

# History of CBC

By Ailsa Thompson

## The Story Begins

European settlement in New South Wales commenced as a penal colony when the First Fleet, under the command of Captain Arthur Phillip, sailed into Port Jackson (Sydney Harbour) on 26th January, 1788, having left England eight months earlier. On board the eleven small ships were 586 men, 192 women, 13 children as well as 695 officials, marines and sailors. It was not until 1792 that the first free settlers arrived in Sydney.



Pitt Street, Sydney, About the time the Baptist Church was opened

## Provision of Religion

The denominational affiliation of the first fleters, and the early inhabitants, is not known. It was not until the 1828 census that provision was made for "religion", and then the only distinction was between Protestants and Roman Catholics. Baptists were first recorded separately in 1871.

Some Baptists had arrived in Sydney by the 1830's and the first record of a Baptist meeting was on

24th April, 1831 when Rev. John McKaeg, an eccentric Scottish preacher, conducted a worship service in the Long Room of the Rose and Crown Inn on the corner of King and Castlereagh Streets. The first service of Believers' Baptism was held in Woolloomooloo Bay on 12th August, 1832, a source of ribald amusement to the vulgar crowd who gathered.

The assumption that a Baptist Church had been formed in borne out by the request to the Baptist Missionary Society in London for a Pastor and, in response, Rev. John Saunders arrived in Sydney

on 1st December, 1834. Building operations commenced on 26th November, 1835 on Crown Land in Bathurst Street granted in 1832. The Bathurst Street Baptist Church opened on 23rd September, 1836 having cost the modest sum of 1,400 pounds (\$2,800).

An English Baptist publication reported "Baptist brethren who little thought of living to see the day when a Baptist chapel should be erected in this colony, were, after twenty, thirty or even forty years sojourn, much gratified by the business of the day, while those lately arrived looked forward to

this building as a religious home to themselves and their descendants”.

It was upon the arrival of Rev. John Saunders, and the ministry over the following 100 years at Bathurst Street Baptist Church of thirteen Pastors that the story of Central Baptist Church begins.

## Story of CBC Begins

Rev. John Saunders was born into an influential London family, whose motto was “Nothing without God”. He studied law and rejected an opportunity to stand for Parliament. At the age of nineteen, he felt drawn to missionary service in India with the Baptist Missionary Society. However, it was finally to Australia that he and his wife, Elizabeth, sailed on

July 27, 1834 after a dangerous and often miserable journey. He was often ill and exhausted, and his wife was ill for most of the journey. Like many others, he was enraptured by the breathtaking beauty of Sydney Harbour.

Aboard the ship “George Hibberd”, he served as Chaplain to the female convicts. The Captain of the ship paid testimony to the excellent surgeon on board, and to the most excellent and worthy man who has come over as a Baptist missionary, John Saunders. His kind attention to the unfortunate criminals has been unceasing, and many of them I hope will retain the grateful remembrance of his kindness to them. Some of them, who when they came on the ship could neither read nor write, have left well capable of doing both.

It was providential that John and Elizabeth Saunders did sail on

the “George Hibberd”, as the ship on which they were to sail was wrecked while endeavouring to enter Sydney Harbour. John Saunders wrote: “Here let me pause and adore the Divine Mercy. The owners and agents did all they could to get me on that vessel. She was dashed to atoms”.

John Saunders affirms his peace of mind and the conviction that he is in the Will of God; a conviction that was to sustain him for the thirteen years in the colony. He said:

**“I believe I have been sent here in answer to the prayers of good people in this colony, and to my own supplication for guidance”.**

He was scandalised by the barbarity of the convict system and pressed for the abolition of transportation. When the movement gathered momentum and 6,765 signatures were presented to the Governor, Rev. John Saunders was one of ten selected to deliver it.

The original Bathurst Street Baptist Church



## Years of Growth

The first 101 years of its history in the Bathurst Street building were years of growth, the Church pastored by fourteen dedicated men of talent and ability. There were some periods of decline but, generally speaking, such decline was due to circumstances beyond the control of the Church. The Church was strong in evangelism, missionary enterprise and outreach into the community.

## MINISTERS 1836 TO 1986



It was during the ministry of Rev. Wilfred Jarvis (father and father-in-law of Betty and Roy Gilchrist) that the Central Church enjoyed its most exciting and significant years. However, the major challenge facing the Church from 1935 was its future location. Here Dr. Jarvis proved to be an admirable leader.

## CBC on George Street

The New South Wales Government had decided to resume the Bathurst Street property for extensions to St. Andrew's Cathedral. A site on Church Hill, at the northern end of the city, was first proposed but rejected as being unsuitable. Then, a few days later, the George Street site was introduced. The eventual decision was to accept the offer, and to receive ten thousand pounds (\$20,000) toward building costs.

Baptists launched a campaign to

buy bricks for sixpence (5 cents). The construction costs of the building were eighteen thousand, six hundred and fifteen pounds (\$37,230) and a further five hundred pounds (\$1,000) for organ reconstruction. It was calculated that 420,000 bricks, 600 tons of concrete, 3,800 bags of cement and 6,910 tiles were used in the building.

The Opening Service on Saturday, 9th October, 1937 was a gala day for Baptists of the State. "A New Day has Dawned" claimed "The Australian Baptist" newspaper in its report. "For the first time in Baptist history, policemen were on duty to marshal the surging crowd of people. Trams slowed to a halt. Passengers in cars stared curiously".

Dr. Jarvis had proven not only a gift for evangelism, but also was an eloquent orator with an abundance of gifts including art, drama, music and a rich sense of humour. On 1st April, 1950, Dr. Jarvis submitted his resignation to the Church stating that "the time has come for me to make way for some other servant of God". His was the longest pastorate

in the history of the Church (1934 – 1951).

## Jarvis Centre

Over the years new ventures were commenced – a Christian Workers' Training College was established with weekly classes of 182, a property at 627 George Street was purchased, a manse at Roseville and a new manse at Haberfield. The 627 George Street property was converted into "Palmer House", a hostel accommodating fifteen young men. This property was remodelled in recent years and is now known as the "Jarvis Centre". Several plans to redevelop the whole property were drawn up at various times but were not acted upon.

The Jarvis style ministry, with strong evangelistic preaching, continued in the thirteen years of Rev. Harry Rowe's ministry (1956 – 1976), but the 1970's saw a period of uncertainty in the Church's life. These years constituted a quest for identity.



Rev Harry Rowe

# The Chinese Ministry

Society was now changing rapidly and development in the southern end of the city was slow and even the famous Anthony Horderns store (situated on the World Square building site) closed its doors. The Haymarket area became unfashionable although, following the transfer of the Growers Market to Flemington, the development in Chinatown hinted at the way ahead for the Church's ministry in the closing decade of the century.

In 1964, a Chinese Sunday School met in the shop at Palmer House (Jarvis Centre) with approximately thirty in attendance each Sunday. This was, for many years, called "The Asian Department". This new ministry was destined to become the major ministry of Central.

Rev. Edward Yu (M.A. in Psychology from the University of New South Wales) is a living testimony to the effectiveness of Central's ministry. In 1962, a close friend invited him to a Church Service at Central. He became a Christian and was baptised on 17th March, 1963, a young student, aged nineteen. Subsequently, he became aware of a Call to the Christian ministry, studied at the Baptist Theological College (Morling College) from 1967 – 1970 and was ordained in 1971.

In March 1967, a translation facility was installed in the Church enabling the services to be translated into Cantonese and, subsequently, into Mandarin. Weekly daytime English classes were also commenced. The same year, the Asian Department had fifty members and conducted regular open air meetings in Dixon Street. From 1968 – 70, Pastor Edward Yu was a part-time assistant, serving with the Asian Department as he studied for the ministry. The 5pm English

service was replaced by Cantonese around the late 1980s. In 1993, the Church commenced a separate Cantonese Service at 9 a.m. each Sunday whilst maintaining the 11 a.m. English Service. Subsequently, a separate Mandarin Service was commenced in 2003.

Rev. Edward Yu was invited by the Church to become an Associate Pastor, in a part-time capacity, in December 1977 and, in the following May, asked to become the Pastor, the position he held until 1994. In 1981, Rev. Frank Starr was appointed Assistant Pastor, part-time, a position he held until 1991.

Rev. David Tse was appointed Associate Pastor in 1996 and, later that year, as Pastor. He continues to serve as Senior Pastor, now the longest serving Pastor of the Church.

## The Asian Department in the 60s



Bulletin of the Official Opening of Asian Department on 13 September 1964



# Looking Ahead Into The Future

Many faithful servants of God have served the Church over the past 180 years as Pastors, Officers and Members, many of whom have served on world mission fields. What a story could be written concerning the dealings of God with His people, first at the Bathurst Street Church over 180 years at the Central Baptist Church.

Thus, the past is recalled, but the people of God must always look away to God's future. The past is to be remembered with gratitude, but the need of the present and the challenges of the future beckon. The Church is still "in the heart of Sydney" and still with the heart of the Gospel, and still for the hearts of the world.

The unfinished task which lies before us,

is no greater than

**THE UNLIMITED POWER OF GOD**

behind us.

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The Story of the Bathurst Street Church 1836 – 1937

Prepared by Mr. Roy Gilchrist (Life Deacon) – 165 years of CBC and updated by Miss Ailsa Thompson.

# The Professional and Personal Witness of Rev. John Saunders

Sydney, 1834-1847

Excerpts from The Inaugural John Saunders Lecture, delivered by Rod Benson at the Tinsley Institute, Sydney. (2008)  
summarised by Nathaniel Kong

## Background

The Reverend John Saunders is arguably the most outstanding colonial Australian Baptist minister. He stands in the shadow of other Protestant pioneers such as Samuel Edward Marsden (1765-1838) and John Dunmore Lang (1799-1878), but has no equal among nineteenth-century Baptists in New South Wales. Saunders was an outstanding preacher, a wise pastor, a strategic church planter, a supporter of world mission, and an exemplar of Christian social responsibility.

John Saunders was born on 7 October 1806 in London into an influential middle class Church of England family. His father, Ebenezer Saunders, was a city alderman, as was his father before him. The motto on their family crest was "Sans Dieu Rien" ("Nothing without God").

The young John Saunders was articled to a London attorney and became a solicitor. At the age of 17 he was baptized by immersion and admitted to the membership of the Baptist Church in Cold

Harbour Lane, Camberwell, under the ministry of the Rev. E. Steane. At the age of 19, Saunders began preparation for missionary service, making contact with the Baptist Missionary Society (BMS) in the hope of being sent to India. He planted Baptist churches at Mason Court, Shoreditch and Ball's Pond, and was minister of two London churches in Shacklewell and Stoke Newington. In 1834, at the age of 28, while minister at Stoke Newington, he declined an opportunity to enter Parliament.

## The Other Side of The World

On the other side of the world, in a bustling colonial convict settlement called Sydney Town, the eccentric Revd John McKaeg was fighting a losing battle to maintain his brief and unofficial Baptist ministry, his sobriety and his freedom from debtor's prison. Some members of the fledgling congregation, consisting mainly of Particular Baptists and independent Protestants, felt compelled to write to the BMS seeking a more suitable pastor.



Constitutionally the BMS was committed to evangelism "through the heathen world," which did not necessarily include Australia, and it was under no obligation to pay his passage or stipend. Nevertheless, the BMS formally farewelled Saunders at its annual meeting in June 1834, he was "set apart for foreign service" at the Shacklewell Church on 2 July, and on 27 July Saunders and his wife of four months, Elizabeth ("Bessy") Willox, whom he affectionately called "wifey," sailed for Sydney aboard the *George Hibberd*, a 328-ton barque transporting 144 female convicts ("consigned servants") and 38 free passengers emigrating to Australia. Saunders was appointed Church of England chaplain to the women convicts for the duration of the voyage. He was 28 when he and



Rev. Saunders described people in Australia at the time were “so thin, so sunburnt and many of them so drunk – not a lady to be seen, hardly a woman. It appeared as if we had landed among a set of the most degraded and uncomfortable beings.” Yet it was to these people he believed he had been called.

Elizabeth first set foot on Australian soil at Sydney Cove on 1 December the same year.

Two weeks later he described the people he had encountered on Sydney streets as “so thin, so sunburnt and many of them so drunk – not a lady to be seen, hardly a woman. It appeared as if we had landed among a set of the most degraded and uncomfortable beings.” Yet it was to these people he believed he had been called, and in obedience to that divine call he quickly set about planning and organising his new antipodean ministry, recruiting and serving the diverse people of Sydney Town.

## The Ministry

The church prospered under Saunders’ ministry. He was apparently well liked and worked hard on a wide ministry front. In addition to regular Sunday services and fellowship meetings, Saunders took an

interest in Sunday School teaching, conducted twice each Sunday to a wide cross-section of the children of Sydney. In July 1843 there were 55 boys and 41 girls enrolled; by 2 January 1848, the day of Saunders’ departure, these had risen to 105 and 63 respectively.

As it grew, the Bathurst Street Church commenced Baptist works in other locations. [The Bathurst Street Church designed by architect and builder John Verge (1782-1861), duly opened on 23 September 1836, and seated up to 400 people. The property continued to serve the church until resumed by the NSW Government for redevelopment just over a century later.] As well as serving the needs of a rapidly growing metropolis (with a large influx of voluntary immigrants), Saunders had “a passion to reach the lonely settlers in New South Wales” and was concerned for “the destitute state of many parts of the colony, where brethren [i.e. fellow Baptists] had settled, as regards religious instruction.” Saunders and his church laid the foundations for

the growth of Baptist churches in these and other parts of the colony of NSW, an achievement that, along with his pioneering work at Bathurst Street, led future generations of NSW Baptists to consider the Bathurst Street Church as “the mother church of the denomination.”

Looking back after two years of ministry in Sydney, Saunders reflected that on arrival he had felt “unaided and alone.” Yet by 1842, at the age of 36, Saunders had clearly established his personal and professional standing in the community. He was “the leading Baptist of Sydney,” and had become, in the eyes of his peers, the leading Baptist of the Australian colonies. He exercised influence in Victoria, Tasmania and South Australia, visiting and corresponding with Baptist leaders, and recommending ministers to churches seeking pastoral settlements.

# Farewell a Great Minister

Ill health eventually led Saunders to resign from the church at the end of 1847 and return to England early the following year with his wife and daughter Elizabeth (later Lady Renwick), who had been born in Sydney. A few days before their departure, the church arranged a large public farewell at which the NSW Attorney-General, John

Hubert Plunkett, Q.C. presided. Saunders was presented with a substantial gift of £300, accompanied by an address conveying his supporters' gratitude for his "zealous and persevering services in the cause of temperance, and also of his efforts to promote the intellectual, social and moral well being of the community."



## A Life Testimony

From what we know of his life and ministry, in addition to his various Baptist activities, Saunders was active in the Bible and Tract Societies, the Auxiliary of the London Missionary Society, the Temperance Society, and the Benevolent Society.

► Benevolent Society the colony's leading charity, established in 1813, which had strong connections with the churches. The 1831 Annual General Meeting of the Society reported that, during the previous year, the Society had sheltered, fed and clothed 146 persons in the Benevolent Asylum, (a hospital for the terminally ill).

Saunders took a strong interest in:

- The welfare of Aboriginal people: His compassion for Aboriginal people is reflected in his correspondence. He was a founding member of the Sydney branch of the London-based Aborigines' Protection Society (an international human rights organisation founded in 1837 to protect the health and well-being and the sovereign, legal and religious rights of indigenous peoples subjected by colonial powers, an organisation which continues to do good work today as Anti-Slavery International).
- The abolition of the convict system: When in 1846 a petition favouring abolition was presented to Governor Fitzroy containing 6,765 signatures, Saunders was one of ten community leaders selected to deliver it. For Saunders, public advocacy of the abolition of transportation served two purposes: it addressed a grievous injustice deeply entrenched in British politics and society, and it nurtured hopes of a new society in which the gospel might flourish.
- The cause of British immigration.
- General education and science.



## His Reputation

As the Revd Wilfred Jarvis observed in the centenary publication of the Bathurst Street Church, Saunders "always gave his ready assistance to the various religious and philanthropical movements then struggling for existence." -- *A Century of Baptist Witness in Sydney*

Saunders was "a Christian gentleman who sacrificed possible worldly greatness for the service of Jesus Christ." -- Murray, *Australian Christian Life From 1788*

Reflecting on his witness to Christian social justice, the Revd Tim Costello noted, as President of the Baptist Union of Australia in 2001, that [Saunders'] insistence on the truth so long ago reminds us that none of us working for justice is its originator, and that it is only by continuing to turn toward the same source of light as he did, that we can hope to reflect it. I pray that some of us will decide to become beacons of light for the generations to come. -- Tim Costello, "Saunders as a 'beacon of light'" in Jill Sutton, *Rev John Saunders*