

# Time takes heavy toll of 123-year-old Mahurangi church

Time has taken a heavy toll on the little weatherboard Presbyterian church standing on a windswept hillside at Mahurangi Heads.

Its graveyard, with headstones bearing the names of Mahurangi's oldest families, is overgrown, rose bushes and shrubs entwined with marble and wrought iron.

The white, kauri-built church itself leans wearily to one side, blown off its foundations by a storm several months ago.

The door has to be forced open, so uneven is the floor.

Inside there is a pulpit, an organ, a book of hymns.

But the floor of the church is humped strangely in the middle, buckled and split, with rows of pews falling off to either side.

Its back seems to be broken.

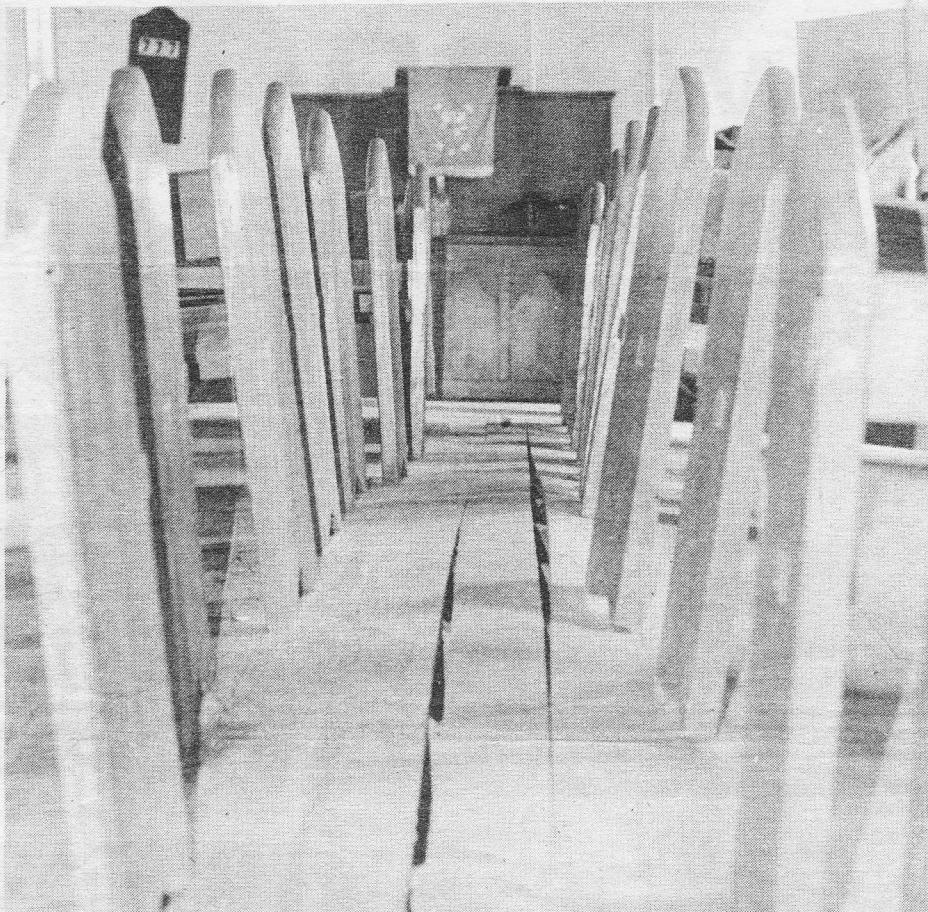
Church elders and the board of managers recently decided not to restore the 123-year-old church.

The cost would be too high and its use too low.

Rev. Peter Armstrong, minister at Mahurangi for 11 years, said it was a hard decision to make and he understood people would feel some sadness.

The Rodney Times asked people with long-standing connections with the church for their opinions.

Noelle Lipinski, a teacher at Matakana Primary



Bent and broken in the middle. The church took a hammering in the storm several months ago.

School, thought many Mahurangi people would be upset.

"We do have to move with the times, but I do feel very disappointed. That little church is all that remains of a very old piece of New Zealand history.

"When it's gone that's another slice of New Zealand history erased, and it was one of the earliest places settled. It's a pity to see it just slide down into the river."

Mrs Lipinski said she attended the church as a child every month. She had several relatives buried in the graveyard.

"My mum used to play the organ and my dad lead the singing. Church was the only outing we had once a month.

"I was 12 by the time I went to school in Warkworth. Everything was based around the church."

Merv Algie, aged 78, has been visiting the church since his teens. His grandparents and parents are buried in the cemetery.

He recalled stories about the first minister who used to row down the river from Warkworth — a trip of some 11 or 12 kilometres — to take services.

"He used to say to his son: 'For six days of the week you toil, and on the seventh day you must row your father to church'," laughed Mr Algie.

The church closed for several years, scrub covered all the graves.

Local people got together to clear the scrub and paint the building and services resumed, ending only recently when the church was damaged.

Mr Algie felt sad about the

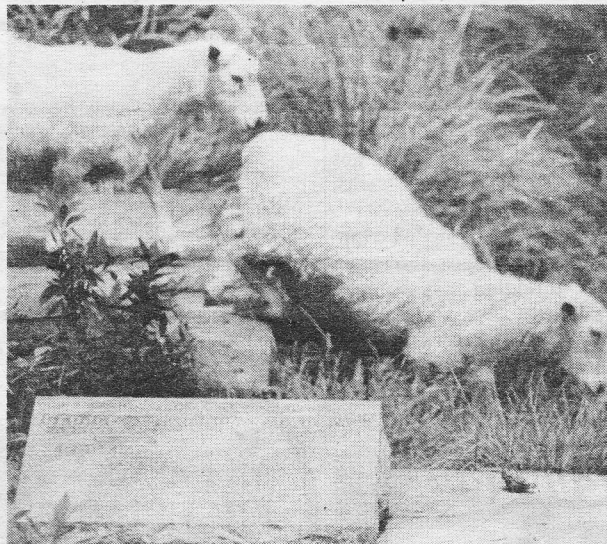
historic building's demise, but was realistic about it.

"The whole church is so old it's only held together with borer and white ants hanging on like beggary.

"We could patch it up to leave it standing there, but then we would get building inspectors coming in.

"At one time the cockies would have got together and patched it up, but not these days.

"It looks like it may be the end."



Sheep scamper among the graves.