

ST FRANCIS, BETHANGA: A SHORT HISTORY

*Dr Donna Bailey
Sandhurst archivist, shares a history of the Church.*



St Francis, Bethanga in 2022.

Like many settlements in regional Victoria, Bethanga was built when gold was discovered there in 1875. Initially, a tiny village with rudimentary buildings was built in Upper Bethanga, which was northwest of the present town, and this was where the first Catholic chapel, built in 1882 was located. In 1879, Lower Bethanga (the site of the present town), was settled; predominantly with miners who arrived in the area after the discovery of copper and silver. As copper and silver mining surpassed subsistence gold mining, Bethanga became known as the copper and silver city of Victoria.

Common to those living in mining communities, the early settlers of Bethanga would have existed at the margin, experiencing many hurdles and hardships. The geographical isolation they experienced, particularly in the spring, as the alpine snow melted, coupled with the fallout from winter flooding, are well recorded in various newspaper articles of the time as well as within the diocesan record.¹

¹ For example, "Bethanga is now fairly shut in from the outside world, for the road to Wodonga is impassable". *Ovens and Murray Advertiser*, [Beechworth Vic, 1855-1918], 21 September 1878, p. 8

In June 1879 one traveller wrote about his journey from Wodonga to Bethanga stating, 'after fourteen miles of road, river and mud, you reach the silver and copper city; the river and mud predominating.'² Eighteen months earlier, another individual provided the local newspaper with a vivid description of his journey into Bethanga. 'That far-famed place' he wrote, 'could, if you were 'anxious to arrive by the nearest and most pleasant route' be reached by crossing the Murray in the most 'primitive fashion, ... being by boat and swimming the horse'; he continued, '... and don't be afraid of trusting yourself in the hands of Bently the ferryman, especially if your life is insured.'³

Diocesan records indicate that visits by clergy to the area were very infrequent and, before the first church was built, Mass was only occasionally celebrated by visiting priests, in the homes of Catholic families (as was the norm). It is likely that before 1886 either Dean William Tierney of Beechworth or Rev. Charles van Der Heyden of Chiltern were the visiting priests, although there is no record of this.⁴

In 1886, a second timber church replaced the first simple building on the same site, and it remained there for another thirty-one years. The 1886 church was paid for through the fundraising efforts of the growing Catholic community who held well attended concerts, balls, and other events at the local hall.

In 1917, with Rev. Flynn at the helm, the timber church was dismantled and shifted from the 'top of the hill' (Upper Bethanga) to its present site where it was repaired and renovated. A parish report stated, '... it now occupies a conspicuous and convenient place in the lower town'.⁵

Two years after the removal of St Francis Bethanga to its present site, the first sod was turned for the construction of the Hume Dam. The project continued from 1919 until 1936 and at its peak employed over 1,100 men. The Bethanga Bridge, which is scientifically and historically significant, was completed as part of the Hume Weir works, in 1929.



Letters written between priests of the Chiltern Rutherglen Mission and a Miss Winifred Murtagh of the Mitta Mitta Junction have survived and are now carefully preserved in the diocesan archive.⁶ Ranging a thirty-year period (1876 – 1901), they provide a unique account of the activities of the Catholic people from the northeast during the period. Although the letters do not specifically reference Bethanga, they are a valued resource that offer a glimpse into the communities living near the Murray and Mitta Mitta Rivers. Most letters were written by Dutch-born Van Der Heyden, who worked across the Mission between 1876 and 1888. His generally chatty communications, written usually to advise of his impending Mass visits to remote posts, reveal a genuine warmth for the Catholic community and often mention the rough landscape and difficult environmental conditions.

Much was made of the visit of the First Bishop of Sandhurst, Martin Crane, to the district in the early summer of 1876. It is unlikely that Crane visited Bethanga at the time as the procession travelled from Chiltern along the righthand side of the Mitta Mitta River towards Granite Flat; however, the Advocate

² *A Trip to Bethanga*, by A Rambler; *ibid*, June 7, 1879, p.6

³ *A Trip to Bethanga*, by Cousin Jack; *ibid*, September 22, 1877, p. 5

⁴ In those days, Chiltern ministered to Wodonga

⁵ Bethanga, Leo Lane Collection.

⁶ Tallangatta letters 1876-1901. These are predominantly letters between Rev C. van Der Heyden and Miss Murtagh but include letters from subsequent priests; J.F Gaffey, E. Delaney, T. Barry, J Fitzgerald, J McCarthy, M O'Connor and P Kavanagh.

correspondent described that 'Catholic settlers from far and near assembled to meet his Lordship'.⁷ Before accompanying Crane on this trip, Van Der Heyden expressed his doubts to Miss Murtagh regarding Crane's ability to ride across the steep terrain.

*His Lordship the Bishop is very anxious to see the distant portions of this circle, but I think, though I may be wrong, his horsemanship is rather under the mark for this enterprise, however, time will tell.*⁸

Years later, long after he had left the district, Van Der Heyden, wrote again to Murtagh, reminiscing about his time there and of the very important first visit to the district by the bishop.

I cannot help bringing back my memory, some of my visits in the older times to the Mitta Mitta and especially do I remember the Cavalcade that surrounded Bishop Crane across the river at your place when he returned from his visit to the city of granite,⁹ where the poor man had to spend hours of penance and mortification as in those good, honest times, they had no chairs to sit upon in that far off locality – and as you remember, the Bishop was rather composed of a robust corporation of which few can boast – and he had to spend his time by sitting on a form without back or anything – I well remember what a tour de force it was for the Bishop during that visit to keep from "expletives" so to speak. I know it was rather a hard job for I felt the deficiency of a chair myself.¹⁰

Bishop Reville administered Confirmation to children at St Francis Bethanga as early as 1885. An 1885 report describes that only two months after being ordained the Coadjutor Bishop of Sandhurst, Reville was met by a cavalcade, welcomed and escorted into Bethanga where he confirmed many children including those from as far as the Bungil Plains, 35 km to the east.¹¹ Reville returned fairly regularly to Bethanga¹² and in May 1902 he toured the Upper Murray region in confirming over 660 children at Tallangatta, Granya, Corryong and Bethanga and other 'smaller centres'.¹³

During the 1930s, Catholic families were well entrenched in Bethanga, and Bishop McCarthy came to the town at least once to administer the sacrament of Confirmation. Some family names from the congregation of that era and spanning as far back as the 1880s were McFarland, Hertzog, Toohey, Packer, Saunders, Murphy and Collins.

*'Entering St Francis in the thirties, a person instantly felt a sense of family, a closeness to God and kin. Each family occupied their own specific pew and no stranger dared intrude upon it.'*¹⁴

⁷ Advocate, 'Episcopal Visit to the Australian Alps', 16 December 1876, p. 7.

⁸ Charles Van Der Heyden to Miss Murtagh, 2 October, 1876

⁹ this would be Granite Flat

¹⁰ Van Der Heyden, C to Miss Murtagh, 29 August, 1901.

¹¹ Advocate, 6 June 1885, p. 15

¹² At least in 1891, 1899 and 1902.

¹³ Ovens and Murray Advertiser, 25 November 1899 and 10 May 1902.

¹⁴ Border Mail, Saturday January 16, 1993.