

Waiheke Friends House

A meeting house by the sea

BY SUE STOVER, WITH INPUT FROM IAN UPTON AND ROBIN WATTS

Friends House Waiheke has one of the best views of any Quaker meeting house in the world with a sweeping vista of sea, sky and islands. Perched on the side of the steep hill looking out over Palm Beach, the meeting house is in the treetops with



passing parades of native birds seeking out food, fun and sun: kererū and tūi are common. The call of the kākā has recently been heard. As well as being a meeting house for Waiheke Friends, it has been – for the past 35 years – a place of retreat for Friends and others.

As occurs in other Quaker meeting houses, Friends House is where new babies have been introduced to their Quaker communities, where weddings and funerals have been held. It is also where writing retreats, workshops and innumerable family reunions have occurred.

That Friends House Waiheke exists at all is a statement about a group of young people who coalesced around concerns and the opportunities that existed in the early 1980s when Friends on Waiheke were meeting for worship in each other's homes. With the awareness that off-island F/friends were frequently seeking places to stay, the proposal for a meeting house with accommodation came from Jim Burdett.

Jim's idea captured the imagination of a core group of capable Friends, but it took considerable time for Auckland Monthly Meeting (as it was then) to reach the decision to support this unusual meeting house and the proposal that it be built by volunteers. Once approved, there was significant financial help from the wider Quaker community. This included grants from the Friends Trust Board's Building Fund, plus a benefactor in the UK. There was also fundraising; for example, several 'services auctions' (e.g., Connie Camfield raised about \$100 for the cause by knitting a jersey for someone willing to pay).

The shape and feel of the meeting house reflect the background of the architect in designing low-maintenance back country tramping huts. For Friends House Waiheke, the goal was to nestle the house into the bush, with a long deck wrapping itself around the seaward side of the house. Recent improvements include underfloor insulation, a covered exterior exit from the bunkroom, and new floor coverings.

Once building consent was approved in 1987, Friends House was built almost entirely by volunteers working together every other weekend for about 18 months. Robin Watts was one of the core members of this group of volunteers. He recalls that other regular builders included John Liell, Jerome Hartigan, Peter Port, Greg Fawcett, Ian Upton and Eric Camfield, as well as Jim Burdett. Many others helped when they could, and a

number of professionals also volunteered their time and expertise. But even more people learned new skills while participating in the building project. For Robin, a big learning was how things work on an island. Frequently

the wider Waiheke community was needed to complete a task. An example is the successful felling of two dead trees on the property by a skilled arborist – but that was not what was planned. The plan was to bring down the trees using chainsaws brought from Auckland. But the chainsaws were not allowed on the ferry. The next plan was to hire chainsaws, but the hire business was not open. Eventually, several less-than-ideal chainsaws were borrowed and were used by the arborist – a friend of a Waiheke Friend, who happened to be visiting and was willing to help.

Thirty-five years later, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to replicate how Friends House Waiheke was built. Such a building project now would require supervision by a licensed building practitioner. The project was affordable because land on Waiheke was still relatively inexpensive. Within a few years of the purchase of the land at Palm Beach, the introduction of fast ferries from Auckland meant Waiheke became less remote and property values escalated. Currently the value of the property at Friends House – just under an acre – is worth many times what was paid originally.

Like Quaker meetings everywhere, Friends House runs on good will. Those using the house are expected to leave it clean for the next users. People contribute what they can to its upkeep. While some tradespeople help out from time to time, most of the maintenance and management of the house is undertaken by Friends together, or as individuals. Ian Upton proposed and then single-handedly dug out the route for an extended wooden walkway that passes under the house – and which provides a gently inclined path up to the back door.

The imprint of generations of Young Friends is very strong – the initial path was concreted during a YF Camp in 1993. The back deck was built by another camp. Tree planting by another YF camp 2023 painted stain on a section of the front deck.

During the Covid years, the house was used for emergency housing and in 2023, bookings have rebounded to pre-Covid levels. As well as meeting for worship, Quaker groups use the meeting house for retreats, and there are regular bookings from community groups.

The vision for Friends House Waiheke remains largely intact – a place for Friends to gather for worship, and a place for **re-creation**.