

A BUILDING REVEALS OUR HISTORY

This article by Colleen O’Sullivan appeared in the *Mudgee Guardian*, 10 March 2014

Every building in Kandos captures something of who we were and who we are. None more so, I think, than the former Methodist Church: its placement and architectural uniqueness; the vision of its founders and commitment of its worshippers; its ability to project and reinvent.

My mother called it a “white elephant.” Perhaps that says as much about her Catholic bias as about its physical quality. It was whitewashed in her day and much more visible, standing on almost the highest prominence in town, unobstructed by tall trees, a landmark from every viewpoint, a solid, huge building looking down over the town.

The Methodists did not hold the first church service in Kandos. That honour belongs to the Presbyterians apparently (*MG* 30/3/1914). However they were next, only two months later, when Reverend Drummond from Rylstone stood beneath a blue sky and “held his congregation by a fine and eloquent sermon”. The only buildings at that time in Kandos were unfinished company structures and make-shift huts.

When town allotments were auctioned the following year Reverend Morris-Yates, Methodist minister from Mudgee, purchased two lots in Buchanan Street with a clear view down Jaques Street; and another lot on the other side of the hill running down to the Works Flat. It was a coup. The Anglicans or Catholics were usually the ones who had the best view in town.

It was the Methodists too who got their church built first, mainly through the patronage of the works manager Floyd S Richards. The laying of the foundation stone (*MG* 6/2/1919) reveals their respect for ceremony and history. A silver trowel was produced inscribed with the name James Dawson and the date. He was a committed Methodist and his father one of the pioneer Methodists of the State. He was also the town’s surveyor.

Dawson dipped the trowel in mortar and spread it on top of the foundation stone, with the words, “in the name of the Great Architect of the Universe I declare this stone well and truly laid”.

It was then that Richards showed the onlookers four coins, including an English farthing dated 1754, which he laid in the mortar. The assembly adjourned to the Angus Memorial hall, listened to speeches and sipped tea.

By the time of the official opening on 20 September 1919, the church was overlooked by the new and magnificent manager’s house. It was truly under the patronage of the manager. He had designed the church and provided the cement for the building, made entirely of concrete. He was at pains to tell the community: “he would have assisted any other church as zealously as he had the Methodists.” His only aim, he said, was to ensure the town had a permanent place of worship. Not surprisingly he was given the honour of opening the church, with the key presented by James Dawson.

The new church certainly created a lot of interest outside the town, as well as inside. “A unique Methodist Church,” reported the *Sydney Morning Herald*, “...of Mexican mission

style...flat-roofed...the only one of its kind in the State.” According to the *Kandos Star* (24/11/1921) it had been likened to “a picture show, town gaol, synagogue or vault.”

The interior and furniture were as distinctive as the exterior. Instead of uncomfortable pews, eighty comfy sea grass chairs were arranged on tiers, rising towards the rear. The concrete rostrum was situated above the entrance, as were the organ, choir and preaching desk, which were level with the back of the church. Its cool interior would prove a relief from a hot central western summer (but it was freezing in winter).

The cost of the building was £1085 of which £728 had been already paid at its opening, leaving a debt of £357 – an impressive result for a small community, though I am sure company patronage helped.

Most of the entertainment in the growing town was organised in order to fund-raise. Unlike most towns, Kandos was starting from scratch and growing rapidly. The *Lithgow Mercury* observed after a particular fund-raiser (28/10/1921) that “Kandos is in the singularly happy position of having practically no sectarian bitterness and Catholic and non-Catholic ably assist each other.”

While the Anglicans and Catholics raised most of their money from bazaars, balls and euchre tournaments, Methodist fund-raisers were much more low-key: mainly flower shows and rose fairs with an occasional “mock wedding” and “continental”. The former combined merry parody with a serious auction of wedding gifts, while the latter combined stalls with a social gathering.

The building of a fence for the Methodist Church was planned in 1926 but did not eventuate till 1931 when John Bennett Simpkins organised relief work for the unemployed of the church. He contributed bricks and supervised the work, Sid Robbins donated ashes and it was completed in a few months. Some complained that the fence prevented a short cut from the town to the works but others said it improved the street and church.

In 1954 the Methodists marked the opening of the Kandos Spring Festival with a flower show and fair. It was also the official opening of the new Sunday School Hall. On that weekend too, the Dawson Memorial Gates were dedicated. These came from the Dawson property Henbury and were installed in the front fence of the church, James Dawson and his wife Jessie having died over a decade before.

No one was to know that by 1988, the church would have ceased to operate, and the building, with the assistance of a government grant, council and community funds, would be re-invented as the Kandos Bi-Centennial Industrial Museum.

Like the Methodist Church building there is much that is unique about Kandos, a rare twentieth century town which began life as a private village. Founded by a group of rich, powerful, influential and visionary men, it developed through the co-operative effort of a company and its workers; a community and its council. Set in a dramatic landscape, it was populated by a high percentage of European migrants and Labour voters.

Kandos, despite no longer having the industry on which it was built, is a symbol of industrial strength and human co-operation. So too the museum.