

Bishop Selwyn and St John's College

The Establishment of St John's Theological College in Auckland

Dr Allan Davidson's book "*Selwyn's Legacy*" published in 1993 provides an excellent record of the development of St John's College from when it was first conceived by Bishop Selwyn in 1843.

Referenced quotations from "*Selwyn's Legacy*" have been used frequently.

Having been appointed Bishop of New Zealand in 1841 before leaving England, Selwyn arrived in New Zealand in 1842. Initially he opened his college at the Church Missionary Society Station at Te Waimate in Northland, but soon saw the need to move to Auckland.

Selwyn used the substantial legacy of £600 from Rev. Thomas Whytehead to enable the land to be purchased. Selwyn had proposed that Whytehead would become "Master of the College", but that proposal was shattered when Whytehead died of tuberculosis in March 1843, just months after arriving in New Zealand.²



With the help of William Martin, Chief Justice for New Zealand, in 1844 Selwyn purchased the initial land area of 378 acres (153 hectares) for St John's College in Auckland.

*Bishop Selwyn
and William Martin in 1862
Auckland Libraries
Heritage Collections
Reference 4-3282*

Other contributions given to the College, some as scholarships, enabled the College to become established and further land to be purchased. The area expanded to 1330 acres (538 hectares) over the next few years.¹

The site of the present-day St John's College chosen by Bishop Selwyn was initially very exposed, covered only in bracken fern with no shelter from wind.

The site was chosen because it was considered that;

"While St John's was close to Auckland, it was also sufficiently isolated to meet Selwyn's concerns for separation from the undesirable attractions of the growing urban centre [of Auckland]"¹

The Encampment

“A site was chosen on the south side of the Purewa Creek for a temporary college. Described as ‘The Encampment’, it was according to Mrs Selwyn, ‘a pretty spot’.

The Bishop’s large tent was put up at Purewa for services, social gatherings and the native boys’ school, seventeen boys having come from Te Waimate.

Initially they and Cotton [Selwyn’s Domestic Chaplain and headmaster of the Collegiate School] were living in tents sheltered by a copse of native trees from the prevailing winds, leaving however, one side open to the periodic invasion of easterly gales which, once a fortnight, almost overthrew the tents drenching the inmates, their bedding and clothes. Raupō houses were built to replace the tents.”³

“In June 1845 Martin [Chief Justice] described how ‘In the hollows below’ the St John’s site ‘a village of wooden houses had grown up containing 78 souls, all belonging to the College.’ In St John’s College at this time there was one candidate for orders, Samuel Williams who was also senior bursar, and six junior students. Twenty seven students were listed in the Collegiate School with Cotton as headmaster.”⁵

There is a large oak tree close to the north side of the Te Ara Ki Uta Ki Tai shared pathway bridge over the railway opposite Purewa Cemetery. It is thought this tree would have been planted by Selwyn at the site of the encampment.



*Bishops Auckland, New Zealand:
Temporary Establishment of Saint John's College at Purewa Estuary
Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, gift of Lady Spens, 1940*

Selwyn's Schooner Undine at Pourewa Estuary



Selwyn's schooner 'Undine'
Painted in 1915 by Captain Mathew Thomas Clayton
Courtesy Kinder Library, St John's College

A big advantage of the Pourewa Estuary site was its water access to Waitematā Harbour; a necessity at that time as overland travel on the few primitive muddy, clay tracks/roads was slow and difficult.

Voyages by sea were the usual way to travel. In addition to his responsibilities as Bishop to the whole of New Zealand, Selwyn also had responsibility for a large area of the Pacific.

From 1849 when his 21 ton displacement schooner *Undine* was built in Auckland, he was able to visit other places in New Zealand and Melanesia.

The *Undine* could be brought up Pourewa Estuary to the site of his encampment.

St Thomas' Church

Soon after Selwyn moved the College to Auckland, the Colonial Treasurer Alex Shepherd, in 1843 offered a six acre site beside Kohimarama Road to build St Thomas' Church. At that time the Tāmaki land had been sold to new settlers who had established farms. With Selwyn's support, the 24 residents of Tāmaki at that time were keen to have a church for all denominations and assisted with cash or labour to enable the church to be built.

Selwyn engaged British architect Sampson Kempthorne, who had built Gothic churches in England, to design the new church. Volcanic rock brought by waggons from Maungarei (Mt Wellington) was used for the walls and sand was brought from Mission Bay using seawater to mix the mortar.

The first service in the new church was held on Sunday, 22 December 1844 just one year after the foundation stone had been ceremoniously laid by the Acting Governor Willoughby Shortland.

Unfortunately, some of the basalt stone was too soft and soon began to crumble. The salt water and sand from Mission Bay beach was too salty causing the mortar to fail. By 1859 the church had to be abandoned because it was unsafe. The roof collapsed in 1905 and the main structure was demolished in 1954.⁴



Photo: John La Roche

***Foundation walls of the original St Thomas' Church
close to the new Church in 2021***



*May 1916 picture of the ruins of Old St Thomas' Church,
corner of Kohimarama and St Heliers Bay Roads.
Built in 1843, abandoned in 1864, the ruins were demolished in 1954.
Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections 5-367*

Moving to the Permanent Site up the Hill



Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections 246-9

Selwyn was keen to commence building on the permanent site up the hill. In 1846 the kitchen was built using large blocks of scoria with a fireplace at one end.

This building with its fireplace still exists today. Selwyn preferred stone because of its English tradition and permanence. However, the problems at St Thomas' church and the collapse of Taurarua (Judges Bay) stone church, designed by his first architect Sampson Kempthorne, caused Selwyn to agree to using timber. Scoria used for the stone buildings absorbed moisture making the interior very damp and the movement of clay foundations caused problems.⁶

The timber chapel designed by Frederick Thatcher, completed in 1847, is now the oldest surviving church building in Auckland.



*Photo of John Kinder Drawing of the original St John's Chapel in 1878-79
Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections 4-3296*

From April 1846 the college began moving to its permanent site using the kitchen as a temporary dining hall. The second stone building called "Bishop's Palace" which did not last, had sixteen rooms providing accommodation for the Selwyn family, other staff members, a library and the English Boys' School. The Māori students continued at Pourewa until November 1846 when their buildings were completed up the hill at the eastern end of the site.⁶

In November 1847 the immigrant ships *Sir Robert Sale* and *Minerva* with Fencible families for Howick arrived in Auckland. They were welcomed and entertained by Bishop Selwyn and his staff of St John's College at Pourewa.

The new arrivals were taken in the Bishop's whale boat and rowed to Pourewa Creek. At Selwyn's tent a central table had been set up with dishes for 300 people. There were joints of whole beef killed for the occasion with pudding to correspond. Among those helping were the wives of the Governor, Chief Justice and the Bishop who assisted in serving the guests.⁷

Life for students at St John's was very demanding. Worship and breakfast were followed by classes, two hours work before dinner at 2 pm then two more hours of classes, tea, chapel, recreation and preparation.

James Stack, a pupil in 1846 described how

"When 12 o'clock struck, instead of adjourning to the playground, every boy had to shoulder some garden tool, which he found on a rack in the passage and proceed, with the master of his class to some part of the grounds, where he was set to work.

Some had to dig drains through swamps, which filled every gully on the estate; others to clear off the fern and grub the tutu and mānuka roots out of the ground; others to attend to the planting and weeding of the vegetable garden".

Meanwhile students

"were ploughing or fencing on the farm; others were grinding wheat for our bread in a large steel mill, or working in the carpenter's shop or at the printing press".

Sometimes the schooling was abandoned altogether when, for example, a vessel needed unloading with timber, or labour was urgently needed to harvest the wheat. Selwyn noted in 1846 with some satisfaction,

"At present we have on the estate about 40 acres of wheat and 10 acres of potatoes."⁸

Selwyn reminded members of St John's College

"that the intervals between times of study should be employed in some kind of work for the general benefit of the community; all unnecessary 'resort to the Town of Auckland' was to be discouraged, boats were not to be used without orders from the College tutor and senior bursar and the College schooner was 'not to be sailed without written permission from Mrs Selwyn'".

Provision was made for the monthly audit to be made by Mrs Selwyn, Cotton, the senior bursar and Thomas Outhwaite, Registrar of the Supreme Court.⁵

But there was continuing difficulty in farming the heavy clay soil.

According to Hutton the college was "sadly deficient in one quality, it had not good soil."⁹

The St John's site, which was very exposed, was landscaped by the foresters.

Sarah Selwyn described how Cotton, Hutton, Dale and the boys

"had planted trees innumerable, chiefly ngaio as nurses for choicer sorts and are now laying out the garden and walks, in the very pretty ground under our windows".

Hutton reported in 1846 that

"nearly 2,000 ngaio had been planted as 'break-winds and shelters for the gardens.'"¹⁰

While land endowments at St John's were considerable, the financial returns for many years were very small. Farmers struggled to make a living on the heavy clay soil and there were often problems with rental arrears, defaulting tenants and bankruptcy.

The College had very little working capital, Kenny the Chairman [of St John's College Board of Trustees in 1865] advancing £300 on one occasion to meet expenses and Patterson proposing to make a further advance of £300.¹¹

In 1853 the college was temporarily closed after student and financial difficulties. Selwyn returned to England briefly from late 1853 until July 1855.¹² He was back in New Zealand in 1859 before he finally left the country in 1868; Selwyn recommended to the General Synod of the Anglican Church that Trustees be appointed to manage the College.¹³

George Augustus Selwyn

Dr Allan Davidson has described Bishop Selwyn in the website he established to describe the history of St John's College as follows;

George Augustus Selwyn, (5 April 1809 – 11 April 1878)

“Bishop of New Zealand from 1841 to 1868, founder of the College of St John the Evangelist, named it after his alma mater, St John's College, Cambridge in England. The College opened on 15 March 1843 at the Church Missionary station at Te Waimate, inland from the Bay of Islands where Bishop Selwyn established his first residence in New Zealand.

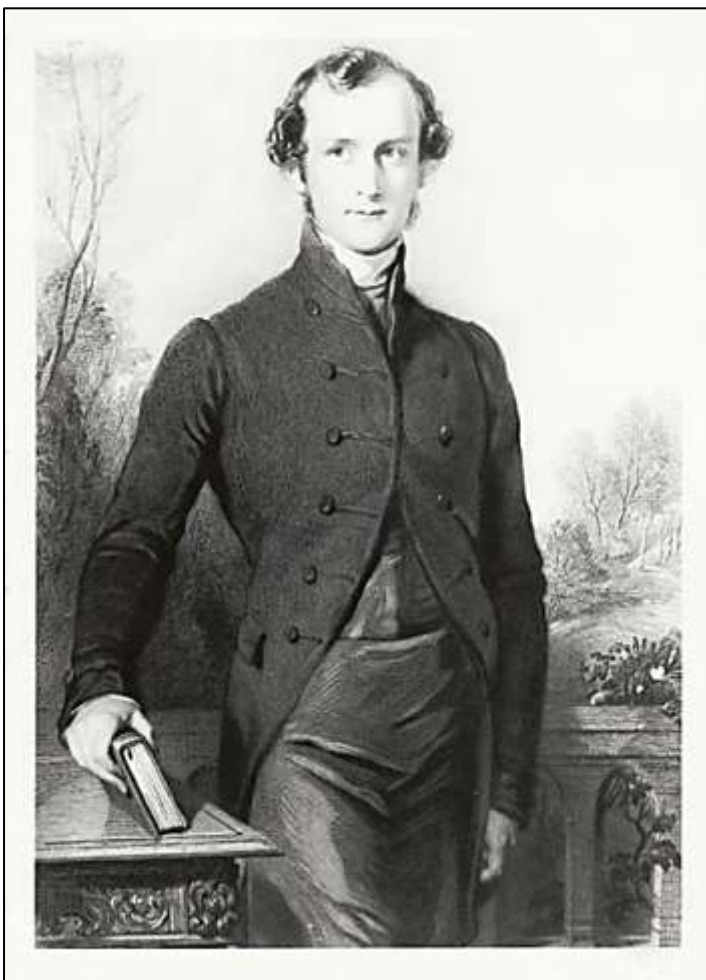
The College was a multi-level establishment, including a theological department initially with seven students, a Māori teachers' school, English and Māori boys' schools, and a Māori infant school. 'Religio, Doctrina, Diligentia', true religion, sound learning, and useful industry was Selwyn's motto for the College. From the outset Selwyn developed a College based on an idealised semi-monastic community. There was a common dining hall, participation in daily worship in Māori and English, a farm to support the College and train students, and a hospital.”¹⁴

Selwyn was widely respected and appreciated. When he left Auckland, a rousing farewell took place.

On 20 October 1868, after the conclusion of the General Synod in Auckland, a farewell communion service in St Paul's began at 3pm and did not end until 5pm. The final communicant to receive the bread and the wine from the bishop's hands was the venerable Ngāti Hao Chief Patuone.

A public holiday was declared to farewell Selwyn.

The press of people in the streets was so great that the horses were taken out of the shafts and the carriage drawn to the wharf by young men. The streets were decked with bunting; steamers sounded their whistles; naval vessels fired their guns. Selwyn arrived in England on 31 December.¹⁵



***George Augustus Selwyn (1809-1878),
Bishop of New Zealand 1842-1869.***
Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections 7-A5477

On his return to Britain in 1868, Selwyn served as Bishop of Lichfield from 1868 to 1878. He had already been enthroned in Lichfield 9 January 1868 after having attended the Lambeth Conference in 1867.

“After his death, Selwyn College, Cambridge, was founded to honour his life and contribution to scholarship and religion. The college and other educational facilities uphold the legacy of the bishop.”¹⁶

References

Bishop Selwyn & St Johns College

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- 4 St Thomas Tāmaki, <https://stthomastamaki.org.nz/about/history/>
- 5 *Selwyn's Legacy* P50
- 6 *Selwyn's Legacy* P52 - 54
- 7 *Colonial Church Chronicle and Missionary Journal* Vol 2 July 1848 – June 1849 from *The History of Howick and Pakuranga* P68 & 69 by Alan La Roche 1991
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