

Te Miringa Te Kakara will rise again

Story by Charlton Clark
Pictures by Ministry of Works

Fire has destroyed a unique piece of New Zealand's Maori history, in the form of an unusual cross-shaped meeting house at Te Hape, near Benneydale in the King Country.

It was Te Miringa Te Kakara, well over 100 years old and built in the shape of a cross. It boasted totara bark walls and roof, and was held together without a single metal fastening such as nails, screws or wire. Instead, its builders used lashings and pegs to bind the structure.

It was not carved, and it had never been painted. When it was destroyed in

January, it was in a very dilapidated condition, although its timbers were still surprisingly sound. Local Maoris were about to restore it with the help of the Historic Places Trust when the fire dashed their hopes.

Now, however, they plan to build an almost identical replacement with the money and timber they had got together for the proposed restoration.

Its cross shape was probably unique among existing Maori buildings in the country, according to a report on its restoration potential prepared by Ministry of Works Hamilton senior architect and Hamilton Historic Places Trust member, Malcolm Campin.

Mr Campin has since drawn plans for the new building, and he envisages that among the few concessions to modern technology will be the use of concrete bases in which to set the pillars so they do not rot below ground level.

Te Miringa Te Kakara's history has become somewhat confused with the passage of time, and different people have their favourite stories about it, which others sometimes dispute.

Mr Campin wrote that it was one of a succession of whare wananga on the site, where young rangatira learnt their craft under the guidance of appropriate tohunga.

According to Mr Campin's research, four whare wananga of the ancient school of Io were established at Tamaki, Kawhia, Whatawhata and Pio Pio by the Tainui people during the early period of their settlement.

Whare wananga

As their population grew, Ngati Rereahu, Whakaterere, Maniapoto and Matakore tribes established further whare wananga on the northern edge of the then great central forest area of what is now known as the King Country.

These were at Ngahape, Hurakia, Waimihi and Pureora, Te Miringa Te Kakara being the last house of the Pureora school. These schools were established between about 1550 and 1600, Mr Campin wrote.

Over the years the buildings decayed and were rebuilt, and the instruction of young chiefs in sacred matters continued.

But Te Kuiti elder Bob Emery does not believe there was a previous whare wananga at the site before Te Miringa Te Kakara was built, probably some time between 1850 and 1870, although he knew of other very old ones in the region.

Top:

The east porch, which was the most dilapidated, both amo and maihi having been removed. The unusual central position of the doorway, with the rarely seen two windows, can be seen.

Left:

A detail of a window frame and panel, showing clearly the totara bark wall cladding.

