

## St Mary's Anglican Church



**Location:** State Highway 4, Heritage NZ Pouhere Taonga  
Upokongaro

**List Number:** 163

**Physical Description:** The small rural timber framed church has a tall, narrow bell tower with a splay foot spire towards the street, with a steeply pitched gabled nave and an apsidal chancel behind. The tower has stepped, diagonal buttresses while the nave has open framed timber buttresses. A small lean-to

Register Item Number:

32

**Building Type:**

- Residential
- Commercial
- Industrial
- Recreation
- Institutional
- Agriculture
- Other

**Significance:**

- Archaeological
- Architectural
- Historic
- Scientific
- Technological
- Cultural

**Thematic Context**

- Early Settlement
- Residential
- Industry
- Agricultural
- Commerce
- Transport
- Civic/Admin
- Health
- Education
- Religion
- Recreation
- Community
- Memorials
- Military

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roof on the north west corner houses the vestry. Consistent with the style, the nave windows all have simple lancet heads while the chancel has trefoil windows either side of the central triple lancet window, all of which have painted leaded glass. The entry to the church is under the tower which leads in the nave revealing diagonal boarded matching lining to the walls and ceiling, with vertical boarding to the chancel. The arched trusses are revealed in the ceiling while an open, arched rood screen divides the nave and chancel, which also has vertical match lining.

**Other known names:**

**Current Use:** Anglican Church

**Former Uses:** Anglican Church

**Heritage Status:** Heritage NZPT List **District Plan Class:** Class A, interior (Cat. 1)

**Architectural Style:** Carpenter Gothic **Date of Construction:** 1877

**Materials:** painted timber shiplap weatherboards, joinery, corrugated steel roofing, shingled coping to buttresses, sheet metal roofing to the spire

**Registered owner:**

**Legal Description:** Pt Sec 163 LBWR Blk XIV Waipukara SD

**History:** St. Mary's Church, which has a Category I listing with the Historic Places Trust, is the subject of a detailed book by Wendy Pettigrew, entitled, *St. Mary's, Upokongaro: The Church on the River*, published in 2005.

The establishment of European settlement in the Upokongaro area took place in the mid-1860s, and was marked by the arrival of John Kennedy in the district in 1866. At this time he built a hotel – followed by a store that later included a post office. The first church services were in due course conducted at Kennedy's hotel by a Mr Allan, later of Papaiti. In 1875, a small Wesleyan Church was built there<sup>i</sup>, however, it closed in 1892 by which time most of its local worshippers had moved away.<sup>ii</sup>

By the mid-1870s, regular Anglican services were being held in the Upokongaro schoolroom, with the Rev. T. Tudor travelling out from town once a month. A lay reader did the other weekly services.

On 22<sup>nd</sup> November 1876, a meeting was held in the Upokongaro schoolroom to discuss building an Anglican Church. John Kennedy offered to donate a site, but

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the meeting resolved to instead purchase the site from him. At a meeting on 21<sup>st</sup> December, it was decided to obtain plans and specifications to build a church able to hold 100-150 people, and which would cost no more than £250. As a result, Wanganui architect, Edward C. Morgan, was asked to prepare a plan – which was duly accepted on 22 February 1877. By 8<sup>th</sup> March, John Randal's tender had been accepted and the timber was on site, with work ready to start.

Things did not go smoothly, however, as a storm in mid-May blew off the rafters and roof timbers. By 10<sup>th</sup> August, Morgan was answering the first of many inquiries about the strange angle of the spire. He also commented that Randal was due to finish the following week. Randal duly handed over the keys to the completed church on October 6<sup>th</sup>.

The first service was held on 11 November 1877. At that time the church did not have a separate chancel and the vestry was upstairs in the belfry. The interior was unlined, the roof was shingled and the nave and porch glazed with latticed leadlights. It was not until 20 July 1879 that all of the construction debts were paid off and the church was finally consecrated, with Bishop Octavius Hadfield fulfilling the task.

In the meantime, the sinking of the ship '*Avalanche*' in the English Channel on 11 September 1877, had resulted in the family of one of the victims (Archibald Montgomery, son of Henry and Frances Montgomery of Upokongaro) donating a stained glass memorial window in his memory. The window, which was installed above the altar, cost £100 and had arrived in May 1879.

Captain Montgomerie had proposed that the church be named St. Benedict's, however, the Rev. Tudor (of Christ Church) and Bishop Hadfield strongly opposed this, and the church became St. Mary's.

Until 1880, the church was within the Christ Church Parish; however, in 1881 it came under the new Wanganui Parochial District along with St. John's Church at Matarawa. The church remained under the Wanganui Parochial District until 1986, when it became the St. Barnabas Parish. Then in 1995, it became part of the Parish of Eastern Wanganui.<sup>iii</sup>

Following the death of Captain Montgomerie in 1890, family members and the

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congregation contributed to a memorial fund – with the chosen goal being a stained glass window in the church. However, this meant adding a chancel to enlarge the church. Despite funding issues, the chancel was complete by June 1892. The original plan had been drawn up by Frederick de Jersey Clere, but the plans used (at Clere's suggestion) were done by Wanganui architect Alfred Atkins, with Thomas Battle as the contractor. The new stained glass windows were from designs by Charles Decimus Barraud. With this work complete, the church looked much as it does today.<sup>iv</sup>

While the chancel is thought to have been lined when constructed in 1891, it was not until 1901, that the rest of the church was lined – with tongue & groove timber installed by Thomas Battle. The roof was re-shingled in 1911, and then the chancel and vestry were re-roofed with corrugated iron in 1925. The church (presumably the part not replaced in 1925) was then re-roofed with corrugated iron in 1934. An electric light was installed in 1929.<sup>v</sup>

The church is noted for its unusual spire which is designed to rise from four corners at the base, narrowing to three corners and thereby giving the optical illusion that the spire is leaning. From the start, the architect, Edward Morgan fielded questions in relation to this design. Certainly it has been the source of many comments over the decades – which perhaps was Morgan's intention. In May 1885, when Alfred Burton photographed Upokongaro, he noted in his diary that: *"Upokongaro boasts a church, with a three-sided spire something like a bayonet."*<sup>vi</sup>

In 1894, a special correspondent to the *Wanganui Chronicle* wrote of a visit to Upokongaro: *"On approaching the cosy little village nestling among its 'vines and fig trees,' the first object to attract attention is a pretty and peculiar spire which when seen from any distance resembles in a miniature way the leaning tower of Pisa, so far at all events as the leaning is concerned, but a closer inspection satisfies one that it is merely an optical illusion. The spire surmounts a church, the interior of which would rather astonish both the travelled and the untravelled. One end of it is fitted up with memorial windows, the stained glasses in which would not discredit a cathedral, and I was informed that these were the bequests of two families – Montgomery and Montgomerie – in no wise related, the heads of which were both captains, the one naval and the other military."*<sup>vii</sup>

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Meanwhile, G.F. Allen, in *Willis's Guide Book* (p. 158), in describing Upokongaro in 1902, remarked that the church “has a three-sided spire on a square tower, the effect of which is very annoying to the eye, as, except from two points of view, it always appears out of the perpendicular.”

In 1953, the spire was repaired at a cost of £358, after it was discovered that part of the tower’s foundations had sunk and its woodwork was in a bad way. A community appeal and fundraising very quickly covered this sum and no parish funds were needed.

The church, which in its rural setting overlooking the Whanganui River is a landmark and a symbol of pioneer faith, was registered with the Historic Places Trust on 22 November 1984.

## Bibliography

Pettigrew, Wendy, *St. Mary's, Upokongaro: The Church on the River* (Wanganui 2005)

Allen, George Frederic, *Willis's Guide Book: New Routes for Tourists: Auckland-Wellington via the Hot Sprints, Taupo, the Volcanoes & the Wanganui River – Supplementary Edition* (Wanganui, 1902).

**Architect/Designer:** Edward C Morgan, Alfred Atkins for chancel extension

**History of changes:** Chancel added 1892

**Date Period:** 1877, 1892

**Rarity / Special Features:**

**Integrity:** From a brief visual inspection, the building appears to be in a fair condition.

**Representativeness:** The church is representative of small rural churches with typical floor plans, materials and style, however the spire design is an usual feature.

**Context/Group Value:** The church is one of a number of Wanganui Anglican churches, with this being the oldest District Church on its original site.

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**Diversity (Form and Features):** As above, the spire is an unusual feature of the church design.

**Fragility / Vulnerability:** As a timber building, it is potentially vulnerable to fire.

## Summary of Significance:

### **Archaeological Qualities**

Having been built in 1877, the site of the church is an archaeological site.

### **Architectural Qualities**

The Carpenter Gothic style of the church is typical of rural church designs and has the characteristic timber construction, a tall, narrow bell tower a steeply pitched gabled nave, diagonal buttresses and open framed timber buttresses, simple lancet headed windows and other Gothic styled detailing.

### **Historic Qualities**

The building is associated with the growth and development of the Anglican church in Upokongaro first within the Christ Church Parochial District and then the Wanganui Parochial District. As well as the clergy and parishioners, the church is associated with its architects E C Morgan and Alfred Atkins.

### **Technical Qualities**

The church uses typical materials and construction techniques for the period.

### **Cultural Qualities**

As a place of worship, the church has spiritual qualities as well as being the focus of the local Anglican community. The stained glass window is in memory of 'Avalanche' sinking in England where Archibald Montgomery, son of a family in Upokongaro died.

## Reference Source:

## Associated Pictures:

*Date of Survey: 2012*

*Prepared by: Ian Bowman and Val Burr*

# *Built Heritage Inventory*

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- <sup>i</sup> *Wanganui Herald*, 11 January 1875, p. 2
- <sup>ii</sup> Wendy Pettigrew, *St. Mary's, Upokongaro: The Church on the River* (Wanganui 2005), p. 12
- <sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 11, 28
- <sup>iv</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13
- <sup>v</sup> *Ibid.*, 18
- <sup>vi</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11
- <sup>vii</sup> *Wanganui Chronicle*, 29 May 1894, p. 2