

Christchurch Cathedral Nelson

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Christchurch Cathedral Nelson is an iconic landmark in the city of Nelson. A church has stood on Church Hill since 1851 and has been the centre of worship in Nelson from that time onwards. Through Queen Victoria's royal decree Nelson became a city and the church on the hill became a Cathedral. Christ Church Cathedral Nelson is used not only as a place of Anglican worship but also as a centre for community and civic events. Although Nelson and its residents' views on Christianity have changed significantly since the arrival of the first settlers in Nelson the Cathedral still remains at the heart of the community today.

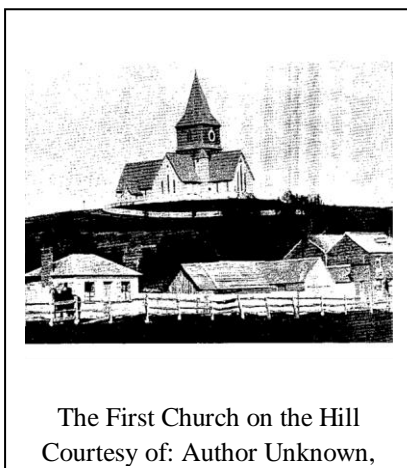
Church Hill otherwise known as Pikimai (meaning climb hither) was seen as a strategic site by the first settlers who arrived in Nelson in 1841. The first service was held on Pikimai on 1st February 1842 in a surveyor's hut. Then six weeks later a liturgical service was conducted by a clergyman the Reverend Hadfield in the New Zealand Company's immigration barracks. Worship continued under the guidance of George Selwyn, the first Bishop of New Zealand. He visited Nelson in 1842 and brought with him a large tent in which services were held. The old surveyor's building and another building were then bought and used as a church and school for many years.

The early settlers faced many challenges after their arrival, one of which was the Wairau Affray in 1843 where several of the settlers were killed by Maori. After this event the frightened people fortified Church Hill with "fosse and ramparts that circled the hill"¹ according to a later 1885 publication. The fears of the settlers were not realised though and as confidence returned Bishop Selwyn purchased the summit of Church Hill to build a new parish church on. The fortifications were taken down and in 1851 the new wooden church was opened and dedicated as Christ Church by Bishop Selwyn.



The Fort on Church Hill
Courtesy of:

<http://www.teara.govt.nz/en/nelson-region/4/6>, (20/06/11)



The First Church on the Hill
Courtesy of: Author Unknown,

The English-styled building was altered and enlarged in 1859 and again in 1866. In 1858 Nelson became a city by royal decree and Christ Church unofficially became known as Nelson's cathedral in 1959. Bishop Selwyn had originally planned for Wellington and Nelson to be one diocese but the Nelsonians protested and so he sent a petition to Queen Victoria. She issued a royal decree allowing the establishment of an Anglican Bishop's seat in Nelson but it was not until 1887 that Christ Church actually became a Cathedral.

¹ A. Whitlock (2011), "Nelson Cathedral, Sanctuary born of Adversity", *Wild Tomato*, p.54

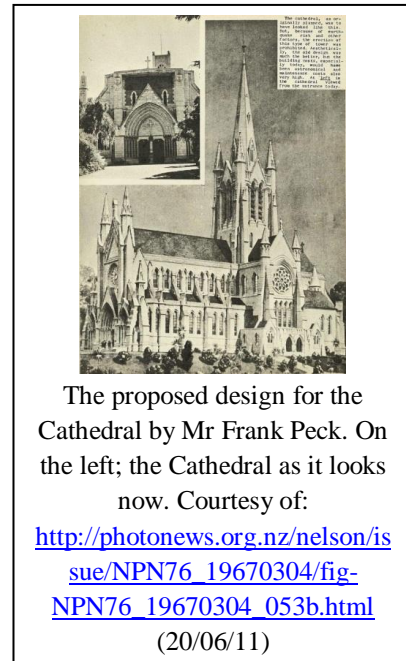
The building had been enlarged to make room for the growing numbers in the congregation and according to a newspaper from 1887 the building was twice as wide as it used to be. “Where was formerly narrowness is now breadth, where was formerly lowness and obscurity is now loftiness and translucent light”.² The building was also the first church in New Zealand to have electric lighting. The consecration service of Christ Church Cathedral took place on the 16th February 1887 in the newly enlarged building.

This building continued to serve the community until February 1893 when an earthquake struck Nelson. The spire was damaged and so the steeple and tower were then demolished in 1921. The same year the church also caught fire. It was extinguished quickly by the Fire Brigade but the event helped to weaken the building. Age, a fire and an earthquake were all contributing factors that led to the building becoming unsafe. It was condemned but continued to serve the community until it was demolished four years later in 1925.

In August of the same year the foundation stone of the new stone building was laid by the Governor General, Sir Charles Ferguson. The plan of the new Cathedral followed the design of Mr Frank Peck and was in the English Gothic style. It was to be made of blocks of Takaka marble. An earthquake in Murchison complicated matters by bringing in stricter building regulations. That meant much greater cost just as the Great Depression started. Faced with these difficulties work was suspended in 1932. The chancel of the old wooden cathedral was attached to the new building and a temporary roof was placed over the partially completed nave.

In 1954, after much controversy and discussion it was decided to finish the building in a relatively similar but much less complicated style to the original design. The other main opposing plan was in the classic 1950's style and would have been quickly out-dated. The chosen plans were designed by Mr Muston of Wellington Structure Group Architects. The design included reinforced concrete faced with ground marble plaster from Takaka hill which would be more resistant to earthquakes and cheaper than the marble blocks used in the original design. It was finished in 1967 and was consecrated when it was debt free five years later on 14th April 1972.

Although the outside of the building was completed, the inside went through a “reordering” in 1984. The main entrance was redesigned and the sanctuary was moved forwards. The two transepts which had been full of seating were converted into the labyrinth on the East side and a historical area on the other. The reordering was organised by Sir Miles Warren, a modern architect.



² Author Unknown (1887), “The Building”, *Nelson Evening Mail*, p.2



Roger Ledingham,
Dean's Warden of Nelson
Cathedral. Courtesy of:
<http://www.nelsoncathedral.org/directory.html>,
(20/06/11)

The present building is an icon in the city due to its wonderful site, quality of glass from different eras and its organ. "Tourists love it", says Roger Ledingham, the Dean's Warden. "They see it sticking up out of the city and come and investigate. As well as being one of the most visited Cathedrals in the country it is also the city's church which is one of the roles of the Cathedral".³ In an interview with Roger, he told me how the Cathedral is used for important civic and community services and also as a concert venue. The Nelson Arts Festival is celebrated each year in a service at the Cathedral, as is St. Francis' Day through the annual Pets' service.

Aside from these special services the cathedral offers traditional worship with at least one service a day. The Cathedral tries hard to maintain the traditions of the early English settlers but also believes that there should be a mix between these and new ideas. "The church is the one organisation that exists for the benefit of those who are not our members",⁴ states the Reverend Yvonne McLean who is Associate Priest at the Cathedral. The Cathedral is there for those who wish to have baptism, marriage and funeral services in the building even if they are not regular parishioners. The Cathedral also acts as the Mother Church of the Diocese of Nelson.

Christianity has been very important in Nelson since the arrival of the early settlers who established a strong Anglican diocese. Enthusiasm grew with the development of the church and then the Cathedral in Nelson. However it is now apparent that the percentage of the population that go to church currently in New Zealand is certainly less than it was one hundred years ago. This can be easily explained as "Children and families do heaps of other things that take them away",⁵ says Mr Ledingham. In the old days the numbers that went to church were much greater but now there are many other activities which draw families away from church on Sundays. However there remains noticeable interest in the Cathedral and it still has an important civic role in Nelson as well as being the centre of Christian worship. The size of the congregation at the Cathedral hasn't changed much in the last thirty years, even though the percentage of Anglicans nationally has decreased about 5% from 2001 to 2006 in the New Zealand census.⁶ There is still strong interest in the Easter and Christmas services at Nelson Cathedral and through its traditional worship, wonderful site and building, the Cathedral still remains strong at the heart of its community. As long as people continue to support the Cathedral it will remain "refreshing lives [and] transforming faith at the heart of the community".⁷



Christ Church Cathedral
Nelson today. Courtesy of:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christ_Church_Cathedral,_Nelson
(20/06/11)

³ Interview with Roger Ledingham (02/06/11), Christ Church Cathedral Nelson

⁴ A. Whitlock (2011) p.55

⁵ Roger Ledingham (02/06/11)

⁶ Statistics New Zealand, <http://www.stats.govt.nz/searchresults.aspx?q=religious%20affiliation> (15/06/11)

⁷ Christ Church Cathedral, <http://www.nelsoncathedral.org> (13/06/11)

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