

The History of the Perth Baptist Tabernacle in Tasmania

David Gibson arrived as a convict in Tasmania in 1804 which was the year that Launceston was established. Not long after his arrival he was granted land near Perth and Evandale, and in 1811 he and his wife are reported to have entertained the governor. He became the colony's first Inspector of Stock. He had seven sons who were all successful farm managers and breeders of sheep. David was granted or bought many properties, nearly all on the South Esk River including Native Point and Scone at Perth.

Governor Macquarie named the township of Perth after David Gibson's hometown in Scotland.

In 1870, one of his sons, William built a new home at Native Point on the South Esk River alongside what is now the Perth Bridge on the Midlands Highway. They also built a home on the opposite side of the river which was named 'Scone'. It has been reported that William Gibson was the first in the southern hemisphere to light his house with electricity using water in an old millrace.

William Gibson and his wife Mary were generous people with a strong social conscience and contributed towards the development of Perth. They initially worshipped at the Perth Anglican Church but, when the minister transferred to Longford, they felt free to erect a Baptist Church.

The foundation stone for the original Baptist Church, now called the Hall, was laid by Mary Gibson on 8 May 1862. By 1880 there was a membership of 90, with a Sunday school for 101 pupils and 13 teachers and the building was too small.

On the 8 August 1888 Mary laid the foundation stone for the Perth Baptist Tabernacle to be erected across the road. It cost 3,600 pounds. At the service where the stone was laid a bottle containing copies of the *Launceston Daily Telegraph* and *Examiner* of 8 August 1888, coins in use at the time and a copy of the dedication address given by Pastor Walton were placed in a cavity beneath the memorial stone. It is still in place.

A year later the Tabernacle was opened. At the opening William and Mary were honored and William gave a short address in which he spoke of the Lord's blessing to him and his family.

There is some uncertainty as to the origin of the architecture. The architect was George Fagg, who was visiting the Gibson family from England. Some say a visiting missionary from India played a part in the design of the unique mosque-type building with its domed roof and octagonal shape as Mary encouraged missionaries from

India to holiday with them on many occasions. Others say Reverend Blackie, the Baptist minister at Longford, who was present at both the stone laying and the opening of the Tabernacle, also had input as he had spent much time in India as a missionary.

The octagonal building with a dome is 50 feet by 50 feet with the walls rising to a height of 35 feet from the foundation. The seats were placed inside the building so that every visitor directly faced the platform. It was built to comfortably seat 400 people with ventilation, lighting and acoustic properties developed so that it was a very comfortable building.

Some other characteristics of the building are the sloping floor down to the front much like a modern cinema and the raised baptistery and pulpit area.

Some of the original furnishings remain including the priceless kauri pine pews. Also retained in the building are the old pedal/bellows organ and a little street pedal organ used for open air street rallies. Two of the pews have pegs on the back for the Gibson family to hang their hats.

An elaborate marble plaque on the interior northern wall of the building confirms the generosity and benevolence of the late William Gibson, born 21 January 1820 and died in his 73rd year on 27 June 1892, and his wife Mary Ann Gibson, born in 1811 and died on 12 January 1903, aged 92.

William and Mary Gibson also played a significant part in the building of Baptist Tabernacles in Hobart and Launceston and in other towns across Tasmania including Deloraine, Longford, Blackwood Creek, Bracknell, Cluen, Liffey, Devonport, Latrobe, Sheffield and Burnie. In the case of Deloraine and Longford the cost of the building came from the sale of one of his prized rams. In both cases the proceeds of the sale were 1,000 quineas.

The Baptist Tabernacle in Perth along with the original Hall still serve the people of Perth and stands as an enduring legacy to the Gibson family.

The link to the home they built at known as Scone remains today. The home was retained in the Gibson family until it was found to be far too large for the needs of a single family. Through their generosity and of many people in the community, it was decided that the home would become a place of care for adults with severe or multiple disabilities. Eskleigh Home was born and remains today as a home for people with a disability managed by The Eskleigh Foundation. Several the residents from Eskleigh continue to attend the weekly worship service.

For more information visit www.perthbaptistchurch.org.au