

Presbyterian /Uniting Church History Pymont /Ultimo

The Presbyterians, through Rev Dr John Dunmore Lang, were the first to establish a church in Pymont in 1846 at 11 Mount Street Pymont. Lang arrived in Sydney in 1823 as the first Scottish Presbyterian minister.

He was said to be a Patriot, Republican, Statesman, Evangelical and Enigma. As a controversial figure in the church and parliament in the early colony, he thought too many poor Irish immigrants were coming into the country. Lang was a critic of the Government Bounty scheme deciding to do something about it. So he went back to Scotland and organized an immigration scheme for thousands of Scots to come and settle in Eastern Australia. As Pymont was known for its sandstone quarries and the Scots were highly regarded as stonemasons, Pymont was a natural place for many to settle. There is a statue of Rev Dr John Dunmore Lang in Wynyard Park, Margaret Street, opposite Scots Church (Presbyterian).



Pymont was a busy industrial community at that time so the first church grew rapidly. As many families lived in Pymont, a school was opened in the rickety wooden cottage at the top of Mount Street. It used to shake in high winds. By 1860 the Education Department had taken on the management of the school. In 1864 the church members built a wooden chapel on leased land in Harris Street, between Miller Street and Pymont Bridge Road.



The Pymont Presbyterian congregation had over 100 members and wanted to build a more substantial church. Meanwhile, John Harris, whose family estate owned all the land in Ultimo, had bequeathed in his will land in Ultimo to the Synod of the Church of Scotland for a church. By the 1860s this entity no longer existed as the Presbyterians had split into four branches. The congregation lived in Pymont, and this block in Quarry Street Ultimo was described as a barren hill where performers had entertained the carnival crowds. Ultimo seemed a long way off in those days.¹ The members wanted to sell the Ultimo land and use it to expand in Pymont. Legal problems arose due to the name changes within the church structure.

In 1874 the church administration attempted to get a private bill through parliament allowing sale of the land in Quarry Street to pay for their Harris Street property. The Harris family objected to this and the struggle went all the way to the level of a

¹ Lord Worsley - Shirley Fitzgerald p32

parliamentary select committee.² When the Harris family won, the Pymont church decided to pay out their option on the Harris Street lease for 500 pounds and promptly sold it again for 1100 pounds. Then they took up ownership of the land bequeathed in Quarry Street Ultimo to build a church.

Construction began using local stone, maybe quarried from the quarry at the bottom of their street where Ultimo Public School now stands. Back in 1878 when a large crowd gathered on the grass for the laying of the first foundation stone, Reverend R S Patterson spoke with half an eye cocked in the direction of the *Glasgow Arms (now the Lord Wolseley Hotel)*, then being built on the opposite corner across the street. The church, he said would provide 'a fountain of living water in a parched land whither the weary and thirsty may repair, drink and be refreshed'. It would be a beacon to guide many a tempest-tossed barque over sunken rocks and quicksands of false doctrine and naughty modes of moral conduct'.³

The new church that was named 'Pymont Presbyterians in Ultimo' was completed in 1883. The Manse followed soon after and the hall was completed in 1902.

A centenary celebration of the hall was held in 2002 and two plaques were placed on either side of the hall door. Reverend R S Patterson remained at the church until his retirement in 1900. Over the next thirty six years five more ministers faithfully served in the church, living in the manse next door. After the First World War and depression, changes were taking place in the community. In 1936 The Ultimo church congregation couldn't support a minister of their own; industries had moved out, rows of houses were demolished and the population was decimated - so the Presbyterian home mission committee put the church under the oversight of St Luke's Redfern.⁴



PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
QUARRY ST., ULTIMO, SYDNEY

The manse became deaconess house for a period - Deaconess Chris Anderson who died in her 90's recently, recalls what it was like when she came in 1940 as a voluntary worker. - In those days the inner city was known as a slum, Ultimo was a workman's area, known for its wool stores, flour mills, print & engineering works and the small goods factory along Harris Street. Men worked on the wharves, the railway goods yard

² Michael Matthews - Pymont & Ultimo A History p 36

³ Shirley Fitzgerald - The Lord Wolseley p33

⁴ Ferguson Memorial Library

⁵ Michael Matthews - Pymont & Ultimo A History p 37

and at Darling Harbour. There was a pub on every corner, sometimes two. Then there were the smells which came from the Bushels tea and coffee warehouse where the TAB is now located in Harris Street, the wool stores, smog from the power stations, and the alley cats. Plus the streets were putrid.

Also the noise was oppressive, coming from the trams rattling down Harris St, the shunting at the Ultimo tram depot, the power station, Darling Harbor goods yards with steam trains coming in 24 hours a day, and ship's sirens screaming from the wharves.



At night time these sounds were magnified. The basic wage was 4 pounds 5 shillings. People were very poor and families were large. Often families with 10-12 children lived in a 2 bed tiny cottage with no bathroom, just a 'dunny' out the back and a bath in backyard, where the water was emptied after all the family had their weekly bath.

After the second world war, over 12,000 Dutch immigrants arrived in Sydney each year. There was a need for a Presbyterian church with services in Dutch where they could share their experiences. Therefore beneficial stewardship of the Ultimo property was given to the Dutch community. Reverend C Ulidam served as the minister for over twenty years.

Jack, a Dutch church member, recalls what it was like – 'There was Sunday school, social life and fetes. People came from all over Sydney as the church was seen as a period of integration for new immigrants from Holland.'

Tjerkje Wiersma came to Australia on a special youth program in 1967, and had to stay for at least one year or a maximum of two years. Recently she was on a holiday in Sydney recalling her memories of belonging to the Dutch Ultimo Church. 'I used to go there nearly every Sunday and liked meeting people and drinking coffee after the services' she said. Apart from the church services she also attended discussion groups once a month, held at the house of



⁶ Michael Matthews - Pyrmont & Ultimo A History p74

church members. In February 1968 they went on a sailing boat trip to Botany Bay and from there they sailed to a little island where they had a barbecue picnic.

She says, 'Very pleasant such invitations. We did this twice'. They would go out to Glenorie where some church members lived, and had excursions to Blue Gum Forest in the Blue Mountains where they camped for the night. They had an evening for square dances. 'These are some of the pleasant things I did in Sydney, due to the Dutch church.'

Jack commented that sometimes the minister lived in the manse but others wouldn't. It was run down with one outside toilet. There was no-one living in the community around there at that time. The Manse was so derelict. The congregation couldn't afford the repairs it required and wanted to sell it but members of the Harris family objected. Once again there was a dispute with the Harris Family.

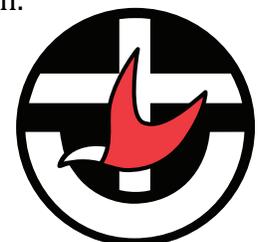


There is a heavy cross high above the door as you enter the church from the vestibule. Eugene Gotland-Godulski, a Polish sculptor living in Australia, made this. It was completed in 1974. The cross was made for the Dutch community of Sydney as an act of gratitude, because Dutch people in the Second World War saved the sculptor's life. The cross is composed of several small crosses to symbolize the suffering of so many people. All these crosses come together in the cross of Christ.

There was a bequest 1972 from the estate of the late George Harris for welfare work for the poor in the Ultimo/Pymont area. The University of NSW School of Social Work did a survey for the best use of the funds. As a result and funded from the bequest and with State & Federal assistance, the Harris Community Centre began in the manse next to the church,. The University was involved for many years. Miss Anne MacCullum was the first social worker in the centre to service this decaying and congested inner city area.

After 99 years, in 1977 the lease ran out for the Buckland Estate. It was bought in 1894 for 8,000 pounds during the depression. This parcel of land in front of the church, comprised Harris/ Fig / Bulwarra / Quarry Streets. The Church tried to buy some properties for low cost housing to help the residents, but was unsuccessful. The small houses sold for \$20,000 and five years later they were selling for \$120,000 In 1998 they were worth \$450,000 and now in 2017 they sell for \$1.400 million.

After 20 years of meetings, planning and negotiations, the three denominations of Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregational came into Union forming "The Uniting Church of Australia" in



1977. All of the Methodist and most of the Congregational churches came into Union. The Presbyterians left it to each church to vote whether they would go – The Dutch Presbyterian Ultimo church voted unanimously to go into Union, becoming Ultimo Uniting Church.

The Harris Centre was passed on to Uniting Care when the Ultimo church went into Union.⁷

During that period 1960 – 1997 the Dutch church had six ministers. By 1997 only a handful of members attended the Ultimo church and they lived in a retirement village at Graystones.

Meanwhile, a small group The Mustard Seed, led by a resident, Robin Davies, had started in Pyrmont in 1996, meeting in St Bede's Catholic Church, Pyrmont. Robin was studying theology at the Uniting Theological College in Parramatta. When the Dutch church moved out of the Ultimo Church property, the Sydney Presbytery gave beneficial stewardship over the Ultimo property to the Mustard Seed group. So 'Kafe Kirk' began at Ultimo once a month as a café style church (coffee cake and conversation) with regular service the other weeks. Why was it called Mustard Seed? There are two parables told by Jesus:-

'I tell you the truth if you have faith as small as a mustard seed you can say to this mountain to move from here to there – nothing is impossible for you.' Matt 17:20
'The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field; and this is smaller than all other seeds, but when it is full grown, it is larger than the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in it's branches.' Matt 13: 31-32

In 1997 the first Anzac Day service was held and a year later the Mustard Seed church started 'Carols in Union Square'. They continued in this location until 2008 when due to construction works in Union Square and threat of a railway station being built there, the Carols with nativity were moved to Quarry Green outside the church. To the excitement of the crowd, camels and sheep were added to complement the donkey.



Sandra Nori, State MP and Frank Sartor, Lord Mayor

⁷ Ferguson Memorial Library

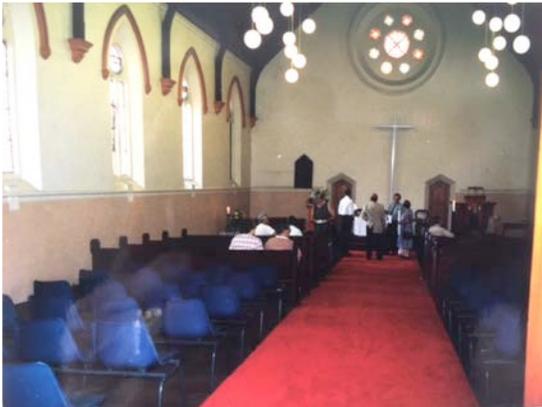


Reverend Robin Davies

The Mustard Seed became a Uniting Church Faith Community and Robin was commissioned as a Community Minister in 2002. The same year the Sydney Presbytery announced their intention to condemn the church building as the floor was unstable. A survey of the properties was completed by Ultimo Building Committee and the cost of refurbishment and repairs was estimated at \$500,000.

The Synod wouldn't commit to financing the repairs so they decided the Sydney City Council would be the best people to refurbish the church potentially for use as an art gallery. Believing that the church should always remain a church, the members of the Mustard Seed objected and committed to raise the funds necessary to restore the church. The urgent works were assessed at \$70,000, which the Mustard Seed felt was an achievable goal. After donations and many fund-raising activities and with the help of a sizable Heritage Grant from the federal government, the money was raised

The church was rededicated in 2006, after the refurbishment was completed. Café church continued every week. Set up like a café, there is fresh coffee and homemade cake during the service and people sit at tables and interact with one another. It has become a flourishing and vital community church.



1997 Before restoration



After restoration 2002

By 2009 the church had grown so the members decided to transition from a Faith Community to a full Uniting Church Congregation. Shortly after, Robin was ordained as a Uniting Church Minister of the Word. There have been many improvements to the church and hall. The hall was refurbished to provide wheelchair access and toilets were added. On community days sponsored by Lend Lease, a kitchenette was installed in the church and walls of storage



In 2015 after 19 years, Rev Robin Davies retired, and a new minister, Rev David Gore was called. As the Ultimo Manse was being used by Uniting Care for the Harris Community Centre, a new manse was purchased by Sydney Presbytery at 98 Quarry Street Ultimo. After spending nineteen years as the Minister at Manly Uniting Church, David moved to Ultimo with his wife Jo and two children. Rev Gore is also the Uniting Church Chaplain at the University of Technology and a member of the Tertiary Resource and Oversight Committee (TROC) at Sydney Presbytery.

In 2016 the church celebrated its 20th anniversary. Mustard Seed Ultimo is a growing, vibrant church bringing many services and activities to the community. Each Sunday morning there is still café church at 9.30, with coffee, homemade cake and conversation. Usually this is followed by more coffee or tea at the Powerhouse or a BBQ and a friendly neighborhood cricket match in Quarry Green. Each week groups meet for prayer and Bible study and there is 'Playtime' for pre-schoolers each Friday morning. English classes are run for ESL students and new migrants.



Reverend David Gore

More recently the church, together with the Harris Centre, have opened a new Op Shop in the front rooms of the Harris Centre's federation house. Mustard Seed Op Shop has its own manager and is an important part of the church's mission in the area.

The Mustard Seed is partnering with the Harris Centre to provide a hub for local community services and connections. They are reviving some favorite activities like Second-hand Saturday and family fun days. The Uniting Harris Community Centre works with individuals, families, groups, workers, students and the community in Ultimo, Pyrmont and surrounding areas. They develop and implement relevant educational, social and recreation activities and projects that aim to create community harmony. They distribute 100 hampers at Christmas to needy families in the community and provide food and clothing to the homeless in the area. They also support the local elderly Chinese with programs and services.

Resources and references:

Michael Mathews - Pyrmont & Ultimo A History

Shirley Fitzgerald – Pyrmont & Ultimo under siege & Lord Wolseley Hotel

Ferguson Memorial Library of the Presbyterian Church

Contacts

MustardSeed Uniting Church Ultimo: www.mustardseed.unitingchurch.org.au/

MustardSeed Op Shop: www.facebook.com/ultimogem/

Harris Community Centre: uniting.org/our-services/services/uniting.../uniting-harris-community-centre

Author: Rev Robin Davies, February 2017