

Trip to Bethel and Kapunda

What a day we had on Saturday 15th April! Despite the threatening weather forecast, 34 people bravely ventured forth to explore the history of the settlement of Bethel.

First some historical background:

Bethel began as a Moravian settlement under the leadership of the Moravian Brethren Pastor CSD Schondorf. He bought 3 square miles of land in 1856 and built a settlement there.

Moravian Brethren families in the early years include: Schondorf, Arnold, Geue, Goedecke, Gruhl, Hasting, Hilbig, Hombsch, Kirsch, Kornetzky, Krüger, Linke, Peltz, Schmidt, Thomas, Vogt, Wagner, Wenke, Winter.

They started out living in a central village, with a church and school. But when the land was divided into 80-acre blocks and shared around, they soon realised it was impractical to live centrally and travel out every day to work on their distant blocks. And so they began to build homes on their blocks and thus the idea of a community village of Moravians eventually came to an end.



Bethel church today

At the same time the surrounding land was being bought by other settlers, and many of these were Germans and Wends.

Some **Germans** were: Fiegert (Fickert), Gräfe, Gregor, Hübner, Just, Klenner, Menz, Pfeiler, Rohde, Scheer, Ullrich, Wehr, Weichert, Weiss.

Some **Wends** were: Albinus, Altus, Doecke, Kubasch, Wenke.

These Germans and Wends were Lutherans, but because they didn't have the regular services of a Lutheran pastor, they were happy to attend the services of the Moravian Pastor Schondorf in the Bethel church. He baptised their children, and conducted their marriages and burials.

However, one of the Wends, Peter Doecke, built a school on his own land and it was known as the **Steinthal** school (Steinthal means Stone valley). When Lutheran pastors visited occasionally, they preached to a Lutheran congregation there.



Steinthal school & cemetery

In 1895 a new church was built at Bethel by the Moravian Brethren congregation. This is the present building.

In the years 1856-1907 the Moravian Brethren congregation was served by 3 pastors in turn: Schondorf, Jacobi and Buck. When in 1907 Pastor Buck returned to Germany, the Moravian Brethren church in Germany refused to send out another pastor.

So the Bethel congregation joined the Lutheran church (Immanuel aaG Synod). The Steinthal congregation then closed their church and school and joined the Bethel church.



Bethel cemetery – Moravian headstones in foreground

Not everyone was happy with joining the Lutheran Church. In 1910 a number of families (Geue, Matz, Doecke, Schmidt, Linke, Vogt) broke away and joined a church with no name.

The Lutheran congregation at Bethel continues to worship each week in the church.

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Trip to Bethel and Kapunda (cont.)

At the Bethel church we were welcomed by Gary Schmidt and Neil Weichert, who are descendants of the original settlers. They outlined the history of the settlement for us and answered numerous questions.

We then walked through the cemetery, particularly noticing the simple headstones laid horizontally by the Moravian Brethren members. This contrasted with the later more elaborate headstones standing upright on the Lutheran graves.



Moravian-style headstone at Bethel

A sudden shower of rain caused us to seek shelter in the hall, which was converted from the former Lutheran manse. Here the congregation has a history room with a lot of information about the settlement and its families.

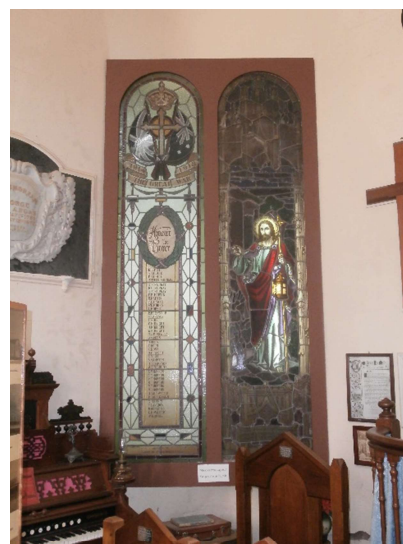
When the rain stopped we followed Gary in our cars along a track to the Steinthal site. Here we were able to inspect the ruins of the school building and the graves in the cemetery. After having a good look around, we started to drive out just as it began to rain again. The last cars to leave were unable to climb the wet slippery track through the gate, so Gary had to push over the fence at another spot to let them get out. Thanks Gary!

After an enjoyable lunch at the Sir John Franklin Hotel in Kapunda, some of us spent time in the afternoon at the Kapunda Historical Society Museum. This is filled with a very large collection of items exhibiting many aspects of life at Kapunda over the years. The items are well-labelled and are neatly presented. It is a very good country museum.



Ian & Paul Doecke at their ancestor's grave at Steinthal

For a more detailed account of Bethel's history, you can listen to the talk that Lyall Kupke gave to the Friends of Lutheran Archives on 23 March 2023. You can access the Livestream at the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/@friendsoflutheranarchives9644/live>



WWI memorial church window in Kapunda Museum



Funeral bier from Bethel church at Kapunda Museum – used for carrying coffins to cemetery