

Mangere Historical Society learns of the Life of Governesses

By Val Payne, August 2005

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The Mangere East Selwyn Church Hall was full on 19 July for the monthly meeting of the Mangere Historical Society. The speaker was Shirley Finnell who has researched her family history, following the family of George and Pamela Rust and their five daughters. A Governess was often a gentlewoman who was down on her luck, unmarried (spinster was the term then) and needing money to support herself. They were not necessarily educated to a high standard.

Shirley read a letter from an application in the 1850s. For the large remuneration of ten pounds she would have to care for seven children, two of whom were babies. She would feed and care for them, do their laundry, tend them when they were sick and teach at least four of the children.

Maria Rye in 1861 started the Female Middle-class Emigration Society. This group advanced loans of twenty five pounds to the women wishing to travel to Australia, New Zealand and other places to become a governess. This entitled them to a second-class cabin for the trip. The loans were paid back and allowed others to travel. In 1863 the first governess arrived in Auckland.

Governor Hobson's wife and their governess Ellery Short had to live in a raupo whare in 1840, while the Governor's house was built. Governor Grey subsidised denominational schools. Onehunga had its own Catholic school and the Anglican school was under Rev Purchas with Miss Bates as his first teacher. Mission schools were favoured in 1857 although the Howick School was turned down for the twelve pounds ten shillings per quarter subsidy because the teacher's morals were viewed to be of a low standard!

Auckland Provincial Council passed the law making it compulsory for education to be provided for the children, although it was not compulsory to attend school full time. Early private schools had the high sounding names of Academy or Seminary although they were often in barn-like structures with very few educational aids. Around 1861 there were disturbances with some Maori and the friendly Maoris were advised to stay indoors between dusk and dawn.

The Rust family lived in Kohimarama and employed Harriett Ward as governess to their five daughters. Harriett eventually married Captain Tilly who was employed by the Melanesian Mission Station at Mission Bay. There were sad stories of governesses who had illegitimate babies and various other plights.

The Free and Secular Education Act was passed in 1877 and the Inspectors were often scathing in their reports of the educational facilities that they inspected. Pamela Rust had established her private school at Devonport where they now lived, and her two elder daughters taught there and another sister did the housework. Another one, Annie, had become a Governess for Rev Gittos, the Methodist Minister on the Kaipara Harbour at Otamatea. She wrote descriptive letters home that have provided Shirley with much background information of life in those days. Mary Louise the third daughter, had also become governess to the Francis family at Waiheke Island. Mr Francis was a farmer and the Postmaster at Potiki Bay opposite Maraetai. A twice weekly steamer serviced the Island on its way to Clevedon – Wairoa South it was called then.

Annie Rust moved to work for Ernest Adams at Pahi in 1881. Her letters spoke of walking across to Matakoho to visit the Coats family. Gordon, one of the sons, became Prime Minister of New Zealand in later years. That same year Mary Louise left Waiheke to teach at the Devonport School as her older sisters had married. Nell, the youngest, took her place at the school in 1893. There was a plaque unveiled on Mt Victoria, Devonport, to recognise the unmarked grave of Annie Rust who had done so much to further the education of so many children throughout her life.

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