

GRAPEVINE CUTTINGS (May 2000)

By Rob Upson

St. Aidan's Orphanage

In the earlier days of the Bendigo goldfields many children were deprived of their parents either by premature death or by mining accidents. The Catholic Church recognised that these children needed to be looked after and educated, so St. Aidan's Orphanage came into being. Forty acres of land were acquired in the area known as Grassy Flat in the Shire of Strathfieldsaye and in May 1904 the foundation stone was laid by his Lordship, Bishop Reville and dedicated to the memory of the Rev. Dr. Henry Backhaus (1812 - 1882).

Such was the urgent need to complete this construction, that work on the Sacred Heart Cathedral was temporarily stopped to free up the workmen for the project. A year later, the orphanage was officially opened by Archbishop Carr and the running of this institution was in the capable hands of a group of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd, transferred from their Convent in Abbotsford.

The initial building according to the Annals of Bendigo, *....is a massive brick structure of English Gothic design, 3 stories in height. At the south end is a 90 feet high tower and the building is roofed with green American slate. The ceilings are lined with embossed steel and zinc and the floors are of Kauri pine. The ground floor is devoted to classrooms, parlours and workrooms. On the first floor is the Chapel and dormitories are on this floor and the top floor. Electricity is generated on the premises and there is a well- equipped laundry.* The building, comprising two sections, one for boys and the other for girls, would initially accommodate about 100 children.

A boy's dormitory building of red brick was added in 1909 and further additions and extensions to the complex were completed in 1931 and 1956. Bendigo's first Youth Hostel in a former section of the orphanage was opened in 1977. With a change in social policy aimed more towards foster-care, the orphanage became redundant and in 1984 it was sold to the Anglican Church and became the new campus of Girton College.

This turned out to be a financial disaster as no doubt the capital expenditure, interest rates and operating costs would have been quite considerable. By the mid 90's the complex was privately sold and to this day has remained unoccupied except for the southern section, which is currently the Kennington Primary School. It would be a shame if these magnificent old buildings, which form part of Bendigo's heritage, should fall into disrepair and disappear.

St. Aidan is the patron saint of County Wexford in Ireland, the birthplace of Dr. Martin Crane, the first Catholic Bishop of Sandhurst. St. Aidan was a 7th century monk who was sent from Wexford to the island of Lindisfarne (or Holy Island) off the coast of Northumberland. Here he established a church and a monastery and set out to evangelise northern England.

Dr. Henry Backhaus, born in Germany, was the first Catholic priest on the Bendigo goldfields. In 1852 he set up a place of worship in a tent, not far from the present site of St. Killian's church.

The Sisters of the Good Shepherd is a catholic religious order devoted particularly to the care, rehabilitation and education of girls and young women who had demonstrated delinquent behaviour. Founded in 1641, in France, they were originally known as the Religious Order of Our Lady of Charity of the Refuge. Several of their convents were unified under Pope Gregory XVI in 1835 and called Sisters of Our Lady of the Good Shepherd.