

## Sunday School History – St. John's

Sunday schools were initiated throughout England in the 18<sup>th</sup> century to provide basic lessons in literacy to poor working children (on their only day of leisure) who otherwise would receive no formal education. The Sunday School Society was established in London in 1785 by William Fox, a Baptist philanthropist, formalising rules, providing religious tracts and funding. In 1799 the Religious Tract Society was founded to publish materials written by evangelical Anglicans and nonconformists for use in these schools.

The Sunday School movement quickly spread to the colonies, reaching Van Diemen's Land in the early 1820s, by which time government-assisted free schools [sometimes referred to as "national" schools] were provided in settled areas, although attendance was not compulsory. On his appointment to St John's in 1828, one of the duties of the rector, the Revd William Henry Browne, LLD, was to supervise and inspect these schools in Launceston and George Town. Having arrived from Ireland, he would have been familiar with the Church of Ireland Sunday School Society which was founded in 1809.

The origins of Sunday School at St. John's can be traced back to just 5 years after the church building was constructed, and little more than 25 years after the town was established. The first known references to a Sunday School at St John's feature in the journal of Chaplain Browne who wrote on 7<sup>th</sup> November 1830 that he '*gave notice for Sunday School being opened this day week*'. By 28<sup>th</sup> November he reported that '*the number at Sunday School increased to 12*'. There were further such journal entries in early 1831, then no mention until on 6<sup>th</sup> November 1831, '*today the SS (sic) was opened by Mr Dowling and my brother*', 16<sup>th</sup> November, '*Gave Mr Dowling some books and cards for SS*' and 20<sup>th</sup> November '*Visited the SS, it is getting along well*'.

According to the [Australian Dictionary of Biography – Henry Dowling](#), Henry Dowling's eldest son, Henry Dowling junior (1810-1885), printer, publisher, bank manager and philanthropist, was born at Gloucester, and educated at the Free Grammar School, Colchester. He arrived in Hobart in September 1830, and was employed at the *Hobart Town Courier* office under [James Ross](#). He soon went to Launceston, joined the *Advertiser* owned by [John Pascoe Fawkner](#) and in 1831 became its editor and publisher. On 10 February 1832 he opened Launceston's first Sunday school with five boys and three girls at St John's Church. There on 6 November 1833 he married Eliza Tayspill, newly arrived from Colchester; they had seven sons and three daughters.

An article published in the Launceston *Examiner* in 1890 outlines the founding of the Sunday School movement. [LAUNCESTON SUNDAY SCHOOLS](#) The Rev. Chas. Price supplies the following interesting reminiscence : The following will be of much interest to many who are now assisting in Sunday schools. It is copied from the *Launceston Advertiser* of Wednesday, April 11, 1832: At a meeting held in the National school-room, Cameron-street, Launceston, on Wednesday, March 21, 1832, George Yeoland, Esq., A.C.E., in the chair, it was resolved unanimously

1. *That this meeting, impressed with a sense of the benefits resulting from Sabbath -schools, have great pleasure in hearing of the establishment of a school in Launceston, for the gratuitous education of the young upon religious principles.*
2. *That it appears desirable that support be given to the first promoters of this object by the constitution of an acting committee and election of officers for the general management and direction of the said institution.*
3. *That the following gentlemen pledge themselves to perform the duties of a committee, etc., until a general meeting of subscribers shall take place:-Committee – Rev. W. H. Brown, L.L.D.; Dr. Westbrook; Messrs. T. Bartley, St. John Brown, Champion, Dalrymple, J. W. Gleadow, W. H. Gough, R. C. Gunn, H. Jennings, H. Prialux, D. Robertson, Whitcomb, Wilson, G. Yeoland, A.C.S.; treasurer, Mr T. Sherwin; secretary and superintendent, Mr H. Dowling.*
4. *That the institution shall be supported by annual subscriptions (not exceeding 10s) and collections, together with the donations or legacies of any who may be disposed to contribute to its support. Subscribers of 10s per annum to be entitled to vote at the annual meetings of the Society.*

The building used for the first Sunday School stood on part of the land later occupied by Holy Trinity Church, and had Methodist origins. [Eric Ratcliff reported in 2009](#), "*After the failure of the first Methodist congregation in the town, the government took over the chapel and used it for an elementary school. As the schoolroom for old Holy Trinity Church, it lasted long enough to be photographed.*"

On 16<sup>th</sup> March 1832, Browne had attended '*a meeting of Gentlemen in the evening assembled to form a society to render the SS more extensively useful*' and on 22<sup>nd</sup> March remarked '*attended mtg (sic) of SS*

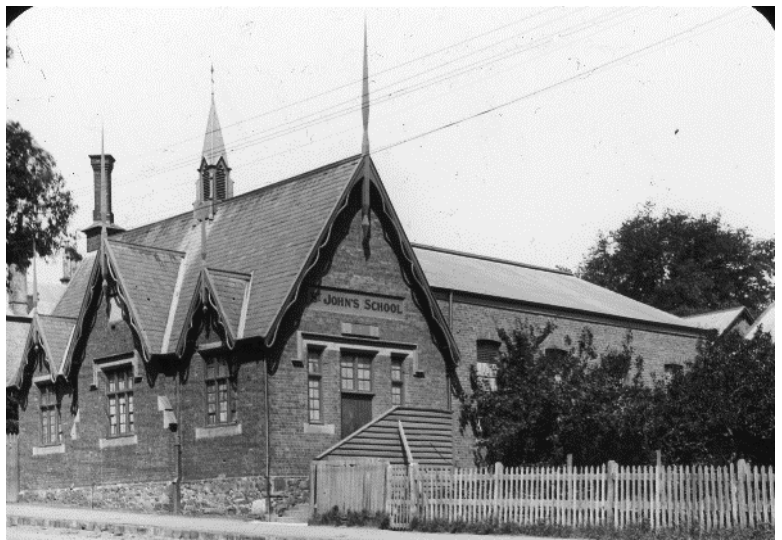
*committee*’ which was made up of worthy citizens of Anglican and Nonconformist persuasion. This meeting formalised the Launceston Sunday School Society.

During the following year, however, there was some contention between the rector and the nonconformists. On 30<sup>th</sup> September, *‘was much annoyed to find that the Superintendent of our SS [Henry Dowling jnr] prevented children attending our church as usual but took them in spite of the muster to the Dissenting place’*, and 1<sup>st</sup> October *‘Paid several visits to the parents of the Children at the national school respecting their being taken to the dissenting place of Worship. Called a meeting of the Committee specially for the evening where I made a full statement of the interference prefacing with a full statement of the liberal principles upon which she (sic) has ever acted towards all classes of Xtians, the result was that the Children for the future should be taken to the place of worship to which the parents belonged.’*

The issue obviously continued to fester as on 20 June 1833 Browne *‘called on Mr Dowling according to his wishes to effect a reconciliation and stop the hostile proceedings between the [Sunday] schools.’* After further negotiations, at last on 27 July, he *‘wrote to the Secretary of the SS assenting to their proposition to re-unite with us’*.

A wide-ranging talk on [Early Launceston History](#) given by Ernest Whitfeld in 1897, reports, *“In 1832 our first Sunday school was started, in what is now Trinity school-room, by Mr. Henry Dowling, Mrs. Theodore Bartley being the first lady teacher. In 1833 the first anniversary took place, and the children were all taken over to Mr. Fawkner’s Cornwall Hotel, and regaled with roast beef and plum pudding.”*

On Wednesday 3 May 1843, Dr Browne officially opened St John’s Church Sunday School building in Elizabeth Street with an address to his parishioners. Planning for the Sunday school had started in 1841 and a hall was built adjacent to St John’s Church for the purpose.<sup>72</sup> The local committee of the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge and Propagating the Gospel provided £40 towards its construction but it was reported that £50 was still owing.<sup>73</sup> In the report of the Society in July 1843, it noted that the Sunday schools connected with the Church of England “continue to be productive of great good among all classes.” St John’s Sunday School had nearly 100 scholars and an average attendance of between 60 and 80, “who are under the diligent superintendence of 14 efficient teachers: Holy Trinity School, which is not in so populous a part of the town, is being attended by only 53 scholars. The usefulness of both schools is grievously impeded by the want of teachers.”



*The original Sunday School building, taken around 1900. The building was used as a government day school for a period in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century.*

L.S. Bethell’s *Story of Port Dalrymple* (1957) gives a little more of the background. The organisation was called *The Launceston Sunday School Society*, with Dowling as superintendent, Mrs Bryant Bartley as teacher and Henry Priaux as secretary. The society was “undenominational”, and after starting in February with 9 children, had an enrolment of over 100 by the end of the year. Every Sunday morning, the children marched two by two to St. John’s Church. Dowling was followed after 4 years by Peter Jacob, and he gave way to William Henty. In 1835, the Wesleyans (Methodists) opened a Sunday School in Canning Street, soon transferred to Paterson Street. In 1842, St. John’s schoolroom was built to take the overflow, and in 1843, it was decided that the children and teachers of every parish should attend their parish schools. This marked the end of the *Launceston Sunday School Society*, and thereafter, the Presbyterians, Baptists and Independents formed the *Van Diemen’s Land Sunday School Union* which had been formed in Hobart in late 1840.

The last related entry in Chaplain Browne’s journal was on 19<sup>th</sup> February 1845, but up until then he continued to refer to Sunday Schools at St John’s, also at the Penitentiary and Female Factory and an Adult Sunday School. Each year he invited an Anglican priest from a northern parish to preach a sermon at St John’s to raise funds for the Sunday School. On 18<sup>th</sup> December 1842, *‘Mr Bishton preached on behalf of the SS Society, collected £26..7..6d’*. He made frequent references to correspondence with the British and Foreign Bible Society and the Sunday School Society in London requesting funds for Bibles and tracts.

There is reference to meetings of Sunday School teachers. On 3<sup>rd</sup> May 1843, he opened the new Sunday School building in Elizabeth Street, adjacent to the church and on 18 December 1844, ‘*Attended Anniversary of the Church Sunday School for children of which upward of 150 after examination proceeded to a festival at the Horticultural Garden.*’

Further research is needed on the development of the Sunday School during the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but the “anniversary” was a major event that continued into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. We are given a glimpse of the progress of the Sunday School in an [Examiner article published 24<sup>th</sup> November 1874](#), which publishes details of a sermon given by the Revd. Marcus Blake Brownrigg on the occasion of the anniversary services. *At the conclusion of the sermon he gave some little information as to the working expenses of the school, which he said amounted to about £40 a year. There were over two hundred scholars on the books, so that the institution was carried on at less than a penny per scholar per Sunday. He instanced this as showing the economy that was practised, though he considered the factor of pounds, shillings, and pence should never be allowed to enter into the calculation of the good done by Sunday schools. The children were seated in the chancel, and at both services rendered the responses and chants occurring in the service, together with seven or eight special hymns most beautifully, and so faithfully had they been trained, that though the organ was at the farther end of the church and could be of little or no assistance, time and tune were kept with remarkable precision. The collections amounted to £38 10s 2d, of which only £10 was taken in the evening, though the congregation on that occasion was by far the larger.*’

A correspondent to the Examiner, writing under the pseudonym An Outsider, expressed their delight at the attendance at the Sunday Schools’ Exhibition in Launceston on 4 July 1880. They said there were 1,800 smiling children, well clothed, and healthy- looking, accompanied by 200 teachers, “whose self-denial and devotion to instruction speaks for itself to their credit.”

Leadership of the Sunday School was evidently held in high regard, and there are several memorial plaques and donated items giving thanks to some of the individuals and families involved. Some came from quite wealthy families, or were prosperous business owners. This includes the [Lakin](#) family, town surveyor and superintendent of waterworks [George Morgan Babington](#), [William John Genders](#) and [Matthew Edward Robinson](#).

Two marble plaques were erected in honour of some of those early leaders. In the adjoining Colonial Hotel, there is a small alleyway behind what was once the original Sunday School building, where a plaque in memory of George Babington and Frederick Lakin was erected in the 1890s. A similar plaque was erected in the now-demolished part of the old Sunday School in memory of William John Genders who died in 1901. Other memorials such as that of the [Murray sisters](#), mentioned their roles both as Sunday School teachers and choir members.

The Brownrigg family was also well-represented in the Sunday School. [Harold Blake Brownrigg](#), son of former rector Canon Marcus Blake Brownrigg, was a teacher, and then superintendent, of the Sunday School. His wife Louisa Mary Brownrigg (née Jones) was in charge of the intermediate part of the Sunday School in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and her daughter Sybil became a teacher in the kindergarten section. In later years, Sybil Brownrigg became superintendent of the senior Sunday School, also continuing into the 1970s.

In the 1990s, an elderly parishioner, [Mrs. Elsie Jessop](#) recalled that during her childhood before World War I, when the Sunday School children went into the church, they would go upstairs to the old “convict” gallery and sit on the narrow, uncomfortable benches built after the convicts ceased to attend St John’s. The children would lean on the railing and look down at the “grand” people below, ladies always in their ‘Sunday best’ with bonnets. The children of the rich did not attend Sunday School with the poorer classes!

The Sunday School movement remained very strong at St. John’s for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It provided generations of children with the basics of the Christian faith. The Sunday School consisted of three divisions, senior, intermediate and kindergarten. While the kindergarten section had a different program from the older classes, Sunday School was generally quite strict and examinations held to measure progress. The main hall was set out with tables, under strict supervision with forms placed around. The Sunday School building, now mostly demolished catered for large classes as well as parish activities. The remaining front section has been incorporated into the present Colonial Motor Inn.

The serious nature of the lessons was offset by the annual picnics, also recalled by Mrs. Jessop; “*Sunday school picnics were grand occasions. Four or five open horse drawn buses would line up in St. John Street, and all the children would go on them and away they would go, along Elphin Road cheering and yelling, on the way to the showgrounds. At the showgrounds, flags would mark the place for each class, and each child would be given a bun and a mug of ginger beer when they first arrived. Activities would continue until lunchtime, and then the Sunday School bell would ring. Children would then sit down, and boxes of*



sandwiches and meat pies would be brought around, with more ginger beer and a bag of lollies. Sports and other interesting activities would fill the afternoon, with the teachers entering fully into the races and other amusements. Parents would be invited to attend afternoon tea, and the children would return to the church in the horse-drawn buses. These picnics took place on Saturdays. Later, train excursions took the picnics to Rocherlea or the Mowbray racecourse; then completely out of town, and at Evandale showgrounds.”

(See also [1900 Sunday School Picnic photo gallery](#))

Elsie Jessop (née Kiddle) herself became a leader in the Sunday School, first as a teacher in the “kindergarten” section, and going on to become superintendent of that section for a number of years up to her marriage in 1935. During that time, she recruited her older sister, [Eleanor Jane Elizabeth Kiddle](#), as a teacher for the older kindergarten boys, and Miss Kiddle took over as superintendent – a role that she held until the early 1980s.



*Overcoats and hats were very much part of church attire for Sunday School children in the late 1950s.*

Sunday School children were encouraged to bring a coin to be put in the curious [tower-shaped donation box](#) which was passed around in the kindergarten section through the 1950s and even later. Children at the time were given to believe that it represented an African man, but close examination will reveal the long hair and moustache of a European warrior! This moneybox would be passed around in one direction, and a [battered silver container](#) in the other, and the children would sing,  
*"Hear the pennies dropping! Listen while they fall;  
Ev'ry one for Jesus, He will get them all,"* with actions during the song. No doubt the coins made the appropriate noise when dropped into the metal container. [Hand bells](#) used in the kindergarten and

main sections of the Sunday School are now part of our museum collection.

Of interest is that Canon William Greenwood was keen to promote the work of Sunday Schools across the Anglican churches, and seems to have initiated the [Church of England Sunday School Teachers Association](#) in the mid 1930s.

During the final decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Sunday Schools gradually declined, along with the general trend in church attendances, reflecting an era where motor vehicles allowed much greater mobility, and recreational options replaced the social aspect of church attendance.

Archdeacon Jerrim included a chart in his report for 1969 that showed declining numbers at nearly all of St John's parish organisations. Sunday school attendances had dropped from over 200 in 1960 to 65 and Youth Fellowship from 110 to only 10.

In the September 1973 edition of St John's *Parish Messenger*, Revd Hugh Girvan raised the need for more helpers in the Sunday school, choir and Girls Friendly Society. "We do not lack children," he said, "We do lack those who will make the time to help them for Christ's sake. We do not lack a good organ or organist (we have one of the best of each in Australia), but we do lack those who are willing to be trained to lead our worship."

In the early 1980, Church Army officer, Sister Jan Syme, was appointed to the staff of St. John's, with a particular brief to build ministry to children and young families. This was a time when the rector of the day, Ernest Horth, was keen to move Sunday School from the



*Sunday School kindergarten children and teachers circa 1983*

somewhat rigid patterns of past decades, into a more modern approach, and long-serving and ageing leaders were encouraged to retire. She established a holiday outreach program, KLOMP Club (Kids Love our Mission Program), which continued for some years after her tenure. Young parishioners Robert and Karen Deavin took on leadership of the Sunday School in the late 1980s, and were effective in recruiting other young leaders as teachers.

By the early 2000s, the need for a paid ministry to children and youth was again recognised, and Church Army officer Nathan Donnelly was appointed in 2002. His tenure was not renewed, and it was not until 2005, when Dianne Illingworth was recruited into the role, that the initiative for paid staff really brought results. Her enthusiasm and ability to recruit a number of volunteers across various age groups led to remarkable growth in children's ministry. The Sunday School was re-branded as *Stepping Stones*, and with the young children came a new influx of young families. By 2009, Dianne and her husband Mark became parents, and Tanya Socorro took on the role, continuing until 2015. She was able to successfully combine being a parent of some of the children in the ministry, with effective leadership, again recruiting key helpers to assist with the ministry.



*Tanya Socorro and the Sunday School children in 2010*

Anja Legg was employed, at first full-time, then part time, to continue the ministry until late 2019. At this time, the ministry was again re-branded, becoming very simply *Kids' Church*. After the hiatus of pandemic lockdowns, Revd Ed Kavanaugh and Lachie Unwin took on the leadership, with Ed stepping down around 2023. Lachie continued until 2024, when Claire Keating was employed in the role. The situation at that time was similar to that of recent years – a paid worker who is able to recruit key helpers seems to be the key to active and ongoing ministry to children and young people, but the core message – bringing the Good News of Jesus into young lives, remains the same as it was from the 1830s – nearly 200 years of Sunday School.