

## HERITAGE ASSESSMENT REPORT

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**NAME:** Former Robe Bible Christian Chapel

**PLACE:** 12372

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**ADDRESS:** 1 Davenport Street, Robe SA

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### ASSESSMENT OF HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE

#### **Statement of Heritage Significance:**

As this place is not considered to meet any of the State criteria, a Statement of Heritage Significance has not been prepared.

### **Comparability / Rarity / Representation:**

There are no Bible Christian chapels in the area around Robe on the South Australian Heritage Register (the Register). However, within broader South Australia, three former Bible Christian chapels have particularly strong associations with the development of the Bible Christian movement in South Australia:

- Office (former Burra Bible Christian Chapel), 1849, Kingston Street, Burra (SHP 10013, listed 1984), the first Bible Christian chapel to be constructed in South Australia,
- Former Way Memorial Bible Christian Church, 30 Sixth Street, Bowden (SHP 13682, listed 1989), associated with inaugural South Australian Bible Christian Superintendent James Way,
- Auburn Uniting (former Bible Christian) Church, Main North Road, Auburn (SHP 10999, listed 1986), remains in continuous use as a place of worship to the present day.

An additional six former Bible Christian chapels are listed on the Register at State and local levels:

- Function Centre (Former Upper Skilly Bible Christian Chapel), 1862, Government Road, Auburn (SHP 14620, listed 1994)
- Hall (former Clarendon Bible Christian Church), 55 Grants Gully Road, Clarendon (SHP 12716, listed 1984)
- Chapel Hill Winery (former McLaren Vale Bible Christian Church), 874 Chapel Hill Road, McLaren Vale (SHP 14504, listed 1993)
- House, former Bible Christian Chapel, Church Road, Highgate (LHP)
- Former Bible Christian Chapel, c1865, 8 King Street, Lyndoch (LHP)
- Western Link Uniting (former Bible Christian) Church, 1879, 93 Crittenden Road, Findon (LHP)

The following ten former Bible Christian chapels are extant and not listed, and it is likely there are others that have not been identified:

- Little Glory Baptist Church (former Bible Christian Chapel), 24 Mary Street, Smithfield
- Greek Orthodox Church of Saints Constantine and Helen (former Bible Christian Church), 101 Goodwood Road, Goodwood
- Former Grace Plains Bible Christian Church (now privately owned), 1865, Traeger Road, Grace Plains
- Former Bible Christian Chapel, Sixth Street Quorn, 1879
- Freemason's Lodge (former Bible Christian Chapel), 1876, Gladstone
- St Matthew's Lutheran Church (former Bible Christian Chapel), 6 Torrens Road, Riverton
- Former Hallett Bible Christian Chapel, 1877
- Former Port Augusta Bible Christian Chapel, 1885, 1 Chapel Street, Port Augusta
- Former Mount Bryan Bible Christian Chapel, 1871
- Former Lawrie's Hill Chapel, 1868, Bagdad Road, Mount Benson

**Assessment against Criteria under Section 16 of the *Heritage Places Act 1993*.  
All Criteria have been assessed using the 2020 Guidelines.**

**(a) it demonstrates important aspects of the evolution or pattern of the State's history.**

Criterion arguments have considered the *Guidelines for State Heritage Places*:

*The place should be closely associated with events, developments or cultural phases which have played a significant part in South Australian history. Ideally it should demonstrate those associations in its fabric.*

*Places will not normally be considered under this criterion if they are of a class of things that are commonplace, or frequently replicated across the State, places associated with events of interest only to a small number of people, places associated with developments of little significance, or places only reputed to have been the scene of an event which has left no trace or which lacks substantial evidence.*

The former Robe Bible Christian Chapel is associated with the development of Robe as an early and important seaport, with the Bible Christian church in South Australia, with the development of public education in South Australia, and with the Methodist and Uniting Churches in South Australia. Each is considered in turn below.

The former Robe Bible Christian Chapel has an association with Robe's period of prosperity and growth as the South East's leading seaport and service and administration centre. Robe was founded by the South Australian Government in 1846 as a port servicing the surrounding pastoral hinterland and as the centre for Government administration in the South East. Robe was the first and only port in the South East and was the major service centre for the area during the first twenty years after European settlement, playing an essential role in the development of the entire region. Robe's development, prosperity and subsequent decline was shaped by the fortunes of the pastoral industry and the associated wool trade through its port.

However, the former Robe Bible Christian Chapel was constructed in 1868, by which time Robe's importance as a port and service centre had begun a rapid decline. From the late 1860s agriculture, closer settlement, competition from newer ports and ultimately the arrival of railways decimated Robe's wool trade and led to a dramatic reduction in the area's population. The Robe Bible Christian congregation endured for only a short period, less than seven years, before declining attendance resulted in the closure of the Chapel.

From the mid-1870s until the end of the Second World War, Robe was isolated by poor roads, and the lack of development in the town during those years has allowed the nineteenth century town, including the former Robe Bible Christian Chapel, to remain substantially intact.

Places that have direct and significant associations with Robe's period of pre-eminence as a port and service and administration centre for the South East of South Australia include:

- Nautical Museum (former Robe Customs House), 1868 (SHP 10261),
- Royal Circus and Seawall, including remains of slipway and Chinese Memorial (SHP 12547),
- Dwellings (former Robe Post Office & Telegraph Station) (SHP 10361),
- 'Ormerod' Cottages (SHP 10360),
- Dwelling ('Karatta House') (SHP 10464),
- Cape Dombey Obelisk (SHP 10263).

The Bible Christian church is culturally significant as one of the Christian denominations which formed the religious landscape of early rural South Australia. Methodism was the dominant form of Christianity in nineteenth century South Australia, and by 1870, most communities in the State contained at least one Methodist chapel. The Bible Christian church was strongest in areas settled by Cornish miners such as at Burra and the northern Yorke Peninsula. The Bible Christian church was also dominant among the farming communities of the Gawler Plains.<sup>1</sup> In the South East, Presbyterianism rivalled Methodism and, consequently, the Bible Christian church never gained a significant foothold in the region.<sup>2</sup> Beginning in 1867, Rev Charles Tresise (1843-1904) spent three years establishing a mission in the South East based in Mount Gambier.<sup>3</sup> This abortive venture resulted in the construction of several churches, including the former Robe Bible Christian Chapel in 1869 (the subject of this assessment). However, by 1875, the South East Bible Christian mission as a whole had less than fifty members, and the church withdrew from the area after less than seven years,<sup>4</sup> despite the fact that the Bible Christians had no competition from the Wesleyans or the Primitive Methodists in Robe.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, while the former Robe Bible Christian Chapel reflects the development of the Bible Christian church locally in Robe, there are other places which better represent the development of the Bible Christian church more broadly across South Australia. In particular, those located in areas where the church thrived or assumed a dominant position over many years, such as the Office (former Burra Bible Christian Chapel) (SHP 10013), the former Way Memorial Bible Christian Church at Bowden (SHP 13682), the Auburn Uniting (former Bible Christian) Church (SHP 10999), and the former Grace Plains Bible Christian church (unlisted).

The former Robe Bible Christian Chapel is also associated with the development of public education in South Australia. The story of schools in the town of Robe was selected by Jennifer Wilson, a curator at the National Museum of Australia, for the subject of an exhibition in the Museum's *Creating a Country Gallery*. However, Wilson selected Robe as a case study because it represented the typical development of Australian education in the nineteenth century, or what she described as its 'completely normal and very average' qualities. Other qualities noted by Wilson include Robe's incidental association with Governor Frederick Holt Robe, who introduced the *South Australian Education Act 1847* into South Australian Parliament, and for whom the town was named; and its association with Mary MacKillop, who established a Josephite School in the Robe Catholic Church in 1869.<sup>6</sup>

While the former Robe Bible Christian Chapel served as the first Government school in the town, this school was one of more than ten that operated in Robe during the nineteenth century, and one of many hundreds of Government schools that operated across South Australia. Furthermore, it was only used as a school for eight years, a relatively short period, as the local community successfully advocated for a bespoke school. The school that operated in the former Robe Bible Christian Chapel, while initially important to the local community, did not make a strong or influential contribution to the development of public education in South Australia.

While not constructed as a Wesleyan, Methodist or Uniting Church, the former Robe Bible Christian Chapel was used for many years as a place of worship by the Wesleyans, then by the Methodist Church, and finally by the Uniting Church in Australia. The former Robe Bible Christian Chapel is typical of a nineteenth-century nonconformist chapel absorbed into the Methodist Church at Union in 1990 and subsequently into the Uniting Church in Australia in 1977. Therefore this aspect of its heritage qualities is considered commonplace and of local rather than State significance.

It is recommended that the nominated place **does not fulfil** criterion (a).

**(b) it has rare, uncommon or endangered qualities that are of cultural significance.**

Criterion arguments have considered the *Guidelines for State Heritage Places*:

*The place should demonstrate a way of life, social custom, industrial process or land use which is no longer practised, is in danger of being lost, or is of exceptional interest. This encompasses both places which were always rare, and places which have become scarce through subsequent loss or destruction.*

*Places will not normally be considered under this criterion if their rarity is merely local, or if they appear rare only because research has not been done elsewhere, or if their distinguishing characteristics have been degraded or compromised, or if they are at present common and simply believed to be in danger of becoming rare in the future.*

The former Robe Bible Christian Chapel is associated with the Bible Christian church in South Australia, and with two-storey church buildings. Both are considered in turn.

At the time when the former Robe Bible Christian Chapel was built, Methodism was the most 'potent religious movement in nineteenth century South Australia.'<sup>7</sup> By 1870, most communities in the colony contained at least one Methodist chapel, and the Wesleyan Methodist Church was the largest and wealthiest Methodist denomination at that time. In addition to the Wesleyan Methodist church, there were three minor Methodist dominations with their own social base, namely, the Primitive Methodists, Bible Christians, and the Methodist New Connexion.

Methodist churches, as a whole, were more common in rural areas than in the city, with Adelaide Methodists forming only a quarter of the total number of Methodists in the Colony. Therefore, the Bible Christian church is culturally significant as one of the Christian denominations which formed the religious landscape of early rural South

Australia. In 1900, the various Methodist denominations merged to form the Methodist Union. Thereafter, Bible Christian Methodism was no longer commonly practiced and many chapels were either adapted for other uses or demolished. While it could be argued that Bible Christian churches could potentially be considered rare or endangered, it is worth noting that many small, simple chapel buildings survive. Therefore the former Robe Bible Christian Chapel is not especially rare or uncommon.

The following nineteen former Bible Christian churches, located throughout South Australia, demonstrate that a number of South Australia's Bible Christian chapels survive, including 6 State Heritage Places and three Local Heritage Places:

- Office (former Burra Bible Christian Chapel), 1849, Kingston Street, Burra (SHP 10013, listed 1984)
- Former Way Memorial Bible Christian Church, 30 Sixth Street, Bowden (SHP 13682, listed 1989)
- Function Centre (Former Upper Skilly Bible Christian Chapel), 1862, Government Road, Auburn (SHP 14620, listed 1994)
- Auburn Uniting (former Bible Christian) Church, Main North Road, Auburn (SHP 10999, listed 1986)
- Hall (former Clarendon Bible Christian Church), 55 Grants Gully Road, Clarendon (SHP 12716, listed 1984)
- Chapel Hill Winery (former McLaren Vale Bible Christian Church), 874 Chapel Hill Road, McLaren Vale (SHP 14504, listed 1993)
- House, former Bible Christian Chapel, Church Road, Highgate (LHP)
- Former Bible Christian Chapel, c1865, 8 King Street, Lyndoch (LHP)
- Western Link Uniting (former Bible Christian) Church, 1879, 93 Crittenden Road, Findon (LHP)
- Little Glory Baptist Church (former Bible Christian Chapel), 24 Mary Street Smithfield
- Greek Orthodox Church of Saints Constantine and Helen (former Bible Christian Church), 101 Goodwood Road, Goodwood
- Former Grace Plains Bible Christian Church (now privately owned), 1865, Traeger Road, Grace Plains
- Former Bible Christian Chapel, Sixth Street Quorn, 1879
- Freemason's Lodge (former Bible Christian Chapel), 1876, Gladstone
- St Matthew's Lutheran Church (former Bible Christian Chapel), 6 Torrens Road Riverton
- Former Hallett Bible Christian Chapel, 1877
- Former Port Augusta Bible Christian Chapel, 1885, 1 Chapel Street, Port Augusta
- Former Mount Bryan Bible Christian Chapel, 1871
- Former Lawrie's Hill Chapel, 1868, Bagdad Road Mount Benson

Of this number, Auburn Uniting; St Matthew's Lutheran, Riverton; and, Western Link Uniting are actively used as churches. These examples show that some former Bible Christian churches are still used as places of worship to this day, and retain their spiritual significance to the community. Their connection to religious worship has not been lost.

While the Robe Chapel played a role in the establishment of the Bible Christian church in South Australia, the above examples illustrate that Bible Christian buildings continue to exist in many areas of the State. Some continue to be used for religious worship and several are protected as State and Local heritage places. Therefore, the cultural significance of the former Robe Bible Christian Chapel is not rare or uncommon.

A number of South Australian churches were constructed in two storeys, with basements or meeting rooms beneath the main worship space. Two-storey South Australian churches include but are not limited to:

- Brougham Place Uniting Church (former North Adelaide Congregational Church), 196-210 Brougham Place, North Adelaide (SHP 10805, listed 1985)
- Port Adelaide Uniting (former Congregational) Church, 1868, 196 Commercial Road, Port Adelaide (SHP 11189, listed 1998)
- Semaphore Baptist Church, 62 Semaphore Road, Semaphore (LHP)
- Former Bible Presbyterian Church, 496 Magill Road, Magill (LHP)
- Our Lady of Protection Ukrainian Catholic Church, 18 Bartley Terrace, Wayville (LHP)

While two-storey churches are relatively uncommon, they were not employed to respond to any particularly South Australian cultural, climactic or topographical conditions. In the case of the former Port Adelaide Congregational Church and the former Robe Bible Christian Chapel, the two-storey layout was a response to an uneven or sloping site. Meanwhile, at Our Lady of Protection, the hall was placed under the church, rather than next to it, so that the church could be viewed in the round, a key requirement of traditional Ukrainian church design. As such, there is no evidence to suggest two-storey churches are of particular cultural significance to South Australia.

It is recommended that the nominated place **does not fulfil** criterion (b).

**(c) it may yield information that will contribute to an understanding of the State's history, including its natural history.**

Criterion arguments have considered the *Guidelines for State Heritage Places*:

*The place should provide, or demonstrate a likelihood of providing, information that will contribute significantly to our knowledge of the past. The information should be inherent in the fabric of the place. The place may be a standing structure, an archaeological deposit or a geological site.*

*Places will not normally be considered under this criterion simply because they are believed to contain archaeological or palaeontological deposits. There must be good reasons to suppose the site is of value for research, and that useful information will emerge. A place that will yield the same information as many other places, or information that could be obtained as readily from documentary sources, may not be eligible.*

Freedom of religious choice was one of the tenets that underpinned South Australia's foundation. Early church buildings contribute knowledge about the ability of the early

settlers to establish new churches of various denominations to meet the needs of their community. Consequently, churches are significant in enabling an understanding of the unique development of Christianity in South Australia. Like Robe, many townships had several small churches of different denominations that demonstrate the diversity of Christian worship in colonial South Australia.

While the built fabric of the former Robe Bible Christian Chapel contributes to the knowledge of the development of religion in Robe, its construction is typical of many similar churches built across the State during the second half of the nineteenth century. 381 Methodist churches were constructed in South Australia during that time, and a large number survive, especially in rural areas. There is currently no evidence to suggest that any physical evidence exists which might yield information that contributes to an understanding of the State's history that is not already well documented or readily available from other sources.

It is recommended that the nominated place **does not fulfil** criterion (c).

**(d) it is an outstanding representative of a particular class of places of cultural significance.**

Criterion arguments have considered the *Guidelines for State Heritage Places*:

*The place should be capable of providing understanding of the category of places which it represents. It should be typical of a wider range of such places, and in a good state of integrity, that is, still faithfully presenting its historical message.*

*Places will not be considered simply because they are members of a class, they must be both notable examples and well-preserved. Places will be excluded if their characteristics do not clearly typify the class, or if they were very like many other places, or if their representative qualities had been degraded or lost. However, places will not be excluded from the Register merely because other similar places are included.*

It is recommended that the nominated place **does not fulfil** criterion (d).

Nonconformist churches were commonly built by local townspeople using the skills and materials they had at hand. Most examples of rural nonconformist churches feature rectangular halls with an arched front door and two or three narrow arched windows on the side elevations. Some included a porch, while others had decorative window surrounds, circular windows, or gable adornment including belfries or turrets.

The following State Heritage Places are examples of nonconformist churches. They were built in the architectural style which typifies this class of building:

- Office (former Burra Bible Christian Chapel), 1849, Kingston Street, Burra (SHP 10013, listed 1984)
- Former Way Memorial Bible Christian Church, 30 Sixth Street, Bowden (SHP 13682, listed 1989)
- Houghton Union Chapel, 1845, 21 Blackhill Road, Houghton (SHP 26493, listed 2018)



- Moonta Mines Uniting (former Wesleyan Methodist) Church, c1884, 557 Milne Street, Moonta Mines (SHP 10114, listed 1981)
- Former Woolshed Flat Wesleyan Methodist Church, 1859, Rhynie-Balaklava Road, near Woolshed Flat (SHP 13046, listed 1988)
- Function Centre (Former Upper Skilly Bible Christian Chapel), 1862, Government Road, Auburn (SHP 14620, listed 1994)
- Auburn Uniting (former Bible Christian) Church, Main North Road, Auburn (SHP 10999, listed 1986)
- Hall (former Clarendon Bible Christian Church), 55 Grants Gully Road, Clarendon (SHP 12716, listed 1984)

The former Robe Bible Christian Chapel is a small, simply-designed structure which displays a range of characteristics typical of its class. However, these characteristics are not of a higher quality, intactness or historical relevance than are typical of places in the class of nonconformist churches. While the former Robe Bible Christian Chapel still faithfully represents its historical message, it is neither an exceptional nor an influential example. There are a number of other more notable examples that provide a better understanding of the class of place.

It is recommended that the nominated place **does not** fulfil criterion (d).

**(e) it demonstrates a high degree of creative, aesthetic or technical accomplishment or is an outstanding representative of particular construction techniques or design characteristics.**

Criterion arguments have considered the *Guidelines for State Heritage Places*:

*The place should show qualities of innovation or departure, beauty or formal design, or represent a new achievement of its times. Breakthroughs in technology or new developments in design would qualify, if the place clearly shows them. A high standard of design skill and originality is expected.*

*Places would not normally be considered under this criterion if their degree of achievement could not be demonstrated, or where their integrity was diminished so that the achievement, while documented, was no longer apparent in the place, or simply because they were the work of a designer who demonstrated innovation elsewhere.*

The former Robe Bible Christian Chapel is a simple rectilinear, gable-roofed structure that was constructed from local limestone using typical building techniques of the time. It is a typical example of a South Australian rural church building built during the 1860s. While it was well built using the skills of the local community, it does not display a high degree of creative, aesthetic or technical accomplishment that is notable at the State level, nor is it an outstanding example of its vernacular construction techniques.

It is recommended that the nominated place **does not fulfil** criterion (e).

**(f) it has strong cultural or spiritual association for the community or a group within it.**

Criterion arguments have considered the *Guidelines for State Heritage Places*:

*The place should be one which the community or a significant cultural group have held in high regard for an extended period. This must be much stronger than people's normal attachment to their surroundings. The association may in some instances be in folklore rather than in reality.*

*Places will not be considered if their associations are commonplace by nature, or of recent origin, or recognised by a small number of people, or not held very strongly, or held by a group not widely recognised, or cannot be demonstrated satisfactorily to others.*

The former Robe Bible Christian Chapel has a spiritual association with the faith of the early Bible Christians. However, the building's association with this faith was short-lived, only lasting six years. In 1876, the church was sold to the South Australian Council of Education for use as a school, and subsequently from 1885 the church was used by the Wesleyan and then Methodist and Uniting Churches. This implies that from 1876 onward, the Bible Christians did not have a strong cultural or spiritual association with the building.

The former Robe Bible Christian Chapel has strong and important spiritual associations for the Uniting Church community in Robe, over a substantial period of time, since the Davenport Street site was used by the Uniting Church and its antecedent Churches continuously between 1885 and 2007. The Robe congregation only reluctantly relocated to a new church on the former Methodist Camp site because of rising maintenance costs. However, the former Robe Bible Christian Chapel is one of many hundreds of Uniting Churches in South Australia, and so the specific spiritual associations of the Robe Uniting Church community are unlikely to resonate with the broader South Australian community.

The former Robe Bible Christian Chapel is also held in high regard by the Robe Branch of the National Trust of South Australia, who include the Davenport Street site on their tours. However, the former Robe Bible Christian Chapel is only one of many places to which this local group has an attachment. Many other buildings of historical importance to Robe are also celebrated and promoted by this group in a similar manner.

During its life, the spiritual and cultural significance of the former Robe Bible Christian Chapel has varied, initially as a place of worship, then as a school and then again as a place of worship. In general, associations with the former Robe Bible Christian Chapel are commonplace rather than resonating with the broader community in a State context.

It is recommended that the nominated place **does not fulfil** criterion (f).

**(g) it has a special association with the life or work of a person or organisation or an event of historical importance.**

Criterion arguments have considered the *Guidelines for State Heritage Places*:

*The place must have a close association with a person or group which played a significant part in past events, and that association should be demonstrated in the fabric of the place.*

*The product of a creative person, or the workplace of a person whose contribution was in industry, would be more closely associated with the person's work than would his or her home. Most people are associated with many places in their lifetime, and it must be demonstrated why one place is more significant than others.*

*Places will not generally be considered under this criterion if they have only brief, incidental or distant association, or if they are associated with persons or groups of little significance, or if they are associated with an event which has left no trace, or if a similar association could be claimed for many places, or if the association cannot be demonstrated. Generally the home or the grave of a notable person will not be entered in the Register unless it has some distinctive attribute, or there is no other physical evidence of the person's life or career in existence.*

The former Robe Bible Christian Chapel has an association with the Bible Christian church in South Australia, however, that association cannot be considered to be special. The former Robe Bible Christian Chapel was one of many Bible Christian churches built across South Australia in the nineteenth century.

Further, the former Robe Bible Christian Chapel was only used as a church by the Bible Christians for a short period of time, in a region of the State where the influence of the Bible Christian church was limited. In comparison, there are a number of churches that better represent the association between the Bible Christian church and the place, either in its built fabric and/or through the continued use of the building as a place of worship. Consequently, the former Robe Bible Christian Chapel has no distinctive attributes that provide as good or a better understanding of the Bible Christian church in South Australia than the examples listed below. The historical importance of the former Robe Bible Christian Chapel is of local rather than State significance.

Examples of Bible Christian churches that have a special association with the Bible Christian church and better demonstrate those associations in its built fabric include:

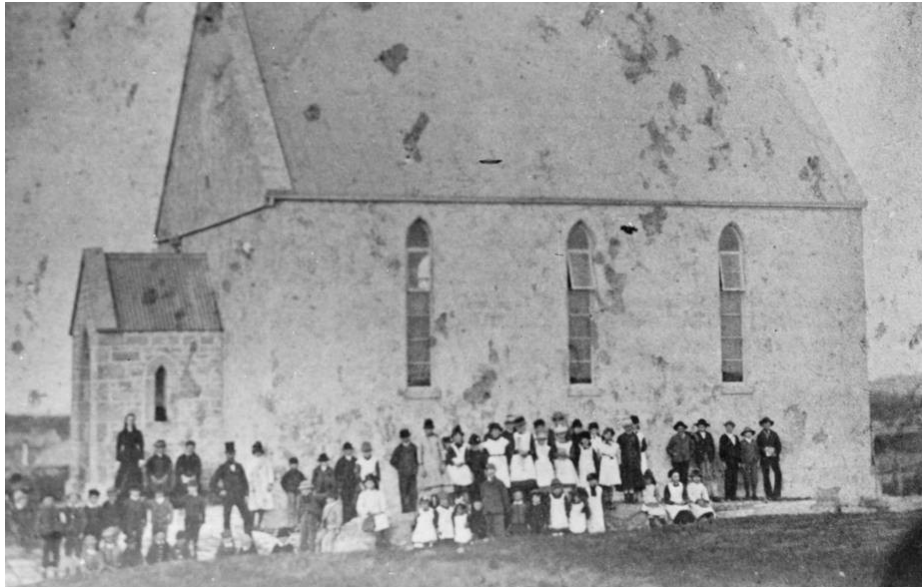
- Office (former Burra Bible Christian Chapel), 1849, Kingston Street, Burra (SHP 10013, listed 1984), the first Bible Christian chapel to be constructed in South Australia
- Former Way Memorial Bible Christian Church, 30 Sixth Street, Bowden (SHP 13682, listed 1989), associated with inaugural South Australian Bible Christian Superintendent James Way
- Auburn Uniting (former Bible Christian) Church, Main North Road, Auburn (SHP 10999, listed 1986), remains in continuous use as a place of worship to the present time

The former Robe Bible Christian Chapel has associations with four Bible Christian ministers: Rev Charles Tresise (1843-1904), Rev Thomas Best (1835?-1874), Rev Thomas Hillman (1823-1907), and Rev John Dingle (1845-1927). The Chapel operated for less than seven years as a Bible Christian place of worship, with four ministers presiding during that time. Consequently, each of these ministers had a very short association with the place.

Best and Hillman are not indexed in *This Side of Heaven*, Arnold D. Hunt's general survey of South Australian Methodism between 1836 and 1977 (to date the most comprehensive history available). Meanwhile Dingle is mentioned twice in the text incidentally (pp. 114 and 267), while Tresise is mentioned twice, once incidentally in relation to the Bible Christian mission to the South East including Robe (p. 85), and again incidentally in relation to Methodist attitudes to death (p. 175). Thus while Tresise, Best, Hillman and Dingle do have associations with the former Robe Bible Christian Chapel, their influence on the development of South Australian Methodism was limited. As such, they did not make a strong, notable or influential contribution to the course of South Australian history.

It is recommended that the nominated place **does not fulfil** criterion (g).

## PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION



B 7782

Former Robe Bible Christian Chapel, c1870, with Sunday School students outside the Chapel.

Source: State Library of South Australia B 7782



Former Robe Bible Christian Chapel, 6 August 2013, showing north elevation with porch and reinstated blind gable opening.

Source: Nominator

The former Robe Bible Christian Chapel is a two-storey three-bay nonconformist chapel constructed in local stone with bastard (mono-coloured) tuck-pointed (raised) mortar joints and a corrugated-steel gable roof. The chapel is symmetrical and the axis of the building is oriented roughly north-south. The former Chapel is positioned on the summit of a hill and is a prominent local landmark.

The chapel has a small gabled porch at its northern end, and three narrow lancet windows piercing the eastern and western elevations. A blind gable vent opening is positioned in the north wall of the Chapel above the porch. A retaining wall is positioned to the north of the church, with flight of steps, built into the wall, leading up to the Chapel.

Inside, the worship space has a clear-finished pine, a painted-matchboard ceiling, and a low gallery to the northern end. Below the worship space, the semi-subterranean former Sunday School room can be accessed via a doorway in the eastern wall of the building.

## **HISTORY**

### **Brief history of Robe**

The following section has been adapted from the *Robe Conservation Study*, prepared by the Urban & Environmental Planning Group in 1979.

Prior to European colonisation, the local Aboriginal people, the Bungandidj, lived on the country in and around the area the Europeans named Robe. The first recorded contact between the Bungandidj people and Europeans occurred in 1822 or 1823 when Europeans (probably sealers) kidnapped a Bungandidj woman from Rivoli Bay and held her captive on board a ship for three months before she was able to escape at Guichen Bay, near the future site of Robe.<sup>8</sup>

Pastoralism commenced in the South East in 1841,<sup>9</sup> resulting in frontier conflict, prior to the founding of Robe by the South Australian Government in 1846 as a port to service the pastoral hinterland of the Tatiara and as the centre for Government administration in the South East. Robe was the first and only Port developed in the South East during the first decades of the Colony, and as such was the major service centre for the area during the first twenty years after settlement.<sup>10</sup> Robe's development, prosperity and subsequent decline was shaped by the fortunes of the pastoral industry and the associated wool trade through its port.<sup>11</sup> During its first twenty years of existence, most of the wool produced in the South East passed through Robe and was traded directly with London at a time when most other ports in South Australia exported through Port Adelaide.<sup>12</sup>

From the early 1850s, pioneer grazier and shipping agent George Ormerod established a near-monopoly on the port's trade through his firm George Ormerod and Co, and Ormerod is credited with the 'commercial development which laid the basis for Robe's prosperity.'<sup>13</sup> During the port's boom period between 1854 to 1869, 'all of the export trade and most of the imports passed through this firm's hands.'<sup>14</sup>

Uncertainty over the renewal of pastoral leases, poor seasons, and a fall in wool prices led to a decline in trade through the port of Robe during the 1860s.<sup>15</sup> Agriculture and closer settlement in the South East gradually supplanted pastoralism, and competition from newer South East ports and an improved communications and transport network decimated the wool trade through Robe. The final blow for Robe's viability as a wool port was the opening of railways, beginning with a line between Port Caroline (now known as Kingston SE) and Naracoorte, in 1876.<sup>16</sup>

Coastal areas of the South East were subject to flooding, could not support intensive agriculture, and could only be productive in large pastoral tracts. Consequently, the population surrounding Robe remained small, and the town became isolated by poor roads, which were not economical for the Government to upgrade.<sup>17</sup> This isolation persisted until after the Second World War, when improved roads and growing motor vehicle ownership allowed the tourism and fishing industries to become established in the town. Meanwhile Federal funding through the *Commonwealth War Service Land Settlement Agreements Act 1945* allowed drainage of the South East to be completed by 1970.<sup>18</sup> The isolation of Robe between its 'rapid decline' in the early 1870s and 1945 allowed 'a large portion' of the old town to evade redevelopment and maintain its intactness and integrity.<sup>19</sup>

### **Bible Christian Methodism in South Australia**

The Bible Christian church is culturally significant as one of the Christian denominations which formed the religious landscape of early rural South Australia. Methodism was the most 'potent religious movement in nineteenth century South Australia'<sup>20</sup> and by 1870, most communities in the State contained at least one Methodist chapel.

Divisions within English Methodism were transposed to South Australia, and by the mid-1870s there were four Methodist denominations in the State, namely, Wesleyan Methodism, the Primitive Methodists, the Bible Christians and the Methodist New Connexion. Division remained a 'feature'<sup>21</sup> of South Australian Methodism throughout the nineteenth century, leading to duplication of religious effort in many communities as the Methodist denominations competed against one another. In sparsely-populated areas where more than one Methodist denomination established a foothold, the survival of one Methodist congregation typically 'meant the death of another, or the survival of both in a state of weakness.'<sup>22</sup>

Methodist church-building in South Australia peaked in the 1870s, when 151 churches were constructed. In total, 405 Methodist churches were constructed in South Australia during the nineteenth century.<sup>23</sup> In rural areas, small Methodist churches were often constructed at crossroads and were typically surrounded by wheat fields,<sup>24</sup> making them prominent local landmarks.

The Bible Christian movement was founded in England by William O'Bryan (or Briant) and originated as an offshoot of Wesleyan Methodism. O'Bryan was a Methodist preacher who rejected the discipline of Wesleyanism, leading to his expulsion in 1810. The Bible Christian movement was particularly strong in Cornwall, though still weaker than Wesleyanism. A high percentage of Bible Christians were miners and farmers.

Development of copper mining at Kapunda in 1844 and Burra in 1845 led to the first substantial migration of Cornish miners and their families to South Australia,<sup>25</sup> bringing with them several forms of Methodism including the Bible Christian movement. In 1849, the first South Australian Bible Christian congregation was established in Burra, and the first chapel located in Paxton Square (SHP 10013) opened in December that year. The Burra Congregation appealed to Bible Christians in England, and in 1850 'amid scenes of fervent excitement' the Bible Christian Conference launched a South Australian mission under Superintendent James Way.<sup>26</sup>

The name Way became 'inseparable from the history of South Australian Methodism for nearly 70 years'<sup>27</sup> through James and his son, Samuel, who was appointed Chief Justice of South Australia in 1876. James Way was responsible for the construction of a Bible Christian chapel at Bowden which bears his name (SHP 13682).

The Bible Christian movement expanded more rapidly than other minor Methodist denominations, capitalising on the presence in South Australia of many former members from Devon and Cornwall, including miners and farmers, and facilitated by the dispatch of Bible Christian ministers from England.<sup>28</sup> In South Australia, the Bible Christian movement was strongest on the Gawler Plains, largely due to the efforts of Samuel Keen, who established fifteen congregations and built over a dozen chapels.<sup>29</sup>

### **Bible Christians in and around Robe**

In 1866, the annual District Meeting of the Bible Christian Church in Adelaide appointed a deputation to visit the South East with the intention of establishing a mission in the area.<sup>30</sup> The following year, Charles Tresise, a young minister, was appointed to Mount Gambier,<sup>31</sup> where he spent the following three years establishing a mission in the South East.<sup>32</sup> On 13 July 1867, Tresise visited Robe and met with 'friends and supporters.'<sup>33</sup> His enthusiastic reception<sup>34</sup> resulted in the immediate appointment of Rev Thomas Best,<sup>35</sup> who took up residence at Robe in late July or early August, and began construction of a Bible Christian Chapel at Robe (subject of this assessment) in May 1868<sup>36</sup> on a prominent hilltop site.

A number of individuals who were 'instrumental' in building the former Robe Bible Christian Chapel were disgruntled Anglicans who resented Diocesan control from Adelaide, and withdrew from the local Church of England congregation over a dispute regarding trusteeship of the rectory.<sup>37</sup> The Church of England in Robe, thriving until that point, lost many parishioners as a result of the dispute during this period. Individuals with nonconformist tendencies often 'switched' to their preferred form of Methodism when that option became available in their community,<sup>38</sup> and so the loss of parishioners from the Church of England congregation following the opening of the Bible Christian Chapel is not necessarily unusual. 'Many' of those who departed the Church of England were 'newly added'<sup>39</sup> members of the congregation, reinforcing the impression that those who departed had only weak ties to Anglicanism. Local historian Kathleen Bermingham reports that the trusteeship dispute alienated many



parishioners from the Church of England congregation, who, 'in the following year, joined various church congregations in other parts of the Guichen Bay District.'<sup>40</sup>

The former Robe Bible Christian Chapel was built by local contractors George Hayles and John Suding to a design by prominent Robe citizen William Warren.<sup>41</sup> The foundation stone was laid by local pastoralist Henry Seymour on 31 August 1868,<sup>42</sup> and the chapel was opened on 1 January 1869.<sup>43</sup> At the time of its opening, the chapel had unplastered internal walls in natural stone and no ceiling. In the original Register nomination research for the Chapel dated 16 July 1982, Register Historian Annelly Aeuckens suggests the incomplete state of the Chapel at the time of opening may have reflected 'a gesture of protest rather than a genuine desire to establish a new church.' However, at least one other Bible Christian chapel was opened for worship in a similar state of incompleteness,<sup>44</sup> and like other Methodist groups, the Bible Christians eschewed decoration and 'worldly' luxuries, so the state of the former Robe Bible Christian Chapel upon opening more likely reflects a desire to make the Chapel available for worship as expeditiously and inexpensively as possible. Furthermore, Rev. Tresise was specifically dispatched to the South East to establish a Bible Christian mission in the area.

Around the time the former Robe Bible Christian Chapel first opened, tenders were called for construction for a second chapel at Lawrie's Hill (now Mount Benson).<sup>45</sup> This second chapel is still standing on Bagdad Road, and appears to be in good condition.

Best resigned his post in October 1869<sup>46</sup> and was succeeded by Rev Thomas Hillman, who was appointed to Robe on 1 March 1870.<sup>47</sup> During Hillman's tenure, various 'improvements' were made to the chapel. These included alterations to the roof, which 'previously leaked badly,' installation of a ceiling, internal plastering, provision of sixteen 'excellent cedar seats,' construction of an internal platform and a wall at the front, laying flagstones in the porch and entrance way, and painting woodwork inside and out.<sup>48</sup> Photographic evidence demonstrates that the original church did not originally have timber bargeboards on the northern and southern elevations. Instead, the main roof was bounded by gabled parapets at each end, capped by stone coping, similar to the present porch roof. It was this original arrangement that likely contributed to the reported leaking. During this period, Hillman described church attendance as 'steady' but not 'crowded,'<sup>49</sup> while Robe was described as 'struggling' and 'not yet self-supporting' in the annual report for 1870.<sup>50</sup>

After a Bible Christian District Meeting in 1873, Hillman was replaced by Rev. John Dingle, at which time Dingle became responsible for the Robe and Millicent congregation.<sup>51</sup> The fortunes of the Robe congregation appear to have improved slightly under Dingle's residency. In 1873, the congregation raised money for the purchase of a harmonium,<sup>52</sup> and an 1874 article in the *Border Watch* described the chapel as 'well-filled.'<sup>53</sup>

In February 1875, Dingle moved on to Broughton and Gladstone, and Tresise was posted to Robe,<sup>54</sup> becoming the Chapel's last Bible Christian minister. By this time, the South East Bible Christian mission as a whole had fewer than fifty members.<sup>55</sup> In the

South East, Presbyterianism rivalled Methodism and, consequently, the Bible Christian church never gained a significant foothold in the region,<sup>56</sup> despite the fact the Bible Christians had no competition from the Wesleyans or the Primitive Methodists in Robe.<sup>57</sup> The Bible Christians vacated the premises in mid-1875,<sup>58</sup> having occupied the Chapel for less than seven years. Subsequently, Millicent became the only Bible Christian congregation in the South East.<sup>59</sup>

### **Subsequent history of the former Robe Bible Christian Chapel**

In 1875, the South Australian Government passed the *Education Act 1875*, requiring the compulsory education of children aged between 7 and 13 and enabling the establishment of public schools. The following year, the former Robe Bible Christian Chapel was sold to the South Australian Council of Education for £300 and became the town's first Government-run school, which opened in 1877.<sup>60</sup> This school became overcrowded over the next few years as the town's non-Government schools closed down, and it was replaced with a new, purpose-built school which opened in 1885.<sup>61</sup>

Meanwhile in 1882, a revival of Methodism occurred in Robe with the arrival of Matthew Burnett, Wesleyan layman, temperance apostle and evangelist, who conducted an eight-week tour of the South East. During Burnett's visit to Robe, 93 'precious souls' 'found the saviour' and 'signed the temperance pledge.'<sup>62</sup> This fledgling congregation initially worshipped in the Robe Institute.<sup>63</sup> Subsequently, the former Robe Bible Christian Chapel was sold to the Wesleyan Methodist Church. The Wesleyans re-opened the building as a place of worship in October 1885.<sup>64</sup>

In 1900, Methodist Union occurred in South Australia, uniting the Wesleyan, Primitive Methodist and Bible Christian branches of Methodism. Consequently the congregation occupying the former Robe Bible Christian Chapel became part of the Methodist Church, remaining so until 1977, when the Methodist Church united with the Congregational and Presbyterian Churches to form the Uniting Church in Australia. The former Robe Bible Christian Chapel closed as a place of worship in 2007, and was replaced by a new place of worship constructed by the Uniting Church at the former Robe Methodist Camp site.

Following closure, the building was purchased by Victorian businessman Bill Purton, who carried out extensive restoration works including removal of external render and repointing and interior renovations. The former Robe Bible Christian Chapel was purchased by the current owners in September 2020.



Former Robe Bible Christian Chapel, 9 February 2021, restored façade and porch showing tuck pointing.

Source: Nominator

### **Heritage assessment of the former Robe Bible Christian Chapel**

In 1983, the former Robe Bible Christian Chapel was added to the now defunct Register of the National Estate.

In 1991, Barry Rowney completed *Type Profile of Churches*, which surveyed 195 South Australian churches constructed prior to 1945, and categorised them into a number of style typologies. In the report, Rowney identified seven churches for potential inclusion on the Register of the National Estate as representative examples of typologies, on the basis of high quality and rarity. Rowney identified Robe Uniting Church for examination as a representative example of a Low Gothic – Primitive church, a 'particularly strong example' of an 'extremely plain church ... to the point of severity,' executed 'without any trappings.' Since the former Robe Bible Christian Chapel was already listed on the Register of the National Estate by 1991, it is presumed

that this recommendation related to expanding the criteria under which the place was listed.

However, Rowney's assessment was based on the appearance of the former Robe Bible Christian Chapel during the second half of the twentieth century, when the external walls were flush rendered and painted white, which contributed to an impression of severity. Restoration carried out c.2010 removed the external render and introduced bastard tuck-pointing to the external mortar joints, which casts shadows across the walls depending on the time of day. It also reinstated a blind gable vent opening that had previously been rendered flush. These changes reduced the apparent severity of the exterior by reintroducing some diversity of colour, texture and contrast to the previously plain, flat wall surfaces, although the church still remains relatively plain.



Former Robe Bible Christian Chapel prior to restoration, c1983, showing flush-rendered walls.

Source: DEW Files

Furthermore, the *Type Profile of Churches* survey was not comprehensive, reflecting limitations of the technology of the time. Rowney conducted a street-by-street survey of the Metropolitan area, however, only a small sample of country churches was added to the survey, drawn from the records of the State Heritage Branch, to provide a more representative selection and to ensure that notable Lutheran churches were captured by the study. Only 170 churches of all denominations, including 132 metropolitan churches and 38 from country areas were included in the report. This is a tiny number, given that at least 405 Methodist churches alone were constructed in South Australia during the nineteenth century.<sup>65</sup> Many hundreds of churches, both metropolitan and country, were not surveyed.

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- <sup>1</sup> Arnold D. Hunt, *This Side of Heaven* p. 67
- <sup>2</sup> Arnold D. Hunt, *This Side of Heaven* p. 85
- <sup>3</sup> "Bible Christian Church District Meeting" in *Supplement to the Adelaide Observer* 30 March 1867 p. 2 <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article159509379> accessed 26 February 2021
- <sup>4</sup> Arnold D. Hunt, *This Side of Heaven* p. 85
- <sup>5</sup> Arnold D. Hunt, *This Side of Heaven* p. 86
- <sup>6</sup> <https://www.nma.gov.au/audio/behind-the-scenes-landmarks-series/transcripts/robe-is-not-famous-for-robos> accessed 25 February 2021
- <sup>7</sup> Eric Richards (ed) *The Flinders History of South Australia* p. 204.
- <sup>8</sup> Christina Smith, *The Booandik Tribe of South Australian Aborigines: a selection of their Habits, Customs, Legends and Language* (1880) Adelaide: E. Spiller, Government Printer
- <sup>9</sup> Urban & Regional Planning Group, *Robe Conservation Study* (1979) p. 13
- <sup>10</sup> Urban & Regional Planning Group, *Robe Conservation Study* pp. 12-13
- <sup>11</sup> Urban & Regional Planning Group, *Robe Conservation Study* p. 20
- <sup>12</sup> Urban & Regional Planning Group, *Robe Conservation Study* p. 13
- <sup>13</sup> Urban & Regional Planning Group, *Robe Conservation Study* p. 20
- <sup>14</sup> Urban & Regional Planning Group, *Robe Conservation Study* p. 22
- <sup>15</sup> Urban & Regional Planning Group, *Robe Conservation Study* p. 23
- <sup>16</sup> Urban & Regional Planning Group, *Robe Conservation Study* p. 26
- <sup>17</sup> Urban & Regional Planning Group, *Robe Conservation Study* p. 28
- <sup>18</sup> Urban & Regional Planning Group, *Robe Conservation Study* p. 29
- <sup>19</sup> Urban & Regional Planning Group, *Robe Conservation Study* p. 13
- <sup>20</sup> Eric Richards (ed) *The Flinders History of South Australia – Social History* (2001) Netley: Wakefield Press p. 204.
- <sup>21</sup> Arnold D. Hunt, *This Side of Heaven* (1985) Lutheran Publishing House: Adelaide p. 22
- <sup>22</sup> Arnold D. Hunt, *This Side of Heaven* p. 212
- <sup>23</sup> Ross Anderson, 'A Heritage Database for Methodist Church Buildings (1836-1900) in the Adelaide and Moonta Districts,' BA (Hons) Thesis, Flinders University of South Australia (1989) p. 13
- <sup>24</sup> Ros Paterson, 'Yorke Peninsula', SA History Hub, History Trust of South Australia, <https://sahistoryhub.history.sa.gov.au/places/yorke-peninsula> accessed 19 March 2021
- <sup>25</sup> Arnold D. Hunt, *This Side of Heaven* p. 62
- <sup>26</sup> Arnold D. Hunt, *This Side of Heaven* p. 63
- <sup>27</sup> Arnold D. Hunt, *This Side of Heaven* p. 64
- <sup>28</sup> Arnold D. Hunt, *This Side of Heaven* p. 66
- <sup>29</sup> Arnold D. Hunt, *This Side of Heaven* p. 67
- <sup>30</sup> "Bible Christian Church" in *South Australian Advertiser* 17 March 1866 p. 3 <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article28785841> accessed 15 March 2021
- <sup>31</sup> "Bible Christian Church District Meeting" in *Supplement to the Adelaide Observer* 30 March 1867 p. 2 <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article159509379> accessed 15 March 2021
- <sup>32</sup> Arnold D. Hunt, *This Side of Heaven* p. 85
- <sup>33</sup> "Guichen Bay." in *Border Watch* 20 July 1867 p. 3 <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article77080407> accessed 15 March 2021
- <sup>34</sup> *Bible Christian Magazine, for the year 1871* (1871) London: Bible Christian Book Room p. 89 <https://archive.org/details/biblechristianm02chrigoog/page/n102/> accessed 15 March 2021
- <sup>35</sup> "Churches at Robe. To the Editor." in *South Australian Weekly Chronicle* 5 October 1867 p. 4 <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article91259847> accessed 15 March 2021
- <sup>36</sup> "The South East. Robe." in *South Australian Register* 5 May 1868 p. 3 <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article39193602> accessed 15 March 2021
- <sup>37</sup> Kathleen Bermingham, *Gateway to the South East: a story of Robetown and the Guichen Bay District* (1961) Robe SA: J. Bermingham
- <sup>38</sup> Arnold D. Hunt, *This Side of Heaven* p. 66
- <sup>39</sup> Kathleen Bermingham, *Gateway to the South East* p. 211
- <sup>40</sup> Kathleen Bermingham, *Gateway to the South East* p. 211
- <sup>41</sup> "Country Correspondence. Guichen Bay" in *South Australian Register* 15 September 1868 p. 3 <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article41406483> accessed 15 March 2021
- <sup>42</sup> "Guichen Bay, September 7." in *South Australian Advertiser* 11 September 1868 p. 3 <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article31982171> accessed 15 March 2021
- <sup>43</sup> "Bible Christians." in *South Australian Register* 8 January 1869 p. 2 <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article41390622> accessed 17 March 2021
- <sup>44</sup> Arnold D. Hunt, *This Side of Heaven* p. 212

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- <sup>45</sup> "Bible Christians." in *South Australian Register* 8 January 1869 p. 2 <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article41390622> accessed 15 March 2021
- <sup>46</sup> "Bible Christians." in *Evening Journal* 21 October 1869 p. 2 <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article197651649> accessed 15 March 2021
- <sup>47</sup> "Bible Christian District Meeting" in *Evening Journal*, 2 March 1870 p. 3 <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article196729378> accessed 15 March 2021
- <sup>48</sup> *Bible Christian Magazine, for the year 1871* (1871) London: Bible Christian Book Room p. 89
- <sup>49</sup> *Bible Christian Magazine, for the year 1871* p. 89
- <sup>50</sup> "Bible Christian Missions" in *Adelaide Observer* 26 November 1870 p. 15 <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article158942695> accessed 15 March 2021
- <sup>51</sup> "Bible Christian District Meeting" in *Yorke's Peninsula Advertiser and Miner's News* 10 March 1874 p. 3 <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article215905190> accessed 15 March 2021
- <sup>52</sup> "Port Robe, August 12." in *South Australian Register* 19 August 1873 p. 6 <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article39293376> accessed 17 March 2021
- <sup>53</sup> Chatelherhault, "English and Australian Topography. Robe and Kingston." in *Border Watch* 22 July 1874 p. 3 <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article77551466> accessed 15 March 2021
- <sup>54</sup> "Bible Christian District Meeting" in *Adelaide Observer* 20 February 1875 p. 10 <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article159452557> accessed 15 March 2021
- <sup>55</sup> Arnold D. Hunt, *This Side of Heaven* p. 85
- <sup>56</sup> Arnold D. Hunt, *This Side of Heaven* p. 85
- <sup>57</sup> Arnold D. Hunt, *This Side of Heaven* p. 86
- <sup>58</sup> "Robe, September 21." in *Express and Telegraph* 24 September p. 2 <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article208178242> accessed 17 March 2021
- <sup>59</sup> "Bible Christian District Meeting." in *South Australian Register* 26 February 1876 p. 5 <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article43007460> accessed 17 March 2021
- <sup>60</sup> "Council of Education" in *South Australian Advertiser* 21 November 1876 p. 6 <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article33742338> accessed 17 March 2021
- <sup>61</sup> Liz Harfull, *Almost an island: the story of Robe* (2013) Kent Town SA: Wakefield Press p. 121
- <sup>62</sup> "Mr Burnett's farewell visits to Kingston, Narracoorte [sic], Millicent, Reedy Creek, and Beachport, Meningie, Point Macleay, and Milang." in *Christian Colonist* 26 May 1882 p. 5 <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article217300396> accessed 26 February 2021
- <sup>63</sup> "Robe. (From our own Correspondent.)" in *Border Watch* 7 October 1885 p. 3 <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article77063936> accessed 17 March 2021
- <sup>64</sup> "Robe. (From our own correspondent.)" in *Naracoorte Herald* 9 October 1885 p. 2 <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article146803451> accessed 17 March 2021
- <sup>65</sup> Barry Rowney, *Type Profile of Churches*, report for the Australian Heritage Commission (1991) p. 9