

# Baptists in Gayndah

## Queensland's oldest (?) town

By David Parker © 2025

### Sources and Acknowledgments

Acknowledgement is made of several sources of assistance and information for this paper. Much of the data came from newspapers of the time (especially in Gayndah and Maryborough) accessed through Trove, the on-line source of newspapers and other publications in Australia provided by the National Library of Australia. Invaluable local assistance was rendered by Mr John Mellor OAM and the Gayndah and District Historical Society Inc. Others include the Brisbane (Catholic) Archdiocesan Archives for the only available photograph of the Baptist church, Barbara Coe (Canberra) for information and editorial assistance, Dr Rod Kirkpatrick, Queensland State Archives, Thom Blake Historian (for the Nancy Roberts' paper on the Aboriginal School), State Library of Queensland and the Baptist Church Archives Qld. Numerous items of information were also sourced on line via Google search.

#### Abbreviation of sources used in footnotes

AE	<i>The Australian Evangelist</i>
BA	<i>Burnett Argus Gayndah and Central Queensland Advertiser</i>
BC	<i>The Courier Brisbane</i>
BM	<i>Bundaberg Mail (and Burnett Advertiser)</i>
MC	<i>The Maryborough Chronicle, Wide Bay and Burnett Advertiser</i>
QSA	Queensland State Archives
QT	<i>Queensland Times, Ipswich Herald and General Advertiser</i>
Roberts, Catholic Roberts, Nancy	– <i>The History of the Catholic Church in Gayndah to 1919</i> (1980)
Roberts, School	Roberts, Nancy – <i>The Gayndah Aboriginal School 1918-1949</i> (n.d. available)
TC	<i>The Toowoomba Chronicle and Darling Downs General Advertiser</i>

### Introduction

Gayndah, on the Burnett river, about 250 kms north-west of Brisbane, is sometimes claimed to be Queensland's oldest town, and Baptists were there from an early point in its history! However, they lasted for only for about a decade, but in that short time they did make quite an impression – in fact, it was said of the pastor there that 'Since the settlement of our brother at Gayndah, I hear the change that has come over the people is quite visible.'<sup>1</sup> Tangibly, the biggest impact was the attractive stone and brick building which he erected which remained in use more than 50 years, although only as a Baptist church for a few years. Baptists did not appear in the town again until after World War II more than 70 years later, when they served in the district for about 40 years until they disappeared for good.

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<sup>1</sup> AE, April 1865

Although the title of ‘oldest town’ may be disputed<sup>2</sup>, Gayndah was, without doubt, one of Queensland’s earliest settlements, being established in the 1840s and undergoing significant growth in the following decade.

Despite this development, there is uncertainty about any settled Christian ministry in Gayndah. From the earliest days, there is evidence of Roman Catholic clergy visiting the town, but there appear to be no long-lasting appointments. There was Church of England minister, Rev Duncan Mackenzie, who conducted regular services in the newly opened Court House, but an effort in late 1860 to raise funds for a church and a stipend was unsuccessful.<sup>3</sup> After this, there were several visiting priests, but it was not until the 1880s that there was any firm development. A Presbyterian minister, Rev Robert Fleming visited in 1863 but was unsuccessful in raising support for an ongoing ministry, and so he departed immediately.

## Early Baptists

The first non-Conformist minister was the Baptist, Rev Richard Robert Wilson, who arrived around October 1861 and remained for a decade. The way for Wilson had been opened up in the previous month by a 9-day trip carried out by Rev John T Hinton, the recently appointed and newly ordained Baptist pastor at Maryborough.

According to a detailed report in the *Australian Evangelist* (October 1861), Hinton set out on Tuesday 3<sup>rd</sup> September, and, after a difficult journey interrupted by floods at Barambah Creek, arrived in Gayndah on the Friday. He spent the weekend visiting homes, attending the Church of England services, and conducting a well-supported service of his own on Sunday evening. In the following days, he visited more homes and handed out Christian literature, but reported that he could not find even ‘one person who had ever been a member, or even a regular attendant at a Baptist Chapel.’ He concluded, ‘Religion throughout the town [is] at a low ebb, and vital godliness, I fear, almost unknown.’ He had also found the town to be very sectarian in spirit.<sup>4</sup>

On his second Sunday in the town, Hinton conducted two services, the one in the evening being particularly well attended, and ministering pastorally to at least one needy soul. On the Tuesday evening, he held a meeting with interested people to discuss establishing a Baptist ministry in the town.<sup>5</sup> It was attended by up to 40 people representing many families, and resulted in the formation of a 13-member steering committee, and the establishment of a subscription list in support of a minister, signed by most present. Arrangements were also made for a regular meeting place (probably the School of Arts, according to *The Courier* report) and (unspecified) accommodation for a minister.

On his final day in the town, Hinton gave an hour-long public lecture at the School of Arts on the topic ‘Reading’, which *The Courier* reported was an ‘eloquent’ presentation. He arrived back in Maryborough on Saturday 14<sup>th</sup> September.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Roberts, Catholic, p 2

<sup>3</sup> MC, 26 Dec 1860, 10 Oct 1861)

<sup>4</sup> AE, Oct 1862

<sup>5</sup> BC, 3 Oct 1861

<sup>6</sup> AE, Oct 1861; AE, Nov 1861; see BC, 28 Sept 1861 for a verbatim report of this lecture, which was also delivered in Maryborough, see MC 3 Oct 1861

## The Pastor – Richard Robert Wilson

The minister designated for this new outpost was already waiting in Maryborough. His name was Richard Robert Wilson. A single man at the time, there is nothing definite that can be stated about his

background, but his death registration<sup>7</sup> cites his parents as James Wilson and Catherine Caulson. A later press report indicated that he was Irish,<sup>8</sup> so it is possible that the *ancestry.com* data saying a man of this name was born in Fermanagh, Ireland in 1840 could be true. However, this would make him very young when he arrived in Gayndah – only about 20 years of age. The *Australian Evangelist*<sup>9</sup> simply reported, ‘Mr Wilson arrived in the colony in 1861, and hearing of the religious destitution in the Burnett district, he resolved to settle there.’

The Courier 28/8/1861

By October 1861 or even earlier Wilson had arrived in Gayndah.<sup>10</sup> He conducted worship services in the Court House which were soon being attended by up to 100 people. He commenced a successful Sunday School in the town, gathering about 30 children, with hymn books supplied by the Wharf Street Baptist Sunday School in Brisbane. He also established a day school, and several other Sunday Schools in the country areas.<sup>11</sup>

Soon Wilson began itinerating around the outlying districts, needing a second horse to carry supplies of Bibles and Christian literature for distribution to the population.<sup>12</sup> He also launched into temperance work, and it was reported that he had succeeded in signing up more than 40 people to take the pledge.<sup>13</sup>

After being recognized by the government as a marriage celebrant on 23 November 1861,<sup>14</sup> he conducted many weddings in the town and in the extended districts. One of them was strange – it was first conducted by the Roman Catholic priest and then ‘subsequently by the Rev R R Wilson’.<sup>15</sup>

He contributed to town life by delivering public lectures on various topics, including one on ‘A happy home’ the report of which said he was an ‘impressive’ speaker.<sup>16</sup> He made various visits to Maryborough, to support Baptist and community work in that town.

All of this activity soon attracted a good response from the local residents, who appreciated Wilson’s presence and service to the community. One report said,

He has wrought a great change, and the earnest manner in which he strives to do good is fully appreciated, not alone by his flock, but by the whole community. The Sunday School is especially a credit, and the orderly and cleanly manner of the children is a

<sup>7</sup> 1872/C/158

<sup>8</sup> BA, 24 Feb 1865 - his speech refers to ‘old Ireland’, and writer of the article said he was Irish

<sup>9</sup> AE, April 1865

<sup>10</sup> BC, 3 Oct 1861 reporting on the Hinton visit said, ‘The Rev. W. Wilson, now at Maryborough, it is stated, will be here in a fortnight to commence his labors.’ ....)

<sup>11</sup> AE, April 1865.

<sup>12</sup> AE, April 1865

<sup>13</sup> AE, April 1865 April, MC, 6 Mar 1862

<sup>14</sup> BC, 25 Nov 1861

<sup>15</sup> BC, 29 Sept 1866

<sup>16</sup> MC, 20 Feb 1862

sight well worth seeing. That the reverend gentleman may long remain amongst us is the earnest wish of all.<sup>17</sup>

This support was forcefully reflected in a letter signed by a large number of people who were outraged when, on one occasion, the Police Magistrate denied him access at the last moment to the Court House for a Sunday service. Instead the building was granted to the Church of England minister.<sup>18</sup> The irate worshipper described it as ‘arbitrary tyranny and high handed oppression’ that, after Wilson had been using the building regularly for about 2 years, something like this could happen. The letter to the press, supported by about 90 signatories, said,

The result was a scene somewhat resembling what we read of about the old Scottish Covenanters a couple of centuries ago. Mr W. was (owing to the shortness of notice) compelled to address his congregation in the open air, and under a pelting rain, whilst the select few of the aristocratic sect [ie, the Church of England congregation]— some seven or eight in number – were admitted through the magistrates’ private door into snug dry quarters.

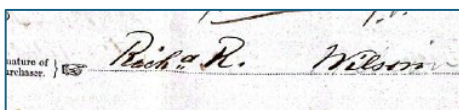
QUEENSLAND. GAYNDAH.—We are glad to learn that the station recently opened in this place is in a most encouraging state. Mr. Wilson has a deeply interested congregation of about one hundred persons every Lord's day. The people have promised liberally to support their minister, and to erect a chapel. A Sunday school has been established, and numbers about thirty children. The Brisbane Sabbath Sch ol Missionary Society has forwarded to this school three dozen hymn books.

Australian Evangelist Dec 1861

However, Wilson’s broad community appeal was put under a test a few years later when, at a very well attended tea meeting to celebrate the first anniversary of the opening of the church on 13 Feb 1866, he was reported to have suddenly ‘introduced sectarian comparisons, and used language which entirely disgusted his audience.’ The reporter said that he ‘hurt himself more than anyone else by this speech, and I am sorry he so far forgot himself.’<sup>19</sup> It was a strongly worded

speech by Wilson, and assuming it was in any way realistic, it probably reflected a hard-working and extremely zealous single young man under considerable stress, venting his feelings a year after achieving the success of erecting a church building in the town.

Yet it is a revealing utterance confirming his Irish background, his extensive and arduous travels in the outlying districts, and his interest in reaching all classes of people. He saw himself as a simple preacher of the gospel serving the population and not entangled with established ecclesiastical or political interests. He was open about the pressures he experienced, including some intriguing but unstated legal difficulties with the acquisition of the bell for the church.



Perhaps he was, on this occasion, encouraged by his namesake and fellow-Irishman, Rev B G Wilson, the leading Baptist minister of Brisbane who had visited Gayndah in March 1862.<sup>20</sup> The senior Wilson was well known for his strident ‘sectarianism’, and often

spoke forcefully about denominational principles, typically stirring up controversy.

Despite this incident, it seems that Wilson’s influence and support for his church remained strong. However, Roberts notes that later, the presence of the Baptist minister was again omitted from another

<sup>17</sup> BC, 6 Dec 1862

<sup>18</sup> MC, 14 Jan 1864; BC 11 Jan 1864 p 2

<sup>19</sup> MC, 3 Mar 1866; see BA 24 Feb 1866 for verbatim report of speech which was printed with a declared vindictive spirit. The proprietor of the *Burnett Argus* had a history of brushes with the truth and the law! Rod Kirkpatrick, *Sworn to No Master: A History of the Provincial Press in Queensland to 1930*, p 33f. See also Allan A Morrison, *Some Aspects of Queensland Provincial Journalism*, Royal Queensland Historical Society lecture 24 July 1952 p 704.

<sup>20</sup> BC, 17 Mar 1862

broadside by the *Argus*.<sup>21</sup> condemning the community for not supporting a minister of any kind in the district or having any church building in the town.<sup>22</sup>



Maryborough Chronicle 13 July 1867

On 8 July 1867 Wilson married Millicent Malinda Sarah Rivers (known as Maud), at his Gayndah church, with Rev W T Godson of Maryborough officiating. Little else is known of Miss Rivers, except that she was born at Shoreditch London on 25 Sept 1846 to Charles Frederick Rivers and Mary Sarah Storey.

Wilson's ministry and activity in the community continued during the latter part of the decade, including the conduct of more weddings (as late as March 1871), although press reports are far less frequent. One interesting report in 1868 indicates that he experimented with cotton growing.<sup>23</sup> He was still conducting a school in May 1868, which paraded through the town to celebrate Queen Victoria's birthday. (QT 12 May 1868). However, by 1871, when he was preaching at the Baptist Church in Maryborough, he was introduced as 'late of Gayndah'.<sup>24</sup>



Headstone, Strathdee family grave, Bundaberg Cemetery (Source – FindaGrave)

However, it all came to an unexpected end when it was reported that, on 28 January 1872, Wilson had suddenly died at Ivory's Station, Eidsvold.<sup>25</sup> He had been suffering for about a fortnight from what was thought to be liver disease, possibly brought on by excessive heat.<sup>26</sup> The burial took place the next day at the Eidsvold Cemetery.<sup>27</sup> A press report of his death kindly concluded, 'His loss will be regretted by a numerous circle of friends and acquaintances.' The only earlier report on his health that is available dates from mid-1866 when he was incapacitated due to 'a very severe attack of rheumatism, or something of that kind, in his leg'.<sup>28</sup>

His widow remained in the district and remarried in 1872, becoming the third wife of Robert Strathdee, Scottish-born pioneer of Coranga station.<sup>29</sup> He had been a staunch supporter of Wilson and had laid the foundation stone for the church.<sup>30</sup> They remained in the district, and she bore 3 children.

However, in 1879 they relocated to the Bundaberg area, where Robert died in 1898, and she died in 1915 at the age of 69 years. Their property was named 'Maudsleigh'. Her obituary described her as 'possessed of a strong personality, and was brimful of resourcefulness and indomitable pluck'.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>21</sup> This was the same allegation that appeared in the original controversial article in the *Burnett Argus* 24 Feb 1866.

<sup>22</sup> Roberts, Catholic, p 6 citing *Burnett Argus* 24 Feb 1868)

<sup>23</sup> MC, 1 Jan 1868

<sup>24</sup> MC, 23 March 1871

<sup>25</sup> See BC 28 May 1932 p 7 for the history of this property.

<sup>26</sup> QT, 22 Feb 1872

<sup>27</sup> Information from Eidsvold Cemetery Records, with thanks to Mr J Mellor.

<sup>28</sup> MC, 13 June 1868

<sup>29</sup> This property, 22 kms south of Mundubbera and established in 1848, appears to have been also known as Cooranga or Old Cooranga <https://lawd.com.au/rural/1998-boondooma-road-old-cooranga-qld-4626/>, but is not to be confused with the location of the same name near Bell.

<sup>30</sup> BA, 24 Feb 1866

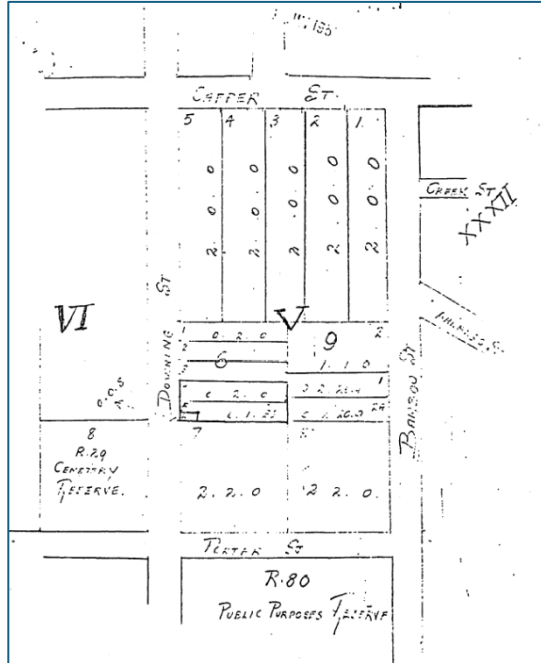
<sup>31</sup> BM, 18 Aug 1915 p 3



While Wilson's remarkable ministry had therefore ceased, and Baptist life with it, he left a substantial legacy for the town in the form of its first Protestant church building.

## Church Building

From the outset, it was expected that a Baptist church building would be erected,<sup>32</sup> so about a year after Wilson's arrival, a public meeting was held on 18 September 1862 to organise the project.<sup>33</sup> A



Gayndah map showing Section VI, blocks 4,5,6 (Source: copied from Nancy Roberts, *The Gayndah Aboriginal School 1918-1949*, n.d. p 8, being a representation of QSA Works Department, Intermediate File, 301 (60-1)

committee of five was appointed, and subscription lists were created to raise funds. Construction would be contracted out and the building would be known as Zion Chapel.<sup>34</sup> In an unusual move for a Baptist church, it was also announced that a bell to announce church services had already been donated. Soon after, a soiree in aid of the project was held with prominent local identity, Dr Stevenson, as chair.<sup>35</sup>

By the end of the year, a site (eventually about an acre in size) had been obtained in Downing Street near the cemetery, opposite Dr Stevenson's residence. It was at approximately the current Numbers 33-35, opposite the end of Remembrance Drive.<sup>36</sup>

The block had originally been granted to Alexander Walker in 1858,<sup>37</sup> and it was purchased from P Mathewson on 21st November 1864.<sup>38</sup> It was described as 'well-drained land in the northern lea of the hills, known locally as the Duke and Duchess',<sup>39</sup> situated on 'rising ground' which would 'present a favourable appearance to the traveller' approaching the town from the south.<sup>40</sup>

Fund raising continued all through 1863 and into the early part of 1864, with subscription lists being published periodically in the local newspaper. There

were dozens of donors' names (perhaps as many as 130).<sup>41</sup>, including many women, together with the amount of their contributions. Many were from the owners of station properties in the outlying districts, such as Coranga, Rawbelle, Boondooma and Culcraigie, including in several cases, donations from the staff of these properties as well. There were several contributions from as far away as Nanango, 160 kms to the south.

<sup>32</sup> AE, Dec 1861

<sup>33</sup> Roberts, Catholic, p 4 Sept 1862; MC, 25 Sept 1862

<sup>34</sup> MC, 25 Sept 1862

<sup>35</sup> MC, 17 Oct 1862 and 23 Oct 1862

<sup>36</sup> MC, 18 Dec 1862

<sup>37</sup> Roberts, Catholic, p 11

<sup>38</sup> QSA Item ITM3248737)

<sup>39</sup> Roberts, Aboriginal, p 10

<sup>40</sup> MC, 18 Dec 1862

<sup>41</sup> It is probably not possible to reconcile fully all the various lists published over several months.



Boondooma Homestead (Photos: D Parker)

These contributions reflected the arduous work Wilson had done in visiting these districts. In fact, in his anniversary speech, he said that he had received little support from the residents of Gayndah township in comparison.<sup>42</sup>

Many donations were small, ranging from 5 shillings or less up to £5, but there were several around £10. One person donated in kind – 6,000 shingles, which might have been worth around £10.

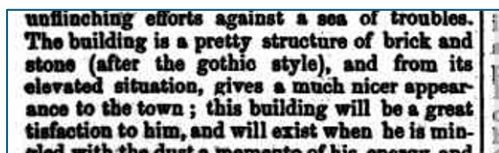
Developments occurred quickly after that. Tenders were called in July 1864, and by September, the Gayndah correspondent for the *Maryborough Chronicle*<sup>43</sup> reported,

I am happy to inform you that the Rev. R. R. Wilson's church is fast approaching completion, the brick work of the walls and gables is finished, and reflects great credit on the contractor; the carpenters are now at work, and I expect to see it finished and Divine service held in it in a few weeks.

The building was completed by the end of the December, and the church bell was used to ring in the new year.<sup>44</sup>

It was constructed of stone and brick in Gothic style,<sup>45</sup> costing around £500. Wilson was personally involved in some of the construction.<sup>46</sup> This 'very neat brick building' which added 'to the beauty of our beautiful little town'<sup>47</sup> was described as being

38 feet by 18 feet, inside measurements, walls of brick with good iron roof and skillion room at back of hardwood walls, 14 feet by 9 feet, inside measurements ... gallery at back of building is 6 feet wide.<sup>48</sup>



Maryborough Chronicle 22 Feb 1865

The official opening did not take place until Sunday 19 February 1865, when there was a very well attended worship service, followed the next day by public tea meeting. The building could not hold the crowd, and the chairman, Mr Gilbert Elliott, Member for Wide Bay and first Speaker of the Queensland Parliament, said that he thought it was the largest gathering ever held in the town.

He said, it 'reflects great credit upon the people of Gayndah to see such a large number – especially so many ladies - meet together' He also lavished praise on Wilson for 'his unceasing labours' because it was

greatly owing to the untiring activity and zeal of Mr Wilson that this building has been erected. ... I cannot pass too high an eulogium upon Mr Wilson for his efforts in this

<sup>42</sup> BA, 24 Feb 1866

<sup>43</sup> MC 22 Sept 1864

<sup>44</sup> MC, 11 Jan 1865

<sup>45</sup> MC, 22 Feb 1865

<sup>46</sup> BA, 24 Feb 1865. It was reported to be opened free of debt in AE April 1865 and MC 22 Feb 1865, but it was later said to be paid off at the first anniversary – perhaps the latter account refers to the whole property including house, kitchen and garden.

<sup>47</sup> MC, 22 Sept 1864

<sup>48</sup> Roberts, Aboriginal, p 11 quoting from QSA WOR/A1214-07161- note that this description dates from 1919? and perhaps the skillion was a later addition )

great cause, and to show the interest and sympathy he feels with his church and congregation..<sup>49</sup>



The only existing photograph of the Gayndah Baptist church taken in 1891 when it was in use as the Gayndah Roman Catholic Church (Image by S E Hill of Eidsvold, courtesy of Catholic Archdiocesan Archives, Brisbane. It appeared in *The Age* 18/4/1920 p19)

entire community celebrated the event. It was announced that all debt on the entire property had been cleared. (Wilson had himself built a house for himself with separate kitchen and an extensive garden.) During the week there was a highly festive event for children which was 'of great enjoyment to the children and their parents and teachers.'

They were happy times for the Wilson and his congregation. The Editor of *The Australian Evangelist* even added a special note of support, '[We are glad to insert the above, and wish our brother labouring in the far off Queensland bush every blessing and great success in his work.]'.<sup>55</sup> Wilson even reported that he had received invitations to move to other areas, but he remained dedicated to Gayndah..<sup>56</sup>

## Roman Catholic Church

Although 'Zion Chapel' was the first Protestant church building in the town, it was not the first church. Local historian, Nancy Roberts, has documented the erection of a Roman Catholic church at the other end of town in Meson Street, almost a year earlier (around May 1864).<sup>57</sup>

This was all accomplished, he added, against the background of a 'sea of troubles' endured by Wilson. A reading desk had also been donated to enhance the building.

Wilson gave a 'a very animated speech which rivetted the attention and enlisted the sympathies of all present.'<sup>50</sup> Other speakers on the occasion included Rev W T Godson of Maryborough and Dr Stevenson, the long serving local identity and medical practitioner who had presided at the foundation stone ceremony. He said that he was astonished at how quickly the building had been erected. His final words were met with 'prolonged cheering' from the crowd:

May this building be for generations to come a memorial of the good done by our worthy clergyman..<sup>51</sup>

Rev W T Godson was the preacher for the opening service, and also at the regular Sunday services the next day..<sup>52</sup> The first communion service was held on that day, with 16 people participating..<sup>53</sup> A children's function was held on the third day.

The anniversary of the opening was held on 11 Feb 1866..<sup>54</sup> when the local shops were closed for the day, and the

<sup>49</sup> BC 25 Feb 1865

<sup>50</sup> BC 25 Feb 1865

<sup>51</sup> BC, 25 Feb 1865

<sup>52</sup> BA, 11 Feb 1865

<sup>53</sup> AE, April 1865

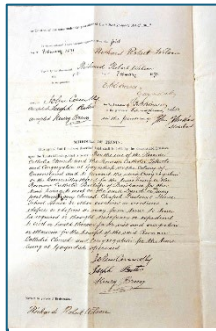
<sup>54</sup> AE, March 1866. There appears to be an error in the date in article which states 'Lord's day, 12<sup>th</sup> February'

<sup>55</sup> AE, March 17, 1866 p 94

<sup>56</sup> BA, 24 Feb 1866)

<sup>57</sup> Roberts, Catholic





Sale document  
QSA Item ITM  
3248791

It was in Doric style, with a priest's residence attached. However, this building was not used because the priest who had initiated its construction was suddenly transferred back to England before it could be consecrated.<sup>58</sup> And then catastrophe struck when, on 17 Dec 1864, a very severe storm completely destroyed this church, as well as causing lots of other serious damage throughout the town.<sup>59</sup> This meant that, when completed about the same time, Zion Baptist chapel became the only such building in the town.

According to Roberts, it is difficult to be certain about subsequent Catholic activity, especially buildings. The new priest, who was given the responsibility of erecting a replacement church, was drowned near the site of the building on 18 October 1865. It was reported that his body was 'interred at the foot of the alter (sic) of the new Catholic Chapel.'<sup>60</sup> However, there are apparently no details of this building, but that one existed seems to be indicated by a letter to the

*Maryborough Chronicle* soon after, stating,

The Baptists, through the exertions of the Rev. R. R. Wilson, have built a chapel; the Roman Catholics have built a church; and why not the Established Church of England?<sup>61</sup>



Aboriginal School at  
Downing Street Gayndah  
showing the "Duke and  
Duchess" in the  
background (supplied by J  
Mellor, OAM, Gayndah)

However, as late as 9 May 1868, the *Burnett Argus* complained that 'there is no place of worship belonging to either sect now existing here nor any resident priest'. He found it strange that Gayndah seemed to be the only place that was 'still unable to support [even] one clergyman of any denomination' but he had earlier referenced only 'the four great sects' of Christianity (Church of England, Roman Catholic, Presbyterian and Wesleyan Methodists) thus omitting the Baptists even though his paper advertised only a month later a Temperance Society meeting in the Zion Chapel.<sup>62</sup> Roberts suggested the omission of the Baptists was out of prejudice on the part of the newspaper. At the end of the year a visiting Wesleyan minister conducted very well attended services in the School of Arts.<sup>63</sup> In an interesting side-light, the paper noted, rather sadly, that the Clerk of Petty Sessions was conducting marriages and that the official registration of births (by the same office?) had become the equivalent of baptism!

## The fate of the old Baptist Building and site

There is little further information available about church buildings in the town, but in September 1870, a notice appeared in the press that Wilson's three-roomed house with detached kitchen and extensive garden adjacent to the church would be auctioned on 20 September, unless disposed of earlier.<sup>64</sup>

Within a month it was announced that the Roman Catholics would buy the whole property – the church as well as the house and land. The report stated that they planned for a resident priest, and that a committee had been created to handle the acquisition. A large sum of money had already been

<sup>58</sup> Roberts, Catholic, p 4; BC, 30 July 1864

<sup>59</sup> TC, 29 Dec 1864, quoting BA 17 Dec 1864

<sup>60</sup> MC, 25 Oct 1865

<sup>61</sup> MC, 11 Nov 1865

<sup>62</sup> BA, 27 June 1868

<sup>63</sup> BA, 12 Dec 1868

<sup>64</sup> MC, 3 Sept 1870

raised.<sup>65</sup> The sale was effected on 1 Feb 1871, with 3 trustees signing on behalf of the Catholic Church.<sup>66</sup>

This action seems to indicate that, if the Catholics had finally erected a replacement for their original building, it was probably modest and was inadequate for their needs. Therefore they were anxious to secure the Baptist property when it became available. They operated from this site for the next 35 years until they erected their own new building in Meson Street, which was opened on 18 April 1915.<sup>67</sup>

Soon after the removal of the Catholics to their new property, there were reports that the old Baptist building was in a very poor state:<sup>68</sup>

... it is of brick construction and very old. The foundation is of rough rubble which has given in places and some of the stones have become loose and are falling out, causing the walls to give also. The gable walls now have a lean towards the front from top plate to apex, taking the roof with them and appear to be about four (4) inches out of plumb. There are many cracks in the walls appearing over all arches to doors and windows and under window sills. The floor is very shaky and uneven and the timbers ant-eaten and decayed. The door and window sashes broken and fit loosely. Should a severe cyclone or an earth tremor occur the building would probably collapse ...



New catholic church at opening  
(Source: Gayndah St Joseph's  
Catholic Parish web site  
<https://www.stjosephsgayndah.qld.edu.au/Contact%20Us/Pages/St.-Joseph's-Parish.aspx>)

Nancy Roberts has documented the later history of the Baptist site in Downing Street. The land was handed to the government for use as an Aboriginal School in 1918. In 1921, the old church, being in a very bad condition, was demolished and replaced by a standard school building. The school operated from 1919 to 1948. After this, the site was derelict until 1951, when a request was made by the local Girl Guides for permission to use the main building for its activities. This request was disallowed for bureaucratic and practical reasons, and early in 1952, the buildings were sold by tender for £101. The main building was removed later in the year, and according to local information, was re-sited in Dirnbir, about 6.5 kms north west of the town further along the river, where it remains in a dilapidated state.<sup>69</sup> The Downing Street site remained the property of the crown, but was later developed for residential housing.

## Baptist work resumed

The initial Baptist work of the 1860s does not appear to have survived in any form. It was based on thin foundations, since Hinton had reported that he found no Baptist members or adherents when he visited initially. This means that if there were ever any members comprising a normally constituted church operating on normal Baptist lines, none would have had any church experience of the kind

<sup>65</sup> MC, 27 Oct 1870

<sup>66</sup> QSA Item 3248791

<sup>67</sup> MC, 19 May 1915

<sup>68</sup> Roberts, Aboriginal, p 11; QSA WOR/ A1214 06281 ITM 107697

<sup>69</sup> J Mellor, correspondence and phone conversations, April 2025

needed to sustain the work. It seems that it was more of a community church, and its success was dependent upon the considerable charisma of its pastor.

At later dates, other denominations established their work and erected buildings, but there is no record of any other Baptist work in Gayndah until the 1940s.



Gayndah Baptist Church 1952  
(Source: Baptist Church  
Archives Qld)

Interestingly, the link to the new phase of Baptist life was actually the Aboriginal School on the site of the original church and manse!

Throughout its existence, there were only 5 teachers ever appointed to the school (although one was there for only a short time on a relieving basis). The last of them, however, was Mr Eric Edmund Davison, a Baptist, who had served from 1919 to 1925 as a pastor at Murgon, Maleny, Mount Morgan, and Park Avenue churches. Then he returned to teaching, working at Palm Island Aboriginal School. He transferred to Gayndah from that post, and was the fifth and last head teacher at the Aboriginal School from 28 January 1936 to 11 February 1949, the longest tenure of all.

As the teacher at the Aboriginal School, he was extremely well respected by the Gayndah community due to his dedication, skill and care for the children and their families. While managing the school, he was a member and deacon of the Murgon Baptist Church, about 100 km to the south. As such, he conducted services and a Sunday School in Gayndah over a considerable period, using the nearby Aborigines Inland Mission church (later used by the Salvation Army).<sup>70</sup>

When the school was closed, Davison was transferred to Tumoulin in the Atherton area, but soon resigned, and returned to Gayndah as the Baptist Home Mission minister in the town. He proved to be an energetic and capable pastor, extending the ministry of the church into many surrounding districts. He travelled far and wide serving the needs of the people and sharing the gospel message. Areas



Remains of Aboriginal School as  
relocated to Dirnbir (Source: J  
Mellor, OAM)

covered at various times included Eidsvold, Biggenden, Branch Creek, Didcot and Cracow. He served until 1953 when he moved to Dalby, and then later worked at Maleny and Murgon. After serving in other roles within the Baptist community, he died on 10 October 1969 at the age of 72.

The church was constituted in 1949 with 34 members drawn from a very wide area including Mundubbera, Eidsvold, Biggenden, and Dallarnil. It was accepted as a member of the Baptist Union in 1950.

A 50 x 25 foot building was opened at corner of the Burnett Highway and Bridge Street on the north side of the river in 1953. Due to the acute post-war building material shortages and other

difficulties, there were long delays in securing approval for the project and some of the materials used in its construction were 'home-made' with a cement mixer being obtained for the project. The facility was later extended with the addition of a Sunday School hall and a manse.

## Conclusion

The church maintained its numbers well until the late 1970s when they fell dramatically. The church closed operation in 1982, and the property (church, hall and manse) was sold to the Wesleyan Methodists in 1987, who have maintained an active ministry ever since at the facility. So this, the second Baptist church building in Gayndah, is still in regular use for worship and ministry, more than 70 years after its initial construction – a lifespan far longer than that of its famous pioneering predecessor at the other end of town.

<sup>70</sup> Roberts, Aboriginal, p 19

As for that original church – at its opening, a reporter said of the ‘pretty structure’ that, because of its ‘elevated situation’, it would give a ‘much nicer appearance to the town’, and added,

this building will be a great satisfaction to [Wilson], and will exist when he is mingled with the dust a memento of his energy and perseverance in the Christian causes.<sup>71</sup>

It did survive Wilson for nearly 50 years, and proved to be a worthwhile asset to the town, but not, of course, for ever!

**END**

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<sup>71</sup> MC 22 Feb 1865