

The Story of Christ Church at Whittlesea

**Compiled and presented by the local historian Mrs Deride Hawkins at
the 150th Anniversary Celebration of Christ Church on the
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**We are gratefully indebted to the thorough research done by Mr J.W. Payne for
the Centenary History of the Whittlesea Shire and his booklet 'The English
Church at Whittlesea' which was printed in 1982.**

**We are also gratefully indebted to Mr Payne's daughter Dr Gwynedd Hunter-
Payne for giving us permission to publish this story of Christ Church which is
primarily based on Mr Payne's book:
The English Church at Whittlesea 1982 ©**

The story begins with the first landholdings taken up in this area from 1837. In that year, George Sherwin took up land on the Plenty River, and built his hut where Hut Street now is, while his brother, John Sherwin, established 'Braemore' at Merriang. About this time, Thomas Wills took up 3,480 acres to the east, north and west of the later site of the Whittlesea township. The area was known at that time as the Upper Plenty District.

By the 1840s, a number of families had spread out into the Upper Plenty area and the first Anglican church services were held in the summer of 1848, under a spreading gum tree beside the Plenty River just south of the present township of Whittlesea.

In 1853, work commenced on the Yan Yean Reservoir. Lt. Governor Charles La Trobe turned the first sod there on 20 December 1853. The reservoir, to supply water to Melbourne, had been designed by James Blackburn and there was soon a tent city for 1,000 workers on the site.

Also in 1853, the site for a township was chosen nearby. It was surveyed into blocks and named 'Whittlesea' by the surveyor, Robert Mason. Two acres of land in the main street, between Laurel and Lime Streets, were set aside for the use of the Church of England and the Presbyterian Church. Anglican Bishop Charles Perry had made his first visit to the district in 1851 and he initiated the move for a Church school to be built on this land. At this time, Rev. William Copeland was appointed 'Officiating Minister for the Upper Plenty'.

In 1855, a. Anglican Denominational School and Headmaster's residence were erected on the land allocated in the Whittlesea township. The school opened on 27 September 1855 and was used for church services as well.

With a suitable building and a congregation increased by a number of construction workers from the Yan Yean reservoir project, the Parish of Whittlesea was declared in 1856. Rev. Copeland, who had already been 3 years in the district, was officially appointed as the first Minister to the Parish of Whittlesea, and he spent a further 6 years in that position.

After Rev. Copeland resigned in 1862, Josiah Hollis, an Anglican Reader, conducted services in the district for a time but the parish was financially unable to support him so he was forced to leave in the following year. Whittlesea was without a resident minister for 3 years.

(We should note that, after leaving Whittlesea, Rev. Copeland took up duties in the Western District but sadly drowned in a swamp near the township of Harrow in August 1862.)

Just at this time in 1863, 15 acres of land on the west side of the Whittlesea township were donated by Thomas Wills for Anglican use. The land was to be held by a local Board of Trustees - Anthony Nicholson, Thomas Hughes, Henry Wordsworth and John Wilton (all local landowners) and Charles Cookson (Headmaster of the Denominational School) were appointed. The official Trust Deed stated that Thomas Wills had donated the land to promote the Christian religion through the Church of England, and that 3 acres in the south-east corner should be used for a church building and a dwelling for the Minister, the remainder to be used only as a Glebe to support the Minister.

In June 1863, a Building Committee was formed with 10 men elected. It was decided that the church building should cost no more than £600 (including the internal fittings) and it should have bluestone foundations, brick walls and a slate roof. An architect was appointed to produce plans, and 50,000 bricks were ordered. Meanwhile, the committee applied for financial assistance from the Diocesan Council and further donations were sought from the local Anglican community.

By June 1864, the site for the church had been selected and the building contract given to a local builder, Mr Nelson — 18,000 bricks were already at the site.

On 14 July 1864, the Foundation Stone was laid - Thomas Wills was invited to attend to lay the stone and the ceremonial trowel was inscribed "Presented to T. Wills Esq. on laying the Foundation Stone of the English Church at Whittlesea on 14 July 1864".

The building went ahead but, within four months, funds had run out so a loan was arranged with the Colonial Bank - £250 at 10% interest.

In August 1865, the Church building was completed - the cost was £1,230, just over twice the set amount. Several other important decisions had also been made: Mr Sherwin was to purchase a bell for the bell tower - it weighed 208 lbs; Mr Beecher was to obtain a baptismal font and register; and 'Pew Hire' would be paid by the congregation — £5 per

year per pew for first 12 pews, £4 per year for the next 4 pews, £3 per year for the rear 8 pews, and 5 shillings per quarter for single sittings. The first fence was 'chock & log' style but this was soon replaced by 'post & rail' and later by a picket fence.

Opening of Christ Church — 25 February 1866

For the opening of Christ Church, Bishop Perry and his wife travelled to Merriang on Saturday 24 February 1866 and stayed overnight with Mr John Sherwin at 'Braemore'. On Sunday 25 February, they were driven 5 miles in a buggy to Whittlesea for the afternoon service and official opening. The church was crowded. Afterwards, there was a tea meeting and then the Bishop and Mrs Perry were driven home to 'Braemore' in the moonlight, 'partly up and down hills and through paddocks', Mrs Perry afterwards wrote.

At the Vestry meeting on the following day, the decision was made to erect a plain tablet to the memory of the late Rev. Copeland (first Minister to the Parish), and this was later fixed to the wall behind the pulpit. The baptismal font was also inscribed to Rev. Copeland's memory.

In February 1867, the new minister was Rev. Henry Morris. He was aged 30 and married with four children. There being no vicarage, it was necessary for seven rooms and a pantry at the Carriers' Arms Hotel to be rented for Rev. Morris and his family - the cost was £16.0.0 per year.

The decision was soon made to erect a vicarage. Mr Thomas Wills had promised to contribute £50 towards a dwelling for the minister and the Diocese granted £287 to the building fund. The cost of the building is not known.

The Victorian Education Department was established in 1872. The Whittlesea State School No. 2090 was built in 1878 on land adjoining Christ Church. The school opened in September of that year but neither the Church Vestry nor the School Committee could afford to replace the dividing fence so the children frequently played in the church grounds, despite protests from the then vicar, Rev. Thomas Neville.

From this time, the old Denominational School building in the township was used by the Christ Church community as the Parish Hall and Sunday School.

In 1889, the first alteration to the vicarage was made - the incoming vicar, Rev. Sparling, had requested two additional rooms.

In 1893, the organist and choir requested a more suitable position in the church. Until this time, they had been located in the back corner. To accommodate the choir, the chancel platform was extended 12 feet and choir stalls were erected on the extended section.

In 1896, an architect's report showed that the chancel arch was in danger of collapsing. The repair cost £146.17.0 and the services were held in the Parish Hall in the town for several weeks while the work was done.

By 1901, the ministers appointed to the Whittlesea Parish were required to also hold services at an ever-increasing number of other centres - Hazel Glen, South Yan Yean, Eden Park, Merriang, Donnybrook and also at Kinglake West in the new school building there. During the construction of the Toorourrong Reservoir 1883-85, services were also held at Wallaby Creek. Other churches were added at various times - South Morang, Glenvale, Wallan, Wandong, and Scrubby Creek (Humevale).

The situation became impossible so a ministry was formed based on South Yan Yean (Mernda) to relieve the Whittlesea vicar of several services.

In 1909, the weight of the bell was endangering the church structure so it was moved to a separate stand. In 1910, ornamental gates were donated by Mr P.W. Clark in memory of his parents. (The gates were replaced by an iron grid in the 1950s.) In 1917, the pulpit was moved from a central position to its present location. In 1919, pew rents were replaced by envelope contributions. In 1920, the kerosene lamps were replaced by much brighter 'Wizard' mantle lights. In 1921, twelve Lambertiana cypress trees were planted to screen the vicarage to the north.

By 1922, the old Parish Hall building in the town was becoming dilapidated and the Vestry decided it was necessary to build a new Parish Hall. To provide funds, part of the township block was sold for £432 and the Diocese granted £200 with permission to arrange a mortgage of up to £400. The foundation stone for the new hall, on the corner of Lime and Church Streets, was laid by Archdeacon Hindley on 3 February 1923. The hall was dedicated to the memory of soldiers of the Parish who fell in World War 1.

On 2 January 1927, the Diamond Jubilee of Christ Church was held with several special services - 135 people attended the communion service at 11am with Archbishop Harrington Lees.

However, as the Great Depression hit in 1929, there were serious financial problems with Vestry unable to meet payments on the large debt on the new Parish Memorial Hall, and also the cost of fencing the glebe land with the neighbour.

70th Anniversary

But in February 1936, the 70th Anniversary celebrations were held with special services and activities over several days - community singing in the Parish Hall, a choral Evensong in the church, supper at Whittlesea House, a garden party in the vicarage grounds and a monster tea and concert in the Parish Memorial Hall where the birthday cake, which stood 3 feet high, was cut by Mr James Coulthard, aged 96, the oldest parishioner.

In 1937, SEC electric power came to Whittlesea and was connected to the church, vicarage and hall. In 1938, the old Parish Hall in the town was finally demolished.

In 1942, with financial difficulties again a major concern, the decision was made that the Parish Memorial Hall should be sold. It had been a significant liability on church funds

ever since it was built. Advertisements were placed in daily and local papers but the sale was not possible during WW2.

At this time in 1942, Robert Dann, then a Stipendiary Reader and attending Trinity College, was appointed to Whittlesea and conducted his first service here in August. Activities, attendances and offerings were soon increasing and the church debts were reduced. When Robert Dann left Whittlesea in 1944, 205 people attended his last service.

In 1947, the Parish Memorial Hall was sold to the Whittlesea RSL Branch for £1,000 and the foundation stone was removed and later placed in the church.

By 1948, interest in the church was growing, the number of children attending the Sunday School had increased, and the various groups were crammed into limited space in the church and the vicarage. So plans were soon being made to build a Sunday School hall in the church grounds. It was decided to build in timber and to allow no more than a £500 debt.

In February 1950, an appeal was launched for funds to paint the exterior of the Church. By September, £100 had been collected. The work cost £90 for the contractor and £63.10.0 for paint.

In 1952, a Building Committee was formed to get on with plans for the new Sunday School Hall. By January 1954, building plans for the Hall had been approved by the Diocese with the cost estimated at £3,400 for the main hall with other rooms to be added to bring the total to £4,400.

A local builder, Mr F. Lear, was employed to supervise building with the help of volunteers to reduce costs. However, before long there were problems with costs - steel frames had become more expensive, and the hall was required to be larger than first anticipated so there were delays.

By July 1955, the bare steel frame was up but progress was slow. Then local builder, George Hinton, agreed to come on Saturdays to work with his carpenter sons and superintend a group of volunteers. Meanwhile, all sorts of fundraising ideas were explored.

In February 1956, the 90th anniversary activities were planned while work continued on the hall, and frantic last minute efforts were made to complete at least the meeting rooms and kitchen in time for the anniversary celebration. And they were finished - just in time.

90th Anniversary

On the day of the 90th Anniversary, the church was filled beyond capacity for the 11am service. The Governor, Sir Dallas Brooks, attended and read the lessons and then stayed

for morning tea in the partly-finished Hall building. A Pleasant Sunday Afternoon service was also well-attended.

Arrangements were soon made for part of the new building to be used as a Baby Health Centre, rental paid by the Shire of Whittlesea. This continued for 21 years and provided an income towards church funds.

In 1963, the driveway around the church was completed and the toilet block built. But the bare frame of the main hall still towered above. The cost to complete the hall was estimated at £3,000 for labour and materials. A loan for that amount was beyond the capacity of the Parish to repay. So the only option was more fundraising - the Ladies Guild began catering for weddings, the officials' lunch at the Whittlesea Show and other local functions, and a successful gymkhana was run and repeated each year for 7 years.

In November 1964, a special appeal was made to the Anglican community and friends for funds to complete the Parish Hall in time for the Centenary Celebrations. In September 1965, a loan of £2,000 was arranged from the Diocesan Council.

Work resumed on the hall with professionals employed for plastering, plumbing and electrical work, and everything else done by volunteer labour under George Hinton's supervision - men wielding hammers and saws, and women applying paintbrushes. The brave ascended the scaffolding high in mid air, and a hay elevator was called into use for a time. It was a great relief to all concerned when work was completed in time for the 1966 Centenary Celebrations.

1966 Centenary Celebration

A Communion Service was held at 10.30am with an attendance of 250 people. This was followed by an Alfresco Lunch. The Dedication of the new hall was performed by Bishop Arnott and an Evening Service was held at 7.30pm.

Ven. Robert Dann, then the Archdeacon of Essendon, returned to preach at the evening service. Twenty years had passed since he left Whittlesea but he was welcomed back by a congregation of 120 people. Ven. Dann became Archbishop in 1977.

Some important work was done in the 1970s:

In 1970, volunteers helped with work on additions to the vicarage - replacing the timberconstructed rooms at the rear and installing a concrete slab over the old well. In 1977, the vicarage verandah was replaced and, in 1978, with the room in the hall being no longer needed for the Baby Health Centre, an external door was fitted, and the room was used by the Whittlesea Historical & Conservation Society for meetings and their fire-proof safe.

In 1982, a Restoration Fund was launched for plaster repairs and painting the exterior of the church. The cost was estimated at \$20,000, a fund-raising challenge for the Restoration Committee.

It should be mentioned that, over the years, a number of memorials of various kinds have been placed in the church. These include the large stained glass window in the East Wall which was dedicated in 1950 'in memory of those from this Parish who fell in the Second World War'. Other windows and plaques acknowledge long-serving members of the church and various Parish families.

This short history has concentrated mainly on the early history of the buildings but the establishment and development of Christ Church has also involved a host of people — Ministers, Vestry members, Wardens, Ladies Guild members, bell ringers, Sunday School teachers, choir members and organists, congregation members, Sunday School children, Youth Group leaders, those who served on the cleaning, flower and Op Shop rosters, and many generous donors. Far too many people to mention their names but all contributions, large and small, have been important and valued.

There have been ups and downs and difficulties, especially financial - times when a resident vicar could not be afforded and times when building maintenance fell behind. But with perseverance and dedication from so many, the church has continued its role in the Whittlesea community and in its outreach townships - cause for thanks and celebration in this, its 150th year.

For the information about the history of Christ Church, we are indebted to the thorough research done by Mr J.W. Payne for the Centenary History of the Whittlesea Shire and also his booklet 'The English Church at Whittlesea' which was printed in 1982 and traces in much more detail 116 years of church life to that time. The booklet was prepared as part of the 1982 restoration project and pays tribute to the hundreds of church members and supporters who have made their contribution to the life of Christ Church since its establishment in 1866.