GRAPEVINE CUTTINGS   (February 2002)

<div align="right">By Rob Upson</div>

BENDIGO'S JEWISH SYNAGOGUE

A few months ago I was asked by a couple of visitors whether there was a Jewish Synagogue here in Bendigo. I responded in the negative but indicated that there used to be one here many years ago. I took them into the Interpretive Centre and showed them the print of the painting *Sandhurst from Camp Hill, 1886* by James Edwin Meadows. There in Hopetoun Street is depicted a square looking building with a turret at each corner. That was the synagogue. Not knowing anything about this structure, I consulted the Bendigo Library and was pointed to a two-volume work by Hilary L. Rubinstein, entitled *The Jews in Australia*.

During the 1850s there were about 850 Jews on the goldfields of Victoria. Most of them did not actually dig for gold but set themselves up as storekeepers supplying provisions to the miners. Some of them were involved in gold buying and exporting. In 1854 religious services were conducted by Jews on the Bendigo goldfields at the 'Cape of Good Hope' store owned by a Mr Helbrun. A weatherboard synagogue was consecrated in 1856 and served the Jewish community until a more substantial place of worship, seating 500 people, was built in 1872 in Hopetoun Street.

This solid and distinctive building resembled a fortress, as did many synagogues in Europe. The well-known firm of architects, Vahland and Getzschmann, designed the Sandhurst synagogue. Square and Byzantine, with long narrow windows, it had a twenty-foot turret at each corner topped with a small dome and a wrought iron Star of David. A large lantern tower dominated the roof with a larger Star of David rising above it.

The Jewish population of Bendigo steadily declined over the last part of the 19th century through to the early part of the 20th century. From a total of 208 in 1861 down to 14 in 1933. This was a general trend in all parts of rural Victoria as well as other parts of Australia. The Jews moved to the larger cities which had more and better communal facilities and also new migrants tended to go directly to urban areas.

The Bendigo synagogue gradually fell into disuse and prior to it being sold in 1926 was used as a corn store. Later it was demolished and yet another piece of our architectural heritage was lost. The funds from its sale were kept in trust for nearly thirty years until, in 1955, they were donated to the Montefiore Homes for the Aged in Melbourne.