

History of Your Cathedral

The actual name of Your Cathedral is Christ Church Cathedral, The original Cathedral was a parish church – Christ Church.

Services have been held on Church Hill or Piki Mai, since 1842.

In 1859 Queen Victoria created the Diocese of Nelson by Royal Charter. As a result Nelson became a city. The Church and the city have maintained a close relationship to the present day.

From 1859 to 1889 Christ Church was the unofficial Cathedral of the Diocese. In 1889 that church was enlarged and opened as the Cathedral Church of the Diocese of Nelson.

Introduction

For nearly 180 years there has been a church of sorts on the same site. The current cathedral is the fifth structure to house services on church hill, a former pa site known as Piki mai, which roughly translates as “come hither, up here”. To date none of these churches have been completed as originally designed.

The first church

The first was a tent in which Bishop Selwyn held a service on August 27, 1842. The second structure was two sheds joined together, one having been used to house surveyors and the other used to process immigrants by the Wakefield Company who used the site for their headquarters. This building was used as a church until 1851 when a new, purpose-designed church was built.

Christ Church 1851

The new church, named Christ Church, was designed by Bishop Selwyn’s favoured architect, Frederick Thatcher, himself an ordained Anglican minister. Thatcher was one of the first 15 associates of the British Institute of Architects formed in 1834 and practised in London until he emigrated to New Plymouth in 1843. In his time in New Zealand, apart from practising as an architect, he had various positions including a licensed auctioneer for the sale of land, superintendent of public works in Auckland, lieutenant in the Auckland Militia, assistant private secretary to Governor Grey, and the architect for St John’s College, Auckland as well as its bursar and auditor. Churches he designed include Old St Paul’s in Wellington, St Mary’s Church and the Gables in New Plymouth, the Kinder House and Selwyn Court in Auckland.

The foundation stone for the Christ Church was laid on June 26 1850. It was designed with a cruciform plan, a nave of 100 feet long by 21 feet wide, transepts of 60 feet and a tower at the crossing with a broach spire 75 feet high. It was intended to seat 300-400 people. Funds didn’t allow the full length of the nave to be completed when it opened on 14 December 1851.

The style of the building, consistent with all subsequent churches on the hill, was Early English Gothic.

William Beatson, who, along with Thatcher, was one of the first qualified architects in New Zealand, and was commissioned to complete the church to its full length. The extended church was opened in 1859. Beatson maintained the same Early English details as he did when he added to the church again in 1863. Beatson paid particular attention to replicating the buttresses, doors and hinges, window bracing, seating and trefoil in the east end.

The extreme length of the building and its low roof caused acoustic problems and its proportions were no longer admired.

Christ Church 1887

Queen Victoria enabled Nelson to become a city in 1858 when she signed the Letters Patent in September 1858. The Letters Patent allowed for the consecration of a bishop and the construction of a cathedral. Bishop Hobhouse was consecrated as the first bishop in 1858 but it wasn't until 1887 that Nelson had its first cathedral.

Bishop Suter, who followed Hobhouse, chaired the Christ Church Re-building Committee. They wished the new church to seat 800 people and to be built of stone. The use of stone was contentious with many preferring timber. For an appropriate approach to designing a cathedral the Committee quoted the foremost English authority, Sir Gilbert Scott:

The Early Pointed Gothic style is capable, as I think, of the greatest possible degree of dignity united with a reasonable amount of simplicity and any amount of beauty.

In the event, Christchurch Benjamin Mountfort was commissioned to redesign the 1851 church, resulting in almost a total rebuild. The foundations were used as well as most of the original timber. The church became twice as wide as the original with the addition of aisles and a clerestory. The nave, chancel and transepts and roof were raised and a second transept was added to house a chapel and baptistery. The spire was replaced with a much taller spire with lucarnes. The interior was lit with electric light, the first church to be so in New Zealand.

In 1844 Mountfort was articulated to prominent London architect Richard Cromwell Carpenter, an influential Gothic Revival church architect and member of the Cambridge Camden Society. The Society formed in 1839 at Cambridge University to promote Gothic architecture and "correct" designs for churches. In 1847 it was renamed the Ecclesiological Society when it moved to London. Bishop Selwyn was a member and was keen to follow their principles with new Anglican churches to be built in New Zealand.

Mountfort settled in Christchurch in 1853 where he set up practice. He designed many churches, all in Gothic, throughout Canterbury and in 1858 he became architect to the province of Canterbury, designing the Canterbury Provincial Buildings between 1858 and 1875. In 1873 Mountfort was appointed to supervise the construction of Christchurch Cathedral, designed by Gilbert Scott. He went on to design many of Canterbury's most significant buildings and became recognised as New Zealand's foremost church architect.

Mountfort maintained the original Early English style of Thatcher's church, consistent with Scott's recommendation. The rebuilt church was consecrated as Nelson's first cathedral on 16 February 1887.

The Current Cathedral

By 1916 the cathedral was in a poor state of repair and the spire and tower were removed. A fire did further damage in 1920 and it was decided that a new cathedral was needed.

Frank Peck was commissioned to design the new cathedral. Another Nelson architectural firm, Houlker and Duke, provided a design for the cathedral but theirs was not successful.

Peck was an English architect from Lincolnshire and who was trained by Sir Aston Webb. He emigrated to Nelson in 1915 where we prepared designs for a number of churches, including Wellington's St Paul's pro-Cathedral (the design for which received praise by his former employer Sir Aston Webb and Sir Gilbert Scott, but were not built) and St Marks Church near the Basin Reserve in Wellington, Alexandra Homes in Palmerston North and Nelson and the Presbyterian church in Motueka. He also designed 5 Ronaki Terrace, near Nelson College, a fine Arts and Crafts house.

The design of the cathedral was magnificent. Also in the Early English style, the foundation stone was laid on 5 August 1925. The cathedral was to have a cruciform plan, like Thatcher's but of reinforced concrete lined with Takaka marble. The drawings show the south elevation with a tall, steeply pitched gable including a rose window, tourelles and gabled buttresses. Under the rose window are triple gables, the central gable being the main entrance with engaged columns, hood moulds (also called label stops) with masques representing the King, Bishops Selwyn and Patterson and Archbishop Averill, and gargoyles at the junctions of the gables. The entrance doors have shouldered arches with further masques as corbels representing Bishops Hobhouse, Sadlier, Suter and Mules.

The transepts were to be of the same height as the nave and also have a rose window, tourelles, stepped buttresses quadruple lancet arched windows. A lofty octagonal spire with small and large lucarnes at the crossing was to be supported by a square planned tower with gables to each elevation, presumably to house bells, octagonal tourelles and double arched, louvred openings. The chancel was to have a polygonal apse, more flying buttresses with gablets, and a semi-circular vestry to the east and a semi-circular morning chapel to the west both with conical roofs. It would have been a truly beath-taking building worthy of the site.

However, the cost of the building, the lack of trained stone masons, the Depression and the additional strength requirements for buildings after the 1931 Napier earthquake saw the building stop at the nave but without the soaring roof. Instead the walls were completed up to the beginning of the triforium level and a nearly flat roof installed over the nave, with just the steeply sloping timber ceiling of the aisles completed.

The interior elements that were completed include large round columns in the nave with stepped capitals supporting an arcade along the nave and arches over the aisles. Alternate columns have dog tooth decoration, and this form of decoration can also be seen in the mouldings over the main door. There are corbels at the junction of the arches, decorated with leaves. There are pairs of engaged columns at each end of the nave.

All work stopped in 1932 and the partially completed building was opened by Governor-General Lord Bledisloe in 1933.

The Mountfort timber chancel was added to the north end of the incomplete church.

Following the end of WWII it was decided to complete the cathedral but not to Peck's design. A Wellington architect, Ron Muston, a partner with Structon, was selected to design the new extension. Muston trained at the Auckland Architecture School and established his own firm in 1939 in Wellington. He became a partner in Structon an architectural practice in Lower Hutt where he designed a number the civic building as well as St James church in 1953 for which he won a gold medal from the NZIA. This church was a remarkable Modern Movement design with stepped, rectangular forms, large areas of glass and a starkly simple, off centre, bell tower facing the street.

Muston followed the general floor plan that Peck had designed but with rectangular transepts, chancel, vestry and chapel on opposite sides. Choir rooms, kitchen, offices and toilets. are located in the same location as the polygonal apse. Instead of Takaka marble, reinforced concrete coloured to look like marble was used. The tower was located in the centre of the elevation, unlike St James, and unlike either the Modern Movement or the Gothic style.

The original design mirrored St James Lower Hutt as a simple, Modern Movement design, with a similar tower to St James but in the centre of the north elevation. The vestries, chapel and robing room are clearly articulated rectangular forms. The Modern Movement design was not acceptable. It had to be Gothicised, and who better to redesign the openings (everything else remained the same) but Ian (later Sir) Athfield who was working at Structon at the time. He found

the exercise somewhat frustrating which is understandable given his post-modern sensibilities revealed in his extensive portfolio of later work.

Some of the rectangular windows became simple lancets and the tower was Gothicised with shallow arched mouldings, similar to Early English Gothic, and simple tracery. The roofs of these lower spaces are flat with the nave transept roofs nearly flat. A nearly flat roof in a Gothic church is typical of Perpendicular Gothic which does not sit well with the Early English style of Peck's original. The ceilings are lined with pink or white acoustic tiles with leaf and fleur-de-lis patterns.

The completed building was opened by Governor-General, Sir Bernard Fergusson, in 1967. At the time the Nelson press was not happy with the compromised design suggesting that the church was settling for second best.

Other changes have happened since the cathedral was opened. The narthex was redesigned, a new organ case and stand were installed, and the chapel now has stained glass windows.

The Future of the Cathedral

The current Cathedral is like its predecessors, a building that has been added to and chopped and changed over time with one constant, that of the use of the Early English Gothic. However Athfield's rather loose interpretation contrasts with the earlier buildings whose architects paid careful attention to the 12 and 13th century precedents to the style. The incomplete nave is perhaps the most jarring element of the current building. Completion of this part of the church, at least, to Peck's design with a soaring roof, flying buttresses and Gothic details would add considerably to the beauty of this section of the building. A number of European cathedrals took centuries to be complete. Hopefully that is what is in store in Nelson.

Gothic

The key elements of Gothic architecture include rectangular plan forms, tall and elongated elevations with steeply pitched roofs, asymmetry, towers, a highly ornate skyline, openings using the pointed arch and slim and delicate detailing. The style evolved from Romanesque architecture and was common in the Middle Ages in Europe and England. English Gothic architecture can be divided between Early English (First Pointed) from the late 12th to the late 13th centuries, Early (geometric) and Late (curvilinear) Decorated (Second Pointed) from the late 13th to the late 14th centuries and Perpendicular (Third Pointed) from the 14th to the 17th centuries.

The Romantic Movement of the late 18th and early 19th centuries saw the revival of the Gothic style, with an early revival style, termed, 'Gothick' following Sanderson Miller's work in Warwickshire and Horace Walpole's Strawberry Hill. Followers of the movement regarded the style highly for its perceived symbolism of truth and beauty from a Golden Period of the past. It was also seen as a highly picturesque style, which was promoted for housing as well as churches.

Gothic had been the principal style for English church buildings since the promotion of the style by AWN Pugin in the 1840's. The High Victorian period between the 1850's and 1870's saw Pugin's academic English Gothic replaced by a more creative use of both English and Continental Gothic.

Gothic architecture became popular in the New World as well as the old. Alexander Jackson Davis and Andrew Jackson Downing promoted Gothic architecture in their house and cottage designs in the United States. William Wardell and Edmund Blacket were two significant Gothic architects in Australia who were instrumental in popularising the style for churches and universities in particular and in the use of stone. Thatcher in Auckland, Mountfort in Christchurch and Beatson in Nelson were New Zealand architects who all used the style for churches, such that Gothic became the main style used for church designs from the 1840s to the 1960s and beyond..

The ease of reproduction in timber of Gothic details by the invention of the jig saw allowed Carpenter Gothic, a vernacular form of Gothic, to flourish in the Colonies.

Glossary

aisles	spaces lower than and parallel to the nave and separated by a row or arcade of columns
apse	semi-circular or polygonal end to a chancel
buttresses	short extensions of and parallel to a wall to give added strength
capital	top of a column
chancel	traditionally at the east end of a church housing the choir and sanctuary
clerestory	row of windows in the upper part of the church
corbel	a projecting bracket, usually decorated
dog tooth	small, pointed, pyramidal decoration
Early English Gothic	the first of the Pointed styles of Gothic architect used in England from the 12th to 13th centuries, typically having tall narrow lancet shaped windows
engaged column	a column partly attached to a wall
gablets	a small gable over a buttress
hood moulds	also a drip mould, label mould or dripstone, a moulding over a window to throw off water
lancet	a slender pointed arch
lucarnes	a small gabled dormer window
masques	a decorative motif, usually out of stone of mask or face usually at either end of a hood mould, or other moulding
Modern Movement	a style of building without decoration or reference to previous styles, using lots of glass, steel, concrete and cubic and rectangular forms, popular from the 1920s to the 1960s
narthex	a vestibule to the church
nave	central space of a church extending from the western end to the transepts
shouldered arches	a flat arch with corbels projecting down

tourelles	a small turret
tracery	curved, moulded, frames usually in windows with different pointed arches depending on the style of Gothic
transepts	the transverse portion of a cruciform church
triforium	a gallery or arcade above the main arcade, usually above the nave, also called a tribune

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