

A History of the Baptist Church Archives, Queensland 1982-2012

By David Parker ©

The Archives is Born

The end of 2012 marks 30 years since work began on organising the historical records of the Baptist Union of Queensland. Rev Dr David Parker had worked with these records originally in 1979 in the course of his doctoral research and found them to be in a good state, but completely unorganised and only accessible by special arrangement with the Baptist Union office. So in December 1982, he volunteered his services to put them in order. On his initial contact, the records were in a cupboard in the ceiling of the BUQ offices which were then located in rented premises in The Wool Exchange Building, 69 Eagle St, Brisbane (now the site of Riparian Plaza and 111 Eagle St). In 1982, the BUQ had just moved to its own building at 225 Brunswick Street, Fortitude Valley; the records were in a strong room in the basement (primarily used as the printing workshop).

The most important items in the collection were the BUQ Minute books comprising the Executive, Council and Assemblies from the establishment of the Baptist Union (then Association) in 1877, and the key committees and departments; there were also the denominational Yearbooks from 1907 when they first appeared and sundry bundles of correspondence and other records. These were all more or less complete, and much of it was professionally bound into strong volumes. However the denominational newspaper, *The Queensland Baptist* (from 1881-88 known as *The Queensland Freeman*) had a 25 year gap up to 1951 (and it was not published 1913-22). Another significant gap was in the Minutes of the Home Mission around World War I. One other serious gap was *The Australian Baptist*, the national newspaper published since 1913, of which there were only odd issues. (Efforts in the late 1980s to obtain a full run from its office in NSW were unsuccessful, as did the hope of getting a microfilm version when it was done by the State Library of NSW—on account of the high cost involved.)

There was a good collection of photographs, many loose but some in attractive albums; a lot were unidentified. There were also many 35 mm colour slides of churches, people and events which had mostly come from the collections of the Home Mission Superintendents and the BUQ General Secretary.

There were some records of local churches but the churches themselves held the bulk of their own records, especially the first churches to be formed in Queensland - City Tabernacle (originally known as Wharf St), Ipswich and Jireh (in Fortitude Valley). The oldest items in the BUQ Archives were, however, documents from early days of Wharf Street. There were no records relating to the first two Baptist ministers in Brisbane, Rev Charles Stewart and Rev Charles Smith, although there were some relating to the third minister, Rev BG Wilson. However, extensive research on these three pastors in later years discovered documents and information in other locations sufficient to record their stories in some detail.

Archives space and access was always a problem with the basement location, and there was no office equipment such as photocopiers, phones or working facilities available. However, Dr Parker with the occasional assistance of members of the Baptist Historical Society of Queensland (established in 1984), listed the contents and began developing the operation of the Archives according to standard (albeit

simplified) archival procedures.

A set of rules for accessioning, indexing and use of the Archives was developed. However, on-going efforts to get the Baptist Union to set up a proper system of archiving its recent and new records were unsuccessful. Membership in the locally based Church Archivists' Society and access to its expertise and publications greatly assisted in the development of the Archives. There were gradual additions to the collection, and modest use by BUQ personnel, students, church and family history researchers. Dr Parker's position as Honorary Archivist was made official in 1987 when it was became part of the Annual BUQ appointments.

Relocation to 518 Brunswick St

In 1991 the BUQ announced it was going to relocate to larger premises at 518 Brunswick St, New Farm. The Executive Secretary, Lloyd Woodrow, indicated that he was keen to have adequate space and facilities for the Archives in the new building, including a display area. However, the initial proposal for the location of the Archives was again in the basement of the building where the print shop would operate. An inspection of the proposed area immediately revealed that it was subject to damp, noise and poor access, making it unacceptable.

It was anticipated that the move by the BUQ to the new building would take place in November 1991 so the BHSQ members made preparations to help pack the archival material. However, the purchase of the building was delayed, and the move did not take place until March 1992. BUQ staff carried out the boxing of the material, and it was placed in storage on the vacant 2nd floor of the new building. Dr Parker was able to sort the material into rough categories so that it could be used under difficult conditions by those who needed special access, including Dr Ken Manley of Melbourne working on his definitive history of Australian Baptists.

Fitting out of the new building took place over subsequent months and in mid-1992, it was announced that the second floor was to become the main BUQ office. The Archives material needed to be moved, and space was found on the 3rd floor where it was placed in storage once more, with access still only available to the most needy cases. It was expected that further fitting out and letting of the building would be finalised in succeeding months, allowing for the permanent organisation of the Archives. This process was also much delayed and by May 1993, the situation of the Archives had become critical. Access by researchers was limited, the material was in danger of physical damage due to the poor storage conditions; its security was also at risk, with cases of unauthorised use being noted.

Temporary Archives

With the situation so serious, an urgent appeal was made by the Archivist to the BUQ, resulting in extra space being made available on a pro-tem basis in the area where the material had been stored, together with desks, filing cabinets and very limited shelving. During June 1993, the Archivist, again with some help, began sorting, re-boxing and indexing the material which was contained in about 160 large archival boxes. The BHSQ organised an Open Day for 11 September 1993 during the annual BUQ Assembly to mark the reestablishment of the Archives. It was a disappointment that, apart from BHSQ members, there were no other visitors for this event! However, the Archives were again ready for use in adequate, if spartan conditions, and there was the expectation still that better facilities would be available when letting arrangements for the building were fully finalised.

In the ensuing period of time, additional space and shelving was obtained. A spacious reading room was part of the arrangement, at least until it was required by the BUQ for commercial purposes. An electronic catalogue for the Archives using a small privately-owned laptop computer was developed, and the protocols enhanced and more accessions took place. Although the facilities were much better than had

ever been available before, there was no copying, phone or computer access but help was offered by the missionary organisation, Interserve, also on the same level, thanks to the interest and support of its director, Rev Keith Applegate.

Collection Developments and Policy

There were also additions to the collection. Some of the new material included records of early churches; some were closing and so mostly their records were obtained, but some continuing churches transferred unwanted records, say, their first 100 years, in the interests of better preservation. Early churches were also covered by one of the activities of the BHSQ when it obtained a Baplink grant to microfilm records (minutes and roll books) up to about 1920. This supplemented the microfilms of *The Queensland Freeman/Baptist* which had been done much earlier by the State Library of Queensland. The other major group of accessions were more Minutes of the Baptist Union and its various departments. There were still no formalised archiving procedure within the Baptist Union administration, but the most important records were being safely archived. Most of the backlog of departmental records was made up during this time.

Local church histories were also added as they became available, although this was largely on an ad hoc basis as churches did not always pass on copies of their publications. One of the most useful additions to the indexes was a simplified listing of all major articles in *The Queensland Baptist* (totalling almost 7,000), which proved to be of enormous help in locating information. It was only superseded when searchable electronic scans were made years later.

The collection policy focused on the denominational records with an effort made to ensure that all relevant material from the top level of the Baptist Union was transferred to the Archives in a timely fashion. Furthermore, an attempt was made to fill any gaps in the collection, and to ensure that records of the various BUQ departments were also placed in the Archives. There was no intention of duplicating the holdings of the theological college library in general Baptist heritage areas, or to collect inter-state or Australian denominational records. Also the larger departments of the BUQ with staff and offices of their own were expected to look after their own records.

It was agreed that local churches records would not be actively sought out of consideration for the principle of the independence of the local church, but also because of the restricted space available in the Archives and the voluntary nature of its operation. Local church material was received only if the church was going out of operation, or if the church was not able to care for the material properly. Questions of ultimate ownership of such material were not completely resolved at the time.

The weakest section of the Archives was personal information about ministers, church leaders and members, where the only worthwhile sources (apart from their official files) related to those who were particularly prominent and therefore warranted a biographical record when they took up or concluded a position or an obituary at their death. Birth, death, burial and marriage records were virtually non-existent.

Good contact was maintained with other local church archives and with Baptist archives in other states. Through his membership in the Baptist World Alliance Heritage Commission, Dr Parker was also able to maintain contact with people and institutions overseas. One member (and later chair) of BHSQ with his wife, Eric and Rosemary Kopittke, were well known experts in the field of family history with specialisation in the German migration; this was particularly helpful to Queensland Baptist work with its unique heritage of German Baptist life.

The Baptist Archives was able to concentrate on the care of denominational and other church records and in providing information and access to documents as required for administrative, legal, historical and family reasons. It was not caught up in matters which often plagued other similar bodies related to indigenous mission stations and children in church orphanages due to the absence of these activities from

Queensland Baptist history. Increasing concerns of privacy matters within the Australian community did not have much impact on the Baptist Archives. However one issue that began to appear was the handling of digital records, but no special action was taken during this period.

Back to the Basement

The operation of the Archives on the 3rd floor level of 518 Brunswick Street gradually became a stable and efficient service, even if the conditions were not ideal, and space was fast becoming a problem again. However, the area was in a section of the building let to tenants and its future was therefore always dependant on commercial considerations. A sudden end to this phase of operation occurred late in 1997 when the administration decided to put the 3rd floor to other uses. This meant another move for the Archives. The place selected was the originally proposed location, the basement, but it would need extensive modification to overcome the problems it had as a site for the Archives. During the work, the Archives were closed for an extended period - from December 1997 to May 1998 - during which the records were again in storage, where they were inaccessible and under considerable risk to their physical condition and security.

One of the welcome additions in the new location was a large compactus, comprising 15 bays, each containing 7 shelves. This provided considerable extra space for the material, but the old boxes were now so badly damaged that they had to be replaced. This meant re-boxing all of the material into smaller boxes suitable for the compactus shelving, and re-indexing of the entire collection. The whole process was slow which meant that the Archives were once again closed for an extended period to all but the most pressing of cases.

Although there was more shelf space than before, the room was far smaller, and there was minimal space for desks and tables. Worst of all, there was a very large air-conditioning fan in one corner; it could not be controlled, and it drowned the room in a continual stream of noise. Access to the room was uninviting at best, and it was remote from the main office and any copier or other support; there were no facilities anywhere near. The new room was reasonably useful for storage of the records, but was completely unsatisfactory for patrons and visitors, and even for the Archivist's regular work. This meant that as much of the Archivist's activities, especially responding to queries, was carried on off-site, and also increasing reliance was placed on digital files and indexes.

Nevertheless, the process of re-boxing, and re-indexing continued over the next year; usage was sluggish and there were additional accessions to the collection. One reason for the slowdown in accessions was that there had been extensive changes to the organisational structure of the Baptist Union which reduced drastically the number of departments and consequently, the number of records being created and ultimately needing to be archived. The end result of this process of change, which took place over many years, resulted in most of the business being channelled through the central executive (or Board) and administrative arms of the BUQ, and the creation of semi-independent charter groups (the college, camping and community services) which were able to care for their own records. The microfilming project was resumed as funds and time again became available, resulting in the filming of most of the records up to about 1920 from the denomination and the earliest churches.

The re-boxing of the material had been barely completed when a potentially serious threat arose. In the early morning hours of 16 March 1999 vandals set a fire in the electrical equipment area adjacent to the Archives. There was no direct damage from flames, but soot and smoke permeated the room which caused extensive problems for the archival material. A State Library conservator was called and recommended professional cleaning of the entire collection! This process was took four weeks and was covered by insurance.

Continuing efforts to upgrade the archiving protocols across the BUQ organisation did not meet with any practical success but there was good personal support from the Executive Secretary, Lloyd Woodrow,

and Office Manager, Nigel Patterson. Even the attention given to the importance of the denomination's heritage by the highly influential Triennial Review, reporting in 2000, did not result in any increased interest in or support for the Archives. It was hoped that the forthcoming sesqui-centenary of Baptist witness in the state to be celebrated in 2005 might see greater interest.

Another move – Gaythorne

After less than 10 years at the New Farm site, the Baptist Union administration began looking around for a larger building to accommodate its growth. An important part of the plan, first mooted late in 2002, was to bring all the main operations of the Baptist Union (including the theological college) together on the same site. This was a promising development for the Archives, with the hope of much improved facilities and much closer relationships with other elements of the Baptist Union. As far back as 1969, at an early meeting of the original BUQ historical committee, the college offered to store the denominational historical records, but that offer was not taken up at the time; there were to be no developments at the new site either.

The new site was the former campus of the Australian Catholic University at 53 Prospect Road, Gaythorne. There were four buildings on the property, and the initial proposal for the Archives made in mid-2003 was on the top level of Building 2. Despite earlier indications, the floor space was actually slightly less than at the New Farm facility (down from 41 to 39 sq metres); furthermore, it was square and therefore not able to take the compactus as it was, even if the floor was considered strong enough. More seriously, the room was on the north east corner of the building with two sides full of windows, meaning that heat and light—the great enemies of documents—would be a huge problem, even with air-conditioning and blinds. Being on the top floor with complicated access from the building's entrance was also a disadvantage.

It was expected that the relocation would take place around 2003, but once again there were extensive delays. In the meantime, another much better location was made available. It was on the lowest level of Building 4, with easy access to the outside. It was an L-shaped room, measuring 11.5 x 7.3 metres, giving a floor space of 56 sq m; although one section had a large pillar in the middle, there was plenty of room to fit the compactus intact, and room for other storage units. There was also room for tables providing plenty of working space. The room was set up with the compactus, open shelving and storage cupboards, four filing cabinets, two stationery cupboards, a double sized table, a computer stand, and a reception desk.

Delays meant that the move from the old site did not take place until early June 2005. This had been an extremely busy time leading up to the publication of the new 150th anniversary history of the Baptist work in Queensland, *Pressing on with the Gospel*, which required a great deal of work by the Archivist and others. The relocation involved more than 425 boxes of material, packed by the Archivist, some BHSQ members and with the last minute assistance of some BUQ staff. The initial unpacking was completed quickly, but it took about nine months to set up completely in the new location. During the time of packing and relocation, limited Archival services were maintained.

The collection was augmented at the time and over the period following with quite a lot of additional material as various items were 'discovered' by BUQ departments. One item of particular interest was the first Minute book of the Clifford House Aged Persons' Home committee dating from the late 1940s; that organisation had since grown to become the very large Queensland Baptist Care. However, some items that had found their way to the Archives in the move were extraneous and removed. There were also other additions to the collection which were part of the normal activities of the Archives. One of these was a fully searchable scanned version of *The Queensland Freeman* on CD-ROM, by arrangement with Archive CD Books, South Australia. Later, extensive runs of *The Queensland Baptist* and the BUQ Yearbooks were also added, making this one of the most useful additions to the Archives, and the commencement of its digital archival program.

Enhanced Operation

In its new location, the Archives were better equipped than ever before. There was now a phone, and a computer, (the initial basic unit replaced after a short time), with connections to the BUQ network and the internet. A simple photocopier made its appearance (it too was replaced with a better one in due course). The single air-conditioning unit (also replaced eventually) was supplemented with an extra unit to provide a more effective operation. However, in the summer of 2008-09, a serious problem arose with humidity resulting in the infestation of mould. A de-humidifier was installed to control the problem, and later a consultant was brought in to inspect the facility. The report indicated that the room was basically satisfactory but advised relocating the de-humidifier to improve its impact, resulting in much better control of the problem.

There was a steady flow of accessions from both the denominational offices and also from the churches and other sources. In particular, important Minutes and other records were accessioned, requiring some additional storage in the form of filing and stationery cabinets. In 2011, an anonymous donor presented the Archives with an elegant glass fronted display cabinet for some of the earliest records as well as the most recently bound volumes. Interesting items still occasionally appeared – including a World War I Honour Board from Jireh which had been rescued from a woodworker's shop, and some missionary documents which had survived the fire at that church after it had closed.

The continual problem of developing a set of archiving protocols for the Baptist Union looked like being resolved in 2007, but the process was suddenly terminated due to staff changes. The matter was raised again by the Archives in 2010, which led to the in-principle approval by the Queensland Baptists Board, and the authorisation of an audit of archiving procedures throughout the denominational organisation. This was carried out late in 2011 and revealed a mixed situation, where some departments and groups were coping satisfactorily but others were struggling. The most important trend however was the rapid move to digital records, including minutes and reports and especially correspondence in the form of emails. There appeared to be no standard approach to archiving this material, some of which seemed to be in danger of being lost or at least, being inaccessible; management of these records was problematic. The recommendation then was to develop a full digital archives plan.

The Archives' own indexes had been digital from the beginning, and it had already been accumulating a considerable body of digital material in the form of images, papers and reports, books, and data. Using advice and information from many sources, the Archives began to organise its material into a mature Digital Archive. An interesting development at the same time was an approach by one of the churches to fully digitise its own records, most of the early ones having been stored in the Archives for many years.

The work of the Archives in its fourth home, at Gaythorne, was also greatly enhanced by the addition of regular volunteer staff. In 2008 Mr R W (Bill) Hughes, formerly of Canberra, retired to Brisbane and immediately offered his services. With a legal background, he soon organised the extensive photographic collection and then went on to begin collecting a full dossier of historical data about churches on the north side of Brisbane. His research and writing skills, already evidenced by books he had produced, found a good outlet in a series of projects on lesser known churches in Brisbane including the elusive Edward Street Church from the 1860s and the Deagon Mission Church. When Baptist Heritage Qld began its project on the history of Baptists in Central Queensland, he researched several of the churches from that area and produced separate monographs on some of them. Other projects have also included a history of the Senior Girls' Missionary Union in Queensland and a biography of Rev William Moore, one of the earliest pioneers. An important bonus from these projects is the establishment of biographical database aimed at containing basic details of Queensland Baptist people, which soon grew to over 700 entries, and expanding continuously.

Another welcome addition to the team was Miss Anne Cameron, formerly of NSW, who had spent

many years working in a senior position in the office of the Baptist Union of NSW. She brought wide experience of denominational life and the ability to research and assemble data. Her projects have included the updating of the details of Queensland churches, Presidents and appointees of the Baptist Assembly, as well as numerous other tasks.

The Vision after 30 Years

The new site also brought more contact with various arms of the BUQ located at Gaythorne, and more awareness of its activities. Regular publication by the QB magazine of news items from the Archives increased its profile amongst the churches, with some readers saying that the Archives page was the most interesting section of all! There was a steady stream of enquiries, sometimes from surprising sources. A stall at the annual Conventions, and an occasional presentation in the form of a book launch or other announcement also helped to keep the work of the Archives and Baptist Heritage Qld before the denomination. There was often encouraging feedback, but as the Archives turned 30, there was still much work to be done in collecting, caring for and sharing the historical records of Baptist in Queensland and promoting the importance of records and their management and use.

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