

THE CHURCH BY THE AIRPORT

Westney Road Methodist Church, Mangere

- Richard WAUGH

Most Aucklanders have driven past it, but few have ever been inside it! The small Westney Road Chapel on George Bolt Drive is the first Church that people see as they leave Auckland International Airport. Built as a pioneer rural chapel in 1856 it is today one of the oldest surviving Methodist Churches in the Auckland area. Its future is somewhat precarious as there are plans for airport extensions with a second runway which would necessitate removal of the Church building and cemetery.

Part of the Manukau North Parish since 1982, the cemetery is currently being closed as the first step toward relocation of the historic building.

The following are comments by Rev F E Leadley published at the time of the centenary in 1956 -

"A hundred years ago, one of a number of small settlements bordering the Manukau Harbour was known as Taotaoroa. Here a few Europeans took up land. The Maori settlement of Ihumatao was situated on the coast about 1½ miles away. It was not until the year 1867 that several of these small groups were united and the district renamed "Mangere".

In those early days there were few roads - just tracks through the fern and flax, ti-tree and manuka. One of these tracks came down what is now Westney Road to the beach, and another crossing it at right angles led to the Maori Pa and Methodist Mission Station at Ihumatao. At this intersection, which also marked one corner of Mr William Westney's farm, an area of two acres was generously set aside by him as a gift for a Methodist Church and Burial Ground. The Church now celebrating its centenary was built there, and opened for public worship at the end of January, 1856. It is interesting to note that at that time, this Church and the one at Onehunga were the only Methodist Churches outside Auckland where services were conducted in the English language. All other services were in Maori."

Mr A W Westney, a descendant of the settler William Westney, who donated the two acres to the Wesleyan Church in 1855, also recalled at the time of the centenary -

"The exact date of the opening is not known but the late Mr Stephen Westney who was then a boy, informed the writer that it was a sweltering hot day in January or February when the surrounding fields of wheat were 'ripe unto harvest'. The large crowd which gathered for the opening proved to be far too large for the small building, so most of the dedication ceremony was held

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outdoors. While one of the speakers was delivering his address, a keen-eyed Maori espied a well known figure approaching in the distance and he and others, uttering cries of 'Haere Mai, E Henere, Haere Mai!' rushed off down the track to meet their old friend and adviser the Rev. Henry Lawry who had travelled all the way from Hokianga to be present at the opening. After the speeches a 'tea meeting' or 'soiree' (to use an old term) was held and in order to promote as much good feeling as possible (this was prior to the Maori War) the Maoris were invited to sit down and partake of the food first, this they did so efficiently that there was little or nothing left for the hungry pakehas."

