

## THOMAS WHYTEHEAD 1815 - 1845

Sometime curate at Freshwater and translator of hymns into Maori

[Return to contents](#)

Thomas Whytehead, was born 30<sup>th</sup> November 1815 at a Thornborough in the North Riding of Yorkshire. Thomas was the fourth son of a clerical father who died when he was three. His mother moved to York and Thomas attended Beverly Grammar School before St John's College, Cambridge where he won the Chancellor's Medal for English verse twice, in 1837 became a fellow, 1839 was ordained and in 1840 received his MA degree.

A scholar, poet, fellow of St John College, Cambridge but remembered now by a few for being the first to translate many Anglican well-known hymns into Maori and his work on the correction of Bible and Prayer Book texts in that language. His own poetry, hymns and writings, some of which were undertaken during his short curacy at All Saints Church, Freshwater, have been forgotten. He was the curate there only from December 1839 until the end of 1841 when, destined for rapid promotion, he was appointed Examining Chaplain to the Bishop-elect of New Zealand. Unfortunately after landing on the way to his new appointment, he slipped and ruptured a blood vessel, and although he went on to New Zealand he never took up his duties there. He died before his 28<sup>th</sup> birthday on 19<sup>th</sup> May 1843 at Waimate in the Bay of Islands.

### Freshwater

In one of his letters written in the spring of 1840 he describes of Freshwater as:



*All Saints, Freshwater, Isle of Wight*

*“-- one of the most sequestered nooks in the British Isles -- our little diocese, for village there is none, but about twelve or thirteen small hamlets, scattered over some six or seven miles of country --”*

Owing to the temporary absence of his rector, after only a few months into his first job he was left in sole charge of the parish for about five weeks. He wrote in May to his brother which shows the work a curate was expected to undertake:

*“ -- I will assure you that the thought of having to feed 1,400 living souls, part of that church of God which He hath purchased with His own blood, is enough to scatter to the four winds and dreams one may have had of the freedom from keen anxiety of a village clergyman’s life. Yet there could not be a parish more to my mind. I read and write till noon, with the exception of a visit to the day-school every morning. From noon till about five I am in the parish and with the sick, of whom there are at present ten or twelve cases of small-pox. Between five and six I dine, and in the evening dispatch business, in and out, and read and write till an early bedtime, generally. There are a great many poor here, but many very charitable rich families and very excellent people. The beauty of the parish just now is marvellous. The little hamlets, some in woody lanes and hollows, ringing with cuckoos and nightingales, and some in sheltered coves, with the sunny sea in front, the down covered here and there with the yellow furze blossom, and the white-blossomed orchards, with glimpses of the sea on all sides, make the long walks, which are needed here, a great pleasure and delight -- ”*

After just six months, in June 1840, and still only a deacon in his first parish, but with all the assurance of youth, he wrote this poem: “*Freshwater*”

## Freshwater Hymns and Poetry

1  
Mine own dear people, whom the Lord  
Unto my care hath given,  
To feed with His most Holy Word,  
And guide you up to Heaven;

2  
Short time ago I oft had planned  
How joyous it would be  
To ramble where your tall cliffs stand  
High o’er the sunny sea;

3  
Or through the shadowy coppice-brake  
My lonely way to keep,  
And with earth’s brightest forms to take  
Communion still and deep.

4  
But now my steps I gladier bend,  
Your cottage home to seek;  
And of the inner life ye spend,  
In solemn converse speak:

5  
But I have learnt in human hearts  
A deeper mystery lies  
Than e’en this wondrous earth imparts  
Or dwells in sea or sky.

6  
A thousand impulses divine,  
And feeling unconfest  
Have gone to mould the soul whose shrine  
Is the rude fisher’s breast.

7  
Each has a being all his own,  
And thoughts which none but he  
Has ever thought, and which he alone  
He can impart to me.

8  
And within each a fount doth flow  
From life’s eternal springs;  
Then why for lofty converse go  
To mute and soulless things.

But within a short time he had realised that the Downs and West Wight landscape influences all those visiting or living there. Having changed his opinion he wrote a second poem entitle: "*The Answer*":

1  
Ye breezy downs and headlands grey  
Forgive my hasty song,  
A voice has whisper'd me to-day  
That I have done you wrong.

2  
My people's ancient friends are ye,  
Whose old familiar face  
They even have been used to see  
Around their dwelling-place.

3  
And all their life, they know not why,  
Does on their hearts the power  
Of that unchanging presence lie,  
That meets them every hour.

4  
Ye have a voice that unto each,  
Although they little deem,  
Has day by day been uttering speech  
Of deepest holiest theme.

5  
And many a one has lived to look,  
From childhood unto age,  
On nought in all Creation's book  
Save on your single page.

6  
Then, would I know my people well,  
Their inmost souls discern,  
I too must in that presence dwell,  
And that same language learn:

7  
I oft must walk where they have walk'd,  
These cliffs and coves among,  
And catch the still voice that has talk'd  
Unto their souls so long.

8  
So shall we like one household feel  
Who see the same friends' faces  
Together all their lives, and kneel  
In the same old Church-places.

On another occasion when he went over to visit the Rev. Wilberforce at Brighstone in August 1840, on seeing the morning dew he wrote the poem which he call: "*Hymn*":

1  
The glittering grass, with dewstars bright'  
Is all astir with twinkling light;  
What pity such a fair array  
So soon is meant to melt away

2  
Yet hath God given those drops a power  
To raise the grass and cheer the flower;  
All the hot noon their grace shall bide,  
And fresh shall fall at eventide.

3  
So day by day, O Lord, renew  
The grace of my baptismal dew:  
Let its sweet power be with me now,  
As when it sparkled on my brow.

4  
And evermore that gift bestow,  
While in Thy garden here I grow:  
That still to heaven my growth may tend,  
From whence those blessed dewes descend.

More detailed information about his life can be found in "*The Poetical Remains and Letters of the late Rev. Thomas Whytehead*" published in 1877, but now unfortunately a very rare book. Visitors to Cambridge may be surprised to see, on the roof of the choir of St John's College Chapel where he was a fellow, a carved full-length figure of him. As he died at such a young age his reputation must have been already significant. *D.M. Sale* includes him in his book "*The Hymn Writers of Hampshire 1975*".

[Return to contents](#)

## Other Hymns

These include amongst others:

*Bishop of my soul! To Thee*

*Sabbath of Saints of Old  
Hymns towards a Holy Week*

The most popular form of this later hymn is a centro usually appropriated to Easter Even and beginning: “*Resting from His work to-day ...*” Two verses from the Fourth Day of this heptad:

*Then spake the Word of the Most High,  
And straight the solitude of sky  
Was peopled with the glimmering powers  
That sway the seasons, years, and hours.*

*In silent order each bright band  
Bows to a secret high command,  
On separate pauseless mission sent  
For witness, guide, and government.*

## New Zealand



Waimate Mission House, Bay of Islands  
NZ oldest surviving building

In 1841 he was appointed Chaplain to Dr Swelwyn, the bishop elect of New Zealand, sailing on Boxing Day 1841. Travelling via Cape Town. But when he arrived in Sydney of 14 April 1842 shortly after landing he slipped and ruptured a blood vessel but continued never to fully take up his appointment

He spent his remaining time in correcting the Maori translations of the Bible and Prayer Book. Almost his last act was to translate his hymn: “*Sabbath of the saint of old*” and Ken’s “*Glory to Thee, my God this night*” into Maori rhyming verse. “*Two hundred and fifty copies were printed, he wrote, “and sung in church and school by the natives, and several of them came and sung under my window.... It is a comfort to think one has introduced Bishop Ken's*

*beautiful hymn into the Maori evening worship, and left them this legacy when I could do no more for them”.*

Just five days later he was dead with the Maori singing outside his window at Waimate in the Bay of Islands.

[Return to contents](#)

[Biography and Further Information](#)