

FREDERICK JOHN PITMAN 1833-1906

Sources

1. Oral records of Chewton Independent Chapel
2. Southern Spectator, June 1857
3. Castlemaine Congregational Church records
4. Registrar-General's Office, Land Purchase No. 45259, 1857
5. Chewton Borough rate books
6. Mount Alexander Mail, 22 May 1861
7. Chewton Cemetery records
8. MAM, 23 April 1858
9. Southern Spectator, 1859
10. R-G O, Land Purchase No. 2454, 1860
11. R-G O, Book No. 268, Memorial No. 939
12. Letter from Rona Pitman, descendant, 9 Pine Street, Hawthorn
13. Congregational Year Book, 1906
14. Congregational Year Book, 1907
15. VPRS 242, Unit 28
16. Uniting Church Archives card index: Frederick John Pitman

Birth and training

Pitman was born in Somerset, England on 20 January 1833. (12) He studied theology at Western College, Plymouth in the early 1850s.(16)

Arrival at Forest Creek

Pitman arrived in Australia in April 1855 and took up a position as pastor to the Independent congregation at Forest Creek in the same month. (1) The congregation had been founded on 22 October 1854. (1) Until the stone Independent Chapel was built, the congregation had worshipped in a tent (2) and/or a slab building situated at Old Post Office Hill, the building having been purchased by public conscription and converted for church use. (1) It would seem to be likely that a tent and then a slab building were used.

The first reference to Mr Pitman that we have found in the Mount Alexander Mail is in the issue of 7 March 1856 when it was reported that he had spoken to the Independents at Kyneton while their pastor had come to speak to the Independents at Forest Creek. On 18 July 1856 the same paper reported that he had spoken at a Congregational tea meeting in Castlemaine.

Marriage and family

On 20 October 1856 Pitman, aged 23, married Maria Brice of Forest Creek, aged 17, at the home of Maria's father. (Marriage certificate held by Rona Pitman (12))

In 1857 Maria's father, John James Brice, in partnership with three other men, purchased Crown Allotment 40, Section F in Main Road, Chewton, which is beside the block on which the Independent Chapel stands. (4) By 1865 the owner and occupier of the allotment was a Thomas Williams, blacksmith. (5) The old house that stood on the site was (illegally) demolished in 1993 but whether it was built by Mr Brice we do not know. Mr Brice died in May 1871 and was buried on 22 May from the residence of his son-in-law, the Rev. Mr Pitman . He was buried in the Chewton Cemetery. (6)

Frederick and Maria Pitman had six children while living in Chewton. The first three children appear to have survived, but the three born later died very young and are buried in the Chewton Cemetery. The three children who survived were baptised in the Castlemaine Congregational Church. The eldest, Louisa Maria, was born on 11 September 1857 and baptised on 8 February 1858. The second child, Frederick John, was born on 27 March 1859 and baptised on 13 February 1861. The third, Lydia, was born on 21 December 1862 and baptised on 11 July 1864, (3) The three children buried in the Chewton Cemetery were Ellen Jane who died, aged 1 month, on 29 August 1867; Charles Joseph who died when 2 years old in February 1875; and Albert who died on 8 July 1876, aged 1 month. All were buried in the Independent section of the cemetery, Ellen Jane and Albert in grave 41D and Charles Joseph in grave 60D. (7)

Construction of the Independent Chapel

On 5 November 1856 a tea meeting was held by the Chewton Independent congregation at which members decided to appeal for subscriptions to buy a site and build a new chapel. As the Independents did not accept government aid, their undertaking was regarded as an arduous one. (1) Despite this, they were soon able to purchase Crown Allotment 40A, Section F, and "a plain, but good and substantial stone chapel" (2) was erected there. According to one source, the chapel was opened for public worship on 13 June 1857 and, at the first service, the pastor, F.J. Pitman was ordained. (1) According to a second source, the opening services took place on Tuesday 8 and Sunday 14 June and Pitman's ordination was held on the evening of Wednesday 10 June. "Mr Pitman gave a very interesting statement of his religious experience and doctrinal views." (2)

Within a few months the chapel proved unstable because of poor materials and deficient workmanship and had to be closed because it was dangerous. Services were held in a building lent by Mr Cowper, the first licensee of the Mount Alexander Hotel. Protracted legal wrangles with the carpenter followed. Eventually another builder was contracted to execute the necessary work and the building was finally declared safe. (1 & 8)

The chapel was re-opened on Monday 19 April. (8) Mr Pitman, the pastor, spoke effectively and the prospects for the Independent cause, with Mr Pitman's improved health, were seen as very encouraging. (9) We do not know from what illness Mr Pitman had been suffering.

The Pitman house

It is not known where Mr Pitman lived when he first came to Chewton. On 17 February 1860

Frederick John Pitman bought Allotment 87, Section E, Chewton for L9/3/2. (10) The allotment is in the eastern part of Chewton in an area known in 1860 as Charcoal Gully. Now the street that runs past the house site is called Pitman Street. Although no written evidence has been found to establish that the street was named after Mr Pitman, it would seem obvious that it was. No house stands there now, but there are several old pepper trees on the site. Mr Pitman sold the block on 17 September 1877 to George Hallandal, a butcher, for L52/10/- . (11)

Leaving Chewton

According to the records of the Uniting Church Archives (16) Mr Pitman was pastor at Chewton from 1855-77 and at Yarrowonga from 1877-89. Yarrowonga is described as a "new station" and a relative reported that , while at Yarrowonga, Mr Pitman had sufficient funds to buy land on which to build a manse.

While in Chewton he had been active in having a church established at Sutton Grange. The PRO holds a letter from him to the Commissioner of Crown Lands and Survey, dated 21 March 1865, asking that a certain piece of land be put up for sale as soon as possible as it was wanted for the erection of an Independent church. (15) The land was granted and, when the church was built, Mr Pitman became the pastor at Sutton Grange as well as Chewton.

There was apparently no Independent church building at Yarrowonga when he arrived there.

The Congregational Year Book for 1906 (13) writes that the church was formed in 1887 which probably means that a church was built by that year. The same source reports that a W.S. Pearse was then pastor at Yarrowonga while Mr Pitman was resident without pastoral charge. After his death, the Year Book (14) described Mr Pitman as having been "for over half a century....one of the most devoted of our ministerial staff. For thirty-one years he was in the active ministry, first at Chewton and Sutton Grange, which churches he was instrumental in founding, and afterwards at Yarrowonga, at which he was the first settled minister."

The 1907 Congregational Year Book reports that in 1906 Mr Pitman had become the first member of the Ministers' Retiring Fund which apparently entitled him to L7/15/- per quarter. After his death, his nominee was paid L125/-/- from the fund.

Mr Pitman died on 13 February 1906, apparently after a long period of retirement, having left the ministry in ~~1989~~.

1889

Barbara James

Other

Mr O'Connor, of the Uniting Church Archives, told me that the Independents were independent in the sense of being self-governing, as were many of the non-conformist churches. (Note that Mr Pitman spoke at his ordination of his religious experience and doctrinal views which sounds independent in other ways.) The term "Congegational", Mr O'Connor said, was used only when such churches managed to agree together to set up an umbrella body. He also said that the Independent, Calvinist and Baptist churches could be either English or Welsh and that the Independent Chapel at Chewton was English.

This seems to fit with other things I've found. There were three Welsh churches at Forest Creek originally, the Calvinist ones at Wesley Hill and Donkey Gully and a Baptist one, I don't know where. At these churches at least some of the services were conducted in Welsh. This seems to have been very necessary early on as many Welsh migrants spoke only Welsh. Although there were some people with Welsh names important in the early days of the Welsh Independent Chapel, the majority seem to have had English names. Oliver Cromwell, I understand, had belonged to what he called the Independents.