

Chapter 3: The Union Church

The Union church is the oldest church in the district and as such has one of the most interesting histories. It was built in the township of Biarra in 1887. This was an historic year in the Toogoolawah district.

D.C. McConnel had retired in 1873 and handed the responsibility for managing Cressbrook to his eldest son, J.H. McConnel. By this time the Cressbrook holding was barely half of the original selection. J.H. McConnel proved to be an astute business man and he explored the possibility of subdividing parts of Cressbrook and selling them as residential blocks. The first of these ventures appears to have been the township of Biarra described as being located "at Cressbrook gates".

Railway records held in Qld State Archives indicate that there were land sales at the town of Biarra via Cressbrook on 5 April and 18 October 1887 that realised £423¹. An additional incentive for prospective buyers would be a union church that could serve as a community hall as well.

Such a church was built there by a Mr. Day from Esk and Nanango between August and December 1887, and would surely have increased bidding at the October sales that year. The church was constructed for Mr. J. H. McConnel and the timber was supplied by the Blank Bros. sawmill at Esk.

We know that the first communion service was held in the Union Church, Biarra on 26 February 1888 and that the minister was assisted by Mr. T.C. Pryde (Snr.) who was described as an Elder and Trustee of the Biarra

Church.² T.C. Pryde was also an elder of the Presbyterian Church, Esk and it is likely that the minister he assisted was a Presbyterian minister of the Esk charge.

The first Presbyterian minister in the district was Rev. David Watt M.A. who lived at Esk in 1876 and died prematurely in the following year. The next five ministers for the Esk charge were relieving ministers: Rev D. Mossop, Rev. J. Clark, Rev. J. Stewart, Rev. P. Robertson and Rev A Gauld. Rev. J. Pollock was inducted in 1880, and Rev C.J. Legate ministered to the Esk district from 1885-1887. He was followed by Rev. James McQueen who remained until 1891 when he resigned "because family affairs compelled him to leave the Colony". It seems more than likely that it was Rev. James McQueen who officiated at the first communion service in the Union Church at Biarra.

There are no records of the dedication of this little church and the J.H. McConnel family certainly had the contacts to invite one or more visiting dignitaries for this purpose. There does not appear to be a newspaper report of such an event, so we may assume that Rev. James McQueen also dedicated this church for his Presbyterian congregation, or perhaps all protestant congregations to follow.

An early photo of the original Biarra Church shows it to be a typically small country church with three windows on each side, a front entrance porch and a steep shingle roof still in use in 1928. There are no early records to tell how frequently services were held here.

¹ Batch 1, A/8848, Railway Records, Queensland State Archives

² St. Paul's Presbyterian Church, Toogoolawah: Golden Jubilee 1926 - 1976



Early Photo of Union Church

In 1891 it was proposed by Mrs. J.H. McConnel that the church building should be used as a temporary school room for the half time provisional school recommended for the district by Inspector John Shirley. But there were bank closures and depression in Australia in the 1890s and overseas loans for capital works were used by the Queensland Government of the day to rescue the Queensland National Bank.

The Department of Public Instruction did not accept Inspector Shirley's recommendation. A Provisional School for Mt. Beppo had already been approved in 1886 and, in spite of economic hardships, this school opened in 1893.

By 1895 the Queensland Government had established a railway guarantee scheme where land owners in a dedicated area were taxed to contribute to the continuing development of the railway system that was opening up Queensland to rapid development. Such a scheme was proposed for the 12 miles of railway from Esk to Biarra (Cressbrook) in that year.³ This would certainly put Biarra on the map and increase land sales at the terminus. For reasons that are very hard to understand, the terminus of this section of the rail line when it

³ Brisbane Courier 13.11.1895, p4 c6

was finally finished in 1904 was a swamp at Yimbun rather than the surveyed town of Biarra proposed in 1895.

J.H. McConnel next established a condensed milk factory on Cressbrook Creek in 1898 that was initially unsuccessful. By 1900 it was a thriving business that provided employment and drove the demand for residential land sales nearby. In 1904 J.H. McConnel had some of his land around the factory surveyed and looked again to real estate sales there.



Original McConnel Milk Factory 1899⁴

There is no doubt that the Union Church had been moved from Biarra by 1904 because it appeared on the original survey plans for what became the town of Toogoolawah. It may have been dismantled and rebuilt there. It is more likely that it was moved by bullock wagon. Again there are no records available.

Its new site was adjacent to the still-to-be-built state school (1905) and opposite the cenotaph built in 1917 to honour WW1 soldiers who enlisted from the district.

The Union Church may have been moved as early as 1900. Certainly by 13 December 1904, yet another School Inspector (A.S. Kennedy) recorded a meeting in the Union Church, Toogoolawah, with 29 prospective pupils for the recommended

⁴ Queensland Times 11 Feb 1899, p16 Supplement, Cressbrook condensed milk factory

Toogoolawah Provisional School that opened in the following year.

The township of Biarra was a failed experiment, but the new township of Toogoolawah was surrounded by dairy farms with a milk factory, a union church, a school and a railway station. Land sales here were assured.

There is a second record of the Union Church's use in 1905 with a handwritten notation that "The A.G. & P.Q. of Toogoolawah was inaugurated in the Union Chapel in July 1905". The initials clearly indicate a single entity and the definition of 'inaugurate' is 'to begin an undertaking with ceremony'. To date, the initials have not been identified as an undertaking that served the Toogoolawah community within the memory of older residents.

For many years Toogoolawah had a church but no cemetery. And thereby hangs a tale.

The Toogoolawah cemetery is not situated in Toogoolawah, but in the surveyed township of Biarra that once housed the Union Church. The church was probably sited in, or adjacent to the current cemetery that was included in the initial survey for Biarra. And the story behind Toogoolawah's cemetery at Biarra has been hard to verify.

We know that the Home Secretary forwarded a copy of the Proclamation of a Cemetery Reserve at Cressbrook to the local government authority before September 1905, and that there were already established cemeteries then at Wivenhoe, Fernvale, Lowood and Esk.

Perhaps there was an increasing demand for public burials at Cressbrook after 1905. In 1908 Mary Elizabeth McConnel, wife of J.H. McConnel complained that there were no services in Toogoolawah and there was still no cemetery. The question of

obtaining a cemetery was handed over to the Member for Stanley, H.P. Somerset, and he advised by letter in February 1908 that the State government was making the appropriate arrangements. Now either this request did not have very high priority or it was problematic, because it was not until November of the same year that F.R. Bostock, an Ipswich surveyor, had received instructions to survey a cemetery reserve at Toogoolawah.

And yet, this did not happen. The only hint comes from a Shire Council motion from the Chairman John MacDonald in June 1908. He proposed a surprisingly modern sounding motion that, "the Local Authorities Association should be asked that an act be passed compelling persons subdividing their lands into townships to provide plans for public purposes including Shire Council, school, recreation, sanitary and rubbish depots, and cemetery reserves, (re the Toogoolawah experience)." It appears that this motion may have lapsed for want of a seconder but it was recorded in full nonetheless.

This was a direct attack on J.H. McConnel who had sold the land on which Toogoolawah now stood, and had provided the original survey without such services. It implied that the difficulties with establishing a cemetery in the township were related in some way to the conditions of the original town survey.

The motion may have been no more than a personal expression of the Chairman's frustration in dealing with the State Government of Bill Kidston (Liberal) who took over from Robert Philp on 18 February 1908 which seems to have coincided almost exactly with the beginning of agitation for the cemetery. J.H. McConnel was not serving on the Shire Council at the time, although he had served as

Chairman and Councillor previously and would do so again.

Because the early cemetery records have been lost it is difficult to establish when it was actually opened. The first dated burial in the 'Toogoolawah' cemetery was in 1910. By this time the trustees of the already established Mooretown cemetery are threatening to resign after the Council refused their request to take it over, because there was nothing in the Local Authorities Act that could compel the Council to do so.

The sorry saga of the Toogoolawah Cemetery is in stark contrast to the sad gift of land to the Apostolic Church to honour a young wife who died with her infant in childbirth.

And the first clear record for the Toogoolawah Cemetery is also for a mother (Mary Gannon) and baby who died in childbirth.

The first forty recorded burials in the Toogoolawah Cemetery are listed below.

No.	Name	Sex	Age	Burial date
1	Infant			
2	Infant			
3	Gannon		Infant	11May1910
4	Gannon, J (Mary)		37 yrs	11May1910
5	Piele, J.W.	F	39 yrs	
6	Brennan		Infant	
7	King, May Ellen	F	74 yrs	
8	McCorry, Emma			2July1910
9	Arnold, John			5Nov 1910
10	McDonald, James	M		
11	Tompkins, Frank			
12	Nunn, William		58 yrs	9May1911
13	Woodhouse, H		5 days	
14	Cronan, Jas		Infant	
15	Tunney, John		44 yrs	5April1912
16	Craydon, E.		10wks	4July1910
17	Murry, Ellen	F	74 yrs	
18	Kerr, Clyde Richard		18 yrs	13July1913
19	Jones, James Owen		3 yrs	20Oct1913
20	England, Sarah		74 yrs	14Oct1913
21	Proud, John Joseph (Jack)		16 yrs	11Feb1915
22	Frost, David		73 yrs	18Mar1915
23	Evans, E.M.		6 wks	19June1915
24	Browning, E.M.		5 wks	20July1915
25	Isles		6 days	17Aug1915
25	Wells, Doreen Joyce		27 yrs	1 May 1943

26	Woodhouse, Edith F		24 yrs	16Jan1916
27	Bruce		3mths	10Jan1916
28	Harding		3 days	21June1916
29	Grieve, T.A.		25 yrs	21June1916
30	McIntyre		3 days	10Aug1916
31	Boyce		3 days	16Aug1916
32	Frost		3 hrs	22Sept1916
33	Neakin (twins)		14wks	24Sept1916
34	Taylor	F	64 yrs	30Oct1916
35	Blakely		3 days	31Jan1917
36	Maroney, Harold		10 yrs	4July1917
37	Hooton, Harold		19 yrs	9Apr1917
38	Woolridge	F	3 yrs	10Apr1917
39	Bleisner, A		8 days	4July1917
40	Brand			30July1917



Jack Proud, 11/2/1916, Toogoolawah Cemetery

One of the original trustees of the Toogoolawah Cemetery was the local undertaker, Will Crandell. His son, the late Jack Crandell, was certain that his father had told him that the very earliest records had been lost, so there may well be earlier burials between 1908 and 1910. An equally likely explanation is that the drama of establishing a cemetery for Toogoolawah dragged on for more than a year.

If the dead were poorly served in Toogoolawah, the living congregations continued to share the Union Church in fellowship and worship. The Church of England Congregation seems to have been the first to make alternative arrangements

with the establishment of a small hall for Sunday school. The plaque inside this hall suggests it was built in 1906 but this could not be verified when the Church of England, the manse and hall were heritage listed. Church services, however, continued to be held in the Union Church or Chapel.

Ruth Kerr's "Confidence and Tradition"⁵ suggested that the Methodist Church from Middle Street, Esk was relocated to its present site in Abbotsford Street, Toogoolawah in 1906 and that it was later remodelled with a new roof and the vestry was added in 1926.

This is inaccurate, as the Quarterly Minutes of the Esk Circuit show. In fact the Methodist Church (now Uniting Church) as it now stands in Toogoolawah was built in 1926 and the Methodist congregation continued to use the Union Church until that time.

Baptist, Presbyterian, Congregational and New Apostolic Churches have all used the Union Church in their turn.



New Apostolic Church members outside Union Church, Toogoolawah circa 1928

By 1928, however, most of the traditional Protestant congregations in Toogoolawah had built their own churches and the little Union Church was falling into disrepair. Australia was slipping into Depression. The

⁵ Ruth Kerr, 1988 Confidence and Tradition: A history of the Esk Shire. Council of the Shire of Esk

Apostolic Church of Queensland needed a church in town as well as the one at Mt. Beppo and the Union Church was finally leased to them in 1929.

The terms of the lease (see following) are informative about the condition of the forty year old Union Church.

*25 Febry 1929
The Trustees of the Toogoolawah Union Church agree to allow the Mt. Beppo and Toogoolawah Branch of the Apostolic Church to make use of the Union Church at the Railway crossing near the State School of Toogoolawah for a term of Twenty five years (25) at a payment of 1/- one shilling a year rental paid to the trustees on the first day of January each year the receipt of which for the year 1929 is hereby acknowledged. The Apostolic Church agree to keep the grounds and fences in proper order, to put an iron roof on the Church and to put it generally in a good order of repair and to keep it so, this is an essential part of the contract.*

Witness: P.J. McNamara, J.P.;

H.P. Gardner & A.D. Munro for the Trustees of the Union Church;

G.J. Lukritz and C. Leisemann

In the hands of the energetic Apostolic congregation, the old Union Church was renovated and later extended. There is no doubt that the

grounds and fences were put in good order and its roof is iron.

There are photos of the church before and after restoration and it continues to serve the Apostolic Church of Queensland in Toogoolawah. The presentation of the oldest church in Toogoolawah, now one hundred and twenty years old, is a tribute to the loving care of its congregation since 1930.



Before 1929



After 1929



21st Century