

St Andrew's Kirk Ballarat—History

The Government of the early 1850's performed a singular service for the city of Ballarat, and for the Church, when it reserved this magnificent site in Sturt Street for the building of a Presbyterian Church.

The site was intended originally for the followers of the Established Church of Scotland. However, it was not this body but the Free Presbyterian Church of Australia Felix, which became the active Presbyterian body in the district. The first resident Minister of any denomination on the district goldfields was the Rev. Thomas Hastie, of Buninyong, who also preached to a small Free Church congregation at Specimen Hill.

In 1855 the Rev. James Baird was appointed to Ballarat, and by the time he left two years later, the congregation was in a position to call its own minister.

With the arrival of the Rev. William Henderson on February 10, 1857, the active history of St. Andrew's begins. Ordained in Scotland, Mr Henderson was one of a number of ministers sent out by the Free Church of Scotland to work in Victoria, and had spent some time at Williamstown before being called to Ballarat.

He immediately set about finding a permanent site for his church, and with the approval of the Established Church Synod of Victoria, the Sturt Street site was made available to the Free Church congregation. Here a small wooden church was opened in 1858.

By the following year the Presbyterian Church of Victoria had come into being by the union of the Synod of Victoria with the Free Church and some congregations of the United Presbyterian Church. It was in the name of this new body that the foundation stone of the present bluestone church was laid by the Rev. William Henderson on December 1, 1862. The new church, to which he gave the name St. Andrew's Church, was opened on August 14, 1864, while the term, St. Andrew's Kirk, has been used since 1870.

The choice of bluestone for the new church was a natural and appropriate one, for bluestone is the characteristic building material of Ballarat. St. Andrew's is situated on a basalt plateau, which extends west from Lydiard Street, and the natural stone is still to be found within a few feet of the surface in most areas.

The work of shaping and dressing the extremely hard stone was a highly skilled craft, performed without the benefit of the sophisticated machinery of today, and the high standard of workmanship in the building is worthy of close inspection.

Designed by C. D. Cuthbert, of Ballarat, the church was built in Norman style, a notable feature being the excellent freestone doorway. The carved rosettes, with their fine, detailed workmanship, were added to the doorway in 1883.

As originally opened, the church was not the complete and balanced structure we now see. The porch and vestry were added in 1873, and in 1882 it was decided to build a tower and spire. This work was in progress when the Rev. William Henderson died in 1884, and as a mark of respect to him the builders decided to incorporate black morning bands on the four pinnacles at the base of the spire. These are still visible. The spire itself reaches a height above the ground of 42 metres.

The transepts were constructed in 1890, and finally the choir vestry was added in 1926. The beautiful stained glass windows, which are memorials to former ministers and members, are among the glories of the kirk. In addition, there are memorial plaques and a fine honour board in the foyer which commemorates those who fought in the First World War.

The first pipe organ was installed in 1873, replacing a harmonium. A new organ built by Fincham and Hobday was installed in 1890, when the choir stalls were transferred from the gallery to their present position below the pulpit. Mr W. Boustead, who was appointed organist in 1887 and choirmaster in 1889, continued in this position for 50 years, bringing great distinction to the musical life of the kirk. The organ was reconstructed in 1926 and again extensively renovated in 1971. By 1991 this instrument was in urgent need of rebuilding, and as funds were not available for such extensive work, the pipe organ was replaced by a Musicom computerised electronic organ which had been commissioned for temporary use in St. Pauls Cathedral, Melbourne.

St. Andrew's was remarkable, particularly in its earliest years, for the long periods of service given by its Ministers, of whom there have been only nine in its long history.

The Rev. William Henderson was followed by the Rev. T R. Cairns, who served the church for 26 years, until his death in 1913. His assistant, the Rev. John Walker, succeeded him and remained a beloved Minister of St. Andrew's until he was appointed in 1926 to establish the new Presbyterian cathedral of St. Andrew's in Canberra.

The Rev. C. N. Button, called to St. Andrew's in 1928, continued his ministry here until his death in 1950. The Rev. S. A. Goddard was Minister from 1951 until 1962, when he was appointed Director of Practical Training at the Theological Hall of Ormond College in the University of Melbourne. The Rev. D. A. Ryrie was called to the kirk in 1963 and the Rev. S. J. Paddle in 1971.

With the advent in 1977 of the Uniting Church in Australia, the congregation of St. Andrew's voted to become part of the new denomination, thus ending 120 years of Presbyterian worship at St. Andrew's.

The Rev. Bill Lidgett, was called in 1980 as Minister of the St. Andrew's congregation within the Ballarat Central Parish of the Uniting Church, which also included the Lydiard Street Uniting Church. His successor the Rev. Henry Martin, was similarly part of a dual ministry within the parish.

The year 1995 brought major changes, with the resignation of the Rev. Henry Martin, and the decision of the Lydiard Street and St Andrew's congregation to become separate parishes within the Uniting Church. The Rev. John Furness was appointed to St. Andrew's for a period of 18 months, and in 1996 was called by the congregation to the position of Minister.

The Rev. John Furness retired from St. Andrew's and full time Ministry in 2002. The Rev. Robert S. Fowler was inducted as the eleventh Minister of St. Andrew's on 11th July, 2003.

~ Compiled by Margaret Cochran & Jan Clarke on behalf of St Andrew's Ballarat congregation ~