

RONGOPAI RESTORED



KEN GEORGE

with the help of the New Zealand Historic Places Trust

Api Mahuika

The New Zealand Historic Places Trust has allocated \$30,000 to the Maori Buildings and Advisory Committee to spend on Maori building projects in the next year. The committee is mainly involved with community houses owned by tribes and sub tribes, but it is also involved in other structures such as niu poles, carved head-boards and canoes, said the chairman, Apirana Mahuika.

He said that the Trust rates the importance of Maori buildings according to various criteria, including the status of the building in hapu or tribal terms, the building's age, association with important events or people, and the quality of carving and artwork. "Frequency of use is considered," he said, "and if the building is well used by the community then there is all the more reason for restoring it."

Mr Mahuika has spent some time travelling around the country telling Maori groups about the work of the Trust, and assistance which can be provided in the way of technical expertise, actual restoration work, and a grant towards the project. He encourages people to write to the Trust if they know of any Maori buildings or structures which they think should be preserved. "We would like to get more letters", he said.

According to Mr G. G. Thornton, committee member and deputy chairman of the Trust, there has been a recent resurgence in the restoration of marae meeting houses and churches. "Often the Trust provides finance for the materials, and technical advice, while local Maoris provide their own labour."

The biggest project for the year is the Hinetaora meeting house in Ruatoria. The \$6000 grant towards its restoration is the largest amount ever given towards a single project. Restoration of the building will mean the replacement of weatherboards, piles and floor boards as well as major renovation work on the roof. Hinetaora was opened in 1896 and contains excellent tukutuku and kowhaiwhai and some unique artwork, a combination of traditional and modern art forms.

Another major project underway is the restoration of Rongopai, a meeting house at Waituhi near Gisborne. The history of the house is no less interesting than its decorations.

It was built in the 1880s by followers of Te Kooti in anticipation of a visit by him after his "pardon" in 1883, and was built and decorated in less than three months by young men of Te Whanau a Kai. Described as "an important example of art in transition", Rongopai is painted rather than carved, and though kowhaiwhai and tukutuku panels are in evidence, the house is notable for the freedom of colour and inspiration in the other designs. There are trees, vines, flowers (some of them in vases), a boxing match, a horse race and a man hunting with his dog. A notable member of Te Whanau a Kai is also depicted. He is Wiremū Pere, a long-standing MP for Eastern Maori, and he has been painted with due attention not only to his moko but also to his spurs and bowler hat. Kahungunu is there too, with his daughter Tauhei.

When the elders saw the completed house they were alarmed. The obvious break with tradition worried them, and it seems that they were particularly bothered by the modernistic treatment of revered tupuna — even down to blue eyes and neatly parted European haircuts.

Te Kooti never visited the house, upon which a partial tapu was imposed. This was not lifted until a special Ringatu service in 1963. The tapu meant that the house remained in its original condition, and though some of the porch paintings were damaged by exposure to the weather, the interior of the house has remained as it was decorated in preparation for Te Kooti's visit.

Recent years have seen some renovations and improvements, however. Concrete block walls now protect the outside of the house, and Rongopai also now has a corrugated iron roof. The porch has been extended and paintings have been restored to their former brightness with local help under the guidance of Cliff Whiting.

As one of the so-called Te Kooti houses, Rongopai represents an exciting development in Maori art, adopting and adapting themes and subjects from Pakeha life in the same way that Maori life itself was evolving. Other Te Kooti houses include Te Whai a te Motu at Ruatahuna, begun in 1870, Te Tokanganui a Noho at Te Kuiti, built in 1872, and Ruataupare, built at Te Teko ten years later.