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THE DAY OF THE

Winemaking



ELIZABETH STREET CHURCH OF CHRIST

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EARLY YEARS AT ELIZABETH STREET CHURCH OF CHRIST

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The Churches of Christ in NSW will consider for publication short papers on historical and theological topics relevant to the development of Churches of Christ. The publication of a paper does not constitute an official endorsement of the views expressed therein.

The Day of the Winemaking:

Early Years at Elizabeth Street Churches of Christ

Every Sunday hundreds of “brothers” and “sisters” across Australia go about the task of preparing the communion table for Sunday worship. They are often un-thanked for this, but their labours uphold a ritual central to the liturgy of Churches of Christ. Done with devotion, the preparation of the table is itself an act of worship.

These days matzo (unleavened) bread comes conveniently packed in boxes, and bottles of unfermented grape juice can be purchased at the local supermarket or health food store. Preparing the table was a little more complicated at Sydney Church of Christ in the 1870s.

This church had its origins in the remnants of the church commenced by Albert Griffin in the back of his grocery shop on the corner of Pitt and Goulburn Street, Sydney in 1852. Around 1857, most of the members of this church relocated to Newtown, closer to where they lived. But a handful of members continued to meet as Sydney Church of Christ. The first motion of its Board meeting in 1857 was that “the funds collected at the church meeting which are made for the saints be applied for the purpose of erecting a place of meeting”. Eventually however, they got their chapel.

In 1862, a concern was expressed within the Sydney congregation about “the scripturalness of the [fermented] wine being used at the Lord’s Table”. In December 1862, Joseph Kingsbury of the Newtown church chaired two meetings of the Sydney church to resolve the issue. The resolution of these meetings affirmed that “the fruit of the vine be used, procured from unripe grapes until the ripe fruit can be procured”. The motion, carried unanimously, suggested a scarcity of ripe grapes.

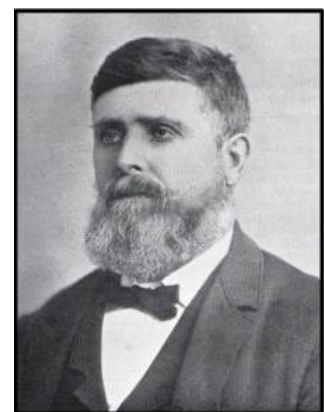


Image: William Stimson

- Foundation member at Bethany (Fairfield)

In 1869, the Sydney congregation moved into their own little chapel in Elizabeth Street, but the scarcity or the cost of grapes still seems to have been a problem. They resolved the problem by obtaining grapes from William Stimson (pictured above) and making their own communion “wine”. William Stimson

was a foundation member of the Bethany (Fairfield) church, and the grapes were apparently grown on his property. A youthful memoir from John Lockley describes the process:

If there was one day among the many old days that were lived in and around the chapel in Elizabeth Street that was worth waiting for, it was the day of the wine making. Yes, the day of the wine making. The day when a consignment of about 20 cases of black grapes from William Stimson, of Fairfield, would be landed on the footpath outside the old Chapel door; the day when all the sweetness and juice of that big batch of berries would be crushed out and bottled before nightfall, to provide the precious unfermented wine for filling the two old cups that for many years were passed around the members every Sunday morning.

“Wine making” appears to have been mainly a job for the ladies. The names he mentions reads like a *Who’s Who* of Churches of Christ on NSW in the 1870s:

By 9 o’clock all the workers were present... Mrs. Elliott with Maggie and Mary – two of the best grape pickers; “Old” Sister Leck (Mrs. Leck always seemed old to me); Mrs Joseph Stimson then not much more than out of her teens; Mrs J. J. Haley, tall and slim and very cheery... Mrs. Joseph Kingsbury; Mrs. Woolams; Mrs. Hodgson; Mrs. Strang and Maggie too would come after the Haleys went to New Zealand.

Not many men turned up, apparently [he mentions a few names], but “old John Strang came along during the afternoon and had a look at things through his glasses. He was never far away when the brethren were busy”. The children apparently had a marvellous time pulling the grapes off the stems but had to be reminded occasionally to stop eating them. It was important that the stalks be removed because they spoiled the flavour.

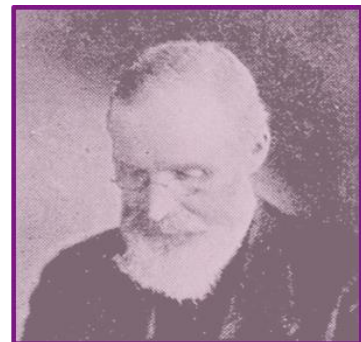


Image: John Strang

– never far away when the brethren are busy

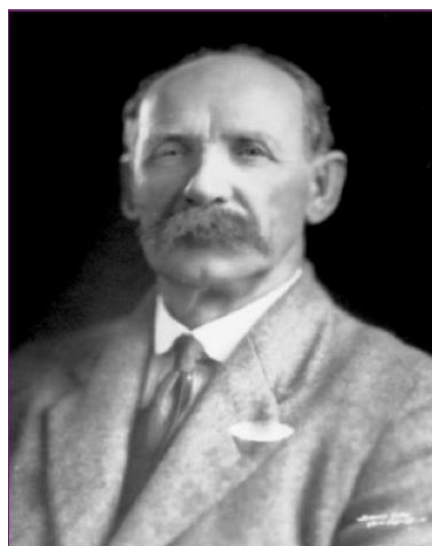
Lockley goes on to describe the process of squeezing the grapes, boiling the mash in the church copper, and straining and bottling the brew. The aim was to bottle and seal at least one hundred bottles for the ensuing year. The finished product was laid to rest in a “cellar” under the church platform. He writes:

No church in Australia had wine like ours. And everybody worked hard all day to keep up the quality... It was well after dark when the last bottle was corked and dipped into the sealing wax before being stowed away.

Lockley recalls his dad³ emerging Sunday by Sunday from a trapdoor under the platform “with bottle in each hand and cob-web or two among his whiskers”. Perhaps real communion lies as much in the preparation as in the partaking. The Mrs. Haley mentioned above was the wife of American evangelist J.J. Haley who came to Sydney in 1875. The Haleys later moved to New Zealand and then to Victoria. John Strang was a Scottish evangelist who served in South Australia and Victoria and ministered at Elizabeth Street, Sydney from 1878 to 1883. The old Elizabeth Street church roll indicates around 40 baptisms by Strang including that of a J. Lockley in 1880.

John (“Jack”) Lockley was born at Waterloo in 1863 and spent much of his boyhood around Redfern and Pyrmont. He had a fund of stories about “old Sydney”.

In the latter part of his career, he was the much-loved gardening journalist for the *Sydney Morning Herald*. Writing under the nom de plume of “Redgum” he wrote cheery columns about growing carnations and dahlias. Perhaps his early experience with grapes stood him in good stead. He served for twelve years as member of Ku-ring-gai Shire Council (1912 – 1924) including a term as President. A member of Elizabeth Street church as a young man, it is not known whether he maintained his Church of Christ connection throughout his life. When he died in May 1937, Lockley’s funeral service was conducted by Joseph Whelan of Chatswood Church. Also attending the funeral was H.G. Harward.



*Image: J.G. Lockley (“Redgum”)
President of Ku-ring-gai Shire 1924
(Photo courtesy of Ku-ring-gai Council)*

In addition to his quirky memoir, Lockley has also provided a sketch (following) of the Elizabeth Street chapel. Until recently, this was the only visual representation of the chapel known to exist. However, armed with Lockley’s sketch, a trawl through the City of Sydney archives uncovered a photo of the old chapel masquerading as “City Hall/Chinese Chapel” (see following). The City of Sydney Archivist has been apprised of the situation.

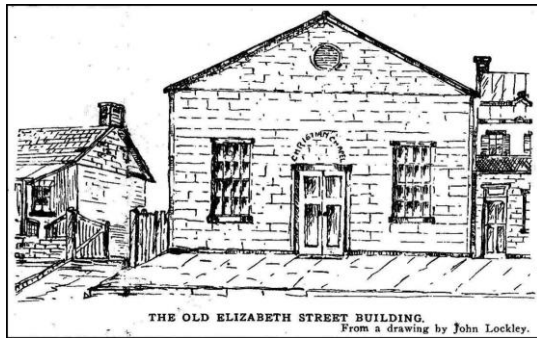


Image: Lockley's sketch of the Old Elizabeth Street Building.



Image: The former "Christian Chapel" was rebadged. With a magnifying class, the date 1868 can be seen above the portal. The old building was demolished in 1909. (Photo courtesy of City of Sydney Archives)

Announcing the opening of the chapel S.H. Coles, evangelist of the congregations at Newtown and Sydney, wrote "The style of architecture is severely plain and would not have drawn down the censure of the most rigid iconoclast."⁴

In 1895, the Elizabeth Street congregation sold their chapel and purchased the "Lyceum" in Campbell Street, Surry Hills. This building had been erected by a rationalist society called the Free Thought Party. The "brother and sisters" renamed the "Lyceum" the City Temple (see photo below). But how the water of rationalism was changed into the wine of the gospel is another story.

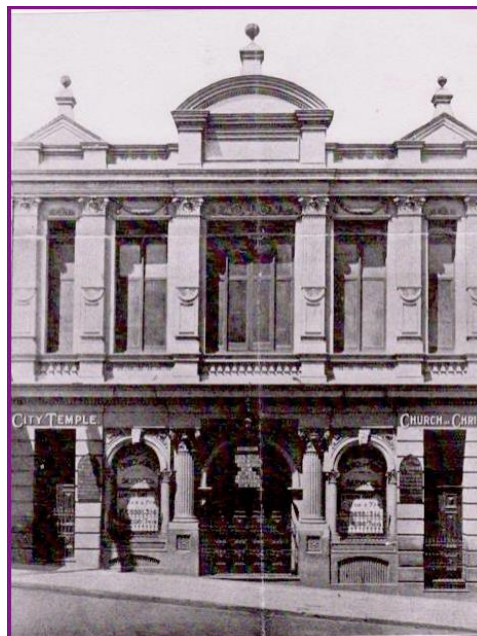


Image: Historic City Temple (formerly "The Lyceum")

REFERENCES

1. "Memories", Souvenir of 75th Anniversary Services of City Temple, May 2 and 5, 1926 published in *The Christian Messenger* 21/4/1926.
2. The photos of Mesdames. Kingsbury, Leck and Elliott may be found on pages 317-321 of the *Jubilee Pictorial History of Churches of Christ in Australasia* by A.B. Maston (ed) Austral: Melbourne, 1903
3. J. Lockley snr is mentioned as an early member – see page 317 of *Jubilee History*
4. *The Australian Christian Pioneer* 1869 p. 268. Any structure that appeared too ecclesiastical may have caused concern.