

Former Methodist/Uniting Church.

This collection of buildings was at the heart of Mount Pleasant's spiritual, social and cultural life for more than a century. For its first thirty years, Mount Pleasant was almost exclusively Methodist. It was not until 1883 that another denomination, the Church of England, established a presence.

The church reserve

In 1855 land here was reserved for Wesleyan use. It extended much further than the present block. In October that year the chapel was relocated from its first site at the school tree further down Morton Street. The grounds were originally fenced and included a caretaker's cottage and from 1927 a tennis court. The rear of the land was set aside for parish retirement units in 1993. In November 2006, the small Uniting Church congregation decided to disband the church and it has since passed into the hands of Uniting Housing.

The buildings

Methodist congregations were financially responsible for building their own churches. Regular rebuilding was proof of vitality. In October 1855 a canvas-roofed structure for one hundred people was relocated here. A wooden building followed two years later. In 1865 the severe bluestone church was built to the design of J.A. Doane. The wooden church was retained as a Sunday School and day school. In 1876 this was replaced with a new wooden school building. In 1907 the brick Sunday School on the corner was completed. Susan Trethowan, whose name can be found on one of its five foundation stones, attended Sunday School in the 1855 canvas chapel. The brick church was opened in 1955 to mark the centenary of the Mount Pleasant church. Its curious placement in completely blocking the old church can be read as an attempt to blot out the image of an old, repressive, bluestone Methodism and to claim a place in a modern world.

The Sunday School

The Sunday School was in many ways as important as the church, especially in forming community attitudes. For several generations, most children in Mount Pleasant seem to have attended Sunday School here. From the mid-1870s to the 1970s there were consistently more than 200 students enrolled often with 20 or more teachers. A library operated in the Sunday School building which was also used for concerts and games. Christmas anniversaries attended by hundreds long sustained the Sunday School connection.

School

The day school that began in the tent at the reserve continued when the chapel moved here in late 1855. The denominational school shared the slab-walled building that also served as chapel and Sunday School. It was very much a self-sufficient enterprise managed and financed by the community with assistance from the church and a small government grant. The cost per child was on a sliding scale between 1/- and 2/- per week, depending on age. By 1857 it was the second largest school on the goldfields. Consistent with their role as teachers in the Sunday school, women were employed as teachers. In 1864 17-year-old William Nicholls was appointed head

teacher and shaped the destiny of the school for the next ten years. Following the 1862 Heales Act Mount Pleasant became Common School no. 424. but it continued to be known as a Wesleyan school. By 1873 enrolment was 351, making it the third largest school in Ballarat. According to the inspector's report that year it was the best performing Common school in the Ballarat district. On 1 January 1874, the Common School was designated State School 1436 while the new school was being built. When that opened in July 1874 the 500 pupils and their teachers marched from here to the Mount Pleasant Primary School in Cobden Street.

The cedar grove

The magnificent cedar grove once surrounded most of the church block. It was planted in 1917 by the Independent Order of Rechabites to commemorate local members who served in the Great War. They were A. H. Smith and J. Grose (both killed in action), R. J. Little, H. Long, J. and W. Stevens, A. Coates, R. Kerby, F. W. Dickenson, J. W. Fraser, J. L. Twaites, and H. Pengelly. The grove was dedicated by the Rev T.H. Indian, minister of the church.

Church leaders

With a few exceptions, the most prominent Methodists in Mount Pleasant were lay members of the congregation. The women who served on committees, the superintendent of the Sunday School, the head teacher of the day school, the choir master and the trustees were often as important as the minister.

The first minister to preach here was the Rev Theophilus Taylor. The forceful Taylor was appointed superintendent minister to the Ballarat circuit early in 1854 and encouraged the early progress of the Mount Pleasant congregation. In the 1950s, the Rev Arthur Lelean was a charismatic minister with a wide reputation for his powers of healing. Lelean oversaw and raised the money for the new brick church.

Social influence

The Methodist church largely shaped the culture of Mount Pleasant through its many ancillary activities. These included its highly-respected choir, variety concerts, women's guild, youth clubs, debates and sporting teams. The Wesleyans made a considered move into sport as a way of broadening their social base when active church numbers began to fall. Tennis was the main social game. Nominally a Methodist club, it welcomed all players. Temperance was a powerful bonding agent. Boys and men were bound by the "Pledge"—a lifelong oath to not touch alcohol. In 1857, the Mount Pleasant Benevolent and Relief Society pioneered such charitable work in Ballarat.