

BETTER HERITAGE INFORMATION

SUMMARY OF STATE HERITAGE PLACE

COMMENTARY ON THE LISTING

Description and notes with respect to a place entered in the South Australian Heritage Register in accordance with either the *South Australian Heritage Act 1978* or the *Heritage Places Act 1993*.

The information contained in this document is provided in accordance with s14 and s21 of the *Heritage Places Act 1993*.

NAME: St Mary's Star of the Sea Catholic Church **PLACE NO.:** 11642

KNOWN AS: Star of the Sea Catholic Chapel and Schoolroom

ADDRESS: Bunganditj Country
2 Hagen Street, Robe SA 5276
CT 5614/20 T441801 A53
Hundred of Waterhouse

CONFIRMED IN THE SOUTH AUSTRALIAN HERITAGE REGISTER:

31 August 1983

STATEMENT OF HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE

St Mary's Star of the Sea Catholic Church demonstrates the origins and expansion of Catholicism throughout South Australia during the first few decades of the colony. As the chapel also housed a Catholic primary school from around 1866 to 1880, it is also associated with the origins of Catholic as opposed to government controlled or state education in South Australia. Additionally, it reflects the social and cultural development of a key government town and port in the mid-nineteenth century.

RELEVANT/INDICATIVE CRITERIA (under section 16 of the Heritage Places Act 1993)

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

Built in 1858, St Mary's Star of the Sea Catholic Church represents the origins and expansion of Catholicism throughout South Australia during the early decades of the colony and is among the first Catholic chapels erected outside of Adelaide. South Australia did not have a resident Catholic priest until 1841 and lacked a dedicated place of worship until 1845. It was only after Bishop Francis Murphy arrived in South Australia in November 1844 and embarked on developing and expanding Catholicism in the young colony that Catholic parishes were established. Murphy was also responsible for hiring priests and initiated the construction of numerous churches, chapels and schools, in Adelaide and regional areas. His successors furthered his foundational efforts. Though erected after Murphy's death, St Mary's Star of the Sea Catholic Church stemmed from this initial drive and was among those buildings built during this early phase of development.

St Mary's Star of the Sea Catholic Church is also associated with the development of Catholic education in South Australia with a school operating from the chapel from 1866. Prior to the *Education Act 1875*, childhood education in South Australia was comprised of government subsidised and private schools, typically run by individuals and churches. While the Catholic Church had at first reluctantly accepted assistance from the state, it became increasingly averse to government involvement. By the late 1860s, it had established its own system of education separate from government. The Catholic school at St Mary's Star of the Sea demonstrates this aspect of the State's history as it connected to these developments.

St Mary's Star of the Sea was one of several buildings constructed during Robe's heyday from the late 1840s to 1860s, when it was one of South Australia's most important government towns and seaports. Built in 1858, St Mary's Star of the Sea Catholic Church is the first church built in Robe, demonstrating the growth and maturity of the town, as well as the arrival and settlement of Irish immigrants in South Australia.

SITE PLAN

St Mary's Star of the Sea Catholic Church
2 Hagen Street, Robe



PLACE NO.: 11642



St Mary's Star of the Sea Catholic Church, SHP 11642, CT 5614/20 T441801 A53, Hundred of Waterhouse.

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LEGEND

-  Parcel boundaries (Indicates extent of Listing)
-  Outline of Elements of Significance for State Heritage Place

Physical Description

St Mary's Star of the Sea Catholic Church is a vernacular chapel building located to the south-east of Lake Butler and opposite to Seahaven Motel – Former Government Residency (SHP 12546). The plot is adjacent to several historically significant administrative sites.

The chapel is a simple rectangular structure built of stone featuring:

- high-pitched gabled roof with corrugated galvanised steel sheets,
- pointed entrance door with a leadlight transom window,
- pointed windows,
- lean-to extension at the rear with a chimney, also with a pointed door on the south facing elevation and pointed windows.

The exterior is painted white, and adornments include:

- cross finial,
- statuette of Madonna and child/Mary and baby Jesus above the front entrance.

The interior comprises a hall and two rooms located in the lean-to. The walls are rendered and painted white, and the ceiling consists of flat timber. There is a fireplace in the lean-to.

Elements of Significance:

Elements of heritage significance include (but are not necessarily limited to):

- chapel,
- lean-to,
- high pitched gable roof,
- pointed entrance door with leadlight transom window,
- pointed side door,
- pointed windows,
- cross finial,
- statuette,
- chimney and fireplace.

Elements not considered to contribute to significance of place include (but are not necessarily limited to):

- non-original internal fixtures,
- corrugated galvanised steel roofing,
- fencing and entrance gate/arch,
- commemorative and interpretative signage.

History of the Place¹

Establishing Catholicism and Catholic Education in South Australia

From the outset, the Catholic community in South Australia was small and consisted almost entirely of working-class people from Ireland. While the community met informally in Adelaide, it wasn't until 1841 that a resident priest arrived when the diocese of Sydney sent Father William Benson to Adelaide.² Father Benson subsequently leased a warehouse in Waymouth Street to use as a chapel. By 1842 the number of Catholic parishioners in Australia had grown to such an extent that the diocese of Sydney was divided creating separate dioceses for Adelaide and Hobart. Father Benson was succeeded by Father Edmund Mahoney in 1844.³ Bishop Francis Murphy arrived later that year on 6 November. Dr Murphy laid the foundation stone for several of the colony's first Catholic buildings, including the first bespoke Catholic Church in South Australia, St Mary's at Morphett Vale (SHP 10596), in July 1845.⁴

Through Dr Murphy's enthusiasm and guidance, other congregations and churches were established outside of Adelaide. Prior to 1858, there were thirteen priests in the diocese, located at Morphett Vale, Mount Barker, Willunga, Kapunda, Gawler, Penola, and Sevenhill. By 1858, there were about fourteen churches in the colony, including at Morphett Vale, Clare, Kapunda, Sevenhill and Robe.⁵

Upon his arrival in Adelaide, Dr Murphy was struck by the lack of Catholic institutions in the colony and in addition to the many churches he supported the construction of he was also responsible for establishing formal Catholic education in South Australia.⁶ The lack of a Catholic primary school was particularly concerning to Murphy. He observed that children in Adelaide had been 'growing up in profound ignorance of the first rudiments of their religion, or what is worse they are imbibing false doctrine in Protestant and Methodist Schools'.⁷

Accordingly, establishing a school for Catholic children was a priority.⁸ Just six weeks after his arrival in Adelaide, the foundation stone of the first school hall and temporary church was laid at a site on the corner of West Terrace and Grote Street on 12 December 1844.⁹ It was completed in 1845 and the school opened in October. Over the next few years, several additional schools were established, including at Clare in 1849 and Dry Creek (now Salisbury) in 1850.

During the first decade of the colony's existence, schooling in general was rudimentary and fragmented, and was provided by private individuals and churches.¹⁰ Schools operated from a range of buildings, most of them makeshift.¹¹ In 1847, Governor Frederick Robe introduced Ordinance 11, which provided assistance to schools regardless of whether they provided denominational instruction.¹² The Ordinance was overturned in 1851 and replaced by the *Education Act 1851*, which restricted support to non-denominational schools. It also authorised the government

to subsidise the cost of constructing schoolhouses, though funds were not allocated for this purpose until the late 1850s.¹³ By 1873, the government had subsidised the erection of approximately one hundred schoolhouses.¹⁴

The Catholic Church at first reluctantly accepted the government's provisions, but gradually came to reject them entirely. Bishop Murphy initially accepted funds from the government to subsidise the cost of teachers, but after 1851 refused to publicly endorse government-funded schools, although he did not prevent Catholic teachers from accepting financial assistance.¹⁵

In 1859, Bishop Geoghegan, Murphy's successor, ordered Catholics not to attend state-funded schools and established an independent school fund financed by the Society for the Propagation of the Faith.¹⁶ Further changes occurred once Bishop Laurence Sheil replaced Bishop Geoghegan in 1866. Together with Father Tenison-Woods and Mary MacKillop, in 1867, Bishop Sheil established what amounted to a new Catholic education system in South Australia. This system centralised authority and prioritised Sisters over lay teachers.¹⁷

Colonial Robe

Guichen Bay in the South East of South Australia forms part of the traditional lands of the Bungandij people, who have been present in the area for at least 30,000 years.¹⁸ Europeans first charted the coastline of the region in 1802 during the Baudin and Flinders expeditions and sealers established a presence at Guichen Bay in 1831.¹⁹

European exploration of the South East took place from 1839 and settlement began as early as 1840.²⁰ Much of the South East was initially settled by pastoralists and by 1847 approximately half of the region was held under pastoral licences. As primary production expanded the colonial government began to provide a series of government towns as service and staging centres. The provision of ports to ship goods to market was also viewed as essential and Robe was established in 1846, to provide a port for the burgeoning wool clip then being obtained from the South East.²¹ Robe was officially declared as a port by the Government in 1847.²²

Situated towards the south of Guichen Bay, the town at Robe (or Robetown) went on to become the first major town of the South East.²³ Robe became the administrative centre of the region when a Government Resident was appointed in 1846.²⁴ Over the next two decades, Robe developed as an international port that serviced the local wool industry and import and export markets. It also facilitated the arrival of thousands of immigrants, including British and Irish people, as well as Chinese prospectors during the Victorian gold rush.²⁵

The Catholic Church at Robe

When planning Robe in 1846, government surveyors allocated 'good grassy land' towards the rear of the township as a glebe for the erection of a church.²⁶ A burial ground was established at the site three years later, which became Robe cemetery (SHP 12645). However, it took over a decade for a church to be built anywhere in Robe. In July 1858, the *Observer* noted that except for a Catholic Church, which was then under construction, no other religious structure existed in the town.²⁷

According to Reverend R. A. Morrison, the church was built by Father Julian Tenison-Woods on land purchased by Bishop Francis Murphy a decade earlier in 1847. As historian Susan Marsden observes, its establishment in Robe 'may be a reflection on the numbers of Irish immigrants who were then landing at the Port of Robe'.²⁸ By late 1858, sometime between October and December, the church was completed.²⁹ As Robe initially lacked a resident Catholic priest,³⁰ Father-Woods, based at Penola, periodically visited Robe to deliver services at the chapel, which he continued to do into the 1860s,³¹ likely until he relocated to Adelaide in 1867.

Furthermore, the church was used as a Catholic primary school during the years 1866 to 1880. In c.1866 two small rooms were added to the back of the church (the western end) to provide accommodation for the two teaching sisters from the Order of St Joseph who had begun conducting a school here. Known as St Joseph's School, it was one of twenty-six Catholic schools located in the diocese of Adelaide in 1867, a year after the school at Robe had opened. The Sisters of St Joseph, a 'frugal order, simple and with a moderate education', were founded by Mary MacKillop at Penola in the mid-1860s.³² They were the first Australian order of nuns established in South Australia and soon spread out from the South East, establishing schools throughout the state, such as at Mintaro in 1874.

Regarding the school, local historian Kathleen Bermingham highlights the following:

The teachers of St Joseph received no subsidies from the parishes in which they had schools. They depended for the most part on what they received in fees – a negligible amount in many cases – and the generosity inspired by the gratitude of those among whom they lived and worked.

At Guichen Bay, the Sisters were high in their praise of the support they were given by the whole of the inhabitants, irrespective of creed, who kept them supplied with food and other gifts.³³

The school temporarily ceased operating in the early 1870s after Bishop Sheil sought to gain control of the Catholic education system.³⁴ In the process, Bishop Sheil removed Tenison-Woods from the diocese and excommunicated Mary MacKillop, though the excommunication was overturned the following year. During this ordeal, almost half of the Sisters resigned or were expelled. However, the school resumed

BHI Summary of State Heritage Place: 11642 7 of 19
Confirmed in the South Australian Heritage Register on 31 August 1983
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operating shortly afterwards following the appointment of a new priest who was supportive of Mary's efforts. Less than a decade later, the school closed for good. Bermingham has noted that the 'school closed in 1880, after having for fourteen years given sterling service in, and for, the community'.³⁵ The opening of a government school a few years earlier in 1876 likely contributed to its closure.

Moreover, the chapel's construction was a part of the general social, cultural and economic development of Robe which took place from the late 1850s until the 1870s when the population and economy declined. The wave of development is illustrated by the formation of a Mechanic's Institute in 1862 and the building of an Institute Hall in 1868 or 1869; the construction of four churches, including the Free Presbyterian Chapel opened in 1858, St Peter's Anglican Church in 1860, and a Bible Christian Chapel in 1868. The gaol was constructed in 1861, the Customs House in 1862, and a new jetty built between 1866 and 1868 (since demolished).³⁶

St Mary's Star of the Sea Catholic Church remains an active Catholic Church and is run by the Penola Catholic Parish. The chapel has changed little since the nineteenth century, save for maintenance and conservation work and was confirmed as a State Heritage Place on 31 August 1983.

Chronology

Year	Event
1841	South Australia's first resident Catholic priest, Father William Benson, arrives in Adelaide.
1842	Rome subdivides the diocese of Sydney to create the diocese of Hobart and Adelaide.
1844	Bishop Francis Murphy arrives in South Australia. The foundation stone for the first St Patrick's Church (since demolished) is laid at a site on the corner of West Terrace and Grote Street in Adelaide on 12 December. Designed as a combined Catholic school hall and temporary church, this building is the first formal Catholic structure built in South Australia.
1845	Archbishop's House (SHP 13398) is built. The foundation stone for St Mary's Catholic Church is laid in Morphett Vale on 28 July. This is the first bespoke Catholic church built in South Australia. First St Patrick's Church (also used as a school) opens on 5 October.
1846	Counties of Grey and Robe are proclaimed and opened to claim under pastoral license.

Government of South Australia establishes Robe as the administrative centre of the South East; Capitan Villiers Butler is appointed as the first Government Resident.

The township of Robe is surveyed from what becomes the Royal Circus. The surveyors allocate land as a glebe to be used for church purposes.

The first bespoke Catholic church, St Mary's (SHP 10596), opens in Morphet Vale.

1847 The Colonial Government officially declares Robe as a port.

1857 Julian Tenison-Woods is ordained as a Catholic priest and is placed in charge of the parish at Penola.

Tenison-Woods travels to his new parish via steamer and lands at Robe.

1858 Bishop Francis Murphy dies from pulmonary tuberculosis on 26 April.

St Francis Xavier's Cathedral (SHP 10892) opens on 11 July.

St Mary's Star of the Sea Catholic Church opens in December. It is the first church in Robe.

1859 Bishop Patrick Geoghegan is consecrated as the new Bishop of Adelaide. Bishop Geoghegan bans Catholic children from attending state-funded schools, unsuccessfully lobbies the government to allocate funds to denominational schools and establishes private funding for Catholic schools.

1866 Bishop Laurence Sheil is consecrated as the new Bishop of Adelaide.

Mary Mackillop arrives at Penola and establishes a school with Tenison-Woods' assistance.

Sisters of St Joseph is established by Tenison-Woods and Mary Mackillop.

The lean-to at the rear of the chapel at Robe is used to accommodate two Sisters of St Joseph and the chapel is used to house a school.

1867 A convent and school run by the Sisters of St Joseph is opened on Franklin Street.

With Father Tenison-Woods, Bishop Sheil establishes a new Catholic school system.

A convent and school run by the Sisters of St Joseph is opened on Franklin Street.

1875 *Education Act 1875* introduces compulsory schooling and establishes the Council of Education.

1880 The school run by the Sisters at St Mary's Star of the Sea ceases to operate.

St Mary's Star of the Sea continues to operate as a church.

- 1983 St Mary's Star of the Sea Catholic Church is listed as a State Heritage Place on 31 August with the name Church – "Star of the Sea".**
- 2014 Heritage SA approved Development Application 822/21/14 to repair and paint the interior and exterior of Church – "Star of the Sea", including its roof, walls, doors, and windows.
- 2023 The South Australia Heritage Council approves changing the Register name from Church – "Star of the Sea" to St Mary's Star of the Sea Catholic Church.

References

Books and Book Chapters

- Bermingham, Kathleen. *Gateway to the South East: A Story of Robetown and the Guichen Bay District*. Millicent: The South Eastern Times Ltd., 1961.
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- 'Guichen Bay'. *Observer* (Adelaide), 31 July 1858, p.4.
- 'Guichen Bay', *Adelaide Observer*, 24 December 1859, p.2.
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BHI Summary of State Heritage Place: 11642

10 of 19

Confirmed in the South Australian Heritage Register on 31 August 1983

The South Australian Heritage Council endorsed the content of this BHI - SSHP on 19 October 2023

'Robe Town', *Adelaide Observer*, 6 May 1865, p.8.

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SITE DETAILS

St Mary's Star of the Sea Catholic Church
2 Hagen Street, Robe

PLACE NO.: 11642

DESCRIPTION OF PLACE:	Rectangular, vernacular chapel built of painted stone with a high-pitched gabled roof, pointed entrance door, pointed windows, and a lean-to extension at rear.
DATE OF CONSTRUCTION:	1858; lean-to 1866
REGISTER STATUS:	Provisionally entered 7 April 1983 Confirmed 31 August 1983
CURRENT USE:	Catholic chapel, 1858 -
PREVIOUS USE(S):	Catholic school, 1868 - 1880
LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA:	District Council of Robe
LOCATION:	Street No.: 2 Street Name: Hagen Town/Suburb: Robe Post Code: 5276
LAND DESCRIPTION:	Title Reference: CT 5614/20 T441801 A53 Hundred: Waterhouse

PHOTOS

St Mary's Star of the Sea Catholic Church

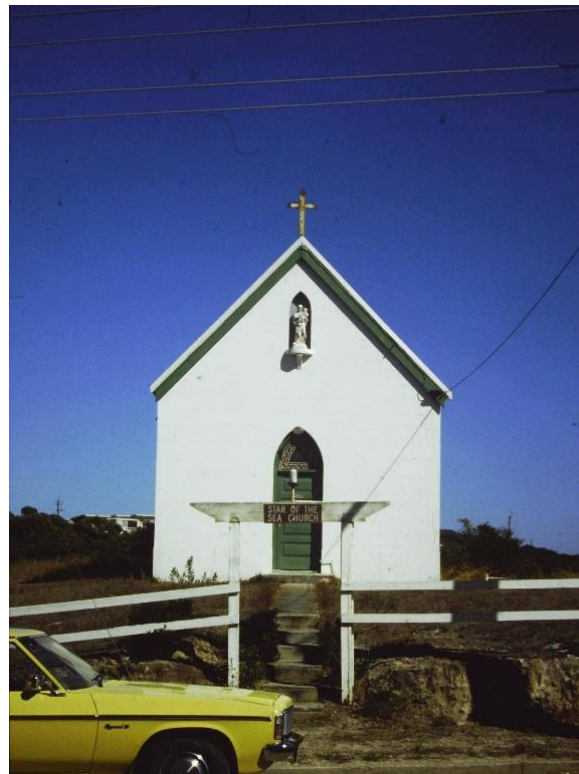
PLACE NO.: 11642

2 Hagen Street, Robe



Front and south-facing elevation of the chapel, 1980. The lean-to is visible at the rear.

Source: DEW Files



Front of the chapel showing the cross finial, statuette, and pointed door, 1982.

Source: DEW Files

BHI Summary of State Heritage Place: 11642

13 of 19

Confirmed in the South Australian Heritage Register on 31 August 1983

The South Australian Heritage Council endorsed the content of this BHI - SSHP on 19 October 2023

PHOTOS

St Mary's Star of the Sea Catholic Church
2 Hagen Street, Robe

PLACE NO.: 11642



South-facing elevation of the chapel with lean-to to the rear, 1980.

Source: DEW Files



North-facing elevation of the chapel with lean-to to the rear, 1980.

Source: DEW Files

PHOTOS

St Mary's Star of the Sea Catholic Church
2 Hagen Street, Robe

PLACE NO.: 11642



View of chapel to the south, 1982.

Source: DEW Files



Interior of the chapel, 1982.

Source: DEW File

PHOTOS

St Mary's Star of the Sea Catholic Church

PLACE NO.: 11642

2 Hagen Street, Robe



Front of the chapel showing the cross finial, statuette, and pointed door, 2005.

Source: DEW Files



Pointed entrance door to the chapel with leadlight transom window, 2005.

Source: DEW Files

PHOTOS

St Mary's Star of the Sea Catholic Church

PLACE NO.: 11642

2 Hagen Street, Robe



South-facing elevation of the chapel with lean-to to the rear, 2005.

Source: DEW Files

¹ Much of this section uses and revises portions of the original 'Historical Research' included within the original item evaluation sheet for Church – "Star of the Sea". A. Aeuckens, 'Historical Research: Our Lady Star of the Sea Chapel', Register Research Programme 1981/82 in Item Evaluation Sheet for Our Lady Star of the Sea Chapel, Robe (Adelaide: Department of Environment and Planning, 1982).

² Kay Whitehead, "'Religious First – Teachers Second": Catholic Elementary Schooling in Nineteenth Century South Australia', *Change: Transformations in Education* 4:1 (2001): pp.64-65.

³ David Hilliard, 'St Patrick's Church, Grote Street, Adelaide: A Short History', *Journal of the Historical Society of South Australia* No. 41 (2013): pp.30-31.

⁴ See Osmond Thorpe, 'Murphy, Francis (1795-1858)'. Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography, Australia National University, published first in hardcopy 1967. <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/murphy-francis-2493>; Donald Langmead, *Accidental Architect: The Life and Times of George Strickland Kingston* (Sydney: Crossing Press, 1994), pp.142-144 and p.249; and Francis Murphy, *The Journal of Francis Murphy, First Catholic Bishop of Adelaide*, Vol. One. Condon, Brian (Ed.) (Magill: South Australian College of Education, 1983), p.91.

⁵ This figure is based on the table prepared by Sister Marie Foale in Margaret Press, *From Our Broken Toil: South Australian Catholics 1836 to 1905* (Adelaide: Catholic Archdiocese of Adelaide, 1986), pp.269-270. Robe is listed as 1860. However, it appears the chapel at Robe was completed in late 1858.

⁶ Bishop Francis Murphy quoted in Thorpe, 'Murphy, Francis (1795-1858)'.

⁷ Bishop Francis Murphy quoted in Whitehead, "'Religious First – Teachers Second'", p.65.

⁸ R. A. Morrison, 'Foundations of the Church in South Australia, No. 2: Bishop Murphy's Great Work Begins', *Southern Cross* (Adelaide), 21 November 1947, p.8.

⁹ Murphy, *The Journal of Francis Murphy*, p.83.

¹⁰ See Peter Karmel, Roma Mitchell, S. S. Dunn, Ian Hayward, and Wm. C. Radford, *Education in South Australia: Report of the Committee of Enquiry into Education in South Australia 1969-1970* (Adelaide: Government of South Australia, 1971), pp.5-13.

¹¹ Press, *From Our Broken Toil*, p.132.

¹² Karmel, Mitchell, Dunn, Hayward, and Radford, *Education in South Australia*, pp.5-6; Press, *From Our Broken Toil*, pp.131-132.

¹³ Karmel, Mitchell, Dunn, Hayward, and Radford, *Education in South Australia*, p.7.

¹⁴ John Bradley Hirst, *Adelaide and the Country, 1870-1917: Their Social and Political Relationship* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1973), p.136.

¹⁵ Whitehead, "'Religious First – Teachers Second'", pp.65-66.

¹⁶ Whitehead, "'Religious First – Teachers Second'", p.66.

¹⁷ Whitehead, "'Religious First – Teachers Second'", pp.66-74.

¹⁸ Liz Harfull, *Almost an Island: The Story of Robe*, reprinted edition (2013; Mile End: Wakefield press, 2015), 12-14; Susan Marsden, *A Glimpse of Golden Days* (Robe: District Council of Robe, 1985), pp.11-12.

¹⁹ Harfull, *Almost an Island*, 11; Marsden, *A Glimpse of Golden Days*, p.12.

²⁰ Harfull, *Almost an Island*, 14-16; Marsden, *A Glimpse of Golden Days*, p.14.

²¹ Roger André, 'Wool', SA History Hub, History Trust of South Australia, 19 March 2014. <https://sahistoryhub.history.sa.gov.au/subjects/wool>; Michael Williams, *The Making of the South Australian Landscape: A Study in the Historical Geography of Australia* (London; New York: Academic Press, 1974), pp.339-341.

²² Dallwitz and Marsden, *Robe Historical Interpretation*, pp.4-10.

²³ Dallwitz and Marsden, *Robe Historical Interpretation*, pp.4-10.

²⁴ Marsden, *A Glimpse of Golden Days*, pp.21-24.

²⁵ Dallwitz and Marsden, *Robe Historical Interpretation*, pp.10-16.

²⁶ Bermingham, *Gateway to the South East*, p.201.

²⁷ Quoted in Bermingham, *Gateway to the South East*, 204; 'Guichen Bay', *Observer* (Adelaide), 31 July 1858, p.4.

²⁸ Marsden, *A Glimpse of Golden Days*, p.43.

²⁹ R. A. Morrison, 'History of the Church in South Australia: The Church in the South-East III', *Southern Cross* (Adelaide), 9 April 1948, p.8.

³⁰ 'Guichen Bay', *Adelaide Observer*, 24 December 1859, p.2.

³¹ 'Robe Town', *Adelaide Observer*, 6 May 1865, p.8.

³² Bermingham, *Gateway to the South East*, p.214.

³³ Bermingham, *Gateway to the South East*, p.215.

³⁴ Harfull, *Almost an Island*, pp.118-121.

³⁵ Bermingham, *Gateway to the South East*, p.215.

³⁶ Marsden, *A Glimpse of Golden Days*, pp.46-48.