

DR. HENRY BACKHAUS

In the recent cutting on St. Aidan's orphanage, I mentioned that the foundation stone of that institution was laid in memory of the Rev. Dr. Backhaus. Here is a brief biography of this pioneer priest of the goldfields.

Henry Backhaus was born in 1812 in the central German town of Paderborn, the eldest of nine children born to a local cobbler and his wife. He was orphaned at sixteen and relatives helped him to attend the University of Würzburg. He then went to a religious college in Rome and graduated as Doctor of Divinity, aged 24. His first posting was to Calcutta as chaplain to the Bengal Lancers where he learnt the English language. By 1847 he had journeyed to Adelaide, via Sydney, to work among the German settlers. When the Victorian gold rush began, it was feared that the South Australian colony would be deserted, such was the mass exodus to the Victorian diggings. Dr. Backhaus then left for Melbourne and offered his services to the Diocese and was appointed as the first priest to look after the Catholic population on the goldfields.

Backhaus started celebrating Mass on the Bendigo goldfields, in May 1852, in a tent in Golden Square with most of the congregation outside. He then moved to a site to what is now McCrae St. in the vicinity of one of the largest groups of Irish diggers. Here he organised the building of a crude church, a wooden framed structure (40 ft long by 16 ft wide) with a canvas roof. By this time, there were hundreds of children roaming the diggings unable to read or write. With a deep concern for education, Backhaus opened a primitive school in 1853 using his church, but apparently only a handful of pupils attended.

His next project was the construction of a larger and more permanent church, completed in late 1857 and named to honour Saint Kilian. (More about this church and the Saint some other time). Church collections were characteristic of the times, small pieces of gold, and Backhaus was a successful and shrewd investor on behalf of the Diocese and himself. He became a commanding and respected figure in the community, tall, clean-shaven with flaxen shoulder length hair. His interests spread well beyond the church becoming actively involved in community affairs. He played roles in establishing a hospital in 1853, initiating plans for a water supply, formation of a fire brigade, introduction of local government, erection of a Town Hall and development of the rail link from Melbourne.

In 1863 Backhaus surprisingly resigned his post and headed back to Europe but by early 1866 he was back in Australia and was again ministering to the Catholic population on the goldfields. In 1874 the Diocese of Sandhurst was created and contrary to expectations Backhaus was not made its first Bishop, the appointment going to Dr Martin Crane. In 1881, Backhaus retired from parish work and went to live in Brighton. When he became ill the following year he came back to Bendigo to the home of his friend John Crowley in Rowan St., 'Marlborough House', where he died on 7th September 1882, aged 71.

A Requiem Mass held at St. Kilian's, prior to the funeral, was attended by civic leaders, representatives of other churches and many parishioners. An estimated crowd of up to 30,000 people lined the route of the cortege as it proceeded through various streets, returning along Pall Mall to St. Kilian's. The Rev. Dr. Reville conducted the burial service as Dr. Backhaus was laid to rest in a vault in the church grounds close to McCrae St.

At the time of his death Backhaus was a very wealthy man. He had invested shrewdly in property, both urban and rural. His will included 83 separate Crown allotments in Bendigo and was valued for probate at \$6 million in today's money. The will named three trustees and instructed them to hold '*all my real estate...forever*'. This meant that none of the land could be sold or disposed of. The income from the estate helped to fund the building of the Sacred Heart Cathedral and St. Aidan's orphanage as well as churches, schools and convents within the Diocese. The Backhaus Estate is now administered by the Sandhurst Trustees and no doubt continues to generate a nice tidy sum.

*References: Banking on the Bendigo – Tim Hewat
Goldfields Shepherd – Frank Cusack*