



BISHOP'S SCHOOL, NELSON

One of the first tasks of the newly founded settlement of Nelson in 1842 was the provision of education. As early as October 1842, Captain Arthur Wakefield, RN, the New Zealand Company's principal agent in Nelson, was able to record that two schools had been established, one a "British and Foreign School" and the other a "Church School". The church school he referred to was in Trafalgar Square and run by Nelson's first Church of England minister, the Rev. C.L. Reay. It was to mark the beginning of the church's close involvement with education in nineteenth-century Nelson.

In December 1843 Bishop Selwyn visited Nelson, and while there made plans for the building of a more permanent schoolhouse. The site he selected was part of Town Acre 438, now on Nile Street East. Here, the following year, Reay superintended the building of a small brick schoolhouse. It was in fact intended as one wing of a larger school building, but lack of money prevented the fruition of these plans. Nevertheless, the completed portion, with its central belltower, decorated bargeboards and paned bay windows was itself considered by the *Nelson Examiner* “a great adornment to the little town”.

Once completed, the school building housed the church school begun by Reay. Reay’s school duties were taken over in 1844 by the Rev. H.F. Butt, who conducted both an elementary school for boys and girls, and the Nelson Grammar School – the first secondary institution in the South Island – which gave preliminary training to potential candidates for St John’s College in Auckland. The elementary school, known variously as St John’s school, the church school, and later Christ Church school, was one of a number of schools opened in the 1840s by the Church of England in the Nelson region. (Others were at Wakefield, Wakapuaka and Waimea). The schools were managed by the resident minister of Nelson and supported by private contributions, church grants and the weekly payments of pupils.

The children were instructed in the usual subjects: “Reading, spelling, slate and Mental Arithmetic, Writing, English Grammar, Geography, Vocal Music, General and Religious History” and “the principles of the Christian Religion as taught by the Church of England”. The latter were not stressed too heavily, according to Butt, “owing to the great mixture of opinion in the settlement”.

This “great mixture of opinion” in the Nelson settlement was indeed one of the main obstacles the church school had to face in the late 1840s and fifties. Although the school provided a much needed service in the earliest years of the settlement, the settlers soon came to prefer the non-sectarian schools run by Matthew Campbell and the Nelson School Society. Other factors which led to the decline of the school were a shortage of finance and teachers. For want of staff the small Nelson Grammar School was wound up in 1848, while the main school finally closed its doors in 1855.

Although the church school had ceased to function, the schoolhouse itself continued in use. 1856 saw the passage of the Education Act in Nelson – the first such act in New Zealand – and the subsequent establishment of public schools funded by a universal education tax. While new classrooms were being built to accommodate these schools, the church schoolroom was used as temporary quarters. Between September 1856 and early



Pupils of Bishop’s School c. 1885 (Nelson Provincial Museum)

1858 it passed into the use of the Central Board of Education for a boys’ school, while from May 1858 to late 1860 it was occupied by the Nelson Girls’ School.

In 1859 came the arrival of Edmund Hobhouse, the first Bishop of Nelson, and with him the beginning of the second major phase in the schoolhouse’s history. Like Selwyn, Hobhouse was a keen advocate of church participation in the education of the young and was anxious to see a church school re-established in Nelson. It was on his initiative that Bishop’s School – as it subsequently became known – was founded in late 1860. In 1861, following its vacation by the Nelson Girls’ School, the church schoolhouse was taken over as premises for the new school.

Bishop’s School proved rather more successful than its predecessor, operating from October 1860 until December 1895. During this time more than six hundred boys of all denominations were enrolled there. The school offered an education at both junior and senior levels, though many boys went on from there to the newly-opened Nelson College.

For a number of years, Bishop’s School continued in the brick schoolhouse built by Reay and extended in 1863 by Hobhouse. In 1881, however, this was almost completely rebuilt, being considered by Bishop Suter – Hobhouse’s successor – as “positively unsafe”. The new building was of

wood, the same total length as the extended brick schoolhouse, with a twelve metre long wing across the southern side. The western wall remained in brick, rebuilt from bricks used in the old school. Of the original 1844 building, only the western porch remained intact.

Bishop's School finally came to a close at the end of 1895. As with the earlier establishment this was because of staffing and financial difficulties and because of a national policy that was beginning to make education, including secondary education, more widely accessible. Another contributing factor to the school's closure was the death in March 1895 of Bishop Suter, a great champion of Bishop's School since his accession to the episcopacy in 1867. Once more, however, the winding up of the school did not mean the closure of the building. In the years following, the schoolrooms were used by the diocesan authorities for meetings and to house the Diocesan Library, while later it was taken over as a small private primary school (still known locally as Bishop's School). In more recent years the building has been used as a meeting place for scouts and guides. The building is now owned by P.A. Day and Sons, Funeral Directors, who have agreed to its retention and restoration by the New Zealand Historic Places Trust.

Restoration work between 1976-8 has involved the removal of the southern wing and later additions to the schoolhouse, and the transfer of windows from the removed wing to the exposed southern wall. The building remaining is thus rather different from the schoolhouse of either Selwyn's or Suter's day, though it retains some features of both. It serves today as an educational museum.

Bishop's School is located in Nile Street, Nelson.



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