

A Church that Became a Site of Resistance and a Symbol of Hope

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Authors' Note

Stories abound in the Hamilton district about the old stone church at the Lake Condah Aboriginal Mission and what happened to it. Much of the story of the church has been documented, and we thank the Hamilton History Centre for helping us to access those documents. However, that documentation falls away long before the church building was destroyed, and the story of what has happened at the site of the church since its demolition is not well known. But the story is still alive in the memories of former Lake Condah residents such as Phemie Day (nee Lovett), who was interviewed for the following account.

As well as interviewing Phemie, we were taken to the site of the church by Denise Lovett, Daryl Rose and Jim McCarthy; entering through bush adjoining the Mission land where Jim had once farmed his forty acres of potatoes. Jim reminisced about the times when Lake Condah women would wash their clothes in Darlot Creek and about times when his sheep found and followed ancient walking trails made and used by Aboriginal people from prehistoric times. Although these trails are now overgrown, he showed us how you can still tell where they were, and this helped us to better understand why the site of the church is so important to the descendants of all those people who once trod those paths.

We hope that our account of an extraordinary place and its moving story will help those who are campaigning to have the church rebuilt.

The old Lake Condah Aboriginal Mission Reserve is situated on the volcanic plains of south-west Victoria, where the local Aboriginal tribes lived for possibly 30,000 years, long before the volcanoes stopped erupting. Their most recent eruptions, dated between 10,000 and 4,000 years ago, produced the basalt that has made this a most fertile area. Conditions became so good that the indigenous people of the area were

among the few to build permanent houses – out of stone – and carry out a form of fish farming in the wetlands. They developed the practice of making woven fishtraps that caught eels as the waters rose and fell, and they then preserved the eels by smoking them in hollow trees. Their way of life continued unchanged until European settlement in the early 1830s.

When the European settlers arrived, there was an inevitable clash over the use of the land. Sheep and cattle were brought to graze where the Gunditjmara had hunted and fished. Their land was enclosed and they were killed if they hunted the new animals for food. Many massacres took place before the Europeans eventually overcame the opposition, and the indigenous people were defeated by starvation. As the European farmers prospered, they were prepared to employ the men from the much-diminished tribes whose way of life was now irretrievably destroyed. In 1860, the Victorian Government appointed a Board for the Protection of the Aborigines (BPA) to save lives, and the Anglican Church was encouraged to set up Christian missions to save their souls.

What the Records Reveal

Of course, this is a very abbreviated background to the founding of the Lake Condah Mission Reserve, but the point of this article is to examine what happened after the mission was established. It was 1867 when an area of just over 2043 acres was reserved for the use of the indigenous people and just over five acres for the establishment of the mission station. The following year, fourteen acres of land were cleared for grazing. By this time, seventy members of the Gunditjmara were living there. Over the next ten years, permanent buildings were constructed, including cottages for the residents, a mission house and a school house that was also used for church services.

In 1875, Reverend J.H. Stahle was appointed permanent head of the mission. Under him, the place prospered and the numbers residing there continued to increase. In a report to the BPA in 1881, Reverend Stahle stated:

A short time ago I was requested to bring some neglected aborigines from Balmoral to the station. The condition in which I found them was a most deplorable one ... It is a great blessing to the blacks and credit to the Government of Victoria that so much is done to help this poor dying race.¹

While the school house was used for church services, Reverend Stahle was preparing to build a substantial stone church. To raise money to cover the cost, he took the mission choir on a tour of the district, with his daughter as organist. They raised the major part of the cost of £450 and the choir gained a reputation for their excellent singing.

In 1883, a Cornish stonemason named John Dashpar was employed to build the church. For several years, the men living at the mission had been quarrying basalt blocks from the nearby Darlot Creek. According to Keith Cole: 'From the creek to the church site the men were placed in a line about

a chain apart. The stones were carried from one man to the other until the stone was got to the church.² When it was finally built, the church tower stood seventy-five feet high, and the ceiling, beams and rafters were all made of pine. The foundation stone of the church – called St Mary’s – was laid by Bishop Thornton of Ballarat in 1885.

In her account of the church, Vanda Savill quotes Joe Sharrock as saying

I used often to go to the Church of England morning service ... women sat on one side, the men on the other... The singing was something to listen to ... the black people loved their church and were always reverent. No one kept the Sabbath as they did.³

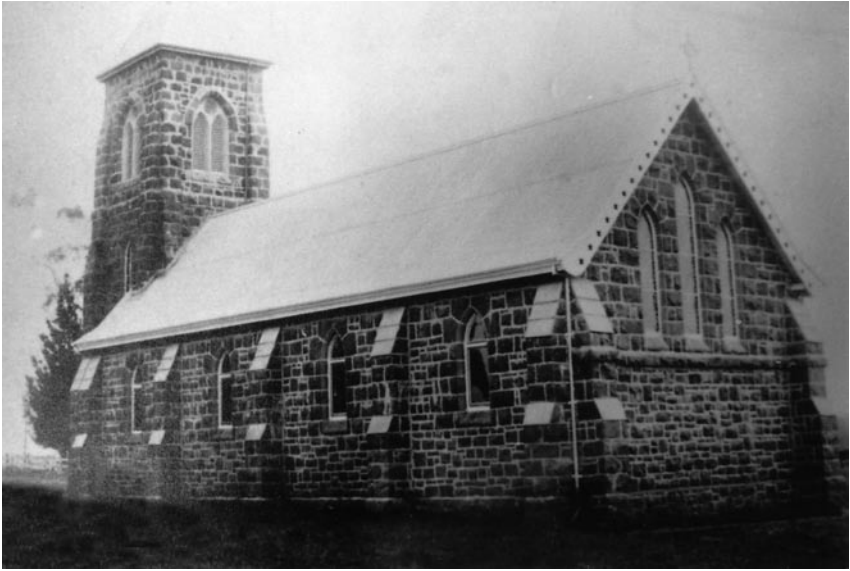
By all accounts the mission was doing well until the year 1886, when an Aboriginal Protection Law Amendment Act was passed. By this time, the Victorian Government had decided that it was costing too much to support all the people now living in the protected reserves, so the new law forced all people of ‘mixed blood’ under the age of thirty-five to leave all such reserves and seek employment in white society. The results of this move were horrific, especially for young women, who had few prospects for employment and were made dependent on uncaring whites. The men fared little better. Because their relations were still living at the mission, many of them remained, homeless, in the district.

After such a disruption, the Lake Condah Mission declined steadily, and, with only the elderly and infirm left, there was nobody to do the heavy farm work. By 1900, Reverend Stahle reported that the ‘the Blacks were dying out and half-caste boys and girls removed so that finality [for the mission] is greatly facilitated and will doubtless be attained in a few years.’⁴ However, he pointed out that the ‘mixed blood’ people living nearby

came regularly on Sundays and their children to Sunday school. They still look to the Station as their home ... [W]henever sick or in trouble they come to us as there is no one else who cares for them or to whom they could go.⁵

That ‘finality’ was swift and cruel. The BPA took over the management of the mission from the Church Missionary Association in 1913 and soon afterwards announced the mission would be closed down along with other small protected settlements. The few remaining elderly residents would be moved to Lake Tyres, far away in Gippsland. It seems that the church protested against this decision by the BPA and that the closure of Lake Condah was also opposed by most residents of the district – Aboriginal and white. However, the Victorian Government would not be swayed. The people were removed and the land was leased for grazing.

In 1912, there were still twenty-three buildings on the mission reserve, of which only the church, the school mission house and the teacher’s house were the property of the Church of England Mission Society. The following year, Reverend Stahle retired to Portland, and the testimonies of the



St Mary's Church at Lake Condah before demolition.
The church foundation stone was laid in 1882 by Bishop Moorhouse
and the church was opened in 1885 by Bishop Thornton.
(Image courtesy of the Hamilton History Centre).



At the site where the church stood. From left: Denise Lovett, Olive McVicker,
Daryl Rose and Sue Pizzey.
(Image: Cicely Fenton)

Aborigines who lived at Lake Condah were glowing in their appreciation of the work of the man and his wife that many called 'Papa' and 'Mama'. The church remained open for occasional services by visiting clergymen, and members of its erstwhile congregation still visited for special celebrations. It continued to be a kind of spiritual home.

When World War 1 broke out, many Aboriginal men joined the armed forces, and many fought with distinction alongside their white comrades. After the war, their names – eighteen in all – were recorded on an Honour Board that was placed in the church at Lake Condah.⁶ Although the mission was formally closed by this time, former residents now living at nearby Greenvale and Dunmore still thought of Lake Condah as their home. When the decision was made after the war to divide much of the reserve land up into smaller farming lots, some of the Aboriginal returned soldiers applied for land grants but none of them were successful. In 1927 and 1931, one of the returned soldiers, Herbert Lovett, was given permission to relocate two of the abandoned Lake Condah cottages to Greenvale⁷, and these became the home of the large and influential Lovett clan.

Between the two world wars, former residents of the Lake Condah mission returned to St Mary's for occasional services, and when World War II broke out, another generation of young Aboriginal men volunteered for active service. Again, the end of the war offered a glimmer of hope when even more of the reserve land was made available for soldier settlement farming, however, once again that hope was dashed when none of the Aboriginal ex-servicemen who applied for these grants were successful.

By 1951, the church, the cemetery and the access road were all that remained of the 2043 acres that had been allocated by Queen Victoria eighty-three years earlier as compensation to the Aboriginal tribes of western Victoria for the loss of their hunting lands. By this time, the church tower had developed 'a lean' and the south wall was deemed to be collapsing. Some of the stones were removed to build the sanctuary in Christ Church in Hamilton and, in a final insult, the crumbling but much loved church was blown up by dynamite in 1957, with the remaining stones given away. To this day, all that remains is the outline of the stone foundations and a simple wooden cross erected where the church once stood.

What the People Remember

Herbert Lovett's daughter Phemie (Euphemia) and her siblings Charles and Iris were born at Lake Condah and were christened in St Mary's church. Where others can now see only empty and crumbling buildings, Phemie can visualise happy, running children:

We had plenty to do in those days: going blackberrying, swimming in Darlot Creek and sliding down the steep red-clay banks of a nearby drain so that we ended up looking like Red Indians. We were never allowed to

go on the road but that didn't worry us. I remember the joy of going to the Mission Store, with its high wide counter to get apple pies made from fruit grown in the orchard.

Phemie remembers going to the church as a child for special occasions, such as 'Pets Day', when everyone took their pets to church, and the Harvest Festival that was preceded by the gathering of flowers, fruit and vegetables from the Mission gardens. But, of course, a sense of freedom was tempered by strict rules enforced by the penalty of being denied food rations. In particular, there was a ban on using their own languages instead of English, and Phemie says that she can only remember two words that she learnt from her grandmother — *benbayan* meaning 'bread' and *malum* meaning 'meat'.

As mentioned above, Phemie's father had relocated two of the old Mission houses to Greenvale in 1927 and 1931, and his extended family lived in those two cottages. However, when Herbert went away to serve with the Australian Army during World War II the family all returned to the Mission. Although the school had officially been closed in 1919, it continued to operate up until 1948, while occasional church services were held at St Mary's. Herbert returned to the Mission after the war, and Phemie remembers him 'wearing gaiters to protect his legs from snakes when trapping rabbits and bringing home 'Blackfellow Bread'⁸ which we warmed on the stove and ate with butter for breakfast.' Life on the semi-closed Mission was hard, but Phemie has very fond memories of the times when the family was 'all around'.

The women did all the cooking in large black pots with long handles. Those pots were never empty, filled with rabbit (we called it 'underground mutton'), fish and chicken cooked with dumplings made from herbs and vegetables grown by my father. We, the children, ate first, then the men, then the women. We sat around a big round table, and we could sit and talk for days. We were brothers and sisters, and we really stuck together. We used to play cricket and other games, and I remember walking to Tyrrendarra and Drumborg for dances.

The Mission school was finally closed for good in 1948, and Phemie then remembers walking along bush tracks to get to the nearby Mt Eccles school. 'That walk was full of joy; listening to the bellbirds and curlews and watching bush rats grubbing in the undergrowth. Now all those trees have been cleared. They have plundered the earth.'

Listening to Phemie it is clear that some of her fondest memories involve St Mary's Church:

The church door was never locked and us children were free to go in at any time. We thought of it as a sacred place. I can still see the fence with the big red flower tree at the gate. I can remember one Christmas when a girl in a cornflower blue dress with a white lace collar got up to sing a hymn.

At this point, Phemie broke into the hymn herself and sang it to us, word perfect! A strong memory from all those years ago.

The written records give due credit to Reverend Stahle for his role in having the church built, but they do not give due credit to the Aboriginal people who did the labouring work or the members of the Aboriginal choir who performed at concerts to raise money for the construction. Phemie remembers that her father travelled far and wide with Reverend Stahle and the choir, helping to carry the organ used in the performances. It is Phemie's greatest wish that the church will one day be rebuilt, and she ended the interview by saying: 'The Anglican Church owes the Lake Condah community.'

A Site of Resistance and Symbol of Hope

In many ways the story of Lake Condah and the way the Mission was closed down is a sad one that has been repeated in many other parts of Australia. Luckily, however, there is a twist in the tail of this particular story. Intensive farming on the rocky terrain did not work out and much of the land came back into government control, albeit with the wetlands now drained of their water. After many years of campaigning for rights to the land granted to them by Queen Victoria, the Gunditjmara finally met some success when the Victorian Government announced in 1984 that as part of the state's 150th anniversary it would give back much of the reserve land overlooking Darlot Creek. However, this move was blocked by the conservative opposition in the upper house of parliament, so the state government had to turn to the Australian Government for assistance. For the first time, the Australian Government used the constitutional power it had gained in the famous referendum on Aboriginal rights in 1967 to overrule state opposition. In 1987, fifty-three hectares at Lake Condah and 1,130 hectares at Framlingham were given back to local Aboriginal control. In the case of Lake Condah, title to the land was vested in the Kerrupjmara group of Gunditjmara elders.

As the interview with Phemie Day revealed, former residents of Lake Condah Mission had defied its official closure for many years. Until its destruction, the church was still used for occasional services, and, even after its demise, people have gathered at the site – up to 300 at a time – for special occasions. Clearly, this gathering place became a site of resistance that helped the Gunditjmara sustain their campaign for historic justice. Furthermore, local Gunditjmara elders have not given up on the hope of having the church rebuilt. The old bell that once rang in St Mary's elegant tower has been found and returned to the Windamara Co-operative in Heywood. It can't be returned to its rightful home until there is a building there to house it, so its return has provided extra incentive to complete the cycle of restoration.

Endnotes

¹ As cited by Keith Cole in *Lake Condah Aboriginal Mission*, Keith Cole Publications, Bendigo, 1984, p. 20.

² *ibid*, p. 24.

³ Vanda Savill, *Dear Friends – Lake Condah Mission*, Kalprint Graphics, Hamilton, 1976.

⁴ Keith Cole, *Lake Condah*, p. 33.

⁵ *ibid*.

⁶ This Honour Board was eventually relocated to Heywood and it contains eighteen names. They are: James Arden, William Dashpar, William Egan, Richard King, Alfred J.H.Lovett, Leonard C.R.Lovett, Frederick A.Lovett, Edward N. Lovett, Herbert H. Lovett, Allan McDonald, George McDonald, David Mullett, Walter C.G.Saunders, Herbert C.E. Stahle, Robert W. Taylor, G.S. Winter, Theodore G. Winter and Lawrence S. Young.

⁷ As documented by Keith Cole, *Lake Condah*.

⁸ 'Blackfellow Bread' was most likely a fungus dug up from underground. This has become an endangered fungus due to the changes in agriculture practice following settlement.

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