

Chapter 1

Religious observances of the pioneers and early settlers of the Brisbane Valley

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In 1843 Reverend John Gregor, Anglican missionary, undertook an impeccably recorded tour of the Brisbane Valley on horse and by foot, worshipping with all the new settlers in the “northern part of the extensive district which has been committed to my pastoral care”. He left Brisbane on 14th August and returned to Ipswich on 1st September; a journey of not less than 200 miles to visit the Archers brothers, Charles, David, John, Thomas & William, (Durundur), E. & C.J. McKenzie (Kilcoy), F. & F. Bigges (Mt Brisbane), G. Scott (Mt. Esk), D. & F. McConnel (Cressbrook), J. & R. Balfour (Colinton, Stanley Creek), Graham & Ivory (Blazes later Eskdale), Oliver & Borthwick (later Wivenhoe) and Wingate. The Rev. Gregor’s horse was injured and unable to continue from Wivenhoe. He recorded in his diary for 28th August, “I shall not be able to ride my horse any more on this journey, and must therefore walk all the way to Brisbane.”ⁱ He reached Mr. Owen’s accommodation house on 30th August and Thorn’s Inn, Ipswich the following day. His arrival in Brisbane is not recorded.

Of all the families he visited, only the McConnel family remain at Cressbrook in the Brisbane Valley. Rev. Gregor received a hearty welcome from the Messrs McConnel and noted “numberless indications of the wealthy squatter”. In spite of his reception, he was somewhat scathing of the McConnel’s upbringing. “The Messrs. McConnel have been educated among Dissenters in Manchester, but are very favourably disposed to the

Church of England in this colony; particularly as there are only a few of their sect in it, and as there are, besides themselves, fortunately none, as far as I yet know, in this district”ⁱⁱ In comparison, Mr. Mort, the superintendent of Cressbrook station, was described as having, “a gentlemanly bearing, and is a staunch churchman”.ⁱⁱⁱ The history of the development of places of worship in the Brisbane Valley will show that Rev. Gregor’s denigration of the McConnel’s religious training was to have been sadly misplaced.

Only six year’s later, on 12th December, 1849, David Cannon McConnel chaired a meeting of prominent men at Kangaroo Point to further the Presbyterian cause in the northern part of what was still N.S.W. He had previously returned to Britain and married Mary McLeod (27 April 1847) but was recalled to Australia again in 1849 because of business difficulties at Cressbrook. “Whilst residing at Kangaroo Point in the second half of 1849, McConnel employed builder Andrew Petrie to construct the (Bulimba) house at Toogoolawah (as it was then called), the first masonry Tudor style homestead in the Brisbane region.”^{iv}

After this historic meeting, the committee distributed a circular providing the basis for Presbyterian worship and fellowship: “..the basis of the Church shall be so broad that individual Christians of all denominations who are willing to merge their minor differences shall be placed on a perfect equality of right and privilege so that they can worship their Maker together content to enjoy the unity of spirit without a uniformity of sentiment and creed”.^v

Another member of the committee, John Graham, built a small wooden church on land that would become the railway station in Grey Street, South Brisbane. It cost £112 to build and was opened for worship in May 1851. John McConnel joined his brother David in Australia in the same year, and together they purchased Durundur Station from the Archer brothers.

In August 1851, the Rev. Walter Ross McLeod, a brother of Mrs. D.C. McConnel, arrived from Scotland to replace the Rev. Thomas Mobray, and he became the first settled minister of the original Presbyterian charge. McLeod conducted his services in the little wooden church in South Brisbane as well as in the old School of Arts building, on the corner of Queen and Creek Streets. Mr. McLeod resigned in 1852 and returned to Britain.^{vi} In 1853 Bulimba House, the McConnel's Brisbane residence was sold and the following year D.C. McConnel took his sick wife home to Britain. They were not to return until 1862.

Between 1849 and 1863 ten Presbyterian churches had been established in Queensland at South Brisbane, Ann Street, Ipswich, Creek Street, Warwick, Rockhampton, Maryborough, Wickham Terrace, Toowoomba and Gladstone. After the Great Disruption of 1843, the Presbyterian Church had been divided and these ten churches represented congregations from both Free and Established Kirk. These divisions were inhibiting the urgent need for churches in such a vast and sparsely populated state, and in 1863 a union of the two was established so that three ministers and their congregations became one church called the Presbyterian Church of Queensland. Only two year's later development was so rapid that the Synod resolved that:

“The Presbytery of Queensland as now existing be divided into three Presbyteries, to be called –

1. Presbytery of Brisbane which shall consist of the following congregations: Ann Street, Wickham Terrace, South Brisbane and Ipswich
2. Presbytery of Toowoomba which shall consist of the following congregations: Toowoomba and Warwick
3. Presbytery of Rockhampton which shall consist of the following congregations: Rockhampton and Maryborough”.^{vii}

The Presbytery of Brisbane covered the whole of South East Queensland.

In 1862 D.C. McConnel and his family returned to Australia, and the partnership between the brothers John and David that had seen them jointly owning Cressbrook and Durundur Stations was dissolved. David McConnel returned to Cressbrook and John retained Durundur. It is noted in the documentation for the heritage listing of Cressbrook that, “Weekly Presbyterian church services were held in the recently constructed (i.e. 1862) addition to the House”.^{viii}

This situation was to continue until David McConnel retired in 1873. It seems apparent that he then turned his attention to providing a church in Esk, so that “welcome was given in 1876 to the “new charge of Town of Esk” where Rev. David Watt was settled.”^{ix} David and Mary McConnel had donated 20 acres of land for the construction of a Presbyterian Church to mark their silver wedding anniversary. Alexander Raff, the financial manager for F. & F. Bigge who had owned both Mt. Brisbane and Mt. Esk, and other local graziers donated money towards the building of St Andrews.

Because St. Andrew's was the first church in Esk, it was initially used as a Union church and demonstrated cooperation between different denominations common in the early stages of establishing townships. It was noted at the time that, "Cressbrook' Station in this district was the property of D.C. McConnel, Esq., one of the first Presbyterian elders to hold office in the colony, and here Adam McIntrye (one of the first ministers to be trained in Queensland) had been stationed some twelve years earlier".^x The Dissenter that Rev. Gregor had been pleased to dismiss as one of the few had become a leader of many.

It was hardly surprising that the first meeting recorded in the Session book for St. Andrew's, Esk indicates the Chairman is D.C. McConnel, supported by James Jones, J.W. Long, John Milner, Alexander Raff, P.J. Thomas.^{xi} This first meeting was held in Brisbane. Between 1876 and 1881, meetings were being held at Esk (St. Andrews), Cressbrook and Glen Harding (Harlin), where Elias Harding, third elder of the Esk Charge, had settled. In 1881 "the session considered it advisable to appoint elders at Wivenhoe and at Deep Creek (Bryden)."^{xii}

By 1885 it was reported in the Esk Charge Centenary that there were decision-making congregations at Biarra (Toogoolawah), Moombra, Esk, Wivenhoe, Deep Creek and Cressbrook. The congregations at Cressbrook, Esk and Wivenhoe each had a church building to keep equipped and maintained, while at Deep Creek and Biarra each shared a Union Church.^{xiii}

In fact, the Union church at Biarra had not been built by 1885 when D.C.

McConnel died. It was his eldest son, J.H. McConnel, who ordered that it be built by a Mr. Day of Esk & Nanango in the surveyed township of Biarra (2 kms beyond Toogoolawah) between August & December, 1887. The Blank brothers with the first sawmill in Esk had the order for timber. The first communion service was held on 26th February, 1888. Elder & trustee of the Biarra Church T.C. Pryde (Snr.) assisted the minister. It was not until 1901 that Victoria Chapel was to be built at Cressbrook although there may well have been an earlier church on the homestead grounds. The Union church remained at the Biarra township at least until 1891.

In that year David McConnel's widow Mary McConnel was secretary of a school committee, and she, "proposed that an Undenominational Church in the township of Biarra be used as a temporary school room".^{xiv} The recommendation from Inspector John Shirley at that time was to establish a half time provisional school at "the Presbyterian (Biarra) Church, Cressbrook Gate". This recommendation was not accepted by the Education Department of the day. The old Biarra Church was removed to the developing township of Toogoolawah before it was surveyed in 1904 and was known as the Union Chapel. This was where the School Inspector, Mr. A.S. Kennedy, recorded his meeting with 20 prospective pupils for the proposed Toogoolawah Provisional School on 13th December, 1904.

By the early 1900s there were 237 adults enrolled in the Esk Presbyterian Charge. The minister preached as often as could be arranged at the following places:- Atkinson's Lagoon (Union Church), Bellevue, Biarra - near Esk (Hall), Caboonbah (Union

church), Coominya, Deep Creek (Union Church), Esk (St. Andrew's), Fernvale, Harlin, Hazeldean (Union Church), Cressbrook, Moombra (Hall), Moore (Hall), Murrumbra (Hall), Toogoolawah (Union Church), Villeneuve, Wivenhoe (Presbyterian Church).^{xv}

With the dispersal of the larger holdings for closer settlement, all denominations were called to provide places of worship and fellowship for their growing congregations in the Brisbane Valley. The Anglican Parish of Esk was created in 1886 and, until 1889 services were conducted at McConnel's non-denominational Union Church, St. Andrews. The site for an Anglican Church was donated by Ellen Webb, and transferred to that Church in 1889. St. Agnes' Church of England was erected in mid-1889 by local Esk contractor, Sawmill proprietor and Anglican parishioner, Lars Andersen, and it was dedicated in October of that year. The street entrance pillars to St. Agnes' were erected in honour of former parishioner and Brisbane Valley pioneer Francis Edward Bigge on whose land the town of Esk is built. They were designed and built by stonemason Andrew Petrie of Toowong in 1920. It is reported that a Methodist church was also built at Esk on the south side of Sandy Creek, and it was moved to Toogoolawah in 1906.^{xvi}

In 1870, St. Mel's Roman Catholic parish of Esk was part of the parish of Nanango and there was no Catholic church in Esk until 1884. This first building burned and the present St. Mel's was rebuilt in 1905 by Lars Andersen at a cost of £600. In 1913 Esk was created a parish, and by then there were Catholic churches in Esk and Bryden (1901) as well as St. Patrick's Church at Moore (1905). St

Agatha's, Toogoolawah, was not built until 1915.^{xvii}

The first Methodist Church in the Brisbane Valley was built on land donated by E. Denham at Fernvale in 1871. The Toogoolawah Methodist Church was originally the Esk Methodist Church built in 1883. The building was shifted to Toogoolawah in 1907.

In 1884 there had been significant settlement of mostly German families in the Mt. Beppo district. The first families were those of J. Bulow, S. Shank, W. Greinke, Marschke, Kleier, H. & C. Teske, W. Schultz, R. Leiseman and A. Benhagen. The following year they were joined by F. Dumke, H. Wolff, R.D. Soden, F. & C. Tetzlaff and G. Gilmeister.^{xviii}

The only church available for worship in the district was at Cressbrook Station, then managed by J.H. McConnel. The German families were visited on November 12th, 1884 by an Evangelist Niemeier who returned a month later and officiated at the re-birth of Brothers Mayer, Greinke and Sister Marschke as Apostolic Christians. There is no record of a family called Mayer in Mt. Beppo in 1884-5 although Carl Meyer became the first resident priest of the new church. Neimeier visited the German community at Mt. Beppo every three weeks for the next 18 months and established the Apostolic faith there.^{xix} Initially the faithful worshiped in family homes before their first church was built on private property below the site of the present Mt. Beppo Apostolic Church.

The family of R.D. Soden had come to Mt. Beppo from Pine Mountain in 1885 where they had grown cotton with Kanaka labour. They retained

their Protestant faith and would have been obliged to travel to Cressbrook for a church service.

In 1879 Katharine Rose McConnel, daughter of D.C. McConnel, had married H. P. Somerset and they spent the early years of their marriage in N.S.W. In 1888, three years after the Soden family had arrived at Mt. Beppo, the Somerset family had secured 20,000 acres in the Mt. Stanley area where they intended to build their home. Instead they exchanged 10,000 acres there for 5,000 acres of freehold land at Cressbrook, and built Caboonbah homestead at the junction of the Stanley and Brisbane rivers. The house was finished in 1890 and remained their home until 1935 when Katharine died.

H.P. Somerset was active in community affairs, and like his brothers-in-law, spoke fluent German. From 1890 to 1904 he was a member of the Esk Divisional Board and finally Chairman. He was voted into State Parliament as an Independent member in 1904 and represented the electorate of Stanley for 14 years.

In 1904 he was in a position to understand the needs of his electorate. The railway had reached Toogoolawah by then, and those families that could access this form of transport were well served with religious services and fellowship available on the railway line at St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Methodist Church, St Mel's Catholic Church, St. Agnes' Church of England at Esk and the old Biarra Union Church that had been relocated to Toogoolawah. Local communities were served by the Apostolic Church at Mt. Beppo and Victoria Chapel, which had been built at Cressbrook in 1901 to celebrate J.H. McConnel's silver wedding anniversary. Most

religious services in rural areas were still being held in family homes, and the homes of R.D. Soden and H.P. Somerset had long served the growing protestant community of Mt. Beppo. It was in this climate of growing populations and increased prosperity that the vision for the Caboonbah Udenominational Church developed.

ⁱ McKenzie Smith (1991) Brisbane River Valley 1841-1850: Pioneer Observances and Reminiscences Brisbane History Group Sources No. 5, p 42

ⁱⁱ Ibid, p 39

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid, p 39

^{iv} Queensland Heritage Register, Bulimba House 600179

^v Richard Bardon, B.A. (1949) The Centenary History of the Presbyterian Church of Queensland) W.R. Smith & Peterson Pty Ltd., Kemp Place, Valley, Brisbane

^{vi} Ibid

^{vii} Ibid

^{viii} Queensland Heritage Register, Cressbrook Homestead, 600503

^{ix} Richard Bardon (1949), p 56

^x Ibid, p 56

^{xi} Esk Presbyterian Charge Centenary 1876-1976, p7

^{xii} Ibid, p 8

^{xiii} Ibid, p 10

^{xiv}

^{xv} Esk Centenary Charge, p 15

^{xvi} . Queensland Heritage Register, St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Esk, 602408

^{xvii} Catholic Leader, October, 1963

^{xviii} G. Launder (1953) History of Mt Beppo

^{xix} Apostolic Home Page, www, History of the Church