

The Oratia Church and its historical Hall

How it all began: Their place in Waitakere's history from 1872 until today.

In the mid 1800's, local settlers had become very frustrated with both the secular authorities and the churches. The former declined to provide a school for the already significant number of children, and none of churches were interested in building a place for Christian worship. So in the year 1867 three settlers in the area applied on behalf of the Oratia community for a section of land under the Auckland Waste Lands Act 1858 and were given a Crown Grant and Trust.

"Victoria by the Grace of God, of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, QUEEN: To all whom these presents shall come: Know ye that for good considerations, Us thereunto moving; We, for Us, our heirs and successors, do hereby grant unto Andrew Kelly, William Cantwell and Thomas Parr of Auckland, settlers, their heirs and Assigns all that parcel of land in the province of Auckland in our Colony of New Zealand, containing by admeasurement . . . 4 acres more or less situated in the Parish of Waikomete in the County of Eden and being allotment number 238 ... with all the rights and appurtenances thereunto belonging:

'To hold unto the Said Andrew Kelly, William Cantwell and Thomas Parr in trust for the purpose of building a place of Public Worship in which Sacred worships shall be held and for the purpose of building a schoolhouse in which the English language shall be taught' their heirs and assigns for ever.

Signed Sir George Grey, KCB., 15th. July 1867

Almost at the foot of Parker Road stands the Oratia Interdenominational Church which was built in 1872 and which was also used as a schoolhouse until the Oratia School opened in 1883. From that year with brief interruptions caused by war or other crisis it continued to be used by the Methodist, Anglican and Presbyterian churches. Beside it is the 'New Church', now approaching its half-century.

The little old Church has quite a history. The small building was erected by George Gunson, a local preacher from Valley Road, Glen Eden. Gunson also made the heavy pews, pit-sawing them from solid kauri - 12 inches wide and 2 1/2 inches thick. The timber, pit-sawn by Kelly and Cantwell, had been donated by the settlers, and the building was opened debt free. Frank Firth was instrumental in getting two steel bars put across the building to strengthen it in about 1922. These steel bars came in very handy for decorating the Sunday School for the annual anniversary. Lacapodium and red rambling roses were often twined around them to great effect.

Terence Donnelly of Parker Road provided the roof shingles, though for many years covered by corrugated iron which itself, when rusting, was re-sheathed with 'Harveytiles' in the 1980's, and now replaced with long-run roofing at the time the sprinkling system was installed.



"The Old Brown Church" in the early 1950's

Oratia Church has always been shared by Anglicans, Methodists and Presbyterians and administered by a Trust.

Its first trustees were Messrs Andrew Kelly, Thomas Parr and William Cantwell. Kelly as the surviving trustee of the original 3, petitioned the Supreme Court to be relieved of his trusteeship, and Jane Cox, Thomas Cox and Gabriel Goulter were registered as the new trustees. It wasn't until 1952 that the "Oratia Religious and Educational Trust Society" was formed -. Ernest Parkin of Carter Road being its first president.

In the early days, the clergy representing the different denominations used to travel out from city churches on horseback. The Anglican Revd Harold Jecks, who rode out from Mt Albert, was fondly nicknamed "Jockey Jecks" from his manner of horse-riding. Oratia's Sunday School was first held at Captain Cable's house, and probably commenced some years before the building of the Church. Captain David Cable was a retired sea-captain who lived near the dip between the then Post Office and Church, and the first teacher there was a Miss Ryan. The school was known as "Waikomiti" until 1908 when it became "Oratia School".



The "new" rooms and entrance – now over 50 years old!

The little Church had two rooms added on to the back in 1922, and in 1956 Gordon Dixon, the then Sunday School superintendent, added two rooms on to the front. Later, in 1967, it was uplifted and moved south by several metres in order to make way for the present beautiful building.



The 'new' church, which had its 40th birthday in 2008, is also a credit to the locals. Church members, the late Russell Gash designed it and Fred Whittaker and Albert Latham supervised its building with the help of voluntary labour. Seating 150 and costing only \$15,000, it too, was opened debt free. Its beautiful altar windows framing native bush, make it an attractive setting, and it is proving a popular venue for weddings. These days all are welcome. and are from wide variety of Christian traditions

When in the year 1952 the Trust Society was formed to take over the property, over two years were to elapse in a long search for surviving relatives of the trustees who had replaced the original three and had died in the intervening years. Finally in June of 1954 the District Land Registrar gave his approval for the title deeds to be vested in the Society which is now sole trustee for the property (The title deeds are held in the custody of the Society's solicitors.

The Oratia Church Hall – recent contemporary users of this community facility

These days the old hall is still greatly used by the Oratia Community. In addition to local church events and use by its young ones, each week it is the home of the 50 strong Oratia Spinners and Craft Group, The Hall is the rehearsal venue for the Te Atatu Men's Choir and the Oratia Singers, the latter also offering concerts every year. From late autumn until spring there is a monthly board games evening open to the whole community. Over any twelve months' period, the hall hosts a number of concerts; sees family and community events such as funeral and wedding receptions, reunions, birthdays and anniversaries – even television film crews on location in 2007-8, 2013 and again in 2016!