The Smallest Chapel

A few moments prior to typing this article, on the smallest churches in Victorian recollection, a few individuals in the Botanic Hotel on Domain Road began in earnest to swap tales of their smallest. One such church is on the Sunraysia Highway, and it seemed that it might have been only as long as the Botanical back bar, (about twelve feet). Indeed so narrow and economic was the building under discussion that it was affirmed that it had no windows and the door was thought to be a later addition or embellishment. That church is between St. Arnaud and Redbank.

The early services held in Port Phillip would have taken place in homesteads and huts. Richard Skilbeck made on such crude entry in his diary on November 16, 1858,

On enquiry I found a bank of Wesleyans, few in number, who met every Sabbath morn to worship the true and living God, not in a magnificent temple of architectural display, but in the rude simplicity of an early settler's home, a house made of wattle and dab, i.e., the poles of the wattle averaged about 4 or 6 inches in diameter and 8 feet in length, driven vertically into the ground and tied at the top by a wall plate on which the roof is rested. Along the sides are battings nailed horizontally to hold up the mud which is stuffed in to fill up the chinks to prevent the ingress of wind and wet. The roof is covered with calico and straw, the ceiling of old sacking, the floor is a few boards laid detached on the ground on which you must tread with care or twisted goes your ankle.

This place of worship was near Koroit. Neil Black of Glenormiston and a Calvinist, attempted to set aside the Sabbath for worship and had 'all the men that could be spared from the sheep into his hut on that day and read a Sermon and Chapter'. He had a meeting at 'Elephant Bridge', (now Darlington), with other squatters in February, 1847 to decide that a stipend of 200 pounds per year for a five year term, (with a manse), should be used to attract Rev. William Hamilton to the area. Hamilton's area extended from Fiery Creek on the north to Timboon, (Camperdown), on the south and from Lismore on the east to Hopkins Hill on the west.

Collecting for the churches took many forms and it was the refusal to accept State aid that resulted in many of the Protestant churches being so small. A letter to George Russell follows:

Dear Sir, Camperdown, 9 October, 1871

As the Rev. Mr. Wilson has met with two accidents to his buggy during the last winter and as it looks sadly in want of repair, I intend collecting from those who can afford it best in the congregation, enough, say £10 or £15, to give it a thorough overhaul. May I request a mite from you.

I trust all your family are well. I must congratulate you on the rise in wool. Mrs. Peebles and two of the children are in Melbourne at present, with kind regards.

Yours very truly, (d)

J. H. Peebles
Presbyterianism was said to be the religion of the squatter and numerous other squatters were to create a religious sphere of influence on their runs - the Kirklands at Trawalla, the Learmouths at Ercildoun, and Adam Swanston Robertson at Little Corangamite, (Gnar Purt), to name only a few. A.S. Robertson's chapel, in the homestead, has a very beautiful Gothic Revival timber mantlepiece at the north wall and dark timber beams along the ceiling suggestive of stone vaulting. His belief that the families on his run should attend each Sunday, was reaffirmed by his building a church in 1867. It was a tiny 24' by 15' basalt kirk which popped out of the plain on the banks of Brown's Water Holes, south of Lismore.
The sitting of the chapel on the other side of the creek from all the stations buildings, meant that the churchgoers had to cross the creek to reach it.

Oh the quiet river crossing
Where we twain were wont to ride
To the little basalt building
We'd dismount and step inside

There the golden noon would find us
As we entered through the door
All the weary world behind us
Just soft footsteps on the floor

Oh those Sundays by the crossing
Where the shallow stream runs wide
Where the sunlight's beams were glossing
Strips of sand on either side

(Apologies to the 'Breaker')

On an old map of Robertson's run, showing the paddock names and other features, the name 'Old Coffin Hole' appears upstream from where the church is today. There years ago a boy disappeared into one of the deep holes in the creek, wading in after an eel. The descendants of that eel are still being caught.

The church was restored in 1967 by the present owners shortly after they arrived. It had been burned by the 1944 fires, left open to vandals and weather and had suffered some structural decay. New flooring, windows and other joinery, plasterwork, roof and ceiling work completed the restoration and the church was the subject of a centenary service attended by many worshippers.

The building works were carried out by a builder from Camperdown to the owner's instructions. A small piece of glass found on the site, (all that remained from the fire), was opaque and lead to the use of a similar glass in the rebuilt windows to the gable-end. The windows take the interlocking, gothic-arch form common to some of the church and church schools in the area of which Shelford is one.

The axed coping stones, on the gable walls, are identical to those used on the Manager's residence at what was the neighbouring property occupied by John Hastie. It was named then 'Purt Mundal' or 'Punpundal'. A falling tree, by chance, exposed the detail of how the copers are kept on the angle of the gable: through the lowest is an iron dowel, as was discovered during restoration of the wall at the Residence.

In fact, the last caper could rotate above a point, be lined up and have the displaced copers placed into the wall above it.
Manager's Residence "Purt Mundal", (Pumpundhal) on Lake Corangamite, south of Lismore: first leased by John Hastie and S.F. Hawkins from 1841. The gable coping on this building is similar to that of the Onar Purt church.

(Reconstructed from a photograph held by the National Trust of Australia, Victorian Branch.)
One cooper about three feet long could be lifted onto the scaffold but, because of its weight, it could not be placed on the wall. Lowered to the ground, it was cleanly split using some stone chisels, borrowed from the same yard in Sth. Melbourne, where the stone for the Shrine of Remembrance was dressed. The two pieces were then lifted and placed on the gable with only a chalky, blue seam showing the work that had been done. That cottage had a verandah as shown on the photograph, (held by the National Trust), and of additional interest is the left-hand chimney that has no fireplace or shaft but is surely for symmetry.

A more functional chimney was that in the first Presbyterian Church in Colac, as described in Issac Hebb's History of Colac of the eighteen eighties. It had a bark roof, slab walls, and a fireplace to warm the faithful. It was 25' by 14', the seats were hewn slabs, and the pulpit was of weatherboard covered in green felt. Parson Gow's Chapel as it was known locally, replaced the use of Hugh Murray's homestead and the chapel was in turn, replaced in 1853.

Gow's successor Rev. McLagan found himself the subject of legal proceedings. He had celebrated the marriage of a young couple, the younger of which turned out to be a minor, without the consent of their parents - who took legal action. McLagan disappeared as did the old timber building.3

Travelling preachers are still very much in evidence in the area. One Sunday morning by the reinforced concrete bridge at Fyansford, (said by some to be the earliest reinforced structure in Australia), I hitched a ride with a gentleman on his way to give sermons at Cressy, Rokewood and Berrybank. The car was ancient and in need of repairs but it got to Berrybank, although at one stage, up the slight hill by Barunah Plains, there was some quiet prayer by the two travellers. When the trip ended, I left two dollars for the collection and believe now, that I had been in the smallest chapel in Victoria.

ANGUS McIVOR

NOTES: 1. Richard Skilbeck, Dairy (Cassell, 1967)

