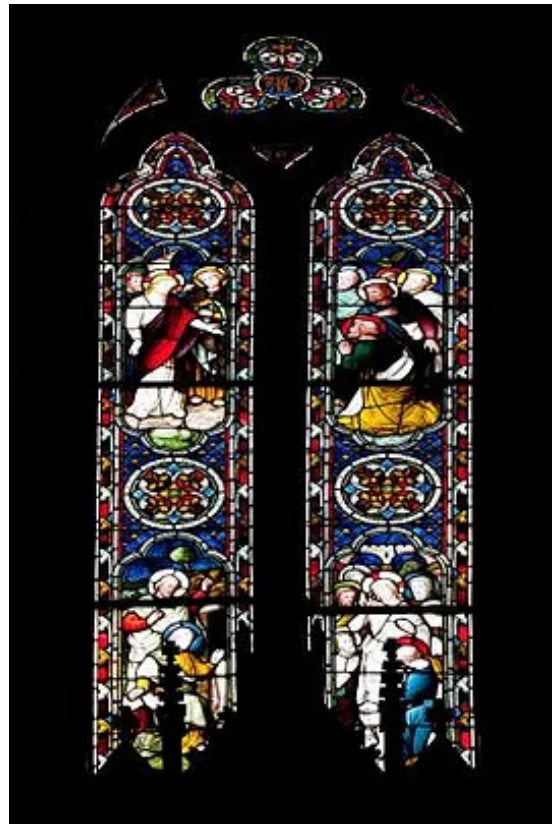
Handsome though the church was when seen from the street, the interior even with its splendid kauri timber work was, in 1879, rather bare. Over the next 25 years the parishioners set about transforming the church into the beautiful place of worship it now is - rich in history, rich in shared devotion.

The three memorial stained glass sanctuary windows showing the life of St. Peter, and the St. John window in the front of the nave on the south wall, were there from the opening of the church. The rest of the windows were of white frosted glass until replaced by cathedral glass in 1892. The "colours selected, their combination, and their arrangement" however, were deemed to have been somewhat unfortunate". This unhappy situation was saved by the four additional memorial windows installed between 1890 and 1923. The late Victorian elegance of these English designed windows, together with the flamboyantly painted pipes of the organ, built in England in 1886, installed in 1890 and left untouched by the subsequent revampings of the organ itself, add much to the character of the church.

Not everything in the church was of overseas origin, The fine chancel screen, marking the transition from the nave to the sanctuary, was designed by local architect Frederick Clere, carved by W.H. Barnett of Palmerston North and installed in 1892. In the same year Clere designed the front porch. Clere and Richmond also designed the ornamental railing and gate below the screen though the iron work was executed overseas and imported in 1894. Clere and Barnett, the admirable carver, produced the choir stalls with their engaging angel figures at the same time. In 1905 Clere also designed the splendid carved reredos behind the high altar though this, too, was made in England. These locally conceived additions enriched the fabric of the church and harmonised with Turnbull's overall design.

Neighbours

From the earliest days St. Peter's has been concerned with the well-being of the people in its neighbourhood. There was no public education system in colonial Wellington - it was largely left to the churches. In 1854 St Peter's responded by opening a day school which grew rapidly. At first the school was run entirely by the parish, then in partnership with the Provincial Government and finally by the



The Central Window in the High Sanctuary

new Education Board alone. The venture ended abruptly in 1922 when the lease of the hall expired and, without warning, a van arrived, carried all the school fixtures off to the new Te Aro School and the no doubt delighted children were sent home for the day

By then the Parish had other things on its mind It had embarked on a series of “missions” aimed at ameliorating some of the social problems affecting the growing city. Quin Street, (now Victoria Street extension) behind the church, had become a notorious area known to the police for its fights and “drunken orgies of the most disgraceful character”. In 1884, in a house lent by a parishioner, St. Peter’s began mission services including Sunday school, evening classes in reading, writing, sewing and music together with games evenings and a popular football club. It was a successful and lively venture even though “the work has been very trying from the rude behaviour of grown-up lads”.



The Chinese Mission established by St Peter's in 1900

In the area around Haining and Frederick Streets a small Chinese community had become established. They were hard-working and peaceable but the area had also been given a certain notoriety because of pak-a-poo gambling rooms and alleged opium smoking. A mission to the Chinese people was begun by St Peter's in 1900. A hall was built in Frederick Street in 1907 for services, educational classes and adult educational activities. This was the forerunner of the Anglican Chinese Church of today. The most successful of these ventures was the mission in Taranaki Street which began in 1904 in a hired room where an evangelist held services and ran a Boys' Club. Three years later the mission had its own hall and its services to the poor, the unemployed and the destitute expanded until it became well beyond the capacity of St. Peter's to support it. In 1929 it was

transferred to Diocesan control as the Wellington City Mission and has continued to play a major role in social welfare work in the City.

Change - and more Change

"There has been a lamentable falling off in attendance of the mid-day service on Sunday. This is generally attributed to the bicycle but I cannot see why cyclists cannot so arrange their rides upon Sunday as to be able to attend Divine Service”.

The vicar's lament in 1897 was truly prophetic for the transport revolution, begun in part by the bike, was to transform the Te Aro area and St. Peter's. Rapid commercial development and the spread of slum areas beyond Cuba Street made living in town less attractive for those who had built the grand houses in the Upper Willis Street area. They began to shift to the newer suburbs and their houses became business and boarding establishments. The advent of trains, the electric tram and the motorcar led to a veritable exodus. New churches, supported by St. Peter's until launched into independence, reduced the size of the parish dramatically. Later slum clearance and the migration of people to the new state housing areas, high rise commercial buildings and the arrival of the motorway in the 1970's completed the transformation of St. Peter's into a city church with a small residential basis, a significant underprivileged transitory population and a large work-day community which hastened to its suburban retreat each evening and left the city virtually deserted at the weekends.

By the 1960's the now historic church had found a new role - a centre for social activism which combined an outward looking theology with a concern for the neglected and marginalised people of the city, and an outspokenness on political issues such as poverty, homosexual law reform, sporting contacts with the South Africa of the apartheid era, the war in Vietnam and nuclear concerns. The liturgical movement of that time was accompanied in St. Peter's by alterations, designed by architect William Alington, which made worship more accessible to people and, in 1969, brought the altar into the main body of the church. This new the enthusiasm of many people both from within and outside the parish. Catacombs, started in 1959 as a young Anglican Club, the meeting place for young and single people and still flourishes in centre in Upper Willis street. St. Peter's Pantry, is still, sadly, much used by those who need emergency help. A flowering of co-operation with the Wesleyan, Presbyterian and Quaker city congregations led to a remarkable series of innovative ventures in social welfare under their combined City Ministry. This organisation, under its new name Downtown Community Ministry, continues to serve Wellington today.



St Peter's Circa 1910

Today and Tomorrow

Like most mainstream Christian churches St. Peter's has felt the effects of the secularism, materialism and cynicism of the late 20th century. Numbers have fallen and commitment has diminished. When you enter this church however, you will sense an openness, a feeling of space, and perhaps a suggestion of new beginnings. The alterations of 1997, the wide and welcoming entrance to the main body of the church which sweeps you from the baptismal font to the altar, the meditation room on the left with its quiet atmosphere for prayer and contemplation, and the efficient vicar's study on the right reflect something new. It is a response to the search for a renewed spirituality which is beginning to work in our community - a search which brings to the recently begun Celtic and Taize services people whose links with established churches have been tenuous or non-existent. The vicar's study, with its new technology and openness to visitors, is a reaffirmation of continuing and business-like commitment to the community - the poor, the office people, and those who have moved back to the revitalised city with its new and renovated apartment blocks, its coffee houses and night spots, its weekend shopping and its street kids, its excitements and its deprivation.

The alterations to the church were designed and carried through by architect Hugh Tennent - himself a Buddhist. Again that is, perhaps, symbolic of the openness of St. Peter's - a recognition that other faiths and many strands of Christian belief have much to contribute to our understanding of God.

So there before you is St Peter's— a church built for the worship of God, committed to serve the community, proud of its Victorian heritage, constantly seeking to fine its proper role in a rapidly changing city.

Please come in and enjoy its beauty and serenity. And pray if you will or sit for a few moments in silent contemplation.