

GRAPEVINE CUTTINGS (October 2000)

By Rob Upson

St. Kilian's Catholic Church

You will recall from our previous article that Dr. Henry Backhaus started celebrating Mass on the Bendigo goldfields in 1852 in a tent in Golden Square. Later that year his Mass tent was moved to a place called Consecrated Flat a little to the west of the present St. Kilian's church. This proved too small and crowded and most of the congregation had to stand outside in the sun. The summer of 1853 was particularly hot and soon a gang of Irishmen were erecting a canvas roofed bark slab chapel 40 ft long by 16 ft wide.

In 1856 work commenced on a more permanent stone church 120 ft long by 40 ft wide. It was soon discovered that the contractors were using an inferior mortar mix that would cause massive problems, so the architect together with Dr Backhaus demolished what had been erected and employed new contractors. The new modern Gothic, slate roofed church built of local sandstone was completed and opened by Bishop Goold in December 1857.

It was named after Saint Kilian (born c.640 in Mullagh, Ireland) who, with two companions, Saints Colman and Totnan, gave his life for the Christianisation of Thuringia and Eastern Franconia. At Wurzburg, c.689, all three were beheaded by orders of Duke Gozbert whom Kilian had supposedly converted and baptised. Saint Kilian is a favourite patron in the Wurzburg region and is venerated in Vienna and Ireland. Franconia (or Franken) was one of the five great tribal duchies of Germany settled by the Franks and Thuringia (or Thuringen) is a region in central Germany. It seemed fitting, with a mainly Irish congregation and a German born pastor, that the church was named after a native of Ireland and a martyr of Franconia in Germany.

This version of Saint Kilian's church is depicted in Thomas Wright's painting of Sandhurst in 1862 (the building at the right of the picture). A print of this picture is hanging in the entrance foyer of the Interpretive Centre. In last year's October edition of *The Grapevine* I discussed Knipe's Castle. I have recently discovered that the castle is also depicted in this painting (extreme right on the hill). But to see it you will have to view the original painting in the Bendigo Art Gallery as the print has been cut a bit short.

By 1887 the church was in a bad state of disrepair and the architect W.C.Vahland was commissioned to design a new church of oregon and hardwood with a kauri ceiling. The finished building was 110 ft by 54 ft with a sanctuary 30 ft deep. After its completion in 1888 the old stone church was demolished. The church bell was originally installed in 1869 in a wooden structure. In 1894 a steel tower, adjacent to McCrae St., was erected to house the bell in memory of Dr. Backhaus. St. Kilian's became the catholic Pro-Cathedral (substitute) of the Bendigo goldfields until 1901 when, after the opening of the Cathedral of the Sacred Heart, it became a parish church.

Major renovation and restoration work was undertaken for the 1982 commemoration of the centenary of the death of its founder, Dr. Henry Backhaus. New carpet, new wiring, new lighting, new amplification system plus a glassed-in foyer was installed. The pipe organ was dismantled, restored and reassembled. Painting inside and out was as close to the original colour scheme as possible. What you see today is said to be Australia's largest wooden church and is classified by the National Trust. Visitors to Bendigo who are interested in our marvellous architectural heritage should be encouraged to visit St. Kilian's.

Reference:- Living Weatherboard Witness - St Kilian's Catholic Church – Edited by Breda Phillips