

Part I: A Noble Site



Holy Trinity Cathedral as it appears today.

Holy Trinity Cathedral is a building familiar to most Aucklanders. Serving as the mother church of the Anglican Diocese of Auckland, it stands in a prominent position overlooking the city from the top of Parnell Road. It hosts a variety of events, spiritual and secular alike. Many Aucklanders who have never attended Sunday service have been inside its walls at some point in their lives, whether for a concert, school prize giving, wedding, or funeral. Like the grand old cathedrals of Europe, it serves as an icon of the city and ceremonial centre of public life.

Yet, from an architectural standpoint, it is something of a curiosity – some would even regard it as an eyesore. Holy Trinity Cathedral is best described not as a building, but rather as a series of interconnected buildings. In the centre is a neo-gothic chancel clad with red brick, which is adjoined by a modern nave in the front and an even more modern chapel to the rear. Next to the main structure stands a much older wooden church, which, despite being dwarfed by the cathedral, is an impressive building in its own right. One only has to notice the striking architectural differences between the various components of the cathedral to surmise that the history of Holy Trinity is not a simple one nor a straightforward one. In fact, it is a long and controversial story that goes back to the very founding of the city. This article, which will be the first in a series of four, will cover the history of the cathedral site throughout the 19th century.

In 1840, a 3,000-acre area of land on the southern edge of the Waitematā harbour was secured for British settlement by Captain William Hobson, who had struck a deal with Te Kawau, the

paramount chief of the Ngāti Whātua iwi.¹ For many decades, the region that would become Auckland city had been the site of conflict and competition between Māori groups, a situation that was further exacerbated by the introduction of European firearms in the early 19th century. Te Kawau was reportedly anxious to ensure that his people could live in peace; indeed, the chief's "great aversion to war" was noted by the Anglican priest Samuel Marsden as early as 1820.² The transfer of land was therefore expected to be mutually beneficial. Te Kawau hoped that proximity to the British settlers would help to keep the peace in the area,³ and Hobson was now able to found a new capital city on what he considered to be "geographically the best site in New Zealand."⁴



The area that would become the city of Auckland, 1840.

The following year, New Zealand was officially granted the status of crown colony, and the local seat of government was officially moved from Russell to the new town of Auckland. Before this point, New Zealand had officially been part of the colony of New South Wales, and thus had fallen under the Anglican Diocese of Australia.⁵ Now that New Zealand seemed poised to grow into a prosperous colony in its own right, a series of "munificent donations" were made to enable the establishment of a brand new Anglican bishopric which would cover the islands.⁶ These donations came from a variety of sources; Adelaide of Saxe-Meiningen, the widow of King William IV, gave £2,000, the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of London gave £1,000 each, and various

¹ Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei and Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei Trustee Limited and the Crown Deed of Settlement of Historical Claims, 5 November 2011, 11.

² Parnell Heritage Report, 30 March 1999, 10.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Deed of Settlement of Historical Claims, 10.

⁵ "Government Notice," *New Zealand Advertiser and Bay of Islands Gazette*, Volume I, Issue VI, 16 July 1840, 1.

⁶ "Bishop for New Zealand," *New Zealand Herald and Auckland Gazette*, Volume I, Issue 2, 17 July 1841, 2.

Christian societies made significant contributions. By September 1841, the total amount of money that had been committed to the project was around £32,600.⁷

The colonists of Auckland looked forward to seeing their small, fledgling town “elevated to the dignity of having attached to it an Episcopal See”.⁸ Naturally, the first order of business for the new bishopric was to acquire a bishop. A 32-year-old priest named George Augustus Selwyn was duly appointed to the role, having been recommended by one of his father’s former students: one Prince Albert, the husband of Queen Victoria.⁹ Selwyn was consecrated and set sail from England in late 1841.¹⁰

As the colonists in New Zealand awaited his arrival, they openly speculated about whether the untested bishop would be up to the unique task of managing a colonial diocese. In a letter to the editor of the *Nelson Examiner*, one concerned settler stressed that the “real duties of a bishop in a colony” were different to those of a bishop in Great Britain. The author of the letter expressed doubt that the young bishop would be able to control New Zealand’s unruly flock, already under stress from sectarian division.¹¹ Others were more optimistic; a response to the original *Examiner* letter contained the following passage:

“We are inclined to believe that [Bishop Selwyn] has landed upon these shores, not as a political bishop, but as a pastor to the whole flock, without the narrow antipathies to other sects, and indeed with a liberality of religious sentiment which will have the effect of drawing towards him those whose feelings are indeed Christian, of whatever denomination.”¹²

Despite his relatively young age, the new Bishop quickly endeared himself to the people of New Zealand, developing a reputation as a proactive and far-sighted community leader. During the long voyage from England to New Zealand, Selwyn dutifully studied te reo with a Māori boy who was on his way home. His language lessons were so successful that he was able to preach his first sermon in the Māori language upon arriving in the country.¹³ Additionally, Selwyn was a strong advocate for the idea of building a permanent cathedral in the colony, believing that the construction of a grand building in the new capital of New Zealand would provide immense benefits to parishioners and clergy alike.¹⁴ Within two months of his arrival on these alien shores, Bishop Selwyn had already identified a site which he believed had great potential to serve as the location of such a grand edifice. In a letter dated July 29, 1842, Selwyn described this site in the following terms:

⁷ “English Intelligence,” *New Zealand Herald and Auckland Gazette*, Volume I, Issue 12, 25 September 1841, 1.

⁸ “Bishop for New Zealand,” 2.

⁹ *New Zealand Gazette and Wellington Spectator*, Volume II, Issue 86, 3 November 1841, 2.

¹⁰ “The Bishop of New Zealand,” *Nelson Examiner and New Zealand Chronicle*, Volume I, Issue 12, 28 May 1842, 47.

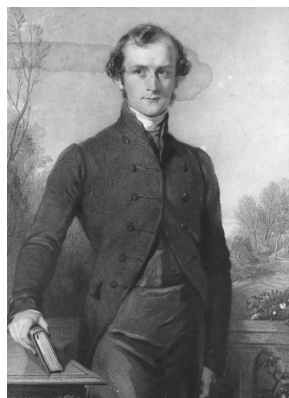
¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, 46.

¹³ “Bishop Selwyn,” *Auckland Star*, Volume IX, Issue 2513, 13 April 1878, 2.

¹⁴ “Anglican Cathedral,” *New Zealand Herald*, Volume LXIII, Issue 19459, 15 October 1926, 13.

“The land bought for the Church includes, as I said before, a noble site for a cathedral, distant about three-quarters of a mile from the centre of the town and commanding a magnificent view of the harbour of Waitemata.”¹⁵



Left: Bishop George Augustus Selwyn as a young man, 1842.

Right: Watercolour by Bishop Selwyn showing Hobson Bay as it appeared in the 1840s.

The future cathedral site is visible in the background (hill left of centre).

At the crest of a gently sloping hill, the plot provided a panoramic vision of Auckland and its surroundings. To the Northeast were the shimmering waters of the Waitemata with Rangitoto island looming on the horizon, to the Northwest was the hustle and bustle of the burgeoning town centre, and to the South was the great isthmus with its many ancient volcanic cones rising impressively from the earth. Truly, there were few cathedrals in Europe that could boast such a unique and awe-inspiring location.

In 1860, Bishop Selwyn opened a fund that he hoped would one day finance the building of the cathedral. However, the plans of the forward-thinking bishop would not come to fruition during his lifetime. In fact, it would be more than a century after Selwyn purchased the land in Parnell that the first stone would be laid on the site. Bishop Selwyn passed away in England in 1878. An obituary in the *Auckland Star* praised his contributions to the community and described him as “one of the foremost missionaries and churchmen of his life and time.”¹⁶ It is reported that his last words were in te reo: “ka mārama ngā mea katoa,” meaning, “it is all light.”¹⁷

In the same year that Bishop Selwyn had opened the cathedral fund, a small wooden church called St. Mary’s was built. For decades, this was the only place of worship standing on Selwyn’s “noble site.” But with the city’s population steadily increasing, it wasn’t long before the small church

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ “Bishop Selwyn,” 2.

¹⁷ “Bishop Selwyn Chapel,” *Holy-Trinity*, 2021, www.holy-trinity.org.nz/bishopselwynchapel.

was “bursting at the seams,” scarcely large enough to accommodate Auckland’s growing flock.¹⁸ It was becoming clear that a new building was required. Yet, in the years after Bishop Selwyn’s death, the fund which he had set up to finance the building of a cathedral in Parnell had barely grown at all. To make matters worse, the 1870s brought the *Long Depression* – a worldwide economic crisis which, among other things, had resulted in the collapse of New Zealand’s vital timber market.¹⁹ These factors conspired to ensure that there was no money for the construction of a grand cathedral on the scale of those in Europe.



The original St. Mary's church in Parnell, 1860s.

Instead, a smaller *pro-cathedral* was built – a church that would temporarily perform the function of a cathedral until a more permanent structure could be erected. Thus, St. Mary’s church was demolished and replaced by St. Mary’s cathedral. This large wooden building was built on the Western side of Parnell Road, opposite the site which was set aside for the future cathedral.²⁰ The foundation stone of the new church was laid in 1886,²¹ and two years later it was consecrated and it held its first service.²² It was finally completed in 1898.²³

The visionary behind this new building was the English-born, Christchurch-based architect Benjamin Woolfield Mountfort.²⁴ An admirer of the great medieval cathedrals of Britain, Mountfort was the foremost proponent of the *gothic revival* style of architecture in New Zealand. While he was involved with St. Mary’s pro-cathedral, he was also the lead architect overseeing the construction of

¹⁸ Margaret McClure, “New Beginnings: The Colonial Church, 1870–1918,” *Living Legacy: A History of the Anglican Diocese of Auckland*, Edited by Allan K. Davidson, Auckland, New Zealand: Anglican Diocese of Auckland, 2011, 108.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 107.

²⁰ Lisa J. Truttman, *Research Summary 446 Parnell Road, Parnell (St Mary’s Church building)*, UID 358, 31 March 2008.

²¹ Jean Gimpel, *The Cathedral Builders*, 1961.

²² “Opening of St. Mary’s,” *New Zealand Herald*, Volume XXV, Issue 9074, 7 June 1888, 8.

²³ “St. Mary’s Cathedral,” *Auckland Star*, Volume XXIX, Issue 169, 20 July 1898, 5.

²⁴ *Research Summary 446 Parnell Road*.

the iconic cathedral in Christchurch. Once finished, St. Mary's stood at 12 metres high and 50 metres long. While much smaller than the colossal (by New Zealand standards) cathedral being built in Christchurch, St. Mary's dimensions are impressive given that it was made entirely out of wood.²⁵ Its material composition reflects the fact that, while marvellous, St. Mary's was never intended to be used as Auckland's permanent cathedral.



Left: St. Mary's pro-cathedral upon completion, 1898.

Right: The architect Benjamin Woolfield Mountfort, c. 1870.

In the meantime, the plot of land that would one day be the site of Holy Trinity Cathedral was divided into sections and let out on 60-year leases. The corner of Parnell Road and St. Stephen's Avenue hosted a row of private houses, and further up the road was Parnell Tennis Club. For many decades, St. Mary's pro-cathedral served as the centre of the Anglican Diocese of Auckland (the original *Diocese of New Zealand* had been split up and the *Diocese of Auckland* was officially created in 1868²⁶). While St. Mary's would eventually lose its status as pro-cathedral, it still stands proudly today and receives many visitors. A sign planted outside boasts that the church is regarded as one of the "finest wooden gothic buildings in the world."²⁷

Before long, though, it became apparent that even the new St. Mary's was inadequate to meet the needs of a major city like Auckland. After all, the seating capacity of St. Mary's was only 700, and Auckland's population was continuing to swell.²⁸ Soon, church leaders would begin agitating for the realisation of Selwyn's dream of a large, permanent cathedral, fit to serve as the spiritual centre of a major city.

²⁵ *New Zealand Herald*, Volume XXV, Issue 9073, 6 June 1888, 4.

²⁶ *Proceedings of the General Synod: 4th General Synod*, 1868, 41.

²⁷ Ann Elder, "Church Shift Architect: 'I'm No Vandal'," *Auckland Star*, 30 January 1982.

²⁸ "St Marys Key to New Plans For Cathedral," *Auckland Star*, 25 June 1980.