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REV GEORGE SHEPPARD. B.A.

Rev George Sheppard was the second Secretary of the Baptist Union of NSW the first being the founder Rev Allan Webb who was Secretary from 1868 to 1872.

Sheppard was born in the UK and went to Spurgeons College from Spurgeons Tabernacle London. He was the college's 60th student and was at Spurgeons from 1862 to 1864. While on a visit to Sydney in November 1863 he was persuaded to take up the work at Newtown. From 1864-67 he was Pastor of the Jersey (UK) church and returned to Newtown in 1868.¹ Sheppard was elected Secretary of the Baptist Union for the 1872-3 year and was to become the Chairman for the 1874-5 year.

At the half-yearly meetings of the Baptist Union held at Hinton in 1873 Sheppard advised his inability to take up the Chairmanship of the Union the following year. Sheppard did not attend the June Committee meeting of the Baptist Union and at the August meeting submitted his resignation as Secretary.

This did not please the Committee. The Committee felt that they had been shown "scant courtesy" because Sheppard had not submitted his resignation and sent in papers in his possession earlier. This had delayed the work of the Union. Sheppard was also requested to forward to the Chairman of the Union the Trust Deeds of Baptist properties still in his possession.²

At the Annual Meeting of the Baptist Union held in September 1883 the resignation of George Sheppard as Secretary of the Union was considered together with the reason for his withdrawing from the honours and duties of the Chairmanship. The Annual Meeting was advised that "Mr Sheppard is pursuing a course of study at the collegiate institution of another denomination with a view to ministerial service in that body but without having uttered one word of reason for so remarkable a change as that which is implied in secession from the Baptist to the Episcopal Church. Such action, as it necessitates Episcopal ordination being a practical repudiation of his own past and our present ministry"³

Such was the concern of the Annual Meeting that it passed a further resolution commending the patience which the Newtown Church exhibited toward their late Minister for a long time during which they were sustained by the prospect of the advantage to be derived from his University

course. The Annual Meeting "desired to give expression to its sympathy with the church in its disappointment of their hopes in the sudden desertion of their Minister"⁴

Sheppard became an Anglican Minister being ordained

a Deacon at the end of 1873 and a Priest in 1874 by the Bishop of Sydney. **The founder of the Baptist Union Rev Allan Webb whom Sheppard succeeded as Secretary took up the Chairmanship of the Baptist Union for 1874-5, which would have been assumed by Sheppard had he been available.**

After serving as a curate for a year at each of St Andrews Cathedral and St James Church, the Trustees of the Estate of Thomas Moore, in 1877, agreed to appoint Sheppard as Vice-Principal of Moore Theological College at a salary of 100



Rev George Sheppard BA²⁰



Moore Theological College, Liverpool

Pounds per annum. The College was then at Liverpool and the Principal was Rev Robert Lethbridge-King. Sheppard was put in charge of a district with Bankstown at its centre. He was praised by Bishop Barker as well qualified and held a weekly class in Hebrew. In 1878 Robert Lethbridge-King retired from the Principalship and Sheppard retired with him.⁵ Sheppard was then appointed to Holy Trinity Berrima.

It might be assumed that Sheppard's secession from the Baptist Ministry was based on theological considerations. But perhaps there is another side to the story.

In 1854, Margaret, wife of Rev William Macquarie Cowper the minister of the Stroud Anglican Church died. In 1856 Cowper was appointed acting Principal of Moore Theological College. In 1866 Cowper married Mrs Mary French, widow of Major French of the Bengal Native Infantry, the daughter of Commander G. Brooks Forster RN. Cowper described Mary as "a lady of earnest piety and high Christian character"⁶

Cowper succeeded his father as Rector of St. Philips Church in Sydney but coupled with this was the office of Dean and Archdeacon of Sydney which appointment he took up upon the consecration of St. Andrews Cathedral in 1868. The Cathedral was completed with the erection of its towers in 1874. Presided over by Dean Cowper St Andrews Cathedral had become the hub of official worship in the diocese.⁷

Mary Cowper had a daughter Edith (French) by her first marriage. Given that Bathurst Street Baptist Church was situated on the corner of Bathurst and Kent Streets – where St Andrews House is now located – and that Sheppard in the course of his duties as Secretary of the Baptist Union would have frequented this area – it is not difficult to envisage the blossoming of a relationship. Nurtured by a strong and committed Anglican household it is not hard to imagine that Sheppards defection from the Baptist cause may well have been a case of heart overtaking head. Sheppards appointment as curate at St. Andrews Cathedral after his ordination would undoubtedly have strengthened any such relationship.

Moreover since Anglicans enjoyed a greater social standing in the community than did the humble Baptists this may also have been seen as an opportunity to find a place in the upper echelons of society.⁸

In any case George Sheppard married Edith French in 1879 after Sheppard had settled at Berrima.⁹

An interesting incident concerning the Sheppard's took place in June 1888 when Sheppard accompanied by his wife was driving from Berrima to Bowral to catch the express train to Sydney when the axle of

the hind wheels of Sheppard's buggy broke "both occupants of the vehicle being forcibly precipitated



Holy Trinity, Berrima

onto the ground Mrs Sheppard being rendered unconscious for a short time"¹⁰. A kind offer of rest at her house from a Mrs Cowper was turned down in favour of returning to Berrima.¹¹

The Anglican Church (Diocese of Sydney) Handbook summarises Sheppard's ministerial career within the Anglican Church as follows –

SHEPPARD, George, *Berrima*, Univ. of Sydney, B.A.1873; D 1873; P 1874 by Bp of Sydney. I of Holy Trin., Berrima and Chapl. To H.M. Gaol, 1878; R.D. of Berrima, 1879 Inc 300 Pounds with Par. Formerly C. of St. Andrews, Sydney, 1874-76; C. of St. James', Sydney, 1876-77; Vice-Prin. Of Moore Theol. Coll., Liverpool, 1877-9.¹²

By 1887 Holy Trinity Church at Berrima was considered "exceptional in being out of debt".¹³ The report went on to say that Three hundred pounds was to be spent on renovations providing new seats and furniture. A handsome brass lectern and reading desk made of English oak had recently been given to the church by Mr Ben. M. Osborne. Both these articles were purchased in England. All the chancel furniture is new, all the articles are the gifts of various donors, the railing being of English oak and three new carved chairs to match are being given by Mrs Powell. The large stained glass window in the eastern end which was erected last year to the memory of Mr Powell is a very handsome one; another is to be erected in the chancel by Mr William McCourt MP to the memory of his son recently deceased. The church seats about 200 persons and when it is re-seated with pine seats and the ceiling of the church

is painted light blue with gold stars and the other improvements effected the church will be most complete and ornamental.¹⁴

The parsonage is a valuable property being surrounded by 30 acres of land all the property of the church. The total cost of the parsonage was something over One thousand pounds and Eight Hundred of this has been raised during Mr Sheppard's incumbency.

In 1897, new Parish arrangements were settled and Sheppard became the Rector of the combined parishes of Berrima, Bong Bong and Moss Vale. This necessitated a move from the parsonage at Berrima to Moss Vale.¹⁵ There was some concern that when Mr Sheppard took over Moss Vale with Berrima the combined parish would be too much for him.¹⁶

In 1905 Rev George Sheppard presided at the Annual Vestry meeting at St. John's, Moss Vale and "announced briefly that it was his intention to resign as soon as suitable arrangements could be made." He felt he must resign as he was "worn out with anxiety and the work of the parish". A vote of "affectionate sympathy" with Sheppard in his infirmity was passed and it was stated that he had been in the parish for 27 years.¹⁷

In referring to Sheppard's retirement Archdeacon Langley advised the church that he would be recommending that the parish support two clergymen, a rector and a curate. He felt quite sure that one alone could not do the work. He knew of six or seven young men who were completing their studies and perhaps one could be secured. It would be difficult to secure a Rector. He knew of none within the Diocese but there were one or two outside who might come; they must not however expect to get another Mr Sheppard with his brilliant preaching. There was not another such preacher in Australia.¹⁸

Upon his retirement George Sheppard became lecturer in homiletics at Moore Theological College of which he had previously been Vice-Principal. He continued to suffer ill health and eventually had to relinquish his work at the College.

Sheppard died at Wahroonga on 29th May 1907. Memorial services were held at the Berrima and Moss Vale Churches.¹⁹

Bruce Thornton,
Baptist Historical Society of NSW.

Sydney 2003.

REFERENCES

- ¹ There is some difficulty in reconciling the events of these early days.
- ² Minutes of the Committee of the Baptist Union held in the Bathurst Street Church Vestry, August 1, 1873, p105.
- ³ Minutes of the Annual Meeting of the Baptist Union, September 1873, p110
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ Loane, M.L. A Centenary History of Moore Theological College, Sydney Angus and Robertson p43-4.
- ⁶ Cowper, Dean, Autobiography and Reminiscences of William Macquarie Cowper, Dean of Sydney, Sydney Angus and Robertson 1902 p160. The wedding of Cowper and Mrs Mary French is registered in the NSW Register of Births, Deaths and Marriages at 474/1866.
- ⁷ Stephen Judd and Kenneth Cable, Sydney Anglicans (A history of the Diocese), Anglican Information Office, 2000. The ministry of Dean Cowper is commemorated in St. Andrews House in the Cowper Room which is named after him.
- ⁸ See A.C. Prior, Some Fell on Good Ground, A History of NSW Baptists, Baptist Union of NSW 1966 p102
- ⁹ The wedding is registered in the NSW Register of Births, Deaths and Marriages at 379/1879
- ¹⁰ The Bowral Free Press, Wednesday, June 20, 1888.
- ¹¹ It would seem that the Mrs Cowper referred to in the article may have been Mary Cowper, Edith Sheppard's mother and George Sheppard's mother-in-law. Cowper (1902) records at p192 "My dear wife's health had been for a considerable period in a very unsatisfactory state and we had tried residence in the cool and more elevated climate of Bowral from which she had derived much benefit, as a means of restoration."
- ¹² Anglican Church (Diocese of Sydney, Sydney Diocesan Directory 1893 p48.
- ¹³ The Bowral Free Press, Saturday 16th April, 1887.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ See The Bowral Free Press, Saturday 4th December, 1897, Page 2, Column 4.
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ The Bowral Free Press, Saturday, 6th May, 1905, p2 Column 4/5.
- ¹⁸ The Bowral Free Press, Saturday, May 6, 1905, Page 2, Column 4/5.
- ¹⁹ The Wollondilly Press, Wednesday, June 5, 1905, Pages 2, Column 2/3.

The only photo of Rev George Sheppard BA in existence is in Holy Trinity Church at Berrima. but it is such poor condition as to be unable to be reproduced. There is no photograph in the library of Moore Theological College at Newtown. Enquiries to the Archivist of the Anglican Church (Diocese of Sydney) yielded no response. The photo of Rev George Sheppard BA in this article from the 'google' website purports to be Rev George Sheppard. There is no guarantee that it is although the writer's recollection is that the headshape resembles that of the photo at Holy Trinity, Berrima.

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